

## Steering Dynamics in the Dutch Education System

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### Introduction

How does steering in complex education systems work? Based on detailed empirical research, our aim here is to paint a lively picture of steering dynamics in Dutch education. We use the policy to stimulate ‘schools as learning organisations’ in secondary education as a case study. The starting point for our research is the steering trilogy inspired by Foucault’s thinking, as proposed by Theisens *et al.* in this issue (Theisens, Hooge & Waslander, 2016, pp. 51). The steering trilogy represents assumed conditions for steering to occur: ‘something’ first needs to be made thinkable, calculable and practicable by different actors. It depicts an actor perspective to trace back steering to the actors’ actions and interactions.

It is important to gain a better and empirically grounded understanding of the general notions by which emergent steering dynamics in education systems are so often coined, such as ‘from government to governance’, or ‘New Public Governance’. The Foucauldian approach enables one to study steering dynamics empirically, putting the searchlight on roles that stakeholders define both for themselves and for others in steering education, how they give sense to policy, and how they work together in policy elaboration and implementation. The steering trilogy aims at getting a close look at steering processes as they occur. It focuses on the role of language and the subtle and sometimes deceitful function of soft policy instruments such as information, communication, support and research.

The ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy area in The Netherlands is very appropriate for an empirical case study of steering in complex education systems along the lines of the Foucauldian steering trilogy. The Dutch education system can be characterised as one of the most decentralised and complex systems in the world. In a formal sense, Dutch school boards have more autonomy than anywhere else in the world (OECD, 2016). OECD data show that, in The Netherlands, 85% of the decisions are taken by school boards and only 15% by central government. Compared to other European countries, we see that in England, Estonia and Belgium (FL), 70% or more of the decisions are also taken at the school (board) level, whereas in Belgium (FR), Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Norway, Luxembourg and Greece less than 30% are taken at this level (OECD, 2012). Results from PISA 2009 suggest that, when autonomy and accountability are intelligently combined, they tend to be associated with better student performance: ‘At the country level, the greater the number of schools that have the responsibility to define and elaborate their curricula and assessments, the better the performance of the entire school system, even after accounting for national income [. . .] In contrast, there is no relationship between autonomy in resources allocation and performance at the country level’ (OECD, 2011, p. 2). In the ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy area, the government has no formal responsibility nor any direct means of control.

Our focus here is on actors at the national level and on ‘thinkable’ as the first element of the steering trilogy. This element points to the use of language as a first condition for any form of steering to occur. To unravel which actors are engaged in steering ‘schools as learning organisations’, how they describe and frame steering schools to become learning organisations, and how they see their own steering role and the role of other actors, we formulate three research questions:

- 1 *What* is to be steered and how is this described (framed), which features are mentioned and emphasised, and by default, which feature is left out?;
- 2 *Who* are considered relevant actors (and who are not)?; and
- 3 *Who* ascribes which (steering) role to whom?

This article begins by a brief outline of the most relevant features of the Dutch education system. We then describe the methodology of the empirical study, involving sequential analyses of policy documents, websites and interviews. Based on document analyses, first, a succinct reconstruction of the ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy is described, painting the ground layer of the steering picture. By answering the three research questions in turn, the steering picture becomes more detailed. We end by drawing conclusions on the steering dynamics emerging around ‘schools as learning organisations’, pointing to some intriguing questions for steering in complex education systems in general.

### **‘Schools as Learning Organisations’ in the Context of Dutch Education**

Education is ‘a subject of continued attention for central government’ according to the Dutch Constitution. The provision of education is free and education laws and regulations must always respect the freedom of providers, particularly with regard to the choice of learning materials and the hiring of teachers. Central government can control the education system by setting standards, attainment targets and examinations (Nusche *et al.*, 2014). All schools are expected to provide adequate education. To ensure that this is the case, they are under the scrutiny of the Dutch Inspectorate of Education, which acts as a government agency. It monitors school quality, financial management and compliance with rules and regulations and checks that schools ensure their quality effectively (Ibid). If schools are found to be at risk of underperformance, the law allows for government intervention.

As from 1917, private providers who comply with certain funding requirements have been eligible for equal funding. Since then, about two-thirds of the schools have been independent, i.e. founded by private initiative, e.g. by parents/communities based on religious, ideological or educational convictions or on ‘general interest’. About one third of the schools are public, i.e. founded by local government. Every local government is expected to provide public education in a sufficient number of schools, thus ensuring that every child is able to attend a public school. There is only a small number of privately-funded and privately-operated schools (approximately 7% of all pupils in primary and secondary education attend private schools).

