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Dilemmas of central governance and distributed autonomy in education

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**DILEMMAS OF CENTRAL GOVERNANCE AND DISTRIBUTED AUTONOMY
IN EDUCATION**

Three Education Policies in the Netherlands

OECD Education Working Paper No. 189

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ABSTRACT

Prepared for a Strategic Education Governance learning seminar, this working paper analyses the ways in which the Dutch government tried to reach overarching goals in education, in a system characterised by a high degree of distributed autonomy of education institutions and the participation of multiple actors, and consequently a government highly dependent on the collaboration with stakeholders. The paper introduces four perspectives on governance: ‘traditional public administration’, ‘new public management’, ‘network governance’ and ‘societal resilience’. In practice, these perspectives do not exclude each other. Based on three cases the paper shows that the Dutch government used simultaneously different perspectives in each case and across the cases, in various combinations. Each combination proved to have its pros and cons. The paper argues for a deliberate consideration and choice of governance perspectives as an important element of policy preparation.

RÉSUMÉ

Élaboré dans le cadre d’un séminaire de formation sur la gouvernance éducative stratégique, ce document de travail analyse les moyens auxquels le gouvernement néerlandais a fait appel pour atteindre ses principaux objectifs en termes éducatifs, dans un système qui se caractérise par un haut niveau d’autonomie des institutions éducatives et la participation d’acteurs multiples et donc des pouvoirs publics largement dépendants de sa coopération avec les parties prenantes. Ce document aborde quatre axes de gouvernance : « l’administration publique traditionnelle », « la nouvelle gestion publique », la « gouvernance en réseau » et la « résilience sociétale ». D’un point de vue pratique, ces axes ne s’excluent pas mutuellement. Ce document s’appuie sur trois cas et montre que le gouvernement néerlandais a fait appel à différents axes simultanément pour chaque cas, et selon les cas, à diverses combinaisons. Il s’avère que chacune des combinaisons a ses avantages et ses inconvénients. Ce document considère qu’un élément important de préparation stratégique passe par un examen réfléchi permettant un choix d’axes de gouvernance.

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1. Introduction: complexity in education governance

1.1. What do we know about complex systems?

In complexity theory, a system is a collection of individual actors who organise themselves and relate to each other. There are many different relationships, as these form in response to positive or negative feedback, and also randomly. How an actor interacts with others influences its behaviour more often than its individual desires or expectations. This means complex systems do not develop in a linear way. The outcomes resulting from multiple interactions vary across the system, are sometimes unpredictable and, to a certain extent, volatile.

Here we see that "complex" is not synonymous with "complicated" (Glouberman and Zimmerman, 2002). Complex problems are like raising a child – each child is unique, so applying the same parental strategy to different children may produce very different results. It follows that in complex problems, while expertise is important, applying formulas may not always work or may not work at all. This is in contrast to solving a complicated problem. For instance, in rocket science, although complicated, once a rocket has been built, it is reasonable to expect to do this again applying the same formula and expertise.

1.2. What are the lessons for governance?

Complexity theory offers many lessons for governance (Snyder, 2013). First, to overcome inertia and change the status quo in a complex system requires sufficient momentum across the multiple components (Mason, 2016). To succeed, policy and reform require simultaneous and sustained interventions at as many parts of the system as possible. In systems with multiple poles, a sense of shared responsibility and joint action is required to move towards the stated objectives for the system overall. Effective governance emphasises collaborative dynamics rather than hierarchical relationships between different parts of the system. It builds on strategic thinking, collaboration and trust – in contrast to centralised decision-making, supervision and control, which have been traditional forms of governance in many systems (Osborne, 2006).

Second, governance needs flexibility and adaptive capacity. On the one hand, addressing complex issues implies being able to respond to varying local conditions and needs. On the other, it requires being aware of and prepared for potentially diverging and even unexpected effects of policy interventions. A crucial condition for flexibility and adaptability is feedback - information from a variety of sources, reflecting a rich array of perspectives, delivered regularly and quickly and tailor-made to the needs of users.

1.3. What are the practical implications for governance in education?

Education systems are complex. While some OECD countries have a long tradition of decentralised responsibilities in their education systems, others have decentralised control

over the last few decades trying to respond more directly to citizens' needs. This means that policy making takes place at different levels of the system. At the same time, parents and other stakeholders are more involved in decision-making. This is facilitated by access to education performance data, which is now widely gathered and made available to a broad range of actors.

This complexity poses challenges for education governance. Central education authorities remain responsible for ensuring high quality and equitable education. However, relationships between stakeholders and decision-makers are dynamic and open to negotiation. Effective governance means juggling this dynamism and complexity at the same time as steering a clear course towards established goals (Burns and Köster, 2016; Burns, Köster and Fuster, 2016).

The presence of multiple actors in decision making turns policy issues into “wicked problems” (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2014). Multiple actors, such as policymakers, parents, and teachers have varying perspectives on the system's problems and how to solve these. Interpretations of reality differ, and so do expectations and preferred solutions. Even when information is widely gathered, this is subject to diverse interpretations, which leads to distinct and sometimes conflicting bodies of knowledge and policy agendas.

Education governance has been pictured as a matter of so much reform, so little change (Payne, 2008). Looking at it through a complexity lens might be a key step in changing such a view. More effective policy making and implementation embraces complexity, by seeking to:

- Align roles and balance tensions. Forming a long-term shared vision supports the development of a whole-of-system perspective able to align the system's elements, overcome power games, and address short-term urgencies while keeping on track towards long-term aims. It is also necessary to foster co-operation among stakeholders and work towards aligning policies, roles and responsibilities to improve efficiency and reduce potential overlaps.
- Be flexible and adaptive to cope with specific contexts and unexpected events. Actors in the education system may react differently to a single phenomenon depending on their circumstances and views. Unpredictability means that the exact effects of an intervention cannot be known. The use of experimental approaches in policy making can help to discover and test changes in the education system in a controlled, ethical, efficient and transparent way (Blanchenay and Burns, 2016; Burns and Blanchenay, 2016).
- Identify and address individual, organisational and systemic capacity gaps. This is a key to effective policy and reform. In this sense, just as important as knowing where to go is knowing how to get there (Fullan, 2010).
- Underline the important role of knowledge and the governance of knowledge. A continuous flow of information combining descriptive data, research results and professional knowledge is necessary to inform all actors about developments (to be able to respond), activities (to be able to align) and results (to be able to learn and improve).

The OECD Strategic Education Governance (SEG) project uses an organisational framework (Figure 1) to promote the identified elements that support a more strategic governance of education. It is organised in six domains containing different key areas and incorporates a range of considerations: empirical findings in previous work on education governance, country priorities in traditional areas of education governance, as well as recent research and new empirical evidence of effective governance processes emerging

from the SEG work. It brings together the analytical lens of the complexity paradigm with practical considerations to maximise the ability to guide improvement efforts. It is meant to stimulate reflection and guide strategic decisions of practitioners and policy makers when facing the intricacies of what complexity entails for education policy and reform.

Figure 1. OECD Strategic Education Governance Organisational Framework

Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling local discretion while limiting fragmentation • Promoting a culture of learning and improvement
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring capacity for policy-making and implementation • Stimulating horizontal capacity building
Knowledge governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting quality and rich data for research and decision-making • Facilitating access to data and knowledge • Promoting a culture of using rich data and knowledge
Stakeholder involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating stakeholder knowledge and perspectives • Fostering support, shared responsibility, ownership and trust
Strategic thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crafting, sharing and consolidating a system vision • Adapting to changing contexts and new knowledge • Balancing urgencies/short-term priorities with the long- term system vision
Whole-of-system perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming system inertia • Developing synergies within the system and moderating tensions

2. Central governance for decentralised systems?

A characteristic of many education systems worldwide is the multitude of actors involved in them. Governments are only one of the stakeholders. There are several ways in which tasks, roles and responsibilities for education are divided among stakeholders. While some OECD countries have a tradition of centralised control in their education systems, others have mixed systems with both central and decentralised elements. In the latter, central government remains responsible for the quality of education, but certain decisions are made at a local level, for example the domain of school boards. In such mixed systems, other actors have a prominent role in achieving policy goals. Central governments therefore face a number of typical problems.

First, *central government has to rely on other actors to achieve policy goals*. Since responsibilities are nested at decentralised levels, governments struggle with exercising direct influence. Many governments aim for high performing education systems, expressed in high rankings on international assessment programmes such as PISA¹, TIMSS² and PIRLS³, while being unable to directly influence school or student performance. In particular, governments can experience a lack of decision-making power in specific policy matters for which other actors are mainly responsible. This is even more challenging when for example parliament demands change or when budgets intended to bring about certain results are allocated. Nevertheless, central governments remain responsible for the performance of the education system as a whole. For that reason, governments put continuous effort into formulating policies, even when occurring issues are not primarily theirs to tackle.

Second, *the numerous interactions between the vast array of actors makes governing education systems a complex task*. Complexity – not to be mistaken for complicatedness - emphasises situations in which problems and solutions are the products of dynamic interactions. While complicated problems are considered solvable with one best solution, complex problems lack such an optimal formula replicable for other situations. Complexity is strongly influenced by decentrality: the system as a whole functions as a sum of local interactions between different actors (Lansing, 2003: 183-

¹ Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): a triennial assessment in which scientific skills, mathematics and reading skills of 15 year old students in thirty-five countries are assessed, published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

² Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS): an assessment of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) comparing the performance on mathematics and science across educational systems in more than 60 countries.

³ Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): an assessment of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) comparing the performance on reading, literacy and the mother tongue language across educational systems in more than 60 countries.

189). Complexity relates to adaptability as well. Systems change over time, as a result of interactions and influence exercised by different actors; the system changes continuously and thus is never the same as before. This explains why past performance does not necessarily offer guarantees for the future and why governance in complex education systems is not a straightforward practice. Particularly complex about these systems is how to influence them from a central level, since they do not solely have central decision-making powers. The presence of multiple actors in decision making results in rather difficult policy making processes. Actors in the system may react differently to a single phenomenon depending on their circumstances and views. For example, as a study on the external evaluation of schools in the Netherlands reveals (see Van Twist et al. 2013), disclosing information about school performance might have very different impacts on schools that are thriving compared to schools that struggle to attract well-performing students. Therefore, governance arrangements need to be flexible and adaptive to cope with specific contexts and unexpected events, in particular when there are large variations and differences in the field. This entails that policy design and implementation have to be sensitive to particular circumstances and accountability demands need to be aligned with local conditions and capacity.

