School leaders' and teachers' leadership perceptions: differences and similarities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer insight into school leaders' and teachers' perspectives on leadership behaviour and its impact on their mutual relationships. Research papers that include perspectives from both school leaders and teachers are relatively scarce in the field of education. However, it is important to take account of both perspectives because if they align, school leaders can be expected to be more successful. Moreover, positive teacher perceptions about school leaders result in lower levels of teacher burnout and enhanced teacher collaboration.

Design/methodology/approach – The current study employed qualitative data drawn from 24 primary schools in Belgium. The data set was assembled from 24 interviews with school leaders and 22 focus groups with teachers. The research analyses the interviews and focus groups from an inductive approach in order to let theory emerge, to refine existing theories in the field of education and to get an in-depth understanding of agreements and disagreements in the perspectives of school leaders and teachers.

Findings – The results show that school leaders and teachers perceive school leadership principally as relation- and task-oriented. However, there are differences in the perceptions about the subcategories of relation-oriented behaviour between school leaders and teachers. School leaders refer to consulting with members when making decisions and providing feedback. On the other hand, teachers indicate the importance of support and encouragement and recognition. The perceptions of the relationships between school leaders and teachers seem to match, with both valuing trust, openness and contribution.

Originality/value – This study addresses the relative scarcity of research relating to school leaders' and teachers' perspectives regarding school leadership. The study clarifies concepts in order to facilitate further research on school leaders' effectiveness.

Keywords Leadership in education, Leadership behaviour, Perceived leadership, Self-perceived leadership, Leader-member exchange, Leader-member relationship, Primary education

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The importance of school leaders for school effectiveness is widely acknowledged (Hitt and Tucker, 2016) and is often related to student achievement. Traditionally, school leadership is researched from the perspective of teachers, by asking them how they perceive leadership. Studies exploring school leadership from the perspectives of the school leaders occur as well. Indeed, leadership, and consequential school leadership, is not only a matter of the intended behaviour of the school leader, but it is also a matter of how followers, that is, teachers, perceive school leaders' behaviour (Atwater and Yammarino, 1997). Moreover, the self-perceptions of school leaders and the perceptions of teachers do not necessarily match.

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Research papers considering school leaders' and teachers' perceptions with regard to leadership behaviour are rather limited in the field of education, especially in compulsory education (Devos *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, research demonstrates that school leaders tend to overrate themselves on important leadership practices compared to teachers (Hallinger *et al.*, 2013; Tosh and Doss, 2019). This divergence can result in negative consequences. Indeed, numerous studies in human resources and organization studies confirm that the alignment of leaders' and subordinates' perceptions relates to leadership effectiveness (Atwater and Yammarino, 1997). Moreover, when leaders' perceptions align with observers' perceptions, leaders tend to respond in a more appropriate way to development feedback (Atwater and Yammarino, 1997). Especially, other perceptions of leadership can be associated with organizational performance, whereas self-perceptions of leadership relate rather to an indirect effect on organizational performance (Jacobsen and Bogh Andersen, 2015). If leaders are aware of how their leadership practices are perceived, it can be easier to change employee behaviour and ultimately the organizational performance (Jacobsen and Bogh Andersen, 2015).

The self-other perceptions of leader–member exchange (LMX) between school leaders and teachers are investigated in the current study. The relationship between leaders and followers is perceived as something that involves both perceptions (Dansereau *et al.*, 1995). Several scholars have pointed to the fact that self-other perceptions of LMX are not convergent and need to be investigated (Schriesheim *et al.*, 1999). The quality of the LMX has among others influences on psychological support, job satisfaction and motivation, performance, organizational commitment and innovation (Liden *et al.*, 1997; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2011). More insight on the quality of school leader–teacher relations is needed, because school leaders and teachers in Flanders, as well as in other regions, report high levels of job stress, burn out, job rotation and absenteeism. High-quality LMX relationships might have the potential to mediate subordinates' turnover intentions (Chen *et al.*, 2016). Insight on perceptions of the LMX relation and school leader–teacher relationships can contribute to the literature and the development of more effective schools.

The current research contributes to the clarification of self-other perceptions of leadership. Insights on the latter contribute to the insight on the effectiveness of school leadership, the overall school performance and serve school leaders' and teachers' professional development. To provide a deeper insight, on the self-other perceptions of leadership, Yukl's behavioural taxonomy and the LMX theory are included. Yukl's taxonomy was chosen, because it allows investigating observable behaviour and approaches leadership from a broad perspective. Leadership research in education is criticized for focussing too much on the instructional aspect of leadership. The LMX theory was added to get a deeper insight on the relational aspect of leadership behaviour, because prior exploratory research showed that the category of relation-oriented leadership came to the front as most relevant. This is not surprising; teachers perform their assignments on a daily basis rather autonomously. However, the school leader can intervene on teachers' assignments and show task-oriented behaviour as well.