In the last few decades, local governments have set up separate entities to govern public schools, so that they now seldom fall under the direct control of local government. All independent and public schools are publicly-financed and all independent and most public schools are privately-operated. All schools are under the auspices of school boards which are structured in private legal forms. Since they are

appointed, school board members in The Netherlands function as trustees rather than as representatives. In many other countries (e.g. the USA), members of school boards are elected officials and therefore operate in a political environment in which they are held accountable through such means as elections. Compared to this, school boards in The Netherlands lack democratic accountability mechanisms and operate at a relative distance from (the dynamics of) government (OECD, 2016; Hooze & Honing, 2014).

A notable development in the Dutch education system in the last two decades has been the growing number of organisations and institutions that operate between the level of school boards and national government (Hooze, 2013). A great diversity of organisation forms exists, such as independent administrative bodies with policy responsibilities or administrative tasks in education, regional administrative authorities, municipalities, sector organisations (representing employers in education), trade unions (representing employees in education), (associations of) occupational groups in education, consultancy and support organisations, process and project management organisations, platforms, think tanks and knowledge centres. The parties at this intermediate administrative level engage in policymaking and steering in the education field to varying degrees, resulting in a great deal of activity and influence that affect school boards' autonomy and discretion.

Due to the freedom of education that is anchored in the Constitution and to significant autonomy for school boards that emerged from these constitutional principles, central government has little direct control or involvement in the 'schools as learning organisations' policy area. Traditionally, the Constitution only confers responsibility for 'the ability and morality of those teaching (delivering education)' in the Dutch State (Dutch Constitution, GW art.23 lid 2). With the introduction of the Education Professions Act (Wet BIO) in 2006, the control of central government in this area has been slightly extended. The Inspectorate of Education will require that school boards establish human resource policies for their schools, keep competency files for teachers, and ensure that teachers' competencies are maintained. Regulations require regular performance interviews with all staff. However, there is little central guidance on how teacher performance should be evaluated (Nusche, *et al.*, 2014). School boards can decide whether, how and when they wish to encourage the secondary schools under their care to become learning organisations. They have the power to design and implement strategies and policies to achieve the objective of schools as learning organisation, e.g. with regard to human resources (HR), organisational development and the quality of education. It is also up to school boards to take measures to promote professionalisation and the learning and collaboration of (teams of) teachers, school leaders and school organisations. However, as explained above, school boards do not operate in a void, but in consultation and deliberation with a large number of organisations and institutions at the intermediate administrative levels. To develop and maintain legitimacy, they must take all legislative and regulatory conditions into account, whether or not central government is the source.

Despite the State's limited control, in the last decade, central government has embarked on active policymaking to promote schools to become learning organisations. This raises the question of how central government tackles the challenge to steer the daily practice of teachers, teams and schools in a particular direction when

it has no formal responsibility in this area nor any direct means to exercise significant influence.

## Methods and Empirical Analysis

Our goal is to chart the steering dynamics in the policy area of ‘schools as learning organisations’ in secondary education in The Netherlands on the basis of the Foucauldian steering trilogy, as proposed by Theisens *et al.* in this issue of the *Journal*. We conducted an empirical analysis by first selecting our data sources, then the actors involved in the policy area, and subsequently analysing all the data and information obtained.

### *Selection of data sources*

This study draws information from two main sources: 1) relevant government reports, policy documents and websites; and 2) semi-structured interviews with key actors.

The government reports, policy documents and websites were selected in three ways:

- 1 By means of (combinations of) the keywords ‘voortgezet onderwijs’ [secondary education], ‘leraren’ [teachers], ‘lerarenbeleid’ [teacher policy], ‘scholen’ [schools], ‘lerende organisatie’ [learning organisation] via Google and <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl>;
- 2 By means of a recent general synthesis study about recent Dutch education policies (Ledoux, *et al.*, 2014); and
- 3 By defining the period from 2013 to 2015.

After identifying the most central actors in the steering network (see below), semi-structured interviews were held with a senior policymaker of the Ministry of Education in this policy area, a senior policymaker of the Council of Secondary Schools (VO-Raad), and the founder of the LeerKRACHT Foundation.

### *Selection of actors*

The actors involved in the ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy area were identified on the basis of analyses of the selected reports, policy documents and websites. We drew on the trichotomy of policy instruments (Vedung *et al.*, 1998 in: Zehavi, 2012) to formulate our selection criteria. Three ‘families of policy instruments’ were distinguished: 1) legal policy instruments, such as laws and regulations demanding and prohibiting certain actions, 2) economic policy instruments, such as financial (dis)incentives, and 3) communicative policy instruments, such as information and discourse to persuade, negotiate or frame. The selection criteria were that central government involves this actor in steering and control in the ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy area either via:

- 1 law and regulation and/or by involving the actor in the implementation of legislation, including references in so-called ‘soft law’, such as a covenant or an indication in the preamble to an act (legal);
- 2 funding/financing (economic); and
- 3 incorporation and/or activation in the communication and information about the policy area (communication).

