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Coping with Very Weak Primary Schools: Towards Smart Interventions in Dutch Education Policy

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COPING WITH VERY WEAK PRIMARY SCHOOLS: TOWARDS SMART INTERVENTIONS IN DUTCH EDUCATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This case study looks at the effectiveness of policy instruments aimed at reducing the number of underperforming primary schools in a system with a long tradition of school autonomy. It reviews relevant Dutch policy developments in education since 1998 and provides an in-depth analysis of five selected schools and their responsiveness to the policy instruments under study. Interviews with relevant stakeholders explore a key issue: what happens after a reform is introduced, and what are the elements that make it successful (or not)? The study suggests that there is not a linear cause and effect driving changes in educational performance of schools. For example, even the assignment of the label 'very weak' can elicit a positive response from one school and a negative response from another, depending on the local context, history and staffing situation at the school. The same intervention can thus create a vicious cycle that triggers increasing deterioration of schools or a virtuous cycle that improves conditions to an extent that surpasses the original goal of the reform. This goes some way to explaining why some reform measures unintentionally backfire while others quickly ('virally') spread over the system and set a virtuous cycle in motion that engages all parts of the system.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude a pour objet l'efficacité des instruments d'action destinés à réduire le nombre d'écoles primaires aux performances insuffisantes dans un système où les établissements scolaires sont autonomes depuis longtemps. Dans cette étude sont passés en revue les faits importants qui ont marqué la politique néerlandaise de l'éducation depuis 1998, et examinées de façon approfondie cinq écoles et leur sensibilité aux instruments d'action considérés. Des entretiens ont eu lieu avec certaines parties prenantes au sujet d'une question de premier plan : que se passe-t-il après la mise en place d'une réforme et quels sont les facteurs qui en assurent la réussite (ou l'échec) ? L'étude montre qu'il n'y a pas de relation de causalité linéaire qui détermine l'évolution des résultats de l'enseignement dans les établissements scolaires. Par exemple, la simple appréciation « très faible » peut susciter une réaction positive de la part d'une école et une réaction négative de la part d'une autre, selon le contexte local, l'histoire de l'établissement scolaire en question et sa situation quant à l'effectif de son personnel. Ainsi, une même intervention peut engendrer un cercle vicieux de détérioration de la qualité des écoles, ou un cercle vertueux qui se traduira par des progrès supérieurs à l'objectif initial de la réforme. Ce phénomène contribue à expliquer pourquoi certaines mesures de réforme ont des effets contraires à ceux qui sont attendus tandis que d'autres se « propagent » rapidement dans l'ensemble du système, enclenchant un cercle vertueux dans lequel sont entraînés des secteurs de ce système qui n'étaient nullement censés être touches .

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Complexity in education systems is on the rise due to a number of intersecting trends. Parents in OECD countries have become more diverse, individualistic and highly educated. As evidence about school and student achievement has become more readily available, stakeholders have also become more demanding, pushing schools to cater for the individual needs of their children.

One of the most important responses to this increasing complexity has been decentralisation: allowing local authorities, school boards and schools a greater degree of freedom to respond to diverse and local demands. Education systems are now characterised by multi-level governance where the links between multiple actors operating at different levels are, to a certain extent, fluid and open to negotiation. At the same time, ministries of education remain responsible for ensuring high quality, efficient, equitable and innovative education. Therefore, one of the crucial questions for OECD countries is how their increasingly complex education systems can achieve national objectives. The Governing Complex Education Systems (GCES) project focuses on this issue by targeting two key elements: governance mechanisms and knowledge options.

Existing research on governance and educational systems shows that there is an abundance of conceptual material on governance, but limited work connecting this to education – particularly empirical work. This case study focuses on the Dutch school system, which is consistently ranked as one of the systems with the highest levels of school autonomy in the OECD (e.g. OECD 2011a). From the late 1980s onwards the autonomy of schools in the Netherlands increased and whereas in many countries local governments play an important role, in the Dutch system this role is almost absent. Instead, the Dutch Ministry of Education has relied on a set of indicators to fund schools lump-sum and to measure performance to ensure educational quality. The Dutch Ministry of Education sees its main responsibility as ensuring the quality of the education system as a whole. What happens in schools is the responsibility of schools and – if quality is lacking – of the inspectorate.

The case study shows how this highly decentralised system copes with very weak schools. Any strategy to accomplish this must respect the autonomy of schools while at the same time ensuring that each Dutch pupil receives quality education. In the Netherlands, the Inspectorate plays a key role in this process and uses a system of risk based school inspections to perform the task. Based on a number of (output) indicators the Inspectorate assesses the risk of an individual school underperforming. If a school is deemed at risk, they will receive inspection, which will lead to an overall assessment as “normal”, “weak” or “very weak”. Schools that are weak or very weak will receive more intense follow up inspection. Schools that are labelled very weak must improve or be closed down within two years. During these two years the Inspectorate engages with school boards and monitors the implementation of its recommendations. The role of the Inspectorate during this time is one of supervision, not of (merely) advising. Alongside this top-down intervention, weak schools are provided with specialised advice and assistance, mostly subsidised by the Ministry and carried out by organizations in the field.

The risk-based inspection system fits with the Dutch governance context:

- It focuses on (output) indicators, not on the actual learning processes happening in classrooms, which are the domain of the school;

- It minimizes intervention for schools that are doing well enough, thereby safeguarding their autonomy;

- It makes it possible for the Dutch Inspectorate to efficiently handle their relatively large scope: i.e. all schools in the Netherlands.

Key findings from this case study

The approach seems to work. Almost all very weak and weak schools improve, albeit at high cost in resources and precious time for the children involved. Overall, while each year most schools labelled as weak or very weak improve, new schools are labelled weak as well. The number of very weak schools has moved down slowly from slightly less than 120 schools in 2009 to less than 100 in 2011. This means that the number of very weak schools in 2011 was less than 1 %, already meeting the objective set for 2012.

The system works for most schools, but definitely not for all; some schools do not recover or indeed get worse, in spite of all the effort that is put into improving them. The results of interventions (in this case by the Inspectorate) are difficult to predict, mostly because of subtle differences between schools and their contexts that can be neither completely known nor affected at the national level.

This case study demonstrates the cyclical dynamic that may follow interventions in very weak schools. Interventions trigger virtuous and vicious cycles of attitudes and behaviour among all stakeholders in the school. However, the interventions by the Ministry and the Inspectorate are based on a linear policy philosophy: X (low intensity or outdated modes of teaching of maths and English) leads to Y (weak performance). In practice, the X-Y nexus is only part of the dynamic that is being influenced by these types of interventions. There are often chains of causation and consequences that interact in a circular pattern, leading to unexpected outcomes and self-reinforcing amplification mechanisms.

These circular dynamics not only occur within layers, but also across them.. Different layers affect each other, and often in unexpected ways. Some measures backfire, while others quickly spread through the system. The case study examines the dynamics of this in more detail, focussing on five schools once labelled as “very weak” by the Inspectorate of Education, two of which have since been “normalised”; one that has climbed back towards a “weak” level, and two that did not improve.

Key recommendations

The Dutch system of risk-based inspections has clearly shown curative effectiveness. However, the findings of the case study suggest that it can be improved further.

Minimize the recovery-time of schools

Even if the school improves well before the two-year time limit, children remain exposed to very poor levels of education for an extensive period of time.

Focus on prevention as well as on improving weak and very weak schools

While most very weak and weak schools improve, other schools are in turn becoming very weak and weak. This suggests that the pre-emptive effects of the policy are limited. Now that the curative problem is largely tackled, it is time to focus on prevention.

Balance this approach targeted at failing schools with a more general focus on improving all schools

Clearly, the risk-based assessment method is effective at weeding out existing weak schools. However, this focus on weak schools risks losing sight of improving the system as a whole. It is important to complement it with initiatives to improve schools that are doing (moderately) well and to stimulate excellence.

Clarify and separate the different roles of the Inspectorate

There is tension between the two roles that the Inspectorate plays. On the one hand it needs to be at some distance to be seen as an impartial observer, while on the other hand it must be deeply involved with schools labelled as very weak. The tension between these roles was confusing for some of the respondents in the case study.

Use a circular model to develop smart interventions

Complex systems cannot be controlled, but they can be steered. Complexity implies emergence, non-linearity and for that matter a relatively high degree of "unexpectedness", but that does not mean that patterns and regularities are entirely absent. The problem with most theory and/or practical repertoire for steering complex systems is the absence of a perspective that is able to see them: in a sense, what is often called an unexpected result is merely the product of a flawed lens.

The case study suggests that policy makers can use a circular model to take a second look at their existing repertoire and analyse how their current set of policy interventions works in a complex system with vicious and virtuous circles. This will:

- Lead to new insight into why and how some interventions seem to work surprisingly well;
- Show why some methods work less well, but it will probably also indicate that there are previously unnoticed indirect effects that are outside of the original intentions of the intervention but represent value to the system;
- Show that some interventions do not work at all and that the capital that goes into them may be better invested in other areas of the system;
- Put some interventions on the radar that come from other areas, other policy domains, or otherwise unrelated incentives and that may be beneficial to very weak schools;
- Be an important element in developing smart interventions in multi-level systems.

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

This study has been conducted as part of a broader project of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) "*Governing Complex Education Systems" (GCES[1]).* This OECD project focuses on the rising complexity in education due to a number of intersecting trends. Parents in OECD countries have become more diverse, individualistic and highly educated. As evidence about school and student achievement has become more readily available, stakeholders have also become more demanding, pushing schools to cater for the individual needs of their children.

One of the most important responses to this increasing complexity has been decentralisation: allowing local authorities, school boards and schools a greater degree of freedom to respond to diverse and local demands. Education systems are now characterised by multi-level governance where the links between multiple actors operating at different levels are to a certain extent fluid and open to negotiation. At the same time, ministries of education remain responsible for ensuring high quality, efficient, equitable and innovative education. Therefore, one of the crucial questions for OECD countries is how their increasingly complex education systems can achieve national objectives. The GCES project focuses on this issue by targeting two key elements: governance mechanisms and knowledge options (OECD, 2011b).

According to the OECD, existing research on governance and educational systems are primarily conceptual studies on governance. Empirical studies linking developments in governance with education issues are lacking. The GCES project therefore contains are a number of national case studies seeking to better understand multilevel governance of education systems.

The focus of this study

This study focuses on a crucial aspect of quality assurance in highly decentralised systems. How do governments ensure that all students receive education that meets the quality standards set by the ministries for education? Put differently, how can governments intervene in schools that do not meet these quality criteria given that those schools have been granted – as is the case in the Netherlands – almost full autonomy?

Obviously, very weak schools should improve and meet required quality standards. However, what government interventions are necessary and acceptable to accomplish this? What are the effects of interventions in very weak schools? Though the policy objective in itself is barely an object of discussion, the possible intervention repertoire very surely is. That holds true in the Netherlands and other countries alike. There is broad discussion about what causes schools to become "weak" or "very weak" and the effectiveness of different Government interventions (Brady, 2003).

Two important issues contribute to weak schools becoming what is called in the literature "a wicked problem" (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2006): (a) no hard evidence exists as to what intervention is most appropriate for very weak schools in a given situation or context; and (b) no agreement exists in the educational field regarding the normative dimension of the interventions: school autonomy versus government responsibility. In the Netherlands as well as internationally, the debate focuses on roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders to guarantee quality of education. What is the role of

national government versus local government or school boards in countering this issue? Is it e.g. "carrot or stick" that delivers the best result?

