The Netherlands: system-wide priorities in a decentralised education landscape

Lessons Learned

The Hague, 29 – 30 January 2018
Introduction

Educations systems have become more complex in the last two decades due to a number of developments. Since it became ever more clear that a high level of education is beneficial both for individuals as for the society as a whole, stakeholders have become more outspoken and a greater number of stakeholders wants to be involved in education decision making, at all levels of the education system. The growing intensity of stakeholder involvement was facilitated by the increasing amount and the expanding availability of information about education. One of the most important responses to growing complexity in many countries has been decentralisation, the devolvement and sharing of responsibilities with authorities at other levels, such as municipalities, local authorities and school boards. This decentralisation turned governance into a multi-level endeavour and changed the relationships between governance levels, from a mostly hierarchical relationship to one characterised by shared responsibility, interdependence and self-regulation (Burns and Köster, 2016[1]). In some countries, like The Netherlands, recent waves of decentralisation are part of a long tradition of divided responsibilities between different actors. These systems combine a high degree of autonomy of schools with the central government’s overall responsibility for good quality education. Confronted with rising expectations of education policy at the central level the following question becomes more pressing for central governments:

How to promote national or system-wide goals in a decentralised system, with highly autonomous schools or sub-central authorities, and the central government lacking the necessary responsibilities to pursue those goals?

This question was at the core of the first Strategic Education Governance (SEG) Learning Seminar that took place in The Netherlands on 29-30 January 2018. The SEG Learning Seminars are small scale gatherings of countries specifically designed as an engaging learning environment. The aim is not only to apply OECD-insights on strategic education governance to specific policy challenges (Box 2) but also first and foremost to uncover and exchange practical knowledge about the implementation of policies. In that sense the learning seminars are aimed at generating ‘new’ knowledge of the actual ‘how to’ of policy implementation. In the Dutch learning seminar, representatives of five education systems participated, besides The Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Flanders and Scotland. Most of the participants were senior officials from education ministries. This summary report is mostly based on their insights. Learning from cases – telling stories about what happened in concrete policy initiatives followed by a reflection on lessons learned – is at the heart of a learning seminar. All participants shared openly and reflectively their experiences with policies in their respective systems.

The ‘Dutch case’

The Netherlands provided the main case, or rather an assembly of cases (Box 1), as the basis for discussions in the seminar. These are fully described in the background paper prepared for the SEG Learning Seminar (Frankowski et al., 2018[2]) In international student assessments, The Netherlands belongs to the group of high performers. Since other countries are catching up, successive governments have formulated the ambition to move from ‘good’ to ‘great’. Several initiatives have been undertaken in different education sectors aimed at improving the quality of education and raising outcomes, both in terms of performance and labour market opportunities. Since The Netherlands has one of the most decentralised education systems in the world, with a legally guaranteed highly
autonomous position of school boards and a strong intermediary field, the education ministry has used a variety of governance styles and accompanying instruments to influence schools and teachers. The three different cases illustrate a different combination of governance styles and instruments (Box 1). Taking into account the relative role of government and stakeholders and also whether the main emphasis is on results or on values (pre-conditions), four different governance perspectives were considered during the seminar: public administration, new public management, network governance and societal resilience (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Four governance perspectives: relative roles of government and stakeholders**