This created a set of actors. To trace possible additional actors, the derived set of actors was offset against the general overview of actors in the administrative environment of Dutch educational organisations (Hooze, 2013, p. 19). The final selection of actors was submitted to experts.

Subsequently, we positioned the identified actors with the help of the following questions:

- 1 Which challenge or task is the actor facing with respect to the policy area (if applicable)?
- 2 Which activities are performed by the actor with respect to the policy area (if applicable)? and
- 3 Which products/instruments are produced by the actor with respect to the policy area (if applicable)?

Finally, when conducting interviews, the selection of actors and the positions attributed to them were tested, and, if deemed necessary, minor alterations were made. A total of 61 documents and websites were analysed and a total of 20 actors were identified.

### *Data analyses*

Data analyses consisted of: data reduction through coding and memoing, data display in tables and networks, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

First, we coded the selected government reports, policy documents and website texts. Descriptive, interpretive and pattern codes were developed both *a priori* on the basis of the steering trilogy, and inductively, using a code log file. We kept record of all ideas, interpretations and theories. The results of these analyses were the basis for semi-structured interviews with representatives of the main actors. The interviewees were asked to reflect on our analyses, complement and correct them, provide further information and confirm or contradict the picture painted thus far. The interviews were transcribed in full and analysed through coding and memoing.

In order to increase inter-subjective reliability, parts of the coding and memoing were carried out independently by two researchers who then achieved joint coding and interpretation through discussion. A member check of the final analysis and results, consisting in a group interview with representatives of the main actors (Meadows & Morse, 2001), will be conducted at a later date.

## **Results**

We present the results of our empirical research on the steering dynamics in the 'schools as learning organisations' policy area following the three research questions we formulated at the beginning of this article. We begin, however, by painting the ground layer of the steering picture, giving a succinct reconstruction of the policy as it emerges from our analyses.

### *Policy reconstruction*

The launch of the 'Teacher' Action Plan by the Ministry of Education in 2007 is an important starting point of the 'schools as learning organisations' policy. It is a policy response to an advice of a temporary 'Teachers' Committee' (2006) that focused on structural improvement of the teaching profession and recommended

the creation of professional school organisations. In the Action Plan, the concept of schools as learning organisations emerges: 'Teachers should feel supported by a school giving them free rein to design their own teaching and learning processes, to influence school policies and the opportunity to be schooled and to further educate themselves. A professional school is well managed' (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2007, p. 21). The main policy measures are directed at school organisations which must improve the quality of teachers and their position.

A year later, a covenant 'Teacher Action Plan' was concluded with social partners in education. Key points in this joint agreement are:

- Reinforcing the position of teachers. Part of school boards' duty of good governance is now to guarantee the professional space of teachers, which means that teachers must exercise control over the design and implementation of education and quality policies in schools.
- Higher salaries and better career opportunities for teachers; and
- Optimisation of the employment of teachers in the teaching and learning processes.

Following this joint agreement, the legislative proposal 'Reinforcing the position of teachers' was sent to the Dutch House of Representatives in 2010. The concept of 'professional space of teachers' is enshrined in this law, as is the obligation of school boards to have a 'professional statute', which is a required document in which boards and teachers agree on ways in which teachers can exercise internal control. It is up to a specific board and its teachers to decide on the content of the statute.

In 2011, the Government presented separate action plans for all educational sectors and an additional action plan for teachers 'Teacher 2020 – a strong profession' (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011). In the action plan for secondary education, 'Better performance' and the plans for teachers, several policy measures were announced to foster schools as learning organisations, such as:

- the introduction of peer review evaluation, peer tutoring and collaborative learning;
- promoting team oriented training and professionalisation;
- generating good practices of professional learning communities (PLC's) in schools;
- encouraging collaborating with teacher training institutes, research institutes and universities; and
- promoting educational leadership and strong guidance in schools to achieve a culture of continuous improvement.

After the Government had stated its ambitions, talks about implementation started with the Council for Secondary Education (VO-Raad) and the Education Cooperation, which brings together the five largest teacher unions and teacher organisations. Administrative agreements were concluded between these three parties (government, employers, employees) in 2011 and 2012. They reiterated the ambitions for schools to develop into learning organisations: 'Schools are characterized by a learning culture which is not only about the learning of students, but also about the learning of teachers and school leaders' (TK 2011-2012, p. 3). Good HR policy, peer review and feedback, and continuous professional dialogue were considered to be important pre-conditions.

