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Exploring school leaders’ dilemmas in response to tensions related to teacher professional agency

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ABSTRACT
This study explores a school leaders’ perspective on teacher professional agency. Tensions may arise when teachers feel hindered in their professional agency and try to negotiate their ‘space’ with other stakeholders (colleagues, students, management). School leaders are expected to empower and support teachers, but how do they perceive teachers’ agency tensions? What leadership instruments do they select for these situations? School leaders’ sense-making and framing of situations can influence the way teachers subsequently interpret and act upon situations. Regular research methods (interviews/surveys) are not sufficient to study school leaders’ framing of agency tensions. Therefore, we used a qualitative vignette questionnaire to study the dilemmas, responsible actors and leadership instruments of 50 school leaders from Dutch secondary schools in response to teachers’ agency tensions. The results show that school leaders perceived dilemmas at both the organisation and teacher levels. Five different leadership instruments showed a variety of possible roles for school leaders (e.g. communicating vision, exchanging expectations, diagnosing problems). This paper discusses the ways in which school leaders attribute an important role to themselves in resolving tensions related to teacher professional agency and the consequences school leaders’ roles and practices might have for how they lead professional learning.

Introduction

School leaders need to set the right conditions for teachers to develop themselves (Bredeson 2000). More recently, ‘Leadership for Learning’ (LfL) scholars have focused on the question how leadership could be more strongly connected to teacher professional learning to benefit student learning (Hallinger 2011, Lovett and Andrews 2011, Daniëls et al. 2019). In general, these scholars emphasise that (a) learning should be a focus for all actors in the school (students, teachers, leaders, organisation), (b) leaders can create capacity for teachers to develop through fostering a favourable organisational climate for learning, and (c) shared or school-wide leadership is emphasised which means that everyone in the school is a potential leader and teachers can take the lead in developing the school. The latter aspect, where teachers are engaged in shared leadership, is seen as a potential instrument for teachers to develop professionally and to – collaboratively with colleagues – improve student outcomes (Poekert 2012). Recent studies increasingly focused on how school leaders can empower teachers to develop as agents of change in schools (Smylie and Eckert 2018, Zwart et al.)

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2018), but how school leaders create opportunities to influence teachers’ agentic capacity is largely unknown. Teachers-as-agents-of-change aligns with the concept of teacher professional agency and the professional space in which teachers enact their agency for their own professional development (i.e. development opportunities within schools, see Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. 2017). How teachers perceive and use these possibilities for their development and for influencing their work environments may vary (Evans 2014, Priestley et al. 2015). Teacher professional agency is thought to positively influence teachers’ professional and school development (Toom et al. 2015). According to Toom et al. (2015), school leaders are key in enhancing teacher professional agency because they can ‘reorganise teachers’ work at school, allocate resources to promote teachers’ initiatives concerning pedagogical innovations, and restructure everyday work in classrooms and at school, and hence provide or restrict teachers’ professional agency’ (p. 616).

Teacher professional agency is situated within complex school contexts. Oftentimes, school management encourages teacher leadership on the one hand, and, simultaneously, it exerts control on educational quality and requires teachers to commit to school policy (Honigh et al. 2017). Additionally, parents exert indirect control by acting as ‘clients of education’ and advising teachers on how to perform their jobs (Noordegraaf et al. 2015). Because of various demands from different actors (colleagues, parents, school leaders), teachers need to (co)create, design, and demarcate their space constantly regarding these actors (Honigh et al. 2017). This process can impact the range of possibilities teachers see for themselves to utilise their agency. Kessels (2012) states that differences between perceived and used possibilities for professional development can result in positive but also negative tensions (called ‘agency tensions’ in our study, see Schaap et al. 2019). These tensions often originate in interactions with others and can arise as a consequence of unclear expectations for each other’s tasks and responsibilities (Seashore Louis et al. 2010). These tensions can be resolved in harmony but can also be part of a negotiation process of ‘giving and taking’ responsibilities (DeRue and Ashford 2010). Leadership can play an important role in communicating about tasks and distribution of power to resolve ambiguity and tensions (Carson et al. 2007). Both school leaders and teachers are thus essential for creating a school-wide capacity to enact teachers’ professional agency. Until now, most research has focused on teachers’ perspectives on enacting professional agency (Priestley et al. 2015, Brodie 2019); however, the complex interplay between teachers and their school leaders in designing teachers’ professional space requires a focus on the perspective of school leaders in creating this space.

The current study was part of a larger research project that started with the idea to explore how Dutch teachers perceive the processes of enacting teacher agency in schools. The backdrop of this project were national policy initiatives that aimed to increase teachers’ role in contributing to school improvement processes by providing them with (financial) resources. The following three policy initiatives were central; teachers with a PhD-grant (combining their job as teacher with a PhD study), student teachers that follow a traineeship (somewhat comparable to TeachFirst in the UK), and teachers that join a professional learning network. Dutch policy officers generally believe that if teachers are provided with resources to develop themselves, then these teachers’ learning opportunities would also benefit the larger school context and contribute to school development. This also relates to the fact that Dutch schools are characterised as having low hierarchy and high teacher autonomy levels. Due to its character, the Dutch context potentially provide many opportunities for teachers to act as agents of change. We were questioning this belief; do teachers really experience space to develop both themselves and contribute to school development? Our results showed that it takes more than ‘just’ providing teachers with resources and addressed the complicated nature of crafting a ‘space’ for teacher and school development (Schaap et al. 2019, Meirink et al. 2019).

The current study aims to understand the mechanisms for achieving professional agency in teachers from a school leader perspective. We did not focus on any of the specific policy initiatives as we believed that these initiatives were too context-specific. However, we considered formal school leaders’ perspective (both principals and team managers) on ‘everyday’ teacher agency tensions (cf. Zwart et al. 2018) As professional agency is not so much an objective thing but is co-created and
understood by the involved actors, we were interested in school leaders’ sense-making (Sleegers et al. 2009). This is because school leaders’ framing of problematic situations can influence the way teachers subsequently interpret, transform, make sense of, and act upon these situations (Coburn 2005). Our paper is written from the idea that how school leaders make sense of tensions that occur when teachers’ (try to) enact professional agency could predict how school leaders subsequently enact leadership for professional learning practices. Thus, our study explores school leaders’ framing of their support in teacher agency tensions and discusses what consequences school leaders’ interpretations might have on teacher agency and professional learning. This way, our study makes an empirical contribution to the field of leadership for professional learning because it demonstrates the variation in leaders’ self-perceived strategies and practices that could empower teachers as agents of change.