Central governments in countries with decentralised or mixed education systems are continually looking for ways to steer the education system, without the ability to influence directly what happens inside schools, where outcomes are produced. Moreover, for some issues the ability to set goals is also dispersed; school boards may have autonomy to set their own goals and are accountable for them, however not towards the central government but rather to local stakeholders. This creates dilemmas for governance; on the one hand central government is responsible for ensuring good quality education, but on the other hand the autonomy to produce it, and to define it, is at least partly in the hands of decentralised entities – the school boards in the Netherlands, local or regional government in other countries. A problem of decentralised systems is not so much that they are decentralised as such, but rather the combination with centralised responsibilities, resulting is a mixed system in which central responsibilities come together with decentrality and autonomy dispersed around the system. For that reason, this paper addresses the question:

How to promote national or system-wide goals in a decentralised system with highly autonomous actors at a regional and local level and the central government lacking the necessary responsibilities?

In this paper we look into dilemmas of decentralised autonomy and central responsibility in three cases. These cases shed light on the experiences in the Netherlands for dealing with these issues and look for mechanisms and patterns that may be interesting for other systems as well. We also reflect on how policy instruments play out in the context of dispersed autonomy. The paper forms the basis for the *OECD Strategic Education Governance Learning Seminar*⁴ and zooms in on policy attempts within the decentralised Dutch education system, with the aim of gaining a better understanding and to get beyond the problematic aspects of governing within complex education systems. Before we explore three cases of dealing with aforementioned governance issues, in the following paragraph we present a governance model that can help governments of OECD countries

⁴ Organised in joint cooperation between the Dutch Ministry of Education and the OECD on 29-30 January 2018 in The Hague, The Netherlands.

to find their own customised solutions for comparable governance issues. After that, we zoom in on three cases: (1) steering on mathematics and reading⁵ in primary education; (2) a governance covenant in secondary education and (3) a macro-effectiveness policy in vocational education.⁶ We conclude with reflections on the three governance practices and relevant questions to discuss in the learning seminar. A brief description of the Dutch education system can be found in the annex to this paper.

2.1. Four perspectives on governance in decentralised education systems

Education governance has been pictured before as a matter of “so much reform, so little change” (Payne, 2008). Looking at education systems through a complexity lens might be a key step in changing such a view. Complexity theory describes governance problems as a product of interactions between local actors that organise themselves and are responsive to one another. Outcomes of complex systems are considered a result of these multiple interactions. Following on from that, complex systems do not develop in a linear way, but rather consist of variations across the system. As a result, issues arising in complex systems require an approach adapted to varying local conditions and needs. Governance therefore needs flexibility and adaptive capacity in order to be effective, and a smart mix of governance styles or approaches. If we look at the literature on governance a conceptual distinction between four perspectives on what governance entails can be distinguished (Bourgon, 2011, 2009, Van der Steen et al., 2014). Each perspective focuses on different elements of governance and policy. The distinction between the four perspectives can function as a tool to categorise governance and policy approaches: traditional public administration, new public management, network governance and societal resilience. The perspectives are divided among two axes: (1) result-oriented versus value-oriented; and (2) inside-out versus outside-in. The vertical axis describes the nature of efforts, in which two approaches are distinguished: either policy results are emphasised strongly and preconditions are altered in order to achieve those results, or setting preconditions has the main focus, while there is little or less attention for outcome or implementation. The horizontal axis focuses on the role of government versus the role of society, including organisations that achieve societal goals. The distinction emphasised here comes down to whether government policies are responsive and include stakeholders’ perspectives (outside-in) or whether policy making is restricted to government alone (inside-out). These four perspectives may be seen as individual ‘ideal types’, though through time the perspectives are also ‘layered’ and combined in government practices. We briefly discuss the key points of each perspective here.

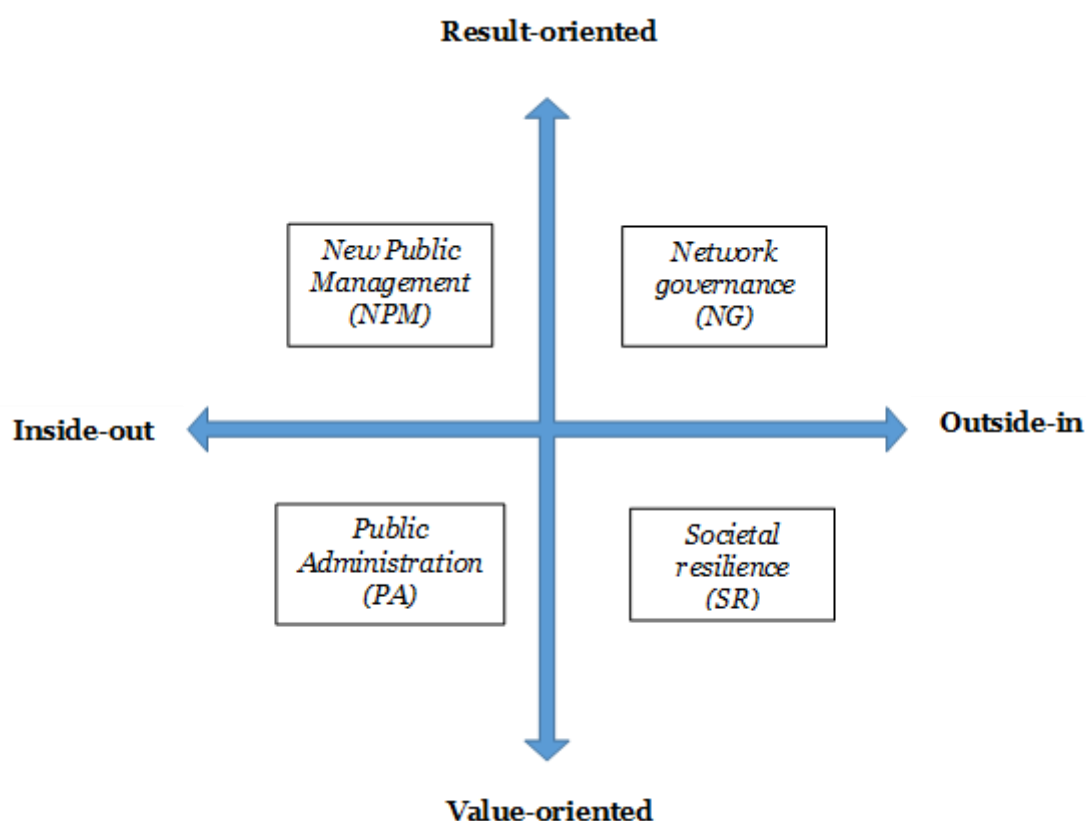
Traditional Public Administration (TPA) is the classic perspective of government as a traditional bureaucracy (Weber, 1978; Wilson, 1889; Wilson, 1989, Bourgon, 2011). This perspective centres the role of government on legality, the rule of law, the political process, and the separation between a representative political system and the civil service. For civil servants, this perspective emphasises values like civil servants’ loyalty, precision, and independence. Being a good civil servant is a legalistic, procedural, neutral, and supportive task. Public goals are determined in political processes, and

⁵ Education in reading, literacy and the mother tongue language are simply coined ‘reading’ in this paper.

⁶ Case descriptions are based on earlier research conducted by the Netherlands School of Public Administration.

policies are formulated for translating political decision into concrete actions; civil servants subsequently execute and perform these policies in practice, without further addition or colouring of the politically defined goals. The bureaucracy ensures the standardisation of response by government. Public interest and objectivity are important values, as well as equality and equity. The loyalty of civil servants is highly important, and they execute what the hierarchy of the organisation asks them to with constant reference to rules, laws, and procedures to prevent subjectivity.

Figure 2. Four governance perspectives



Source: Van der Steen et al. (2014), “A multi-level strategy as the key to success; an evaluation of the Interdepartmental Programme BioBased Economy”, www.nsob.nl/publicatie/a-multi-level-strategy-as-the-key-to-succes/; Adapted from Bourgon (2009), “New directions in public administration: Serving beyond the predictable, Public Policy and Administration, Vol. 24, pp.309-330 and Bourgon (2011), *A Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century*, Queen’s Policy Studies, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zp3k.

The perspective of *New Public Management (NPM)* emerged in the early 1990s and centres around the efficient and effective delivery of output by public organisations (Ferlie, 1996; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004; Frederickson, 2005; Bourgon, 2011). NPM represented a turn in the debate about governance, lamenting what is seen as widespread “waste” in traditional governmental bureaucracy. Legalistic values still matter, but are instrumental for achieving results. As NPM grew in prominence, many private-sector management techniques and instruments were introduced into public organisations, such as performance targets, deregulation, efficiency, contract management, and financial control. These were translated into values

for civil servants: a focus on measurable “SMART”⁷ results, and efficient and effective execution of policies.

The perspective of *Network Governance (NG)* focuses on the collaboration of government organisations and societal actors and reflects the displacement of government as the central actor (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Bogdanor, 2005; Hanf and Scharpf, 1978; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000; Pollitt, 2003; Sørensen, 2002; Stoker, 2006). This is often related to the move from government to governance, and the solving of wicked problems and “super-wicked problems” that typically require cross-institutional action. That is why civil servants have to operate in networks. Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) and network management are typical prototypes of this perspective. This inherently involves interaction, finding mutually acceptable definitions of the problem and looking for joint solutions. As a result, other actors become guiding factors in the process. In this perspective, a “good civil servant” is a networker who builds relations with other social actors to create and execute policies that are co-produced with others.

