RAISING STANDARDS, LEARNING ORGANISATIONS AND CIVIC EDUCATION: STEERING DYNAMICS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL IN THE NETHERLANDS

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1   INTRODUCTION

Complex education systems are characterised by having a substantial number of actors involved in steering activities. A crucial question for governments is how to relate to these (networks of) actors, and how to perform the act of steering with them or through them. At least two new forms of steering are believed to have emerged (Politt & Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2010; Pierre & Peters 2005): (1) meta-steering, whereby the government steers *through networks*; and (2) network steering, whereby the government is an *actor in a network*. Whilst some argue that the role of the state has been weakened or even hollowed out (e.g. Rhodes, 2007), others maintain that the state is still playing a dominant role in governing the public domain, be it less powerful and omnipotent (e.g., Pierre & Peters, 2005). If governments are indeed increasingly steering through and as part of networks, the act of choosing actors to join a network might be one of the most effective ways to exercise influence.

This paper addresses the following question: what kind of steering dynamic has emerged in the complex education system in the Netherlands? In order to undertake a detailed analysis of the steering dynamic in the Dutch education system, we focus on the secondary education sector and, within this, on three specific policy issues: raising standards, civic education and learning organisations. Aided by Foucault's concept of governmentality and using the steering trilogy (see Theisens, Hooge & Waslander, 2016; Hooge, Theisens & Waslander, 2017), we formulated the following research questions for each of the policy issues:

1   When steering education, how are various (networks of) actors created and positioned by central government?

2   How do such (networks of) actors create and position themselves?

3   How can we characterise the steering dynamics for between (networks of) actors?

2 DESIGN AND METHODS

Design

Two criteria were used to select specific policy issues, the degree to which the Dutch central government (a) is responsible in a formal sense, and (b) itself plays an active steering role (see table 1). Policy issues for which the government is neither responsible, nor plays an active role were left aside. For each of the remaining quadrants one specific policy issue was selected. For each of these issues we study in detail the actor- and network steering and emergent steering dynamics.

Table 1: Choice of three policy issues

Central government	High level of responsibility	Low level of responsibility
High level of active steering	1. **Raising standards** in literacy and numeracy. In 2010 detailed legal quality standards were introduced, including minimum requirements for literacy and numeracy education. Since then, the Inspectorate has had the power to impose penalties and the ministry can withdraw funding from schools on the basis of pupil attainment levels. Steering on the basis of these minimum requirements was accompanied by the introduction of reference levels and tests.	2. Schools develop as **learning organisations.** Within broader aims of the teachers' agenda (*lerarenagenda*) 2013-2020, schools committed themselves to developing as 'learning organisations'.
Low level of active steering	3. **Civic education** Schools are legally required to prepare pupils for 'active citizenship', but aside from this, there is very little central steering (OCW, 2013a).	

Methods

First, we mapped the steering network for each of the three policies. These networks show which actors are involved in steering, their mutual relations and interactions. By applying a snowball method, the network of relevant actors (or networks of actors) involved in steering at the national level was identified for each policy issue. On the basis of documents and websites of each of the actors involved, we identified their mutual connections for the particular policy, such as contract partner, receiver of subsidies or advise.

Second, we gathered relevant documents and websites produced by these (networks of) actors between 2012 and 2015. These documents and websites were coded and analysed in accordance with the theoretical framework and steering trilogy (see Hooge, Theisens & Waslander, 2017), identifying how actors made the policy issue thinkable, practicable and calculable. For the raising standards policy, 13 actors were identified and a total of 560 text fragments from 48 documents and websites were analysed; for the issue of learning organisation, 10 actors were identified and a total of 559 text fragments from 59 documents and websites were analysed; and for civic education, 10 actors were identified and a total of 134 text fragments from 22 documents and websites were analysed.

As a third step, we conducted interviews with three to four key actors in each network. The respondents reflected on and validated the reconstruction we had made on the basis of the texts and the composition of the steering network, and were asked additional questions in order to deepen our understanding of the motives behind particular steering activities.

For more details about the theoretical framework and how the empirical research was conducted, see the other papers of this symposium (Hooge et al., 2017; Waslander et al, 2017).

