

Who am I and where do I belong? The perception and evaluation of teacher leaders concerning teacher leadership practices and micropolitics in schools

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Abstract The phenomenon of teachers taking on leadership tasks beyond their classroom duties has become widespread internationally. While presented as a catalyst for educational improvement, it blurs the traditional division between teaching and leading and therefore challenges the conventional professional relationships in schools as well as the professional self-understanding of teacher leaders. This article reports on an exploratory study of the perceptions of teacher leaders in Flemish primary and secondary schools. By conducting semi-structured interviews of 26 teacher leaders, we collected data concerning their tasks and the consequences for both their social–professional relations with teacher colleagues and school leaders and their professional self-understanding. From a micro-political perspective, the results demonstrate how teacher leadership introduces new structures of interactions in schools that makes teacher leaders find themselves continuously juggling between two different agendas of professional interests: obtaining recognition as a teacher leader by their colleagues as well as maintaining their social–professional relationships with their colleagues.

Keywords Teacher leadership · Social–professional relationships · Professional self-understanding · Qualitative case-studies · Micropolitics

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Teacher leadership in Flanders and beyond

The idea of a teacher who is responsible for teaching only one group of students or for instructing a single subject in schools is no longer self-evident. The complexity of schools has strongly increased due to the processes of school enlargement and a higher level of local autonomy, among other reasons (see Fullan and Hargreaves 1996). Decentralization trends in several countries have brought decision-making governance in closer proximity to schools, placing schools in charge of the development of their own local policy with respect to various issues, such as professionalization, special needs care, the induction and support of new and beginning teachers, etc. (see Devos et al. 2010; Verhoeven and Devos 2002). Schools are expected to take on more and new responsibilities; therefore, schools must undertake coherent actions to realize the essential and desirable objectives that contribute to overall school quality. In doing so, different school actors are assuming more and new responsibilities.

In Flanders, the government supports the task extension of schools by providing additional funding through various programs. The empirical reality shows that the additional financial means are mostly deployed for partial teacher relief from the classroom duties. In addition to their pedagogical-didactical responsibilities in the classroom, several teachers also undertake tasks beyond their classroom duties, such as coordination tasks (within a grade as well as at the school level), special needs care responsibilities, organizing and leading induction programs for pre-service and in-service teachers, and guiding the compulsory implementation of cross-curricular attainment targets in the school. In doing so, they have a wide range of impacts on the overall teaching and learning within the school. Consequently, the worldwide label of ‘teacher leadership’ (see e.g., Crowther et al. 2002; Lieberman and Miller 2004; Muijs and Harris 2007; Murphy 2007; Smylie 1995, 1997; Smylie and Mayrowetz 2009; York-Barr and Duke 2004), which implies an increased empowerment and agency of teachers in schools, seems to be just as much in place in Flanders.

Next to dealing with decentralization trends, teacher leadership is also introduced worldwide as a solution for the rising concerns regarding the status and health of teaching as a career option (Sykes 1990).¹ According to many authors (see Conley et al. 1989; Elmore 1990; Katzenmeyer and Moller 2001; Lieberman and Miller 2004; Smylie et al. 2011; Wasley 1991), teaching is perceived as a flat career in which ‘novices’ and ‘experts’ are asked to fulfill the same task and, generally, no promotion within either the school or the educational system is in sight, except for obtaining a principal position. All teachers hold equal status within a school, and ‘going ahead’ instead of stagnating in current roles without new learning opportunities can only be reached by leaving the profession (Ingersoll and Kralik 2004). Smylie and Denny (1990) argue that new opportunities for professional learning and development and for recognition and reward of excellence in teaching are needed. Teacher leadership also emerges from dissatisfaction with the current

¹ In Flanders, this makes part of the current ‘teacher career debate’ where initiatives are developed to make the teaching career more attractive and to make the professionalization of teachers more effective.

conditions in education and is regarded as a key element of recent initiatives to expand and diversify the nature of teachers' work to attract and retain motivated and talented teachers and, consequently, to ensure the quality of the teaching practice (Harris and Muijs 2002; Muijs and Harris 2007; Smylie and Denny 1990).

In a study by Harris and Muijs (2001), teachers who engaged in leadership activities could be associated with higher levels of teacher retention as well as with stronger feelings of empowerment and job satisfaction. Bogler (2001) as well as Kushman (1992) illustrated how teachers who participate in school decision-making feel more committed to the school and report on a higher job satisfaction. Lieberman et al. (2000) showed how taking on leadership tasks improved teachers' confidence in their own abilities. O'Connor and Boles (1992) demonstrate how the self-confidence and knowledge of teachers increased after fulfilling leadership responsibilities and how this has led to a more positive attitude towards teaching. Smylie (1992) assumes this positive attitude will improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and eventually the student learning outcomes. Ross et al. (2011) concur that making the development of teacher leaders a priority in education systems concerned with reform will result in those systems achieving in school improvement, better student learning outcomes, enhanced teacher learning and increased staff retention. However, the paradox of Lieberman and Miller (2004) shows how taking on leadership responsibilities not only stimulates but also leads to burnout, disaffection, professional conflict and disappointment at the same time.

What is a teacher leader anyway?

Although teacher leadership has been extensively studied, an unambiguous definition of the concept is still lacking (Scribner and Bradley-Levine 2010). This deficiency has resulted in a significant amount of (partially) overlapping and even somewhat contradictory definitions in the international literature, and to a broad empirical reality associated with the umbrella concept of teacher leadership (York-Barr and Duke 2004). In some cases, the definition of being a teacher leader includes a formal role (i.e., one with formal leadership duties and authority); examples of this role include a school coordinator, head teacher, mentor, and special needs coordinator. However, in other cases, teacher leadership is concerned with informal practices that contain the potential to influence other teachers' behavior by engaging in dialogue with other teachers, helping to broaden the understandings of others, and/or modeling practices without any delegated authority. Considering formal teacher leadership, some teachers are partly relieved from their teaching responsibilities, whereas others exert fulltime leadership duties or fulltime teaching by taking on extra leadership responsibilities in addition to their teaching obligations. Additionally, the levels at which teacher leaders undertake responsibilities can differ. The task of a teacher leader can be entirely located within the school (school-level or grade-level) or can exceed the borders of the organization. Finally, the focus of teacher leadership varies, ranging from organizational-level work (membership in decision-making councils), to professional development work or instructional-level work (mentoring or special needs care). Despite the various

forms, there seems to be agreement on the idea of teacher leadership as a way to enhance the quality of the core tasks of a school, namely teaching and learning. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leadership as follows: “teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice” (p. 5). Wasley (1991) describes teacher leaders as those with “the ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they wouldn’t ordinarily consider without the influence of the leader” (p. 23). Day and Harris (2003) see an important task for teacher leaders in “helping to translate the principles of school improvement into the practices of individual classrooms” (p. 973).

