Leadership in Flemish secondary education: mapping principals' daily assignments, self-efficacy beliefs and leadership practices

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Abstract

Schools all around the world operate in an increasingly complex and demanding environment. Over the past decades, school leadership therefore attracted a lot of attention. Leadership for Learning (LFL) emerged most recently as a comprehensive leadership framework, integrating aspects of frameworks thus far applied in school leadership research. Via semi-structured interviews and surveys, this paper sought to deepen our understanding of the leadership practices and beliefs among Flemish school leaders in secondary schools and assess the prevalence of an LFL model in Flanders. It appears principals' daily routines are mainly operational in nature. Due to tight work schedules and day-to-day hustles, little time remains to work on a school's vision and pedagogical strategy. Furthermore, school leader's descriptions of leadership most closely connects to a transformational leadership mode with principals' self-efficacy beliefs explaining most of its variance.

Introduction

Schools all around the world operate in a rapidly changing and demanding environment, causing education to become an increasingly complex affair (Bush & Glover, 2012, 2014). Societal and managerial trends on the one hand, put pressure on education from the outside to meet a wide array of expectations (and complaints). On the other hand, educational systems contend with difficulties from within. Both closely intertwine and put an unprecedented pressure on educational professionals.

Over the past decades, pressure on education augmented in the first place due to societal shifts (e.g. globalisation causing international (market) competition; large-scale migration flows rendering classrooms more diverse and multicultural than ever; technological (r)evolutions multiplying information exponentially and individualisation in society leading to an increased awareness, outspokenness and involvement in youngsters and their parents) (MacBeath & Cheng, 2008). In the second place, pressure on education augmented in the wake of New Public Management (NPM) reforms. School leaders, just like their fellow public sector managers, were allowed more autonomy in leading their organisations. In return, they were expected to do so efficiently with measurable objectives set to hold them accountable (Bush & Glover, 2014; Hood, 1991). And whereas accountability should give managers an incentive to organise more efficiently, increased monitoring entails more administrative burdens as to successfully account for all actions taken (Pollitt, 2003). Not only planning demands and administration increased however, rules also turned more complex as education related practices are more frequently brought sub judice. School leaders' space to manoeuvre and liberty to take choices as they see fit, is therefore also paradoxically curtailed (Hulsbos & van Langevelde, 2017). This 'accountability-paradox' might lead to dissatisfaction and detachment from the job as school leaders feel overworked, under pressure of impossible time schedules and an enormous amount of paperwork (Holligan, Menter, Hutchings, & Walker, 2006; MacBeath, O'Brien, & Gronn, 2012).

Furthermore, Flemish school leaders do not only face above-mentioned external challenges. They are also expected to deal with contextual problems connected to Flemish SE's core design. Think of problems such

as the reproduction of social inequality (Lavrijsen, Nicaise, & Wouters, 2013; Nicaise, 2016; OECD, 2015), grade repetition which remains a recurring phenomenon (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2017 a) and an imminent shortage of teachers (Kabinet Vlaams Minister van Onderwijs, 2015).

In sum, the belief in a socially engineered society clearly finds its way to education. Given youngsters, before the age of 18 years, spend a substantial part of their lives at school, schools are pre-eminently considered a vehicle for social change and national economic competitiveness by politicians, policy-makers and the wider community (Forde, 2011; MacBeath et al., 2012). However, when all societal expectations are deferred to education under the guise of educating future generations of citizens, educators are at risk of getting overwhelmed. MacBaeth, O'Brien and Gronn (2012, p. 422) describe this phenomenon as 'intensification'. Though expenditure on education is expected to help foster economic growth, enhance productivity and decrease social inequalities (Eurostat, 2017), augmenting demands are not paralleled by augmenting financial resources (OECD, 2017; Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2017b). And whereas organisational innovation could counter – or at least ease – these burdens, in essence, schools still function according to the logics and structures of old (Bruns & Bruggink, 2016).

Not surprisingly, in 2016, four out of ten schools (i.e. primary and secondary education combined) started the school year with a new principal. School principals moreover fell within the category of Flemish employees to most frequently take sick leave (i.e. calculated in full days off) due to psychological distress-related illnesses such as burn-out. Although several reasons can explain these figures, augmented pressure of work accounts for a lot of cases with fifty- to sixty-hour weeks being no longer the exception according to Flemish School Leader associations (Vancaeneghem, 2017). In addition, headmastership, all in all, implies a lonesome job which might aggravate perceived work stress and thus add to the drop-out figures (Holligan et al., 2006). As a result of high principal turnover, a great deal of expertise gets lost and continuity and long-term vision within schools are hindered.

Over the past decades, school leadership therefore attracted considerable attention as a topic for scientific research (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). How do school leaders manage? Do they even manage? And what kind of leadership proves suitable to keep a school up and running in these highly demanding times?

Literature

Leadership, in spite of being a topic that has generated ample of interest and fascination among people throughout history, proves an ambiguous and complex concept to define (Stogdill, 1974). In literature, leadership has therefore been defined in a variety of ways, such as personal traits, behaviours, influence pathways, work relations and positions, etc. (Yukl, 2013). Gradually, comprehensive theories on leadership emerged. Whereas multiple theories were considered, this paper limits itself to a concise overview of leadership theories relevant for the field of education.

Situational leadership

Situational leadership (SL) theories emerged in the 70s. These theories were first to explicitly recognise the importance of contextual factors in managing organisations and leading staff. A leadership style that proves effective in one situation might be ineffective in another. Leaders should therefore adapt their leadership style to staff characteristics (e.g. job maturity such as years of experience and technical competence; and psychological maturity such as engagement and motivation), task structure (e.g. complexity), hierarchy (e.g. good or bad relation between leader and subordinates) and power relations (e.g. strong or weak formal power position of the leader) (Bouckaert, Hondeghem, Voets, Op de Beeck, & Cautaert, 2011). As a rather general leadership model, situational leadership recently found its way to educational research (Hallinger, 2011).