The Netherlands has put in place an innovative system aiming to support (very) weak schools to improve as quickly as possible. This system – which will be described in detail in Chapter 4 – has yielded promising results: the number of very weak schools has been reduced from 2006 to 2010 more quickly than the objectives originally set out. Notwithstanding this success at the macro level, at the micro level important questions remain unanswered. At the moment there is very limited understanding of why certain schools improve when the central government intervenes and why others do not. This study will focus in particular on that micro level. However, as many different actors are involved to safeguard quality of education in the Netherlands, this analysis of the policy programme for underperforming schools also serves to understand the multi-level governance of the Dutch education system.

The central research questions underpinning this study are:

- How does the institutional context of Dutch education policy shape the roles, responsibilities and interrelations between all relevant (government) actors and layers in the educational system?
- What national policy has been developed to identify and incentivize underperforming (very weak) schools?
- How is this policy implemented, given the multi-level character of the education system?
- How does the approach contribute to reducing the overall number of very weak primary schools, and/or the duration of the average period of schools being assessed as very weak?

Methods and data

This study was based on the case study framework developed by the Governing Complex Education Systems project of the OECD (OECD 2011b) and relied on a number of research methods.

First, a *media analysis* of two large national newspapers (the "NRC Handelsblad" and "De Telegraaf") was conducted. Using the database *Lexis Nexis, a search* using the keywords "weak school" and "very weak school" produced 98 hits in NRC Handelsblad and 64 hits in De Telegraaf. A frequency breakdown across time was conducted and the content of each of these articles was analysed, not only allowing for a general sense of the interplay between media attention and policy developments but also to examine the specific image of very weak schools in the media and the opinions of relevant actors in the field (Scherpenisse, 2011).

Second, a thorough *document analysis* was conducted to produce a review of policy developments in the Netherlands regarding very weak schools since 2007. This also took into account major policy initiatives during the period 1998–2007 that were important to the motivation and design of the reform. The purpose of this analysis was to draft an historic account of policy regarding very weak schools and the changing role of the Inspectorate of Education (Scherpenisse et al., 2011).

Finally, five schools were selected for more intensive study in consultation with the Inspectorate of Education. Empirical data for this analysis was collected through on-site visits and interviews with key stakeholders: teachers, parents, school directors and members of the school board. In addition, representatives of the Inspectorate involved in the assessment or improvement process of these (very) weak schools were interviewed[2]. The schools were in various stages of "recovery" following their first designation as being very weak: two of the five schools had been improving relatively quickly and two of

them had improved after a longer period, although one of these two was still classified as weak. The fifth school had only become very weak recently and was still in its designated (two-year) improvement period.

The interviews followed a semi-structured questionnaire that focused on the following aspects: the context of the school (for example the socio-economic background of the neighbourhood in which the school is located, the existence of alternative schools in the area, the socio-economic background of students); internal factors (for example the professionalism of the teachers and staff, or the commitment of the school board); the nature of the interventions and measures deployed after schools had been denoted as being very weak (for example teacher turnover, change in management, hiring of a consultancy firm). The interviewees were also specifically asked to discuss the relations of the school with relevant policy actors, such as the Inspectorate, the Council of Primary Education[3], and the local city council *alderman*. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand the dynamics of weakness and improvement in primary education.

The preliminary findings of this study were reported to a feedback and brainstorming workshop with a broad selection of stakeholders (school teachers and administrators, school board managers, local government actors, school inspectors and public servants from the Department of Education). The meeting was held in The Hague in November 2011 and facilitated a valuable exchange to fine-tune the analysis, as well as to stimulate professional debate between these stakeholders in a safe environment.

Structure of the report

This report will first describe the background against which the Dutch system of intervening in (very) weak schools has taken place (Chapter 2). Then, the analysis of the five schools is presented. Chapter 3 provides a policy analysis of the Dutch system of intervention in very weak schools. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of what happens when national interventions hit local schools. Chapter 5 reflects on the conceptual lessons learned in the case studies. The report ends with some key conclusions and policy recommendations (Chapter 6).

CHAPTER 2.

BACKGROUND: DUTCH CONTEXT, EDUCATION AND GOVERNANCE

The Netherlands is a nation of 16.8 million people.[4] It has a small land area of 41 530 square kilometres in the centre of Europe. It is a wealthy country: with a GDP per capita of 42 772 USD, it was the tenth wealthiest country in the world and the fourth wealthiest in Europe in 2011. It combines high levels of wealth with relatively low levels of unemployment, only 6.4% in March 2013 in comparison to an EU27 average of 10.9%.

Most of the value added in the Dutch economy, 74%, is created in services.[5] An important part of the wealth is a consequence of the nation's long tradition as a trading nation with a very open economy. It is a European hub for transport of people and goods, with one of the largest harbours in the world, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam Airport (Schiphol), one of the largest airports in Europe.

As is true elsewhere in Europe, the Netherlands has an ageing population, and the main source of demographic growth and the driver of future educational expansion is immigration. The number of foreign born inhabitants has risen significantly in the last three decades. This is primarily due to increased immigration of Northern African and Middle Eastern migrants, whose share in the population (first and second generation migrants combined) is now more than 10%. While participation of non-western migrants in higher education has gone up steeply (in 1996 around 6% of higher education students were non-western migrants, a figure that had risen to 14% in 2010), this group has had difficulties in terms of economic integration, with unemployment levels of around 13%, almost twice as high as the Dutch average.[6] In educational performance, first and second generation migrants perform below the Dutch average as measured by PISA (see next section for more details).

Education performance in the Netherlands

Dutch students score very well in international comparisons, routinely ranking among the top 15 countries in the world and the top five countries in Europe. This is true for average scores as well as for the comparison between the 10% of the highest performing students and the 10% of the lowest performing students (see for example Table 2.1, with the reading scores from PISA 2009 (OECD, 2010)). In other words, the best Dutch students can compete with the best international students. At the same time, the 10% of students with the lowest scores are doing well compared to the 10% worst students in other countries.

Table 2.1. Dutch reading performance

Mean scores of all students, highest scoring 10% and lowest scoring 10% of the 15 best-performing countries in each category

All students		Highest scoring 10%		Lowest scoring 10%	
Shanghai-China	556	Shanghai-China	654	Shanghai-China	450
Korea	539	New Zealand	649	Korea	435
Finland	536	Singapore	648	Finland	419
Hong Kong-China	533	Finland	642	Hong Kong-China	418
Singapore	526	Japan	639	Canada	406
Canada	524	Australia	638	Singapore	394
New Zealand	521	Canada	637	Estonia	392
Japan	520	Korea	635	***Netherlands***	***390***
Australia	515	Hong Kong-China	634	Macao-China	388
Netherlands	***508***	Belgium	631	Japan	386
Belgium	506	United States	625	Liechtenstein	385
Norway	503	***Netherlands***	***625***	Australia	384
Estonia	501	France	624	Denmark	383
Switzerland	501	Sweden	620	New Zealand	383

Source: OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science (Volume I)*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264091450-en.

While Dutch educational performance in general is very high, first and second generation migrants are falling behind. While native students score on average 515 in the PISA 2009 testing, first generation migrants score 471 and second generation migrants score slightly worse at an average of 469. This gap between native and migrant students is not unique to the Netherlands and can also be found in Belgium, Germany, Sweden and Finland. As weak schools in Dutch cities tend to have high proportions of first and second generation migrant students, this is an important fact to keep in mind for the discussion in this report.

Governance in the Netherlands

Dutch governance is characterised by coalition governments in which two or more parties work together to form a government. The formation of a government is often a lengthy process in which the parties create a governing contract, or a compromise based on the political positions of the parties joining

the coalition. This compromise at the start of the coalition government is certainly not the last. During the period that the coalition governs, the parties need to find consensus on all issues that are not, or only partially, established in the governing contract.

The parties also need to compromise on which individuals are appointed ministers and state secretaries in the cabinet. A typical arrangement, important in the context of education, is that a Minister and a Secretary of State in one ministry are not of the same political background. In a sense they balance each other although the minister clearly has the ultimate formal authority.

There is a strong position for organised interests in all stages of the policy process. Traditionally, the Netherlands delegates power to heavily subsidised private associations, especially in the fields of education, healthcare and culture. In this system, government decisions are reached after extensive interactions with associations, and implementation is carried out in part by these actors as well.

Governance of Dutch primary education

Traditionally the Dutch educational system has been relatively decentralised. An important historical reason for this is the fact that in 1917, after decades of pressure from religious groups in society, public schools and private religious schools were made formally and materially equal. Religious organisations and associations of citizens were free to start a school and, provided it met the regulations of the government, those schools were financed publicly. In the Dutch educational system, parents can choose which school their children will attend, which stems from article 23 of the Dutch Constitution, called "Freedom of Education" (Eurydice, 2005). This situation is still largely intact, with one exception: growing worries about the quality of education in some of the new private schools have led the government to create a light assessment between the moment a school is established and when it receives its first budget. The assessment focuses on the questions of whether teachers are licensed and whether there is a school plan (but not whether it is a good school plan). Any assessment prior to the establishment of the school or any more intrusive assessment is seen as unconstitutional.

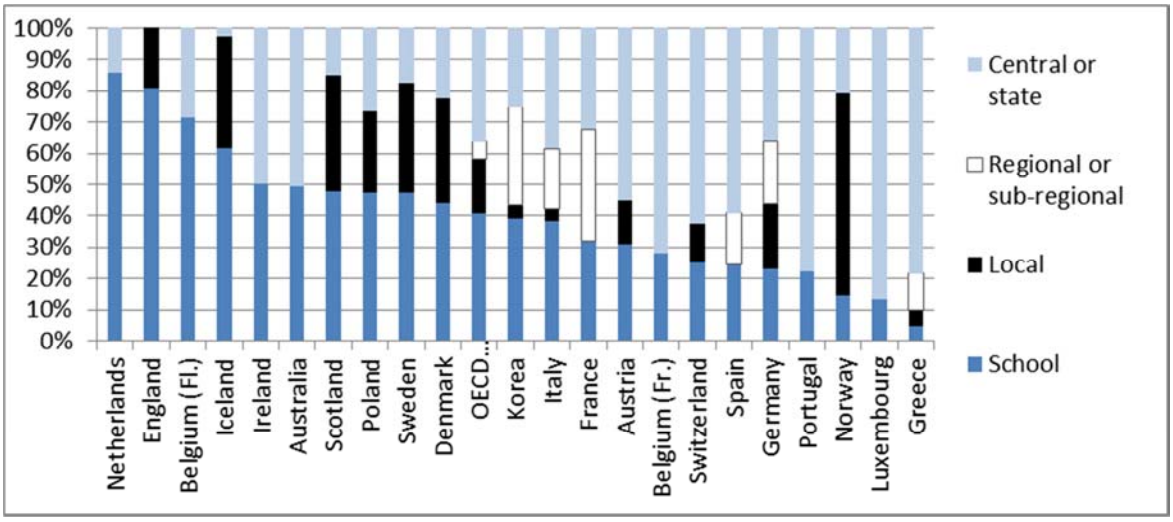
Private, but publicly financed schools have been part of the Dutch landscape for almost a century. In the past, private schools differed from public schools in that they could use educational methods considered appropriate within their belief systems. They could also refuse students and teachers whose beliefs potentially conflict with the school's religious or philosophical background. Private schools are managed by school boards, most of which consisted of parents.

This clear difference between what public and private (but publicly financed) schools could do changed from the 1980s onwards, when the ministry devolved more and more authority to all schools including the public schools which are now in a very similar position to private schools. School boards in both public and private schools – especially the larger ones responsible for several schools – often consist of professionals.