2. Review of the literature
In the following paragraphs, leadership is briefly introduced followed by the relevant theories for the current study: Yukl's taxonomy on leadership behaviour and LMX, focussing on the relationship between leaders and followers, are elucidated.

2.1 Leadership
Leadership is a well-researched and complex topic, though no agreed definition of leadership exists. Most definitions share the assumption that leadership is "a process of influencing in which an individual exerts intentional influence over others to structure activities and

relationships in a group or organization" (Yukl, 2002). The ability to influence is strongly related to the relational aspect of leadership, which is the focus of the LMX theory.

For the sake of the present study, leadership will be approached from a broad perspective. Therefore, the definition of Daniëls *et al.* (2019) is adapted:

Leadership in education is a process of influencing teachers and other stakeholders. The process of influence ideally leads to an effective learning climate which all stakeholders (such as pupils, teachers, parents, society) experience as an added value and keeps all the organizational processes running smoothly.

2.2 Leadership behaviour
The available models about school leadership focus predominantly on leadership assignments linked to teaching and learning, and pay rather limited attention to other processes of leadership or leadership behaviour. Yukl's (2012) hierarchical taxonomy of leadership is integrated to study the perceptions about school leaders' leadership behaviour because the taxonomy considers leadership behaviour that influences team performance. This taxonomy allows to approach leadership from a general approach and consists of four meta-categories: (1) task-oriented behaviour involving behaviour that focusses on accomplishing work in an efficient and reliable way; (2) relation-oriented behaviour that intends to increase the quality of human resources and relations; (3) change-oriented behaviour comprising working towards increasing innovation, collective learning and adaptation to the external environment; and (4) external leadership behaviour that considers acquiring necessary information and resources to promote and defend the interests of the team (Yukl, 2012). Leaders typically engage in all four meta-categories. Yukl (2002) states that the context of the organization plays an important role in determining effective leadership behaviour. For instance, when curricula change, a school leader has to apply more change-oriented behaviour in order to be effective.

The different meta-categories have different primary objectives, but all involve determinants of performance. The taxonomy can be consulted in Table 1.

The two most elaborated meta-categories: task-oriented and relation-oriented behaviour align with a long existing approach of leadership that divides leadership into two dimensions: task-oriented and relation-oriented leadership. In this approach, task-oriented leadership behaviour is seen as leadership behaviour that contributes to the completion of tasks by organizing and directing the work of others, whereas relation-oriented leadership behaviour is seen as leadership behaviours that strive to maintain positive interpersonal interactions among group members (Lee and Carpenter, 2018).

2.3 Leader–member exchange theory
The relationship between the leader and the follower is the central focus of the Leader-member exchange theory (LMX theory) and correlates more with relation-oriented behaviour (Yukl *et al.*, 2009) (see Table 1). The LMX framework assumes that leaders develop different dyadic relationships with their followers (Bernerth *et al.*, 2007; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2011) and assumes that both leaders and followers can influence the relationship through their behaviour (Scandura *et al.*, 1986; Yukl *et al.*, 2009). Leader-Member Exchange is the essence of LMX. LMX is a kind of social exchange between a leader and a follower (Peng *et al.*, 2017). High-quality relations are according to the LMX theory based on high levels of leader-member exchange. A high level of LMX refers to high levels of mutual trust, loyalty, affect, respect and contribution (Liden and Maslyn, 1998; Yukl *et al.*, 2009). In contrast, low levels of the latter refer to a low level of leader-member exchange. Relationships can be placed on a continuum ranging from low-quality relationships, which are solely based on the assignments in the contract, to high-quality relationships, which are based on high levels

Leadership behaviour (based on Yukl's hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behaviour (2012))

Task-oriented behaviour
(1) Clarifying task assignments and responsibilities
(2) Planning short-term activities
(3) Monitoring operations and quality of performance
(4) Problem-solving: searching for and implementing solutions for a variety of problems in the organization
(5) Decision-making*: taking (ultimate) decisions and communicating about it

Relation-oriented behaviour
(1) Team coaching: helping the team to function effectively, fostering team effectiveness and performance by coaching the team (Hackman and Wageman, 2005)*
(2) Providing support and encouragement
(3) Providing feedback and evaluation such as formal performance reviews*
(4) Developing member skills and confidence
(5) Recognizing achievements and contributions
(6) Empowering members to be involved in decision-making and problem-solving
(7) Consulting with members when making decisions

Change-oriented behaviour
(1) Advocating change
(2) Envisioning change
(3) Encouraging innovation and innovate thinking
(4) Facilitating collective learning to improve performance and knowledge dissemination
(5) Engaging in professional learning and development*

External leadership behaviour
(1) Networking
(2) Monitoring information about trends and changes in the external environment
(3) Representing, promoting and defending the organization

Leader–member exchange relation (based on Bernerth *et al.*, 2007; Liden and Maslyn, 1998; Yukl *et al.*, 2009)