Transformational leadership

Central to the transformational leadership (TL) theories are the attitudes, behaviours, capacities, engagement and motivation of co-workers (Bass, 1995; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Seltzer & Bass, 1990). As higher levels of staff members' commitment to the organisation's mission and objectives cause more willingness to contribute thereto, it is important for leaders to foster a feel of involvement and engagement among staff. Transformational leaders do so by formulating a clear, ambitious and invigorating mission with corresponding objectives. In its design process, stakeholders, such as staff members, are heard and their opinions, values, aspirations and complaints taken into account. Leaders align personal and organisational values and objectives with those of staff members. The mission therefore forms a supported and shared agreement. All organisation members are motivated to set aside their self-interest for the pursuit of common organisational objectives (Marks & Printy, 2003; Seltzer & Bass, 1990). Staff members are also transformed to higher levels of performance, motivation and commitment through 'individualised consideration' and 'intellectual stimulation' by their superior. A people manager who lends an ear to co-workers' aspirations, concerns and/or problems, advising and coaching them along the way. Someone who addresses co-workers' capacities and talents and grants them the liberty and opportunities to develop themselves personally as well as professionally. Able staff members, in turn, are more likely to make a substantial contribution to the realisation of the school's objectives (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Finally, a transformational leader models the behaviour he wants to see in co-workers. Bass termed this 'idealised influence' (Bass, 1995).

Instructional leadership

As school leadership gained in importance over the past 30 years, general leadership theories were abandoned and new theoretical frameworks were developed to grasp the complexity and specificity of leadership in an educational context (Bush & Glover, 2014). 'Instructional leadership' (IL) emerged as model explicitly linking leadership to school and student outcomes via a predominant focus on teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2008).

According to Hallinger and Murphy (1985), in defining the school mission, managing the instructional programme and promoting the school learning climate, principals undertake all necessary actions to address teaching and learning and thus engage in effective schooling. Hallinger (2003) goes on to define ten specific leadership functions within these three broad action categories. That way defining the school mission entails the formulation of school objectives and communication thereof. In managing the instructional programme, principals are expected to coordinate the curriculum, supervise and evaluate instruction and monitor student process. Finally, a principal promotes a strong and vibrant learning climate by protecting instructional time, stimulating teachers, promoting professional development and maintaining a high visibility.

Over the years, the idea of instructional leadership was however frequently subjected to criticism:

1) Principals are put down as lonesome heroes in charge of teaching and students' and co-workers' learning. They are the very centre of expertise and the driving force in school decision-making (Hallinger, 2003). Teachers are merely regarded as a school leaders' obedient followers (Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals should, instead, be considered one of many leaders as multiple professionals (e.g. teachers) within a school need to combine strengths for effective schooling (Townsend, Acker-Hocevar, Ballenger, & Place, 2013). Additionally, Leithwood et al. (2006) and Day et al. (2008) found school leaders to exert most influence on teaching and learning through indirect means (e.g. raising staff motivation and commitment while optimising their working conditions) rather than direct ones (e.g. weighing on instruction, curriculum and assessment through personal expertise and experience).
2) Instructional leadership is too concerned with teaching and learning, and so neglects the administrative, legal and financial aspects of running a school. Curiously, it is these aspects of keeping order and effective managing that gained importance (L. Sackney and C. Mitchell, 2008 as cited in MacBeath & Dempster, 2009).
3) As a framework, instructional leadership provides too little guidance on how to be a successful principal as it focusses predominantly on what school leaders should do rather than how they should

be doing it. "In this respect, [instructional leadership] is limited and partial, and has to be considered alongside other models" (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 566).

In order to break with the hierarchal and top-down approach, several scholars incite on combining multiple perspectives on leadership (e.g. situational, instructional and transformational) in a new and comprehensive theory (Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008; Townsend et al., 2013).

Distributed leadership

In the wake of instructional leadership theories, literature on school leadership witnessed the rise of distributed leadership (DL) models (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). These models dismissed previous models' one-sided view on school leaders as lonesome heroes on top of their organisation (Bush & Glover, 2003). Not only has contemporary education turned into a too complex affair for principals to go about it completely on their own - as this premise would require a school leader to possess an inhumane amount of knowhow and skills to cope (Bush, 2018; Bush & Glover, 2012) - leadership, moreover, is increasingly considered a quality that can be taken on by a multitude of individuals within a school. This is especially the case in large schools: school leaders simply do not have enough time at their disposal to meet and discuss daily with every single employee (Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009).

Overall, distributed leadership theories recognises that leadership can be administered by all members within the school (Spillane, Harris, Jones, & Mertz, 2015). Generally, this implies multiple individuals or teams of individuals to share the responsibility for leadership functions or tasks (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Leithwood, Mascall, et al., 2008). Depending on the context, size, complexity and scope of a task, various individuals can be involved at different times and to varying degrees (Torrance, 2013).

In examining the distribution of leadership within a school, one at first tends to look at how these functions are dispersed over formal positions within the organisation (e.g. the principal, assistant-principal(s), grade coordinators, student counsellors or newcomer mentors) as the holders of these functions were officially

assigned and trusted leadership responsibilities. In this regard, it is hard to think of distributed leadership without the concept of 'teacher leadership'. After all, achieving shared leadership assumes experienced teachers willing to take responsibility, engage in the realisation of school objectives, let their voices be heard and commit to the collective building of knowledge and understanding (Frost, 2008). Teacher leadership is next to a personal choice, also an organisational state of affairs as it presupposes a culture of trust and collaboration, strong and purposeful professional development opportunities and a principal that organises, supports and coordinates teacher leadership through clear and transparent structures in alignment with a shared vision of where the school needs to go (Leithwood, Mascall, et al., 2008; Muijs & Harris, 2006).

Concepts of teacher leadership and distributed leadership are however not restricted to those in formal positions. Leadership as a practice can, in theory at least, be exercised informally by every single school member (Harris, 2013; Muijs & Harris, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Hence, distributed leadership is more than solely the sum of distributed responsibilities. An important feature is also clear communication and solid interaction between leaders (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014), next to allowing broad and regular staff participation and consultation (Day et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2006).

