Voortgang in autonomie: een studie naar de organisatorische gevolgen van financiële en personele beleidsbenutting in het basisonderwijs

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Summary

1. Introduction: school-based management in primary education

As a result of the policy of deregulation and increased autonomy in the field of education, the administrative structure of Dutch primary schools has changed. The decision-making authority is being redistributed, just like in other mainly English speaking countries, where school-based management is being introduced (Levacic, 1995). The central government partly draws back and devolves tasks and responsibilities in the field of financial and staffing policy to the individual school boards and their schools. The scope for policymaking of individual schools, or in other words, the autonomy of schools, is being expanded.

The policy of deregulation and increased autonomy assumes that the individual school is the primary unit of improvement. The redistribution of decision-making authority is a mean through which improvement might be stimulated and sustained (Karsten, 1994; Malen et al., 1990; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). The idea is that the redistribution of decision-making authority will result in a change of what is produced, that is to say, will change the final result. An increase in the scope for policy-making offers a school the means to improve education (Levacic, 1995).

The key question examined in this study is which school organisational changes occur as a result of the expanded scope for policy-making of primary schools. There is still little empirical knowledge about the consequences of school-based management (Gamage et al., 1996; Malen et al., 1990). However, as school-based management can be seen as a structural change (Karsten, 1994; Levacic, 1995; Tanner & Stone, 1998), which are usually not very effective (Fullan, 1992; Johnes, 1995; Plank, 1987), the expectations about school-based management should not be high.

Possible consequences of school-based management and the increased autonomy of schools are an increasing policy execution by schools (Buist, 1995; Hooge, 1998; Levacic, 1995), a change in the spending and allocation of financial means (Brown, 1990; Levacic, 1995), a change in the decision making authority within schools (Ax, 1993b; Brown, 1990; Imants, 1996; Levacic, 1993a, 1995; Malen et al., 1990), a change in the task-differentiation and coordination (Ax, 1993a), a change in the role of the schoolleader (Gamage et al., 1996; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Levacic, 1995; Sackney et al., 1994), a change in the organisational culture (Cheng, 1996; van Esch et al., 1993; Karstanje et al., 1995; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998) and a change in the organisational quality (Cheng, 1996; Gamage et al., 1996; Levacic, 1995; Scheerens, 1993; Thomas, 1987).
2. Theoretical framework

School-based management
Within this research project school-based management focused on the changes within the funding system of primary education. The funding system, or financial system, regulates the financial relationship between the schools and the central government. This is effected on the basis of formulas and rules which determine the amount of money a school receives from the central government (Verhoeff, 1992). The funding system is an important policy instrument for the central government (McDaniel & de Vries, 1995; in 't Veld et al., 1994). It can be seen as an instrument to increase the autonomy of schools, an instrument to cost control, an instrument to scaling, cooperation between school-boards and to increase efficiency (Verhoeff, 1990, 1992).

This research project concentrates on the changes within three parts of the financial system, which have been pursued since 1985: the ‘Londo-system’ with regard to the material costs of schools, the ‘formatiebudgetsysteem’ for the staffing costs and the decentralisation of the financial means for the retraining of teachers. The general purpose of these changes in the financial system is the enlargement of the scope for policy-making of schools.

Schools as organisations
Several organisation theories can be of use while studying school organisations (Marx, 1991). This research project departs form organisational theories that accentuate the relationship between the organisation and its environment. Besides the open systems approach, which stresses the relevance of the environment for organisations (Katz & Kahn, 1966), insights are applied from the contingency theory, the institutional theory and the theory of the professional bureaucracy. The contingency theory is being used because it explores the relationship between the environment and the organisation with respect to its content. Standard patterns of organisation and administration are not appropriate in the face of all types of environmental demands and needs (Hanson & Brown, 1977; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969; Mintzberg, 1979). Insights from the institutional theory are also relevant for non-profit organisations, like schools, that have an institutional environment (van der Krogt & Vroom, 1995; Selznick, 1948), as well as insights from the theory of the professional bureaucracy, because schools are often compared with this type of organisation (Bergen et al., 1997; Marx, 1984; Mintzberg, 1979, 1983; van Vilsteren, 1984).

When schools are seen as a professional bureaucracy, institutionalised in its environment, it is possible that the schoolleader shields the teachers from the changes, because institutionalised organisations have an interest in self-maintenance. When changes occur in the environment of schools, like the changes in the funding system and the increased autonomy of schools, it is possible that a school adjusts ritually (Hooge, 1998; Selznick, 1948). This
means that only the formal structure of the school, as seen as the bureaucratic part of the organisation, assimilates to the changing demands of the environment, while the professional part of the organisation remains unchanged. The changes in the funding system are being met by the bureaucratic part of the organisation and the teachers in the classroom do not notice the changes.