Recently, the governance perspective of *Societal Resilience (SR)* has gained increased academic and practical attention (Bourgon, 2011, 2009; Nederhand et al., 2016; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011, 2016; van der Steen et al., 2014; van der Steen et al., 2015; Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2015). This perspective centres around the production of public value on a self-reliant citizenry. Societal actors produce public value for their own reasons, and are guided by their own preferences and priorities. Citizens can undertake this independently, as well as through self-organised networks and cooperatives. It is important to note that this perspective still acknowledges a role for government. However, it departs from the other models in the sense that societal actors are the ones primarily responsible for producing societal outcomes. This type of value production happens within the bounds of government responsibility, as self-organising citizens still have to follow the law and act according to norms and standards (Sørensen and Torfing, 2016). Self-reliance is not an equivalent of a “laissez-faire” approach to government. The key point of this perspective is that the dynamics that produce public value start within society and that government relates to that; for example, do nothing, let go, block, facilitate, attempt to “organise” more self-organisation. From that perspective societal self-organisation should also be considered to include other public value self-organising than by citizenry alone. Schools and other organisations take up initiatives that produce public value that is in line with government aims and goals. Thus, the challenge for government is to find ways in which other organisations may be tempted to take up initiatives by themselves, of their own accord, that at the same time stimulate the government’s goals.

⁷ S.M.A.R.T. goals are: Specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused and time bound.

Table 1. Differences between four dominant governance perspectives

	TPA Bureaucratic model	NPM Competitive model	NG Interdependence model	SR Self-organisation model
Focus on	Law	Principal-agent relation	Alliances	Societal energy
Legitimacy	Input: rules and resources	Output: measurable performances, KPIs	Throughput: process quality and participation	Outcomes: societal dynamic
Co-ordination	Ex-ante: compose a good law	Ex-post: measure what is done	Ex-durante: keep the process going and redirect it if necessary	Self-organisation: relate to what happens
Role of stakeholders	Subjects with rights and responsibilities	Contractors or customers	Co-producers and partners	Prosumers, self-steering agents

Each of the four perspectives focuses on different strategies for dealing with the combination of central responsibilities and decentral autonomy. In an approach that relies primarily on TPA the law is the central method for co-ordination; e.g. by crafting clear directives for what is the autonomy of school boards and what falls under the responsibility of the central government; or by drawing up quality standards that schools have to meet and that can be enforced by the ministry or the Inspectorate. This would require a process in which the school boards can be involved as stakeholders in the regulatory process, for instance by asking them to respond to drafts of the law or by even asking them to provide input for the quality standards or other details. The crucial point here is that they are treated as hierarchical subjects, not as equal partners. The TPA perspective looks for legal clarity in the relations in the mixed model, so that clear hierarchical positions can be defined and enforced.

The perspective of NPM would not so much rely on legal measures, but rather invest in a system of performance management and financial incentives for school boards to channel the autonomous space that they have. The ministry acts as the principal that makes means available to the agents under certain conditions. These conditions are the focus of steering; drawing up good quality performance management systems will make autonomous actors behave in a certain way, so that they will use their autonomy to maximise the performance and the financial incentives attached to it. However, if they do not deliver to performance, the principal can hold the agents accountable; for instance by cutting its budget, retrieving part of the budget, or by demanding plans for improved performance. Another typical intervention of the NPM perspective would be to publish rankings of the performance of different schools, so that they can be benchmarked. The principal can set incentives for being higher in the ranking, but it can also rely on ‘customers’ of the schools to use the benchmarks in their choice of school. Again, this requires clear and measurable indicators of performance and a system to collect the information to assess performance of schools.

The model of NG is more a collaborative model; typically, the ministry would organise a dialogue with stakeholders and perhaps with representative bodies of the various stakeholders. Each party can bring in their particular interests and wishes and they then look for possible agreements. These are usually built around specific performance objectives or outputs, for instance the introduction of certain topics in the curriculum or an investment in the quality of teachers. Agreements or ‘covenants’ as they are often referred to require a specific goal or target to agree upon. The difference with an NPM-type agreement is that in this perspective the stakeholders are considered as

horizontal equals; they cannot ‘bargain over with is imposed upon them’, but can decide for themselves whether or not they want to be a part of the agreement. This means that they can also opt out of the process. The role of the ministry then is to organise a process in which the necessary stakeholders will participate and that leads to agreement about shared interests and concrete actions. Moreover, after the agreement is reached, it is necessary to make sure that actors act according to the agreement and deliver what they promised. Again, this is first and foremost a matter of ‘process-management’, since the various actors can opt out of the agreement. This governance perspective focuses on collaboration and the forming of alliances of partners for dealing with the mixed system; an alliance can make autonomous actors move in the direction the central actor wants them to move.

The perspective of societal resilience (SR) takes another route for achieving this same result. The central actor has goals, but is looking for initiatives from actors in the field to relate to. It leaves the first steps to actors in the field and then looks for initiatives to link up with or to help grow. This means that the central actor is reliant on the actions and initiatives by autonomous actors; it is possible that nothing happens, or that initiatives only partly help the central actor achieve its goals. This is an inherent part of this perspective; however, there are also interventions that the ministry can make to stimulate and direct the dynamics in the field. It can ask for proposals to reach a goal and add financial incentives: “as long as an initiative helps to reach the goal, we support it.” This may unleash creativity in the field, instead of imposing actions on the autonomous actors. The essence of this approach is that autonomy can be a very productive source of energy that helps the central actor achieve its goals. It also implies that the central actor has very little control over what exactly happens where. Uniformity is hard to achieve from this perspective, and it is also not all that important. Different school boards can take a different approach depending on where the energy is in that particular area; that is why the societal resilience perspective is a value-oriented perspective; stakeholders act on issues they think are important and organise themselves around values they consider valuable. This still is translated into outputs, but it is not the outputs or performance measures that get them moving.

However, we hardly see one of these perspectives acted out as an ideal type in practice. They merely serve as lenses to see what governance seems to focus on and how certain elements in the relation between the central actor and the autonomous decentralised actors are understood; in all of the examples we discussed above, there was an element of performance measurement, but it had a different meaning in each perspective. The perspectives provide us with a lens and with language to discuss with more depth and precision what exactly we see in the governance we observe in practice.

3. Three cases in the Netherlands

The Dutch education system is characterised by a strong autonomy of school boards and high levels of decision-making responsibilities at the school level. This autonomy is anchored in the constitution. However, the article that determines the freedom to provide education, also stipulates the ongoing responsibility of the government to safeguard good quality education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2013). In this section, three cases are presented that show how the government tries to fulfil its constitutional responsibility in different ways, and in doing so, seeks to carefully balance central regulation with the autonomy of school boards.

3.1. Case 1: Steering on mathematics and reading in primary education⁸

Mathematics and reading⁹ are considered two of the most important themes within primary education worldwide. The Netherlands is no exception to this. Dutch central government puts a big emphasis on these subjects. Central government uses several tools to ensure a good performance of schools on these subjects. Three of these form the combined approach discussed here: (1) setting attainment targets; (2) conducting a uniform standardised test; (3) monitoring and sanctioning by the inspectorate of Education (Inspectorate).

3.1.1. Setting attainment targets: formal norms for mathematics and reading

In Dutch primary education, so-called ‘core targets’¹⁰ specify the norm – the level of knowledge - children are required to have at the end of primary education. ‘Intermediate targets’¹¹ mark and define steps in the process towards the core targets, set for certain grades in between. Neither the core targets, nor the intermediate targets are formulated as learning competences or objectives of individual students. They do not specify anything regarding the pedagogics or didactics behind the learning process of students. Rather, they specify the minimum level of knowledge a school has to offer its students and are rather supply-oriented. The targets are formalised in law.¹² Besides these targets, central government added ‘reference levels’¹³, solely for reading and mathematics. These

⁸ This paragraph is based on earlier conducted empirical studies carried out by the Netherlands School of Public Administration (see Frankowski et al. 2017; Frissen et al. 2016; Frissen et al. 2015).

⁹ Education in reading, literacy and the mother tongue language are simply coined ‘reading’ in this paper.

¹⁰ Kerndoelen (Dutch)

¹¹ Tussendoelen (Dutch)

¹² In the Primary Education Act implemented in 1998 (Wet op het Primair Onderwijs in Dutch).

¹³ Referentieniveaus (Dutch).

indicate and specify levels of knowledge that should be reached by schools at the end stages of all the different education types (e.g. primary education, secondary education, vocational education, higher education, etc.), and were introduced to ensure a logical build-up of the content and didactics of education in mathematics and reading between different stages of a student's school career, in order to guarantee a smooth transition from one educational type into the next. Together, the core and intermediate targets and the reference levels specify the formal norms for mathematics and reading in primary education: the attainment targets.

3.1.2. Uniform standard testing

Adherence to the formal norms for mathematics and reading in primary education is tested at the end of primary education. Since 2014, it is mandatory for all primary schools to conduct a centrally approved test in the last grade of primary education. There is a uniform standard test that has been developed for this purpose on request of the central government, as well as other approved tests that have been developed by the market. In 2016, 76 percent of schools in the Netherlands conducted the test developed by government (24 percent conducted one of the two other approved tests).¹⁴ The test assesses student achievement at an individual level, group level and school level and therefore functions as a tool for determining both student as well as school performance. On the one hand, results are being used to formulate individual student school career advice, while on the other hand, aggregated test results are used for sector-wide benchmarking on school performance. The idea behind the test is twofold: government underlines the importance of individual students' rights for an objective and independent test determining their further school career and the test functions as an important tool to enhance schools' focus on goals and hence their performance. The results of the tests are publicly available, at a school aggregate level, resulting in a mechanism for public accountability: students' parents are able to assess and compare the performance of schools in the core courses of mathematics and reading, which provides objective information when choosing a primary school fit for their children.

3.1.3. Monitoring and sanctioning

Since 2002, school boards are addressed as the main actors responsible for quality in primary education.¹⁵ School boards are responsible for carrying out internal evaluations on the quality of their education. Externally, the Education Inspectorate supervises this quality, by visiting schools periodically once every four years¹⁶, unless the performance of a school is below norms; in the latter case, inspection is intensified. The Inspectorate has the power to sanction schools for not adhering to the judicially formalised aspects of quality, for example if the results in the standardised tests for mathematics and reading are below the norm for a longer period of time (longer than two years). In 2017, 1.9% of

¹⁴ Source: DUO Basisregister Onderwijs (2016).

¹⁵ Following from the Supervision of Education Act (Wet op het Onderwijstoezicht in Dutch).