Today the Netherlands is one of the most decentralised education systems in the OECD, with a very high level of school autonomy (see Figure 1) and no formal levels between the central government and the school level.

Figure 2.1. Levels of decentralisation

Percentage of decisions taken at each level of government in public lower secondary education (2011)



Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2012-en.

With autonomy came responsibility for the quality of education. This has changed the way government monitors and steers schools. Government steering is now based on output steering. For example, the funding of the schools is based on output criteria, such as grades and the number of graduating students. This change has also had an impact on the way the central government can intervene when schools fail to meet the minimum quality criteria: school boards cannot simply be overruled as they are to a large extent autonomous.

The absence of formal governance levels between the school and the national government is relatively recent. For many years, public schools were managed by local government, since the 1980s a shift has been made to public schools run by private foundations with school boards (though schools themselves remain public). As a result, almost all Dutch schools are now privately run while publicly funded. At the same time, there has historically been competition between local governments and school boards about who has the ultimate power over schools. In recent years, the power balance has shifted from local government control towards autonomy for the school boards, as shown in Figure 2.1. This has also meant that the Ministry of Education is in charge of a quite daunting system, almost 1200 school boards that manage almost 7 500 schools, with 1.65 million students. Granting autonomy to schools is partly a response to this, as given that the central government simply cannot control a sector of this size. The focus on (very) weak schools instead of the entire sector can be interpreted partly as way to reduce complexity.

Table 2.2. Number of students, personnel, schools and school boards in primary education

Number of students	• 1.65 million
Personnel	• 135 437 (Full-time equivalent) • 187 387 persons
Number of schools	• 7 480
Number of school boards	• 1 180, of which ○ 46% manage one school ○ 18% 2 to 5 schools ○ 16% 6 to 10 schools ○ 14% 11 to 20 schools ○ 6% more than 20 schools

Source: PO-raad, www.poraad.nl/content/cijfers-uit-de-sector, accessed 11 April 2013.

Multilevel governance in the Dutch education system

While Figure 2.1 suggests a rather straightforward governance situation divided between central government and schools, the reality is more complicated.

At the national level both the Ministry of Education and the Inspectorate of Education are in their own ways responsible for the overall quality of education. While these two institutions have separate responsibilities, the fact that the ministry has moved towards output steering and a focus on quality means that the work of the Inspectorate, also focussing on quality assurance, brings the two organisations very close.

In 2007 the Council of Primary Education was established. Although it is an association of primary schools in the Netherlands, it represents the schools at national level and also plays a role in developing and implementing national policies.

The local level also involves a diverse range of actors beyond simply the schools themselves. School boards, some of which manage one school, but most of which manage two or more (6% manage more than 20 schools, see Table 2.2) are formally responsible for the quality of education at their school(s). School directors manage daily school practices, and teachers are responsible for the quality of education in the classroom. In many schools, parents also play quite a prominent role: in smaller schools they may be members of the governing board, they are members of the parents' representative council and they assist with extra curriculum activities, and can also assist children in the classroom who, for example, have difficulties reading or are otherwise falling behind. The local government is a stakeholder as well, as it usually owns public school buildings.

Table 2.3. summarises the key roles, institutional interests, and intervention repertoire of the most important stakeholders in the Dutch multilevel governance structure in the education sector.[7]

Table 2.3. Overview of key roles, interests and interventions

Stakeholders	Role/interest	Intervention repertoire
Minister of Education	Responsible for the overall quality of education in primary schools	• Development of national policy • Development of quality norms • Development of financing of supportive measures • Power to stop funding or close schools
Inspectorate of Education	Supervision of quality of education	• Assess schools using a set of fixed indicators; • Inform and advise schools using informal contacts with the school • Report (very) weak schools to the Ministry of Education.
Council of Primary Education	Representation of primary education school boards' interests	• Assist schools to improve performance
Local Government (Alderman for Education)	Owner of school buildings and responsible for their maintenance	• Improve the quality of education in schools by making funding and assistance available at the local level
School board	Formal constituent of the school(s), responsible and accountable for corporate and educational quality of school	• Hire, professionalise and lay off school leaders/management • Hire, professionalise, and lay off personnel • Hire support • Set the organisational structure • Internal quality monitoring • Determine the organisational/learning climate in the schools • Steer educational quality • Change schools' budget
School director	Managing the day to day business in the school	• Hire and lay off personnel • Shape team climate • Invest in teachers or methods • Contact with parents
Teacher	Responsible for the quality of education in the classroom	• Make changes in classroom • Contact with parents
Parents/students	Client of the education system, some formally part of school board or member of the parents' council representative	• Participate actively in school • Assist with day-to-day activities

Given the multilevel governance structure in the education system, the division of responsibilities is a continuous matter of debate. Tension exists between steering and control on outcomes by the national government on the one hand and the autonomy of schools regarding the delivery of education on the other. The content of what is being taught and the level of education is a matter for government to decide, but how knowledge is being transferred to students is part and parcel of schools' discretionary powers (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2006). The government, however, is often directly confronted

with the consequences of poor quality education, for example, when failing education has an impact on the labour market opportunities of graduates, which in turn affect the economy.

In addition, as discussed above, local government lacks the formal powers to manage the performance of schools in the Netherlands. Privatization of public school boards in foundations has left local governments with few tools. They own school buildings, but have no formal responsibility for the quality of education. This is seen as problematic for local government, as it is often held accountable by citizens for very weak local schools. Many stories in the media are about *aldermen* who are held accountable for poorly performing schools in their cities and notice the problems that these create, but do not have the legal authority to intervene in these schools. This tension came to the attention of the media after the publication of an alarming letter of the aldermen of the four biggest Dutch cities (G4) to the Ministry of Education.[8] In this letter the aldermen write that they need more possibilities to intervene in very weak schools. They also write that the national government should do more to intervene as well: "The aldermen also want the Inspectorate and the Ministry of Education to intervene faster and tougher against weak schools".

To a large extent these tensions between different governance levels within the existing multilayer system are resolved in line with the governance context of the Netherlands: after more or less lengthy discussion and negotiation, consensus is reached on a pragmatic solution. Interestingly – and a sign of how crucial education quality has come to be seen – the system to assess and improve (very) weak schools is uncharacteristically top-down for the Netherlands.

CHAPTER 3.

POLICY ANALYSIS: A MACRO PERSPECTIVE

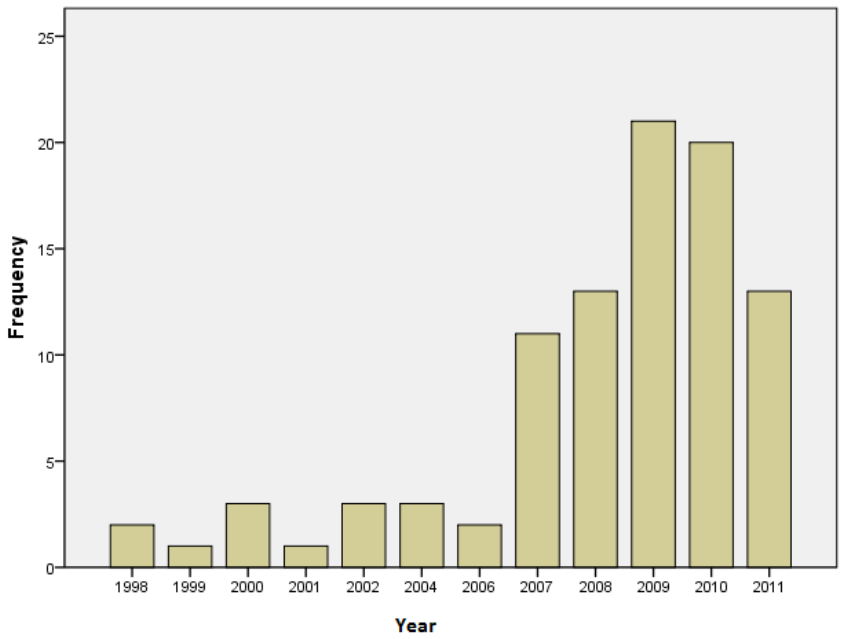
Policy context

In 1999, the Inspectorate for Education developed criteria to distinguish between very weak schools, good schools and normal schools (Education Inspectorate, 2001). These criteria were developed primarily for use by the inspectorate, and allow for a targeted approach to very weak schools. In the years after 1999, data gathered about very weak schools led to a number of publications by the inspectorate and a deeper insight into what makes schools weak and what can help schools to do better (Education Inspectorate, 2006).

An important shift happened in 2006 when the Inspectorate for Education started publishing lists with the names of weak and very weak schools in the Netherlands. This policy, intended to make the quality of education more transparent and inform parents of the quality of their children's education, was also picked up on by the media. The lists and the numbers of schools that were designated as weak or very weak received a lot of media attention. Figure 3.1 shows that by 2007 the amount of media attention for weak and very weak schools had increased spectacularly from the time these data were released (i.e. 2006).

Figure 3.1. Media attention for very weak schools

Number of articles about very weak schools published in two Dutch newspapers,



Source: Lexis Nexis, www.lexisnexis.nl/dutch/home.page.

The media analysis leads to the conclusion that very weak schools are commonly described in negative terms and that the central government is being held both responsible for the existence of these schools and accountable for their improvements.

Many stakeholders have called for more and tougher interventions by the government.[9] The recognition of the problems goes hand in hand with the suggestion of preferred solutions: government interventions. The underlying idea in the media coverage is that very weak schools should not be allowed to exist, as every child has the right to receive good quality education.[10]

The media attention for very weak schools is by no means the only source of pressure, but rather is part of a more widespread debate about the quality of education. The society for Better Education in the Netherlands,[11] established in 2006, mounted a very effective media campaign suggesting that there is a crisis in Dutch education and that teachers lack deep content knowledge. While this claim has not been substantiated with data, there is a growing feeling that the quality of education, particularly reading and mathematics, is stagnating when compared internationally.

The ministry responded to this pressure with the Quality Agenda for Primary Education in November 2007 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2008).[12] In this agenda the ministry formulated quantitative objectives to halve the number of weak schools by 2011. The agenda formulates a number of plans to improve schools and education quality but does not specifically target the (very) weak schools. The Parliament responded during the 2008/2009 budget conciliations (September 2008) by adopting a motion from two opposition parties[13] in which the Secretary of State for Education was asked to develop a plan targeted at (very) weak schools with the specific request that the time an individual school carries the label *very weak* should be shortened.

The mounting pressure from the media and (political) stakeholders forced the ministry to respond quickly. In February 2009, the ministry presented Parliament with an "action plan for very weak primary schools" (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2009a). This quick turnaround – September 2008 to February 2009, i.e. less than 5 months – was very rapid for policy making in a Dutch setting. It prevented the building of an extensive evidence base for the action plan. The plan was instead more pragmatic and was described by one of the respondents as a "scattershot approach", a combination of activities that maximised the possibility that they would hit the target.

