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STEERING DYNAMICS AND TEACHERS DAILY PRACTICE:  
STEERING OVERLOAD IN DUTCH SECONDARY SCHOOL BOARDS

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## ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** steering, steering dynamics, steering overload, governmentality, teachers

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Education systems in almost all OECD countries have become more complex as a result of greater school autonomy, more parental choice, and the introduction of more and new actors into the education system (Burns & Köster, 2016). Not only are more actors involved in educational decision-making, but these actors are also affecting each other across multiple levels (e.g. state, district, school) and multiple centres (e.g. government, agencies, councils, boards). This is leading to complex steering dynamics, as steering by one actor can reinforce, neutralise, oppose, distort or reinforce steering by others. Nevertheless, governments are still being held accountable for providing high-quality education systems that are efficient, equitable and innovative. These trends are very visible in the Netherlands where school boards traditionally enjoy a great deal of *autonomy* and receive public funding as a block grant mainly based on the number of students (OECD, 2016). And where for over a century, school boards are free to choose their pedagogical vision and identity. This has resulted in an educational landscape of publicly funded schools offering a wide variety of pedagogical visions, programs and profiles (Waslander, 2010).

There is thus a need to understand the kinds of steering dynamics that actually arise in complex education systems and the consequences that these dynamics have both for educational practice and for effective government intervention. Although there have been many attempts to conceptualise steering in these decentralised, diverse and therefore complex systems (for example: Politt & Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2010; Pierre & Peters 2005), we believe there is a real need for a more empirical approach. In this study we want to unravel how the interaction between different actors involved in steering activities works out in the daily practice in schools.

In order to conduct empirical research into the steering dynamics in complex education systems, we need a concrete perspective that does not conceive of steering as linear or hierarchical. Foucault's concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1988, 1995; Burchell et al. 1991; Rose, 1999) is particularly suitable in this respect. By 'governmentality', Foucault means all of the techniques that are used by a government to influence people's behaviour (Foucault, 1988). These techniques can be revealed by conducting empirical research into how steering emerges in the relations between actors. This theoretical framework (see also Theisens, Hooge & Waslander, 2016; Hooge, Theisens & Waslander, 2017) forms the backbone of a research program focusing on steering at the national level in the Netherlands, (Hooge, Waslander, Theisens & Drewes, 2017), Dutch steering compared to other countries (Theisens, Hooge & Waslander, 2017), and steering dynamics in secondary school boards (this paper). The study in this paper is based on a multiple embedded case-study, including nine carefully selected school boards and fifteen schools in secondary education. Our main aim was to find out how steering by government works out in the daily practice of schools, particularly for teachers. Over a hundred people were interviewed, including more than fifty teachers. In addition, more than three hundred teachers of the participating schools filled in a web questionnaire. The theoretical framework geared us towards a micro-physics of steering, and enabled us to uncover the subtleties of steering. Meticulous coding of the interview transcripts and carefully conducted analyses, led to systematic comparisons within cases and between cases.

In this paper we first introduce our theoretical framework and methodology. We then describe the policy context in which we employed that methodology. Followed by the results of using the methodology for those policies. Finally, we draw our conclusions and interpret the results.

## **2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS**

### **Theoretical framework**

In order to trace steering within educational systems and school boards, we defined our research questions with the aid of three concepts that have already proven their value in research and studies undertaken from the governmentality perspective: the concepts of 1)

thinkable, 2) practicable, and 3) calculable (Edwards, 2002; Rose et al., 2006; Gillies, 2008; Suspitsyna, 2010).

### *Thinkable*

Reflecting on *what* needs to be steered presupposes a language with which we can speak about a phenomenon and the ultimate intention of the steering ('outcomes'), including terms to designate the steering objectives. A notion such as 'raising standards', for example, presupposes that we have a language for thinking about 'educational standards' and terms with which we can describe these standards. At the same time, this language and these terms contain presuppositions about our ability to influence (that is, steer) aspects of educational quality in a goal-oriented way. Steering is therefore paired with terms that give specific meaning to the intention and the objective of the steering, and who is doing the steering (roles).

### *Practicable*

The terminology and technology of steering (see below) may or may not be translated into action. In the process of translation, both the meaning that others give to the terminology and technology (sensegiving) (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991) and the meaning that individuals themselves give to them (sensemaking) (Weick, 1995) are relevant. The actions that are relevant for steering assume different forms for actors at different levels of the system, and often entail the use of steering instruments. These can be formal instruments (such as subsidies and accounting rules) or more subtle and informal forms of steering, such as communication, for example, or the active promotion of 'best practices'.