The focus of the present study is on (1) school leaders’ diagnoses of dilemmas in tense situations regarding teacher agency, and (2) school leaders’ use of leadership instruments and their view on responsible actors. We see ‘dilemmas’ as leaders’ interpretation of the tense situation, and this interpretation does not necessarily have to be negative or problematic to the leader, but an aspect of the situation that attracts their attention and needs a response or action. The combination of school leaders’ diagnosis of the dilemmas in a situation as well as the decision that follows, and the rationale behind the decision, are considered an ‘action consideration’. Current research methodologies (surveys or interviews) on school leaders’ interpretations of situations seem to measure espoused theories (‘spoken’) rather than theories-in-use (‘action’) (Argyris et al. 1985), and, as a consequence, these methods are less appropriate to measure leaders’ action considerations. Our study tried to overcome this shortcoming by using a projective research strategy in the form of a qualitative vignette questionnaire, which uses case descriptions of tense situations to elicit school leaders’ action considerations (Donoghue 2000).

Our research questions were:

1. Which dilemmas do school leaders perceive in situations that include agency tensions for teachers?
2. Which leadership instruments and responsible actors do school leaders select in response to different situations with agency tensions?

**Theoretical framework**

**Teacher professional agency and agency tensions**

In order to understand agency tensions, it is important to note that teacher professional agency is differently addressed across countries. For example, in the USA, some teachers in schools are teacher leaders because of their expertise in specific subject areas, and they are expected to utilise their agency to inspire their colleagues (Poekert 2012). In European countries, like the Netherlands, all teachers in schools are expected to become teacher leaders, meaning that they have the capacity to initiate purposeful actions that imply will, autonomy, freedom and choice and that their agentic capacity will result in active involvement in directing educational practice (Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011, Priestley et al. 2015). Teacher agency has regularly been described as teachers exerting influence, making choices and taking a stance in school organisational development (Vähäsantanen 2015). We see teacher professional agency as both agentic capacity to design and improve teaching practice as well as the capacity to exert influence and enact leadership in school organisational development. Agency tensions arise when workplace affordances for professional development interact with teachers’ personal features (e.g. motives, expectations, needs) that affect the way teachers regulate these affordances, which may result in perceived feelings of friction (Billett 2009, Schaap et al. 2019). An example of an agency tension is when teachers develop innovative curriculum materials in a professional learning community with teachers from different schools but
experience a conservative learning culture in their own subject team that hinders the introduction of curriculum materials at their own schools.

**Leadership perspectives on teacher agency tensions**

We studied school leaders’ interpretations of agency tensions from two different theoretical perspectives: (a) boundaries and distribution of responsibilities and (b) teachers co-creating development opportunities in interaction with their environment.

**Boundaries and responsibilities**

Within this perspective, professional agency is granted through the creation of development opportunities by management. School management is held accountable for setting clear boundaries for teachers’ tasks and responsibilities and for setting directions for school development. A school organisation where a lot of rules and agreements are being formalised, and which is mainly organised through top-down control, will decrease a teacher’s perceived agency (Priestley et al. 2015, Vähäsantanen 2015, Freire and Fernandes 2016). Teachers generally hold the belief that school management is held accountable for the allocation of resources and, subsequently, they take a reactive stance (Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers 1992). A school organisation in which teachers are granted plentiful opportunities for shared decision-making will increase teachers’ options for enacting agency (Freire and Fernandes 2016). When opportunities for teacher decision-making increase, this could occur in the harmonious negotiation of roles and responsibilities. However, when teachers and leaders experience incompatible goals (Seashore Louis et al. 2010) or competing professional judgements (Honingh et al. 2017), tensions can arise. Hanson (1978) introduced the interacting spheres model (ISM) that describes the way hierarchical control, collegial control and teacher autonomy are intertwined. Although the model is over 40 years old, the organisational processes described are still relevant today (Noordegraaf et al. 2015). According to the model, a school organisation contains multiple decision-making domains called ‘spheres of influence’ (Hanson 1978, p. 13). Hanson describes a teacher domain and an administrator domain, but the analogy of different spheres can be extended when distinguishing different sub-coalitions in the organisation (subject teams, department heads). Within every domain, there exists a relative amount of power, autonomy, legitimacy, and certain tasks and goals. Hanson calls the overlap between two domains the ‘contested zone’ (1978, p. 19), which refers to the agreements that are made to overcome tensions and that require continuous (re)negotiation of responsibilities. Because of the interdependence between both domains, members from each domain try to influence the other domain and simultaneously try to protect their domain from outside interference (Hanson 2003). As Shen and Xia (2012) point out, the view in which only one of the domains can exert power over a certain topic resembles the zero-sum theory as opposed to the win-win theory, where the increasing power of teachers does not mean that school leaders lose power. In sum, this perspective emphasises the negotiation about the distribution of tasks and responsibilities in the organisation, where boundaries about these responsibilities are a central topic for discussion.

**Co-creation in interaction with environment**

From this second perspective, there is not a win-lose distribution of power in the school; multiple actors can exert power over similar domains, topics and subjects (win-win theory, Shen and Xia 2012). This perspective emphasises a dynamic co-creation process in which teachers actively interact with other actors (colleagues, parents, school management) to pursue their aims. Within this perspective, achieving professional agency is socially constructed in the school context (Priestley et al. 2015) and is largely dependent upon the capacities and motivations of teachers to perceive, create and negotiate opportunities in their environment (Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011). Teachers’ perceptions of development opportunities are related to the co-existence of multiple claiming and granting processes in the school (DeRue and Ashford
coaching new practices 'significant leaders a Diamond use leaders' adaptation in their situation, their daily life. In a study, reciprocal teachers' perspectives on agency tensions, we draw from educational leadership literature, which relates leadership practices to school effectiveness.