Policy content

The plan for very weak primary schools contained a number of actions, in particular focussing on the role of the Inspectorate of Education with regard to underperforming schools and the role of school boards. It consisted of six parts:

1. An extra evaluation for very weak schools one year after they have been labelled very weak;

2. Intensification of supervision by the Inspectorate for Education;

3. Strengthening the quality of school boards and school management;

4. A targeted approach to clusters of weak schools, for example in the Northern provinces, Islamic Schools, and in the city of Amsterdam;

5. A new law "Good education, Good Management"[14] to strengthen the possibilities for the Ministry to sanction and ultimately close weak schools;

6. Developing applied research projects focussed on improving (very) weak schools.

In short, the system was to become less tolerant of weak and very weak schools. A new law "Good education, Good management") and the recently introduced concept of *preventive inspection* in combination with the deployment of risk assessment and quality measurement tools for early warning, allow the Minister to end the funding of very weak schools or to close long-term underperforming schools (within two years).[15]

The new policy is not, however, only an increase in inspection and supervision. The Ministry has also funded different projects to support failing schools. Because of the issues with school autonomy these projects are operated as services offered not by the Inspectorate but by the Council for Primary Education. Schools that are labelled very weak can use these services to improve. The decision to do this remains with the school board. Services offered include things like flying brigades (teams of experts that support failing schools in improving the educational quality) and analysis teams (to assess the schools situation and what they should improve to retain the normal supervising arrangement from the Inspectorate). In addition, the Council of Primary Education assists in twinning projects, where good performing schools team up with failing schools to exchange knowledge and expertise (PO-raad, 2010).

Also, as mentioned above, the Ministry has been directly involved in areas where many failing schools exist. A study by the Inspectorate showed that many of the failing schools are situated in the rural north of the Netherlands (Education Inspectorate, 2010). Therefore, the Ministry has made agreements with three Northern provinces, Drenthe, Groningen and Friesland. In the agreements, goals are formulated to reduce the number of failing schools and improve the overall quality of education. The Ministry has invested money to reach these goals, which can be spent by the provinces. The schools in these areas can receive help from the Primary Education Council and the province when their quality is below average (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2010, 2011). Provinces are not normally involved in education policy, their involvement stems from the geographic concentration of weak schools in the Northern provinces.

The new approach has meant a new role for the Inspectorate. Supervision of schools has become risk-based. If the annually conducted risk analysis demonstrates risks for a school to become weak, the school may receive a warning from the Inspectorate or the Inspectorate can start a full inspection of the quality of education at the school (Education Inspectorate, 2010). This type of supervision is a product of the shift in priorities from schools in general, to the worst performing schools.

The Inspectorate's position has been shifting from one of being assessor and advisor to schools to a more arm's length philosophy of solely assessing the quality of education provided.[16] The risk of confusion about roles and responsibilities – and the possibility to become too closely involved with the inspected schools – was therefore formally reduced. As much as possible, schools are assessed by and held accountable for measurable results. Government has increasingly specified and operationalized what quality of education is being expected. Specific curriculum norms have been developed in key areas such as mathematics and language.

The relationship between the Inspectorate and the schools has come to be based on the principle of *deserved trust*. This means that schools that perform satisfactorily receive minimal inspection. Underperforming schools, on the other hand, are placed under an intensified supervision arrangement by the Inspectorate. During the two years within which those schools are required to improve their performance, the Inspectorate engages with school boards and monitors the implementation of its recommendations. The role of the Inspectorate during this time is one of supervision, not of (merely) advising.

Some of the weak or very weak schools are not content with an Inspectorate that diagnoses and labels them but otherwise remains at arm's length. They expect the Inspectorate to act more like their critical

friend and engage in a more permanent program of professional advice and support. That does not imply an abrogation of the school's own ultimate responsibility for its own performance, but a call to make more productive use of the unique local knowledge of inspectors about specific schools and about the factors that produce, sustain or help turn around performance failures.

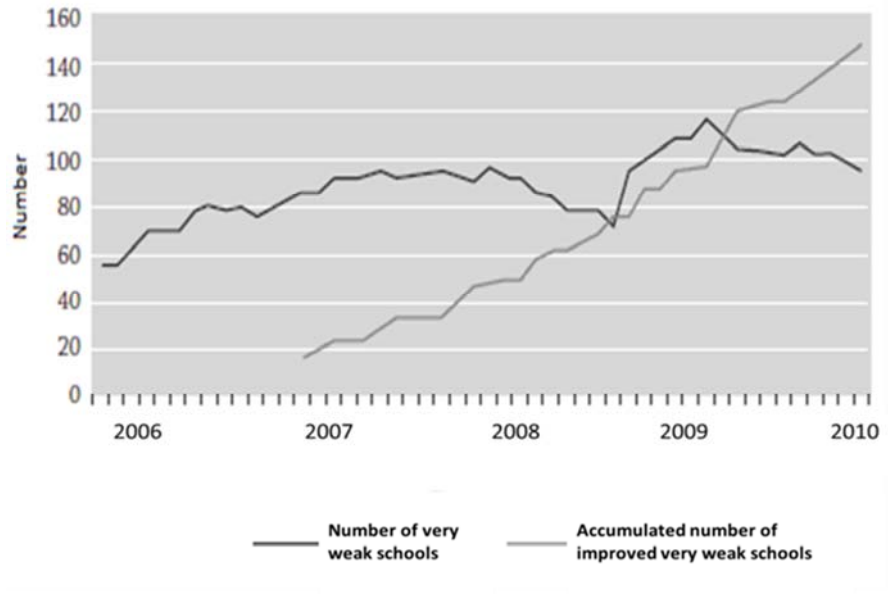
There are also other criticisms from stakeholders in the field. A report of the Council of Primary Education about a meeting with school managers and the Minister of Education in 2011 makes reference of school boards that claim the Minister is interfering too much in their autonomy (PO-raad, 2011). Schools assert that policy measures show little confidence in schools. Hence while local governments would applaud further reaching interventions at very weak schools from the national government, stakeholders in the field of education have argued that national government is intervening too much already.

Policy outcomes

Although there are only a few evaluation studies available, most of which are qualitative, the available evidence suggests that the results of this new policy are positive: the proportion of very weak schools in 2011 was less than 1% of all schools, which exceeds the objective originally set for 2012.

Figure 3.2. Many very weak schools have improved

Number of very weak schools and accumulated number of improved very weak schools



Source: Adapted from De Wolf, I.F. and J.H. Verkroost (2011), Evaluatie van de theorie en praktijk van het nieuwe onderwijstoezicht [Evaluation of the theory and practice of the inspection regime in education], Tijdschrift voor toezicht (2), 2.

Figure 3.2 shows the number of very weak primary schools that improved and are now "normal schools" (De Wolf and Verkroost, 2011). The dark line indicates that the number of very weak schools has declined since its peak in 2009, when the Inspectorate introduced the more rigorous system of risk-based assessment. The grey line shows the accumulated number of very weak schools that have improved: each year more very weak schools improve their quality enough to lose that label. The fact that the total number of weak schools has remained around 100 in spite of many very weak schools improving in the past three year reveals that new schools become very weak each year.

The increased pressure on very weak schools thus seems to pay off. As shown earlier, the number of schools labelled by the Inspectorate as weak or very weak has declined significantly since 2009. Also, almost two thirds of the schools that were labelled weak or very weak in the period 2000 to 2010 improved back to the base-line level by January 2010, one third of the schools went from very weak to weak and two schools remained very weak. Hardly any school was forced to close or merge, since they were able to restore the level of quality necessary to remain open.

In a more qualitative evaluation (Research voor Beleid, 2012) the evaluators find that while the initial labelling as a very weak school comes as a great shock to most schools, leading to confusion and disbelief, all schools are very satisfied with the help they have received in improving their performance. What is appreciated most is the (practical) knowledge of the experts involved.

However, it goes too far to say that the problem of weak schools is solved. First, although the policy is successful in restoring quality in most schools that are labelled weak or very weak, it has not been able to prevent new schools from entering these categories. Secondly, some schools do not make it out of the weak or very weak category within two years' time and therefore need to be closed after all. Although the approach works for many schools, it does not do so for all of them. Another qualitative evaluation points at the real risk that schools copy the recommendations by the Inspectorate without thinking through how these fit with the school (VO-raad and AOC-raad, 2010). In addition – and this will be the focus of the next chapter – it is not well understood why the same interventions work in one case and not in another.

CHAPTER 4.

CASE STUDY ANALYIS: A MICRO PERSPECTIVE

Very weak schools in the Netherlands share a number of common context variables. Research by the Inspectorate in the period from 1998–2005 suggests that many of these schools:

- Are located in a socio-geographic environment where educational levels in the local population are traditionally low. The level of education of parents is – for different reasons – one of the main predictors of school results of their children. Schools that operate in areas with a relatively poorly educated population therefore need to invest more in the quality of education to reach a similar level of quality as schools in an area with an average, or highly educated population.

- Have a relatively large proportion of students who need extra care or who fall behind on parts of their educational development. This may not only be a direct cause for lower average test scores of students, but it may also have a negative impact on the education of other children in the class room.

- Tend to be schools with relatively few students, and subsequently a small staff. This makes the school more sensitive to external shocks, like an increase in the number of students that need extra care, a decrease of the number of students, or teachers that fall ill. It also makes it more difficult to deal with challenging changes in the environment of schools.

- Tend to have a high level of stability in staff composition: many (very) weak schools have a relatively small turnover of staff. This can have a *lock-in* effect: changes are hard to implement ("this is the way we do things here").

It should be noted that though virtually all weak schools are set in contexts characterised by these factors, these contextual conditions do not in and of themselves predict weakness in schools; quite a few schools perform perfectly adequately despite facing this same set of contextual constraints. To get a better understanding of why certain schools respond positively while others do not or even respond negatively to the interventions of the Inspectorate, five case studies were conducted in 2011 at primary schools across the Netherlands. Four of them were assessed as very weak and have now recovered or are still in the process of improving their quality. The fifth school was assessed as very weak just before the case study analysis. The case studies provide insight into the dynamics of interventions and their consequences for very weak schools.

Although some context factors are common in very weak schools, even this small subset of cases demonstrates – see Table 4.1 for an overview – that schools operating in very different local contexts, governance contexts and adhering to different educational philosophies can all become classified as very weak. Such factors can play a part in this development, but are unlikely to be the sole or even the primary cause of the problem. Therefore, there is no one size fits all causal diagnosis underpinning a single tried and tested intervention strategy. The next section will describe the developments in school as they were labelled very weak, while the remainder of this chapter will analyse these findings.

Table 4.1. Overview of background of the schools in the study

School A	**Small, public primary school with 64 students**
	Located in a small town of 9 700 inhabitants on the countryside in the north of the Netherlands.
	In the village are several primary schools and two of them are very close to school A. One of these primary schools is a Christian school. Together they compete for children who live in this socially and economically deprived neighbourhood.
	Many parents of children in this area have serious private problems – for example, issues of unemployment, drug and alcohol related matters, medical problems – and the educational level of the children, especially the level of their language skills, is often far below average. The school is part of a foundation with 13 other schools.
School B	**A very small Christian school (only 37 students in three combined classrooms)**
	Located in a tiny 400-person village in the countryside in the north of the country.
	At some distance there are two other primary schools. The school board is a foundation comprising 18 other schools.
	The student background is diverse, but many children happen to need special care. Because of the relatively small scale of the school, these children put extra weight on day-to-day processes in the school.
School C	**A public school**
	Located in a neighbourhood of a medium-sized city in the very south of the Netherlands.
	The school competes for students with two schools nearby. In the 1980s this was one of the three biggest schools in the Netherlands, but since that time the school has suffered from dramatically reduced numbers of students.
	The students' backgrounds are mixed and student capabilities are average. The fact that the school has reduced its numbers continuously in the last 10 years has had a large impact on the school in many different ways.
School D	**A Waldorf school**[17]
	In one of the Netherlands' four big cities.
	Most of the overwhelmingly highly educated parents of the student population have specifically chosen this school because of its alternative philosophy. The school therefore competes to a much lesser extent with other city schools for pupils, and existing parents are less likely to use the exit option.
	The board of the school manages just one other school.