The definitions given by most authors remain rather open with respect to the specific forms teacher leadership can take (formal vs. non-formal, full-time vs. part-time, in the school vs. exceeding the school borders), as well as to the actual responsibilities that a teacher leader embraces (from the development of a school vision or pedagogical project to the support of teachers’ daily practice). The empirical reality in Flemish primary and secondary schools, however, demonstrates a trend of teachers receiving an explicit and formal mandate within their schools to take on responsibilities beyond their classroom duties, being partly relieved from their teaching tasks. Although these responsibilities are in the first place introduced in Flemish schools to distribute tasks and to relieve school leaders from certain leadership duties, we still consider it as a form of teacher leadership because their responsibilities entail guiding other teachers toward improved educational practice and focus on teaching and learning processes in the school.² Given that this article exclusively focuses on the practice and experiences of teacher leaders with a formal mandate, we therefore have used the following definition of teacher leaders: *teachers who, in addition to their classroom duties receive, sometimes only temporarily, a formal mandate to carry out leadership responsibilities by guiding other teachers toward improved educational practice. In doing so, they are partly relieved from their teaching responsibilities.*

Current study

In this study, our research interest is to grasp the notion of what it means to be a teacher leader in Flemish schools and, more specifically, how taking on a formal mandate as a teacher leader influences their social-professional relations and their professional self-understanding. Although teacher leadership is presented as a catalyst for dealing with the increased complexity of schools as well as a way to create career opportunities for teachers, which lead to higher levels of job

² In Flemish schools, some teachers are partly relieved from their teaching duties in order to assume merely administrative tasks and thus to support the school leader. Those administrative tasks do not focus on processes of teaching and learning and do not imply interactions with other teachers in the school. In line with the definitions of teacher leadership in international literature (see e.g., Frost and Durrant 2003; Wasley 1991; York-Barr and Duke 2004) we do not consider those teachers as teacher leaders since their responsibilities do not go beyond the delegation of responsibilities, and thus are merely a matter of distribution rather than teachers’ agency.

satisfaction and teacher retention (Harris and Muijs 2002; Muijs and Harris 2007; Smylie and Denny 1990; Sykes 1990), empirical studies of teacher leadership are rather rare (Muijs and Harris 2006, 2007; Smylie 1997). Moreover, Smylie (1995) sees a contradiction between the increasing amount written about teacher leadership and the small proportion of systematic empirical investigations and studies using formal theory to focus research questions and to develop new theoretical insights. Muijs and Harris (2006) indicate that the literature still leans towards advocacy rather than empirical research and offers a rosy view of the implementation of teacher leadership and its consequences while it can be assumed that diverse barriers operating in schools inhibit the implementation of teacher leadership in schools (see also Hart 1990; Murphy 2007; Smylie 1992, 1995, 1997; Smylie and Denny 1990; Smylie and Mayrowetz 2009). Smylie (1997) argues that teacher leadership in schools leads to reshaping the existing structures and expectations of teacher roles in order to legitimize roles beyond the classroom. Hart (1990) indicates how the creation of teacher leadership roles challenges established authority patterns and intervenes with many professional norms. Macbeath (2005) assumes that the renegotiation of institutional roles can make many people uncomfortable and can introduce role conflict and confusion concerning who has the authority to make certain decisions. According to Hanson (1991), schools exist of two separated zones that need to be considered as ‘decisional zones’. Each zone has their own purposes and define and operationalize their own aims. Hanson (1991) distinguishes the teachers’ zone, which encompasses issues concerning the key processes of teaching and learning and where teachers feel in charge of the decision-making process; and the administrators’ zone, which covers all issues of administration, finances, staff policy and contacts with external partners. In this zone, school leaders are the ones who feel authority over decision-making.

Due to the existing structures and expectations, established authority patterns, professional norms and the ingrained division of zones in schools, we can assume that the practices of teacher leaders in formal roles are rather complex. Teacher leadership blurs the traditional division between teaching and leading and forces teacher leaders to revise the conceptions they hold of themselves as a professional by asking questions such as: who am I?; how well am I doing?; and what is my task? Taking on formal leadership responsibilities as a teacher involves not just obtaining and using new knowledge and skills but also continuously switching between teaching and leading, as well as commuting between individual classroom and broader school practices. These dimensions force a teacher leader to exist in changed relationships with teacher colleagues and the school leader(s). Thus, the implementation of teacher leadership mandates has important consequences for the social-professional relations in schools, and, according to many studies (see e.g., Nias 2005; Penuel et al. 2009; Silins and Mulford 2004), social-professional relations should be considered as one of the most important working conditions in a school. As a result, the complexity of teacher leadership should be acknowledged and further unraveled, using empirical studies that help us to obtain a deepened understanding of the phenomenon of teacher leadership from an insider’s perspective. The field needs a greater understanding of teacher leadership by examining how those practices really take place and how these practices are perceived by the teacher leaders involved.

Conceptual framework

In addition to the international literature on social-professional relations and the micropolitical relevance of these relations, we make use of research on teachers' work lives and careers, with focus on the notion of 'professional self-understanding' (Kelchtermans 2009) to build our conceptual framework. This combined theoretical perspective allows us to explore the social-relational dynamics in schools and to obtain insight into how teacher leaders experience the actual practices of teacher leadership in Flemish schools.

Social-professional relations

Research on the work lives of teachers notes the importance and relevance of social-professional relations in the school for teachers. Social-professional relations form an important source for job motivation, social recognition of expertise and a feeling of identity for teachers (see Nias 2005; Penuel et al. 2009). Several studies have indicated that collaboration and strong collegial relations have a positive effect on educational innovation and school development because strong ties between colleagues improve the exchange of expertise and professional learning in the workplace (see Daly 2010; Day and Harris 2003; Johnson 2003; Nias 2005; Rosenholtz 1989; Wasley 1991). At the same time, diverse authors have argued for a more balanced view on collaboration and collegiality: Hargreaves (1992) argues that not every form of collaboration is useful, nor should every form of individualism be avoided. He refers to a so-called "contrived-collegiality" (p. 195) in which interactions are merely administratively arranged and controlled, as well as to "elective individualism" (p. 195), where working autonomously is regarded as a positive and conscious choice and thus is floated by intrinsic reasons. Kelchtermans (2006) emphasizes that collaboration only leads to positive outcomes when the collaboration is sufficiently profound and thus more than merely solving the problems that keep schools from functioning efficiently: "It has to include also exchange, discussion and confrontation of underlying beliefs" (p. 228). However, according to Wasley (1991), schools are ruled by "an unspoken code discouraging teachers from talking about work" (p. 3). Additionally, Murphy (2007) shows how schools are still characterized by deeply rooted norms that inhibit the exchange of underlying beliefs concerning education. He distinguishes, among other norms, the norms of privacy and autonomy, which define the teaching job and allow teachers to fulfill their teaching duties in their own way within the relative autonomy of the four class walls: "they [teachers] learn not to meddle in the affairs of other teachers, especially in matters dealing with how their colleagues work with youngsters in their classrooms" (p. 688). Murphy (2007) also emphasizes the norm of egalitarianism among teachers and thus the idea of all teachers as peers based on their equal position in the school: "egalitarianism is deeply rooted and with long standing traditions" (p. 689). According to Smylie (1997), those norms strongly influence how social-professional relations in schools are shaped. Following Whitaker (1995), the norms function as "yardsticks that most teachers use to measure acceptability" (p. 80).