In the autumn of 2012, a new coalition government came to office. Acknowledging that 'steering from above' no longer worked, it worked with agreements with societal organisations to ensure their commitment to policies from the outset. In 2013, central government reached a National Education Agreement with teacher unions, teacher organisations and councils representing school boards, united in the Foundation of Education (FoE). The agreement 'The Road to Exceptional Education' was inspired by the McKinsey study on high-performing school systems (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010). The Government promised to invest an additional one billion euros in education, whilst the contract parties agreed to improve the quality of education by ensuring more professional space for teachers, ratifying a professional statute, and making peer review part of teacher assessment systems.

The 'schools as learning organisations' policy took further shape when it featured prominently in the Teachers Agenda 2013–2020, launched by central government and which provides a long-term policy perspective and is of great significance for the education field. A year later, central government and the Council for Secondary Education (VO-Raad) renewed their Administrative Agreement for the period 2014 to 2017. In this agreement, schools as learning organisations was an important policy ambition, and agreements were reached about professional space, professional dialogue, peer review, and professionalisation between and among teachers, school leaders, and school organisations.

This short policy reconstruction makes clear that the Government, more than once, started by expressing its own ambitions, followed by talks and negotiations with other parties about further elaboration and implementation. It may give the impression that other parties simply followed government ambitions without much argument. The adventures of the professional statute tells a different story, however. Government, councils and teacher organisations agreed to implement a professional statute as early as 2008. A bill obliging school boards to negotiate a professional statute with teachers in their schools was sent to Parliament in 2010. As part of the National Education Agreement, involving one billion euros, the aim of a professional statute was reiterated by the parties. Nonetheless, as of 2016, the bill has not been discussed in Parliament because employees (united in the Education Cooperation) and employers (represented by the councils) have not yet come to an agreement.

*Research question 1: What is to be steered and how is this described (framed), which features are mentioned and emphasised, and by default, what is left out?*

For the Ministry, the notion of schools as learning organisations is embedded in a wider ambition for the education system as a whole to make the step from 'good' to 'great' (NOA, 2013). When talking about a learning organisation as part of the Teacher Agenda, the Ministry had in mind 'an organisation that continuously aimed to improve the quality of education' (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2013, p. 5), or more precisely 'teachers, teams, leaders and boards build a learning culture together in which they continuously work to improve the quality of education' (Ibid., p. 30). Indicators and a dashboard were developed by the Ministry to monitor whether progress was made on this agenda and to inform Parliament about the results of public spending (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014). Four indicators of the

dashboard referred to schools as learning organisations (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014; 2015).

- 1 In 2020, all teachers in primary, secondary education and VET will be evaluated at least once a year;
- 2 In 2020, all teachers in primary, secondary education and VET will participate in peer reviews;
- 3 In 2020, teacher satisfaction with HR policy will have increased by 15%; and
- 4 In 2020, school leader satisfaction with HR policy will have increased by 15%.

Thus, while the Ministry initially emphasises quality improvement and collective features of schools as learning organisations, the four indicators narrow down the concept quite dramatically to features of HR policies and satisfaction of teachers and school leaders. Notably, these indicators are concrete measures containing quantitative targets to be reached in 2020. With this approach, the Ministry has turned general policy goals with respect to the broad concept of schools as learning organisations into firm agreements about concrete targets for which the parties involved can be held accountable.

It is worth mentioning here that actors interpret the broad concept of schools as learning organisations in different ways. In terms of our steering trilogy, they differ with respect to *what* is to be steered (thinkable). The VO-Raad (the Council of School Boards in Secondary Education) takes a developmental and incremental approach. It focuses on strategic HR policy as a crucial precondition for schools to develop into learning organisations and foresees ‘a developmental path of students, teachers, school leaders and school board members all engaging in learning’ (interviewee). The Education Cooperation, a combination of the largest teacher organisations, draws on a perspective starting from individual teachers in which teacher professionalisation, control and ownership are key elements. The ‘School aan zet’ (SaZ) executive agency applies a perspective of innovation and change to the policy of schools as learning organisations. It frames the concept in terms of a necessary transition from traditional to 21st century education.

*Research question 2: Who are considered relevant actors (and who are not)?*

On the basis of the methodology outlined above, our analyses indicate that, of the 20 actors we identified, seven (networks of) play a substantial role in steering schools to become learning organisations. Table I names these actors, characterises them and describes their mutual relationships. Figure 1 describes the steering network in the ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy area, showing that commitment and involvement of actors were enforced and/or evoked by means of Administration Agreements accompanied by funding, commissioned research, and joint implementation activities.