Table 4.1. Overview of background of the schools in the study (continued)

School E	A public school in a large city
	Many primary schools in the area, so there is a lot of competition for students.
	Almost all of the residents in the area are of immigrant backgrounds. Until recently, the education in the school was based on the Montessori philosophy.
	Close by is another Montessori-school which unlike school E attracts the children from native-Dutch parents. Given the significant gap between the education performance of native and migrant students in the Netherlands this is likely to affect their education performance.

Developments in the case studies

School A

School A competes with other schools in the area for so-called "A students": (above) average performing pupils. It is a public school which implies it has to accept all students who would like to attend the school. The neighbouring Christian primary school, on the contrary, can and does on occasion refuse students from immigrant backgrounds based on religious considerations (non-Christians). This implies that the fall back option for these children (who often suffer from serious language or other problems) is School A. Also, School A has a larger than average number of students with special care needs ("*rugzakjes*"), requiring extra time from the teacher. Therefore, differences between students can be relatively large.

Another issue is that the level of stability in staff composition is high. Some teachers have even taught parents of current students. This has led to a rather closed (the director felt solely responsible for leadership issues in the school and did not share ideas with staff), change-averse mentality and culture. While education philosophies, methods and standards changed, and the type of students became more complex, the staff's "operating mode" remained the same.

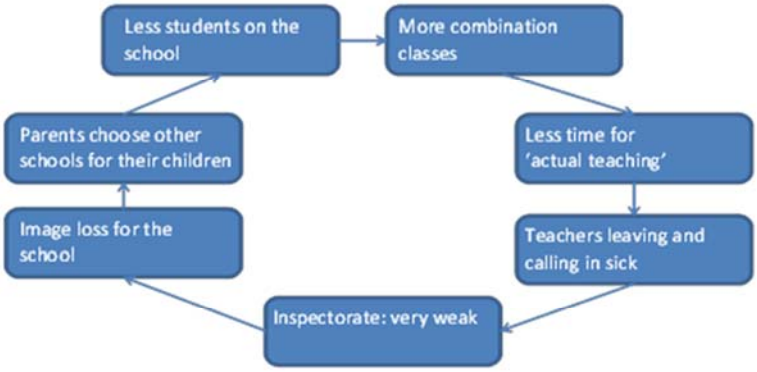
In 2006, the school was assessed by the Inspectorate and considered weak. The director informed the teachers but lacked a response repertoire: for one and a half years, no action was undertaken to improve the quality of education in the school. In 2008, the situation at the school had deteriorated and it was subsequently considered very weak. This had a big impact on the teachers. They realised some dramatic changes had to be made. The Inspectorate and the school organised an information session for the parents, who until that time had not been informed of the problems in the school.

Some parents, especially with better performing children, decided to transfer them to another school. Other parents followed this example, which led to a dramatic decrease in the number of students and a decrease of the average quality of the student population. Given the reduced number of students, the school was forced to combine three school grades into one classroom. Classrooms from now on comprise three different age groups. This requires an extra effort from the teachers and students alike. Students have to work more independently, while the teacher is teaching students in other grades.

There is also positive change. Some of the old staff members have been replaced, and a new director and new teachers contribute positively to the quality of education. Two years later, the Inspectorate assessed the school and acknowledged the improvements: the school is considered weak rather than very weak.

But the school has fallen into a vicious cycle: The image of the school has not improved and the number of students has not increased. Some teachers fall ill and are replaced. One steady staff member mentioned in the interview that staff changes happen with no hand over; hence the burden to train new staff weighs heavily on her shoulders. The school board of the school is currently exploring options to merge with another school. School closure by the Minister of Education is a real option. Hence, despite the improved performance of the school and the acknowledgement of this by the Inspectorate, the school is threatened more than ever by the most severe measure: school closure.

Figure 4.1. Vicious cycle in school A



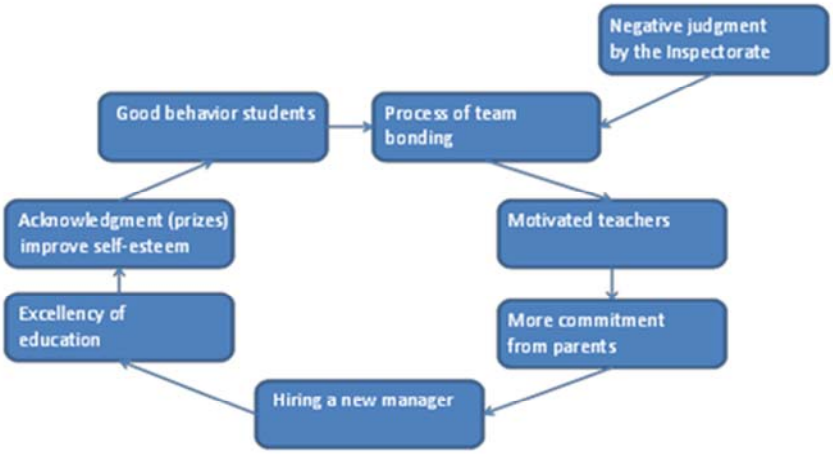
School B

School B is a very small school and has an overrepresentation of students with special needs. Some of these children actually need special education, but their parents prefer that they attend this small neighbourhood school. These special need pupils have a large impact on the school's average performance. School B struggles to deal with this rather complex student population.

The school was assessed by the Inspectorate in 2007, and was considered very weak. This was difficult for the school team to hear. After an initial period of denial/defence, the school director and the rest of the staff pooled their efforts and did everything they could to lift the quality of the school. Morale and team spirit flourished. Parents became well informed and saw the commitment of the staff. Most parents felt committed to contributing as much as they could and are now more involved in the school than before. Not a single student has transferred from the school because of the Inspectorate's assessment

There is clearly a virtuous cycle here: After being considered very weak, the school invested in improving the school's education structure and the professionalism of the teachers. One of the teachers was replaced. In 2009, a new and experienced director was appointed at the school, and in 2010, the school reverted back to the normal inspection regime of the Inspectorate. Since then, the school has further improved and won several prizes for their excellent education. The Inspector's interventions have put in motion a chain of actions and reactions that made staff members highly motivated to improve. Also, the parents played an important role by supporting the school, instead of turning their back on it.

Figure 4.2. Virtuous cycle in school B



School C

The director of school C has been in that position for the last 10 years. The school board has provided the director wide discretionary powers to manage the school. The director is highly motivated to keep up with modern education methods and standards and has introduced a series of changes in the school. Teachers are required to follow one course after the other to be able to implement new methods. For some – in particular older staff – this is too much effort. They feel overburdened with yet another new programme and feel they lack the time to actually teach well in the class room

In addition, staff turnover has been low. The Inspectorate noticed that the high level of stability in staff composition has led to a culture within which staff members no longer critically review each other's work. Enthusiasm for teaching is also lacking.

As a result of all these factors, the Inspectorate's negative assessment of the school did not come as a surprise. The unexpected aspect of the assessment was that the school was not considered weak, but very weak. The latter had a large impact on the teachers. They felt their proactive consultation with the Inspectorate was a positive action badly punished by the Inspectorate.

When the assessment was made public, the school board and director hired an external consultant to help analyse the problems in the school. The management of the school was part and parcel of this analysis. However, the director and the board were exempt from criticism and were not considered causes of current problems. The consultant successfully assisted the school in tackling its problems regarding the quality of education. This period has been described by the respondents as "hard but necessary." A few teachers could not adjust to new circumstances and left either voluntarily or involuntarily. After two years of hard work, the school is no longer considered weak and has reverted back to the normal inspection regime (so-called "basis arrangement") of the Inspectorate.

However, problems still exist. Another vicious cycle appears on the horizon: The image of the school is badly damaged by the categorization as very weak. The school has not been successful in regaining parents' trust. On the contrary, the number of students continues to decrease. It is highly likely the school will not meet the minimum number required for a city school and may therefore be closed after all.

Figure 4.3. Vicious cycle in school C

School D

In 2007 the Inspectorate assessed this school as very weak. The Inspectorate could not assess the average scores of students, because the school was unable to provide the necessary information. On top of that, all school scores were below average on most other indicators. The parents and the school distrusted the Inspectorate's assessment. They assumed the school's alternative philosophy (it is a Waldorf school) may be part of the negative assessment rather than the assessment results alone, as the school believes that child development is a broader concept than just test results. However, given that assessment cannot be dismissed, the school board decided to initiate changes in the school to focus more on end results of students. The period following was hectic and even attracted the attention of national media.

The parents, however, did not agree with the proposed changes. According to media reports, some parents even threatened teachers and board members.

Around the same time, local government in this big city started a school improvement project and made funding available for schools that wanted to join the program. The school board decided to take part, and in 2008 the school received local government funding which was supposed to last for two years. Unfortunately, disagreements arose between the school and the local alderman involved about how local government funding was being spent. The alderman subsequently decided to stop subsidising the school. In addition, he demanded the school return the funding it had already received. This caused serious financial problems as the school board was unable to repay funds.

During this hectic period, the director quit, and the board appointed five successive interim-managers in a short period of time. Eventually, the entire board quit as well. The newly appointed board selected a new school director for a period of two years. Around the same time, the Inspectorate returned to the school to assess improvements made. Given that this had not happened, one option would have been for the Inspectorate to refer the school to the Minister and advise school closure. However, the Inspectorate decided to provide the school with a second chance given that the new director had just started in his job in the school.

Since then things have gone well. The school invested in the quality of the teachers, and is now measuring and using the test results of the students. Some of the parents still disagreed and took their children out of the school, but the majority of parents had confidence in the school and its new leadership. Since 2011, the school has reverted back to the normal inspection regime of the Inspectorate. The biggest challenge that remains for the school board is getting school finances back on track.

Figure 4.4. Vicious cycle in school D

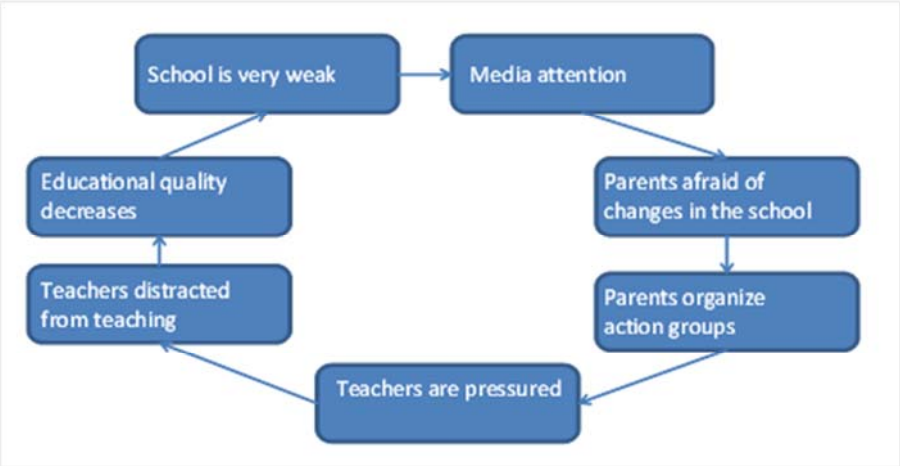
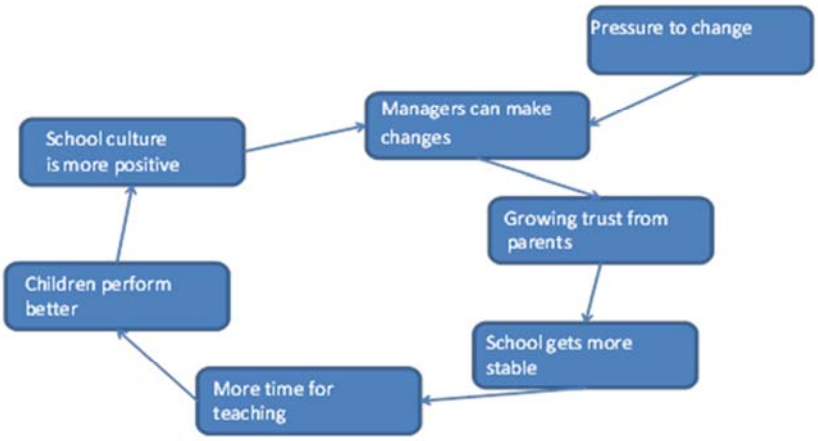


Figure 4.5. Virtuous cycle in school D



School E

Although School E was classified as very weak in 2011, its educational performance had been sub-standard for at least five years prior, according to its new director. The last director was able to hide from the Inspectorate that the teachers did not teach the children but instead let them do anything they wanted, abusing the school's Montessori philosophy to legitimate this lack of ambition. The consequent meagre progress of the children was being explained away by references to their weak socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. For the same reason, the teachers did not set high expectations of them and did not stimulate them to improve themselves.