(1) Affect: having positive emotions, positive feelings to one another
(2) Loyalty: having feelings of long-term support towards someone, even if the particular person makes some minor mistakes
(3) Trust: relying on one another under conditions of risk
(4) Respect: showing positive feelings about someone's character and/or ideas
(5) Contribution: showing positive contributions to the job and job-related issues
(6) Openness in communication, name things honestly and being open to perceptions of others about the situation*
(7) Authenticity: being genuine and real, being able to be yourself*
(8) Accessibility: extent to which a school leader is accessible and concerns accessibility as important*
(9) Reciprocity: responding to another in a balanced and positive way*
(10) Caring, concerned: expressing feelings of care or being concerned about the other person in the relationship*

Note(s): *Asterisks refer to codes emerging from the inductive coding; other codes were derived from the theory

of affect, loyalty, trust, professional respect and contribution (Bernerth *et al.*, 2007; Liden and Maslyn, 1998; Yukl *et al.*, 2009). A high level of leader-member exchange predicts important outcomes such as organizational commitment (Galletta *et al.*, 2013), trust in the organization and management (Van Dam *et al.*, 2008) and lower turnover intentions (Harris *et al.*, 2014). Followers in relationships that are characterized by high levels of leader-member exchange can perceive more organizational support, obtain more rewards from leaders and hence, feel more connected to the workplace (Bauer *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, leader-member exchange assumes that leaders and followers benefit from high-quality relationships (Schriesheim *et al.*, 2001). The relationships between leaders and followers influence job satisfaction, career

development, performance, organizational commitment, role clarity, innovation, job stress, workplace safety and willingness to share information (Erdogan and Liden, 2002; Liden *et al.*, 1997; Schriesheim *et al.*, 2011). Most LMX research so far solely relies on the perceptions of the followers and is of quantitative nature. Therefore, this project focusses on the perceptions of leaders and followers who emphasized the importance of the exchange. The research is of a qualitative nature, which adds the dipped dynamic to understand the relationship more in detail.

Harris and Kacmar (2006) point to the drawback of high degrees of leader-member exchange. Followers experiencing high levels of leader-member exchange between them and their leaders report more stress reactions compared to those experiencing moderate LMX quality relationships due to additional pressure and deep senses of obligation (Harris and Kacmar, 2006). Besides, other followers can perceive high quality of interchanges between leaders and certain followers as inequity at the workplace (Jha and Jha, 2013). Consequently, followers who perceive lower levels of LMX and inequity may develop negative reactions to the situation, withhold efforts or even undermine the group performance (Othman *et al.*, 2010). It is therefore important not only to emphasize the relationship and the exchange but also to approach leadership in a balanced manner as Yukl does in his theory by emphasizing the relation-oriented, task-oriented, change-oriented and external-oriented aspect of leadership.

3. Methodology
This study was conducted to identify the perceptions of leadership behaviour and the school leader–teacher relationship including school leaders' and teachers' perspectives. Literature on leadership behaviour and LMX is available, but is often developed in research fields other than education and out of the geographical–cultural reach of the current study. Since this study investigates how leadership behaviour and leader-member exchange in the school leader–teacher relation are perceived in a rather unexplored field, a qualitative approach is the best-suited way to gain insight. The study questions:

(1) How do school leaders/teachers perceive leadership behaviour?

(2) How do school leaders/teachers perceive leader-member exchange (LMX)?

This study contributes to the insight on leadership behaviour and leader-member exchange in the field of education starting from the Flemish context. Insight on leadership behaviour and leader-member exchange can serve school leaders' performance and their professional development.

3.1 Participants and context
The present study was conducted in primary schools in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. A single school leader taking the daily lead over the teachers and an absence or lack of middle management characterizes the organizational structure of Flemish primary schools. Flemish primary schools employ a special needs coordinator (SNC) who takes the lead in developing and implementing a tailor-made policy on special needs.

The sample was assembled via "purposive sampling". Purposive sampling was used to ensure homogeneity of the sample with regard to the school leader–teacher ratio varying from 1:20 to 1:35. This range aligns with the average school leader–teacher ratio in primary schools in Flanders. The sample was developed by inviting all 2,143 primary school leaders whose email addresses were available via the Flemish ministry of education. The primary school leaders were asked to participate in an interview and to pass along the request to participate in the study to the teachers, because teacher details are not available via the ministry of education. The teachers were asked to participate in a focus group. Initially, 70

school leaders replied, and based on the school leader–teacher ratio and geographical spread, 24 primary schools were selected. 24 school leaders participated, 16 female and 8 male, with an average age of 45.5 years (SD 5.83). We conducted 22 focus group discussions in 22 schools of the 24 participating school leaders. The focus groups consisted of 4–8 teachers ($\overline{X}$ = 5,91) and were composed assuming maximum variation concerning experience and job content. In total 130 teachers participated in the study. All participants signed for informed consent. The informed consent clearly described the interview/focus group procedure and the researchers invited them to ask questions before the interview/focus group started. At the start of the focus group, the participants were explicitly asked if the group composition felt safe for the discussion and the opportunity to ask further questions was created. The participants voluntarily took part and confidentially was assured.