Leadership for Learning (LFL) and associates

Notwithstanding the critiques, instructional leadership stayed the dominant conception of school leadership in Anglo-American research for 25 years (Townsend et al., 2013). Only over the past decade did the research on school leadership come under review (Hallinger, 2011). New comprehensive theories emerged as to cope with the aforementioned limitations of deploying solely instructional leadership as a theoretical framework to grasp school leadership (Bush & Glover, 2003, 2014). These theories are most frequently denoted in literature with the term 'Leadership for Learning' (LFL). And even though there is no agreed definition of the concept, descriptions of LFL do however share a common base (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009; MacBeath, Swaffield, & Frost, 2009).

First, similar to instructional leadership models, LFL considers leadership as an intentional and result-oriented process with an explicit focus on learning (MacBeath et al., 2009). Administrative, financial and logistical aspects of schooling are of secondary importance as they serve thorough teaching and learning. According to Murphy, Elliot, Goldring and Porter (2007, p. 179):

> "The touchstones for this type of leadership include the ability of leaders (a) to stay consistently focused on the right stuff - the core technology of schooling, or learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment and (b) to make all the other dimensions of schooling (e.g. administration, organization, finance) work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning".

Secondly, the focus on learning outstretches student achievement. Everyone in the school organisation is considered a learner and shares a responsibility thereto. The creation of a strong learning climate is indispensable for school performance and improvement (Marsh, 2015; Murphy et al., 2007). Third, according to LFL theories, educational leadership is a collaborative process of shared responsibility taking (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; MacBeath et al., 2009; Marsh, 2015). Stemming from this point, leadership is not solely attributed to those in formal positions such as the principal (Marsh, 2012). A principal is just one of many leaders in the school community required to establish optimal learning conditions and school improvement (Townsend et al., 2013). He 'serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation' (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008, p. 5). Supportive structures for teacher participation and collaboration need to be in place for schools to make the conversion to communities for learning (MacBeath et al., 2009; Schelfhout, 2017). Distributed leadership is thereby believed to leave a positive mark on school improvement and student learning (Day et al., 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood, Harris, et al., 2008). Finally, LFL theories recognise that principals' leadership style is subject to contextual factors (e.g. personal factors such as years of experience; school factors such as staff and student composition) (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Murphy et al., 2007).

Murphy et al. (2007) looked into the leadership practices of USA's highest performing schools and their school leaders as they believed not all types and styles of leadership to be equally suitable to achieve educational success. They delineate a LFL-framework composing of eight major dimensions, each further defined in a number of operational actions effective school leaders undertake on a daily basis. These eight dimensions are: (1) vision for learning, (2) instructional programme, (3) curricular programme, (4) assessment programme, (5) communities of learning, (6) resource acquisition and use, (7) organisational culture and (8) social advocacy.

According to Daniëls, Hondeghem and Dochy (2019), LFL integrates features of all aforementioned leadership theories. That way, regardless of its deficiencies, it meets scholars' call for a purposeful integration of different frameworks.

Self-efficacy

Finally, this study touches upon the concept of self-efficacy (SEE). Self-efficacy refers to the situation in which professionals profoundly trust upon their own abilities and trade to effectively plan, organise, achieve predetermined objectives and live up to job-related expectations (Bandura, 1997; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Research showed (principal) self-efficacy to be positively related to multiple professional aspects such as job performance (Alessandri, Borgogni, Schaufeli, Vittorio, & Chiara, 2015), persistence in attaining goals (Osterman & Sullivan, 1996) and work engagement, job satisfaction and perceived job autonomy (Federici, 2013; Federici & Skaalvik, 2011). Self-efficacy was likewise associated negatively with signs of (teacher) burn-out (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). It is therefore reasonable to assume that SEE might also leave its mark on school principals' leadership style (Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2018; Tschannen-moran & Gareis, 2004). After all, a driving spirit might emanate from feeling self-confident about one's own abilities to bring specific leadership tasks or obligations to a favourable conclusion (Bandura, 1977, 1997).

Research questions

Given the current state of research on school leadership – with most theorising originating from Anglo-American research raising the question whether these models also fit a Flemish educational context – and questions still unanswered, this study aspires to provide an answer to the following research question (RQ):

- RQ. What does school leadership in Flemish secondary education currently looks like?
  a) Does Flemish school leadership take on characteristics of explicitly one leadership mode (i.e. situational, transformational, instructional or distributed) or does it align with recent beliefs of successful school leadership, thus combining different modes?
  b) Which tasks do Flemish school leaders perform on a daily basis? How do these relate to the current predominant LFL conception?
  c) Do Flemish school principals feel self-effective in their job as school leader?
  d) What influences Flemish SE school leaders' most applied leadership styles?

Data and Methods

To answer aforementioned research questions a mixed-method approach was chosen and an exploratory interview and survey round was set up. The following paragraphs describe the data collection and analysis of both sources. In addition, annex 1 provides an overview of relevant respondent characteristics in the qualitative and quantitative sample, comparing these to the overall averages in Flanders.

The interviews and surveys serve to answer different parts of the main RQ. That way, this study chose to approach sub questions one and two from a qualitative perspective as rich and in-depth descriptions by interviewees were deemed to give the best insights. Sub questions three and four on the other hand lend themselves more for a quantitative approach and answering through internationally validated measurement scales and statistical analysis.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

Via semi-structured in-depth interviews 19 principals reported on their daily leadership practices and views on effective leadership in secondary education. They described the tasks requiring most of their attention during a working week and the attitudes and virtues, knowledge and skills an ideal school principal should possess or behaviours he should display in order to be successful at this job. Additionally, 3 innovation coaches reported on these exact same elements based on their experience in working with secondary school leaders. They were added to provide insights from a different angle and thus enrich our data. All principals and innovation coaches were selected via purposeful snowball-sampling. From every educational network, the pedagogical head counsellor was contacted and asked to refer to either novice school leaders within their network or experienced school leaders who both held strong opinions on school leadership. Eventually 16 experienced school leaders and 3 newcomers took part in the interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and analysed via NVivo 11.