School leaders' practices and considerations

There are multiple perspectives on educational leadership, the most well known of which are transformational leadership (Leithwood and Steinbach 1991), instructional leadership (Blase and Blase 2000) and distributed leadership (Spillane and Diamond 2007). Within each leadership perspective, different practices are emphasised. Effective educational leadership does not prefer one perspective over the other but describes context-dependent combinations of leadership practices in a broad repertoire of effective leadership practices (Leithwood et al. 2006 cited in Ten Bruggencate et al. 2012). Leithwood et al. (2020) describe four generic domains of effective leadership practices:

1. set directions (vision);
2. build relationships and develop people (develop);
3. develop the organisation to support desired practices (re)design;
4. improve the instructional program (manage).

In our study, we use these four generic domains to map school leaders' action considerations to teachers' agency tensions. Leithwood et al. (2020, p. 6) foreground that situated contexts have 'significant consequences for how those engaged in leadership work in schools select and enact their practices if they are to be successful'. This does not mean that school leaders act differently in every new situation, but rather they make 'contextually sensitive' combinations of leadership practices from their repertoire. In addition, leadership theorists increasingly emphasise the importance of reciprocal influences between teachers and leaders (Fairhurst and Grant 2010). In an empirical study, Anderson (2004) showed that teacher leaders influence leaders' decision-making and vice versa, highlighting the reciprocal and social nature of leading schools. This would mean that how teachers disclose their agency tensions to the formal leader can have an impact on the leaders' interpretation and decision-making, and this decision subsequently affects what teachers do.

We assume that school leaders consider and weigh each situation to arrive at a certain combination of possible practices, and these considerations are dependent upon how they perceive and adapt information gathered from their environment (Coburn 2005, Sleegers et al. 2009). The leaders' action considerations can be perceived as the cognitive and affective structures leaders use to base their day-to-day decisions. Coburn (2006) distinguishes two ways of how school actors
can frame and interpret situations: diagnostic or prognostic. Diagnostic framing focusses on analysing or diagnosing problems and determining who is responsible for solving it, and prognostic framing focusses on creating solutions and setting directions for problem-solving.

**Methods**

**Research design**

Regular research methods like a questionnaire or interview are insufficient to study leaders’ action considerations in response to agency tensions. Therefore, we chose a projective research strategy (Donoghue 2000) that asks participants indirect about their actions as opposed to directly. By means of a vignette questionnaire, we asked school leaders to respond to case descriptions (vignettes) that were characterised by teachers’ agency tensions. The vignette questionnaire was inspired by the policy-capturing methodology, which is often used in research on decision-making processes for policymakers (Poulou 2001). By manipulating variables in the vignette, the influence of those variables on pre-structured response options can be tested. Because all participants responded to the same vignettes, differences in beliefs, considerations and decision-making can be analysed (Maguire et al. 2015). Traditionally, vignettes are mostly used with a quantitative research design (Aguinis and Bradley 2014). For this study, we took this principle as a starting point, but we focused on the qualitative part as we realised that pre-structured response options would make it difficult to understand why certain variables would elicit what kind of decision-making (Barter and Renold 2000).

**Participants**

In the Netherlands, different school leader positions exist in secondary schools: team manager, school principal and school board manager. For this study, we chose to include both team managers and principals because we expected agency tensions mainly related to the primary process of teaching. We approached 147 school leaders from our networks of three universities both verbally and through email and asked them to fill out our online questionnaire. The vignette questionnaire was eventually filled out by 50 Dutch school leaders (34% response rate with 23 incomplete questionnaires). Reasons for nonresponse were generally a lack of time as we saw that many participants dropped out halfway through the questionnaire.¹ The participants (50% men, 34% women, 16% unknown/unanswered) were representative of different geographical areas and educational levels. Most participants were appointed as school principals (n = 38); four participants were team managers, and for eight participants their positions were unknown.²

**Vignette questionnaire**

A vignette questionnaire consists of short, narrative case descriptions of hypothetical though recognisable situations designed to elicit participants’ judgements of these situations.

In Figure 1, an example is provided of a vignette. All vignettes can be found in Appendix A.

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A policy document needs to be written about the enforcement of science education at the school. The school management does not formulate any requirements for this piece. The document will be leading the vision of science education for the next two years. Four science teachers, because of their innovative ideas, have been invited to get involved and write this policy document. They have received hours in their schedule to do this. The teachers respond to the invitation enthusiastically at first. However, thus far, this group of teachers has not started writing. They explain that they would like to receive clear guidelines from school leadership first before they can start writing this new policy document.

**Figure 1.** Example vignette.
Essential is that the descriptions contain the right amount of real-life information; too much would make the situation too specific and not recognisable. The vignettes in our study contained agency tensions, which are teachers’ feeling of friction between what is afforded and their personal features (Schaap et al. 2019). In our introduction we already stated that tensions ‘might result in friction’, but also that tensions can be ‘resolved in harmony’, thus the case descriptions are not necessarily negative. In our study, the situations in the vignettes were created by combining 1) the literature (e.g. Freire and Fernandes 2016), 2) real-life situations taken from interview data with 54 teachers from our overarching research project on teacher professional agency (Schaap et al. 2019, Meirink et al. 2019) and, 3) explorative interviews with seven school leaders to check (a) whether the situations were recognisable, (b) which responses the situations would elicit and (c) on what characteristics they based their responses (e.g. ‘if it were an individual teacher I would respond differently’). In these interviews, we additionally asked the school leaders whether they could describe related situations from their own practice, so we could collect multiple examples from different contexts. This process resulted in a questionnaire with seven vignettes that varied on six variables:

- The situation describes an individual or a teacher collective;
- The teachers experience no or plenty of development opportunities;
- The teachers do or do not use their agentic capacity;
- The opportunities for development are organised in different ways (time allotted, finance, support);
- The situation is related to the entire school or to an individual’s practice;
- The situation is aimed at different domains (organisational, teacher, student).

School leaders were asked to answer the following questions: (1) What is happening in this situation according to you? (2) Does this situation require the action of somebody? (3) If so, who should do something? and (4) What should this person be doing in this situation and why?

The vignette instrument was pilot tested in several rounds: (1) explorative interviews with school leaders, (2) focus group interview with six principals, (3) consultation with national and international experts on educational leadership, and (4) think-aloud pilots with three educational experts and four school leaders. During these pilot rounds, we adapted the vignette descriptions, questions and instructions to increase the variation and recognisability of the situations and the variability in the answers (Zwart et al. 2018). Based on this last cycle of think-aloud pilots, we decreased the number of situations from 16 to seven because of the time it took to fill out the questionnaire. Situations that did not contain enough tension or where the problem appeared unclear were eliminated. On average, filling out the entire questionnaire took 47 minutes.