The organisation of the school
Organisations consist of a structure, a culture, a technology, a qualification and a strategy (Scheerens, 1993; van Wieringen, 1993). As mentioned before, research indicates that the structure and culture of schools can change as a result of alterations in the funding system. Joining these results, this study examines the impact of the enlargement of the scope for policy-making and the expanded policy execution by schools on the organisational structure, culture and quality of schools. And since the environment of schools can influence the changes in the organisational structure and culture, the environment of schools will also be a part of this research.

The description of the structure of schools is concentrated on three characteristics: the (de)centralisation of decision making authority on strategic and operational decisions; the task-division between on the one hand the school boards and schoolleaders and, on the other hand, between schoolleaders and teachers; and the configuration of the school (Keuning & Eppink, 1996; Veen, 1980). Although the management of organisations plays a central role with respect to the internal cohesion and the external adjustment of an organisation, it is not viewed as a separate variable, but is investigated as part of the organisational structure.

The culture of organisations consists of the assumptions a group has and which determine the values and behaviour of the group (Schein, 1984). In this research project organisational culture is oriented on the behaviour of the group, as to say the teachers of the schools, which can be distinguished in the professional behaviour and the autonomy of teachers (van der Krogt & Vroom, 1995; Weiss, 1990).

To define and measure the quality of school-organisations it is necessary to use multiple effectiveness-criteria (Cameron, 1984). Because this research project focuses on changes within school organisations, the competing values model is being followed (Quin & Rohrbaugh, 1983). The competing values model has been translated to the situation of Dutch education as the ABCD-model (Boerman, 1998; Majoor et al., 1996, 1998; van Wieringen 1994, 1995). The environment of schools can, as indicated before, influence the behaviour of school-organisations and the schoolleader. The schoolleader, the strategic apex of the organisation, is a major actor in the adjustment of the organisation to the environment (Keuning & Eppink, 1996). Relevant elements of the macro environment of organisations are the administrative, economic, sociocultural, technological, international, demographic and climatological situation (Keuning & Eppink, 1996; van der Krogt & Vroom, 1995). The introduction of school-based management is part of the administrative situation of
schools (Hooge, 1998). Beside this element of the administrative environment, as part of the macro environment of schools, some elements of the microenvironment of schools are relevant for this research project. These external contingencies possibly increase the complexity of the school environment, namely the relationship with the own school board and the size of the school board (Hofman, 1993; van de Venne & van Wieringen, 1995), competition between schools (Teelken, 1998) and the social environment of the schools (Vernooy, 1984).

3. Research design

This study attempts to give an answer to the question which school-organisational changes occur as a result of the increased scope for policy-making of primary schools. The key question is crystallised into several questions, namely: in which fields and to which extent the policy execution by primary schools increased; whether the expanded policy execution by schools results into changes with respect to the organisational structure, culture and quality of schools; and which elements of the environment of the school influence the relationship between the expanded policy execution and the organisational changes.

This research approached these questions in three stages. The first stage involved a review of the research and theories, relevant for the variables central to this study. These are the development of school-based management and the increased policy execution by primary schools, the organisation of the school (the organisation structure, culture and quality, as well as the nearby environment of the school) and organisational change.

Secondly a questionnaire survey of 231 primary schools has been carried out, based on a random sample. The purpose of the survey was to examine the degree to which the phenomena occur, namely the policy execution and the changes within the organisational structure and culture of primary schools, as well as to examine the relationship between these phenomena. Several reliable and homogenous scales have been developed for the purpose of the survey. These scales are largely based, or otherwise comparable, with scales used and constructed by other researchers. The ABCD-criteria, with regard to the measurement of organisational quality, are comparable with the scales developed by Boerma (1998), the scales used to examine the organisational structure are comparable with Hooge (1998) and the scales to measure organisational culture are based on Hofstede et al. (1993). Finally, the scales to examine the policy execution by schools concur with the several changes in the funding system that led to the expanded scope for policy-making of primary schools.

The third stage in this research project involves a comparative case-study of six schools, given the difficulties to isolate the consequences of the changing funding system from other policy measures like scaling and mergers between
schools (Karsten et al., 1997; Polder, 1996). A case-study research is an appropriate research method when it is difficult to isolate the phenomena from its environment (Hutjes & van Buuren, 1992). The purpose of the six case studies within this study was to complete and interpret the results of the survey (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

4. Empirical findings

Policy execution

The data of the survey show that schools utilise their scope for policy making to a small degree. The policy execution of schools is relatively low, especially with respect to the field of staffing policy. The case-study schools, which are characterised by a relatively high level of policy execution, point out that the scope for policy-making and the policy execution of the school increased, however, they already pursued their own policy before the changes in the funding system and the increased autonomy.