### *Calculable*

In order to be able to steer, the phenomenon that has to be steered must be made calculable. This means that information is needed in order to map out the nature and magnitude of a problem, to legitimise the need for policy, and to monitor whether the problem is becoming greater or smaller. This information can be objective or subjective, hard or soft. Together, the way in which steering objectives are operationalised, which information is collected by whom, and how information is analysed and represented, form the *technology of steering* (see, e.g., Suspitsyna, 2010). How a steering technology works is not defined in advance, nor is it inherent to the technology itself. Making a quality judgement ('very weak') thus forms part of a steering technology, but the steering effects that result from this can be different (see

also Van Twist et al., 2014). The same technology can be employed at different times for different purposes. Likewise, different actors can interpret and use the same technology differently.

The idea behind the three central concepts comprising the ‘steering trilogy’ is that in order to be able to steer, actors must have: a conception of the policy area, their role and others’ roles (thinkable); translate this in a certain way into their own or others’ actions (practicable); and be able to make the area and progress in relation to it visible (calculable). In this way, we can use the steering trilogy to trace an actor’s steering techniques, because it reveals how the actor makes something thinkable, practicable and calculable. Mapping out the steering trilogy for a single actor reveals the techniques that the actor uses to steer in that area. After the steering trilogy has been mapped out for every actor involved in a particular policy area, the relations between thinking about, making calculable and implementing the steering between these actors can be analysed. At the system-level, all of these steering actors together produce what is referred to in this research as the ‘steering dynamic’: the pattern of relations and interactions between ‘language, terms, role perception, repertoire of action, instruments, information and monitoring and evaluation techniques’. The mutual relations and interactions between the actors can strengthen, transform, neutralise or undermine steering. This produces a specific pattern of interaction; that is, a steering dynamic.

## **Methodology**

Our theoretical frameworks points in the direction of a microphysics of steering, based on fine-grained empirical analyses. An embedded multiple case-study encompassing the relevant actors involved in steering, at all relevant layers, best suits our aims (Yin, 2003, 2009; George & Bennett, 2005). Given the exploratory nature of this research, the selection of cases as well as the selection of units within each case, is geared towards maximum variety.

We studied literacy, numeracy and civics education in the context of the Dutch *secondary education* sector (see Hooge, Waslander, Theisens & Drewes, 2017). This sector caters for roughly one million students, offering employment to the equivalent of circa 60.000 fulltime jobs for teachers. There are about 340 school boards, ranging from boards with only one school educating 600 students, up to boards with more than thirty schools, located in different parts of the country, educating over 60.000 students. In a legal sense there are 638 schools with 1383 locations. From the viewpoint of students, parents and teachers, a *school* is one of

these locations, regardless of administrative details. In this research, when we use the word school, we refer to one specific location. The vast majority of secondary schools can be characterised by a two tier model, with an executive board and a supervisory board. In smaller organisations, the executive board is consisted by one person who is also school principal. In larger organisations, the executive board can be made up of several fulltime employees. All schools have the equivalent of a works council, which in secondary schools represents both teachers and parents. These councils have right of approval or right of advice, depending on the topic of specific policy proposals. Most executive boards work closely with the council. Smaller school boards have one council. Larger school boards work with a layered structure with a decentral council for every school, and one central or common council at the board level.

Our *design* comprises nine school boards and - depending on size - one, two or three schools within each of those boards. The boards and schools were selected on the basis of four criteria: size, school type, location and vision/identity. We made a longlist of possible schools based on the combination of these criteria and asked three experts in the field which combination of boards would best serve our goal of maximum variety. Their advice led to a shortlist of boards, with an alternative for each board in case they were not able or willing to participate in the research. Five boards agreed immediately to participate, for the four other boards a backup was contacted. The noteworthy willingness to participate - two out of three boards were willing to participate in a very demanding field study - testifies that issues about steering are considered highly relevant and are very much alive in educational organisations. The selection of schools within the participating school boards was also made with maximum variety in mind, considering also willingness to participate.