This paper opted for a theory-driven approach on coding. In doing so, this paper took the descriptions within the theoretical framework as a starting point for labelling and counting. Hence, all references, direct or indirect, to ‘vision building’, ‘intellectual stimulation’, ‘individual consideration’ and ‘idealised influence’ were gathered under a TL denominator. Looking at IL, we considered all references to any of the activities within Hallinger’s (2003) three categories. For DL we considered everything that could be link to (1) delegation and the actual dispersion of responsibilities, (2) broad and broadening participation (e.g. allowing co-workers to participate in policy and decision-making, and consulting them regularly via clear and transparent structures), (3) facilitation of cooperation among co-workers, (4) building and maintain a culture for a thriving DL practice (e.g. a culture that allows autonomy, breaths openness and trust and encourages responsibility-taking) and (5) professional development (as a prerequisite to take on responsibility within the school). Finally, for a full description of elements in the LFL framework, the reader is referred to Murphy et al. (2007). When labelling leadership, we considered facts (e.g. descriptions of situations as they currently are) and factions (e.g. descriptions of situations as principals would want or believe them to be in the future).

Finally, references that connected to multiple theories (e.g. building a school's vision and setting directions might be coded at 'Instructional Leadership' just as well as 'Transformational leadership'), were coded under all possible nodes it aligned with insofar previous wording could not unambiguously connect it to one category in particular.

Annex 3 provides the reader with an overview of times a leadership theory's element was mentioned and by how many interviewees. In addition, via the 'Administering and running an organisation' category, table 5 shows how many times reference was made to an element that did not properly fit the LFL framework.

Quantitative data collection and analysis

The interviews' qualitative results were complemented with data from a survey round. All Flemish school leaders in general secondary education (n = 939) received a questionnaire which they were able to complete either on paper or digitally. 39% or 366 respondents did so. All of which observed the function of either principal or assistant principal.

The Headmasters' Transformation Leadership Scale (HTLS) (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010), the first part (i.e. the overall assessment of participative school decision-making) of the Distributed Leadership Inventory (DLI) (Hulpia et al., 2009) and the Norwegian Principal Self-efficacy Scale (NPSES) (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011) were selected as instruments for measuring respectively TL, DL and SEE. To the 18-item HTLS four more items were added (e.g. "As a principal, I provide teachers autonomy in taking didactical decisions"). To NPSES one item of own formulation was added (i.e. "How certain are you that you can involve co-workers in decision-making processes"). Job satisfaction (JS) was measured through a newly constructed scale consistent of three items (i.e. "I am fully satisfied with my job", "I feel good at work" and "I am satisfied with what I achieve at work").

All scales were (re)modelled on a 7-point Likert scale base. Answer categories ranged from -3 (Strongly disagree) to 3 (Strongly agree) for the HTLS, DLI and JS scale and -3 (Absolutely not certain) to 3 (Absolutely certain) for NPSES. Apart from NPSES, explanatory factor analyses (EFA) confirmed the internal consistency of all our scales, provided that the supplemented HTLS was slightly adapted [1] [2] [3]. NPSES, on the contrary, is used to measure self-efficacy in principals as this scale was specifically designed to grasp the rich variety in responsibilities Norwegian school leaders take on daily (Federici & Skaalvik, 2011). A variety that seemingly closely resembles Flemish contemporary school leadership responsibilities. However, an EFA did not find the Norwegian scale's original factor structure which consisted of eight theoretical dimensions. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was therefore chosen as procedure for further analysis. Small adaptations to the original model eventually led to an acceptable model fit for our Flemish data and a coherent SEE variable for usage in future analysis [4].

Multiple linear regressions were run to predict transformational leadership and distributed leadership from gender, years of experience as a school principal, professional experience in a leading position outside SE, job satisfaction and self-efficacy; and to determine whether TL and DL can be mutually reinforcing.

Results

School leadership styles – connecting theory to practice

Throughout the interviews, and more specifically when asked to describe a day in the life of an SE school leader and what entails effective school leadership, Flemish school leaders most often mentioned things typically associated with transformational leadership as out of 21 unique interviews, 64 references were coded. Distributed leadership got mentioned 44 times over 18 of the interviews, whereas elements of instructional leadership were only mentioned 26 times over 16 interviews. Similar results were to be found when it comes to situational leadership with mere 6 references over 5 interviews. Table 7 in Annex 2 gives the reader a detailed overview of references per sub category of each leadership style.

Here, this paper wishes to draw specific attention to distributed leadership and its sub categories. A considerable amount of respondents emphasized the importance of an adequate leadership distribution and an accompanying supportive culture for effective schooling. Even though they were asked about effective leadership in education on an individual or micro-level (i.e. personal values, behaviour, knowledge and skills), remarkably 12 out of 22 respondents spontaneously added things that, to their opinion, constitute effective school leadership on a structural or macro-level (i.e. organisational structures, procedures and/or culture). All of these related to DL. These 10 principals and 2 innovation coaches indicated that effective leadership in reality implies something more than simply individual competences or particular behaviour as effective leadership involves all wheels of school to function optimally. In their opinion, effective leadership requires collaboration and sound communication between leaders within the school; the maintenance of a school culture characterised by openness, a willingness to share didactical material and meaningful experiences, a profound trust to experiment and take responsibility as a teacher in (semi-)self-regulatory teams; designing clear and logic structures for co-workers to move in; allowing a voice in decision making and finally granting co-workers opportunities to be co-creative and develop themselves professionally and following-up on these developments for the better of the whole school (e.g. by disseminating newly acquired

knowledge by one teacher). Or as one respondent puts it:

> Respondent 18: A very important element for me is doing things together at this school. We collectively discuss things in which my trust in every single colleagues is 100%. And in which I will never call someone to account. Never. […] Minutes or lessen preparations, I do not want to see anything of the kind. I think this is a kind of trap a lot of [principals] fall into, having a control mechanism. […] Quit those things because you are making it hard on yourself and you deprive people of their creativity.