**Data analysis**

In total, we coded 228 school leaders’ responses to agency tensions. The analysis of perceived dilemmas, responsible actors and action considerations took place in multiple rounds. First, answers to each open question were categorised for data reduction purposes. The answers to the question ‘What is happening in this situation according to you?’ were categorised in dilemmas that participants perceived in the vignettes. Multiple dilemmas could be categorised per participant per vignette. If participants thought the situation required an action of somebody, we coded the question, ‘Who should be doing something?’, with five categories of responsible actors: the school leader, the team leader, the teacher(s), someone else or no one. Eight combinations of actors were provided (see Table 2). The participants’ answers to the final question, ‘What should this person be doing and why?’, resulted in actions in response to the dilemma and the consideration (the *why* of that action). During the analysis, we labelled these ‘action considerations’ as ‘leadership instruments’ because the actions demonstrated what leadership practices
school leaders would select from their leadership repertoire. During the coding process, it appeared that most answers centred on why this actor was selected and less on the consideration for that particular action. An example of a leadership instrument is to have the team leader initiate a conversation where he/she would ask the teacher what he needs to solve the situation by himself. As our framework relies on the notions of framing and sensemaking, we assume that school leaders’ responses are filtered through their own frames. Therefore, we compared the variation in leadership instruments dependent on the dilemma-category that was selected for each vignette.

The multiple rounds of coding the dilemma categories and leadership instruments were done by the first three authors. Based on the first explorative analysis, every author compiled a set of content categories for dilemmas and instruments. These three sets were then compared and discussed. Based on this discussion, a coding scheme was developed with each category having a description and recognisable elements. An example category for a leadership instrument is the school leader thinking of a solution him/herself. Recognisable elements for this instrument are (a) the participant explains how the school leader (in the situation) should approach the dilemma and/or (b) the school leader takes the initiative and has a large share in solving the dilemma. With the developed coding scheme, the three authors have analysed a couple new cases. After this round, the coding scheme and its application to the cases was discussed and adjusted. For example, the category ‘the school leader does not act’ was adjusted to the wording ‘the school leader does not exert influence on the situation’ because in some occasions doing nothing still has an indirect influence on the situation, for example, to convey the message that the situation is a responsibility for the teachers. As a last step, each author checked one or two executed codings of responses to a vignette for accuracy, traceability of the summaries and the description of dilemma and instrument categories. Inconsistencies were once more discussed and adjusted.

Results

Dilemmas in the vignettes

When school leaders were asked ‘What is happening in this situation according to you?’, they perceived different dilemmas in the vignettes (see Table 1). These dilemmas can be categorised according to two themes: (1) related to the school organisation or (2) related to teachers’ attitudes or behaviour. Also, a large category was distinguished with dilemmas that are specific for the vignette. An example is vignette 2 in which a teacher who performs a PhD-study is the main character. In this specific case, school leaders name dilemmas that are specific for combining research with teaching.

School leaders described dilemmas in all vignettes that are related to the school or school management. Often this has to do with the (lack of) a clear vision of the school, with a problem related to the school’s culture or with (a lack of) communication of expectations. However, not all dilemma categories were used for each vignette. For four vignettes (#1, #2, #3, #7) the dilemma is mainly related to the context of the school organisation. For two vignettes (#4, #6) the situation was perceived both at the school and teacher levels. For one vignette (#5), the dilemma is mainly perceived from a teacher perspective, and only for one vignette (#7) the answer category ‘there is no dilemma in this situation’ was used.

Most school leaders (61%) described dilemmas both from the perspective of the school organisation and from the perspective of teachers’ attitudes or behaviours. A minority of school leaders (39%) showed a tendency to formulate dilemmas predominantly from the perspective of the school organisation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dilemma</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sample statement</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School organisation</td>
<td>Not clearly embedded in school vision or school organisation</td>
<td>The goal of the activities that teachers (are about to) undertake is not clearly embedded in the vision of the school or insufficiently related to other school activities.</td>
<td>It is hard to imagine that a policy document will be created without any further guidance, because there is a chance that this plan will not contribute to the achievement of school goals. (SL 39&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;, in response to vignette 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem with the school culture</td>
<td>A learning culture is missing in the school; there is a lack of shared vision and/or inquiry-based thinking; there is a lack of trust.</td>
<td>Teachers are not used to this. A culture of trust is missing, and it is perceived as a potential threat. (SL 13, in response to vignette 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School lacks clear communication, expectations are not clear</td>
<td>If expectations are not communicated clearly in advance by the school and/or the teacher, then a situation exists in which teachers do not know what to do or they act from feelings of fear/resistance.</td>
<td>This question is too general. This request should be introduced in a more structured, focused way, for example, in collaboration with subject departments. (SL 27, in response to vignette 7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No experienced relevance/usefulness, motivation</td>
<td>Teachers' lack of initiative or (intended) behaviour should be interpreted because of a lack of experienced relevance or usefulness.</td>
<td>It could be the case that the subject is relevant only for a limited amount of people in this school. (SL 9, in response to vignette 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers' attitudes/behaviour</td>
<td>Teachers' competencies insufficient</td>
<td>Teachers are not (yet) able to undertake certain professional development activities, or they are not able to take responsibility in the situation.</td>
<td>… a talented teacher does not necessarily make for a good project leader. (SL 23, in response to vignette 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers are insecure</td>
<td>Teachers do not undertake action (yet) because they are insecure about their own competencies, because they do not want to hurt colleagues, or because they fear making mistakes or fear change.</td>
<td>Fear for the unknown. Doing what you're good at is safe. (SL 14, in response to vignette 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers are conservative, do not want to change</td>
<td>The hindering belief teachers have towards changes and school improvement.</td>
<td>There is no need for change and renewal in this group (SL 3, in response to vignette 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Vignette-specific</td>
<td>These dilemmas are specific to the situation, e.g. the research grant in vignette 2 or the novice teacher in vignette 6.</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>SL refers to the School Leader and the number refers to the identifier of this participant.
Table 2. Actors named by the school leaders (per vignette).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>SL</th>
<th>TL</th>
<th>SL, TL</th>
<th>SL, TL, TE</th>
<th>TL, TE</th>
<th>SL, TE</th>
<th>TE</th>
<th>No one</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SL = school leader, TL = team leader, TE = teacher.

