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# Dutch boards governing multiple schools: navigating between autonomy and expectations

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last decade the governance of primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands has by no means become simpler. This paper sketches recent policy developments and their consequences for the leadership of Boards of Multiple Schools (BMSs) and their school leaders. Thereof we describe the challenges BMSs in the Netherlands currently face to enhance educational quality. However, the existence of a wide variety of school board types and a lack of research into BMSs prevent a solid evidence base on how the leadership of school boards contributes to improving the quality of education in the schools they run. As the interaction between school leaders and boards is understudied we make a plea for a research agenda that does justice to challenges for school leadership in multi-school systems.

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## 1. Introduction

If there would be an award for the most complex governance system in education internationally, the Netherlands would be a very strong contender. One of the ‘unique selling points’ of the Dutch education system is its dual nature. Both publicly and privately run schools are government-funded as long as they meet statutory requirements. Equal financial footing and freedom of education are laid down in section 23 of the Dutch Constitution, introduced in 1917.<sup>1</sup> Section 23 of the Dutch constitution can be summarised as follows (Mentink and Vermeulen 2001): Education is a subject for which continued care by the government is obligatory. Both public and private providers are eligible for public equal funding when the funding requirements are met. Consequently, the provision of education is free under the condition that adequate education is provided, which is ensured by the Inspectorate. Freedom of education was intended to protect the educational rights of both school

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organisations and parents and pupils against far reaching government interventions in education (Hooge 2017). In fact, the Dutch embraced the idea that education is an essentially contested concept (Education Council 2012; Gallie 1956). Hence, the 1917 constitutional change spurred the establishment of a large variety of schools and, therewith, a large variety of autonomous school boards in the Netherlands. From a policy take, section 23 of the constitution is crafted as a balancing act between centralised and decentralised steering.

In international comparison (OECD 2016), the Dutch education system grants a high level of autonomy to school boards. Dutch schools (and thus their boards) are formally more autonomous than schools in any other country. In no other country are so many of the key decisions on education taken at school board level: over 90% compared to an OECD average of 34% (OECD 2018). Concretely, school boards receive almost all of their governmental funding in block grants, with the freedom to decide over personnel matters, assessments, curriculum and the general internal organisation (Hooge and Honingh 2014). Consequently, school board's decisions, spending and choices differ (McKinsey 2020; Heijsters, Van der Ploeg, and Weijers 2020). The characteristics of the Dutch dual education system enable a large variation among school boards regarding size, governance, and educational leadership. Following this observation, one cannot but conclude that there is no such thing as 'the typical Dutch school board'. Given contemporary interest in the performance of education systems and the role of Boards of Multiple Schools (BMSs), studying school boards in the Netherlands is quite informative since 61% of school boards in the Netherlands govern more than one school (Onderwijs in cijfers 2019). Additionally, Dutch school boards sit largely outside any framework for local democratic oversight.

In this paper, we will focus on characteristics of the Dutch school boards that govern multiple schools, and the challenges these school boards face given their legal responsibility for educational quality and improvement. We pose the somewhat provocative question whether there is enough solid evidence to provide scientific advice to school boards, school leaders and policymakers on how to improve the quality of education via BMSs given the variety of boards in a multi-layered system?

To answer this question, the outline of this paper is relatively straightforward. We, first, provide relevant characteristics of Dutch school boards and explain our focus on BMSs. Second, we illustrate recent policy developments concerning educational governance and leadership in the Netherlands. Third, we illustrate the current position of school boards and school leaders. Fourth, we question what school leadership can do to enhance educational quality in such a complex and diverse system. We conclude with a reflection on lessons that can be learned from the Dutch system and suggestions for a research agenda on BMSs.

## 2. School boards in the Dutch education system

Historically, public schools were run by local authorities, while private schools were governed by school boards consisting of local dignitaries and parents. Hence, private schools were not governed by professionals, but by parents and respected individuals from the same religious or ideological background (Education Council 2010a). Both the local councils and the private boards oversaw the schools they ran, but left the day-to-day decision-making at the school level. Local councils could oversee multiple schools; private boards tended to oversee only one school.