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<tr>
<th>Emphasis is on</th>
<th>Perspective: <strong>New Public Management</strong></th>
<th>Perspective: <strong>Network Governance</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>results</strong></td>
<td>Focus: Efficient and effective delivery of output by public organisations</td>
<td>Focus: Collaboration of government organisations and societal actors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Instruments: Performance targets, deregulation, efficiency, contract management, financial control</td>
<td>Instruments: interactions, finding mutually acceptable definitions of the problem, looking for joint solutions</td>
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<th>Emphasis is on</th>
<th>Perspective: <strong>Public Administration</strong></th>
<th>Perspective: <strong>Societal Resilience</strong></th>
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<td><strong>values</strong> (pre-conditions)</td>
<td>Focus: legality, the rule of law, the political process, the separation between a representative political system and the civil service</td>
<td>Focus: the production of public value by self-reliant citizens and a responsive government</td>
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To move forward the ministry needs to balance responsibilities between the central level and the level of schools and school boards. The three illustrative cases showed that the ministry used in each case a different mix of styles and a different balance of responsibilities (Box 1). In terms of flexibility and adaptability this is clearly a strong point, as the ministry proved to be responsive to the context of each policy initiative. The flipside, however, is that it was not always clear what was expected of the different stakeholders nor what the nature of particular instruments was. It also showed some serious pitfalls in all cases, which had predominantly to do with a lack of ownership of schools and their stakeholders, more particularly with the involvement of teachers and in one case also students in the policy initiatives. Without such involvement, policy initiatives might not be sustained over time or even get off the ground at all.
Box 1. Three Dutch cases with different combinations of the four governance perspectives

1. Numeracy and literacy in primary education

In the first decennium of the 20th century the Dutch government prioritised raising the quality of education and of performance in numeracy and literacy. The government introduced standards and the legal obligation for primary schools to use a standardised test at the end of primary education. Performance on numeracy and literacy also became core indicators in the risk assessment of the national inspectorate. Eventually schools could be closed if the performance was insufficient for a certain period of time. In terms of governance perspectives (Figure 1) the policy was dominated by a combination of public administration and new public management, with strong incentives from the national government and a high trust in legal provisions.

2. Making secondary education future proof

The former Dutch government reached an agreement with the Sector Council for Secondary Education on seven broad ambitions, among them ‘challenging every student’, ‘a broad development of all students’, and ‘schools as learning organisations’. These ambitions were elaborated in 67 subthemes, with specific goals, measures and funding. The agreement was shaped as a covenant, that is, more an intention of good will between equal partners than a binding agreement. The approach taken was a combination of network governance and new public management: an agreement on equal footing combined with setting targets, monitoring and reporting about the results.

3. Macro-effectiveness in vocational education

The national government wanted to increase the labour market relevance of vocational education programmes and also organise the offer of programmes across institutions more efficiently. For that reason a law was introduced with the ‘duty of care’ for institutions to offer only courses with sound labour market perspectives and to spend public funding efficiently. A duty of care is an open provision, stipulating the responsibility of the institutions and leaving room for institutions to choose how to fulfil that responsibility. The duty of care is an example of a combination of public administration and societal resilience: a provision in law captures the legal responsibility of institutions, while at the same time leaving room for bottom-up initiatives.


How to improve governance?

The Strategic Education Governance (SEG) project addresses the need to develop flexible and adaptive governance processes that improve the effectiveness and sustainability of reform in today’s complex education systems. It aims to help countries develop smarter governance arrangements, sensitive to context and capable of delivering improvement by
building upon robust knowledge systems, stakeholder cooperation and constructive accountability.

Underlying the project is a framework capturing governance processes that are crucial for dealing with complex systems (Box 2). This framework was also used to organise the reflection at the seminar. It is still work in progress, among other, the results of the learning seminars will feed into its further elaboration.

**Box 2. Strategic Education Governance: analytical framework**

| Accountability | • Enabling local discretion while limiting fragmentation  
|                | • Promoting a culture of learning and improvement |
| Capacity       | • Ensuring capacity for policy-making and implementation  
|                | • Stimulating horizontal capacity building |
| Knowledge governance | • 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 | • Integrating stakeholder knowledge and perspectives  
|                | • Fostering support, shared responsibility, ownership and trust |
| Strategic thinking | • 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 | • Overcoming system inertia  
|                | • Developing synergies within the system and moderating tensions |


Participants at the Learning Seminar used the Strategic Education Governance analytical framework to note their initial observations on the Dutch cases. Based on this analysis, participants drew on the experience and insights from peer countries (Box 3), to discuss how to improve central steering strategies and to develop a smart mix of governance instruments. The elements identified by participants mapped to the Strategic Education Governance framework as follows:

- Whole of system perspective
  - Balancing carefully central direction with local variation to prevent both lack of ownership of national aims by schools, as well as fragmentation and inequality at the school level.
  - Clarity on structures, processes, roles and responsibilities facilitates the involvement of stakeholders and the realisation of polices.
• Strategic thinking
  o There needs to be a compelling vision, connecting to the motivations of the key stakeholders as teachers but also of other stakeholders.