¹⁶ As from 1 September 2017, the Dutch Inspectorate of Education has adopted a new approach, in which the periodical school visitations are partly substituted for school board visitations. However, this brand new approach has not yet been formalised in Dutch law and the workings and effects of it are largely unknown at this point. For that reason, this background paper still focuses on the former approach.

primary schools were assessed as being weak or very weak, and as a consequence were supervised more intensively (Inspectorate of Education, 2017). An ultimate sanction for schools that do not improve over longer periods of time is closure; the Minister of Education has the power to take over the authority of a school in case of shortcomings related to the quality of education. The norms of the Inspectorate are divided into two categories: norms that directly follow from laws and norms related to other aspects of quality, not formalised in laws. Schools can only receive sanctions for not adhering to the judicially formalised aspects of quality. Other aspects are not all regulated, partly because other tools and strategies are used as a stimulant, but also partly because these elements fall under the autonomy of schools; central government simply does not have the authority to regulate these. However, negative results on these other aspects of quality are made publicly available in inspection reports nevertheless.

3.1.4. Reflections on governance dynamics and dilemmas

In the case of attainment targets for mathematics and reading, the government applied a combined approach of setting attainment targets, standardised testing and monitoring performance, followed by the possibility to sanction schools. Even though training and support were offered as well by government, the former elements have become the dominant approach. In terms of governance, combinations between perspectives come together. Setting attainment targets and formalising them in rules and regulations, is an expression of the perspective of *Traditional Public Administration*, whereas monitoring and sanctioning belong to *New Public Management*. The combined approach has both pros and cons. The attainment targets for mathematics and reading are an attempt by the Dutch government to ensure a basic quality of education in all schools, such that all children in the Netherlands receive a basic level of education. In doing so, it has been rather successful: the number of weak performing schools¹⁷ in the Netherlands dropped. In 2017, less than two percent (namely 1.9) of schools in primary education did not live up to the basic quality norms, compared to 15 percent in 2003 (see Inspectorate of Education, 2017; Inspectorate of Education, 2010). This suggests that mathematics and reading levels of Dutch children have increased.

However, there is much less self-organisation at the level of schools than desired and intended by the constitution (although some political parties are quite satisfied with this outcome) and the government dominates the networks around the mathematics and language initiative (see Waslander et al., 2016). Apart from that, due to the formalised side of the attainment targets and the corresponding *Traditional Public Administration* mechanisms combined with *New Public Management* tools of supervision and control exercised by the Inspectorate, visions on the quality of education have become rather narrow and uniform. It appears that the government has a broad vision on the quality of education, looking at theory, law, rules and regulations and policy documents. The same most likely applies to school boards, looking at their internal vision documents. In

¹⁷ Weak performing schools are schools that score below the norm on (one of) the subjects mathematics and reading, and have potential additional insufficient results on other indicators of quality according to the Inspectorate of Education, which supervises schools on the basis of a standard set of indicators. The Inspectorate actually distinguishes even further between weak performing and very weak performing schools; the difference is irrelevant for this background paper however and therefore not elaborated on.

practice however, education quality seems highly confined to performance in mathematics and reading, due to prioritising in the education system, at the expense of other subjects.

Even though many actors agree that the quality of education in the Netherlands in general is good, there is a shared opinion as well that the meaning of the quality of education has become too narrow and limited in practice. Some believe that it is predominantly government who decides what quality is, instead of the school boards – even though they are the ones formally responsible. However, this is not only the result of the policies formulated by government, but equally the response of school boards and teachers to the set attainment targets as well. Even though school boards express having the intention of formulating a broad vision on the quality of education, there are at least two mechanisms in place which result in a narrow vision instead. First, schools are held accountable for the performance on mathematics and reading by the Inspectorate, but not for outcomes on any other subject in the curriculum.¹⁸ Even though the Inspectorate also holds schools accountable for insufficient results on other aspects of quality - such as the pedagogical climate in schools – the test results on mathematics and reading are the only quantitative, objectively determined output measure for educational quality, making it the Inspectorate's biggest trump card. If this indicator is insufficient, the corresponding conclusion is that clearly something is wrong. Second, the publicly available results on the outcomes function as an important marketing tool towards students and their parents. This dynamic results in schools adapting their internal educational processes to a focus on high outcomes in mathematics and reading, with school leaders copying didactical principles that were successful elsewhere, and teachers following very prescriptive educational methods, developed by market actors (educational publishers) who thereby gained a dominant position in the educational system. As a result, the quality of education as such is reduced to a mere policy target - an accountability measure - with a loss of felt ownership for realising it. This is not a desired outcome, as both government and the Inspectorate indicate that there is by no means an intention of reducing the quality of education into a narrow policy target.

Another reason why the government has such a dominant perspective on education quality is because actors involved in the primary process –teachers, school leaders and parents - are underrepresented in discussions about quality. They simply do not find their way to the policy table and are therefore not able to express their perceptions. At the same time, government has put major efforts into enhancing their influence, by improving parent involvement¹⁹ and stimulating the professional development of teachers²⁰ with numerous policy programs. Apart from that, government has actively stimulated the

¹⁸ There are a few attainment targets (namely core goals and intermediate goals) for other subjects than mathematics and reading in primary education in the Netherlands, for example regarding English and gymnastics; however, the performance on these subjects is not measured based on the output of schools (e.g. test results). Adherence to these targets is only checked by assessing whether schools provided students with the required knowledge on these subjects.

¹⁹ For example with the programmes: *Manifest versterking ouderbetrokkenheid* (2007).

²⁰ For example with the programmes: *LeerKracht* (2009); *Actieplan Leraar 2020* (2011); *Lerarenagenda* (2013).

professionalisation of school boards²¹. For example, the government supported the creation of a representative organisation for primary school boards in 2007: the Sector Council for Primary Education²², and another representative umbrella organisation for sector-wide educational boards in 2010: the Association of Education²³. These initiatives show that there are mechanisms at hand that provide parents, teachers and school leaders with plenty of opportunities to provide feedback. However, in practice, this has not lead to a sufficient counterweight that balances out the dominant government perspective on the quality of education.

3.2. Case 2: Governance covenants in secondary education²⁴

Governance covenants are an important instrument to steer public domains in which government does not have a formal hierarchical position, but needs the efforts and input of other actors to reach its national political goals and ambitions. A cross-sectoral covenant in the domain of education, namely the National Education Covenant was introduced in 2013. It was an agreement between the Minister of Education and the cross-sectoral representative umbrella organisation for sector-wide educational boards – the Association of Education, a joint initiative of the Sector Councils for primary education, secondary education, vocational education, higher professional education and universities - and additionally employer and employee organisations. The covenant consisted of agreements and ambitions for education towards 2020, with the aim of improving the quality of education in all sectors. In 2014 and 2015, the national covenant, which consisted of broader agreements, was translated into different covenants focused on the specific sectors (e.g. primary education, secondary education, vocational education and higher professional education). The covenants for individual sectors differ widely from one another, and so do the agreements of which they consist. Some of the agreements are detailed and specific, whereas others are more broadly formulated. Another distinction is that certain covenant agreements have a quantitative nature, in the sense that they can be measured and monitored. They entail commitments for schools (for example in the higher professional education sector). Other agreements are softer in the sense that they are formulated as broad ambitions for the sector as a whole (for example in primary and secondary education). The content, the instruments applied and the possibilities for monitoring are quite different for each sector, leading to a diverse set of covenants with even more variance in the agreements themselves.

The covenant for secondary education, an agreement between the Minister of Education and the Sector Council for Secondary Education consists of seven broad ambitions: challenging every student; having contemporary facilities; broad development for all students; partnerships between schools and other organisations in the region; professional schools as learning organisations; human resource management with an eye for the future and accountability and control. These ambitions were linked to four thematic categories,

²¹ Several support programmes were launched by government to enhance the professionalisation of school boards, for example: *Versterking bestuurskracht onderwijs* (2013).

²² PO-raad in Dutch.

²³ Association of Education (Stichting van het Onderwijs, in 2010).

²⁴ This paragraph is based on earlier conducted empirical research carried out by the Netherlands School of Public Administration (see: NSOB, forthcoming).

to which 67 concrete quality agreements were added. These agreements entail goals, measures and formulated priorities, as well as agreements on extra funding for schools from the Ministry of Education. The aim is to make secondary education in the Netherlands fit for the future, and well adapted to current developments that influence society to a great deal, such as individualisation, digitalisation, globalisation, dejuvenation and aging. The covenant incorporated other education policies as well, that were launched around the same period.²⁵ Additionally, the Sector Council for Secondary Education developed a corresponding evaluative tool that can be used by schools as an instrument to determine their progress regarding the ambitions in the covenant, compared to other schools.

3.2.1. Reflections on governance dynamics and dilemmas

The covenant as a tool can be regarded as a combination of elements belonging to the *Network Governance* and *New Public Management* approaches. A collaboration between government and the Sector Council for Secondary Education²⁶ lies at the heart of the chosen approach (*Network Governance*). Such collaborations can be very fruitful: stakeholders in the field are offered the chance to participate in and contribute to education policies. Due to the covenant, the sectoral Council for Secondary Education received an opportunity to exercise influence. Getting stakeholders involved can be very useful for the government as well, as it creates support for education policies. Actors feel listened to, and can end up with a sense of joined ownership for the program, which in turn could strengthen their intrinsic motivation to contribute to policy goals. However, the government also focused on output measurement by means of performance indicators (at the core of *New Public Management*). A covenant can be a feasible approach in dealing with the autonomy of schoolboards; as the government does not have a say in certain matters - since responsibilities are nested at a decentralised level - there is no coercive or regulatory way to achieve such goals alternatively.

However, as public funds are spent on the policy, government still requires some form of feedback on performance, because the government itself is held accountable for efficient and effective spending on education from the direction of the parliament. Yet, a problem is that monitoring is difficult because of different perceptions on the status of the agreements in the covenant. Partially due to the big differences between the different covenants (the national one versus the sectoral one), the large number of agreements and the variance within the nature of those agreements, among other contributing factors, different involved actors have different expectations regarding the covenants. They sign the same covenant but have different ideas and expectations about the nature and the results of it. This is also due to the fact that the covenants cover a wide range of topics and corresponding policy ambitions. The parliament perceives the covenant as a set of concrete ‘commitments’ that can and should be monitored, given that additional funding for the sector is connected to it. Politically, there is a belief that actors should comply with these commitments and additionally, should be held accountable for their results. However, school boards perceive the commitments rather as ‘ambitions’ and a collective set of values and ideas regarding the prioritisation of those different ambitions. The agreements in the covenant are in that perspective not a ‘commitment’ for which a set of

²⁵ For example the policy programme *Lerarenagenda* (2013).