Over the last two decades, however, a major shift in governance has taken place. National policy promoted that non-professional school boards governing one school be merged into professional school boards governing a number of schools (Education Council 2008). Such BMSs were considered to be more professional and financially stable (OECD 2016, 138; Education Council 2010a). These professional school boards were no longer expected to only oversee the schools they govern, but were now explicitly expected to take the responsibility for day-to-day decision-making. In 2009, school boards were additionally made formally accountable for the organisational and educational quality of the schools they govern (Waslander 2010). As a consequence of these policy shifts, a rapid development towards more BMSs has taken place. In the private sector, this involved single school private boards merging with other private boards in foundations, governed by one board overseeing multiple schools (Education Council 2010a). In the public sector local authorities overseeing public schools created independent boards to oversee the different schools previously governed by the local council (Van Thiel and Verheij 2013).

Consequently, the number of boards dropped from over 2700 in the late 90s, to just 1300 in 2019, while the number of schools remained roughly the same at 8200 (Turkenburg 2008; Onderwijs in cijfers 2019). Approximately 30% of the school boards govern public schools, while the other 70% govern private schools (Education Council 2012). Dutch school boards, hence, govern from one to a large number of schools. The majority of public and private primary and secondary schools are currently governed in BMSs arrangements (Hooge and Honingh 2014; OECD 2016). As of 2019, in primary education, 39% of the boards govern only one school, 34% are in charge of between two and ten schools, 19% govern between ten and nineteen schools, and 8% govern twenty schools or more (Onderwijs in cijfers 2019). In secondary education, 35% of the school boards are in charge of just one school, 58% govern two to ten schools, and 7% govern more than 10 schools (VO Raad n.d.).

Though various types of school boards are permissible under Dutch law (Carver 2006; Education Council 2009), we identify the two most prevalent types. The first type is a board that includes both executive and non-executive members (one-tier). In this model either the school board selects one of its

board members to run the board's daily operations, or the board delegates these executive tasks to its schools and their school leaders. In the latter cases, the board acts as a supervisory board (Heemskerk 2020). The second school board type is the most popular one; most school boards are now organised by means of a two-tier model, with a separation between an executive board and a supervisory board. The executive board, in most cases just one or two persons, is appointed by the supervisory board and manages the educational organisation. As such the executives function as trustees rather than as representatives. The supervisory board consists of skilful volunteers that are appointed by the other members of the supervisory board (Honingh and Van Genugten 2014).<sup>2</sup>

In the remainder of this paper we will focus only on BMSs for two reasons. First, as a consequence of government policy, BMSs have been on the rise for two decades, with the number of boards dropping by 60%, while the number of schools stayed the same (Turkenburg 2008; Onderwijs in cijfers 2019). Consequently, a little over 90% of Dutch schools are governed by a board that oversees multiple schools. This clearly shows that BMS have become the predominant form of school organisation in the Netherlands.

Second, following assumptions by policy makers, one can expect BMSs to function differently from school boards governing only one single school (Education Council 2010a, 2010b). Here it is crucial to point to the fact that when a school board governs just one school, one single person combines the functions of chair of the board and school leader (Neeleman 2019a). It is clear that the governance and leadership within single school boards is quite different from a BMSs. Issues related to e.g. organisation and human resources development, staffing policies, finances, and quality assurance have a totally different dynamic in a single-school board than in a BMSs. In addition, professional collaboration between schools and the development of learning communities are easier to initiate and manage from a BMSs organisation than from a single-school organisation (Education Council 2008, 2018; Heijsters, Van der Ploeg, and Weijers 2020).