The implementation of teacher leadership in schools can foster collaboration between teachers and the school leader as well as challenge the norms of privacy, autonomy and egalitarianism by establishing status differences within school faculties (Hart 1995; Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers 1992). Smylie and Denny (1990) see teacher leadership as the installation of new social-professional relations in terms of ‘helping relations’ or ‘supporting relations’ that not only challenge the egalitarianism within the school but also that challenge the norms of autonomy and privacy. Bishop et al. (1997) show how teacher leaders often refuse responsibilities out of fear that the norm of egalitarianism will be placed at risk. Consequently, introducing teacher leadership in schools installs new social-professional relationships that break open the prevailing norms and, therefore, interferes with one of the most important working conditions within the school, the social-professional relations.

In a study by Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002), using a micropolitical perspective, social-professional relations, and thus the nature and quality of the relations between different members of a school team, are identified as a professional interest. A central idea in this perspective (see Ball 1987; Blase 1991) is how the behavior of organization members is determined by interests. Kelchtermans (2007) connects these interests with the notion of organizational working conditions. The members of a school team have more or less clear ideas of the working conditions seen as important or even essential for carrying out their jobs in ways that meet their personal standards and motivations while providing job satisfaction. The desirable working conditions then operate as professional interests and lead to micropolitical action to establish, safeguard or restore the desirable working conditions. Consequently, we may expect that the implementation of teacher leadership encourages micropolitical actions because it introduces important changes in the social-professional dynamics in schools, which then could interfere with what school members see as desirable.

Professional self-understanding

Teachers develop throughout their teaching career because they, more or less consciously and reflectively, make sense of the experiences and interactions encountered in their daily teaching practice. Kelchtermans (2009) defines this lifelong learning process as ‘professional development’. As a result, changes in ‘thinking’ and ‘acting’ (due to a more varied, refined and often more effective action repertoire) occur. In line with the ‘teacher thinking movement’ (see Clark and Peterson 1986; Richardson 2001), we assume that teachers’ knowledge and conceptions regarding themselves guide their actions. Throughout the endless stream of meaningful interactions with their professional context, teachers develop a ‘personal interpretative framework’ (Kelchtermans 2009), which functions as a personal system of knowledge and beliefs that acts as a cognitive and affective lens through which the teachers look at their job, give meaning to it and act within it.

Within this framework, Kelchtermans (2009) distinguished two interrelated domains, identified as professional self-understanding (conceptions held by a teacher of him or herself as a professional) and subjective educational theory

(personal answers to the questions ‘how should I do this?’ and ‘why should I do it this way?’, i.e., teachers’ so-called professional ‘knowhow’). In the professional self-understanding domain, Kelchtermans (2009) identified five interconnected components, including self-image (‘who am I as a teacher?’), self-esteem (how well am I doing?), job motivation (what motivates me to become a teacher and to stay in the teaching profession?), task perception (what do I need to do to be a good teacher?) and future perspective (how do I anticipate my future as a teacher?). It is clear that changes in responsibilities in the school are highly important to the development of the professional self-understanding domain.

Research questions

In this article we study how teacher leadership takes place in Flemish schools. In doing so, we focus on how teacher leaders experience taking on leadership duties and, more specifically, if and how the implementation of teacher leadership influences their social-professional relations in the school as well as their professional self-understanding. The research questions are as follows:

1. How does the phenomenon of teacher leadership emerge in Flemish schools?
 - (a) How is the mandate as a teacher leader defined in the school?
 - (b) What tasks are comprised in the mandate as a teacher leader?
2. What are the consequences of taking on a teacher leader mandate for the social-professional relations of the teacher leader with
 - (a) his or her teacher colleagues
 - (b) the school leader(s)?
3. What are the consequences of taking on a teacher leader mandate for his or her professional self-understanding?

Methods

To explore the phenomenon of teacher leadership in Flemish schools, we used non-probability purposive sampling (Neuman 2011). More specifically, we looked for respondents in several Flemish primary and secondary schools who meet our definition of teacher leadership: *teachers who, in addition to their classroom duties receive, sometimes only temporarily, a formal mandate to carry out leadership responsibilities in a particular school by guiding other teachers toward improved educational practice. In doing so, they are partly relieved from their teaching responsibilities.* Schools were chosen based on former connections as well as on geographical location (accessibility). We asked every school leader to list the teacher leaders they have in their school. Because there is little tradition in Flemish schools to use the term ‘teacher leader’, we clarified what we mean by ‘teachers leaders’ by articulating the above mentioned definition. Next, we selected one teacher leader in every school. In doing so, we tried as much as possible to collect

different forms of teacher leadership in primary and secondary schools (maximal heterogeneity) until saturation was achieved. Once a teacher leader per school was designated, they were contacted separately by means of an initial phone call as well as an e-mail to clarify our research aim and to find a suitable moment to conduct an interview. In this way, we collected data from 26 respondents, each of which was from a different school. Tables 1 and 2 give an overview.

Because our research interest is to grasp the notion of what it means to be a teacher leader in Flemish schools and, more specifically, how taking on a formal mandate as a teacher leader influences the professional self-understanding and the social-professional relations of a teacher leader, a qualitative-interpretative research methodology, i.e., a ‘multi case studies’ design, was adopted. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with all respondents. In this way, data collection was sufficiently standardized for all respondents but also provided us the opportunity to capture the individual experiences and perceptions. In these interviews (approximately 1.5 h) we collected information on three themes (see Table 3), including (a) general background information and the individual’s specific responsibilities as a teacher leader, (b) the consequences for their professional self-understanding and (c) their view on the consequences for their social-professional relations with the school leader(s) and teacher colleagues. Prior to the interview, the respondents were asked to provide an overview of their qualifications and formal careers as well as their demographic data, such as age and gender, through a brief written questionnaire.

All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and coded by using descriptive and interpretative codes. The coding process was guided by a coding scheme, which was developed with descriptive codes (summarizing the issues addressed in the fragment, such as the student population, application procedure, teaching duties, etc.) and interpretative codes (derived from our conceptual framework, such as self-image, motivation, egalitarianism, etc.). After coding the data, data analysis progressed in two phases, a vertical (or within-case) analysis and a horizontal (or cross-case) analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994; Neuman 2011). In the vertical analysis, an individual structured case report was composed for each teacher leader, encompassing the answers to the research questions for that particular respondent, including illustrative interview fragments. Thus, the teacher leader was taken as the unit of data analysis. The fixed structure in the individual reports was the starting point for the horizontal analysis, where we looked for systematic similarities and differences across the cases by using the constant comparative method (Glaser 1965; Strauss 1987). We focused on identifying and interpreting the patterns and mechanisms of the teacher leaders’ perceptions and actual practices across the different cases. The vertical analyses were conducted by the first author, whereas other members of the research unit functioned as a critical resonance group for the developed procedures (construction of the individual case reports, the code scheme, etc.) and for the horizontal analyses (cyclical process of interpretative comparison). By means of systematic consultation between the first author and those members of the research unit at every stage of this study, all preliminary interpretations and conclusions were critically examined for the probability and argumentation with the data.