²⁶ VO-raad in Dutch.

‘indicators’ can be developed to measure and monitor schools’ performances, but a vision for the sector with a set of intentions that steer into a certain direction towards the upcoming time period.

However, even if the expectations of the different actors would be the same, the effects of the covenant agreements would still be difficult to measure. The sectoral covenant for secondary education consists of 7 broad ambitions and 67 agreements, which should be realised in a certain time frame (2014-2017). Not all of these agreements can be easily measured and monitored; some agreements are more qualitative in nature, and do not allow for a reduction into a performance measurement indicator. Particularly, it proves to be hard to measure both the long-term effects (outcomes) and the ‘added value’ of an agreement, the causal relationship between the agreement and particular outcomes. A further complication is the fact that the Ministry of Education did not conduct a base line measurement. For this reason, a relationship between agreement and outcomes at the school level cannot be identified. This makes it difficult to link sanctions or financial incentives to particular agreements – especially since each school in each region deals with divergent social issues differently. Additionally, sanctioning would probably not be perceived as an appropriate response from the perspective of the school boards, since the sector voluntarily committed to the terms of the covenant (as there was no regulatory or coercive power on the side of the government to begin with).

Another issue arising from the chosen approach is that the covenants are signed on the sectoral level (by the Sector Council for Secondary Education), but do also include agreements that should be pursued at the level of schools. The covenants therefore underline an issue of representation here as well. A question is to what extent sectoral councils reach their members – school boards – and furthermore, the school boards that do not have a membership, but are nevertheless expected to reach the policy targets as well (this is only 13 percent of the schools however, as 87 percent are members of the sectoral council²⁷). As school boards have a large amount of autonomy in the Netherlands, they cannot be held accountable for adherence to agreements the council makes on their behalf. The council lacks coercive power for that. For that reason, an important aspect on which such agreements depend is to what extent school boards, school leaders and teachers support the policy targets and to what extent there is a sense of urgency or a sense of felt ownership to solve certain problems. In that regard, the success (or failure) of the covenant comes down to the willingness of schools to implement the policy and to what extent its goals are aligned with their agenda.

In addition, it is not self-evident that school boards will comply with the terms, given that they did not commit to them themselves. Notably, the covenant does not hold the signatures of all the different autonomous school boards, but of the representative sector council. So the agreement travels a long road from its inception to the implementation in daily practice by teachers, with many intermediating actors along the road: the Ministry of Education, the Sector Council for Secondary Education, school boards, and school leaders. In this journey, the translation of the ideas in the covenant can change and the original meaning can be altered as well. Apart from that, there are so many steering mechanisms in play in education already, for example laws, procedures that need to be followed, action plans, policy programmes and vision documents and school plans each school is obligated to have, that the question arises whether the covenants reach the level

²⁷ According to the website of the Sector Council for Secondary Education (see: www.voraad.nl).

of the school boards at all. Another question is how the different policies and plans relate to each other and whether they interfere with the local context of schools. Do they (unintentionally) contribute to the rising workload and stress of teachers and managers in the primary processes? A final issue that may arise from applying the covenant as a policy tool lies in the accompanying dynamics. The risk of using covenants as steering instruments is that actors can use a 'minimising strategy': they do not feel committed, they do just enough to be invited to the most important meetings. Whereas, the covenant strives towards maximising the energy of different actors and is used as a vehicle to create motivation, shared ambitions and commitment.

3.3. Case 3: A macro-effectiveness policy in vocational education²⁸

In 2015, the central government introduced the so-called Macro-effectiveness Act²⁹ in vocational education. This law aims at ensuring a better fit between educational programs and the labour market and altering the competitiveness between schools in a productive cooperative relationship by preventing fragmentation: multiple schools within the same area offering similar educational programs. In order to ensure the continuity and quality of educational programs, schools' portfolios should be aligned, such that programmes consist of sufficient numbers of student participants, and there is a better fit between educational programmes and the labour market to enhance students' job chances after graduation. In pursuit of these goals, schools have to coordinate their plans before starting up new educational programmes (it is not allowed to offer similar tracks as other schools in the same region).

With this aim, a specific legal provision was introduced in vocational education, termed "the duty of care". The first "duty of care" was introduced in 2008 and specifies that vocational schools are only allowed to offer educational programmes for which there is demand from the labour market. This aims to guarantee better labour market prospects for graduates³⁰. In the 2015 Macro-effectiveness Act, government formalised a second duty of care for effectiveness: a legal obligation to ensure efficient spending of public funds on education. While both duties originate directly from law, they are formulated in an open way: the regulations do not specify which actions should be undertaken by the schools, they just underline a responsibility for school boards for a desired outcome. The duties of care are not supervised by the Inspectorate, but schools have the obligation to account for them in their annual reports, which are publicly available. A government advisory committee screens the educational programmes for adherence to both duties of care and the Minister of Education has the power to sanction schools, following from the Vocational Education Act³¹. Besides the two duties of care for vocational education, government created an investment fund in order to stimulate public-private co-operation between vocational schools and the labour market. The investment fund was created with

²⁸ This paragraph is based on earlier conducted empirical research carried out by the Netherlands School of Public Administration (see: Van der Steen et al., 2016).

²⁹ *Wet Macrodoelmatigheid in het Beroepsonderwijs* (Dutch).

³⁰ Namely by means of the implementation of an act (*Wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs inzake deregulering en administratieve lastenverlichting*) in 2008.

³¹ *Wet MBO-Instellingen* (Dutch).

the aim to support schools in their transitions in the light of the macro-effectiveness policy.

3.3.1. Reflections on governance dynamics and dilemmas: the Case of Lentiz Life College

The approach of the macro-effectiveness policy chosen here is characterised by a combination of *Traditional Public Administration* and *Societal Resilience* elements. The Government set formal rules, but formulated them in an open way, in order to leave enough discretionary room for schools to make choices and operate in preferred ways. In doing so, the government attempted an approach in which it could steer school boards in a certain direction, on the basis of clear central government responsibilities (steering on finances and ensuring an efficient and effective spending of public funds), without trespassing over the border of the tasks and responsibilities that are decentralised (the content, curricula and set-up of educational programs). The duties of care seem an optimal tool for governing decentralised systems in a central way in that regard. However, when we zoom in on a specific case, namely Lentiz Life College, a vocational school located in Schiedam in the Netherlands, some issues seem to arise along with the chosen approach.

At Lentiz Life College the school board has a very different perspective on the concept of macro-effectiveness. In order to connect optimally to the local labour market, the school applies an approach which directly goes against certain principles of the macro effectiveness policy implemented by the government. Instead, the school board has its own vision. The school is situated in a very specific region known for agricultural trade. In this region, economic activity is specifically targeted on the domain of food and the regional labour market is characterised by countless connections between different trading industries. Money is made by means of trade on the boundaries of different domains. The school board perceives macro-effectiveness as the ability to connect optimally to the specific demand of the regional labour market. According to the school, cross-overs are needed in order to achieve this goal: educational programmes in which connections are sought between different educational domains (e.g. health and food, food and safety, mechatronics and agriculture, climate and technique). The school board sees its task as providing those educational programmes required for the labour market, not only to ensure internships for students during their education, but additionally to prepare students properly for their working life after school. Lentiz Life College works together with other school boards in order to facilitate the cross-overs.

In providing the required educational programs, the school board is faced with certain difficulties, arising from government policies. For example, the innovative industries in the region of the school require small numbers of specifically trained students, with a distinct 'hybrid' profile, on the boundaries of multiple domains. Though small numbers of students are only needed, these students would have a good labour market perspective, since their skills would be highly useful for local companies. However, the macro-effectiveness policy prescribes that educational programmes with small numbers of students should be circumvented. Besides that, the school needs to collaborate with other school boards, since they are not allowed to offer educational programmes similar to other schools in the region. However, other regulations put up thresholds for these collaborations: (1) required qualification files and (2) compulsory elective parts. Qualification files are mandatory dossiers in which educational programmes are accounted for. They describe the contents of educational programs. The aim of these files is to ensure quality and to enhance comparability with similar tracks offered by other

schools, such that diplomas are similarly weighted. However, they complicate the plans for offering cross-over programs, because they would require two half qualification files, which is not allowed. To circumvent this, the cross-over programmes only offer some additional modules of other educational programs, rather than being a true cross-over program. This limits further stretching collaborations between educational programmes and different schools. Additionally, compulsory elective parts put up further thresholds. All educational programmes have an elective part consisting of 240 class hours per year. Schools are not allowed to make their own free choices regarding these elective parts; for every program, the government predetermined elective part options to choose from. For that reason, there is no room for schools to make own choices and to arrange this differently. For Lentiz Life College this means that certain relevant cross-overs simply cannot be offered.

In the case discussed here, the school developed its own vision on macro-effectiveness, based on the circumstances, conditions and context specific to the school. This is precisely what was intended by the formulated policy. However, the school's vision on certain specific topics was not fully in line with – or was even opposed to – what was intended by the government policy. In addition, conflicts arose with other rules set by government with which the contextually designed school board vision collided. A relevant question with regard to governance is whether government should allow schools to take more initiative and strive for new opportunities and possibilities by self-organisation, and contribute to goals set by government, even when they are going against other rules and regulations. From a *Societal Resilience* perspective, it might be worthwhile for government to stimulate school boards in taking such initiatives. The described case illustrates how difficult it is for government to align centrally formulated policies to the specific decentral contexts of local schools, resulting in sub-optimal and unintended policy outcomes.

3.4. Reflections on the Dutch cases and relevant questions for the learning seminar

The Netherlands is known for its great autonomy of school boards in education. As is shown by OECD-indicators, in lower secondary education for example, the Netherlands ranked the highest among OECD countries in the percentage of decisions taken at the school level (OECD, 2018). At the same time, the national government is confronted with high expectations of its steering capacity to reach nationally agreed goals, due to its system level responsibility for the quality of education. The three governance practices described as cases in this paper present three different attempts by the Dutch central government to contribute to goals in education on a central level, while bearing in mind decentralised responsibilities and dispersed autonomy at the level of school boards. The cases showed that the position of the national government is stronger than expected in a decentralised system, as was also observed by Waslander et al. in their reconstruction of steering dynamics in Dutch education policy: “This agile network steering places the government in a powerful position and provides it with the ability to steer centrally the complex decentralised education system with its many relative autonomous actors in a sophisticated way” (Waslander et al., 2017: 7; translation by authors). Different forms of governance are applied to overcome dilemmas emerging from the system of centralised decentralisation. In each of the examples there is a responsibility for government to provide results at a system level, whereas at the same time the actual actors to produce these results have a large share of autonomy. Neither of the two can do without the other, but neither one can go alone as well. The three practices we have shown from the Dutch

pallet for central steering of decentralised education systems are all expressions of different governance or steering perspectives.

