



Research paper

Fostering teachers' team learning: An interplay between transformational leadership and participative decision-making?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Transformational leadership was directly and indirectly positively associated with team learning.
- Transformational leadership also was positively associated with participative decision making.
- Participative decision making was positively associated with team commitment and task interdependence.
- Team commitment and task interdependence were positively associated with team member proactivity.
- Team member proactivity was positively associated with all team learning activities.

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of educational innovations by teachers seems to benefit from a team approach and team learning. The study's goal is to examine to what extent transformational leadership is associated with team learning, and to investigate the mediating roles of participative decision-making, team commitment, task interdependence and teachers' proactivity in this association. Data were analysed using multilevel structural equation modeling ($N = 992$ teachers, 92 teams). Results show that transformational leadership had direct and indirect positive associations with team learning through all mediators. These results provide insights into how transformational leaders can have a positive influence on team learning.

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1. Introduction

Worldwide, governments and schoolboards initiate educational innovations to improve student attainment and the quality of educational programmes. As a result, schools constantly work on educational innovations (Runhaar, Konermann, & Sanders, 2013). Teacher teams play a crucial role during these innovations, because it is only when teams change the way in which they work that effective change can be achieved at the organisational level (Edmondson, 2002). This implies that the success of school improvements depends, in part, on team performance (Park, Henkin,

& Egley, 2005). Team learning, which consists of building shared knowledge on innovations by sharing information and ideas with each other and questioning, concretising and discussing this shared information (Decuyper, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2010), is needed to increase team performance (Vangrieken, Dochy, & Raes, 2016). By engaging in team learning activities, teacher teams can better understand ideas behind educational innovations, reach agreement among team members on educational innovations, increase their innovativeness and make progress towards realising educational changes (Drach-Zahavy & Somech, 2001; Runhaar, Ten Brinke, Kuijpers, Wesselink, & Mulder, 2014; Wijnia, Kunst, Van Woerkom, & Poell, 2016).

Although team learning is important for realising educational innovations, simply putting people together in a team is no guarantee that team learning will occur (Van den Bossche, Gijssels, Segers, & Kirschner, 2006). Research shows that team learning occurs more in teacher teams that are 'real teams' (Vangrieken

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et al., 2016). A real team is defined as “a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their task, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems” (Cohen & Bailey, 1997, p. 241). However, teacher teams do not always meet these criteria (Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2013). Instead, teachers are often individually occupied with everyday issues, and may find it difficult to disengage themselves from these issues in order to collectively invest in team learning (Oude Groote Beverborg, Sleegers, & van Veen, 2015; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015). Consequently, teachers tend to engage in more superficial levels of collaboration, such as planning practical tasks and activities, and discussing existing course materials (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Therefore, Vangrieken et al. (2015) argue, teacher teams often resemble an aggregate of individuals who are not interdependent and who feel only limited team commitment, which hinders team learning.

Our study aims to examine how team learning can be fostered through the leadership style of team leaders, by focusing on transformation leadership. Previous studies reveal multiple positive research results. For example, a transformational leadership style of school leaders or team leaders enhances a school's innovative climate (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010), teachers' involvement in individual learning activities (Geijsel, Sleegers, Stoel, & Krüger, 2009; Oude Groote Beverborg et al., 2015; Runhaar, Sanders, & Yang, 2010; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011), and teachers' involvement in collective learning activities (Lodders, 2013; Silins & Mulford, 2002; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Additionally, research outside the educational context shows that transformational leadership is positively related to team learning (Raes et al., 2013).

Although these studies show the importance of transformational leadership in general and for teachers' team learning in particular, more research is needed to understand the underlying mechanisms and to unravel effective components. For instance, some studies show a direct association between transformational leadership and teachers' team learning activities (e.g. Lodders, 2013; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016), while others suggest indirect associations (e.g. Raes et al., 2013; Silins & Mulford, 2002). Therefore, in this study we identify and explore possible underlying mechanisms in the relationship between transformational leadership and team learning by examining the mediating roles of: 1) teachers' collective opportunities to participate in decision-making, defined as joint decision-making processes by leaders and teachers (Thoonen et al., 2011); 2) teachers' individual team commitment, defined as teachers' affective bond with the team (Van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005); 3) teachers' individually perceived task interdependence, defined as the extent to which teachers need support from their colleagues to fulfil their task (Van der Vegt, 2008); and 4) teachers' proactivity, defined as teachers' behaviour aimed at improving the team's performance (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007).

More specifically, we examine whether transformational leaders decentralise influence in teacher teams by giving teachers the opportunity to participate in decision-making (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Thoonen et al., 2011) and whether this stimulates team learning. Additionally, we examine whether participation in decision-making enhances teachers' team-oriented attitudes in terms of their team commitment and perceived task interdependence. Finally, we examine whether these team-oriented attitudes encourage proactive team behaviour and whether these proactive teachers participate more in team learning. As such, the following research questions are answered: ‘To what extent are there positive associations between transformational leadership and team learning activities?’, and: ‘To what extent are associations between transformational leadership and team

learning activities mediated by participative decision-making, affective team commitment, perceived task interdependence and team member proactivity?’

1.1. Theoretical framework

In this section, the concept of team learning is first elaborated by explaining the core team learning activities that are central to this study. We then explain why we expect transformational leadership to stimulate team learning directly and indirectly through the aforementioned potential mediators.

1.2. Teachers' team learning

Team learning enables teams to respond to changing environments and to learn how to collaborate more effectively (Decuyper et al., 2010; Edmondson, Dillon, & Roloff, 2007). In the literature, different team learning activities are identified, such as discussing errors, learning from mistakes, seeking feedback and integrating knowledge (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson et al., 2007; Kostopoulos, Spanos, & Prastacos, 2013; Tjosvold, Yu, & Hui, 2004). In their review study, Decuyper et al. (2010) combine these different activities into three processes that they believe form the core of team learning: information sharing, which refers to team members sharing previously unshared information with other team members; co-construction, which refers to team members collectively combining insights and information into shared interpretations through dialogue and reflective communication; and constructive conflict, which refers to team members negotiating and discussing different perspectives of team members. These processes describe what happens in teams when they learn. In practice, these three processes do not occur linearly but are very much intertwined (Decuyper et al., 2010; Van Woerkom & Van Engen, 2009). Van Woerkom and Van Engen (2009) therefore suggest combining these processes under the denominator *information processing*. Here, we follow their suggestion and consider information processing as the central team learning process in teacher teams. Information processing is essential for enabling learning in teams because it helps teams to reduce ambiguous information and to define what actions they need to take (Van Offenbeek, 2001).

Before team members can share information with each other and discuss, question and concretise information in such ways that necessary actions can be formulated and planned, it is important that new information flows into the team. Individual team members play a central role in this, because it is they who acquire relevant new information (Van Offenbeek, 2001). They can do this by engaging in *information acquisition* and *boundary crossing*. Both activities imply that team members search for new and relevant information, but the way in which they do this differs. Information acquisition involves carrying out an active search within the known environment when more information is needed, to strengthen existing knowledge or to fill existing knowledge gaps (Van Offenbeek, 2001). This can be done by consulting different information sources, for example collecting information from the Internet and books, participating in professional development activities or asking other team members for advice (Van Offenbeek, 2001; Wijnia et al., 2016). Boundary crossing implies that team members ask people *outside* the team, such as experts, stakeholders or members of other teams, for feedback and advice on team tasks and team performance (Wong, 2004). In other words, new information is gathered from people outside the mental, physical and organisational team borders (Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997). Through boundary crossing, team members can acquire advice or feedback on ideas that the team has come up with or on the

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