When the director quit in 2008, the board chose to use the opportunity to turn the school around. It fired the deputy and appointed an interim-manager to carve a path towards improvement. The board wanted to eliminate the Montessori pedagogy and aimed for a marked improvement in the quality of the teachers. When the new interim director set out to achieve this, she did not initially obtain the trust of the parents and the teaching staff. Being of native Dutch descent in an immigrant-dominated community, she

felt she was considered an outsider. Her mandate for change was considered threatening. With the support of the board, she persevered and managed to overhaul the teaching staff considerably. A cast of new, young, and energetic teachers supported the new concept of the school, which called for a more hands-on role of teachers in the classroom.

Under the new regime, the children get more personal attention and are being challenged more. Also, the parents are being drawn into the life of the school, by letting them sit in class and see the new teachers at work. This has won their confidence, and now many of them are actively involved in school activities. They have also asked the board to continue the appointment of the new the director, a clear vote of support for the good work she was doing.

Despite some early yields from the many positive changes that were taking place, the Inspectorate again assessed the school as very weak. This was not unexpected, as the assessment simply came too early in the process for the true impact of the changes to have taken full hold. The assessment outcome came as a big blow to the teachers, who felt the school's turn around process had been ignored or snubbed by the inspectors. Despite this, the school's continuing positive changes, implemented with the help of experts of the flying brigade.

Figure 4.6. Virtuous cycle in school E

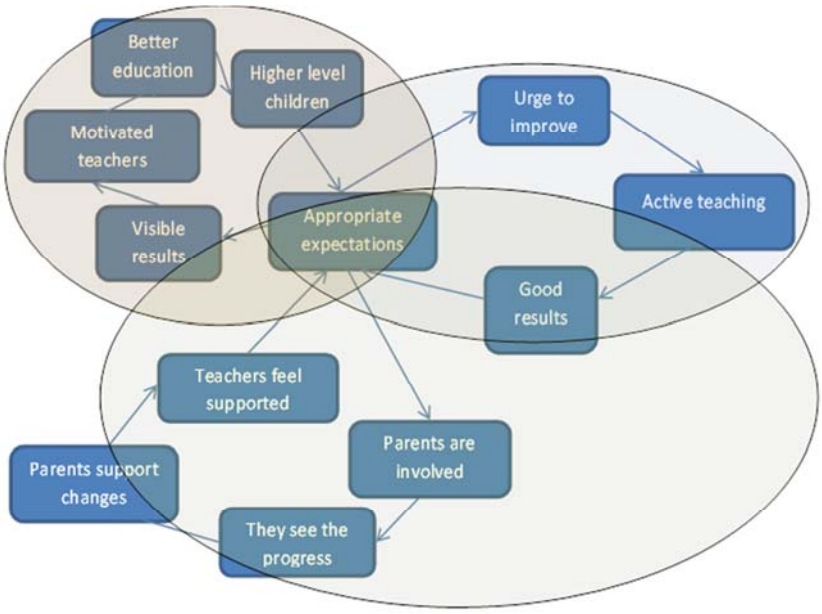
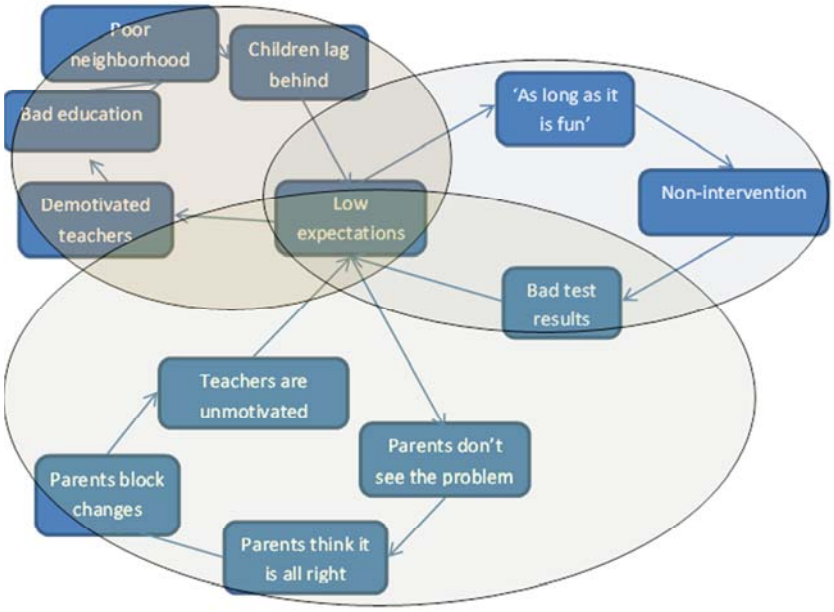


Figure 4.7. Vicious cycle in school E



Cyclical dynamics

Clearly these schools are all unique, both in terms of their background and also in their response to the Inspectorate's label of very weak. However, they all share a common element in that they demonstrate the cyclical dynamic that may follow interventions in very weak schools. The case studies suggest that there is no simple linear flow of cause and effect driving the "upward" or "downward" movement of educational performance at the schools. This implies that interventions to enhance educational performance need to take into account the complexity of these systems. Even simply the assignment of the label very weak can elicit a positive response from one school and a negative response from another, depending on the local context, history and staffing situation at the school. At schools A and C, many parents removed their children from school, while at schools B and E, they seemed to become more involved in the school. The same pattern of differentiated responses to Inspectorate assessments and interventions was discernible at the team level. At schools B and D, the teaching staff "switched off" and even reacted angrily; yet at school B, the teachers did start to make changes in the school following the inspection/intervention, while at school D they essentially resisted and fought to retain the status quo at the school. At some schools, being handed the very weak stigma created division within the staff, or between staff and management; at other schools the same trigger served to bond the team together in defiant determination.

Clearly, Inspectorate interventions of this kind have a big impact. What they do is set in motion a range of possible self-reinforcing cycles, for example a first wave of exit behaviour by parents which triggers more exit behaviour by a wider group of parents; or an initiative of a small group of parents who step up to the plate, which resonates throughout the parents and caregiver community and attracts more voluntary engagement. These effects are neither linear nor planned; they are partly unintended, circular processes. Such positive and negative cycles can co-exist within and around a school (i.e. in student, staff, management and parent behaviour).

In other words, our cases suggest that the policy interventions in the contexts of weak and very weak schools follow the patterns of cyclical dynamics. The cases do not show evidence of a linear pattern but of loops: interventions have effects, but these effects cause new dynamics, new effects, and so on and so

forth. The Dutch approach is highly effective, but it remains unclear what element(s) of the set of interventions is responsible for that success. It may well be that interventions work well, but for different reasons than the policy theory suggests: do teachers perform better because they learn new skills and methods, or is it the professional attention, and the confidence they gain from that, that is decisive for their performance in the class room? This is a common finding in complex systems, as literature on complexity suggests (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2006). Indirect consequences – second or third order – are often more important than first order direct consequences, and are more robust (Vermaak, 2009). Steering in a complex system therefore requires a careful application of the cyclical perspective. The remainder of this chapter will describe how applying the cyclical perspective may improve the outcome of interventions, which in turn may add to the robustness of effects and help prevent school from failing.

Circular dynamics and multi-level governance

The policy programme to reduce the number of (very) weak schools in the Netherlands can be best understood as an intervention in system dynamics that works at *three levels*.

The first level is that of the *macro-level*. Policies do not tell schools *how* they should go about their job of educating young children; instead, they are entirely built around outcomes: the central government prescribes *what* children are supposed to be learning in school and how and when that is measured. For schools, board, location-managers, individual teachers and even parents, this provides clarity about what education outcomes are and can be expected.

The second level is that of the *micro-level* of individual schools that fail to attain the key performance indicators. For these individual schools, attention is simultaneously scaled up and sized down. Policies become personal as inspectors visit the schools and interact directly with the actors involved in their local context. Attention is scaled up, in the sense that inspectors look far beyond the original indicators. They literally take a much closer look at what is happening in the school and enter the classroom to see how the teachers are doing their job and individual children are encountered. The intention of this localized approach is two-fold: to get a clear, rich, and direct image of the state-of-affairs at a specific school, but also to provide a strong incentive for the school to put in a last-ditch effort to improve performance. Some schools manage to reverse their non-compliance. Others do not. And that is when the third level of policy intervention in the schools' system dynamics comes into play.

The third level is where this study is focused: the Inspectorate issues the label weak or very weak to the school and sets in motion a chain of events that eventually should lead to the improvement of the school. However, although most schools eventually recover –some only in the nick of time, shortly before the two-year recovery-time has passed – they do so very differently. This variation in response to essentially the same incentive can be conceptualized as the difference in thinking in linear patterns or in loops. This explains why unexpected effects occur, for instance, why actions to improve the quality of teachers may actually worsen their performance. Or why parents who accepted the deteriorating weakness of the school before it was formalized as weak opt out when the school starts a trajectory that is bound to solve the problem parents used to accept or neglect. It also explains why many effects are disproportionate to the interventions to which they are related. Such effects are unexplainable in a linear model while they are perfectly normal in a circular one.

What is interesting if one looks at the case studies is that circular dynamics not only occur within layers, but that there is also interaction between vicious and virtuous circles on various layers. For example, interventions in teams may well affect the motivation of parents to step into the school and the trust in the school to guarantee quality for the children. In this way, an intervention targeted at teachers may strongly affect parents, while a meeting with parents can have a massive empowering effect on the

teaching staff. Intervention at the management or board level may cause unexpected effects at the level of the staff or even the parents. Interventions cause effects in levels of the system that are thought to be unrelated to it.

A frequent example from the interviews was that of the professional support for school-teachers at very weak schools. These teams are intended to solve the problem of underdeveloped or outdated skills and methods of teachers, but in some cases merely cause stress amongst teachers and makes them uncertain about their competency as a teacher, which translates into stress and poor performance in the class-room. Students notice and are affected by it. This is picked up on in turn by parents who express their worries about the way the teacher is handling the matter, which further frustrates the already pressured teacher: "Why don't they let us go about our work, don't they notice the immense effort we are putting into it?" While all of this is going on, teachers are under constant pressure to raise standards and make pupils reach the minimum scores on tests. They cannot afford a single slipup, because the Inspectorate will only raise the weak-status if all performance indicators are measured as above average. Tensions rise and some teachers report in sick, etc. The school is locked in a vicious cycle that cannot easily be reversed.