When distributed leadership got mentioned in the interviews though – and looking at what has been said more in-depth, in 41% of the cases it had to do with allusions to a formal delegation of responsibilities (e.g. a dispersion of tasks that can be traced back within a school's organisational structure). Furthermore, the degrees to which formal distribution happened, varied highly among cases. The following quotes serve to make this variation apparent:

> Respondent 19: At our school, we have four members on the board of directors. We try to divide tasks between all four directors in accordance with each's training, personality and capacities.

> Respondent 18: I have a lot of deliberative bodies in my school. I divided the school in four large groups. Each group comprising of some eight classes. A coordinator is head of those eight classes and maintains those classes in cooperation with all form masters. For me this is very useful because they are my contact persons via which I stay up to date with everything happening in class. Frequently, I just let things happen. If needs be, I am called in [to deal] with pupils and parents.

Both citations specify a clear and formal way of organising responsibilities within a school. Yet, where the first example sticks to an hierarchical approach of old, the second one implies an innovative stance on distributing leadership. A stance moreover that allows informal leadership. Because happening seemingly less often according to the interviews, were things that can be attributed to an informal leadership distribution. In some cases, this study was thus able to discern a discrepancy between what is deemed desirable in terms of effective school leadership and what is actually already happening when it comes to a purposeful distribution of leadership responsibilities.

Finally, a comparison of references based on respondent characteristics (e.g. gender, years of experience, school composition and size) revealed one notable pattern in our data. With 7 out of 10 school leaders having at least 7 years of professional experience in their current jobs, more experienced principals appeared more likely to spontaneously mention effective school leadership elements at a macro-level. Furthermore, nearly all (5/6) principals that previously held leading positions outside education, included effective school leadership elements that transcended themselves. Furthermore, more references to either SL, TL, IL or DL did not seem to go hand in hand with more references to any of the others. One leadership style does not seem to explain much of the other as all respondents mentioned at least two leadership styles and references were, on average, fairly dispersed over the different styles' categories. This should not come as a surprise however. After all, educational networks referred us to the most outspoken of school leaders within their network, novice and experienced alike.

A day in the life of a Flemish SE School leader

Whereas Murphy and colleagues (2007) report on a rich diversity of tasks effective school leaders preform on a daily basis, Flemish school leaders appear to mainly contend with operational aspects of their jobs, ranging from replacing ill co-workers and making sure the boarding school's restaurant runs smoothly to helping the cleaning lady decide on the size of toilet paper rolls to avoid theft. In ample of cases it appears that exactly these small problems and corresponding ad hoc solutions, take away time from the so-called

'touchstones' for effective school leadership. That is, building an ambitious long-term vision for the school, implementing and stewarding this vision to raise the bar and strengthen instruction and learning in the school. The following quotes serve to proof this point:

> Respondent 2 (innovation coach): What I often notice is principals working on very operational things ranging from teaching schedules that need to be drawn up to dealing with students that need to be censured […]. That requires a lot of their time causing them – as so to say – to do the real part of their jobs, thinking about the school's future, after school time.

> Respondent 21: In 99% of the time, I am managing via which I mean: organising the school, directing personnel, solving problems, taking ad hoc decisions, … In fact I have to just sit down and problems wander into my office. […] I think that is one of the problems: I became a principal to make school. Yet, if you look at what I spend my time on, that is purely management.

In sum 6 out of 22 respondents indicate they either feel they have enough time at their disposal to work on the school's vision, mission and instruction improvement, or the principals they work with do so. Whereas in 14 out of 22 cases respondents made completely clear they lack time to work on their job's core business.

> Respondent 10: due to all small interpersonal conflicts I constantly have to deal with, I actually do not find enough time to work on the things I really would like to work on: outlining a vision and a strategy and finish plans. Sometimes I tell myself: 'I should work from home for one week, walking round in joggers, sufficient coffee and cigarettes, then at least everything would be put to paper', but of course that is not how it should be.

As vision and mission building is often referred to as work for the weekends or holidays, even less time remains for its actual implementation, let alone regular check-up and thorough evaluation. This is problematic as the alignment of a school's vision and mission with a school's structures and culture is considered a key strategy to improve teaching and learning (Day et al., 2008).

> Researcher: Do you feel as if principals have sufficient time at hand to work on the school's vision and mission? Respondent 6 (innovation coach): Yes, I do. To determine a vision: yes. But, to systematically follow up on this same vision, that is something else entirely. Let along implementing it on a classroom level. […] The strength of our principals is also their weakness: they work very hands-on. They deal with problems as soon as they pose themselves […] but then you have less time do deal with things in the long run.

When considering all unique references to activities or actions undertaken by the interviewees when questioned about a week in their professional lives, 109 out of 139 references could be fitted in the LFL-framework. The remaining 30 references were grouped in a separate category, labelled 'Administering and running an organisation'. Included in this category were (1) interpersonal relations and personnel welfare (e.g. listening to small frustrations and concerns unrelated to the professional sphere), (2) preparing and following-up on large projects indirectly related to schooling (e.g. school mergers, redevelopment projects and construction works), (3) organising, planning and distributing relevant information (e.g. answering emails and phone calls, following up on certain progress and keeping an overview of what happened and what still needs to happen, informing colleagues of new plans and timeframes as to execute these) and (4) administration and IT coordination (e.g. the most operational of tasks otherwise assigned to a secretarial office such as keeping guard at the playground over lunchtime, taking student absences, etc.). Annex 3 provides an overview of all categories as mentioned in the interviews.