3.2 Instruments and procedure
The data were collected on the basis of semi-structured interviews to capture the perceptions of the school leaders and on the basis of semi-structured focus groups to capture the perceptions of the teachers. To contribute to the reliability of the study, an interview guideline was developed. The interview guideline was tested several times before the actual data were collected. Peer debriefings were held to ensure the quality of the data. The focus groups allowed discussing and eliciting topics, and questioning and challenging one another. However, participants may have slightly influenced some other participants. Taking this into account**,** efforts have been made to ease the participants and to ensure confidentiality. Moreover, school leaders and teachers received a summary and could provide individual feedback on the summary of the interview/focus group. This assumes to level out the possible peer influences. Some participants ($n = 5$) of the focus groups made use of the possibility to make additions to the summary. 84 participants of the focus groups agreed with the summary, one person disagreed and 40 participants did not reply. The possibility to give feedback on the interpretations of the researchers contributes to the reliability of the study (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The additional comments of the participants yielded very little extra information.

3.3 Analysis
The verbatim transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were accurately read to get a general overview of the data. Based on the exploratory (inductive) reading, a preliminary list of codes was constructed. During the development process of the coding tree, all included constructs were clarified. The authors determined some construct clarifications by themselves, whereas some other clarifications were built on existing theories or definitions. Clarifications are helpful to structure the coding process and minimize bias. The development of the final coding tree and the clarifications of the constructs were refined and adapted during the coding process. The final coding table is displayed in Table 2. For the sake of the word limit, the table comprises solely the added codes to Yukl's taxonomy and the clarified codes of the LMX theory.

Perception of relation-oriented behaviour	
School leaders	*Focus groups*
(1) Team coaching ($n = 20$)	(1) Providing support and encouragement ($n = 14$)
(2) Consulting teachers and sometimes parents and other stakeholders ($n = 16$)	(2) Team coaching ($n = 11$)
(3) Providing feedback and evaluation ($n = 13$)	(3) Recognition of achievements and contribution ($n = 10$)
Note(s): The categories are presented in a ranked order	

Table 2.
Main categories of perceived relation-oriented behaviour

To explore the data and give room to empiricism, the data were first inductively coded bearing in mind general questions such as "Which behaviour is explained?" and "How is the school leader–teacher relationship explained". This phase consisted of two coding rounds to make sure that the inductive coding was meticulously executed. During the first inductive coding round, some extra codes emerged. The inductive coding consisted of coding using the preliminary list, but involved generating an unlimited additional number of codes (Charmaz, 2014). After the inductive coding rounds, the emerged codes were checked for relevance (i.e. the coding frequency) and compared to the descriptions of the hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behaviour (Yukl, 2002) and the LMX theory. The emerged codes showed clear similarities with the theories. Hence, the data were finally deductively coded to check whether the theories were sufficient to grasp the practice. The used codes for the final coding process can be consulted in Table 1. The results of the deductive coding are used to report on. The coding and analysis were done using NVivo11.

4. Findings
The findings of the present study are discussed in the same order as the research questions. The results arose with help from the coding tree (see Table 1). The coding tree was composed on the basis of codes emerging from the data and codes derived from the theory. The results are clarified using quotes from the transcriptions. The *n* of the focus groups refers to the number of focus groups in which the finding was named. For a clear understanding, we repeat that 24 school leaders were interviewed and 22 focus groups were conducted.

4.1 Leadership
This paragraph reports on the results of an introductory topic considering which people are in charge of leading the school. In primary education in Flanders, the ministry of education funds one school leader per registered school. However, almost every school leader ($n = 23$) in the sample indicated that leadership is no longer a matter of the single school leader. Only one school leader indicated that the team wanted the school leader to be the one and only person to take all the decisions. All school leaders ($n = 22$) exemplified the Special Needs Coordinator (SNC) as someone who takes up leadership. In some cases, the SNC was explicitly described as someone who particularly focusses on leadership tasks considering special needs, whereas in other cases, the SNC has leadership responsibilities going beyond this scope. Some schools ($n = 4$) have "policy coordinators" who support the school leader in policy. The school leaders ($n = 4$) perceive the policy coordinators as people taking up leadership responsibilities. In addition to the individuals who take up leadership in schools, school leaders ($n = 7$) name the importance of policy teams, involving teachers in policymaking.

In the focus groups ($n = 13$), teachers predominantly refer to the SNC as someone who takes up leadership, second to the school leader. Apart from the SNC, they perceive policy coordinators, if they are employed, as leading and influencing ($n = 4$). In addition, working groups were named as influential with regard to leadership ($n = 9$) and the importance of policy teams was mentioned as well when describing leadership ($n = 5$).