Table 1 Overview of respondents primary schools

Name	Mandate	Experiences	Job responsibilities	Hours relieved from teaching ^b
Jolene	Special needs care teacher	29 years teacher >14 years special needs care teacher	Providing special needs care to pupils and guiding teachers how to deal with those pupils in the classroom	9/24 (F)
Sandra	Special needs care teacher	10 years teacher >2 years special needs care teacher	Providing special needs care to pupils and guiding teachers how to deal with those pupils in the classroom + responsible for organizing all school activities	9/24 (F)
Ellen	Special needs care teacher	10 years speech therapist 9 years teacher >5 years special needs care teacher	Providing special needs care to pupils and guiding teachers how to deal with those pupils in the classroom	14/24 (F)
Debby	Coordinator ^a	15 years teacher >7 years coordinator	Organizing and leading teacher meetings, providing administrative support (school schedules, school regulations, ICT)	12/24 (F)
Josephine	ICT manager	11 years teacher >4 years ICT manager	Providing ICT help to all teachers, guiding teachers in the implementation of ICT attainment targets for all pupils, maintenance of all school materials	4/24 (F)
Dorine	Mentor	12 years teacher >2 years mentor	Supervision and guidance of new beginning teachers	8/24 (F)

F fulltime job, *H* haltime job

^a Coordinators seem to fulfill very different responsibilities in all schools

^b A fulltime job in Flemish primary schools comprises 24/24

Results

Our analysis shows how the umbrella concept of teacher leadership covers various actual practices concerning the nature of the mandate, the exact responsibilities and the number of hours relieved from their teaching duties (“[Teacher leadership: one concept, one broad empirical reality](#)” section). Next, although we distinguish a broad empirical reality of teacher leaders (and of teacher leader responsibilities), they all seem to experience how taking on a formal teacher leader mandate places their social-professional relations at risk by installing new structures of social interaction in schools (“[Social-professional relations placed at risk](#)” section) and how these new relationships provoke the teacher leaders to redefine their own professional self-understanding (“[The professional self-understanding](#)” section). Finally, our data allow us to distinguish one central micropolitical strategy that the respondents used in dealing with those consequences for their social-professional

Table 2 Overview of respondents secondary schools

Name	Mandate	Experiences	Job responsibilities	Hours relieved from teaching ^b
Monica	Coordinator ^a	30 years teacher >1 year coordinator	Organizing and leading grade meetings, organizing school and class activities, class compositions, designing agenda, etc.	10 h (F)
Liz	Coordinator ^a	30 years teacher >1 year coordinator	Organizing and leading grade meetings, organizing school and class activities, composing supervision and exams schedule, etc.	6 h (F)
Catherine	Coordinator ^a	20 years teacher >5 years coordinator	Writing and implementing schools' pedagogical project, composing exams and teaching schedule, etc.	13 h (F)
Stephanie	Coordinator ^a	10 years teacher >4 years coordinator	Organizing and leading grade meetings, organizing activities of 3rd grade, supporting students' council, designing year book, etc.	11 h (F)
Daisy	Pedagogical coordinator ^a	39 years teacher >5 years pedagogical coordinator	Organizing and leading meetings for subject teachers, designing evaluation procedures, supervising and guiding new beginning teachers, etc.	8 h (F)
Valerie	Coordinator ^a	3 years teacher >1 year coordinator	Coordination and guidance of teachers in the implementation of compulsory cross-curricular attainment targets in schools, organizing school and class activities	2 h (F)
Lisa	Coordinator ^a	11 years teacher >1 year coordinator	Supervising and guiding new beginning teachers, composing exams and teaching schedule, organizing school and class activities, etc.	6 h (F)
An	Pedagogical coordinator ^a	10 years teacher >4 years pedagogical coordinator	Organizing and leading student evaluation meetings with all teachers, organizing open days, composing exam schedule, etc.	4 h (F)
Samantha	Coordinator + Student supervisor	31 years teacher >15 years student supervisor >4 years coordinator	Organizing all activities of 3rd grade, social-emotional supervision of students and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping student to make choice of study, etc.	9 h (F)

Table 2 continued

Name	Mandate	Experiences	Job responsibilities	Hours relieved from teaching ^b
Tina	Coordinator ^a	34 years teacher 13 years coordinator	Developing and implementing schools' local policy on professionalization, supervising and guiding new beginning teachers, organizing all activities 3rd grade, etc.	7 h (H)
Sarah	Coordinator ^a	6 years teacher >1 year coordinator	Coordination and guidance of teachers in the implementation of compulsory cross-curricular attainment targets in schools, organizing and leading school board meetings, organizing all school and class activities, etc.	10 h (F)
Evelyne	Coordinator ^a	17 years teacher >1 year coordinator	Developing and guiding teachers in the implementation of the curricular of the 1st grade, Organizing all activities of 1st grade, etc.	14 h (F)
Marco	Student supervisor	37 years teacher >1 year student supervisor	Guidance for students with learning disabilities or psycho-social problems and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping students to make choice of study, general contact person for teachers	5 h (F)
Jeffrey	Student supervisor	21 years teacher >6 years student supervisor	Guidance for students with learning disabilities or psycho-social problems and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping students to make choice of study, general contact person for teachers	2 h (F)
Evy	Student supervisor	12 years teacher >5 years student supervisor	Guidance for students with learning disabilities or psycho-social problems and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping students to make choice of study, general contact person for teachers	6 h (F)
Anna	Student supervisor	23 years teacher >10 years student supervisor	Guidance for students with learning disabilities or psycho-social problems and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping students to make choice of study, general contact person for teachers	7 h (F)
Tessa	Student supervisor	8 years teacher >1 year student supervisor	Guidance for students with learning disabilities or psycho-social problems and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping students to make choice of study, general contact person for teachers	7 h (F)
Steven	Student supervisor	27 years teacher >4 years student supervisor	Guidance for students with learning disabilities or psycho-social problems and guiding teachers how to deal with those students in their class, helping students to make choice of study, general contact person for teachers	10 h (F)

Table 2 continued

Name	Mandate	Experiences	Job responsibilities	Hours relieved from teaching ^b
Patrick	Mentor	31 years teacher >6 years mentor	Supervising and guiding new beginning teachers.	2 h (F)
Silvy	Curricular developer	10 years teacher >6 years responsible	Coordination and guidance of teachers in the implementation of compulsory cross-curricular attainment targets in schools	2 h (H)

