



## Fostering teacher learning in VET colleges: Do leadership and teamwork matter?



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined perceptions of workplace conditions affecting VET college teachers' learning.
- Self-efficacy and task interdependence affect self-reflection and feedback asking.
- TL-individualized consideration affects task interdependence only.
- TL-vision building affects asking for feedback through goal interdependence.
- TL-intellectual stimulation affects asking for feedback directly.

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores teacher learning in Vocational Education and Training colleges, combining organizational and psychological factors, such as transformational leadership, teamwork, and self-efficacy. 447 teachers participated in a survey study. Multilevel structural equation modeling was used to test 7 hypotheses derived from previous research. The results show that transformational leadership has direct and indirect effects on teacher learning as mediated by teamwork processes. Moreover, the impact of teamwork processes on teacher learning was mediated by self-efficacy. The study contributes to research on workplace learning by giving insight into the role organizational and psychological factors play in stimulating teacher learning.

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## 1. Introduction

During the last decade, governments, local politicians, and school managers across the globe have been involved in efforts at improving educational systems in support of better student performance. In the Netherlands, where this study takes place, schools in general, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges in particular, have been confronted with ongoing reforms, including restructuring movements, educational reform efforts, and rigid accountability policies, as strategies to improve the quality of

education. VET colleges have gone through many mergers with the formation of massive educational institutions as a consequence. These institutions also are involved in educational reforms aimed at the development of learning environments designed to stimulate self-regulated, reflective, independent, authentic and social-interactive learning. To implement these reforms, VET teachers are organized into multidisciplinary teams. Teachers from different disciplines and different subjects are called to collaborate for imparting the competences students *need* to become strong professionals and thus function in a continuously changing labor market. The challenge facing individual VET teachers is to learn how to work effectively in teams directed at strengthening their professional expertise and practice, with the ultimate goal of improving student performance.

Research has shown that the implementation of teams in educational settings is not an easy task and that altering teachers'

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practices is even more difficult (e.g. Crow & Pounder, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007). As VET colleges are expected to improve instruction through fostering individual and collaborative learning in teams, building school- and team-level capacity through professional developing initiatives seems to be an important prerequisite for sustained improvement (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Parise & Spillane, 2010; Stoll, 2009; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Toole & Louis, 2002).

To better understand how schools can enhance their school wide capacity for improvement, different studies into organizational learning, professional learning communities, and schools as learning organizations have been conducted (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Findings from these studies have shown that such school organizational conditions as participative decision making, teacher collaboration, trust, and transformational leadership can clearly foster teachers' professional learning in schools. Many of these studies have used a system theory of change to understand the links between the structural and cultural dimensions of the school as a workplace and professional learning.

Additionally, research has also shown that psychological factors such as self-efficacy, teacher autonomy, and sense making affect teacher learning (Coburn, 2004; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). This paper meets the call for studies wherein attention is paid to the interplay between psychological and work environmental factors (Kwakman, 2003; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Smylie, Lazarus, & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996), and builds on studies that recently examined organizational and psychological antecedents to the professional learning and classroom practices of teachers. These studies have shown that the impact of transformational leadership practices and workplace conditions on professional learning appears to be mediated by psychological factors, such as self-efficacy beliefs of teachers (Geijsel, Slegers, Stoel, & Kruger, 2009; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011; Kwakman, 2003; Smylie et al., 1996).

However, most of the relevant studies have been conducted in primary schools, being relatively small communities, and thus concerned relatively long and intense connections between the teachers with the schools and also between the teachers and students within the schools. VET colleges, in contrast, involve a higher level of education, have gone through many mergers, and have attracted experienced professionals from the actual field to teach their students with a wide variety of experiences and expectations as a consequence — particularly when the multidisciplinary teams are formed. Additional research is thus needed to validate previous findings.

Those organizational conditions and psychological factors studied to date have been found to explain only a small to moderate portion of the variance in the professional learning of teachers. It is thus likely that *additional* factors may also affect teacher learning. Although the few available studies provide some evidence for the relationship between teamwork, especially perceived task and goal interdependence, and professional learning of teachers, more research is needed, thereby validating and expanding existing models on teacher learning in schools.

This study aimed to contribute to these lines of research by exploring the role of self-efficacy in the relationship between transformational leadership, teamwork (i.e. perceived task and goal interdependence) and teacher learning in VET colleges, which seem important antecedents of teacher learning. By placing a strong emphasis on principals' behaviors that stimulate social identification, intrinsic motivation and extra effort, transformational leadership may mobilize the interpersonal relationships for the enactment of professional learning in schools. Through facilitating

interaction between teachers, teamwork may create opportunities for knowledge sharing, open discussions, exchanging information, and thus for learning. A strong sense of self-efficacy motivates teachers to meet challenges, and thereby may positively influence the professional learning of teachers. These and other assumptions will be explained and discussed in more detail in the theoretical background.

The following research question guided our study: To what extent do transformational leadership practices and teamwork affect teacher learning, as mediated by self-efficacy?

## 2. Theoretical framework

The framework used to guide this study is based on a model of teacher learning as developed in research on the interplay between teachers' psychological states and organizational conditions in teacher learning in elementary schools (Geijsel et al., 2009; Thoonen et al., 2011). Teacher learning was conceptualized as the engagement of teachers in a variety of professional learning activities within an educational context. Variations in teacher learning are viewed a function of the capacities and motivations of teachers, the characteristics of the organizational setting and transformational leadership practices.

In the model that guide this study (see Fig. 1) it is assumed that self-efficacy beliefs and teamwork will have direct effects on the engagement of teachers in professional learning activities. Teamwork also has indirect effects on teachers' engagement in professional learning activities through self-efficacy. Transformational leadership practices have indirect effects on the engagement of teachers in professional learning activities through teamwork and self-efficacy. Although not measured in this study, it is assumed that teacher learning in school will affect teachers' instructional practice, and in turn enhance student learning. We will test the relationships among these factors, using data from 447 teachers and 66 teams of 6 VET colleges. In order to elaborate the model more fully, we will now describe the different variables and pose hypotheses around the relationships between the variables of the model.

### 2.1. Teacher learning: engagement in professional learning activities

Research on professional development programs in the late 80's and early 90's provided evidence for the failure of earlier conceptions of teacher change as something that is done to teachers often based on a training paradigm that implied a deficit-mastery model and consisted of 'one-shot' professional development approaches (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Richardson & Placier, 2001). These findings caused many researchers to reconceptualize teacher professional development by using the "change as professional growth or learning" perspective to professional development. Teacher learning in the workplace is seen as an active and constructive process that is problem oriented, grounded in social settings and circumstances, and takes place throughout adults' lives (Jarvis, 1987; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Smylie, 1995). In line with this view, researchers have emphasized the notion of ongoing and lifelong teacher learning embedded in schools as a natural and thus expected component of professional activities of teachers and a key component to build school-level capacity to change and sustained improvement (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Jarvis, 1987; Kwakman, 2003; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Smylie, 1995). The focus of teacher learning is on teachers' engagement in a variety of professional learning activities within schools and on becoming a participant in a community of learners (ten Dam & Blom, 2006; Sfard, 1988). This perspective on learning implies that teachers take responsibility for their own actions and

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