Changes in the organisational structure

With respect to organisation change, changes in the structure of schools occur more often than changes within the organisational culture. Changes in the organisational structure that most frequently appear are a more jointly strategic decision-making by the school-board and the schoolleader and a changing division of tasks between on the one hand the school-board and schoolleader and on the other hand the schoolleader and the teachers. In both cases an increasing task-specialisation of the decentral actor occurs.

The policy execution of schools effects the changes in the division of tasks, both between the school-board and the schoolleader and between the schoolleader and the teachers, as well as the changes in the operational decision-making.

The data of the case studies point out that schools perceive the changes in the funding system and the expanded autonomy as an extension of their responsibilities and working pressure, which forces them to alter the allocation of tasks. The division of tasks partly shifts to the organisational level above the school, through the collaboration between schools, the introduction of a management-team above several individual school organisations or the enlargement of school boards. This development leads to changes with regard to the strategic decision-making, which, from the perspective of the individual schools, becomes more centralist.

Following naturally from the introduction of a management-team above the school, the task-division within schools changes, as well as the operational decision-making. When the schoolleader of a school becomes a part of the management-team above the school organisation, the task-division within the school expands and the operational decision-making takes place at a more decontrol level.
Changes in the organisational culture
The organisational culture of schools changes most often with regard to an enlargement of the professional behaviour of teachers. A decrease in the autonomy of teachers less often occurs. The policy execution of schools hardly effects the changes in the organisational culture, in contrast to the changes in the organisational structure, which influence the changes of the professional behaviour and the autonomy of teachers. If for example the task-division within schools expands, the autonomy of individual teachers decreases.

The external environment of schools
The external environment of schools can effect the changes within the organisational culture and structure. For example, schools that experience competition from other schools can be characterised by a further task-division between the school board and schoolleader. The social composition of the schools' neighbourhood effects the enlargement of the professional behaviour of teachers, as well as the decrease of their individual autonomy. The case-studies point out that characteristics of the school-organisation and the external environment of the schools strengthen the relation between the policy execution by schools and the changes within the organisational structure and culture. For instance, changes within the operational decision-making and the task-division between the schoolleader and teachers occur partly as a result of the changes in the funding system and the enhanced policy execution by the school. They also occur because the schoolleader of the school becomes a part of the management-team above the school organisation, because the school becomes bigger or because a different schoolleader is appointed, more interested in financial and staffing policies. Besides, the external environment can be a stimulus to introduce a new management-team at a higher hierarchical level, above the individual school organisation, with a more central strategic decision-making and a task-division that shifts to the organisational level above the school. The schools that introduced a management-team above the school can be characterised by a school board with insufficient expertise and capacities.

5. Conclusions

Previous research pointed out that schools differ with respect to the extent of policy execution (Hooge, 1998; Sleegers, 1991). The results of this research confirm these finding. The data of the survey and case-studies point out that schools perceive the changes in the funding system and the increased autonomy as an extension of their responsibilities and working pressure, which forces them to alter the allocation of tasks. This has also been noted in the literature (Ax, 1993a; Ber-
When the realisation of tasks is allocated to a management-team above the school, the task-division within schools changes, as well as the operational decision-making. When the schoolleader of a school becomes a part of the management-team above the individual school organisation, the task-division within the school expands and the operational decision-making takes place at a more decontrol level.

An enlargement of the task-execution by teachers relates to a decrease of their individual autonomy. This development enlarges the responsibility of teachers for the entire school and extends their professionality (Hoyle, 1989; Sleeegers et al., 1992).

Characteristics of the school-organisation and the external environment of the school strengthen the relation between the policy execution by schools and the changes in the organisational culture and structure. Besides, characteristics of the external environment can be a stimulus to organisational-change. These research findings support the findings of the review Leithwood & Menzies (1998) gave. They emphasised the relevance of the context in which school-based management is introduced, a conclusion confirmed by the contingency theory, which states that internal and external contingencies influence the organisation (Hanson & Brown, 1977; Marx, 1984; Pröpper, 1993).

When the external environment of schools becomes more turbulent, the internal structure of school-organisations changes.

The organisational structure of schools becomes more complex as a result of the growing task-execution at the organisational level above the school and the changes within the decision-making authority. When a management-team above the single school organisation is introduced, a part of the strategic decision-making is centralised to this new organisational level. At the same time, a part of the operational decision-making and task-division within schools is decentralised to the teachers.

The introduction of this new organisational level can enlarge the division between the educational and administrative domain within schools. The new organisational level responds to the changes in the funding system, while the teachers have hardly any idea about these changes and the policy execution by the school. These findings are supported by other research on school-based management (Levacic, 1995; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Scheerens, 1995). The formal structure of schools (the bureaucratic part) adjusts to the changing demands of the environment, but the professional part of the schools, the teachers, are screened from these developments. The leading structure of the organisation incorporates elements from the (institutional) environment, while the operating core does not notice the developments (Mintzberg, 1979; Selznick, 1948). Because of these ritual adjustments, the teaching-learning process will not be disturbed.