F fulltime job, *H* halftime job

^a Coordinators seem to fulfill very different responsibilities in all schools

^b A fulltime teaching job in Flemish secondary schools comprises 20 h a week

Table 3 Overview interview themes

Interview themes	Examples of interview questions
<p>(a) General background information and their specific job responsibilities as a teacher leader</p> <p>With these questions, we aimed at gathering important background information of all respondents as well as context information of the school. More specific, we were interested in the specific job responsibilities of the teacher leaders, the reason of the implementation of their mandates, the application procedure and the proportion between their leadership duties versus their teaching responsibilities</p>	<p>“What teaching responsibilities do you fulfill in this school?”</p> <p>“Can you describe your school in four key words?”</p> <p>“Can you tell me who makes part of the school board and what is the task of every single member?”</p> <p>“What is the official title of your mandate?”</p> <p>“How many hours are you relieved from your teaching responsibilities?”</p> <p>“How come you were assigned these responsibilities and how did it happen?”</p> <p>“Which responsibilities does this mandate imply?”</p> <p>“Are all teachers in this school informed about you taking on these responsibilities?”</p> <p>“Why did the school board decide to implement this mandate?”</p>
<p>(b) Consequences for teacher leaders’ professional self-understanding</p> <p>With these questions we tried to gain insight in the way teacher leaders experience their formal mandate. More specifically, we were interested in the consequences of taking on leadership responsibilities as a teacher for their professional self-understanding and thus for the conceptions they have about themselves in their job</p>	<p>“Can you describe your job as a teacher leader by means of a metaphor?”</p> <p>“Did taking on leadership duties made your job easier/more difficult/more challenging?”</p> <p>“Do you feel more competent now than before you exerted leadership responsibilities?”</p> <p>“Did the image that you have about yourself in your job changed after taking on leadership responsibilities in the school?”</p> <p>“Do you look different to your future now you are fulfilling leadership responsibilities in the school? How?”</p>
<p>(c) Consequences for teacher leaders’ social-professional relations in the school</p> <p>With these questions we tried to obtain insight into the perceptions and experiences of teacher leaders concerning their social-professional relations with their teacher colleagues as well as with the school leader(s)</p>	<p>“Did taking on this teacher leader mandate changed your relationship with the school leader(s)? How?”</p> <p>“Do you feel recognized as a teacher leader?”</p> <p>“Did taking on this teacher leader mandate changed the relationship between you and your teacher colleagues? How?”</p>

relationships and for their professional self-understanding (“[Task differentiation as a micropolitical strategy to deal with the consequences](#)” section).

Teacher leadership: One concept, one broad empirical reality

With the first research question, we aim to obtain a better understanding of who teacher leaders in Flemish schools really are and, more specifically, what tasks they assume. Derived from Tables 1 and 2, substantial variation concerning the mandates can be seen, as well as the number of years an individual functions as a teacher

leader and the amount of time that the individual is relieved from teaching duties. This confirms the international finding that teacher leadership comprises a broad empirical reality. Another important finding is how diverse the use of the job title ‘coordinator’ (see Table 1 and 2) is in Flemish schools, since this mandate can contain very different responsibilities. For example, in one school, the coordinator is responsible for the organization of the school’s own local policy on professionalization, whereas in another school, the coordinator is in charge of organizing and leading the grade meetings.

Moreover, coordinators not only fulfill different responsibilities in comparison to each other, their mandate consists in itself of several divergent tasks that have nothing to do with each other, such as the combination of writing and implementing schools’ pedagogical project and organizing the open days. These teacher leaders take on a multitude of tasks that contain responsibilities to create supportive working conditions (administration, logistics) and to ensure efficient, effective school functioning in addition to the normal responsibilities of addressing pedagogical issues.³ This seems to be different for other teacher leaders, such as mentors of new and beginning teachers, special needs coordinators, student supervisors, and the individuals responsible for ICT and for the implementation of the cross-curricular attainment targets. Those teacher leaders take on a mandate that consists of the same duties in all schools (in both primary and secondary schools) and that contains one well-defined responsibility within the school. For these teacher leaders, it is clear to their colleagues which tasks are performed, what expertise is offered and which problems or questions can be solved by the teacher leader.

Social-professional relations placed at risk

Our analyses show how teacher leaders feel not only that they interact ‘more’ with other members in the school as a result of taking on the leadership responsibilities but also that the diversity of the topics, as well as the number of people with whom they interact, has increased. As a teacher, they only interacted with colleagues teaching the same grade level or teaching the same subject. Now, teacher leaders also report interactions with other teachers and with the school leader(s):

“I’ve got to know some colleagues better and even in a different way because I sometimes work together with them or I talk with them about special needs issues of one or their students (...) Some relations are closer now. I would never have talked to those people if I wasn’t teaching in the same year or teaching the same subject” (Evy).

“Yeah, you really interact more frequently with the school leader. You don’t do this when you are just a teacher because you are only responsible for your own class. But as a student supervisor, you need more often to talk to him

³ Conform to our definition of teacher leaders, we do not consider these administrative tasks as teacher leader responsibilities. Nevertheless, we have mentioned these responsibilities in Table 1 and 2 to give you an idea of all responsibilities coordinators assume.

[school leader] about, or inverse, he talks to you about certain issues that went wrong, that are hard, things that happened and so on” (Anna).

In particular, collaboration with the formal school leader seems to be considered a very new experience because their responsibilities have always been limited to the so-called ‘teachers’ zone’, far away from the administrators’ zone (Hanson 1991). Now, the tasks of teacher leaders seem to include a portion of both the teachers’ and the administrators’ zones, more or less forcing the teacher leaders to commute between both zones and the people involved.

Further, our data clarify how teacher leadership mandates are often introduced in schools to transfer certain school policy issues from the realm of the school leaders into the classroom practice or to constitute a structure that allows communication of the concerns, desires, ideas and difficulties experienced by the teachers into the administrators’ zone:

“I think that the coordinators need to be seen as the intervening people, as those who stand between the team of all teachers and what comes down from the Ministry of Education or from the school leader (...) I think they are the ones who translate what comes from above in something that is useful for teachers to students” (Monica).

“The school board has knowingly chosen for that [a teacher leader with still teaching responsibilities], because they think that if you are still teaching, you stand closer to your students, you know very well what is happening in a classroom and in the teachers team” (Catherine).

This may entail the opportunity for teacher leaders to acquire affinity with both zones but also brings a sense of not belonging somewhere in particular, which can be regarded as a drawback. Our respondents seem to express the sentiment of existing between a rock and a hard place, i.e., taking on teacher leader responsibilities increases the quantity of social-professional relations with other school members while contributing in a limited way to higher relational quality. Teacher leaders often feel lonely because, in most cases, no other teachers fulfill similar responsibilities within the school:

“It is a lonely position, yes, that’s for sure (...) I think, if we had some sort of small special needs core team within our school, I wouldn’t feel so lonely (...) Our school leader is someone who gives me feedback and who dare to question my ideas (...) but I would love to have these conversations with other colleagues” (Ellen).

With respect to this issue, teacher leaders mention the difficulty associated with meeting each school member’s desires and with satisfying everyone at the school. More precisely, teacher leaders are involved, more than anyone else, in issues in which either no clarity exists with respect to the zone to which an individual belongs or who has the authority; consequently, teacher leaders must address more differences in opinion or variable interests, which is emotionally demanding:

“I sometimes experience how I defend at the same time the interests of the teachers and those of the school leaders because I’m still a teacher (...) and those interests do not always agree (...) If they [school leaders] are talking about workload, I tend to say to them ‘hey, think about this, try to put yourself in their shoes [the teachers]’. But on the other hand, I also need to have solidarity with the school leaders, as a member of the school board, and convey decisions to the other ones [teachers], although these issues are not very popular” (Catherine).