**Responsible actors and leadership instruments**

**Responsible actors**

In response to the question ‘Who should be doing something?’ different (combination of) responsible actors were mentioned (see Table 2). From Table 2 it becomes clear that the school leader assigns an important role to him/herself in most vignettes, but it depends on the situation whether the school leader acts alone or in cooperation with others. The school management assigns an important role for itself in some situations (#1, #7), while in other situations (#2, #3, #4) the responsibility for initiating action is shared between school management and the teacher(s). The arguments that the participants provide are that it has to do with the organisational structure (‘because this is his primary responsibility’) or culture (‘because it is important to have a shared understanding of the problem’).

**Leadership instruments**

We identified five different leadership instruments (see Table 3):

1. School leader acts (53% coded): school management creates solutions to the problem and executes this plan or the school leader has an important share in solving or approaching the situation;
2. Multiple actors act (22% coded): the school leaders demonstrate in their answer that the dilemma is a shared responsibility. Every actor in the situation has his or her own responsibility, and the proposed solution is approached collectively. In this instrument, there is an

Table 3. Distribution of leadership instruments per vignette (in %).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership instrument</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>V1</th>
<th>V2</th>
<th>V3</th>
<th>V4</th>
<th>V5</th>
<th>V6</th>
<th>V7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School leadership acts</strong></td>
<td>53.22</td>
<td>56.94</td>
<td>57.41</td>
<td>53.85</td>
<td>46.81</td>
<td>43.14</td>
<td>59.52</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set directions</td>
<td><strong>27.17</strong></td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td><strong>40.38</strong></td>
<td><strong>27.66</strong></td>
<td><strong>27.45</strong></td>
<td><strong>28.57</strong></td>
<td><strong>17.95</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build relationships and develop people</td>
<td>11.48</td>
<td><strong>15.28</strong></td>
<td><strong>29.63</strong>*</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>11.90</td>
<td>10.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the instructional program</td>
<td>9.24</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td><strong>16.67</strong></td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>7.84</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td><strong>17.95</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop the organisation</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td><strong>10.64</strong>*</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td><strong>11.90</strong>*</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple actors act (collective)</strong></td>
<td>22.41</td>
<td>27.78</td>
<td>25.93</td>
<td>13.46</td>
<td>27.66</td>
<td>19.61</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build relationships and develop people</td>
<td>10.08</td>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>12.96</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>7.84</td>
<td><strong>16.67</strong></td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set directions</td>
<td>9.24</td>
<td><strong>16.67</strong></td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td><strong>25.53</strong>*</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the instructional program</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td><strong>11.11</strong>*</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td><strong>12.82</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop the organisation</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First explore what is going on</strong></td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td><strong>21.15</strong>*</td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td><strong>19.61</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.29</strong></td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First tackle a bigger problem</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td><strong>17.95</strong>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No direct influence</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>14.81</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>5.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages bold: the percentage is 1.5 times more likely to occur than what we would expect based on 10 cells (>15%).

**Percentages italic:** these percentages were not considered in calculating the overall percentage as these percentages refer to meta-categories.

The cells with an asterisk refer to percentages that are twice as big as the total percentage of that row.
emphasis on conversation or dialogue. The word ‘together’ is often used and mostly meant that the school leader worked together with teachers, sometimes including students.

(3) First explore with others what is going on in the situation, before a solution can be created (11% coded); The action that results from this exploration could be a responsibility of multiple parties (school leader, team leader, teachers). After the exploration, the participant believes that school management should create or provide a solution for this situation.

(4) First tackle a bigger, underlying problem (e.g. school culture), before responding to the dilemma (5% coded); The school leader considers that there are other, different, bigger problems in the organisation that need to be dealt with first. An example is waiting for an initiative to have enough support from employees in the organisation before trying to pursue that initiative.

(5) Exert no direct influence on the situation (9% coded). School leader demonstrated different considerations to decide to (purposefully) refrain from acting upon the situation; the dilemma in the situation is not seen as urgent, or, teachers are given the responsibility to deal with the situation.

The first two leadership instruments propose solutions for the dilemma and can be seen as prognostic (Coburn 2006), whereas leadership instrument 3 and 4 are mainly diagnostic because these approaches require further inquiry. For the two most frequently mentioned instruments (1, 2) we created four subcategories according to effective leadership practices by Leithwood et al. (2020):

(a) Set directions, e.g. explaining why something is important, providing guidelines, making expectations explicit (school leader acts), or targeting the vision as a shared responsibility (multiple actors act)

(b) Build relationships and develop people, e.g. building trust with teachers, showing interest (school leader acts), or explicating reciprocal needs (multiple actors act)

(c) Improve the instructional program, e.g. supporting teachers with time and facilities for developing their instruction (school leader acts), or initiating new instructional ideas collaboratively (multiple actors act)

(d) Develop the organisation to support desired practices, e.g. creating a safe learning environment (school leader acts).

Regardless of situations in the vignettes, school leaders frequently mentioned instruments in which the school leader acts or multiple actors act. Other instruments were less often mentioned and seem more dependent on the situation in the vignette. For example, ‘first tackle a bigger problem’ was rarely coded, except for vignette 7. In this vignette, school leaders relatively often perceived the dilemma to be a ‘culture problem in the school’ that needed attention first. ‘First explore what is going on’ is mostly mentioned in vignettes 3 and 5, in which situations are described with one or more teachers hesitant to join a school-level activity to increase teaching quality. This situation requires further exploration of the problem with the teachers, and in the case of vignette 5, also with the students.