- Attainment targets set in primary education are at the core of *Traditional Public Administration* and *New Public Management*, showing that government mainly tries to steer from its own perspective – ‘inside-out’.
- Working with a government covenant in secondary education on the other hand is an expression of *Network Governance*, allowing for participation of and contributions from the field via representative sectoral organisations in education policies, though combined with *New Public Management* elements, as monitoring on the basis of performance indicators remained important as well. This approach rather has a more ‘outside-in’ style, looking at it from the perspective of government.
- Last, the introduced duties of care in vocational education demonstrated an attempt to leave room for and cope with diversity at the decentralised level, as school boards are given the opportunity to fill in a deliberately openly formulated policy, characterised by *Traditional Public Administration*, - government setting the rules - but still allowing for diversity and variance at the local school level, which fits within a *Societal Resilience* perspective.

We have seen that all the different elements applied, had both pros and cons. A focus on regulatory power (an element belonging to the *Traditional Public Administration* approach), by drafting regulations and checking adherence to formal laws, like in the case of the attainment targets for mathematics and reading, turned out to be a very effective tool in reaching policy goals. However, it had unintended effects as well, as the (central) government perspective on the quality of education became predominant and prescribing, while limiting room for manoeuvre at the decentralised level.

Tactics that evolve around naming and shaming, an outcome of publishing results openly to all relevant stakeholders (typical for *New Public Management* policies), can be very effective as well, while having negative effects at the same time. We have seen such dynamics revealed in a recently conducted study (Van Twist et al., 2013), which showed very different outcomes of *New Public Management* tactics on schools that are thriving than on schools that struggle with attracting well-performing students. Deploying such a strategy ultimately may lead to negative spirals for schools with weak performance, since parents only choose well-performing schools for their children, which results in weakening even further and schools being unable to break with this negative dynamic. This is not a desired outcome on a system level.

At the same time, classical steering mechanisms central to *Traditional Public Administration* and *New Public Management* are not particularly well adapted to systems with decentralised responsibilities, since they leave little room for the perspective of the decentralised counterparts (school boards). The perspectives of *Network Governance* and *Societal Resilience* naturally leave more room for school boards, as they put stakeholders and society at equal terms or even in the lead of the process. This element makes these approaches seem rather attractive in a context of a decentralised system. However, as we have seen in the cases discussed here, they come with specific dilemmas. The case of governance covenants, in which the government made agreements with stakeholders (at the core of *Network Governance*), it proved difficult for the ministry to measure outcomes and to direct lagging schools to speed up their efforts. Individual schools interpreted the formulated policy goals in their own way. Moreover, many school boards saw the agreements not as a ‘performance contract’, but rather as an agreement over

shared good intentions. Different interpretations of the agreements made it difficult to monitor and sanction – how do you sanction schools that do not live up to expectations if they participate on a voluntary basis.

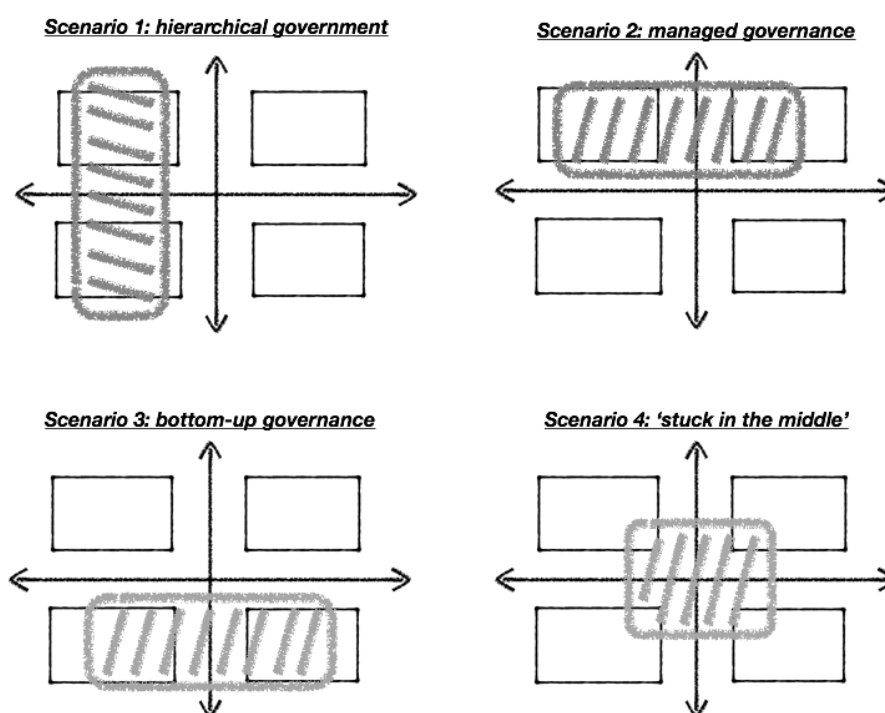
Moreover, the principles of *Societal Resilience* – in the case of the deliberately openly formulated ‘duties of care’ as we have seen in the macro-effectiveness policy in vocational education - illustrated once more how difficult it is for a central actor as the government to foresee what the policy effects on a decentralised level are going to be. The essence of this approach is that school boards take their own course in achieving qualitatively good education and can even develop their own definitions of quality. This can lead to very promising results that would otherwise not have been achieved – Lentiz is a success-case – but also means that educational quality is not the same everywhere, that rules do not evenly apply to all, and that it becomes hard for the minister to be held accountable for the system as a whole.

Based on what we have seen in the different cases, we see four possible scenarios for the governance of mixed systems of education.

3.4.1. Scenario 1: hierarchical government

This scenario handles the decentralised system as a hierarchical system; the centre is in control and produces regulatory and managerial interventions to organise what happens in the decentral elements of the system. This happens in a combination of regulation and performance management systems, where the principal imposes a regime on the decentral actors and also clearly states its own role. Setting attainment targets in primary education as described earlier could be seen as a typical example in this scenario.

Figure 3. Four scenarios for education governance in a decentralised system



3.4.2. Scenario 2: managed governance

This scenario combines the strategy of crafting alliances around shared goals with the performance management and principal-agent relation of NPM. The central actor can negotiate a mutual agreement with decentral actors, but then treats the agreement like a contract; a performance contract that can be enforced in case of 'negligence' or 'under-performance' by the other partners, and the contractors. The autonomous partners are more or less free to opt into the contract, but once they have agreed they are held accountable for the terms they agreed upon. The covenant in secondary education exemplifies this approach.

3.4.3. Scenario 3: bottom-up governance

In this scenario, the balance is deliberately shifted to the decentralised elements in the system. The autonomous actors can come up with their own initiatives to achieve the values they consider important. The central actor sees if and how that relates to the goals and values at the central level. In case of possible synergies, the centre can support initiatives or even help them scale-up. This also implies that the system is no longer based on uniformity; that is why in this approach the legalistic role becomes very important. The role of the central actor is also to see if initiatives fit the core values such as equal treatment, the rule of law and if the 'spirit' of the law is safeguarded in initiatives (even if they do not comply with the law). The role of the central government is partly 'participatory' and partly legalistic; it is both about pragmatically working with what comes up from society and principally safeguarding the core values of government and society. A duty of care as in vocational education would fit in this scenario.

3.4.4. Scenario 4: stuck in the middle

In this scenario there is no real focus in the governance of the system. Governance attempts to be everything, or refuses to become more precise in how it intends to use certain interventions, such as a performance management system. Is it the basis for steering, or is it simply a starting point for a discussion about what school boards have done and what they think is needed? The risk of this scenario is that the lack of precision in the governance-strategy causes ambiguity in the system; actors are not sure what to expect, central government is inconsistent in its role, and parties cannot find stable patterns of behaviour to overcome their differences.

None of these scenarios provides the ideal ‘solution’ for steering in mixed education systems. The purpose of the scenarios, the perspectives, and the cases is to broaden the debate about governance and provide concepts and language to feed the discussion. The OECD Strategic Education Governance Learning Seminar provides an ideal occasion to discuss the current governance practices and explore possible, plausible and also preferable routes for governance.

Annex A. A brief background of the Dutch education system

Most important characteristics

The Dutch education system is one of the most decentralised in the world (OECD, 2011), characterised by a high autonomy for school boards. Since 1917, the Dutch constitution ensures the *freedom of education*, including a number of rights: (a) the right for everyone to establish a school in accordance with their own vision on education, provided that certain key conditions are met; (b) equal state funding for all schools (public or private and regardless of denomination or pedagogical stream); (c) free school choice for students and their parents (MoECS, 2005). Historically, this led to the establishment of many private schools across the country, many of which on denominational grounds (predominantly catholic, but also protestant). These schools were run by private school boards, often consisting of parents, had the right to select and refuse students based on religious grounds and received additional funding from parents or religious organisations.

For a long time, public schools fell under the responsibility of local governments. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, public schools underwent a process of privatisation. To align public schools with their private counterparts, local governments established public school boards, mainly foundations, to which they handed over power. Even greater autonomy was handed over to schools, by introducing a funding system based on ‘lump sum’ financing³²: schools make their own choices with regard to the public funding they receive from government. These developments resulted in a system in which almost all schools in the Netherlands are privately managed, though publicly funded. This system is described as ‘centralised decentralisation’ (Van Zanten, 2009).

These developments resulted in a diverse system, in which non-Christian schools (Islamic, Hindu and Jewish) have been established over time as well, predominantly in the biggest four cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) and schools based on ideological or pedagogical beliefs (such as Montessori, Jenaplan and Dalton). In the meantime, both public and private schools are mostly governed by professional boards, no longer consisting of parents. Moreover, since 2011, schools have the obligation to establish a functional division between the executive part and the supervisory part of the board; governance models that school boards in the Netherlands use are for example one tier (one board with a distinction between the two roles) and two tier (an executive board and an independent supervisory board) (Honinigh and Hooze, 2012; PO-raad, 2013).