Some teachers are getting used to the fact that they cannot please every single school actor: “I’m really trying to make everybody happy about some decision, but you can’t please everyone with what you do. I have accepted by now that you always will be criticized for what you do” (Stephanie).

All teacher leaders also mention feeling that although they still have teaching responsibilities, they are no longer perceived as a teacher by their teacher colleagues. In the interviews, the respondents indicate how they are now positioned by all other teachers in a higher hierarchical position because of their access to more confidential information as well as the fact they interact more frequently with the school leader(s). The latter tends to cause suspicion among their colleagues, who wonder to what extent the teacher leader is still ‘one of them’:

“Yeah, I think that some colleagues, they see it like a ladder, a ladder where teachers are standing (...) and then a bit higher the formal school leader and it seems like there is a small step provided between the school leader and the teacher for the mentor” (Dorine).

This doubt or lack of clarity results in a more detached, restrained attitude held by the teachers toward the teacher leader:

“From time to time, I can tell you, they are talking about a certain topic and then suddenly they stop their conversation. And afterwards, I heard they were criticizing new things we’ve just started and on which they didn’t agree (...) Then they were thinking ‘we have to be quiet otherwise she will pass it on to the school leader” (Monica).

All respondents emphasize that they do not wish to be placed higher in the hierarchy and also express the desire to continue their relationship with their former teacher colleagues from the perspective of the teachers’ zone, based on terms of egalitarianism: “No, I don’t see myself higher in the hierarchy as we don’t have any privileges, we don’t get better paid. It is just that, some part of my time I spend on organizing things” (Valerie).

Altogether: teacher leaders feel that their social-professional relationships within the school and, thus, their ‘sense of belonging’ are placed at risk once they have taken on leadership duties. Although they experience an increased quantity and diversity of interactions with their teacher colleagues and with the school leader, little contribution to higher relational quality seems to be at stake. On the contrary, teacher leaders mention how they find themselves commuting and even struggling between two zones and the people and objectives of these zones; they feel lonely

because other teachers position them higher in the hierarchy without (almost) any colleague sharing the same position or responsibilities. They feel like they have lost their colleagues since assuming leadership responsibilities.

The professional self-understanding

Our respondents report that taking on teacher leadership responsibilities is a positive choice. They see it as an opportunity to participate in school policy and decision-making, as a way to broaden and deepen their own professional expertise and as a solution for the limited variation in tasks and responsibilities encountered as a teacher: “I think this is very enriching, definitely the pedagogical issues (...) But also the variation that makes you not getting bored after a while (...) And the challenges it brings along, especially the challenges. They form my strongest motivation sources” (Samantha). “Yeah, the feeling of cooperating at school’s local policy, of making something of the school” (Lisa). However, taking on such responsibilities also seems to bring significant frustration and disappointment, which strongly impact the self-esteem and job motivation of the teacher leaders. These frustrations are consequences of the increased workload that teacher leadership necessitates. Teacher leaders talk about themselves as a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ or ‘centipede’ with a broad and diverse range of leadership duties. Therefore, teacher leaders must address the feelings of not having everything under control, of having only limited attention for multiple tasks and of only partially fulfilling their responsibilities in a good way:

“It is not always that easy because we do a bit of everything, we have to deal with so many things (...) You can’t do all those tasks in a same way, with the same energy and put equal time in it (...) Because there are so many tasks, sometimes you feel like, if I only had to do this, I could really focus on it, but now I have to do three, four different tasks and that makes it really hard” (Sandra).

In addition to the many leadership tasks, the combination of leadership responsibilities with teaching responsibilities seems to be difficult for these teacher leaders and affects their task perception. Several respondents report how difficult it is to ensure that they spend a sufficient amount of time on their teaching responsibilities. The official proportion of the amount of time spent on teaching and the amount of time spent on leadership responsibilities seems to vary significantly in reality:

“No, that is a lot lot lot more. Teaching should normally be a half-time job, 9 of the 20 [hours], but I think it takes only a fourth of my time. I actually think that being a coordinator almost can be considered as a fulltime job, but then with a halftime teaching job on top of it” (Stephanie).

Therefore, teacher leaders express the feeling that they fall short with respect to their students:

“I feel like, my teaching responsibilities, well, I don’t spend much time on it (...) I would like to have more time to focus on the language I teach [French], but I don’t succeed in it. Like reading books (...) and watching some French movies sometimes, watching television programs in French (...) but also if it comes to correcting homework and exams. I try to keep up with corrections, but I just can’t and then I have to ask my students to be a bit more patient” (Catherine).

For some teacher leaders, this experience seems to be enough to reconsider becoming a fulltime teacher, which has implications on their future professional perspectives: “I really want to have more time for my students. I would like to become a fulltime teacher again” (Sarah). “I don’t know if I will continue with taking on leadership duties. The task fragmentation and speed is too high. So I really don’t know.” (Lisa).

Carrying out teacher leadership responsibilities seems also to have important consequences for the self-image of teacher leaders. On the one hand, teacher leaders remain classroom teachers and want to be considered teachers. Therefore, they encounter frustration when the increased workload impedes their ability to spend time on class preparation and with their students. On the other hand, they also see themselves as teacher leaders, and as a result of these responsibilities, they develop new cognitions about themselves. Consequently, they redefine their professional self-understanding and look for recognition and appreciation for both responsibilities (teaching and leading duties) from their colleagues: “I still think there are issues that should be discussed with me first, when it comes to special needs issues, before it is communicated to all teachers.” (Jolene) This social acknowledgment is not only necessary for their self-esteem and job motivation but also gives teacher leaders the necessary legitimacy to effectively accomplish their tasks as teacher leaders, especially when those tasks involve ‘leading’ teacher colleagues.

However, receiving this recognition and appreciation from their colleagues must be achieved. Because it is given by others, it cannot be controlled by the teacher leaders themselves. Our respondents report how receiving recognition and appreciation for their leadership duties is far from evident because it mostly implies extra work for the other teachers, as well:

“Teachers, they can react like, ‘oh no, did we receive another e-mail, do we need to take this in account too?’ (...) Especially when it comes to students with learning disabilities (...) then they get like an action plan of more than 35 pages and I can understand there are more pleasant things in life (...) I can imagine how hard it must be if you have four of them in your classroom” (Jeffrey).

Additionally, teacher leaders feel that their ideas do not always align with those of the other teachers:

“Sometimes I feel that what we do as coordinators, okay, this may sound exaggerated, that others do not appreciate what we are doing (...) Sometimes you get those comments like ‘you are organizing way too many activities’, or ‘the school should more focus on the classroom practice instead of all those

happy activities' (...) They are very skeptical sometimes and question everything like 'do we really need to do this and what is the added value of it?'" (Sarah).