With a 78,4% rate, the LFL model, at first glance, proves fairly valid in a Flemish context. Yet, based on this paper's transcriptions, four side notes can be drawn. First, within all activity categories, school principals are mainly preoccupied with the most practical of activities residing under each denominator (e.g. instead of working out a long-term and ambitious financial plan for the school via for example the acquisition of additional external funds, school leaders have to get their heads around tax declarations). Second, while the LFL model, as designed for an American context, pays a lot of attention to communication with, probably, a school's most prominent stakeholders, its teachers, the framework leaves little room for talking about personal and interpersonal matters and relating to co-workers with regard to those same matters (e.g. by offering a listening ear and/or an opportunity to simply ventilate frustration). The framework is predominantly occupied with the instructional aspects of communication. Remarkably however, no less than 5 out of 19 principals report on this kind of communication happening on a daily basis within their schools. Three, with only 'Resource acquisition and use' the LFL framework provides too little administratively oriented elements to completely describe all aspects of a Flemish school principal's job. One type of activity clearly goes unmentioned: stewarding the administration and the organisation as a whole (e.g. through continuously following up on what has been done and disseminating relevant information) as this not always entails activities directly connected to the school's mission, vision nor strategic or operational objectives but rather mere organisational procedures. Four, when school principals and innovation coaches talk about the instruction provided at (their) schools, they rarely differentiate between instruction, curriculum and evaluation but tend to regard this as a complex.

Self-efficacy beliefs in Flemish SE

Flemish SE school leaders thus perform a myriad of tasks on a daily basis. Yet, how self-effective do they feel in executing all subparts of their jobs and living up to the accompanying expectations? From the comprehensive NPSES scale it appeared that principals, on average, felt least self-effective in the domain of social advocacy and maintaining contact with the local community. Rather unsurprisingly – given our

earlier findings - principals also seemed doubtful about their ability to continuously evaluate and follow up on school processes and activities. On the contrary, school leaders felt most self-effective when it came to their instructional leadership and teacher support as can be deduced from table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the three highest and lowest rated items on the adapted NPSES

Scale item	N	$\bar{X}$	*Std. dev.*	Dimension
… engage your employees in their professional development.	366	1,55	0,795	Teacher support
… develop this school's instructional platform.	365	1,53	0,866	Instructional leadership
… support and assist teachers with challenges or problems.	366	1,47	0,865	Teacher support
… maintain contact and cooperate with local businesses.	362	0,59	1,501	Local community
… have ongoing evaluation of all activities at school and follow up on these.	365	0,75	1,142	Administrative management
… use resources in the community (people and areas).	362	0,87	1,172	Local community
Self-efficacy (SE)	353	1,16	0,616	

On average, Flemish SE school leaders feel rather self-effective with an overall score of 1,16. In considering gender, years of experience, school size, composition and affiliation, this study found no notable SEE differences between groups within our sample. Similar to Fisher's (2006) findings, the fifth year of ones principal career seems to mark a turning point as SEE levels on average started to gradually rise again - yet differences between four experience categories (i.e. '0 to 2 years', '3 to 5 years', '6 to 10 year' and 'more than 10 years') proved too small to reach statistical significance.

Towards an explanation of transformational and distributed leadership

In order to determine whether Flemish SE school leaders are, overall, in fact proficient in transformational leadership – or at least perceive themselves this way – and do not scare away from distributing leadership, this paper triangulates our qualitative findings with quantitative data. How do both leadership styles fare in real life and what does explain a high occurrence of both?

Multiple regressions were run to predict transformational leadership and distributed leadership from gender, years of experience as a school principal, professional experience in a leading position outside SE, job satisfaction and self-efficacy. We furthermore added either DL or TL to the regression model to help explain variance within respectively TL and DL. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for all dependent and independent variables. All assumptions were met in order to conduct the analyses. Both regression models rendered statistically significant predictions. When using TL as a dependent variable, the model showed $F(6, 338) = 39.876$, $p < 0.005$, adj. $R^2 = 0.404$. When using DL as a dependent variable, the model showed $F(6, 338) = 31.669$, $p < 0.005$, adj. $R^2 = 0.349$. Not all seven independent variables added significantly to the estimation ($p < 0.05$). Regression coefficients, standard errors and standardized coefficients can be found in Table 3.

Educational network, school size and school composition were omitted from the regression models as prior one-way ANOVA's indicated no differences between categories within these grouping variables when it comes to TL and DL [5].

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all of the dependent and independent variables included in the regression models.

Variables	N	$\bar{X}$	*Std. dev.*	Min	Max
Gender – Male (0)	196				
Gender – Female (1)	170				
Years of principal exp.	358	8.068	6.479	0	30
Exp. outside SE – No (0)	198				
Exp. outside SE – Yes (1)	167				
Job satisfaction	364	4.146	2.501	-9	9
Self-efficacy	353	18.584	9.851	-48	48
Distributed leadership	361	7.900	4.185	-18	18
Transformational leadership	358	26.193	9.851	-54	54

Table 3. Linearly regressed estimates of transformational and distributed leadership based on gender, years of experiences as a principal, professional leading experience outside SE, job satisfaction and self-efficacy.

	Transformational leadership (TL)			**Distributed leadership (DL)**		
Variables	*B*	SE_B	*β*	*B*	SE_B	*β*
Intercept	12.530	1.335		2.285	0.653	
Gender (M – F)	0.855	0.859	0.043	-1.428	0.373	-0.170***
Years of principal exp.	-0.162	0.067	-0.106*	0.031	0.030	0.049
Exp. outside SE (N – Y)	0.610	0.841	0.031	-0.253	0.373	-0.030
Job satisfaction	0.278	0.182	0.071	0.063	0.081	0.038
Self-efficacy	0.420	0.052	0.419***	0.130	0.024	0.305***
Distributed leadership	0.674	0.117	0.286***			
Transformational leadership				0.133	0.023	0.313***
Variance explained (R^2)		0.414			0.360	
N		331			331	

*Note. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001*

The standardized coefficients make clear that self-efficacy has the largest effect on either two leadership styles, followed by the effect both exert on the other. Gender, unexpectedly, appeared to have an effect on perceived DL within a school with women perceiving less distribution of leadership within their schools. This was not the case when it came to TL.

Unlike the qualitative analysis, these quantitative analyses hinted at a mutually reinforcing effect of leadership styles. The more transformational a Flemish SE school leader, the less he scares away from sharing responsibility. Distributed leadership on the other hand also seems to explain quite some of the variance in transformational leadership. This should not come as a surprise however as the distribution of leadership requires a fair transformational stance in a school leader. That way, transformational leadership seems a mindset and way of procedure that allows for ample co-worker and colleague involvement. Unlike the qualitative analysis however, this paper did not find years of experiences to have an effect on the extent to which respondents reported on TL or DL.