4.2 Leadership behaviour
When describing leadership behaviour, school leaders and especially teachers exemplified relation-oriented and task-oriented behaviour. One participant named it as following:

But I think that you can make the division quite roughly, it is about actions, it is about doing things, and situations, and then about people. Those relationships, those people, it is always interrelated. The relationships between the school leader and the people in the field. (. . .) I think that the relationship is, for me, the base of everything. [School leader 3]

In the following paragraphs, the results from the coding with regard to leadership behaviour are presented. The codes are presented in order of occurrence. The most named topics are presented first. Change-oriented behaviour is not discussed because it was barely mentioned in the interviews and focus groups.

4.2.1 Relation-oriented behaviour. Team coaching is understood as leadership behaviour that helps the team to function efficiently (Hackman and Wageman, 2005) and is named by 20 school leaders. Also in the focus groups ($n = 11$), team coaching came to the front as a part of leadership behaviour.

> Leadership for me is mainly, I think to give people responsibilities and especially, the drive to give them the possibility to feel good in a working group. You can create working groups that are finally not efficient so it is searching for which working groups to expand. Hum, it is important for me anyway, and I have told the teachers that we must go through the PDCA cycle, always, so things happen efficiently. [School leader 2]

School leaders ($n = 16$) indicated in the interviews that they consult teachers and sometimes parents and other stakeholders when making decisions or redesigning the schools' mission and vision. However, it is remarkable that only in one focus group, teachers named this as part of the current leadership behaviour. Though, in a few focus groups ($n = 5$), teachers indicated the desire to be consulted when decisions are made.

> We are working on a new vision, we are writing the vision with the children and the teachers and the parents. Step-by-step. [School leader 20]

> Hum, teachers get a survey anyway. [. . .] We also do an annual evaluation, with the whole team. From that evaluation, I will look for the emphasis of next year. [School leader 5]

In Flanders, providing evaluation is a decree authority of the school leader. 13 participating school leaders perceive "providing feedback and evaluation" as a part of leadership behaviour in contrast to teachers who currently hardly perceive feedback and evaluation as a part of leadership behaviour, it was only named in two focus groups, though in a few focus groups ($n = 4$), a need was indicated.

In many focus groups ($n = 15$), perceptions of school leaders' support and encouragement were expressed in various ways. This can be related to pedagogical support, support in dealing with stress and coping with ticklish situations with parents. Moreover, one in three participating school leaders ($n = 8$) named explicitly supporting and encouraging leadership behaviour. Elaborating on support and encouragement, the skill "listening" came to the front in the focus groups ($n = 10$).

> A leading person in the first place, is someone who is able to listen carefully. [. . .] I also expect someone with insight, knowledge, pedagogical skills, that if you do not know something,... that you get support, tips and advice, and advice from them. Someone with a certain intellect. Someone who can take care of you when you need it. [Focus group – School 24]

Lastly, in ten focus groups, "recognition of achievements and contribution" were indicated as leadership behaviour of interest. It was striking that none of the school leaders named it in the interviews as part of leadership or leadership behaviour. However, two school leaders described it in additional questions gauging leadership development objectives or when they were given room to add something.

4.2.2 Task-oriented behaviour. Decision-making is the most frequently named subcategory of task-oriented behaviour. School leaders ($n = 16$) and teachers ($n = 14$) often named it in descriptions of leadership behaviour. School leaders indicated to be the ones who take the final decisions about varying processes in the organization, that is, administration, finance and the core process of teaching.

I find it important to make choices. These choices can be on budgeting, on accounting, how much we spend on which budget line. At the same time, I make a decision about, x and y and z. That is shaping the organization. This is about occasional matters, that's decision making. [School leader 20]

Teachers indicated that they expect their school leaders to make decisions, but also emphasized that it is important to consult with teachers when making decisions. When decisions are made, it is important that the school leader is convinced of the decision and carries out the decision or clearly communicates with the entire team why modifications are necessary and how they will be executed.

I think that it is someone who has to take the lead and who has to make decisions, not only make decisions, not only, but in consultation with the team, that is the healthiest form of leadership, leadership with consultation. It is someone who makes the final decision, someone who goes for it, who stands for the decision. [. . .] It is the captain of the ship. [Focus group – School 20]

About half of the school leaders ($n = 13$) indicated that monitoring teachers' actions and quality performance is an important aspect of leadership resulting in effective performance. School leaders mainly monitor outcomes of meetings and the quality of education. Teachers named monitoring less frequently ($n = 7$) though name it for the same reasons: to make sure that outcomes of meetings are followed up and to make sure that every teacher participates in offering qualitative education.

I feel that monitoring is very important, if you do not monitor it . . . it does no't make sense. Teachers have already so much to do. Therefore, they think . . . okay, we do not do that. That's how it goes. [School leader 10]

When describing clarifying assignments, it seems that school leaders ($n = 9$) and teachers ($n = 9$) are on the same page. In the descriptions, clarifying assignments was often linked to keeping assignments and actions/initiatives aligned with the schools' mission and vision. The importance to explain assignments and responsibilities was also emphasized especially assignments and responsibilities which go beyond the scope of teachers' daily tasks.