Also, teachers often see the actions by the teacher leader as a threat to their autonomy in the classroom:

"Some of the teachers are quite suspicious towards me because I sometimes need to intervene and comment, like saying: 'that didn't really work out well, next time you may want to try this different approach. They sometimes seem not to trust me, although I try to make them feel at ease but, well yeah, sometimes I just have to tell them that they'd better do things differently'" (Daisy).

Besides those reasons, teacher leaders also feel that teachers seem to have a problem with the fact they do not teach fulltime anymore and have a different rhythm. Teachers tend to see such a different rhythm as 'easier':

"When I'm not teaching, I feel teachers don't appreciate. Just the fact that someone doesn't have to teach and can do something different. They consider this as easier and more relaxed job than teaching." (Dorine).

"Some teachers really think I don't have that much work to do because it is less well-defined than when you are a fulltime teacher. When teaching, you are teaching from the moment you come to school till the moment you leave. I do different things, such as talking to parents. But teachers sometimes think that this is not working, that what I'm doing is easy, such as drinking some coffee with parents." (Ellen)

While teacher leaders indicate that they struggle with obtaining the recognition and collaboration of their teacher colleagues, they all mention receiving the explicit legitimacy from the school leader(s), for example by numerous 'pats on the shoulder' and by the fact that they are entrusted with confidential information:

"I get lots of e-mails saying 'that was really good' and 'I learn how to work more efficiently because of you' (...) She really takes time to do so, to express her gratitude and appreciation" (Ellen).

"Yes our relationship even got better. She really shares lots of confidential information (...) She consults me about many issues, issues we would never have talked about before" (Silvy).

The explanation for the development of a fluent collaboration between teacher leaders and school leaders (in contrast to the collaboration between teacher leaders and teachers) in Flemish schools can be found in the fact that the teacher leaders take over a significant number of leadership tasks, decreasing the workload of the school leader(s). Teachers on the other hand may experience an increased workload due to the interference of the teacher leader's new responsibilities on classroom practice. Innovation often requires an investment of extra time.

Although teacher leaders experience taking on leadership duties as a way to broaden and deepen their own expertise and to introduce more variation in their tasks, their motivation tends to fade away because of the high work load and the little time they still can spend on their teaching responsibilities. Teacher leaders struggle in obtaining recognition and appreciation for their expertise and responsibilities by their teacher colleagues because they introduce a higher work load for teachers. Teacher leaders and teachers often do not share the same values on educational issues and teachers also don't seem to value the hard work of teacher leaders. School leaders, on the contrary, seem to recognize and appreciate teacher leaders more. These elements are of importance for the self-image, self-esteem and job motivation of teacher leaders and makes teacher leaders doubt which responsibilities they should take on in the future.

Task differentiation as a micropolitical strategy to deal with the consequences

When we approach the above-mentioned findings from a micropolitical perspective, two professional interest agendas arise, which appear to be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, we illustrated how teacher leaders do not want to place their social-professional relations within the school at risk and thus they attach significance to preserving hierarchically equal positions to the other teachers in the school (see [“Social-professional relations placed at risk”](#) section). On the other hand, teacher leaders want to obtain recognition for their actions as a teacher leader and thus use their certain expertise to lead other teachers to better school practices. Our respondents indicate the desire and the necessity to receive recognition for their leadership duties and expertise, assuming that this determines their self-image, self-esteem, job motivation and task perception as a teacher leader as well as the ability to conduct their leadership responsibilities in an effective and efficient way ([“The professional self-understanding”](#) section). Pursuing such self-interests seems to clash with the realization of social-professional interest and vice versa. Consequently, our respondents seem to develop strategies that allow them to realize both opposing professional interests.

A central micropolitical strategy is used discursively and comprises the framing of their role and position as teacher leader in terms of task differentiation instead of function differentiation. By task differentiation, we mean the fulfillment of other tasks in comparison to their teacher colleagues without being caused by or leading to taking on a new position in the school hierarchy. Task differentiation covers the fact that teacher leaders, similarly to other teachers, teach and on top of that take on 'different' responsibilities within the school, by means of relieved hours from their teaching job. In contrast with function differentiation, task differentiation is merely a 'different' type of time allocation. In contrast, function differentiation implies that the fulfillment of other tasks is associated with taking on a new and different position in the hierarchical structure of the school.

Our respondents profile themselves as teachers who only differ from their colleagues in terms of their specific job responsibilities and not in terms of their position within the school. Teacher leaders emphasize that they only possess 'different' obligations and that their knowledge and expertise is slightly different

but is not qualitatively better or more substantial than the knowledge and expertise of other teachers. Therefore, the teacher leaders interviewed in this study use a well-defined speaking manner in which they position themselves, the teachers and the school leader in a certain way:

“Yes, I do see myself as equal to all teachers (...) I’m still a teacher, just like them (...) But every now and then, I happen to fulfill sometimes other tasks than when I haven’t got these responsibilities” (Tessa).

“In the end, I’m still one of their teacher-colleagues but who only spends more time participating in thinking about school level processes.” (Liz).

Accordingly, teacher leaders emphasize the difference between their tasks and that of the school leaders to reinforce their equal position with teachers. In particular, this seems to be the case when talking about the topic of evaluation. Teacher leaders explicitly refuse to take on evaluation tasks with respect to other teachers or to exhaust the desirability of the classroom practices of colleagues. Teacher leaders decline to evaluate other teachers, confirming that this task does not belong to the responsibilities of a teacher and further emphasizing that it constitutes a primary aspect of the duties of school leaders, who are positioned higher:

“The school leader never has to ask me what I think about a certain teacher. Evaluation is none of my business (...) If the principal decides that a teacher is dismissed, then it is her decision (...) I really don’t want to deal with those sorts of issues” (Daisy).

“Although my task is to supervise teachers and what they are doing, it is the school leader that reprimand teachers. I’m not going to say to teachers what they have done wrong” (Ellen).

The micropolitical strategy of task differentiation does not only constitute part of their way of speaking but teacher leaders also undertake diverse actions to strengthen the credibility of their speaking. Because these actions are both purposeful and public, teacher leaders openly position themselves as members of the teaching team:

“I always have lunch in the teachers’ room because I (...) I think it is important. Yes, I do this very intentionally. If there is some kind of special activity in the school, school leaders and teacher leaders tend to sit together. I never do. I always go and sit next to all teachers. Otherwise, it seems like I’m leading from above and that can’t be the purpose” (Daisy).

“I think that if you want to be a teacher leader, you have to gain confidence of the school leader but also of your teacher colleagues (...) and that’s why I sometimes talk about my classroom practices, like ‘oh hey, today was a really disaster’. You cannot give teachers the impression that everything is happening the way you want it to happen. Not about your classroom practice, but nor about the responsibilities as a coordinator” (Debby).

