



# Revealing the balancing act of vertical and shared leadership in Teacher Design Teams

F. Binkhorst <sup>a,\*</sup>, C.L. Poortman <sup>a</sup>, S.E. McKenney <sup>a</sup>, W.R. van Joolingen <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> ELAN Department of Teacher Development, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Freudenthal Institute for Science and Mathematics Education, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 85.170, 3508 AD Utrecht, The Netherlands

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Providing adequate leadership in teacher teams is challenging.
- Both shared and vertical leadership are needed.
- This study illustrates how shared and vertical leadership can be combined.
- This study provides insights into how leadership can support the process.

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## ABSTRACT

Teacher Design Teams (TDTs) are professional learning communities in which teachers collaborate to (re) design educational materials. Although studies have indicated that leadership is vital for TDTs' functioning, providing adequate leadership is challenging. Both shared and vertical leadership are needed, and how to combine them is not obvious. TDT participants and coaches might benefit from insight into what shared and vertical leadership look like in practice. In this study, we monitored two TDTs that used a stepwise method that integrates shared and vertical leadership. Findings reveal that combining shared and vertical leadership in TDTs is possible, but remains a challenging balancing act.

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## 1. Introduction

Designing educational materials is increasingly considered to be a core aspect of teachers' work (Carlgren, 1999; Cober, Tan, Slotta, So, & Könings, 2015; Koehler & Mishra, 2005; McKenney, Kali, Markauskaite, & Voogt, 2015). Being engaged in the process of designing new educational materials contributes to a sense of ownership (Cviko, McKenney, & Voogt, 2013; Visser, Coenders, Terlouw, & Pieters, 2012), increasing the probability that teachers will actually implement these new materials in practice (Wikeley, Stoll, Murillo, & De Jong, 2005). Therefore, engaging teachers as designers can support sustained implementation of educational innovations in practice (Bakah, Voogt, & Pieters, 2012a; McKenney,

Boschman, Pieters, & Voogt, 2016). The aim of engaging teachers as designers is reflected in national educational policies. The Dutch government, for example, recently articulated the intention to give teachers a substantial role in the design of educational materials (Platform Onderwijs2032, 2016).

One way of having teachers take on the role of designers is to encourage their participation in Teacher Design Teams (TDT). TDTs are a specific type of Professional Learning Community (PLC) in which teachers collaborate in (re)designing educational materials (Binkhorst, Poortman, & van Joolingen, 2017). While designing materials in TDTs, teachers can share expertise and experiences, allowing them to gain new knowledge and skills and use these to improve their overall teaching practice (Bakah, Voogt, & Pieters, 2012b; Kafyulilo, Fisser, & Voogt, 2014). In this way, TDTs can contribute to teachers' professional growth, potentially leading to increased student achievement (Voogt et al., 2011). Furthermore, professional growth can lead to greater professional satisfaction for teachers, which makes the teaching job more attractive (Guskey, 2002).

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [f.binkhorst@utwente.nl](mailto:f.binkhorst@utwente.nl) (F. Binkhorst), [c.l.poortman@utwente.nl](mailto:c.l.poortman@utwente.nl) (C.L. Poortman), [susan.mckenney@utwente.nl](mailto:susan.mckenney@utwente.nl) (S.E. McKenney), [w.r.vanjoelingen@uu.nl](mailto:w.r.vanjoelingen@uu.nl) (W.R. van Joolingen).

As with other types of PLCs, TDTs can have either participants from the same school (school-based TDTs) or participants from various schools (networked TDTs). This study is focused on networked TDTs, as several studies have indicated that teacher networks have the potential to move beyond the knowledge that is available within the school to create even higher quality learning than when teachers from a single school work together (Binkhorst et al., 2017; Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011; Chapman, 2014; Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010; Stoll, 2010).

### 1.1. The role of leadership

Although the potential outcomes of TDTs are promising for teachers, as they can contribute to both the design of renewed educational materials and to teachers' professional development, various studies have indicated that the effectiveness of the process and the quality of the outcomes produced by TDTs are mixed (Binkhorst, Handelzalts, Poortman, & van Joolingen, 2015; Binkhorst et al., 2017; Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen, & Voogt, 2014). Previous research has shown that collaboration in the workplace or in teacher teams is not always as easy as it may seem (Brouwer, 2011; Horn & Little, 2010). In teacher teams, leadership behaviour plays a vital role in shaping the process, and hence the outcomes (Binkhorst et al., 2017; van Driel, Meirink, van Veen, & Zwart, 2012). However, providing adequate leadership is challenging (Becuwe, Tondeur, Pareja Roblin, Thys, & Castelein, 2016; Huizinga, Handelzalts, Nieveen, & Voogt, 2013; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer, & Kyndt, 2017). On the one hand, TDTs are self-regulating teams in which participants have the authority to make decisions themselves (Handelzalts, 2009). Therefore, team coaches are expected to create an environment in which teachers take the lead by participating in making decisions, sharing ideas, initiating activities and carrying them out (Binkhorst et al., 2017; Bouwmans, Runhaar, Wesselink, & Mulder, 2017). On the other hand, team coaches need to enact top-down or vertical leadership to provide structure, clarity and quality during the team's design process. For example, they are expected to organize the TDT meetings, to provide basic process support and to bring in expert knowledge about designing and pedagogy (Becuwe et al., 2016; Huizinga et al., 2013; McKenney et al., 2016).