Before we turn to the next section, it is important to stress that we do not argue that BMSs provide better education or govern more effectively than single-school boards. It is rather that BMSs face different opportunities and challenges, such as governing in networks together with school leaders and steering multi-layered organisations (Education Council 2018). There are certainly benefits in scaling up, such as more professional governance, financial resilience and the effective use of the large autonomy granted to Dutch boards. However, scaling up is not necessarily beneficial, as it might lead to a decrease in variety, limit the involvement of teachers and parents in the governance of the school and put the board at a large distance from the primary processes of education (Education Council 2010a, 2010b). In fact, until now there is no solid evidence that suggests that BMSs provide a higher quality of education in their schools

than boards governing only one single school (Heijsters, Van der Ploeg, and Weijers 2020). Contingency most likely explains why BMSs are sometimes more successful than single-school boards (Education Council 2010a).

### 3. Autonomy, education quality and control

The adoption of the Act *Good Education, Good Governance* in 2009 is a key turning point in Dutch educational policy. After decades of policies aimed at increasing school autonomy, this act was a shift in the opposite direction: a call for increased intervention gained ground in education policy (Waslander 2010). School boards were made accountable for the quality of education of their schools and had to separate the executive from the supervisory tasks in order to improve control (Hooge and Honingh 2014). In addition, the Minister of Education was given the power to request that supervisory boards would fire malfunctioning executive board members and apply the sanction of withdrawing funding. Moreover, statutory quality requirements, which determine whether boards are eligible for funding, shifted from a broad to a rather specific nature, including quality requirements on, for example, language and mathematics (Education Council 2009). Boards, therefore, no longer have broad autonomy in the governance of the primary process, but have to adhere to specific norms.

Waslander (2010) interprets this policy shift as a fundamental change in the position of government vis-à-vis the boards. She states that the government had never before formulated additional eligibility criteria for public funding. For example, for the first time, the government had formulated specific standards for pupil achievement in language and mathematics, and had made these standards a requirement in assessing eligibility for funding. As a consequence, quality requirements were no longer merely of a broad nature, i.e. merely offering indications of what pupils were supposed to learn during their time at school. The act built on ideas that reflected the New Public Management paradigm claiming that schools share characteristics which can be evaluated and compared to measure effectiveness, efficiency, and continuous improvement. However, these practices may also be considered as government technologies to take back control and strengthen external accountability via the Inspectorate (Wilkins 2015).

Since august 2017 the Inspectorate no longer holds the direct providers of education (i.e. school leaders) accountable for the educational quality of a school. Instead the responsibility for educational quality and, hence, the focus of the Inspectorate was redirected to school boards. This shift of responsibilities hinges upon the assumption that school boards are able to safeguard and enhance the quality of education in their schools (Hooge 2013; Honingh, Ehren, and Van Montfort 2018). There is no doubt that policy changes like these directly affect the micro-politics between boards, school leaders, and teachers, in terms of how internal accountability is now exercised through the organisational hierarchy (Piot and Kelchtermans 2015). At the top of the

pyramid is the supervisory board, which has to hold the school board governing the educational organisation accountable. Next in the hierarchy is the school board itself, that holds each individual school leader of all the schools under the board accountable for the education quality provided by the teachers in their school. This new reality reveals a stronger hierarchical model and requires the school leader to become a boundary spanner. From an organisational perspective, this can be understood as the dual nature of school leadership. On the one hand, school leaders are responsible for the management of their school, while on the other hand, they are constrained by the managerial, educational and financial policies of its executive board (Nolen, Honingh, and Geijsel 2020). In sum, we notice a growing focus on external accountability and a hierarchical orientation within educational organisations.

These notions about hierarchies within school organisations raise questions about management and the underlying policy assumptions about effective leadership and interventions in educational organisations (Van Twist et al. 2013). When it comes to multiple schools governed by one school board, the school board might conceive its school leaders as members of their administrative community or network. Consequently, the formal hierarchical structure of the organisation might not be reflected by the leadership of school boards. Instead, the leadership of school boards might be more focused on steering the educational organisation together with school leaders in a network.