4.2.3 External-oriented behaviour. School leaders see themselves ($n = 10$) and are perceived in the focus groups ($n = 10$) as people who take the role to represent their school also outside the boundaries of the school. School leaders network with other organizations such as municipalities and umbrella organizations, participate in the school board, the parent–teacher association or negotiate in conflicts with parents.

I think ... the link between the school board and teachers, that connection, what does the school board expect from us, not that that happens a lot, but it is an intermediary role. It is that connection. I think also about the municipality. Things about culture, sports, day care and so on. [Focus group - School 2]

In the focus groups, teachers exemplified that they expected their school leaders to stand up for them when parents interfere too much or over-criticize their efforts and functioning. This kind of behaviour is linked to providing support and encouragement, which is part of relation-oriented behaviour.

Sometimes, I have to protect the teachers; I have to stand up for them, against our open door mentality. It is not because we are a community that we serve as a service institution for demanding parents. It all has to stay feasible. [School leader 9]

4.3 Leader–member exchange
While explaining the relationships between the school leader and the teachers, both school leaders and teachers provided us with elaborated descriptions using various aspects of exchange in the relationships. The most named aspect of exchange was *trust*. Trust was described by 14 school leaders and in 18 focus groups as an important aspect of the school

leader–teacher relationship and as a condition of efficient collaboration. Besides, trust is named as important in terms of feeling eased, safe and at home at the workplace.

> Trust, I personally find trust my number 1. I think, if you cannot trust your school leader or your colleagues, then it stops. Yes. There it stops for me. If you have to work in a suspicious atmosphere . . . that just does not work. [School leader 6]

> I can state that if you say something to her (i.e. school leader), if you want it to be confidential, that it stays confidential, it will happen that way. It feels very safe, she grants haven, can I say it that way? [Focus group – School 3]

Linked to trust, openness was often described. The participants explained that a clear and open communication in which expectations and interpretations are shared is perceived as meaningful for a high-quality relationship. 15 school leaders named it, whereas in 13 focus groups it was mentioned.

> So I try to deal with my team in a positive way, but if something goes wrong, it should also be mentioned. So I mean, I am really open and I name things as they are, but with mutual respect, and I think that is very important. [School leader 13]

> We focus on openness, on "open communication", that is something . . . almost every school year we start with it. What do we expect from each other? We know that it is difficult. But it is fruitful. And the creation of a safe climate. [Focus group – School 9]

Contribution to the profession and to the school emerged as prominent for school leaders ($n = 14$). Likewise, it was named in 11 focus groups. School leaders and teachers assign relationships higher levels of quality if they notice that the other shows higher levels of contributions to the job and job-related issues, for instance, in putting extra efforts in working groups, developing teaching materials, and supporting colleagues and pupils. School leaders indicated that it is harder to work with people with low levels of contribution because people with low levels of contribution usually stick to strict minimum requirements. One of the school leaders clarified that he did not like to start discussions each time to participate in an extra activity and therefore levels of collaboration with that teacher were perceived as rather low.

> Hum, yes, I think . . . commitment is also very important, not purely professional, but going the extra mile for the school. [. . .] Involvement, certainly to their pupils, that they really get the most out of their pupils and that they do everything they can, to help their pupils, to move them forward. [School leader 17]

Respect was mainly named in the focus groups ($n = 17$) and less by school leaders ($n = 8$). It was exemplified that school leaders and teachers sometimes have different opinions and can have discussions; but that everyone has to be respected.

> Respect, for your own character, everyone … yes … everyone's individuality. Being yourself. Yes, that's it. You are, who you are. You do not have to play a role, nor to wear a mask … to be able to function. Appreciating and being appreciated, that's what it is all about. [Focus group – School 2]

In addition to respect, authenticity was described in the focus groups ($n = 11$) and by school leaders ($n = 7$). They explained that they find it important to be themselves and do not want to change their own character nor personality through peer pressure and value authentic people in relationships.

> Our school leader does not want to be popular and I think that's important. Everyone can be himself or herself. [Focus group – School 7]

School leaders ($n = 8$) recognize the importance of reciprocity in relationships. This came out in the focus groups as well ($=11$). They named that they both experience situations from their

own perspectives, can have different information and opinions about the same issues and need to recognize each other as equal partners in the relationship in order to work efficiently.

Teachers indicated in the focus groups ($n = 10$) that school leaders are involved in taking care of them. They recognize it as nice and pleasant, but on the other hand, some warn school leaders to take care and protect themselves for stress-related diseases. In addition, only a few school leaders ($n = 5$) indicated care as an aspect of the relationship between the school leader and the teacher in the interviews. School leaders described it in taking care of teachers suffering from stress-related symptoms, facing serious conflicts with parents or more in general by ensuring that they like to teach at their school.