• Stakeholder involvement
  o Stakeholders need to be involved, at all decision making tables, from school level to system level. Stakeholder involvement needs to be genuine.
  o For mutual impact on policy making at the system level and education practice at the school level, direct interactions between policy makers and frontline professionals seem crucial.

• Capacity
  o Capacity is required at all levels of the system. Capacity needs vary, related to the responsibilities, roles and tasks performed at the various levels of the system.

• Knowledge governance
  o A system of feedback and assessment of school performance is needed to create a culture of continuous improvement and to share knowledge about good practices.

These elements will be elaborated subsequently below.

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**Box 3. Country cases**

In addition to the Dutch cases, participating countries were asked to present a case illustrating the key governance dilemma of the seminar.

- Austria: the proposed reform of governance structures;
- Denmark: the introduction of a new curriculum;
- Flanders: the creation of a new quality assurance and inspection framework;
- Scotland: the delivering equity initiative.

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*Beware of the centralisation trap as well as local fragmentation*

It was observed in several cases that to pursue system-wide goals, central governments had centralised responsibilities. Too much direction from the centre could lead to a lack of ownership at the levels of schools and local authorities. Other voices in the room argued for local variation, which might seem a bit paradoxical. Based on their experience they stated that in order to reach system-wide, overarching aims in a system with distributed and shared responsibilities and distributed autonomy, it seems productive to create room for variation and diversity in goal-setting and policies at the local or school level. However, as was also observed at the seminar, too much local variation could lead to the fading of the overarching aims, difficulties in measuring the outcomes of the system as a whole, and most importantly, to unequal opportunities for students. This is where diversity turns into fragmentation.
**Key point:**

₋ Balance local discretion and central direction to promote both local ownership and equity.

**Clarify structures, roles and responsibilities**

A whole-of-system perspective implies clarity of structures, roles and responsibilities. Pertaining to structures it was observed that a proliferation of policy-specific institutions, networks and platforms might obscure a clear view on who is responsible for what. During the seminar, it became clear that all actors involved should be motivated, capable and knowledgeable to take up their responsibilities and roles.

In the case that key actors are not motivated or organised to take up their roles and responsibilities, there may be a temptation for the government to intervene, for example, by falling back on legislation. This tension arises, as the government is accountable for the success of a particular policy. In particular, there may be time pressures to show concrete results. However, the government stepping in might not be very effective, since, as one participant concluded, it can never replace any stakeholder. This was illustrated in a case where the lack of a strong professional teacher organisation had led to a vicious cycle of stricter government interventions and more resistance from teachers, growing mutual distrust, with the result that the professional development and improvement goals were ever harder to reach.

**Key point:**

₋ Governments stepping in the position of stakeholders in governance arrangements, risk a vicious cycle of growing resistance and ineffective policies.

**A compelling vision connects to the motivations of students, teachers, and school leaders**

A crucial part of strategic thinking comprises formulating a vision at the level of the system. However, a system vision in itself is not enough, to have an impact the vision needs to be compelling. ‘Compelling’ means that the vision really connects to the motivations of the stakeholders, particularly the teachers, but also other stakeholders crucial for the realisation of policy aims. If a system vision is collaboratively built and shared across the system, there is a greater chance that it connects to what drives and motivates stakeholders. Several participants observed that in their systems more than once system visions had been developed that did not really connect to teachers.

A first consideration in creating a system vision is whether all stakeholders share the definition of the problems to be solved. The seminar showed clearly that different stakeholders have different perceptions of what exactly the issues are. Without an open exchange about those perceptions the lack of agreement about the issues might result in a lack of support and ownership of the policy solutions proposed by the government.