Conclusion

In sum, we can conclude that LFL proves a useful framework to look into Flemish SE school leadership. This paper formulated four side notes however. The first of which can be linked to a prominent point of critique on the framework: the lack of administrative oriented elements. Even though LFL as a theoretical framework developed in reaction to instructional leadership for being too concerned with the pedagogical aspects of running a school and therefore missing out on other essential tasks, the model has been criticised for doing exactly the same. That way, Townsend et. al (2013) argues correctly LFL merely recycles instructional leadership concepts and still pays too little attention to the managerial aspects of the job. A second side note would be that principals rarely differentiate between instruction, curriculum and assessment but tend to look at these as a complex. A third one notes how the respondents in our sample mostly contended with the most practical of issues within each of the framework's eight categories. As a fourth and final side note, this paper wishes to drawn attention to the human aspect of a principal's job. For the LFL framework incorporates personnel management within the instructional programme category. It thereby keeps its interpretation narrow and limited to hiring, allocating, facilitating and evaluating staff. Consequently, personnel well-fare and time spent on interpersonal affairs remain overlooked despite of Leithwood et al. (2008) underlining the importance of emotional understanding in successful leadership. Because, unlike instructional leadership proclaims (Robinson et al., 2008), principals are expected to only have a very small direct impact on their teachers' instructional capacities. They are on the other hand expected to have a bigger impact on their pedagogics indirectly by raising their motivation and commitment.

Stemming from first and the latter two side notes, Flemish SE principals unsurprisingly indicated that they lacked time to work on instructional quality through a detailed and well-implemented school vision. Consequently, transformational and distributed leadership appeared to align most with their daily leadership than did instructional and situational leadership. The quantitative analysis furthermore found both styles of leadership to be mutually reinforcing. A school leader that scored highly on one was also expected to score highly on the other. Although all four types of leadership (i.e. distributed, situational, transformational and

instructional) were questioned and analysed separately, it is therefore self-evident that these should not be regarded as mutually exclusive interpretations of sound school management. The strongest predictor of elevated TL and DL levels was nevertheless self-efficacy.

The observation that Flemish SE school leaders appear to be rather removed from an archetypical form of instructional leadership because of operational and organisational concerns, triggers two questions worth debating. The first one is whether a classic managerial interpretation of a principal's job should even be considered problematic. After all, a school principal is also a businessman running an organisation. Thinking away organisational and corresponding administrative activities, seems utopic. Nevertheless, school leaders should pay significant attention to their school's educational policy and instruction that runs smoothly. Or, at least, they should find themselves in a position that allows them to do so. Arising from this observation, one can ask oneself how then we can guarantee a sound balance between both sets of responsibilities? An answer that is not provided in any of the theoretical frameworks but by the innovation coaches within the interview design. They hinted in the direction of co-creative leadership.

> Respondent 2 (innovation coach): Co-creative leadership is something of which we dare say: 'Today, you cannot do without' […] I meet little principals that are genuine co-creative leaders. Principals who will tell you: 'I have a vision, I designed a framework and within the limits of that framework I invite co-workers to freely think and work along.

Co-creative leadership asks school leaders to tap into all previously researched leadership styles as it is a modus operandi that responsibilizes professionals within a school to take instructional quality into their own hands by transforming schools into genuine learning organisations. Such an organisation allows autonomy, facilitates cooperation and encourages experimenting and the sharing of meaningful experiences among staff. Hence, co-creative leadership sets in motion a cycle of gradual teaching improvement. A cycle which school leaders no longer have to uphold all by themselves as their teachers can now firstly turn to each other

for help and mutual reinforcement. Principals simply decide on the gridlines for cooperation and enhanced participation and regularly follow up on its progress. As a consequence, time is freed up for principals to work on vision and strategy. Given mainly the innovation coaches pointed out the importance of co-creation and co-creative learning in today's education, references to this specific type of shared leadership and collaborative ways of working remained rather scarce among principal respondents. As a topic for professional development there thus proves to be a lot of growing potential. Or as MacBeath (2011, p. 105) states: "There is, however, an urgent need for policy makers to rethink what we expect of our school leaders and to recognise that 'distributed leadership' is more than an academic conceit." Definitely as Bush (2018) points out that in ample countries around the globe, adequate principal preparation is neglected.

Consequently, an interesting topic for future research in Flanders might be how to most effectively professionally develop co-creative leadership in Flemish SE school leaders. And what conditions at school and teacher level need to be fulfilled in order to successfully implement and preserve this type of leadership. Finally, as this paper relied heavily on self-reported data, future research might want to take teachers perspectives into account. Do they perceive reality in the same way as do their superiors?

Explanatory notes

[1] A principal axis factor analysis (using a direct oblimin oblique rotation) confirmed a three factor structure for the TL scale, explaining 49,34% of the variance. Factor 1 'Intellectual stimulation' was comprised of 9 items (explaining 34,74% of the variance with factor loadings from 0.326 to 0.829), factor 2 'Vision building' consisted of 6 items (explaining 8% with factor loadings from -0.510 to -0.794) and factor 3 'Individualised consideration' contained 3 items (explaining 6,6% with factor loadings from 0.587 to 0.742). 4 items were dropped as they did not load sufficiently on any of the three underlying factors. That way, 3 items of the original scale (i.e. items 10, 11 and 17) and one item of our own adding (i.e. "As principal I provide teachers with a voice in policymaking") were omitted from further statistical analysis. Cronbach's alphas for each of the factors indicated respectively 0.85, 0.835 and 0.707. Finally, a CFA was run to test the second order nature of our data. The model run through IBM SPSS AMOS 26 Graphics indicated an acceptable fit (χ^2 (132, n = 312) = 362.401, p < .001, CMIN/DF = 2.745, RMSEA = 0.069, IFI = 0.904, TLI = 0.874, and CFI = 0.903) and thereby confirming the usefulness of TL as one single variable in our sample.