#### 4. Challenges for school boards<sup>3</sup>

To this day, little is known about the contributions school boards make to the quality or effectiveness of education. The number of studies covering empirical data on the relation between school boards and educational quality is small, especially when compared to the large number of studies on educational quality, school (leader) effectiveness, and school improvement (Honingh, Ruiter and Van Thiel, 2020).

In school effectiveness studies, boards are expected to have (in)direct effects on educational quality (Alsbury 2008; French, Peevely, and Stanley 2008; Plough 2011; Saatcioglu et al. 2011). However, including boards in the analyses has often led to conceptual models that are far from parsimonious. Stringfield (2002), for instance, argues that evaluating the impact that boards have on student achievement involves looking at virtually all functions of a board, from internal governance and policy formulation to communication with teachers, administrators and the public.

The evidence that is available about the contributions of school boards is rather inconclusive about possible effects (Land 2002; Hooze and Honingh 2014; Honingh et al. 2020b). Results of these few, mostly quantitative, studies show only minor, often indirect, effects (Rice et al. 2001; Saatcioglu et al. 2011; Ehren et al. 2016; Honingh, Ehren, and Van Montfort 2018). Moreover, the few studies available focus on clear steering lines and use a narrow



definition of educational quality. These outcomes reveal that there are still many theoretical and methodological challenges to identify the effects of boards on educational quality (Scheerens 2015; Land 2002; Honingh, Ruiter and Van Thiel, 2020).

First, the likely indirect effects of school boards on educational quality are a challenge to understand, map and capture (Honingh, Ehren, and Van Montfort 2018). Second, the effect of boards on educational quality is most likely a result of interaction between actors within the organisation and not a matter of linear steering processes that can be clearly isolated (Ranson et al. 2005). Third, educational quality is an essentially contested and broad concept, and current studies have diminished this concept to test school effects, which does not capture the full richness of the concept (Honingh, Ehren, and Van Montfort 2018; Education Council 2008; Hargreaves 1994). Last, both the capacity of the school boards to govern and what is understood as educational quality are contingency dependent (Honingh et al. 2020a).

In short, when studying school board effectiveness one is faced with the complicated challenge of capturing indirect, interacting, non-linear effects of steering by boards on the contingency dependent and contested concept of educational quality. The limited existing evidence base shows exactly this complexity and how little is truly understood of board dynamics and the relation between school boards and educational quality (Land 2002; Rice et al. 2001; Hooge 2013; Honingh, Ehren, and Van Montfort 2018; Honingh, Ruiter and Van Thiel, 2020). Methodologically, the complexities faced and limited information available on the dynamics implies that instead of quantitative research, more qualitative approaches might be necessary to unravel the complex indirect and interacting effects of boards on educational performance (Creswell 2014).

Consequently, for BMSs the large knowledge gaps create challenges for effectively managing their organisation. With both government and the Inspectorate increasingly shifting focus to the contributions of school boards to educational quality at the school level, policy expectations are high (Waslander 2010; Honingh, Ehren, and Van Montfort 2018). At the same time, evidence for their potential contributions remains limited in number and inconclusive in effects (Honingh, Ruiter and Van Thiel, 2020; Scheerens 2015), leaving boards with very little support in the complex question of improving educational quality. Here we want to explicitly stress that this research gap is more pressing and specific for BMSs than for single-school boards, which can rely on the literature on school leadership.

## 5. School leaders pivotal in school board effectiveness

In contrast to the literature base on school board effectiveness, there is ample robust scientific evidence of the key role school leaders play in student



achievement. In a comprehensive review by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008, 28), with recently updated confirmation (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2019), it is concluded that school leadership 'is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning' and that school leadership 'acts as a catalyst without which other good things are quite unlikely to happen'. Various studies already found that school leaders play a central role in initiating changes in schools (Fullan 2001; Pont, Nusche, and Moorman 2008; Ten Bruggencate 2009). The literature surveyed so far indicates that the quality and capacity of school leadership is increasingly recognised as a key component of success in effective school systems. As such, it makes sense that Hess and Meeks (2010) claim that investing in school leadership is one of the three most popular strategies of school boards and superintendents to make schools perform better (Education Council 2018).