A number of observations can be made. First, the mutual relationships between the actors are manifold. Funding is clearly an important means for the Ministry to position other actors in a steering network, be it through negotiations with parties in the field about how to spend public funds, setting up and funding an executive agency, or commissioning and encouraging projects and research. Second, some ‘actors’ are ‘composites of actors’ with members who are also actors in their own right. The Foundation of Education, for example, can be considered an actor in its



TABLE I. Actors involved in ‘school as learning organisation’

Actor	Characteristics	Mutual Relationships
<b>Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (MoE)</b>	Department national government	Agreement with FoE; Administrative Agreement with VO-Raad; co-founder SaZ; funding VO-Raad, SaZ and EC; commissioner of research
<b>Foundation of Education (FoE)</b>	Network of organisations in the field of education, including teacher unions, councils of school boards, student organisations, association of supervisory board members	Agreement with MoE (The Road to Exceptional Education) for 1 billion euros additional funding; VO-Raad & EC are members.
<b>VO-Raad</b>	Council of school boards in secondary education; membership of boards governing over 90% of Dutch secondary schools; interlocutor for MoE	Member of FoE; co-founder of SaZ; Administrative Agreement with MoE (Ready for the Future); project with EC; partly funded by MoE; commissioner of research
<b>School aan Zet (SaZ)</b>	Executive agency to support schools with implementation of “Ready for the Future”; services are free for schools	Founded by MoE & VO-Raad; funded by MoE; commissioner of research
<b>Education Cooperation (EC)</b>	The five largest teacher unions and teacher organisations, representing circa two-thirds of teachers in special, primary and secondary education and VET	Member of FoE; initial pilot project with Foundation LeerKRACHT; works with LeerKRACHT; project with VO-Raad; commissioner of research
<b>Foundation LeerKRACHT</b>	Started as a <i>pro bono</i> initiative by former partner McKinsey & Company; now operating on contributions of schools, gifts and support of organisations including public agencies, banks and multinationals (gifts are tax-deductable)	Initial pilot project with EC; works with EC
<b>Inspectorate of Education</b>	Government agency	Stimulation and assessment of the quality of education on behalf of central government; commissioner of research
<b>Research and consultancy organisations</b>	Universities, commercial and non-commercial research institutes, commercial and non-commercial consultancy firms	Commissioned by several actors

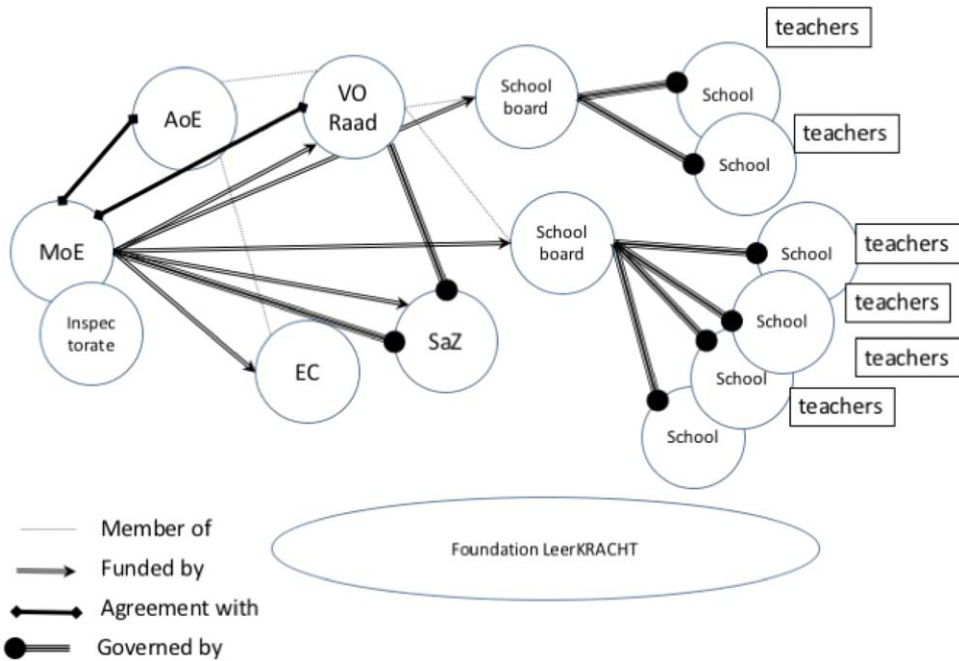


FIGURE 1. Different relations between the (network of) main actors in the policy area of “schools as learning organisations”