[2] A principal axis factor analysis confirmed the one factor structure for the DL scale. The one factor extracted, explained 51.18% of the variance between our 6 items. The reliability score showed 0.801.

[3] A principal axis factor analysis confirmed the one factor structure of job satisfaction. The one factor extracted, explained 70.82% of the variance between our 3 items. The reliability score showed 0.792.

[4] This study first tested the original Norwegian factor structure through CFA. According to the CFA however, the original structure did not fit the Flemish data (χ^2(202, n = 312) = 631,608, p < .001, CMIN/DF = 3.127, RMSEA = 0.083, IFI = 0.828, TLI = 0.780, and CFI = 0.824). Based on the standardised estimates within the first model tested, this study decided to drop certain items from the analysis. That way, items 15, 16 and 17 were omitted and the remaining 'School environment'-items (i.e. items 13 and 14) were now connected to the latent variable 'Teacher support'. Similarly, items 7 and 8 were omitted as both showed low standardised estimates the first time around. Finally, we removed the parental relations factor and

corresponding items 11 and 12 from the analysis. This second model showed an acceptable fit to the data (χ^2(89, *n* = 312) = 213,656, p < .001, CMIN/DF = 2.401, RMSEA = 0.067, IFI = 0.926, TLI = 0.899, and CFI = 0.925). In a last and third model, this study also tested the second order nature of our data, still indicating an acceptable fit (χ^2(98, *n* = 312) = 304.991, p < .001, CMIN/DF = 3.112, RMSEA = 0.082, IFI = 0.877, TLI = 0.847, and CFI = 0.875).

Annex

Annex 1. Respondent characteristics

Table 4. Characteristics of respondents within the exploratory interviews (as far as the principals is concerned; n = 19) and survey (n = 366) compared to the overall Flemish average.

Gender	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
Male	12	196	63	54	60
Female	7	170	37	46	40

Location[1]	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
Urban	11	145	58	40	39
Semi-urban or rural	8	219	42	60	61

School size	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
Small (< 300)	3	69	16	19	37
Medium (300 – 899)	9	201	47	55	56
Large (> 900)	7	94	37	26	7

Years of experience	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
Less than 3 years	3	110	16	31	n.a.
3 – 10 years	5	148	26	41	n.a.
More than 10 years	11	100	58	28	n.a.

Province	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
Antwerp	4	n.a.	21	n.a.	27
East Flanders	1	n.a.	5	n.a.	21
Flemish Brabant	7	n.a.	37	n.a.	18
Limburg	5	n.a.	26	n.a.	15
West Flanders	2	n.a.	11	n.a.	19

Educational network	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
GO!	2	63	11	17	23
POV	3	7	16	2	3
OVSG	3	29	16	8	4
KOV	11	265	58	73	69
Other	0	2	0	0	1

Age[2]	$n_{interview}$	n_{survey}	$\%_{interview}$	$\%_{survey}$	$\%_{Flanders}$
< 35 years	2	14	11	4	3
35 – 44 years	6	83	32	23	21
45 – 54 years	6	135	32	38	37
> 54 years	5	124	26	35	39

Note. Estimations of Flemish percentages were based on the Flemish Statistical year book 2016-2017 (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2017c).

[1] Counted were the so-called 'Centre Cities' by the spatial master plan of the Flemish government. We took in all area or zip codes connected to these municipalities as to calculate the amount of schools located within a centre city. We based these results on the student populations files 2016-2017 as provided by Agodi.

[2] The Flemish Government's statistical year book reports on all direction functions within a school. This measure is thus wider than only principals.

Annex 2. Coding tree with corresponding sources and references

Table 5. Activities making up Flemish SE school leaders' daily routine connected to the sub activities residing under Murphy's (2007) eight LFL core dimensions.

Nodes **Day-to-day leadership**	Sub nodes	References	Sources	Total references	Total sources
Vision for learning	Developing a vision	9	8	10	8
	Articulation a vision	0	0		
	Implementing a vision	0	0		
	Stewarding a vision	1	1		
Instructional programme	Knowledge and involvement	15	9	33	18
	Hiring and allocating staff	8	7		
	Supporting staff	8	8		
	Instructional time	2	2		
Curriculum programme	Knowledge and involvement	0	0	0	0
	Expectations and standards	0	0		
	Opportunity to learn	0	0		
	Curriculum alignment	0	0		
Assessment programme	Knowledge and involvement	2	2	6	2
	Assessment procedures	1	1		
	Monitoring instruction and curriculum	1	1		
	Communication and use of data	2	1		
Communities of learning	Professional development	4	4	25	14
	Communities of professional practice	7	6		
	Community anchored schools	14	11		
Resource acquisition and use	Acquiring resources	1	1	9	6
	Allocating resources	2	2		
	Using resources	6	5		
Organisational culture	Production emphasis	0	0	8	5
	Learning environment	7	5		
	Personalised environment	1	1		
	Continuous improvement	0	0		
Social advocacy	Stakeholder engagement	18	13	18	13
	Diversity	0	0		
	Environmental context	0	0		
	Ethics	0	0		
Administering and running an organisation	Interpersonal relations and welfare	5	5	30	17
	Preparation of large projects	8	8		
	Organising, planning and informing	6	6		
	Administration and IT coordination	11	7		

Table 6. Actual leadership praxis in Flemish SE based on school leaders' and innovation coaches' accounts of reality and personal preferences.

Nodes Leadership	Sub nodes	References	Sources	Total references	Total sources
Situational leadership	n.a.	6	5	6	5
Transformational leadership	Vision building	24	17	64	21
	Intellectual stimulation	15	12		
	Individual consideration	19	12		
	Idealised influence	6	5		
Instructional leadership	Defining the school's mission and vision	6	5	26	16
	Managing the instructional programme	5	5		
	Promoting the school's learning climate	15	13		
Distributed leadership	Delegation and dispersion of responsibilities	18	10	44	18
	Broad participation and regular consultation	10	8		
	Facilitation of cooperation	6	5		
	Culture	8	7		
	Professional development	2	2		

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