The *final selection* of publicly funded boards and schools can be described as follows. Fieldwork was carried out in two large school boards (more than ten schools), three middle sized boards (between two and five schools) and four small boards (one school). In total, fifteen schools participated in the study: three schools in the largest cities of the Netherlands, six schools in provincial towns and cities and six schools in more rural areas. The Dutch education system distinguishes between six different tracks; participating schools differ in the (combination of) tracks they offer. Five schools offer four tracks in lower vocational education (vmbo), five schools offer six tracks (vmbo/havo/vwo), two schools offered the three highest tracks (highest track vmbo/havo/vwo), while the remaining three schools either

offer only the first or only the second cycle of secondary schooling. Boards - and therefore schools - also differ in identity and pedagogical vision. Five schools are protestant, four are catholic, three schools are public schools and the three remaining schools identify with an outspoken pedagogical vision such as Steiner and Montessori.

For each case, *data collection* consisted of several interviews. At the *board level* interviews were conducted with the chairperson of the executive board, the chairperson of the supervisory board, and the chairperson of the council of teachers and parents. At the *school level*, for each participating school interviews were conducted with people at all relevant layers of leadership for the school. People in leadership positions go by very different names. The terminology we use is as follows: a principal is head of school and responsible for all policy areas of an entire school; a location leader is responsible for part of school, oftentimes a location but sometimes only one large track on a particular location. Depending on the size of the school, schools can have none or up to several location leaders. We use the very general word team manager for people in leadership positions who work directly with teachers. In the vast majority of schools, team managers are former teachers who are currently involved in educational management and leadership of the school for all their working hours. Smaller schools make no distinction between a team manager and a location leader, while large schools may work with several team managers working with several location leaders. As for *teachers*, in all participating schools we aimed at two group interviews with three teachers each. In addition to these face-to-face interviews, all teachers of the participating schools were sent a web questionnaire immediately after the school visit. In schools with low replies, we recalled once.

Given the nature of an embedded case-study, the design rests on participation of all relevant actors. Apart from one team manager who was ill for a long time and another team manager not available at the time of interview, we succeeded to include all the relevant people in each of the case-studies. In total, 116 interviews were held, 54 of which were with teachers. In addition, a total of 320 teachers filled in the web questionnaire in a form usable to us (a number of teachers did not state their school).

The topic lists for the interviews followed our theoretical framework, focusing on the meaning respondents attach to policy issues (thinkable issue), considerations about who is or ought to be involved in the issue (thinkable roles), whether any particular instruments were

used (calculable), and how the policy effected daily practice (practicable). By the nature of their respective roles, interviews with different actors focused more or less on each of these aspects. Interviews with teachers put more emphasis on how policies worked out in daily practice. To tap into the meaning respondents attach to a policy issue, we used a vignette to introduce the policy issue in very general terms, so as to avoid as much as possible particular words or meanings ourselves. Interviewees were then asked with a very open ended question, what their thinking was about the issue.

The interviews were conducted between September 2015 and May 2016. During the school year, the policies with regard to the numeracy test were modified (see section 3). Interviews for one case were conducted before this modification. In all other cases we talked about what schools had done at the beginning of the school year (in retrospect) and what had changed since the policy was modified. Interviews with chairpersons of supervisory boards and councils were mainly conducted by phone and lasted between 30” and 45””; all other interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 75” and 90””. All interviews were audiotaped and full transcriptions were made.

### *Coding*

During data-collection, it became very clear that the policy aim of ‘raising standards’ represent two very distinct policies from the viewpoint of schools (see section 4). Therefore, numeracy and literacy were treated as separate issues during coding and all subsequent analyses. Transcriptions of the interviews were coded in a number of steps, using MaxQDA. For the open ended questions tapping into the ‘thinkable’ aspects of the policies, we developed a provision coding list and used in vivo coding during the first cycle (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). An inductively derived coding scheme was developed for each of the policy issues. This resulted in 84 codes for raising standards - distinguishing between general remarks and remarks about numeracy and literacy specifically - and 54 codes for civic education. For other aspects of our theoretical framework, a provisional descriptive coding scheme was used containing 31 codes for each of the policy issues. In all, first cycle coding resulted in 1444 coded segments for ‘raising standards’ and 797 coded segments for civic education. Reflecting the number of teachers that were interviewed, a substantial part of the coded segments refers to the practicable aspect (520 for raising standards and 433 for civic education).

### *Data analyses*

Subsequent data reduction steps, using the summaries feature of MaxQDA, resulted in case descriptions based on detailed empirical analyses. First, summaries were made for each group of codes, for each policy issue and for each (group of) respondent(s) separately.