own right in its capacity to negotiate The National Education Agreement with the Ministry in 2013. This overarching agreement then paved the way for the Ministry to negotiate more detailed agreements with separate member organisations of the Foundation, for example, the VO-Raad in 2014. Third, the position of the LeerKRACHT Foundation in the steering network is noteworthy. It has no direct financial ties with the Ministry, is very well connected to central actors in the network, and has a high public profile. It has deliberately positioned itself as an independent, temporary organisation that directly supports teachers (interview). Testifying to its central position in the network is an initiative called ‘learning together’ (Belgers *et al.*, 2014) which comprises the founders of the LeerKRACHT Foundation, a number of outspoken teachers and school leaders – a self-proclaimed ‘progressive vanguard’ – and members of Parliament of the coalition Government. The group discussed the future of education and proposed ‘recommendations from education’ and endorsed the ambitions formulated in ‘The Road to Exceptional Education’, ‘Ready for the Future’ and the Teacher Agenda. However, in its view, these ambitions can only be achieved if additional action is taken. A central notion in the recommendations is the need to work towards a ‘culture of improvement’ in schools. Illustrating the high profile of this group, the Minister and State Secretary reacted officially to these recommendations, which is very unusual (2014).

Our final observation is that the main actors use all sorts of steering modes which can be categorised with the help of the trichotomy of policy instruments (see Table II).

The other actors who were identified as being involved in steering and who are not specifically mentioned in Table I fall all but one (the temporary group ‘learning together’) under the general heading of research and consultancy organisations which are commissioned either by the Ministry or one of the other actors that were

TABLE II. Main Actors' Steering Modes

Category	Steering modes
Legal	<i>Ministry</i> : Administrative Agreements; Holding firm to agreements; Assuming that school boards forcefully give effect to the measures in the agreement.
Economic	<i>Employers and Employee Organisations</i> : Collective Labour Agreement <i>Government/Ministry</i> : invests an additional one billion euros in education under the National Education Agreement; finances SaZ, VO-raad and EC projects on peer review and PLC's; provides extra funds to invest in school leaders; provides structural and incidental funds. <i>SaZ</i> : provision of free services to school and school boards via projects financed by the Ministry <i>VO-raad</i> : provision of free or low-cost services to school and school boards via the VO Academy, via projects financed by the Ministry
Communication	<i>Ministry</i> : providing support, procuring the development of a monitor, calling on main actors for policy implementation and steering, calling them to account, making agreements, collecting, citing and disseminating good practices, setting up resonance and inspirational groups, consulting critical friends, connecting parties, engaging in dialogue and listening, supporting initiators, launching websites, video's, blogs and vlogs. <i>SaZ</i> : directed at schools: engaging in conversation and dialogues, reflect on, inspire, connect, help, being a sparring partner, support, indicate, contact, publish information, giving examples, develop tools, models and frameworks, organising networks, launching website. <i>VO-raad</i> : directed at school boards: call on school boards for policy implementation, stating what school boards should do, organising networks, support and help, contact, giving impulse, contributing by means of projects, representing interests, helping school leaders, carrying out research, disclose information.

named. They produce literature reviews, research reports, evaluations of pilot projects, monitors for the Teacher Agenda dashboard, tools for schools, websites with information, support, toolkits, etc.

Of all the actors mentioned in the 61 documents and websites that were analysed, one is still missing in the overview. The Ministry of Education repeatedly calls upon teacher training institutions in rather general terms to 'take their responsibility' (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014). Apart from these mentions in policy documents of the Ministry, these institutions are invisible in the steering network as a whole.

### *Research question 3: Who ascribes which (steering) role to whom?*

The last step in our analysis adds a dynamic element to the picture, as we look at how different actors interact. We do this by analysing how the seven (networks of) actors play a substantial role in this policy area and envision their own steering roles and the role of others. Non-complementary role definitions may then point to tensions in the steering network. Figure 2 shows in what way different actors contribute to the network.

In the policy documents, the Ministry stresses repeatedly that, ultimately, the responsibility for schools to become learning organisations lies with school boards

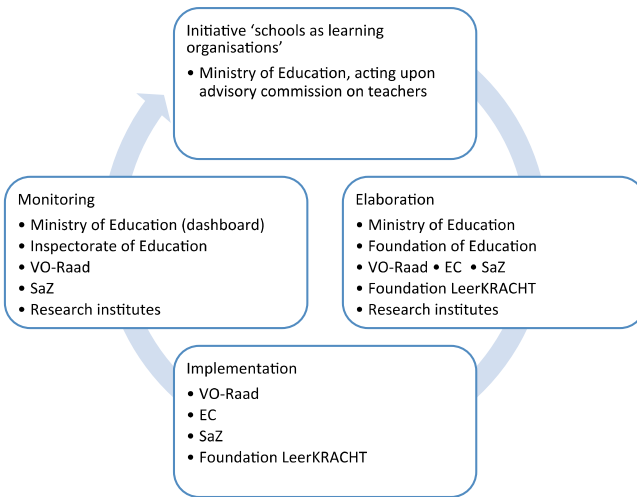


FIGURE 2. The ways different actors contribute to the steering network

and teachers. It defines its own role as: setting the general framework, facilitating, creating conditions, including laws and policies, providing funding, and sharing good practices. Most notably, it repeatedly 'calls on' contributions of a wide range of actors, such as school boards, schools, school leaders, teachers, teacher training institutions, teacher unions, teacher organisations and parties that negotiate labour agreements. The Ministry positions the VO-Raad and the Education Cooperation most clearly by repeatedly calling upon them to 'take responsibility'.