‘Setting directions’ is often coded within the leadership instruments school leader acts or multiple actors act. For multiple actors act, ‘setting directions’ was often selected in response to a situation in which a group of teachers cannot initiate development on their own (e.g. vignette 1 and 4). Apparently, this kind of situation requires the school leader to choose a collective approach to set directions to continue teacher development. The leadership instrument ‘Managing the curriculum’ has often been described as the supporting role of school management to cater the conditions for teachers’ professional development such as the facilitation of time, budget, or communication of school management (e.g. vignette 2 and 7). This instrument was often selected in response to situations in which the individual development of a teacher is hampered or can be enhanced more.
Table 4. Comprehensive overview of vignette characteristics in relation to dilemmas, leadership instruments and actors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of vignette</th>
<th>Leadership instruments and actors</th>
<th>Framing of dilemma*</th>
<th>Dilemma perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 1 – Vision on science education</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on a group of teachers in relation to school management. It is related to the organisation and the entire school. Teachers experience (much) space for development, and they are given sufficient time. Teachers do not employ this space.</td>
<td>• Vision development and direction-setting (management provides guidelines, makes expectations explicit and/or a collective of management and teachers discusses direction-setting as a shared responsibility)&lt;br&gt;• Building relations and developing people (building trust and showing interest in teachers by management).&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): School management or school management with teachers</td>
<td>Prognostic</td>
<td>Seen from perspective of school management/school organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 2 – PhD track</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on the individual in relation to the school and school management. It is related to teacher development and teacher contribution to school development. The teacher is given sufficient time (less teaching hours) to conduct his PhD study. The teacher experiences space for development but too few opportunities to make use of that space.</td>
<td>• Improve the instructional program (management supports teachers)&lt;br&gt;• Building relations and developing people (building trust and showing interest in teachers by management and/or from the collective of management and teachers (by voicing mutual expectations and needs))&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): team leader and teachers, school leader and teachers</td>
<td>Prognostic</td>
<td>Seen from perspective of school management/school organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 3 – Classroom visit</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on the individual in relation to a group of enthusiastic colleagues. It is related to whole-school development and development of the teacher team. It is focussed on teachers’ classroom practices. Teachers’ teaching rosters are rescheduled for professional development purposes. One teacher experiences the active limitation of his space.</td>
<td>• Vision development and direction-setting (management provides guidelines, makes expectations explicit)&lt;br&gt;• Building relations and developing people (building trust and showing interest in teachers by management and/or from the collective of management and teachers)&lt;br&gt;• First explore what is going on in the situation before management creates a solution&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): Team leader, team leader together with teachers or teachers</td>
<td>Prognostic and diagnostic</td>
<td>Seen from perspective of school management/school organisation, but also seen as insecurity of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 4 – Professional learning community</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on individual teachers in relation to a group of subject colleagues. It is related to the professional development of the teacher and the group. The teacher experiences space for development, which is granted by school management, but cannot employ this space because of differences in opinions with colleagues.</td>
<td>• Vision development and direction-setting (management provides guidelines, makes expectations explicit and/or a collective of management and teachers discusses direction setting as a shared responsibility)&lt;br&gt;• Redesign the organisation (management actively creates a safe learning environment)&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): School leader or team leader/school leader and teachers</td>
<td>Prognostic</td>
<td>Seen from perspective of school management/school organisation, but also from attitudes/behaviour of teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Table 4. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of vignette</th>
<th>Leadership instruments and actors</th>
<th>Framing of dilemma*</th>
<th>Dilemma perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 5 – Whole-class instruction</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on the teaching practice of a group of teachers in relation to the dissatisfaction of a group of students. The teachers are given space to organise teaching differently, but this space is not being used by teachers.</td>
<td>• Vision development and direction-setting (by management)&lt;br&gt;• First explore what is going on in the situation before management creates a solution&lt;br&gt;• Exert no direct influence on this situation&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): School leader, team leader, no one (own responsibility of teachers)</td>
<td>Prognostic and diagnostic</td>
<td>Seen from attitudes/ behaviour of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 6 – Traineeship</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on an individual beginning teacher in relation to his/her subject colleagues. It is related to the teacher’s own professional development and teaching practice and the teaching practices of the teacher’s colleagues. There is space offered and encouragement from school management, but agency is not experienced due to a lack of support from subject colleagues.</td>
<td>• Vision development and direction-setting (by management)&lt;br&gt;• Building relations and developing people (collectively initiating development and, for some, building trust and showing interest in teachers by management)&lt;br&gt;• Redesign the organisation (management actively creates a safe learning environment)&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): School leader, team leader or team leader and teachers</td>
<td>Prognostic and diagnostic</td>
<td>Seen from perspective of school management/ school organisation, and from attitudes/behaviour of teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vignette 7 – Using budget for professional development</strong>&lt;br&gt;This situation is focussed on a young teacher in relation to school management. It is related to the teacher’s professional development and the development of his/her teaching practice. For this specific case, it should be determined which facilities need to be organised to create opportunities for professional development.</td>
<td>• Vision development and direction-setting (by management)&lt;br&gt;• Improve the instructional program (management supports teachers)&lt;br&gt;• First tackle a bigger, different problem (by management)&lt;br&gt;Actor(s): School leader, school leader and team leader, no one (in case respondents see no dilemma)</td>
<td>Prognostic</td>
<td>Seen from perspective of school management/ school organisation, or no dilemma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Prognostic perspective: Participants focus their action considerations mainly on solutions and formulate goals and strategies to arrive at those solutions.

Diagnostic perspective: Participants focus their action considerations mainly on actions to understand the problem better and to understand who should be responsible for problem-solving.
Table 4 shows a comprehensive overview of a description of each vignette coupled with the most-coded leadership instruments and dilemma perspectives. From this overview, there appears to be a dominant dilemma for a couple of vignettes (the school organisation as source of the dilemma in vignette 1 vs. the teachers' attitudes and behaviours in vignette 5). When the dominant dilemma was perceived from the school organisation, prognostic strategies where the school management is responsible for problem-solving were often mentioned. School leaders chose diagnostic strategies when they perceived teachers' behaviour or attitudes to be the dominant dilemma (except vignette 4). Common for the situations that elicited diagnostic strategies was that they were all aimed at improving teaching practice.

Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to provide insight into the role school leaders see for themselves and others in response to teachers' agency tensions. The study was not focused on the actual leaders' practices, but on their interpretations of situations with agency tensions and the actions and responsible actors that they describe in response to these agency tensions. These responses provide insight in how school leaders disclose their leadership practices to teachers, which can subsequently affect teachers' responses and opportunities for enacting agency to develop both themselves and their schools.