Subsequently, these summaries were in turn summarised for each aspect of the theoretical framework. This procedure was continued until we derived at a summary for each policy issue at the school level for each of the participating schools and at the board level for each of the participating boards. Given our design of an embedded multiple case-study, we then conducted within-case analyses for each of the schools within the same board. This was followed by a between case analyses for each of the policy issues separately. During the final analyses, comparisons were made between the different policy issues (see also George & Bennett, 2005).

### *Member check*

Based on our initial analyses, a day-long meeting with case-study participants was organised in September 2016. During this member-check with board members, principals, team managers and teachers, initial research findings were presented and upcoming themes were discussed. Participants validated our first interpretations, mutual discussions further deepened our understanding.

## **3 POLICY CONTEXT<sup>2</sup>**

In 2010, a law passed parliament introducing learning standards for literacy and numeracy. Students must meet well-defined minimum levels of proficiency at different points in their education careers. One of these points is the end of primary school, before they enter secondary school. The next point is the end of secondary school, where students must meet proficiency levels to pass their exams. Minimum levels differ by educational track. The policy to raise standards was implemented in phases. To support implementation, school boards received additional funding as part of their block funding. The only requirement was that they need to state in the yearly financial accounts, how they spend the money and in what way that contributed to raising standards.

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<sup>2</sup> For information about the choice of policies, the background of these policies, ways of steering and actors involved in steering at the national level, we refer to Hooge et al. 2017.

To make policy matters a bit more complicated, implementation differs between literacy and numeracy, and specific requirements differ by track and school year.

### *Literacy*

Proficiency levels for literacy were translated into examination guidelines for Dutch language and then incorporated in the standardised national exams for Dutch language. Students in the lower tracks (vmbo) must pass their exam; their grade cannot be compensated by higher grades in other subjects. Students in the higher tracks of havo and vwo preferably also pass their national exam. If these students do not pass the exam for Dutch language, but do score higher than 50%, there is another option. If such students pass the required exams for mathematics and English language, and their grades for these latter subjects can compensate their grade for their Dutch examination, they pass the national exams and still get their diploma.

### *Numeracy*

Proficiency levels for numeracy led to a special test. Students with severe problems can be eligible for an exemption. From 2013 onwards, all secondary students are obliged to take the test. During the first phase of implementation, marks on the numeracy test were stated on the diploma but had no consequences for passing final examinations. Initially, the final implementation phase was scheduled to take effect in the school year of 2015-2016. This final phase entails that all students need to pass the test. Regardless of the track they take, student who fail to pass the test but have at least 50%, are offered an alternative. If these students pass their national exams for Dutch language, mathematics and English language, and their grades on these three subjects can compensate their grade for the numeracy test, they still pass the national exams and get their diploma. In all other cases, failing to pass the numeracy test results in failing to pass the national examinations.

The numeracy test is high stakes, for both students and schools. For students the test results determine whether they pass their exams. For schools, the number of students who pass or fail the numeracy test is part of the accountability framework used by the Inspectorate.

Ever since the initial stages of the policy, the special numeracy test came under scrutiny. In the early fall of 2015, weeks after the new school year started, a new round of disappointing test results in pilot studies was published. This ignited, once more, public outcry and

parliamentary debates. As a consequence, the policy was reversed in the middle of the school year. The final phase of implementation was postponed, except for students in the highest track (vwo). Students in the highest track now need to meet the proficiency levels for numeracy in order to get their diploma, while students in all other tracks need to take the test without any consequence for passing or failing their national examinations. Other specifics of the policy also differ by year and track. It suffices to state here that lack of clarity, complexity and ever changing regulations contributed to a major backlash in schools.

### *Civic education*

The constitutional freedom of education has made government involvement in civics education a very contentious issue for a long time. In the wake of rising tensions in an increasingly diverse society and dramatic events including politically motivated assaults, the government has taken on a more active steering role in civic education in recent years. Since 2013, the law requires schools to stimulate active citizenship and social integration. This obligation is specified in a number of so-called core objectives. These objectives apply only for the first cycle of secondary school. Core objectives are formulated in very general terms, such as “the student learns about similarities, differences and changes in culture and world views in the Netherlands, learns to relate these to the way of life of themselves and others, and learns what respecting each others opinions and ways of life means for society as a whole.” (objective nr 43) It is up to schools how they translate these objectives into (extra-) curricular goals and activities, in accordance with the vision and identity of the school. The inspectorate evaluates whether schools have and work with a coherent vision, and how the school evaluates the realisation of its own vision, which may or may not include any kind of student assessment. The inspectorate does not give any judgment about the specific content, as long as schools abide by the law such as non-discrimination regulations. So, very different from literacy and numeracy, schools are granted a very substantial amount of autonomy in the area of civic education. It is up to schools which goals, issues or values they want to emphasise, how they want to go about civic education and also what any kind of assessment in this area might look like.