### 1.2. Problem statement

How to combine these shared and vertical leadership behaviours in practice is not obvious, and is sometimes even described as paradoxical (Binci, Cerruti, & Braganza, 2016; Elloy, 2006; Meirink, Imants, Meijer, & Verloop, 2010). For example, in our previous study participants and team coaches explained that it was important that participants could take the lead in defining the team goals, as this promoted their sense of ownership. At the same time, however, participants expected the team coach to take the lead more in defining the team goals, as this could have supported greater clarity and focus in the team's work process (Binkhorst et al., 2017). In this example, the participants and team coaches indicated that both shared and vertical leadership were needed, but they struggled with combining these leadership behaviours. Many other TDTs or teacher teams have reported similar leadership difficulties (Becuwe et al., 2016; Binkhorst et al., 2015; Huizinga et al., 2013; van Driel et al., 2012).

Therefore, TDTs could benefit from practical insights into what vertical and shared leadership behaviours look like in practice and how they can be balanced. Such insights could help TDTs in three ways: (1) by helping them to recognize their own leadership behaviours, (2) by helping them to become more aware of how leadership can support the design process and (3) by helping them

to avoid potential pitfalls related to leadership.

Therefore, the present study investigated how shared and vertical leadership behaviour are manifested in TDTs and how these behaviours might support the TDT process, and identified leadership challenges for TDTs.

### 1.3. Nine-step method for TDTs

To promote blending of shared and vertical leadership behaviours, we developed a nine-step method that integrates both types of leadership (Binkhorst, Poortman, McKenney, & van Joolingen, 2018). The method was inspired by agile product development, which is very common in self-regulating teams of software developers (Highsmith, 2010). Similar to teams of software developers, TDTs aim to develop complex products such as curricular units and lesson series. TDTs that follow this method work in small, achievable iterations, which stimulates participants to be creative, bring in ideas and formulate their own plans on a planning board. In order to make clear the procedure, we will describe each of the nine steps using the model displayed in Fig. 1.

- A. The method starts with collaboratively brainstorming about the team goal.
- B. When the team agrees on the team goal, it is articulated on a planning board.
- C. The participants brainstorm which activities or tasks are needed to achieve this team goal.
- D. These tasks are spelled out on the planning board resulting in a list of tasks.
- E. The participants collaboratively brainstorm about a sub-goal for the time period from step G to step I, which is referred to as a 'term', and participants select which tasks they want to perform this term.

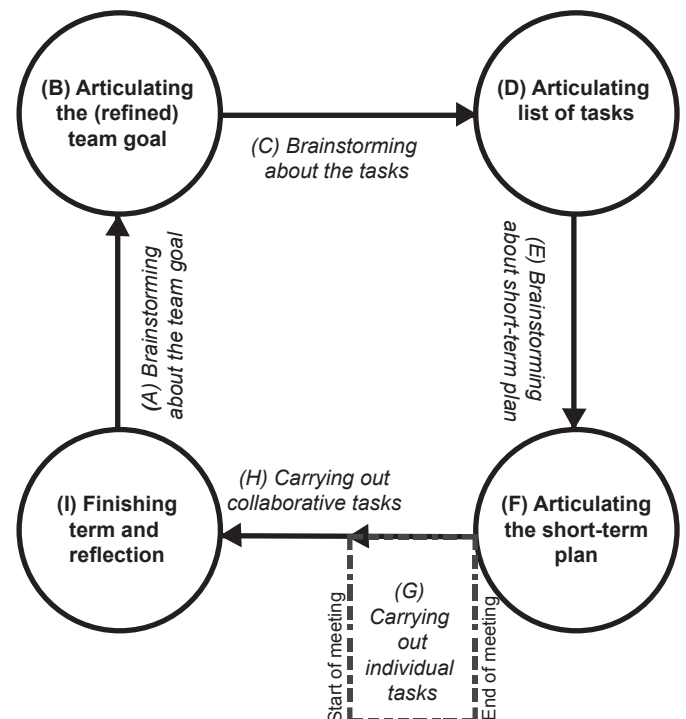


Fig. 1. Model of the nine-step method for TDTs that integrates shared and vertical leadership.

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