Lastly, accessibility was often named in the descriptions. Accessibility was perceived as a condition but also a feature of the school leader–teacher relationship. In the focus groups ($n = 13$), teachers name it as a condition to work towards a high-quality relationship. Indeed, if you cannot access the school leader because he or she is hardly at school, it is hard to develop a relationship. Some school leaders named to consciously pay attention to an open-door attitude so teachers easily can walk in if they feel a need to discuss things. Besides, accessibility in terms of having no feelings of fear to approach the school leader was expressed.

5. Conclusion and discussion

School leadership research has a tradition of researching the construct of leadership predominantly from the perspective of teachers. This study researches the concept of leadership in primary education integrating school leaders' and teachers' perspectives. The study has an explorative nature and aims to clarify and refine the theoretical perspectives of leadership and leader–follower relations, which were mostly developed out of the educational field. The study compiles the perceptions of 24 school leaders and 22 teacher groups employed in 22 schools.

The results reveal that leadership is no longer the responsibility of a single person. School leaders and teachers indicate that different people can take up leadership roles such as special education needs coordinators or policy coordinators. It was striking that teachers perceived working groups as leading, whereas school leaders left them underexposed.

When describing leadership behaviour, school leaders and teachers paid especially attention to relation-oriented leadership behaviour and task-oriented behaviour. Relation-oriented behaviour is perceived as largely different among school leaders and teachers (see Table 2). School leaders indicated that "coaching and guiding people" is the core of their job in order to ensure organizational performance. The taxonomy of Yukl provided guidance to structure the data, though through giving room to empiricism we noted that categories as "team coaching" and "providing feedback and evaluation" are important categories to add to the taxonomy.

Team coaching, that is, helping the team to function efficiently, is especially perceived by the school leaders but also named in about half of the focus groups. Besides, the category providing feedback and evaluation emerged. Providing feedback and evaluation is a decree authority of the school leader and something school leaders perceive as an important assignment. Teachers perceive this barely as leadership behaviour. This might be because school leaders focus more on providing feedback and evaluation, due to the decree authorities for Flemish school leaders. Further research is needed to confirm this. Teachers long for a daily confirmation of their performance, which is reflected in the category "recognizing achievement and contribution". Recognition was predominantly mentioned in the focus groups and rather absent at the level of the school leader. In times of teacher shortage, it is interesting to know that recognition and the support of co-workers and leaders can contribute to the desire for continued employment as a motivating factor in the senior phase of the career (Van Dam *et al.*, 2009).

The self- and other perceptions of relation-oriented leadership behaviour seem rather divergent. On the one hand, in the focus groups the teachers exemplified to perceive their school leaders as "supportive and recognizing". In contrast, the school leaders perceive themselves rather exceptional as supportive and recognizing. Given the high levels of stress among school leaders, it could be easing for school leaders to be aware of this perception and appreciation of teachers. On the other hand, school leaders name "consulting with members when making decisions" as a main part of their leadership behaviour. The recognition of teachers about consulting in the decision-making process is, however, low. Clear communication about consultation in the decision-making process can help to guide teacher perceptions and lead to better alignment of school leaders' and teachers' perceptions about consultation in the decision-making process, leading eventually to a positive influence on school leaders' effectiveness (Atwater and Yammarino, 1997).

Moreover, according to a review of Daniëls *et al.* (2019), communication and maintaining quality internal relations are features of effective school leadership. The same applies to providing feedback and evaluation. The divergence in the previous mentioned perceptions can be explained by the Rashomon effect. The Rashomon effect is based on the principle that people see and interpret different aspects of an event and that all perceptions of the truth are shaped by peoples' own perceptions and understandings (Roth and Metha, 2002). School leaders have other priorities than teachers. School leaders focus on keeping the overview of the school and keeping the school running, whereas the teachers focus on their particular teaching assignments and pupils.

School leaders and teachers need support from one another, but in a different way. School leaders need support in terms of consulting in decision-making, whereas teachers need support in terms of receiving "support and encouragement" and "recognition of achievement and contribution". Moreover, school leaders focus on "team coaching" and "providing feedback and evaluation" in order to keep the team functioning effectively.

Task-oriented behaviour was also extensively described in the interviews and focus groups (see Table 3). It was mainly exemplified as decision-making, monitoring operations, clarifying assignments related to the schools' mission and vision and accomplishing particular tasks according to the decretal obligations. The results for task-oriented behaviour are largely similar for school leaders and teachers. It is striking that the distinction between the task-oriented and relation-oriented approach with regard to decision-making is difficult in practice. Teachers expect their school leaders to make decisions (task-oriented) though state that they value consultation (rather relation-oriented) about decision-making.

External-oriented behaviour comes to the front in the school leaders' role of presenting, promoting and defending the reputation of the organization and/or the teachers. Results are convergent for school leaders and teachers. Change-oriented behaviour is another subcategory of Yukl's taxonomy, but was underexposed in the interviews and the focus groups.

In conclusion, Yukl's taxonomy of leadership behaviour is directional to study leadership in primary education, though we noticed that some subcategories are more appropriate than others are and that it is recommended to elaborate the taxonomy with a few subcategories.