³² Universities in 1984; higher professional education in 1986; vocational education in 1991; secondary education in 1996; and primary education in 2006.

Structure

Although schooling in the Netherlands is not compulsory until children turn five years old, 98% of the children start primary school at the age of four. For most children primary school lasts eight years.

After primary school, pupils continue into one of many secondary school tracks that the Dutch education system knows (see the diagram on the Dutch education system below). Based on both teacher advice and results of a compulsory standardised test³³ aimed at measuring their cognitive capabilities, which is conducted in the last grade of primary education, pupils move into one of the secondary education tracks at the age of twelve. For that reason, the Dutch system is known for its early tracking. Within these different tracks, pupils still have to choose between a variety of educational pathways. The three most common tracks within secondary education are:

- Pre-vocational education (VMBO), a four year programme offering theoretical and practical courses (mainly 12-16 year-olds), after which students can continue in either (secondary) vocational education (MBO) or senior general secondary education (HAVO).
- Senior general secondary education (HAVO), a five-year programme (mainly 12-17 year-olds) which prepares pupils for either higher professional education (HBO) or pre-university education (VWO).
- Pre-university education (VWO), a six year programme (mainly 12-18 year-olds) which prepares students for going to university.

Stakeholders

Table A.1. Overview of number of schools and school boards in the Netherlands

	Primary education	Secondary education	Upper secondary vocational education	Higher professional education	Universities
Number of schools ³⁴	6,893 ³⁵	635	56	34	18
Number of school boards ³⁶	1,140	366	54	34	18
Percentage of school board memberships of sectoral council ³⁷	85%	87%	100%	100%	78%

Source: Adapted from CBS, DUO and Dutch Ministry of Education (2017), websites sectoral councils³⁸, <http://www.onderwijsinijfers.nl>.

³³ A uniform standardised test has been developed upon government request for this purpose. However, specific approved other tests developed by the market are allowed as a substitute as well. Cito-toets (Dutch).

³⁴ In 2015/2016

³⁵ Including special primary education schools and (secondary) special schools.

³⁶ In 2015/2016

³⁷ In 2017

Table A.2. Overview of the most relevant stakeholders in the Dutch education system

Stakeholders	Role/interest	Intervention/support repertoire
Minister of Education, Culture and Science (MoECS)	Responsible for the overall quality of education in schools.	Development of national policy. Development of quality norms. Development of financing of supportive measures. Power to stop funding or close schools.
Inspectorate of Education	Supervision of education: quality, finance, social security, and citizenship.	Assess schools using a supervision framework. Since 2007 also school boards. Discuss absolute and relative performance with boards and professionals in the schools. Report (very) weak schools to MoECS. Identification of "excellent schools" (see www.excellentescholen.nl). Provide public reports of judgements.
Sector councils i.e. PO-Raad, VO-Raad and MBO-Raad	Representation of education school boards' interests.	Development and implementation of national policies. Assist schools to improve performance.
Local Government (Alderman for Education)	Owner of school buildings and responsible for their maintenance.	Improve the quality of education in schools by making funding and assistance available at the local level.
School board	Formal constituent of the school(s), responsible and accountable for corporate and educational quality of school.	Set the organisational vision and structure. Hire, professionalise and lay off school leaders/management and other personnel. Hire support. Internal quality monitoring. Determine the organisational/learning climate in the schools. Steer educational quality. Change schools' budget.
Internal supervisory council	Integral supervision and focusing on the importance of education. Acts as adviser and sounding board to the school board. Employer of the board members.	Ensures compliance with the code of good governance in education. Approval of strategic policy, annual reports and accounts. Appointment, dismissal and legal status and remuneration of board members. Annual appraisal of the board and its members. Amendment of the statutes. Appointment of an external auditor.
(Joint) participation council	Co-decision/advisory role in the management of the school. The joint participation council fulfils these functions at the board level in case a school board consists of more than one school.	Right to information, right to consent and prior consultation on a number of defined pieces of the school board.
School principal	Managing the day-to-day business in the school.	Hire and lay off personnel. Shape team climate. Invest in teachers or methods. Contact with parents.
Teacher	Responsible for the quality of education in the classroom.	Make changes in classroom. Contact with parents.
Parents/students	Client of the education system, some formally part of school board or member of the parents' council representative.	Participate actively in school. Assist with day-to-day activities.

Source: Adapted from OECD (2016a), *Netherlands 2016, Foundations for the Future*, Reviews of National Policies for Education, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264257658-en>; and Van Twist et al. (2013), "Coping with very weak primary schools: Towards smart interventions in Dutch education policy", <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3txnpnhd7-en>.

³⁸ www.poraad.nl; <https://www.vo-raad.nl/> www.mбораad.nl/; www.vereniginghogescholen.nl/; www.vsnu.nl/.

Currently on the Dutch policy agenda

The Inspectorate signals in the last *State of our Education* that the Netherlands has relatively high differences in student performance outcomes for schools in secondary education. Students on certain schools can score significantly lower than their peers from schools with similar populations. The Inspectorate compared differences between schools in the Netherlands with those in other countries and noticed that differences are relatively high in the Netherlands. This means the achievements of an individual student partly depends on the choice of school the individual student makes. Differences between schools are partly a result of the system of great autonomy – giving space to innovation and flexibility in approaches to meet certain goals as well. Yet, when differences in the way schools perform become too big, this raises questions about the way autonomy is dealt with.

The Dutch system internationally compared³⁹

The Dutch system of ‘centralised decentralisation’ has some similarities and differences with other mixed education systems. Compared to the education systems of Finland, Flanders (Belgium) and Ontario (Canada)⁴⁰, a number of factors stands out.

First, the age in which children first start going to school in the Netherlands is noteworthy. Children go as early to school as the age of four (98%), even though this is only mandatory from five years onwards. Comparatively, children only start school at the ages of seven in Finland – even though a pre-primary education year for six year-olds is offered, six in Flanders (optional pre-primary education starts at age five) and five in Ontario (see: FME, FNBE & CIMO, 2012; Rouw et al., 2016; OECD, 2011). In addition, choices for continuation into secondary education tracks are made quite early in the Netherlands as well. At age twelve, students advance into differentiated tracks, even though tracking can be postponed because many schools offer comprehensive instead of categorical classes for the first one or two years of secondary education (Van der Ven, 2017). The Dutch education system is criticised for its *early tracking*, because it is associated with negative outcomes related to educational attainment, labour market success, earnings later on in life and with inequality (see: Borghans et al., 2012; Korthals, 2015), with differences between students of low and high ability. Even though secondary education starts at the age of twelve in Flanders as well, the system only allows for two tracks: a general education track, of which more than eighty percent of students go to and a vocational education track to which the other part goes. Further differentiation only takes place after two years of secondary education. Similarly to the Netherlands, Flanders has a highly stratified secondary education system then as well (Shewbridge et al., 2011).

Second, there are differences across systems regarding the position of teachers. In the Netherlands, responsibilities for ensuring qualitatively good education lie at the level of school boards, making it a managerial issue, whereas in the Finnish system, teachers are responsible for the quality of their own education. Teachers in the Netherlands have far less autonomous positions than in Finland. In primary education, this is partly related to schooling: Dutch teachers require a bachelor’s degree, whereas Finnish teachers mostly

³⁹ This paragraph is largely based on earlier conducted research carried out by the Netherlands School of Public Administration (Frankowski and Schulz, 2017).

⁴⁰ These selected cases were part of an international comparative study conducted by the Netherlands School of Public Administration at an earlier stage.

hold master's degrees (Brueggeman, 2008). Other factors are the large share of part time workers in the sector in the Netherlands and the dynamic between educational publishers and school teams. Educational publishers – market parties - gained quite a dominant position in the educational field. They develop high quality methods that are elaborate and prescriptive. An upside is that the methods provide schools with a solid and reliable base to fall back on; a downside is that they might narrow down the role of teachers in a pedagogical sense. This does not necessarily lead to worse outcomes, but could affect teacher professionalism.

This also has an effect on representation in the system. Actors involved in the primary process of education, such as teachers, school teams, school leaders and parents, have notoriously underrepresented positions in the system in the Netherlands, limiting their participation in policy debates about education. Even though there are representative organisations for these groups, they have not managed to gain a dominant position in the field of education, except for some labour unions, but they mostly restrict to addressing issues related to terms of employment. The Ministry of Education rather discusses education policy issues with the representative organisations of school boards (sectoral councils), resulting in nearly an absence of the crucial primary actors in educational debates on the one hand, but also in an inability to reach these groups vice versa, looking at it from a government perspective.

The influential position of the sectoral councils (representative organisations of school boards), is connected to the autonomous position of school boards. Similarly to Flanders, the Netherlands has the freedom of education and free choice for parents to choose schools in primary and secondary education, as one of the basic foundations of the education system. In both countries, this has resulted in high levels of autonomy for school boards. A difference with regard to the role of government however, is that federal government plays a minor role in education in both Flanders and Ontario, where most responsibilities for education are transformed to regional (Belgium) or provincial (Canada) governments (Rouw et al., 2016), whereas central (though not federal) government does in the Netherlands. The distance between the highest level of authority and the level of schools or school boards may make a difference when it comes to decentralised systems.

Third, supervision and control differs. Whereas the Netherlands, Flanders and Ontario have Inspectorates of Education and accreditation committees that assess schools periodically by means of an external inspection, in order for them to receive funding and accreditation, the Finnish system lacks such an arrangement (the Inspectorate was abolished in the 1990s). In addition, there are no national central achievement tests for students in Finland, covering the entire age group, and there is no national control of text books or other learning materials. There is only a sample-based national achievement test in two subjects of basic education (primary and secondary education are offered jointly under the term basic education). Results are published in such a way, that it leaves no possibility for ranking lists of schools. Results are merely used for developmental purposes, for improving curricula, learning materials and teacher education. Rather than measuring the outcomes, the Finnish government invests more in the input, by paying more attention to the content of educational programmes beforehand than the other countries discussed here.