Further along in the policy process, the way a system vision is implemented also makes a difference. For example, a case where the system vision was elaborated in a handful of general ambitions or principles leaving room for schools to set their own goals and
develop their own plans, which seemed to promote the engagement of the stakeholders with the overarching aims.

Interestingly, compelling could also mean that the politicians in charge of a policy proposal set high stakes, not for schools, but for themselves. In one of the cases the politician who was responsible for a policy initiative, put his political life at stake to emphasise the urgency of the issue he dealt with.

Key points:

- Build a vision at the system level collaboratively with stakeholders, starting with the problem definition.
- A compelling system vision connects to the motivations of the most relevant stakeholders.

Genuine stakeholder involvement takes time and effort

In one of the participating countries a variety of stakeholders was closely involved in the development of a quality assurance framework both for school internal evaluation and for external evaluation by the inspectorate. In the first phase of the development process a great number of stakeholders was consulted about their conception of quality. In the second phase the framework was actually developed as a co-creation of the key stakeholders and the inspectorate. Remarkably, the minister agreed to accept the outcomes of the co-creation process, both a sign of trust in the stakeholders as well as courage to take a risk in the political arena. This is an example of stakeholder involvement taken a step further, to the actual co-production of policy, in this case not even with the policymakers in the lead, but in a position of being responsive to the outcomes of stakeholder initiatives.

Not every case requires such intense stakeholder engagement. However, stakeholder involvement needs to be genuine to really engage stakeholders and create trust and ownership. Country experiences show that genuine stakeholder involvement is not a box ticking exercise. On the contrary, it is a hard process, taking time and energy, and it is never finished. A variety of mechanisms is needed to reach a broad range of different stakeholder groups.

Given that not all teachers, school leaders and parents can actually be involved in central level policy making, the perceived legitimacy of those who are is crucial. The stakeholders who are actually sitting at the decision-making tables must be perceived by the stakeholders to be truly representative of the stakeholder group as a whole and have the authority to have an impact outside of the decision rooms. This was not obvious in all cases discussed during the seminar. One of the suggestions was to capitalise on the energy already present in the field, by inviting broadly supported grassroots initiatives to the table.

Key points:

- Genuine stakeholder involvement is not a box ticking exercise but is an on-going and time-consuming process.
- Stakeholder representatives who are involved in the decision making process need to be perceived as legitimate representatives by the stakeholder group.
Involving stakeholders can benefit from the energy of existing grassroots initiatives.

The power of proximity

Several systems benefited from having direct relationships between the ministry's civil servants and the school leaders and teachers. In fact, one of the participants mentioned these face-to-face interactions as a success factor in reform. The interactions created trust, mutual understanding and reciprocally deepened insights in the dilemmas of policy making and the hardships of implementing policy in every day practice. In this case direct relationships were not obvious since traditionally intermediate bodies are responsible for translating system-wide policies to the schools. Patience was sometimes needed for policy makers to be accepted by intermediate authorities and schools. It might also take creatively circumventing existing structures, particularly through soft modes of governance.

Another example saw the ministry establishing a body of consultants as part of the national agency to support schools in quality development. The consultants not only support schools, but they also strengthen relationships in the quadrangle of education practice, teacher training, research and policy. For policy makers, proximity also means being transparent about where the decision-making tables are, who sits at the tables and when the decisions are taken, thus allowing stakeholders to opt for a chair at the table.

Key point:
- Direct interactions between policy makers and teachers and school leaders create trust and mutual understanding.

Capacity attuned to roles and responsibilities

In several cases there was a discrepancy between the expected roles, tasks and behaviour of the stakeholders and what actually happened in daily education practice and education governance. Partly this was caused by a lack of clear communication about those expectations. However, even more important might be that policy makers do not always ascertain beforehand whether the stakeholders have the capacity to meet the expectations.