Our first research question was 'Which dilemmas do school leaders perceive in situations that include agency tensions for teachers?'. The results show that, even though school leaders perceive different dilemmas in similar situations (vignettes), there appears to be a dominant dilemma for a couple of vignettes (see Table 4). School leaders described dilemmas in all vignettes related to the school management, which was often related to the vision of the school, the school's culture or with (un)clear communication of expectations. Also, school leaders' interpretations of the dilemmas seem to impact the selected leadership instruments due to the framing of the situation, i.e. prognostic or diagnostic (Coburn 2006). For example, school leaders chose diagnostic strategies when they interpreted a dilemma from the attitude or behaviour of the teachers. Following a diagnostic strategy could be a symptom of the reciprocal influences between teachers and leaders (Anderson 2004) as school leaders were especially careful to act in situations where attitudes and feelings of teachers were involved. Also, these diagnostic strategies could indicate that the school leaders thought further inquiry through dialogue with the teachers was necessary.

Our second research question was 'Which leadership instruments and responsible actors do school leaders select in response to different situations with agency tensions?'. From our findings it becomes clear that school leaders can take up many possible roles in responding to tense situations, e.g. making expectations explicit, exploring mutual expectations for professional development, formulating a vision collaboratively with teachers, showing trust to teachers, and taking away resistance or anxiety experienced by teachers. These examples demonstrate that the school leaders in our study use a broad leadership repertoire to encourage teachers to use their professional agency. Most of these leadership instruments are based on clear communication (Hulpia and Devos 2010). Although school leaders are often attributed a facilitating role for creating opportunities for teacher development (i.e. assigning policy, budget, time, see 'boundaries and responsibilities' in theoretical framework), we saw this role only slightly represented in our results (i.e. managing curriculum, redesigning organisation was infrequently coded). School leaders' perspectives on teacher agency are thus not limited to 'simply' providing teachers with enough development resources but rely heavily on their social interactions with colleagues and teachers.

School leaders assign different responsible actors dependent on the situation in the vignette. The selection of one or multiple actors can be interpreted from Hanson's interacting spheres model (1978), that describes a distribution of responsibilities within and between the different spheres. For example, the tension described in vignette 3 between a teacher team and the management team could be seen as a distribution of responsibilities between two spheres (a
`contested zone`). In line with this, we can argue that selecting multiple responsible actors from
different spheres (team leader together with teachers) seems to relate to a more horizontal
approach of leadership (Carson et al. 2007). Distributed leadership could increase shared deci-
sion-making and teacher leadership (Spillane and Diamond 2007), and it seems appropriate to
increase teachers’ opportunities to enact professional agency (Kessels 2012) and develop profes-
sionally (Poekert 2012).

However, the school management is being held responsible to act in most of the selected
leadership instruments. This could mean that the school leaders attribute a large role to themselves,
or it could be a consequence of the way the questions were formulated in the vignette instrument.
School leaders seem to prefer a vertical approach over a horizontal approach in responding to
leaders’ agency tensions. A preference for vertical leadership practices can be a consequence of
school leaders’ beliefs that vision development and setting direction is the best approach in
ambiguous situations to support teachers in enacting their agency. In their view, a first step is to
communicate to teachers a solution to the situation, so teachers can take further steps from there.
Another reason for vertical leadership practices could be because school leaders distrust teachers’
capabilities to solve the situation by themselves as teachers may lack agentic capacity (cf.
Noordegraaf et al. 2015). Due to high teacher autonomy levels, the Dutch context potentially
provides many opportunities for teachers to act as agents of change; however, the results from
our study showed that the school leaders believe they have a large share in solving agency tensions
for teachers. If school leaders stick to their domains of ‘indicating boundaries and responsibilities’
or ‘managing teacher learning’ and teachers are expected to ‘receive’ opportunities, a potential risk
exists that the distribution of power follows a zero-sum approach in which power can only remain
in the management domain (Shen and Xia 2012). As a consequence, teachers might await their
professional development opportunities, and do not take initiatives for crafting their own profes-
sional space. For leadership for professional learning, it seems important to share responsibility for
school development between formal and informal leaders (Lovett and Andrews 2011). It largely
depends on the interplay between mental models of both school leaders and teachers how tensions
in shared decision-making areas are resolved (Coburn 2006). One major drawback of our study is
that we do not know how the interaction between school leaders and teachers would unfold after the
initial response from the school leader to the tensions described in the vignettes.

Our results did not make clear in what way situational characteristics of the vignettes are
influencing school leaders’ selection of leadership instruments, although from Table 4 it seems
that the vignettes described from a collective point of view seem to generate collective leadership
instruments. This lack of evidence for a context-sensitive combination of leadership instruments
(Ten Bruggencate et al. 2012) can be explained in multiple ways. From the perspective on
effective leadership practices, we found that some leadership instruments (e.g. setting directions)
were used in response to all vignettes and might function as a basic repertoire that school leaders
use regardless of the situation. Other categories from Leithwood et al. (2020) might be more
dependent on leaders’ framing of the situation. From a methodological perspective, it could be
possible that school leaders do not differentiate between a situational characteristic such as
a distinction between facilitated and experienced development opportunities to base their deci-
sions on. Also, we amended the policy-capturing methodology and manipulated multiple cues per
situation to simulate authentic situations. The participants might not have experienced these cues as
distinctive.

**Limitations**

We used a projective strategy to uncover school leaders’ considerations in situations involving
agency tensions, and asked 50 school leaders to respond to situations in an open-ended vignette
questionnaire. Although this is a well-known and validated research approach, we do not know
what school leaders would actually do in these situations. Vignettes are by definition static and
artificial, but in the construction of the situations, we took a lot of care in designing context-rich descriptions. We used multiple rounds of piloting, and based the vignettes on real-world examples. A projective strategy has previously been found useful in approaching ‘actual’ responses (cf. Donoghue 2000) because the context-richness of vignettes together with the probing questions (‘how would you respond?’) imitate actual practices and immerses the participant in those situations which can possibly reduce social-desirability or ‘spoken’ truths of participants’ responses (theorie-in-use as opposed to espoused theories) (Barter and Renold 2000, Aguinis and Bradley 2014). Follow-up observational research would be necessary to compare our participants’ responses with their actual leadership practices.

This study is based on a limited and selective number of school leaders. Of the 147 school leaders that we contacted, only 27 completed the questionnaire, and 23 partly filled out the questionnaire. In future studies, we need to find a solution for the relatively low response relative to the effort. The school leaders were all connected to Dutch secondary schools that are part of the networks of our universities. This means that the results cannot automatically be translated to other situations or contexts.