Fourth, and last, there are differences in who decides about the content of educational programs. In the Netherlands, schools have a large amount of discretionary room to determine what they offer in their programs. The government only regulates a narrow set

of objectives for a limited number of subjects (for example, in primary education, there are only standards for mathematics, reading, English, world orientation, cultural orientation and gymnastics, the other subjects are the responsibility of schools themselves). There is no national curriculum in the Netherlands, like in Finland, Flanders and Ontario have. However, it has to be noted that the national curricula in the countries at hand vary greatly. Flanders has a core curriculum set by government with specified minimum attainment targets and developmental objectives (Nusche et al., 2015), which has to be approved by the Flemish parliament as they form part of an official decree (Rouw et al., 2016). It leaves room for schools to develop their own learning plans, similarly to the Netherlands (even though the latter has 58 core learning objectives, whereas Flanders has about 1.000). Apart from that, influential umbrella organisations of school boards – that handle representation towards government – play a major role in translating learning objectives into these learning plans rather than schools themselves (see Shewbridge et al., 2011; Rouw et al., 2016). The Finnish national curriculum is set by government and is, on the contrary, very elaborate. It contains general objectives for basic education and general rules in education. These are outcome-oriented, although not in a quantitative sense. Since there is no central testing by the end of basic education, there is no need for measurable quantifiable objectives. The curriculum is set once every ten years, by the Finnish National Agency for Education, an agency that falls under the responsibility of the Finnish Ministry of Education. The curriculum is drawn up on the basis of large stakeholder consultation of all relevant actors in the field of education. This process involves broad-based co-operation with education experts and various stakeholders, including citizens, outlined by multidisciplinary working groups and online consultation groups (FME, FNBE & CIMO, 2012; Halinen and Holappa, 2013). It therefore has a broad basis and large support in the field. In Ontario, the provincial Ministry of Education develops the Ontario curriculum, focused on outcomes. It specifies which courses should be taught and which expectations regarding the given courses are at hand (Levin, 2012). Additionally, it contains requirements to obtain diplomas and general learning objectives. All schools are obliged to offer at least the Ontario curriculum or a programme with higher educational value than the curriculum.

System performance

International assessment programmes such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) give a good indication of the relative performance of education systems, as they include large numbers of countries. Even though they remain limited to measuring mathematical, scientific and language skills, these are often used as an indicator for the performance and quality of education systems as a whole, because these skills are considered some of the most crucial for students to obtain in order to function properly on the labor market and during the course of their lives, worldwide (cf. Sulkunen, 2013).

The countries or regions mentioned in this annex, the Netherlands, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), and Ontario (Canada) are generally considered above average up to high achievers. According to the TIMSS 2015 assessment in which mathematical and scientific skills were assessed, both Flanders and Finland fall within a category of countries that are considered the best performers, except for five East Asian countries (Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Chinese Taipei and Japan) that are considered top performers (Mullis et al., 2016a; 2016b). With regard to reading, Finland falls even into the category of top performing countries worldwide, with a fifth place in the PIRLS 2016

assessment, just behind Russia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Ireland (Mullis et al., 2017). According to the PISA 2016 results, both Canada and Finland score very high levels of performance in reading, scoring as high as the third and fourth position of 64 countries in total. All four countries score comparatively high and similarly on the PISA mathematics performances (OECD, 2016b). The table below provides an overview of all the country rankings in the most recently conducted before mentioned international assessment programs.

Table A.3. Country rankings in international performance assessment programmes

	TIMSS 2015 (49): math ⁴¹	PIRLS 2016 (50): reading ⁴²	PISA 2015 (64): math ⁴³	PISA 2015 (64): reading ⁴⁴
Netherlands	19	20	11	15
Finland	17	5	13	4
Flanders	11	32	15	20 ⁴⁵
Ontario	29 ⁴⁶	23 ⁴⁷	10 ⁴⁸	3 ⁴⁹

Source: Adapted from Mullis et al. (2016a), TIMSS 2015, *International Results in Mathematics*, <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2015/international-results/download-center/>; Mullis et al. (2016b), 20 years of TIMSS, *International Trends in Mathematics and Science Achievement*, <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2015/international-results/timss2015/wp-content/uploads/2016/T15-20-years-of-TIMSS.pdf>; OECD (2016a), *Netherlands 2016: Foundations for the Future*, *Reviews of National Policies*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264257658-en>; OECD (2016), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, PISA, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>.

Even though Flanders and Finland are both still perceived as good performers in mathematics, it has to be noted that Finland's average performance on mathematics relative to other countries, has started dropping between 2011-2015 (Mullis et al., 2016a) and Flanders' performances are dropping gradually over the course of the past two

⁴¹ Mathematics performances of fourth grade students in primary education.

⁴² Reading performances of fourth grade students in primary education.

⁴³ Mathematics performances among 15-year-olds.

⁴⁴ Reading performances among 15-year-olds.

⁴⁵ Belgium as a whole ranked 20th. However, Flanders' sole score is higher than the number ten in the ranking.

⁴⁶ No specific data on Ontario is available, only for Canada as a whole. Canada ranked 29th in the assessment. However, the country scores as high as an eighth position in mathematics rankings for eight grade students, just behind the worldwide top performers (just behind the top 5 of East Asian Countries Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Chinese Taipei and Japan).

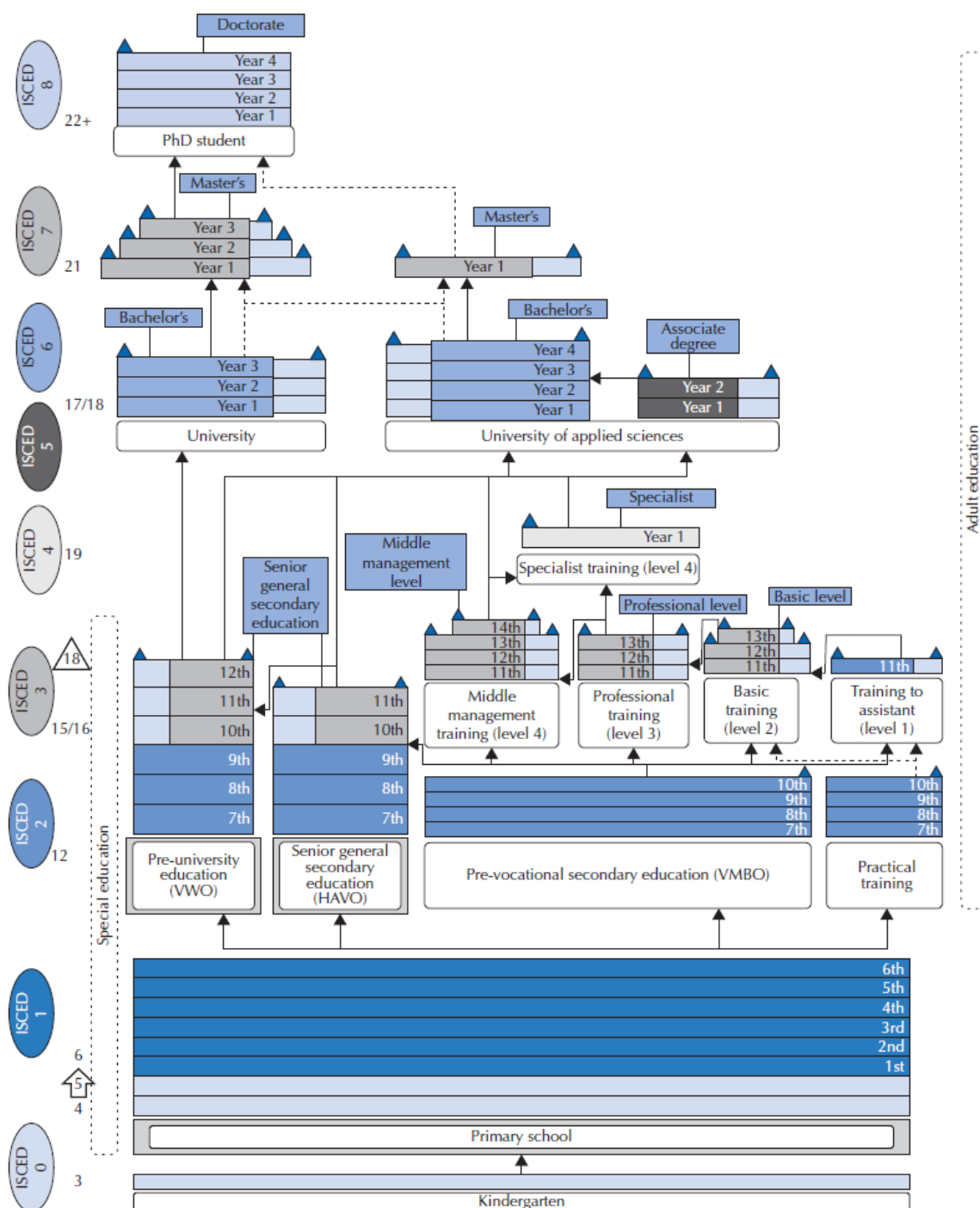
⁴⁷ Canada as a whole ranked twenty third in the assessment. However, data on the province of Ontario only is available as well. It ranks similarly to the Netherlands (20th), slightly better than Canada as a whole.

⁴⁸ Canada as a whole ranked tenth in the assessment. However, Ontario as a province scores in between a fourteenth and fifteenth place compared to the country scores in the ranking.

⁴⁹ Canada as a whole ranked third in the assessment. However, both Canada as a whole and Ontario as a province have the exact same score.

decades as well – on average and for both the top segment and lowest segment of students (see: Mullis et al., 2016b). In addition, research suggests that, even though Finland is scoring very high on reading assessment tests (for example PISA), the literacy performance of seven percent of students still remains at a level that is not sufficient enough for further studies or even active citizenship (Linnakylä et al., 2004). Apart from that, the mathematics achievements of fourth grade Dutch students in primary education have been dropping marginally but still gradually since 1995 and there is only a limited amount of students who reaches the level of excellence (only four percent of Dutch students, compared to ten per cent in Flanders, Denmark and England) (Meelissen and Punter, 2016). These notions suggest that there is room for improvement, even within education systems that are considered good or high achievers. In line with that, the Dutch cabinet has formulated the ambition of wanting to go from a generally good to a great performing education system.

Figure A.1. Diagram of the Dutch education system



Source: OECD (2016), "Diagram of the education system: the Netherlands", *OECD Education GPS*, <http://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=NLD>.

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