Apart from the core objectives and the role of the Inspectorate, one other policy measure is relevant for civic education. The Council for Secondary Education, representing all school boards, makes agreements with the Ministry of Education. The Council and the Ministry agreed to introduce a so-called ‘*plus-document*’ from the school year 2015-2016 onwards.

The document is an appendix to the diploma, and is to show what students have accomplished and what special qualities they might have in addition to the subjects and grades that are part of their final examinations. With the plus document, schools wish to acknowledge and in some way reward that secondary school is more than sitting exams and getting grades. It is up to schools which competencies or qualities they wish to acknowledge, and how they choose to go about it.

#### **4 MAIN FINDINGS<sup>3</sup>**

Literacy, numeracy and civics education are topics that teachers find important. In the teacher questionnaire, we asked: Do you think, regardless of government policy, there should be minimum standards for literacy and numeracy? The vast majority of teachers (84%) answered yes, while an additional 7% wasn't sure. In similar numbers (83%), teachers spend time on improving literacy and numeracy in their lessons. There are no differences between teachers of different subjects, track, or any characteristic of school boards. These numbers indicate that the aim of the government policy receives solid support from teachers. When we asked teachers: do you consider civics education important for your students? Nearly all teachers indicated they did. Furthermore, almost all teachers (93%) also reported that they pay attention to civics education in their lessons. Merely a few teachers indicate that what they consider as civics education, is no task for the school but the responsibility of parents. With such high numbers, there are no differences between teachers of different subjects or tracks, nor for characteristics of school boards.

The interesting issues not so much refer to the policies *in general*, but in the way in which policy issues are converted into steering. In terms of our framework, how these issues are made thinkable, calculable and practicable.

#### **4.1 Literacy**

##### *Thinkable issue*

The importance of literacy is undisputed. In fact, teachers consider improving literacy skills even more important than improving numeracy skills. Unlike numeracy, all teachers have to

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<sup>3</sup> A thick description of our findings, interpretations and conclusions can be found in our research report (Waslander & Pater, 2017). In this paper we can only summarise the main findings.

do with literacy, regardless of the specific subject they teach. Teachers raise concerns, based on their experiences that students do not understand the questions on tests. Not only on school tests, but also on standardised examinations. A number of schools has come to the conclusion that, even if students know the answer, they lack the skills to formulate their answers in such a way as to score points. The policy aim to improve proficiency in literacy is therefore welcomed.

#### *Thinkable roles*

As outlined above, the new literacy standards were incorporated in the national exams. In schools, it goes without saying that preparing students for these modified exams falls on Dutch language teachers. In none of the case studies did we notice any considerations or discussions on roles.

#### *Calculable*

Schools did not introduce any specific or separate instruments to enhance literacy skills in students, other than modified teaching methods. Via the incorporation of the new standards in such methods, standards effected daily teaching practice.

#### *Practicable*

The new standards proved particularly challenging for students in lower tracks. Most schools therefore introduced additional lessons in Dutch language for these students. For students in higher tracks no lessons were added to the school timetables. The extra lessons for lower track students were nowhere disruptive for daily practice: the lessons were taught by Dutch language teachers, were given on a class basis, and simply extended the familiar school timetable. Some schools found the resources for these additional lessons within their own budgets, other schools used the subsidies they received to implement the ‘raising standards’ policies.

#### *Steering dynamics: steering by incorporation*

The incorporation of new literacy standards in the existing instrument of national examinations, made it relatively easy for schools to implement the policy. The policy aims were widely supported, it build on existing role division in schools so that it was evident who was to do what, and additional lessons for students in lower tracks could fairly easily be

incorporated in daily practice. At the same time however, schools had no other options than to comply with the policy. Steering by the government was both subtle and inevitable.