Although all teacher leaders in our study express the same consequences for their social-professional relations in school and their professional self-understanding, it seems that some teacher leaders experience these consequences more intensely, which then lead to more intense micropolitical actions. It is remarkable how most of these teacher leaders seem to have the term ‘coordinator’ in the title of their mandate (see “[Teacher leadership: one concept, one broad empirical reality](#)” section and Table 1 and 2: ^a), and thus all have a broad set of tasks and responsibilities that contains not just pedagogical issues but also responsibilities that create supportive (administrative, logistics) working conditions in school. This may be related to the fact that a part of their responsibilities, namely their duties concerning the creation of supportive working conditions in the school, are closely aligned with those of the school leader(s) and with issues that are not immediately visible to teachers:

“Teachers don’t see this but it is really tough. We are relieved from our teaching responsibilities for some hours, but they [teachers] often forget all the meetings we have, all those meeting moments and councils, the fact that we need to organize a lot of things which takes a lot of time and which they don’t see.” (Sarah).

Teachers do not always see these teacher leaders in action and therefore are not aware of all responsibilities of the teacher leader because those tasks belong to the administrators’ zone. Also, in contrast to the other teacher leaders, teacher leaders with the term ‘coordinator’ in the title of their mandate fulfill responsibilities that do not imply clear professional expertise in comparison to responsibilities such as special needs care, mentoring, and ICT. Thus, these teacher leaders cannot invoke such an expertise as a source of social recognition and appreciation in order to obtain legitimacy for their position as teacher leader.

Conclusion and limitations

Schools are complex organizations, characterized by the presence of structural and cultural working conditions and interpersonal relations, which interconnect all school actors with each other by means of formal and informal networks. Recent research indicates that both interactions and collegial support must be considered as central elements to increase teachers’ professionalism as well as to augment the engagement of teachers in their job (see Daly 2010; Penuel et al. 2009). Because teacher leadership structurally creates more interaction in schools, it can be regarded as an effective and efficient strategy for contributing to school development, professional development, and better student results. However, the results of 26 interviews with teacher leaders show the complexity associated with the reality and actual practice of teacher leadership in school organizations. In this article, based on the experiences of teacher leaders in Flanders, we found out how a formal shift in the job responsibilities of teachers, implying leadership duties, has a strong impact on their social-professional relations as well as on their professional self-

understanding. Teacher leaders feel that when taking on leadership duties in schools in order to contribute to the quality of education by guiding other teachers toward improved educational practice, they place their social-professional relationships within the school at risk. They all mention how they feel lonely in their position because they are positioned by other school actors as not belonging anymore to the teachers' zone. This also influences the cognitions teacher leaders have about themselves in their job. Next to an increased work load that makes teacher leaders having only little time to spend on their teaching responsibilities, teacher leaders report on how they struggle in obtaining recognition for their expertise and responsibilities by their teacher colleagues and how this all has an impact on their self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspective.

This study contributes to the teacher leadership literature because it grasps the notion of what it means to be a teacher leader in a school and thus how teacher leaders feel about guiding other teachers toward improved educational practice. In the international literature, teacher leadership is presented as a catalyst for educational improvement although few indications for such positive assumptions are available. The literature leans towards advocacy rather than empirical investigations and offers a rosy view of the implementation of teacher leadership without paying attention to how teacher leaders experience taking on leadership duties and, more specifically, what the consequences are for their social-professional relations and professional self-understanding. Therefore, this study offers empirical evidence that indicates how the implementation of formal teacher leadership mandates in schools need to be seen as more than merely a task expansion of one single school actor. Moreover, teacher leadership provokes teacher leaders to revise their professional identity, reshapes the authority patterns and institutional roles and dissolves the division between the teachers' and the administrators' zone, which has implications for all members of the school. Teacher leadership therefore must be recognized and studied as a complex phenomenon with consequences for the school as organization and with paying attention to unexpected side effects that can at least make the rosy story of educational improvement less self-evident.

Given the fact that the implementation of teacher leadership should be considered as more than a task extension of one single teacher, the most important limitation of this study is that we did not include the experiences of teacher colleagues and school leaders concerning the implementation of a formal teacher leader mandate. We did not look at concrete interactions between teacher leaders and other school members. A follow-up study that also pays attention to the perceptions of teachers and school leaders to highlight the concrete moment-to-moment interactions would be very helpful in unraveling the complexity of teacher leadership. Moreover, such a study would be in line with recent research on distributed leadership where the concept of leadership is studied by primarily focusing on processes that influence social interactions while also exploring the formal roles of school leaders. According to Scribner and Bradley-Levine (2010, see also Spillane 2006), leadership is "not necessarily located in formal positions but is distributed across school organizations through interactions that are intended to influence organizational activity" (p. 492).

For this reason, it is important to study teacher leadership as a practice, as opposed to a role in which several actors and their personal sense-making influence how teacher leadership takes place. More specifically, a follow-up study that integrates the perspectives of other actors (teachers and school leaders) and maps how taking on leadership duties as a teacher is ‘negotiated’ within the social-professional interactions in the school will provide a clearer picture because leadership is comprised of mutually reinforcing identities as leaders and followers (DeRue and Ashford 2010). For this purpose, Social Network Analysis (see e.g., Borgatti and Ofem 2010; Scott 2000; Scott and Carrington 2012) and Positioning Theory (see e.g., Harré 1995; Harré and Van Langenhove 1999) can be useful approaches. Social Network Analysis can help us to map how different actors in the school are connected and how these connections influence the teacher leadership practices. Positioning Theory can offer us a framework, allowing us to focus on the negotiation process between teacher leaders, school leader(s) and teachers with respect to recognition and thus the legitimacy to act as a teacher leader from the idea that “positions are relational (...) and cannot be understood by referring to general rules and roles” (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999, p. 6).

Consequently, to obtain a better view of the processes that play an important role in shaping teacher leadership practices, more qualitative research. This new research agenda would include, in addition to interviews of teacher leaders, interviews of teacher colleagues and school leaders as well as observations with explicit attention given to how the diverse actors are positioned and how they position each other. This elaborated and intensive data collection would also help us to identify variation concerning, for example, characteristics of the individual teacher leader, of their tasks and responsibilities, and of the school organization and culture, and to look more in depth how variation in these characteristics influences how teacher leadership really takes place in schools. That way, a fuller picture of teacher leadership is created which would allow us to look for practical conditions that support and strengthen the implementation of formal teacher leader positions in schools.

Another important limitation of this study is the exclusive focus on teacher leaders with formal teacher leader responsibilities. We did not consider teacher leaders without formal positions in schools although it would be interesting to investigate to what extent the findings of this study are also applicable to them. Since informal teacher leaders are granted and recognized by both their colleagues and the school leader(s), based on their expertise and personal authority, it may be that they experience fewer difficulties than teacher leaders in formal positions distributed and granted by the school leader.

Despite these limitations, this study gives a clear view on how teacher leadership has a strong impact on teacher leaders’ professional self-understanding as well as on their social-professional relations with their colleagues. Moreover, this study stands up to the overall assumed positive outcomes of teachers taking on leadership responsibilities beyond their classroom duties by uncovering underlying processes that turn teacher leadership into a complex phenomenon. However, this article does not argue for eliminating the practice of distributing leadership responsibilities to teachers in schools. Instead, it illustrates how teacher leadership comprises more

than merely a task extension of some teachers and how teacher leadership needs to be approached as a whole-school intervention that is critical to prevailing structures and professional norms.

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