RESULTS[2]

Steering dynamics for raising standards

Figure 1 in the appendix maps the raising standards steering network, which is formed by thirteen tightly-knit actors. As can be seen, it comprises:

- *multiple actors of a diverse nature*, including a state body (the Ministry of Education); independent administrative bodies (Inspectorate of Education, Centre for Tests and Examinations (CvTE), government-commissioned advisory committees (the Committee on Numeracy Reference Levels, the Committee on Raising Numeracy Standards); an advisory body (the Education Council); independent foundations, associations and private companies (National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), Council for Secondary Education (VO-Raad), National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO)); and actors without legal forms, such as programme management or (digital) platforms (Support Office on Raising Standards, Schools have the Initiative Programme, Framework for the Professionalisation of Numeracy Teachers, Teacher24);
- *two so-called composite actors,* namely a digital platform (Teacher24) comprising four actors and the Framework for the Professionalisation of Numeracy Teachers, comprising two actors;
- *which hold a range of positions,*
- *and maintain multiple reciprocal relations.*

The Ministry of Education steers intensively and targets primary educational processes directly by:

- concluding a sectoral agreement with the Council for Secondary Education, which is an association of 334 school boards and over 600 schools in secondary education;

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[2] A thick description of our findings, interpretations and conclusions can be found in the research report (Hooge, 2017). In this paper we only summarise the main findings.

- financing school boards/schools in relation to this policy issue from a performance-related budget (the 'prestatiebox');
- founding and funding new actors to aid with the implementation of the policy (committees on numeracy reference levels and raising numeracy standards, Support Office on Raising Standards, Programme Framework on the Professionalisation of Numeracy Teachers);
- funding existing actors to help implement the policy (Schools have the Initiative Programme, Teacher24);
- responsibilising actors in relation to this policy, particularly teachers (numeracy teachers), and school principals.

The closely-knit nature of the steering network is particularly evident from the identical way in which the different actors make the policy issue thinkable. They frequently echo each other's concerns about basic literacy and numeracy standards, thereby reinforcing the steering. Only two of the actors (the Council for Secondary Education and the Education Council) question the content, usefulness and necessity of the policy. Less unanimity is evident in the manner in which the different actors make the policy issue practicable, especially in relation to the timeframe and the manner of implementation.

The Ministry of Education and, to a lesser extent, the Council for Secondary Education, are the key players in this network. Central positions are held by the Centre for Tests and Examinations (CvTE) and the Support Office on Raising Standards and, together with the committees on numeracy reference levels and raising numeracy standards, the National Institute for Educational Measurement, the Ministry of Education, the Programme Framework on the Professionalisation of Numeracy Teachers and the Curriculum Development Foundation, form a tightly-knit sub-group, whilst the Schools have the Initiative Programme, the Education Council and Teacher24 occupy more marginal positions in the network.

The Ministry of Education itself plays a significant, active role. In order to fulfil this role, it relies heavily upon the Centre for Tests and Examinations, the Support Office on Raising Standards and the Inspectorate of Education. The Support Office on Raising Standards describes its own role as independent and neutral, despite having been founded by and receiving funding from the ministry as part of the raising standards policy. Providers of education and continuing education and initial teacher training programmes are granted little or no responsibility.

The steering dynamic is characterised by instrumentalisation: actors in the the steering network make a large number of instruments available and undertake activities to support schools and ensure that advice, assistance, supervision, information and data are available. There is a high level of focus on the sender (rather than the receiver) of the instruments, with many actors referring to each other's services and websites. The Ministry of Education, the Support Office on Raising Standards and the Council for Secondary Education make the policy issue calculable by using the quantified SMART indicators in the sector agreement.

Steering dynamics for learning organisation
Figure 2 in the appendix maps the learning organisation steering network, which comprises ten closely-knit actors. As can be seen, it consists of:
- *multiple actors of a diverse nature*, including a state body (the Ministry of Education); independent administrative bodies (Inspectorate of Education); an advisory body (the Education Council); independent foundations and associations (Association Teacher!, the Education Foundation, the Education Cooperative, the Council for Secondary Education); and actors without legal forms, such as programme management (Schools have the Initiative Programme), a political initiative (Learning Together) and a digital platform (Teacher24);
- *of which a substantial number are so-called composite actors,* namely the Education Cooperative, which comprises six actors; the Education Foundation, which comprises

nine actors; Learning Together, which comprises nine people; and Teacher24, which comprises four actors;

- *which hold a range of positions;*
- *and maintain multiple reciprocal relations.*

The tightly-knit nature of this network is reinforced by the presence of four so-called composite actors, two of which are large: 1) the Education Foundation comprises five employers' and five employees' organisations in education, students' organisations, the Education Cooperative and an organisation of supervisory boards; and 2) the Education Cooperative consists of five large education employees' organisations (trade unions) and a number of smaller professional, employee and lobby groups and initiatives by teachers.

The Ministry of Education steers indirectly by using three administrative agreements (one with the Council for Secondary Education, and one with each of the large composite actors, the Education Foundation and the Education Cooperative); by providing funding specifically for this issue that is dependent on performance at the sector level (the 'functiemix' regulation); and by funding the Education Cooperative, Schools have the Initiative Programme, the Council for Secondary Education and Teacher24 specifically in relation to this policy issue. Expert and research institutes play a major role in the steering dynamic: various actors in the network commission them to conduct research into the design, functioning and effects of learning organisations (or aspects of them) on educational standards and pupils' attainment levels. This expertise and these research results play a key role in how the actors in the steering network make the issue of learning organisation thinkable, practicable and calculable, because it provides a basis for sensemaking and implementation (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991). The Council for Secondary Education acts as a linking pin; along with the Ministry of Education, it is a key player.