## 4.2 Numeracy

### *Thinkable issue*

Teachers, team managers, location directors, principals and board members, they all agree on the vital importance of numeracy. Interviewees consider numeracy a basic skill that is not only essential to students to advance their educational career, but also to participate in modern society. Practical skills, such as dealing with money, particularly come to the fore. Despite emphasising the importance of numeracy, many respondents voice severe criticism about the policy to enhance such skills. The criticism concerns a wide range of policy features, such as: the separate test for numeracy; the weight grades on the test are given for passing the final exams; the nature of the test itself, considered to be too wordy; and the disadvantage for particular groups of students as a result of all students needing to pass the test. The most heavily criticised features however are the lack of clarity and ever changing nature of the policy measures, often referred to as a prime example of ‘wandering policy’. Content analyses of interview segments show that in talking about numeracy, the standardised test has become synonymous with numeracy skills. Improving skills has become equivalent to passing the test.

### *Thinkable roles*

On the whole, numeracy is not considered to be part of the school subject of mathematics. In some schools, this issue is highly disputed by math teachers. In one track in one school preparation for the numeracy test was integrated in already existing school subjects – economics, and management and organisation. In all other instances, a new school subject ‘numeracy’ was called into being to prepare students for the test. Many schools hired new teachers for this new subject. With the new school subject and new teachers, also came new coordinators and new working groups specifically dedicated to numeracy. In all schools existing actors - such as mentors - were assigned new roles and new actors took up new roles. People in various leadership positions gave a number of reasons for the special status and special treatment of numeracy. One recurring reason was the high stakes nature of the test. Not passing the test would have great consequences, both for the student as well as for the school. Another reason was that people in leadership positions tried to design school policies

that would avoid putting the burden on teachers. By appointing special numeracy teachers and special numeracy coordinators and by adding special numeracy lessons on the school timetable, they tried to keep disturbance of daily teaching practice to a minimum.

The special treatment for numeracy, was accompanied by centralising tendencies at the school level and occasionally also the board level. The case studies showed several examples of chairpersons of executive boards who became deeply involved in school policies around numeracy testing, which is very unusual. Similarly, the case studies indicate that supervisory boards discuss test results, not just at a grade level, but at the level of particular classes and teachers. No other school subject was ever discussed in that way.

### *Calculable*

The numeracy test is a national standardised test all students must take. The size of the market and the nature of the test made it worthwhile for publishers of teaching methods to invest in digital learning material. All secondary schools use these digital methods. These methods generate all kinds of information. Not only do they provide information on which student has difficulty with what kind of questions, information is also given on whether students logged in, how many times they worked on it and for how long. In a number of schools, student counselors or mentors were given a task in monitoring whether and how students did prepare for the test. They must check, for example, whether their students actually do log into the system and make progress. These counselors and mentors use the same digital learning system as students do, and the system also generates information on them. This allows coordinators and principals to monitor the digital behaviour of teachers and mentors. So, while teachers monitor students, coordinators and principals monitor teachers.

### *Practicable*

The digital teaching methods schools bought into, also allowed for differentiation in teaching. Combined with a focus on having students pass the test, this led to differentiated practices. A first distinction schools made, was between students in lower and higher tracks. Students in lower tracks were obliged to take numeracy lessons, which were scheduled for whole classes on the timetable. For students in higher tracks, the approach relied more heavily on self study. Two arguments were used for this distinctive approach: students in lower tracks were thought to have more difficulty with self study; and in lower tracks almost all students were found to lack numeracy skills, calling for a class based approach. Secondly, students in higher tracks

were not treated as a group, but on an individual basis. Students who showed up during monitoring as being ‘on track’ to pass the final test, were assumed to study by themselves. When monitoring showed lack of work or lack of progress, students had to take special numeracy lessons. Schools main argument was that resources were invested most efficiently in this way.

*Steering dynamics: steering through instruments*

The numeracy test plays a pivotal role in the policy aim to improve numeracy skills. For the thinkable aspect, passing the test became synonymous to improving skills. New actors emerged and new roles were assigned. The high stakes nature of the test sparked an unprecedented involvement of executive - and even supervisory board members. The standardised and compulsory test came with differentiated practices in schools, to ensure that as many students as possible would pass the test. Digital methods urged such practices, while also allowing for close monitoring of students as well as teachers. The steering dynamics in schools are a prime Foucauldian example of steering through instruments.