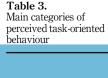| Perception of task-oriented behaviour	
School leaders	*Focus groups*
(1) Decision-making ($n = 16$)	(1) Decision-making ($n = 14$)
(2) Monitoring operations ($n = 13$)	(2) Clarifying assignments ($n = 9$)
(3) Clarifying assignments ($n = 9$)	(3) Monitoring operations ($n = 9$)
Note(s): The categories are presented in a ranked order	

Table 3.
Main categories of perceived task-oriented behaviour

The perception of the leader–member relationship seems to match fairly well for school leaders and teachers. In the focus groups, "respect" is more often named than in the interviews with the school leaders. In the focus groups, school leaders are frequently described as caring and concerned, whereas school leaders perceive themselves less caring and concerned. The latter seems to align with the findings in the section on leadership behaviour. School leaders do not perceive themselves as caring, supportive and recognizing as teachers do. The proposed aspects of LMX by the LMX theory: trust, contribution and respect correspond with the perceptions of the participants in our sample, whereas loyalty and affect are less present. It is suggested to elaborate the aspects of leader-member exchange with openness and authenticity. In addition, the use of care and feelings of concerning and reciprocity should be considered to include. The preceding ones are clearer at the level of the teachers. Besides, accessibility was often named by the teachers as a condition for the development of a high-quality relation but also mentioned by teachers and school leaders as a feature of a relationship. Given that the largely shared mutual perspective on leadership, it is likely that school leaders and teachers develop high-quality relationships, which benefit among others job satisfaction, performance and job stress. However, scholars warn for the drawback of high degrees of LMX, which can cause higher degrees of stress due to deep senses of obligation (Harris and Kacmar, 2006). To get a thorough understanding of the effects of high degrees of leader-member exchange related to the effects on job stress and satisfaction in education, follow-up research is designated. Lastly, establishing and maintaining trusting and high-quality relationships with each teacher individually takes time, though this time is well spent because it helps school leaders to create conditions necessary to meet their goals (Tschannen-Moran and Gareis, 2015).

Summarized, the current study shows that the hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behaviour (Yukl, 2012) and the LMX theory are guiding theories for studying leadership in primary education including self- and other perceptions, but that it is recommended to elaborate the constructs of the theories taking into account the findings of the current study. Studying the alignment of self-other perceptions about leadership in education is important because it contributes to the effectiveness of school leaders' actions such as facilitating change in teachers' behaviour contributing to the overall school effectiveness and affects school leaders' responses to development feedback. Moreover, insights on the quality of school leader–teacher relations are relevant concerning the issue of teacher shortages in education. The quality of school leader–teacher relations has among others influences on job satisfaction, job motivation and organizational commitment. Therefore, the insights of the current study provide building blocks for future work focussing on unravelling the effects of school leader–teacher relations concerning turnover intentions and the reasoning behind turnover intentions. Overall, the study (1) contributes to future research on school effectiveness and the increase of organizational effectiveness and (2) provides insights, which give direction to research and practice concerning the sustainability of the teacher profession.

6. Limitations and recommendations

While reasonable efforts have been made to conduct a reliable and valid study, the study has some limitations. First, the current study was conducted in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The culture in Flemish primary schools is generally known as a less hierarchical culture. This cultural context may have influenced the perceptions of leadership behaviour and the school leader–teacher relationships. In case of comparisons with more hierarchical school cultures, precautions must be taken and possibly additional research must be carried out. Second, our research was conducted in schools with a school leader–teacher ratio varying from 1:20 to 1:35. This is an average size for a Flemish primary school. However, the school

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leader–teacher ratio can vary among schools and is different in secondary education where the school leader–teacher ratio easily increases to 1:100 or even more. The school leader–teacher ratio can possibly influence the results. We especially expect an influence on the school leader–teacher relationship as the school leader has to spread the attention over more teachers. We recommend this hypothesis as a subject for follow-up research. Third, we are aware of the self-selection effect that may have occurred during the sampling phase. Indeed, we allowed every school leader to participate in the study, but they have chosen themselves to participate in the sample. Fourth, we coded the interviews and focus groups using the coding tree. We did not elaborate on the particular meaning of the codes as it was out of the scope of the current research. However, we recognize it as meaningful for follow-up research. Lastly, we would like to recommend that follow-up research focusses on the quality of school leader–teacher relations and uses mirrored interviews to explore the relationships between school leaders and teachers and relates it among others to job-related stress and turnover intentions. The authors would like to warn against generalizations based on the current study. The current study is a qualitative study, and therefore, it is advisable to carry out additional quantitative research before generalizations are made.

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Appendix

Sample questions interviews and focus groups
Similar questions were asked to school leaders and teachers. The questions are adjusted to the perspective of the school leader/teachers?

(1) How do you describe leadership (behaviour)?

(2) What are (un)important/favourable features of leadership (behaviour)?

(3) Which features of a professional relationship are important in a professional relationship with a teacher/school leader?

(4) What would make you describe the relationship with a teacher/school leader as strong/weak?

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