What strikes the most, is the wordiness actors in the steering network use to conceptualise, advise and provide good examples. Responsibilisation is a major feature. Despite differences in

emphasis, the actors in the steering network use the same phrases to make the issue of learning organisations thinkable. When making it practicable, a major role is played by expertise and research results on what learning organisations are or can be, and how this can be achieved; this means that there is enough 'space' for different emphases. Teachers, school principals and schools are themselves actively involved in the (development of) activities and instruments by actors in the steering network such as the Education Cooperative, Teacher24 and Foundation Teacher!. When making the issue calculable, the Ministry of Education reduced the broadly defined policy issue to a few narrow SMART indicators with the aid of a dashboard. These indicators are not without consequence, as the dashboard is also used to determine whether targets at the sectoral level have been met for performance-dependent funding (the 'functiemix' regulation).

Steering dynamics for civic education
Figure 3 in the appendix shows the civic education steering network, formed by ten closely-knit actors. As can be seen, it comprises:
- *multiple actors of a diverse nature*, such as a state body (the Ministry of Education); an independent administrative body (the Education Inspectorate); independent foundations and associations (National Institute for Curriculum Development, the Association for Schools and Security, the Schools Advisory Service (KPCGroep), the Council for Secondary Education); and actors without legal forms, such as programme management or (digital) platforms (the Civic Education Alliance, Teacher24);
- *of which two are so-called composite actors,* namely the Civic Education Alliance, which consists of nine actors, and Teacher24, which comprises four actors;
- *which hold various positions;*
- *and maintain reciprocal relations*.

The closely-knit nature of this network is reinforced by the presence of two so-called composite actors, one of which – the Civic Education Alliance – is extremely large (nine

actors, linked to a large number of schools/school boards), and plays a central role in the steering network.

The Ministry of Education steers actively and directly by means of legislation and regulations, by means of an administrative agreement with the Council for Secondary Education (VO-Raad), by responsibilising, and by providing the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), the Association for Schools and Security, the University of Amsterdam and Teacher24 with funding that is specific to this policy issue. The Ministry of Education's direct steering is open with respect to content; the Ministry is careful not to prescribe the content of civic education, so as to give space to schools'/school boards' individual visions and interpretations of civic education. Central government as a whole (the government with its vision on integration (the Integration Agenda) and the Ministries of Security and Justice, Social Affairs and Labour, Foreign Affairs, and Finance) steers *indirectly* via organisations such as the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) and the 'House for Democracy and the Rule of Law' (ProDemos), which specify the issue further with topics such as commemorating and celebrating, diversity and integration, human rights and financial citizenship. Central government as a whole, the Ministry of Education and, to a lesser degree, the Education Inspectorate are key players in this network. The National Institute for Curriculum Development and the Civic Education Alliance play central roles. The primary emphasis is on responsibilising schools, whilst providers of education and continuing education and teacher training programmes remain somewhat out of the picture.

When making the issue thinkable and practicable, the actors in the steering network echo substantive shifts of emphasis in the policy issue over time, whilst simultaneously putting different emphases on the meaning and potential design of civic education in secondary education. The National Institute for Curriculum Development and the Civic Education Alliance play a major role in providing a well-stocked tool kit with which schools can work on civic education. The policy issue is made calculable by the actors in the steering network only with the aid of international benchmark research.

Three types of steering dynamics

The detailed analyses of the steering networks of the three policy issues indicate that although there are steering networks in each case, their composition and dynamic are very different. The complex play of forces that occurs within these steering networks– in other words, the steering dynamic – can be characterised as: Direct and directive, 2) Indirect dialogue and 3) Steering autonomy (Table 2).

Table 2   Three types of steering dynamic

Type of steering dynamic	Direct and directive	Indirect dialogue	Steering autonomy
Policy issue	Raising standards	Learning organisations	Civic education
Description	Relatively tightly-knit network. Government steering is characterised by intensive, direct steering of a top-down nature. The steering dynamic is contested and politicised, and tends towards instrumentalisation and (assisting with) implementation.	Very closely-knit network. Government steering is characterised by indirect steering with a 'network' character. The steering dynamic is characterised by dialogue and tends towards conceptualising (a lot of text) and advising.	Tightly-knit network. The steering by the government is characterised by constant, direct steering while maintaining schools' autonomy. The steering dynamic is 'value loaded' and has an agenda-setting character.