For BMSs the challenge lies in how to cooperate, facilitate and relate to school leaders in order to foster and stimulate improvement within the organisation. This is a challenge that is not faced by boards governing only one single school, as the chair of such boards is most often also the school leader (Neeleman 2019a). To understand how BMSs can guide, stimulate and steer school leaders we need to look at the position of school leaders within the organisation. In particular, it is important to understand the delegation of tasks of BMSs to school leaders and the subsequent steering between BMSs and school leaders.

First of all, for the delegation of powers, management documents indicate that a vast share of decision-making power is delegated to school leaders: 'everybody looks to the school leader to guide decision-making in the school' (OECD 2016, 143). Most Dutch school leaders 'are responsible for financial matters and for ensuring that teaching and learning comply with the school's educational goals and standards' (OECD 2014, 10). Responsibilities range from teaching methods to student care and resource allocation. Decision-making powers for most human resources matters – including professional development, hiring and firing – are delegated to school leaders too (Eurydice 2007). In Dutch education practice, therefore, the autonomy that is officially delegated to school boards is, at the school level, often exercised by school leaders (Neeleman 2019b). Consequently, a large part of the formal tasks set for school boards to improve the quality of education is, in practice, executed and shaped by their school leaders.

Second, as a consequence of the delegation of certain tasks of BMSs to school leaders for improving the quality of education, while boards retain ultimate responsibility, a complex dynamic between school boards and school leaders is created (Nolen, Honingh, and Geijssel 2020). In a situation in which school boards are ultimately held responsible, while many tasks are delegated to school leaders, the relation between the school board and school leaders becomes more important. The complexity of the relation between the school

board and school leaders is contingent on the size of the organisation. BMSs of larger organisations tend to create additional layers of management, while BMSs governing only a handful of schools tend to have more regular and direct contact with their school leaders.

Once again, however, as with the impact of BMSs on the quality of education, so is the steering relationship between boards and their school leaders still poorly understood (Saatcioglu et al. 2011; Honingh, Ruiter and Van Thiel 2020), leaving BMSs with little evidence or best-practices to guide their decision-making, interactions and actions.

## 6. Studying educational improvement in a diverse system

Until now we have, first, argued that the Dutch system allows for a large variety of school boards. Second, we discussed the policy shift from boards governing one school towards BMSs, with now over 90% of Dutch schools being governed by a BMSs. Third, we have shown that school boards hold large autonomy over the schools they govern, only being limited by statutory requirements by the government. Fourth, we argued that the 2010 Act *Good Governance, Good Education* changed the nature of the statutory requirements to absolute minimum norms and shifted responsibility for the quality of education from individual schools to school boards. Fifth, we discussed the lack of empirical evidence on the possibility of BMSs to improve the quality of education. Sixth, we argued that there is evidence for the effect of school leaders on the quality of education, but that there is little evidence on the relation between school leaders and BMSs. In short, these six assertions leave us with the conclusion that the complex Dutch system creates high expectations of the leadership by BMSs, but has little solid evidence to back up these assumptions. We might expect tighter coupling as a consequence of the new responsibilities of boards in enhancing the quality of education, but how this tighter coupling by BMSs can contribute to the quality of education remains a black box to this day. But what can we learn then from research about Dutch BMSs in the quest to enhance the quality of education in BMSs?

A first direction for improvement focuses on the professionalisation of school boards and school leaders (Education Council 2017). Boards and school leaders should show more ambition in their quest for improvement, should stimulate a learning culture in their organisation and should professionalise more consistently and comprehensively (McKinsey 2020). We argue, however, that this direction for improvement is flawed for two reasons.

First, concepts such as professionalisation, ambition and learning culture are concepts that are highly agreeable to all involved. No one is against professionalisation per se, but what professionalisation, a learning culture, or higher ambitions in fact entail is highly contingent (Education Council 2015). Here, we also read the fashioning of school boards as professionals who should be

able to enhance school processes, outcomes, and student achievements. These notions seem to apply to the discourses of professionalisation regardless of whether this is realistic (Wilkins 2015). The challenge is to overcome simple solutions, but to truly understand the complex social interactions within an organisation to find the right buttons (Scheerens 2015).