Although some examples of this vicious dynamic followed from (at least in time) issuing the label very weak to schools, the exact opposite was also observed. In some schools teachers flourished, as they finally felt taken seriously, enjoyed improving their skills, felt empowered by the new methods they learned, and saw tensions in the class room fade away when pupils responded well to teachers' renewed confidence. Teachers were encouraged by the quick wins and by the positive feedback that they got from parents. They felt recognized for their hard work and finally felt strong enough to encounter in dialogues with their colleagues: "Why are you doing that? I think you should try something different." In schools where feedback used to be merely a word, it became a standard practice in professional dialogues between the same teachers that used to leave each other alone. The staff entered a virtuous cycle that did not only improve immediate results in the classroom, but also reached a self-sustaining culture of improvement and professional quality. Not only were results improved– reflected in improving test scores – but the improvement itself was extremely shockproof and resilient Notice not only the self-sustaining effect of the cycle, but also the pace of it. Organizational culture and small-group social rules are both assumed to be deeply ingrained in an organizations' or a groups' DNA, but they changed entirely in weeks. People moved beyond social rules that they had hung on to for years – and some even longer. And once they had done that, they could no longer imagine how they had ever done things differently. Effects were not merely considered to be unexpected, they were impossible. And although culture does not change because of a course in methodology, in some cases, apparently, it can.

At the heart of the concepts of the loop is the self-sustaining and even self-propelling nature of the process: loops have a life of their own. They speed up, fade out, intensify, change nature or divert in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways. They are often set in motion by some sort of external intervention, but go well beyond that once the loops set in. The choice of parents to stay in or opt out of a weak school is one of the best examples of that: parents do not simply – and causally – decide to opt out or stay in as a response to the issuing of the label very weak, but look at others for clues about what to do. If most stay, nobody leaves. If some leave early, everyone is likely to go. Such processes are non-linear in the sense that they follow a tipping-point style curve. Schools that were literally full in June may be all but empty in September. Effects do not end when a policy is terminated. Long after the Inspectorate lifts the label of very weak and schools are considered average (or even strong performers), their image may remain badly damaged. One of the cases is the ultimate example of this: it has long recovered from the weak status and has been winning prizes for its educational approach, but is quickly losing students to other schools. Not because the quality is bad, but because people remember or know hearsay about something that was once wrong.

CHAPTER 5.

REFLECTIONS: POLICY IN A CIRCULAR PERSPECTIVE

This chapter reflects on some of the conceptual lessons learned from the Dutch approach. After discussing the essence of that approach – an approach that is by no means limited to education systems – the question of what the circular perspective can add to the understanding of steering multi-level systems is discussed. The chapter closes by listing the strategic issues that all actors face in a multi-level system that follows a cyclical logic.

Multi-level governance: The essence of the Dutch approach

One of the instruments that central policy institutions use to steer in multi-level systems is measurement: central policy actors formulate more or less varied sets of performance indicators and/or parameters for risks and monitor how the system is doing. These measures are more than an indicator of what is happening in the system: they are incentives for actors to act according to the goals of a policy or a set of policies. Expectations toward outcomes are clearly communicated by the policy level to the actors on the local level and in schools. At this highest level, steering is deliberately distant. As long as schools perform to the basic key performance indicators they will hardly encounter any direct attention from either the Ministry or the Inspectorate. If they don't, the Inspectorate operates very locally and personally. Inspectors visit the school, observe and assess the performance of teachers in the classroom, evaluate the management-structure and take a close and local look at how the school is doing. That leads to a judgment about the school and, eventually, to the issuing of the label weak or very weak to a particular school.

After that, schools face a tough challenge to return to an acceptable level of quality. Once again, the level of quality to be achieved is transparent. Schools know where to go, and, furthermore, schools are offered help in getting there often not by the Inspectorate themselves, but by a range of specialized organizations and programs that offer assistance in improving. Also, schools can enter communities of practice, where schools and teachers help each other to improve. In other words, schools will have to change themselves, but they are given tools with which they can do that.

This two-tier approach is the key to the Dutch system: macro-measurement at the systems level is combined with a localized micro-measurement at the level of the schools that do not comply with, or otherwise stand out negatively from, the general performance indicators. Schools have maximum autonomy, but the policy centre can step in extremely closely once the pre-determined conditions for such a direct intervention are met. And if that is the case, the local approach seems to work. Almost all schools improve, albeit at high costs and a significant amount of time lost for the children involved.

From a linear to a cyclical perspective

Part of this approach is a strong policy belief that schools can be stimulated and held accountable by means of performance measurement. The exploratory study at hand suggests that this view of government steering needs modification. Steering interventions impact on more than their intended targets. Further, even if the numbers show positive results, as in the case of Dutch education policy where most very weak schools improve within two years, this does not tell the full story. A positive cycle of quality improvement

in the school's internal processes can be triggered alongside a negative cycle of a bad image and parents leaving the school. By taking into account these second-order effects and amplification dynamics of government steering, smarter regulatory intervention strategies can be designed.

The findings of this case study suggest that in order to fill in these gaps and to increase the overall effectiveness of the curative approach – in The Netherlands but also for countries that want to learn from the Dutch approach – it is important to apply a different perspective to questions such as: "What makes a school weak?" and: "How can weak schools be improved?"

In a linear causal approach, events are characterized as the logical effects of policy interventions. Actions cause effects, such as a change in behaviour by actors in the system. Such effects are supposed to be stable and, to at least some extent, enduring. They can be generalised to other contexts, as long as the conditions there are the same. Put simply, what works in one school should work in similar other schools, as long as a minimal set of requirements for a specific intervention are met. Policy interventions are often formulated in this linear fashion. Measures, instruments, and attention are allocated in policy planning cycles that apply this linear reasoning to the systems in which they want to intervene. In most cases a predefined and proven set of interventions is utilized. However, linear thinking is not the same as a "one-size-fits-all" approach. On the contrary, it implies a careful study of the condition of the system, the specific characteristics of the problems, the variety of actors involved, and other possibly disruptive factors in the system. Linearity is not the same as generality or even simplification.

As a perspective in policy planning, linear causality has some key characteristics. Success and failure are perceived exclusively as the achievement of the pre-defined and intended outcomes. Not only is it hard to pinpoint effects – positive and negative – to exact causes, it is also a limited view (Twist & Verheul, 2009). It narrows the perspective down to what was expected beforehand and leaves out or undervalues everything else. It sees only what it looks at, and only registers the quantity of predefined outcomes. It also simplifies the dynamics of complex systems to stable and predictable mechanisms. These often have an intuitive logic, but are essentially unpredictable and uncertain on the longer term. In many policy systems, as in the cases analysed for this report, short term effects often wear out fast, or generate whole new problems in the system, as actors adapt to what is thrown at them from the policy intervention. The cases show that the linear perspective is vulnerable as a policy theory for at least two reasons:

First, what works in general terms, may play out very differently if applied in different doses and in different contexts. A bit more of the same may produce entirely different and even contrary outcomes, which suggests a parabolic relation between cause and effect.

Second, what may work well at some point in time in a system, may work out differently later on and this may not be a slow, steady decrease or increase in effects, but can just as well be a sudden shift in impact and/or effects. Actors may learn, can be pushed beyond a point, and other sorts of non-linear outcomes may occur with the effects of instruments being cyclical, and the loop of the cycles often unpredictable and instable. Effects can be stable for some time and all of a sudden fade out or change dramatically.

The circular perspective for policy makers in multi-level systems

This study has analysed five schools in depth. Therefore, it would be too soon to draw robust conclusions about the interaction between different government interventions and circular dynamics. However, some preliminary statements about the intervention repertoire of the different actors in the educational system can be made. Table 5.1 illustrates these repertoires and the relevant strategic questions.

Table 5.1. Stakeholders, repertoires and strategic questions

Stakeholder	Strategic questions
Minister of Education	• What is the appropriate balance between central government steering, local government steering and school autonomy in achieving and sustaining school performance? • How to respect staff professionalism within schools and yet effectively mitigate the risk of schools failing to meet performance standards?
Inspectorate of Education	• When dealing with very weak schools, what mix of assessing/reporting and advising/directing should be adopted? • How to prevent 'regulatory capture' when embarking upon a trajectory of proactive engagement in which regulatees may come to depend upon Inspectorate expertise?
Council of Primary Education	• How to balance roles as representative of school boards to the ministry and arms-length resource for schools?
Local Government (Alderman for Education)	• Stay within formal mandate and not take active involvement in school quality issues, or go beyond mandate and carve out a role? • What mix of incentives, sanctions and other policy instruments can be used in performing such a role, and what are their potential risks, benefits and the conditions for their effective application? • If opting for active involvement, how to weigh the interests of the students and parents at individual (very weak) schools, with the broader local public interest in optimal use of education resources?
School board	• How much autonomy to grant to school directors, particularly of weak/very weak schools? • When and for what reasons should the board 'step in' and take a more hands-on stance?
School directors	• Accept or decline own responsibility as location leader for the school's educational outcomes? • What mix of loyalty/voice towards School Board and the Inspectorate? • How to interpret and manage the 'stigma' of being assessed as very weak: as a threat or as an opportunity? • How to manage communication with parents, media and other stakeholders about school's status as (very) weak? • How to maintain/strengthen staff morale?
Teachers	• Accept or decline own responsibility as teacher and staff member for the school's overall educational quality? • How to deal with the 'stigma' of being associated with a 'very weak' school? Fight or flight?
Parents/students	• Accept or decline own responsibility as parent and 'co-producer' of educational quality? • What mix of loyalty, voice or exit vis-a-vis school when it has been assessed as very weak? • Work through the issue alone or organize with other parents?

The Ministry of Education can steer schools by making policy and setting clear rules and key performance indicators for the schools. Another powerful tool is the funding of schools and the development of financial or other supportive measures. This way, from a distance, the Ministry can have a large impact on schools on the micro level. By determining general rules for schools, it becomes clear to schools how they have to perform. On the other hand, applying general rules means that failing schools in very different positions and contexts receive the same intervention, for example, the label of very weak. The lens of circular dynamics shows that it will never be certain how this intervention will work out for individual schools. For example, if a failing school is improving, the label very weak can be a impediment

to this improvement, because of the negative image imparted to the school. This can either motivate the school's staff to perform better, or it can demotivate them, when they feel that their improvements are not recognised by the Inspectorate. Therefore, when general rules apply, local contacts and interventions are necessary to prevent vicious cycles.

Individual attention is given by the inspectors. They can intervene at a local level by taking the context and position of the school into account, and use informal contacts to inform or advise the school. But there is a risk in this, too. Inspectors have to prevent regulatory capture when advising the school and embarking on a trajectory of more proactive engagement with those being regulated who could benefit from their local and system-wide expertise. This means that inspectors have to make strategic choices between assessing from a distance, by using a set of fixed indicators, and being up, close, and personal. Their intervention repertoire consists of assessing the schools, based on a fixed set of indicators, and reporting (very) weak schools to the Ministry of Education. Depending on the school's situation, the inspectors can make a choice in how they approach the school.

While the local government cannot intervene directly into the schools, they still have the possibility to intervene in a different way. Our cases have shown that local government can improve the quality of education in schools by making funding and assistance available at the local level. This way they can provide additional help to failing schools over and above what is already present. Although we have seen many good examples of this, more help isn't always beneficial. When a local government uses its own set of indicators to assess the school's quality, this blurs the image of performance indicators with which the schools have to comply. Increased attention from local government for failing schools can also damage the image of these schools, thereby setting off a vicious cycle.