The Inspectorate of Education also plays a steering role, be it intended or not. It develops the 'aspects of quality' laid down in the law into indicators of its supervisory framework. Indicators refer to ability requirements for teachers, teachers' professionalisation activities and ways teachers justify these. The Inspectorate also plays a steering role by mentioning and promoting the concept, expressing its role as wanting to help schools to become learning organisations, and launching research that focuses on schools as learning organisations.

Whilst the Ministry considers the VO-Raad as *responsible* for actions to be taken by school boards, the VO-Raad defines its own role in terms of *supporting* school boards. According to the documents we studied, it sees its role as giving an impulse to continuous improvement in schools and contributing to this development by connecting practice, school development and research. It aims to support school boards and schools in their further development and building capacity towards becoming a professional organisation.

Based on our interviews, these differences in role definition put a strain on the relations between the Ministry and the VO-Raad. In their Administrative Agreement, both parties agree that school boards will invest in strategic HR policies in schools and shape conditions for schools to become learning organisations. The Ministry considers these points in the negotiated agreement as a commitment to outcomes for which the VO-Raad can be called upon. The VO-Raad sees it as a commitment to take actions to support the outcome, but not to the outcome itself. It stresses that, being an association of autonomous school boards, its members are not 'puppets on a string'.

The SaZ executive agency considers its role to be supporting schools on a voluntary basis. Under the principle that schools remain responsible for their development, SaZ aims to strengthen this development. It is set to instigate a process for continuous improvement (reflect), facilitate knowledge exchange and pass on tools (inspire) and start learning networks (connect). It acts as sparring partner and critical friend for school leaders and teachers. The differences in role definition between the Ministry and the VO-Raad inevitably impacted on SaZ. Setting up this agency was seen by the Ministry as an important vehicle to implement the agreements outlined in the Administrative Agreement. The initial intention of the Ministry was to steer the agency jointly with the VO-Raad so as to implement the policies both parties had agreed upon. Given their different role definitions, the Ministry and the VO-Raad saw steering SaZ in a different way. The role SaZ was to play towards school boards and schools was also reason for discussion. Over time, the relation between the Ministry and SaZ is said to have become a principal-agent relationship, while the VO-Raad expanded its own activities (Van Kuijk *et al.*, 2015). The agency will end its activities in the summer of 2016.

The ultimate goal of the LeerKRACHT Foundation is to become redundant and it therefore aims at creating momentum in schools in order to sustain and facilitate school improvement. In terms of steering, it positions itself as supporting teachers directly. This in sharp contrast with the indirect steering path through councils, school boards and schools that the Ministry is bound to follow.

Completing our list of actors involved in steering are universities, commercial and non-commercial research institutes and consultancy firms. They are either assigned a role in steering in the schools as learning organisations policy area and/or take on a role themselves. Actors who are active in this policy area commission research projects, extending the range of actors who become knowledgeable and in some way involved in the policies. To give examples of these research projects:

- The Netherlands Institute for Education Research received additional funding from the Ministry and commissioned two university research institutes to conduct research on schools as professional learning communities and two commercial research institutes to describe modes of collaborative learning and good practices of peer review, and to chart factors of school development;
- The VO-raad commissioned a commercial research institute to conduct a literature review of professional culture in school;
- SaZ commissioned researchers of a university to carry out a project under the heading 'the learning organisation: what works?'; and
- The Inspectorate of Education launched research on 'professional teachers and good quality schools'.

## Conclusions

In this article, we reported on a study about steering dynamics emerging in the Dutch education system with respect to the 'schools as learning organisations' policy area. We carried out our empirical research along the lines of the Foucauldian steering trilogy as proposed by Theisens *et al.* in this issue of the *Journal*. The case of 'schools as learning organisations' is particularly suitable to study steering dynamics, as the Dutch education system is one of the most decentralised and

complex systems in the world and the Government has no formal responsibility nor any direct means of control in this policy area.