A realistic assessment of the existing capacities is important not only for the content of policy proposals, but also for the governance of reforms. It not only revolves around individual capacities, but also around collective capacity, from the school level to the system level. It is about the capacity of all stakeholders to participate in governance at different levels and to govern themselves. For school leaders, for example it means the capacity to build a comprehensive school policy. For teachers it would entail the capacity to collectively organise and self-regulate the profession.

Capacity building needs to be embedded in reforms. Capacity needs to be deliberately and actively built, among other ways, through courses, consulting and coaching, and peer learning. In some systems publicly funded and well-established and sustainable structures are in place to support teachers and schools, varying from the inspectorate, ministry learning consultants, to pedagogical support organisations. In one of the systems a structure of advisors was established to guide schools and stimulate lateral learning.
between schools in the context of a particular reform. These advisors or consultants also play a role in creating more stable networks of schools and teachers for exchanging knowledge and experiences.

**Key points:**
- **Realising roles and responsibilities depends on the capacity of stakeholders.** Capacity varies within all systems and a realistic assessment of this is critical.
- **Capacity building needs to be embedded in reform initiatives.**

**Feedback and assessment serving learning and improvement**

The use of knowledge and feedback at all levels proved to be highly important for the success of policy interventions and for quality improvement in general. One of the cases clearly showed that feedback resulted in adapting the implementation strategy of a particular national level policy. Providing a well-functioning feedback arrangement close to schools stimulated improvement and a growing culture of knowledge use in several cases. Mostly such an arrangement consisted of a combination of external expertise, networks of schools and teachers for peer learning, and easy access to research knowledge either through on line platforms or experts.

Several experiences showed that also accountability measures could promote the uptake of policy initiatives and drive a culture of improvement. Making school plans publicly available as an eligibility condition for specific funding, served legitimacy and quality assurance: schools could be held accountable for the efforts they plan to deliver. Similarly a performance assessment can support schools to improve their quality. Several governments actively promoted, for example, the formative use of assessment results, by providing schools with dashboards, containing performance data and benchmarks.

**Key point:**
- **The use of knowledge from data and research is actively promoted by combining different sources and mechanisms: external expertise, lateral learning in networks, easy access to research and centrally collected comparative data.**

**Strategic policy design**

To conclude this report, the seminar not only generated lessons for the actual design of governance, but also provided relevant insights for the art of policy making itself and for the further development of the analytical frameworks. More than ever, in complex systems policies need to be carefully thought through, considering the rich variety of stakeholders involved, the possibility of unpredictable events and unintended (side-) effects and the extensive toolbox with instruments to choose from. The frameworks presented at the seminar (Figure 1 and Box 2) could be useful in guiding such an exercise.

The domain of strategic thinking (Box 2) would be strengthened by explicitly using the four perspectives on governance (Figure 1) to discuss and determine the long-term system vision “where we would like to be ideally”. To achieve that vision, what roles should the
different stakeholders take and which instruments would be used? Three basic questions seemed particularly relevant.

- **What is the problem?** Answering this question calls for an adequate reflection on a correct diagnosis, taking multiple perspectives into account. As noted earlier, the stakeholders should take part in the definition of the problem. Ideally the problem is defined before aims and concrete policy initiatives are discussed, in practice it had happened that a specific policy approach was introduced before the problem was thoroughly analysed.

- **What are the existing networks?** Answering this question entails describing the policy arena, which means mapping the stakeholders in terms of power, motivation, interests, and capacities. This mapping might also show white spots and highlight the need for engaging new stakeholders. During the seminar it became clear that an inaccurate assessment of the motivations and capacities of the stakeholders, could lead to the flawed implementation of policies. Equally important is awareness of the power positions of different stakeholders, as power permeates all phases of policy, from problem definition to evaluation.

- **What are the preferred approaches?** Clarity about the governance approach or a combination of approaches taken, the legal status of particular instruments and what that means for different stakeholders, prevents paralysis in the implementation caused by divergent interpretations and facilitates stakeholders taking responsibility. Obviously, the political environment will influence the choice of approaches, but this should also be informed by research evidence and knowledge about feasibility in practice.
References