School boards are being held directly responsible for the quality of their school(s). School boards have to make a strategic choice to decentralise power to the school management, or to intervene themselves. In the Netherlands, there is a trend of boards becoming more involved in the schools and starting to monitor their performance regularly. If a school becomes (very) weak, the school board can intervene by hiring and firing personnel, and by hiring support. These interventions can have a major impact on the school's performance, either positive or negative, depending on the context of the school. Therefore, it is important that school boards are aware of this context and learn from other schools that have been in the same situation before.

The influence of school directors largely depends on the autonomy they receive from the school boards. Although there is a trend of school boards becoming more involved in their school(s), in many of the schools we have studied, the directors had a great degree of autonomy to manage the school. In this case, directors can intervene most directly in the school. In agreement with the school board, they have the power to hire and lay off personnel and invest in teachers and methods. When a school becomes very weak, it often happens that there are changes in the staff and methods. This can be a necessary intervention, setting off a virtuous cycle of better education, improving students and results, improving the image of the school, attracting new students, and so forth. But hiring new teachers or changing the methods also means that time and energy is needed to adjust to the new situation, or that conflicts arise between advocates of the old and the new. Interventions at the local level have a direct impact on the system dynamics and all the factors involved, so these interventions cannot just be based on best practices, but should also take into account the different factors and developments at the school. Another important aspect of the director's repertoire is the contact with parents. As we have seen, parents are a crucial factor in the system dynamics around failing schools, because they have to make a strategic decision to either exit or be loyal to the school. Parents can get very involved in schools, that way helping to improve the quality of the education, but can also leave the school and trigger a vicious cycle. A balance has to be found between alarming the parents, and creating a protective climate for the schools to improve.

CHAPTER 6.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS SMART INTERVENTIONS

"All's well that ends well." The approach seems to work: almost all very weak and weak schools improve, albeit at high cost and in precious time for the children involved. Overall, while each year most schools labelled as weak or very weak improve, new schools are receiving the label weak as well. The number of very weak schools has moved down slowly from slightly less than 120 schools in 2009 to less than 100 in 2011. This means that the number of very weak schools in 2011 was less than 1%, already meeting the objective set for 2012.

The system works for most schools, but definitely not for all; some schools do not recover or indeed get worse, in spite of all the effort that is put into improving them. The results of interventions (in this case by the Inspectorate) are difficult to predict, mostly because of subtle differences between schools and their contexts that can be neither completely known nor affected by the national level.

This case study demonstrates the cyclical dynamic that may follow interventions in very weak schools. Interventions trigger virtuous and vicious cycles of attitudes and behaviour among all stakeholders in the school. However the interventions by the Ministry and the Inspectorate are based on a linear policy philosophy: X (low intensity or outdated modes of teaching of maths and English) leads to Y (weak performance). In practice, the X-Y nexus is only part of the dynamic that is being influenced by these types of interventions. There are often chains of causes and consequences that interact in a circular pattern, leading to unexpected outcomes and self-reinforcing amplification mechanisms.

Those circular dynamics do not only occur within layers but also between various layers. Different layers affect each other, and often in unexpected ways. Some measures backfire, while others quickly spread through the system. The case study examines the dynamics of this in more detail, focussing on five schools once labelled as very weak by the Inspectorate of Education, two of which have since been normalised; one that has climbed back towards a weak level and two that did not improve.

Key recommendations

The Dutch system of risk-based inspections has clearly shown curative effectiveness. However, the findings of the case study suggest that it can be improved further.

Minimise the recovery-time of schools

Even if the school improves well before the two-year time limit, children remain exposed to very poor levels of education for an extensive period of time.

Focus on prevention as well as on improving weak and very weak schools

While most very weak and weak schools improve, other schools are in turn becoming very weak and weak. This suggests that the pre-emptive effects of the policy are limited. Now that the curative problem is largely tackled, it is time to focus on prevention.

Balance this approach targeted at failing schools with a more general focus on improving all schools

Clearly, the risk-based assessment method is effective at weeding out existing weak schools. However, this focus on weak schools risks losing sight of improving the system as a whole. It is important

to complement it with initiatives to improve schools that are doing (moderately) well and to stimulate excellence.

Clarify and separate the different roles of the inspectorate

There is tension between the two roles that the inspectorate plays. On the one hand it needs to be at some distance to be seen as an impartial observer, while on the other hand it must be deeply involved with schools labelled as very weak. The tension between these roles was confusing for some of the respondents in the case study.

Use a circular model to develop smart interventions

Complex systems cannot be controlled, but they can be steered. Complexity implies emergence, non-linearity, and for that matter a relatively high degree of "unexpectedness", but that does not mean that patterns and regularities are entirely absent. The problem with most theory and/or practical repertoire for steering complex systems is the absence of a perspective that is able to see them. In a sense, what is often called an unexpected result is merely the product of a flawed lens.

The case study suggests that policy makers can use a circular model to take a second look at their existing repertoire and analyse how their current set of policy interventions works in a complex system with vicious and virtuous circles. This will:

- Lead to new insight into why and how some interventions seem to work surprisingly well;
- Show why some methods work less well, but it will probably also indicate that there are previously unnoticed indirect effects that are outside of the original intentions of the intervention but represent value to the system;
- Show that some interventions do not work at all and that the capital that goes into them may be better invested in other areas of the system;
- Put some interventions on the radar that come from other areas, other policy domains, or otherwise unrelated incentives and that may be beneficial to very weak schools;
- Be an important element in developing smart interventions in multi-level systems.

NOTES

1. www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/gces.

2. Twenty-five interviews in total.

3. In Dutch: de PO-raad, a buffer organisation that both represents primary schools at the national level and plays a role in governance of the sector.

4. Central Bureau for Statistics, www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/cijfers/default.htm (accessed April 2013).

5 Worldbank, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx (accessed April 2013).

6. All data in this paragraph are from the Central Bureau for Statistics (http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/dossiers/allochtonen/nieuws/default.htm (accessed May 2013).

7. Note the absence of teacher unions in the table: while there are teacher unions in the Netherlands, these play a marginal role in policy making compared to other OECD countries.

8. NRC Handelsblad, 09-10-2008. *Wethouders: sluit slechte scholen.*

9. NRC Handelsblad, 10-02-2011. *Zeer zwakke school moet straks binnen één jaar sluiten*. NRC Handelsblad, 10-09-2009. *Slechte scholen krijgen straf, met nieuwe wet kunnen zwakke scholen financieel worden gekort.* De Telegraaf, 21-11-2008. *Eerder ingrijpen op zwakke school; 'Al bij opstart kijken naar kwaliteit'.*

10. De Telegraaf, 16-05-2008. *Moslimschool zakt naar nul. Citaat wethouder Asscher: Ik vind het onacceptabel dat kinderen onderwijs krijgen op zeer zwakke scholen.*

11. Beter Onderwijs Nederland (BON).

12. See in particular pp. 8, 34, and 50. For a more thorough analysis of the Quality Agenda see: Noordegraaf et al. (2010).

13. House of Representatives, Parliamentary years 2008-2009, 31 700 VIII, nr. 126

14 In Dutch called: "Goed onderwijs, goed bestuur". Staatscourant, *Toezichtskader PO/VO 2009, aanpassing 17 mei 2011*, nr. 15145. See also: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2009b), *Memorie van Toelichting wetsvoorstel 'Goed onderwijs goed bestuur'*, Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2008-2009 [Explanatory Memorandum bill 'Good education good governance ', House of Representatives, Parliamentary years 2008-2009], 31 828, nr. 3

15. The Dutch term is: "preventief toezicht" (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011). Recently it has been announced that the current period of two years within which schools need to have improved the quality of education may be reduced to one year in the future.

16. Staatscourant, *Toezichtskader PO/VO 2009, aanpassing 17 mei 2011*, nr. 15145.

17. Waldorf education (also known as Steiner education) is a humanistic approach to pedagogy based on the educational philosophy of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy.

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APPENDIX 1.

LIST OF RESPONDENTS

School A	School manager
	School board representative
	Teacher
	Parent
	Inspector
School B	School manager
	School board representative
	Teacher
	Parent
	Inspector
School C	School manager
	School board representative
	Teacher
	Parent
	Inspector
School D	School manager
	School board representative
	Teacher
	Parent
	Inspector
School E	School manager
	School board representative
	Teacher
	Parent
	Inspector
Inspectorate	2 strategic policy makers
Ministry of Education	2 strategic policy makers

APPENDIX 2. TOPIC LIST FOR SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A. External factors and their relation with the assessment of the school as "very weak"

- Socio-demographic factors in the neighbourhood and village / town / region where the school is localised
- Composition of the student population, i.e.:
  - (fluctuations in) the number of students in the last 10 years
  - Socio-economical and socio-cultural background of the children and parents
  - Percentage of children with disabilities
- Type of education: public, Christian, Islamic, special education?
- Development in student population and composition after the school was assessed as "very weak"

B. Internal factors and their relation with the assessment of the school as "very weak"

- Functioning of the school management:
  - Quality of the school management
  - Background and professionalism of the manager(s)
  - Recruitment of the manager(s)
  - Leadership style of the manager(s)
  - Co-operation between school managers
- School policy
  - Educational philosophy of the school
  - Support for the school policy under managers, school staff and parent community?
  - Satisfaction about the amount of available resources (i.e. financial, human resources, support systems) and the way these are used
- Local governance
  - Governance structure in which the school is embedded
  - Planning and accountability relationships between school management and the school board
  - Quality of co-operation, communication and mutual trust between the school management and the school board
  - Division of supervision and management functions within the school
- Team
  - Quality of the teachers
  - Degree of stability in staff composition
  - Team motivation and cohesion
  - Degree of absenteeism
  - Degree of agreement within the team about school policy
  - Degree of support for the functioning of the school management

C. Interventions by the Ministry / Inspectorate of Education

- Steering model
  - Opinion about the Ministry's policy of steering on results and making the school boards responsible for the way these should be achieved
  - Experiences with this policy in own practice
- Interventions by the Inspectorate:
  - Division of roles and responsibilities between schools, school boards and Inspectorate (i.e. trust - control, advising - judging)
  - Experiences with the visits of the inspectorate:
    - Focus
    - Timing
    - Thoroughness
    - Fairness
  - Degree of agreement with the outcome of the Inspectorate's study on the educational quality by relevant parties
  - Implications for the school of the assessment as "very weak" by the Inspectorate. Effect on:
    - Own motivation
    - Team spirit in the school
    - Motivation and quality of school teachers
    - Considerations by parents / caretakers
    - Sense of urgency to realize improvements
    - Availability of resources / help from other parties
- Actions
  - Interventions by the Inspectorate
  - Help from other parties (i.e. analysing teams, flying brigades, twinning partners, quality improvement facilities of the Province)
  - Measures taken or to be taken by the school to improve the educational quality and restore confidence
  - Structural changes (i.e. school fusion, management structure, collaboration with other schools, re-organization)
    - Cultural changes (i.e. administrative relationships, leadership style, team spirit, communication)
    - Environmental changes (i.e. investment in the neighbourhood, looking for other students, parent support)
    - Gaining new resources
    - Autonomy: extending or decreasing the influence of the school board / inspectorate.
    - Seeking advice, training, hiring new staff

D. Other

- Other remarks: i.e. other comments or topics, suggestions for further interviews or essential documents.

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