Our first general conclusion is that, despite the State's limited control in the 'schools as learning organisations' policy area, the Dutch Central Government is strongly committed to promoting this policy. This is done indirectly and through network steering by means of 'responsibilisation' and 'normalisation', as Foucault would have called it. More than once, the Ministry of Education took the initiative to express its own ambitions in a policy agenda or plan, followed by talks and negotiations with other parties about further elaboration and implementation, and calling on them (*responsibilisation*). In doing so, the Central Government relied heavily on communication policy instruments such as information and discourse to persuade, negotiate or frame (*normalisation*), rather than on legal and economic policy instruments (Vedung *et al.*, 1998 in: Zehavi, p. 201).

However, this indirect and network steering does not happen without controversy. The failure to get parties to agree on placing a legal obligation on school boards to negotiate a professional statute with teachers in their schools illustrates this. The Ministry is walking a fine line and easily oversteps the mark, as can be seen in the growing tension between the Ministry and the VO-raad about their respective roles: can the VO-raad be held accountable for shaping the conditions for schools to become learning organisations, or only for supporting and encouraging this?

Taking a closer look at the steering network in the 'schools as learning organisations' policy area, we unravelled that it could be concluded that the emerging steering dynamics were characterised by the presence of actors and 'composites of actors' who hold different positions, sometimes noteworthy or deviant due to their independence, a vanguard role, obsolescence or dominance and that the occurrence of mutual relationships between the actors were manifold, whereas the main actors used all sorts of steering modes.

The dominant doctrine of school board autonomy that is so very characteristic of the Dutch education system runs like a thread through the results of this study. Not only is the Ministry of Education very reluctant to control school boards directly because of their autonomy, but other main actors in this policy area such as the VO-raad, the Foundation of Education, and SaZ are equally reluctant. All actors make extensive use of what can be labelled as modes of 'soft steering' instead of command and control. They do this in a variety of ways: consulting, connecting parties, engaging in conversation and dialogue, listening, supporting, launching websites, videos, blogs and vlogs, reflecting, inspiring, connecting, giving examples, developing tools, models and frameworks, organising networks, giving impulse, disclosing information, etc. Developing, assembling and disseminating information, insights and knowledge about the policy theme by commissioning research or conducting its own research are central to this 'soft steering'. These various and subtle ways of 'soft steering' can be interpreted as *normalisation* in Foucault's terminology. Concerning this specific policy area, it is striking that institutes for teachers' initial training and in-service training are conspicuously absent in the network of actors involved in the steering dynamics. We are unable to say whether this is a sign of silent resistance and 'counter conduct'.

Another important conclusion can be drawn about the role of instruments in the steering dynamics. The steering trilogy points to the importance of instruments that may act as connecting devices between actors across the system and have very concrete effects on daily practices, despite the different meanings actors attach to it. The results of this study illustrate this. Despite various actors emphasising vastly different

and broad meanings to ‘schools as learning organisations’, the Ministry of Education developed a dashboard with four indicators. These indicators narrow down the concept quite dramatically to two simple features of HR policies (input factors) and two measurements of satisfaction of teachers and school leaders (output factors). By introducing the dashboard, the Ministry has turned the broad and differently defined concept of ‘schools as learning organisations’ into firm agreements about concrete quantitative targets to be reached in 2020 so that parties involved can be held accountable. This approach could leave little scope to other parties in the steering network to interpret the policy theme and choose an implementation route. However, it remains to be seen what impact it will have. Much depends on how much regard or respect the main actors involved ultimately show for the agreement and its targets, and to what extent Central Government monitors compliance.

This raises the question of which instruments are used to evaluate the impact of the ‘schools as learning organisations’ policy. Despite the substantial amount of research that is commissioned in the context of this policy area, none of the research projects is directed at any kind of large scale evaluation to find out to what extent schools are developing towards becoming learning organisations. The small evaluation studies do focus on the extent to which schools are learning organisations, but have no intention of tracing whether this development has an impact on teacher performance and the quality of education. The research can therefore more justly be interpreted as part of stimulating and extending policy aims than as playing a role in holding any of the actors accountable for results.

Our last conclusion is that drawing on the ‘thinkable’ element of the steering trilogy is a fruitful way to investigate steering dynamics in education systems. It allows for a broad approach to discourse analysis, focusing on the way actors are created and positioned both alone and as part of networks, figuring out which ideas or perceptions are spread through networks of involved actors, and investigating whether there is (lack of) congruence between the language used by different actors in the field. Also, the Foucauldian steering trilogy allows one to cast the searchlight on and compare the different roles actors take on and/or are ascribed in the steering network and on the various steering modes they use. Altogether, the first part of the Foucauldian steering trilogy provides a promising framework for the empirical study of steering dynamics in complex education systems.

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