**Implications**

Despite these limitations, we believe that our first exploration can provide insight into school leaders’ roles in responding to teachers’ agency tensions. Our vignette research approach was successful in decreasing social desirability and proved useful in eliciting school leaders’ decision-making. The vignettes can serve as a tool to support dialogue about teacher professional agency in schools and to discuss roles and mutual expectations when crafting a professional space for school development and leading learning. A follow-up study could measure the interplay between leaders’ interpretation of teacher agency tensions and how the situation would unfold in interaction with teachers (reciprocal nature of leadership, cf. Anderson 2004). One way to do this is to organise focus groups were leaders together with teachers interpret the vignettes collaboratively. This could facilitate the dialogue about collective responsibility between teachers and leaders for practising leading for professional learning. Another implication is to use the vignettes as a reflection tool in programmes for school leaders’ professional development.

Until now, most research has mainly focused on the teachers’ perspectives on enacting professional agency (Priestley et al. 2015); however, the complex interplay between teachers and their school leaders in designing teachers’ professional space (cf. Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. 2017) requires attention to the role of school leaders in creating this space. Our study puts the school leader at the forefront and demonstrates that school leaders and teachers have a collaborative responsibility in developing teachers’ agentic capacity.

**Notes**

1. There is a decrease in participants across the vignettes, general questions n = 50, vignette 1 n = 43; vignette 2 n = 36; vignette 3 n = 34; vignette 4 n = 30; vignette 5 n = 30; vignette 6 n = 29; vignette 7 n = 27.
2. In a first round of data collection, the questionnaire asked for school leaders’ position at the end of the questionnaire. Data on these questions is missing for the participants that did not complete the questionnaire. We later amended the questionnaire and moved these questions to the beginning.

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Appendix A. Seven vignettes used in the vignette questionnaire

Vignette 1: Vision on science education

A policy document needs to be written about the enforcement of science education at the school. The school management does not formulate any requirements for this piece. The document will be leading the vision of science education for the next two years. Four science teachers, because of their innovative ideas, have been invited to get involved and write this policy document. They have received hours in their schedule to do this. The teachers respond to the invitation enthusiastically at first. However, thus far, this group of teachers has not started writing. They explain that they would like to receive clear guidelines from school leadership first before they can start writing this new policy document.

Vignette 2: PhD track

Willem has received a grant to write a doctoral dissertation on the subject ‘Germanic handwriting’. The grant provides Willem with the possibility to work two days on his doctoral research (the school receives money for his decreased availability to teach). He has been working on his research for half a year and he wants to share his experiences with you. He is very enthusiastic about his doctoral research, and his research experiences really help him in teaching students in the upper secondary classes where students are introduced to science by performing research projects. However, he has the idea that no one in the school is really interested in his work. He thinks it is particularly disappointing that he is hardly involved in students’ scientific education as he thinks the school management does not have time for this.

Vignette 3: Classroom visit

Teachers can learn a lot from each other when they visit each other’s classes. A group of teachers has told you that they would like to try out classroom visits. They notice, however, that it is hard to actually visit each other’s lessons. As a consequence, the roster-maker has received the task to schedule the lessons of these teachers in such a way that there are actual opportunities for them to visit each other’s lessons. The roster-maker managed to do so. However, one of the colleagues of this teachers’ group mentions that he is not really happy with this opportunity and tells you he feels that his professional space is limited when other teachers come and visit his class.

Vignette 4: Professional learning community

Igor is a talented teacher who has reached out to you and said he wants to participate in a professional learning community (PLC) about his subject. In this external network, teachers from different schools come together to develop a curriculum integrating different subjects. Igor has drafted a plan to show you how his participation in the PLC can contribute to curriculum development at your school. You have agreed to this plan under the condition that Igor will start a small PLC in your school about this topic. After a couple of months Igor initiates a conversation with you because he notices that participating in the external PLC gives him a lot of energy and joy, but that the small, school-based PLC hasn’t come off the ground due to a difference in opinions from his colleagues.

Vignette 5: Whole-class instruction

A couple of teachers from a specific subject department teach using whole-class instruction. From the results of a student questionnaire, it appears that students are dissatisfied with the boring lessons of these teachers. The teachers are satisfied with their teaching. During a department meeting, the teachers show that they are aware of the possibilities (time, money, encouragement) to experiment with other methods of teaching. However, they do not experience a need to experiment because they believe that their lessons do not necessarily have to be joyful as long as they are effective. According to these teachers, providing direct instruction works really well. They also refer to the student outcomes in their department: their exam results have been at a sufficient level for years now.
Vignette 6: Traineeship

Fenna follows an educational traineeship*. In her teacher training program, she is encouraged to think about educational policy. She has a couple of ideas that she would like to introduce in her school. The induction program of her school provides her with opportunities to make these ideas concrete and receive feedback on their implementation. In her teaching schedule, there is space to try out new ideas, but from her colleagues in her subject department she does not get the feeling of support. She gets the idea that she should have more experiences in teaching before she is allowed to talk about improving teaching practices. This is why she does not use the space in her teaching schedule to bring her ideas to practice.

* An educational traineeship is different from a regular teacher training program. Education trainees are provided a teaching job while they follow teacher training. In this traineeship, they earn an academic degree with a specific focus on developing an analytical, broad-minded attitude and knowledge of recent developments in education. The knowledge and skills that the trainees develop in this program should have a positive influence on their professional development but also bring about opportunities for improving education in the teacher team and school that they work in.

Vignette 7: Using budget for professional development

The school management has invited teachers to hand in plans for professional development and school improvement for their school. An approved plan means a budget to execute the plan for the next school year. The school management decides which plans will get a budget. Bram is the only teacher who responds to the invitation with three possible plans. He is a teacher full of initiatives, with plenty of innovative ideas, both for his own subject and for the entire school. He works in a small subject department, and his appointment exists of 20 teaching hours in upper secondary classes. In his full task description, there is only space for one of his plans. The first plan is to follow a one-year university master on top of the academic teaching degree he already has. His second plan involves the creation of a professional learning community with colleagues around a topic that is important for the school. His third plan involves the improvement of the current structure of after-school individual student guidance (a homework class).