### **4.3. Civic education**

*Thinkable issue*

Our interviewees associate civic education first and foremost with personal development of students. The common view is that civic education is about getting to know who you are, what your qualities and strengths are, who you want to become as a person and what you want to do in live. Underneath this common view lie more subtle differences however. These differences appear to be systematically related to the identity and pedagogical vision of the school board. In the two public school boards, respondents stress the importance of knowledge about the law and how a democracy works; in protestant and catholic boards the emphasis is put on students becoming active citizens who fulfill their duties; and in boards identifying with Steiner and Montessori personal development of students is stressed even more than in other schools. Within boards, meanings associated with civic education also differ between schools. These differences appear to be related to the tracks the school offers. In short: in lower tracks knowledge and current events are accentuated; in higher tracks personal development is found more important.

### *Thinkable roles*

In conjunction with the meaning interviewees attach to it, civic education is considered to be very much part of shared values, ethos and vision in the school. Many respondents underscore that civic education is deeply ingrained in the identity of the school and the social fabric of the school community. As such, everybody is involved in civic education: it's everybody's core business. Teachers consider themselves, and are considered by others, to have a key part in their capacity as role models for students.

### *Calculable*

To schools, civic education is like stating the obvious. As it is thought to go without saying, goals for civic education are seldom made explicit. One board left such goals deliberately and intentionally implicit. In the eyes of the chairperson of this board, explicating goals for civic education will reduce it's meaning and harm rather than help achieving them. In most cases the absence of instruments, including assessments, is an unintentional consequence of the meaning interviewees attach to civic education. Following the introduction of the 'plus-document' (see above), a number of schools started to think about developing and introducing some kind of assessment for students, such as a portfolio. In that manner they want to acknowledge personal qualities in students, and show that schools are much more than institutions where students get grades and pass exams.

### *Practicable*

Because civics education is seen as an obvious task for schools and as deeply embedded in the school itself, the practice of civic education is not limited to a single program or a specific activity. Quiet the reverse. Teachers consider a wide range of programs, projects, initiatives and also day-to-day behaviour with students all to be part of civics education. By role modeling who they are and what they find important, teachers instill values and norms in students. Civics education is all-embracing and very much an embedded practice.

### *Steering dynamics: steering through values*

In the case of civic education, the analyses reveal rather subtle ways of steering. All people in schools - from board members to teachers - attempt to steer by being a role model and act as embodiment of shared values. They also steer by devoting their attention to certain and not other topics, and by the way in which they talk about such topics. Steering is above all interactional: it occurs in live and personal interactions between people.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATION

Foucault's governmentality concept proved a very fruitful starting point in developing a theoretical framework that allows us to do what has been long overdue. That is, to study empirically how steering in complex multi-layered education systems actually works out practice.

From the perspective of schools and teachers, the policy aims of raising standards and civic education represent three different issues. At the national level, the government applies different ways of steering and different actors are involved in each steering network (see Hooge et al. 2017). The three policy aims also grant schools different degrees of autonomy in their response. The specific policies with regard to numeracy, literacy and civic education we studied here, form just a fraction of all governmental policies and regulations that are relevant to schools and teachers. The many demands made on schools came up in almost every interview. Teachers, but also team managers, location directors, school principals and board members, perceive governmental policies as a constant stream of regulations, often pulling in different directions, with as common denominator that schools are allowed insufficient time for proper implementation.

To interpret what these results mean at the level of schools and explain the reactions of schools, the theoretical notion of organization routines is helpful (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011; Tubin, 2015). A routine is a fairly stable pattern of behaviour involving different actors in an organisation. Organisation routines coordinate the daily activities of different workers and may cut through all layers and all departments and units of an organisation. The planning and control cycle is an example, with an annual budget at the board level, budgets at school- or unit-level, monthly or quarterly monitoring and an annual report. In schools, the timetable is an important routine, as it coordinates who is where, when, to do what, with whom (Spillane, Parise & Sherer, 2011).

Steering in organisations can be seen as ways in which organisations try to affect their routines. If existing routines do not change, daily operations will remain the same and steering does not come into effect. And the other way around: steering only comes into effect when organisation routines are affected. Changing organisation routines has proven to be very difficult and requires substantial amounts of organisational capacity (Feldman &

Pentland, 2013; Spillane, Parise & Sherer, 2011). Organisational capacity is a broad concept and includes not only financial resources and personnel, but also devoted time and attention (Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011). Organisations can adapt existing routines, but also develop entirely new routines. Such new routines can only survive when they are coherent with other features of the organisation (Spillane, Parise & Sherer, 2011; Tubin, 2015). So, any governmental policy can only take effect in schools through organisation routines. An emerging steering pattern can be seen as a strategy to affect organisation routines (see also Greenwood et al., 2011). Considering steering patterns as strategies to affect organisational routines, also allows us to compare steering patterns for different policy issues.