Second, we point out again that there is no such thing as *the* Dutch school board. Even though the shift from single school boards to BMSs has diminished the variety between Dutch boards, pointing towards a certain degree of isomorphism (Education Council 2009, 2010a), variety remains a cornerstone of the Dutch education system (Education Council 2019; Honingh and Stevenson 2020). A consequence of the large variety in Dutch school boards, is the difference in challenges they face in their quest for improvement. This variety, whether in size, internal organisation dynamics, environment, pedagogical vision or student population, implies that practices that are highly functional in one organisation, might be of little use or even dysfunctional in another (see also Van Twist et al. 2013). In short, there is no 'one size fits all' improvement strategy for Dutch school boards (Honingh and Stevenson 2020; Educational council 2015). Therefore, the idea that there is one way to stimulate professionalisation or a learning culture for Dutch school boards is flawed, as it fails to acknowledge contingency and the need for fit.

Although for some readers the argument might now sound as if 'anything goes', we propose that there are promising directions that do account for the variety between Dutch school boards and offer a way forward for BMSs in their quest for improving the quality of education in their schools. Using the different steering paradigms in Public Administration (Osborne 2006), BMSs might adopt different possible steering mechanisms, depending on the situation at hand. BMSs striving for improvement need to ask themselves two questions to determine what form of steering is most appropriate: whether there is sufficient expertise available within the board to take an informed decision and whether school leaders and teachers within the BMSs agree on the set goals. Depending on the answers to these questions and the micro-politics within the organisation (Piot and Kelchtermans 2015), different sorts of steering are potentially appropriate (Osborne 2006; Bannink and Trommel 2019; Honingh and Stevenson 2020). If there is sufficient expertise within the board and all actors agree on the organisational goals, more traditional forms of steering are most likely sufficient in steering for improvement. If the board has sufficient expertise to set goals, but there is conflict over the formulation and implementation of the goals, New Public Management steering principles might be most suitable.

In practice, we expect that most issues BMSs have to address are not simple by nature. BMSs will not have the expertise to address the many issues facing the organisation themselves, and, therefore, need expertise from others within the organisation to formulate clear and shared goals. This implies that

boards actively incorporate the schools they govern and their school leaders as actors in a policy network to formulate goals and guide implementation (Honingh and Stevenson 2020). Steering in networks can be regarded as part of the New Public Governance paradigm (Osborne 2006). This approach looks promising as education is complex and essentially contested while the actors involved agree on the shared goals of the organisation and need each other, especially each other's knowledge, in order to be able to achieve the formulated goals. As a result, goals, working methods and interactions are not fixed in advance and there is a certain degree of unpredictability, which leaves room for variety. This means that network steering as a way of governing can account for the variety between different boards. As a result, differences may arise between school boards, depending on a variety of factors and the mechanisms that turn out to be effective within the organisation. There is, however, the common approach that boards do not go at it alone, but steer by recognising the expertise of others within the organisation for improving the quality of education (Osborne 2006).

## 7. Conclusion and discussion

The complex Dutch school system is described as a best kept secret, in which a variety of highly autonomous school boards provide education which is considered 'good' compared to many other systems (Harris and Jones 2017). The existing variety of boards is a consequence of the acceptance by the Dutch that education is an 'essentially contested concept', that there is no 'one way' to manage and organise education (Education Council 2012). The Dutch system shows that embracing the contestedness of education does not necessarily mean a degeneration of quality, but can also lead to a more equitable, dynamic and open system.

Embracing contestedness, however, also brings along complexity and a tension between centralised and decentralised steering. School boards are accountable for the quality of education, while the central government retains the overall responsibility for the quality of education at the system level. Despite a policy shift towards BMSs, with BMSs now governing over 90% of Dutch schools, how the leadership of BMSs can improve the quality of education remains a black box. We argue that for BMSs and their school leaders the approach of network steering to enhance the quality of education can be promising. Network steering does not provide a 'one size fits all' solution, which would be unworkable for the existing great variety of boards, but does offer a template for steering in the face of accountability and complexity.

For BMSs to use successful network steering in leading and managing their organisation, however, more evidence is necessary first, regarding the role and interaction of BMSs within networks, and second, regarding the possible contributions of BMSs to the network outcomes. First, to understand the role

and interaction of BMSs in networks within the organisation, it is important to research the basic dynamics between BMSs and school leaders. As suggested by Scheerens (2015) and Hooge (2013), the notion of loose coupling can be useful for this (Weick 1976; Orton and Weick 1990). A central idea in institutional theory is that changes in structures and procedures at the board level may be decoupled from schools and classroom instruction. Since the 1970s, researchers have argued that schools and their leadership often respond to pressures from their institutional environment by making symbolic changes. In other words, structures and procedures that are changed by the board and management layer or support staff do not necessarily affect classroom practices. Due to decoupling, the classroom is buffered from changes in the other subsystems (Meyer and Rowan 2012). Take for example the up-scaling and increase of school autonomy in the 1990s. Both reforms led to dramatic changes in the organisational structure of schools, but there is hardly any evidence that this changed classroom practices (Karsten 1999) and, as such, improved education.

Second, to understand whether and how BMSs can use network steering to contribute to the quality of education within the schools they govern, one needs to map how the behaviour, decisions and actions of the actors in the network are understood by participants. To explain whether interactions in networks are contributing to a better quality of education, one might turn for instance to the theory of sensemaking (Weick 1995). In those cases where the interactions in the organisation point towards loose coupling between the board and the quality of education, the question of direct steering by the board becomes redundant. Network steering, therefore, can only be applied when the interactions between actors in the organisation point to at least some coupling between the actions of the board and the quality of education. In those cases of more tight coupling the perspective of sensemaking can be useful in gaining an understanding of the position of the different actors in the network and of whether contributions of the BMSs affects other actors. In fact, the interaction between and the interpretation of the other actors in the network shape the possible contributions of the BMSs boards (Coburn 2001, 2004).

Evidence on effective leadership practices of BMS and the role of networks herein requires research that explicitly acknowledges that the role, interactions and contributions of BMSs depend on a variety of factors, such as size, steering practices, vision on educational quality, organisation structure, and pedagogical vision. Research on Dutch school boards, therefore, cannot focus on identifying 'one way' to improve the performance of boards. Instead it should focus on how different factors impact the role, interaction and contributions of BMSs, so as to better understand how network steering by BMSs can guide improvement. Given the complex nature of education and the large variety of boards within the Dutch system, a more qualitative approach should be used. Such an approach will help to identify the different factors that impact BMSs roles,

interactions and contributions to enhance the quality of education within their organisation.

All in all, by using Dutch BMSs as a case, we have tried to identify relevant knowledge gaps concerning the effectiveness of the leadership of BMSs and to provide a direction for further research to better understand the dynamics and mechanisms in multi-school organisations. The Dutch case reveals the potential of network steering as a possibility to better understand steering of multiple schools in improving the quality of education. In order to apply network steering, however, more qualitative research is needed. This qualitative research should focus on both the role of and interaction between actors within these networks as well as boards' contributions to the networks and the educational quality of the schools they govern. The importance of understanding this dynamic cannot easily be overestimated given the assumptions and expectations that come with the performances of multi-school organisations and the boards that govern them.

## Notes

1. Freedom of education refers to three types of freedom: freedom to give schools a specific religious, ideological, educational or 'generic interest' character, freedom to establish schools, and educational and organisational autonomy.
2. An educational organisation can only have one executive and one supervisory board, regardless of the number of schools governed.
3. The literature review on the impact of school boards' on educational quality was in its search criteria not restricted to BMS only.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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