In the case studies we identified emerging steering patterns for each of the three policy issues numeracy, literacy and civic education. In an additional step of the analyses, we looked at these emerging steering patterns from the perspective of strategies to affect organisation routines. There appeared to be four main strategies. A first strategy is what we call the *default option*. This means that no attempt is made to change anything: organisation routines are deliberately left for what they are. A second strategy is to *incorporate* a new policy into an existing routine, without actually changing the routine itself. A third strategy is to *adapt an existing routine*, in which case the routine itself does change. The fourth strategy is to develop a whole *new routine*. Which strategy is adopted, is related to the degree of autonomy boards and schools are granted in implementation. These findings make perfect sense from the viewpoint of organisational capacity.

The four main strategies demand very different amounts of organisational capacity. While the default option requires hardly any organisational capacity, developing a new routine demands a great deal of organisational capacity. As might be expected, board members and people in leadership positions, clearly prefer strategies demanding the least of amount of organisational capacity. This is exactly what we have seen. Schools have great autonomy concerning *civic education*. For this policy area, schools either choose the default option or incorporation of civic education in existing routines. To enhance *literacy* skills, it was the government itself who incorporated the new standards into the national exams for Dutch language. This made it relatively easy and at the same time inevitable for schools to implement the policy. Straightforward incorporation was not deemed sufficient for students in lower tracks. In those cases, schools increased the number of hours for Dutch language on the timetable. By doing so, existing routines hardly changed: roles did not change as everybody considered literacy to

be the responsibility of Dutch language teachers; the content of the examination changed, but the whole process of preparing students for examinations was left unaltered; teaching methods changed in accordance to the new content, but no other instruments were introduced; and although additional lessons were introduced, the phenomena of a school timetable - the routine itself - was reinforced rather than transformed. To improve *numeracy* skills of students, the government introduced a separate high stakes test. As a consequence, the default option was no longer an available strategy for schools. Several school principals and board members revealed in interviews that they first considered to incorporate the test in existing school subjects, such as mathematics or economics. Only one of the fifteen participating schools was successful in adopting this strategy. Other schools who considered this strategy did not follow through, either because school leaders did not want to put more burden on (mathematics) teachers, or because there was a backlash from teachers who felt that enhancing numeracy skills was not part of their responsibility and/or who saw no possibilities to incorporate numeracy into their teaching and preparation of students for their exams. Trying to avoid the disturbance of daily teaching routines, existing routines were bypassed by setting up a new routine. The additional funding schools received to implement the test, helped schools to make this choice and invest the demanded organisational capacity for this strategy. In all boards the new routine for numeracy involved new actors, new roles for existing actors, new tasks and new ways of working. As described in section 4, the standardised test and the introduction of digital learning methods were key to these new routines.

When collating the strategies at the level of boards and schools, we see that boards and schools adopt at least two, but most often three, different strategies for the three policies. For example: a school may simultaneously incorporate civic education in an existing routine, adapt a routine to enhance literacy skills and develop a new routine to improve numeracy skills. With the exception of the default option, any such strategy in itself requires substantial organisational capacity. Although seldom studied, it is not a far-fetched assumption that adopting different strategies with different impacts on organisational routines simultaneously, is even more strenuous. The inevitable consequence is that people in schools experience *steering overload*. This applies particularly to teachers, who's daily work is involved in each and every routine and each and every strategy to effect a routine.

So, as we consider steering within boards as strategies aimed at organisational routines, it makes sense for school boards to prefer strategies that require the least amount of resources and the least amount of disruption of daily practices. In the Dutch case, different government policies allow for some, but not other strategies within schools. It is the combination of policies, requiring different strategies at the same time, that gives rise to steering overload. Just for the three policy issues we studied alone, we saw the simultaneous adoption of different strategies to adapt, change or develop new routines. It is well known that adapting -, changing - and even more so developing new routines, puts strains on organisations. Doing so simultaneously puts organisations under even more stress.

All things considered, steering in the Dutch multi-layered polycentric education system reveals two sides of the same coin. While steering through and with networks provides the central government with high levels of agility and flexibility (Hooge, Waslander & Theisens, 2017), those exact features may result in steering overload within school boards.

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