The first type of steering dynamic – *direct and directive* – was seen in the raising standards policy. It is contested/politicised, and tends towards instrumentalisation and (assistance with) implementation. In this case, the network acts mainly as an implementation device. The second type - *indirect-dialogue* - was found for the learning organisation policy. It is characterised by dialogue between many actors and tends towards conceptualising (a lot of text) and advising. Here, the network plays a key role in mutual sense-making and building commitment. The

steering dynamic of the third type - *steering autonomy* – came to the fore in the case of civic education, and can be described as 'value loaded' with an agenda-setting character. In this case, the network acts more as a figure head that pushes the policy agenda forward.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

Based on Foucault's governmentality perspective and our detailed empirical research into system-level steering dynamics for the policy issues of raising standards, learning organisation and civic education, a number of conclusions can we drawn. Most importantly, our findings illustrate the complexity of steering by means of networks.

A first notable finding is the *size* of the steering networks: for each policy issue ten to fifteen (composite) actors were identified as playing a role in steering. Together with the close and varied relations between actors we found, these results testify to a high degree of interconnectedness. When combining the findings for the different policies, distinctions can be made between established actors and policy-specific actors. Established actors play a role in all steering networks while policy-specific actors only play a role in very specific policy issues. The size and varied nature of steering networks make it the more notable that, although *teachers*, *team managers* and *school principals* are continuously and ceaselessly addressed, they are seldom directly involved in steering networks. Many actors, including the Ministry of Education and the Council for Secondary Education, frequently and emphatically *responsibilise* teachers and their direct supervisors. The way in which most actors in the steering networks attempt to stimulate implementation (*instrumentalisation*) is characterised mainly by sending messages. Steering appears as one-way traffic towards teachers and their direct supervisors,

Secondly, steering networks are *policy specific*. For each of the three policy issues that we investigated the steering network has a unique composition of different actors. Furthermore, the actors in these steering networks engage in policy specific forms of steering. This varies from

sensemaking and setting exemplary behaviour (*normalisation*), through role assignment and appeals to actors' responsibilities (*responsibilisation*), to all forms of oral and written communication/information and equipping by means of meetings, assistance, research results, step-by-step plans, indicators and formats (*instrumentalisation*).

A third conclusion is that, despite the size of steering networks and irrespective of the specific policy issue, *central government* plays a *key steering role* in every network. In other words, complex steering networks do not so much limit, but rather transform the role of government. The Ministry of Education applies direct as well as indirect network steering. In *direct* steering various actors at the intermediary level are involved in the ministry's steering of the policy, or steer alongside the ministry in a *steering network*. This is the case for raising standards, where the Ministry of Education directly steers primary processes in secondary schools by establishing minimum standards for literacy and numeracy in legislation and regulations, and through *instrumentalisation*. Other actors take central positions in the steering network and *participate in* steering. In the case of *indirect* steering, the Ministry of Education steers the policy *through a steering network* made up of various actors at the intermediary level. This takes place, for example, in the case of learning organisation, where the ministry indirectly steers schools via three administrative agreements with employers' and employees' organisations and by using performance-dependent funding. Comprising a steering network proves a crucial steering activity in itself.

In addition to notions of steering by and steering through a network (Politt & Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2010; Pierre & Peters 2005) our findings indicate that *building a network* is a consequential steering act in itself. The ministry not only utilises existing actors and networks, but it also creates/strengthens them with specific goals in mind. The study revealed a whole range of new actors that were founded and existing actors who were subsidised for a specific task. In fact, there are no, or hardly any, actors at the intermediary level between central government and educational organisations that are completely independent of the Ministry of Education. Those actors that are ostensibly independent - such as the Civic Education Alliance,

the Education Cooperative and Teacher24 - are in fact supported by the Ministry of Education. Either materially by full or partial funding, or immaterially by explicit support and promotion by the Ministry. It is doubtful whether actors in the steering networks could survive without support of central government.

In a way, networks multiply the steering options for governments. Government can steer by *building* a network, steer *by* a network and steer *through* a network. This gives the government a considerable amount of options and flexible avenues for change, while also allowing for swift and direct steering if political developments so require. Actors at the intermediate level hardly ever adopt legislation, regulation or funding as their main steering activities. From a government perspective, complex steering networks may proof particularly valuable when traditional forms of steering are impossible, inappropriate or ineffective. As our findings show, the Dutch Ministry proves to be an agile network steerer, creating networks and adopting forms of direct and indirect steering, depending on specific policies. In a very advanced way, this agility allows or even enhances a powerful position for the Ministry of Education, by virtue of a complex decentralised education system with its large number of relatively autonomous actors. The central government and/or the Ministry of Education's steering role is not always manifest, as the ministry is literally able to hide behind steering networks (indirect steering) or within steering networks (direct steering). It is also able to divert the spotlight onto other actors who help steer, influence, instrumentalise, implement and enforce.

Despite the powerful position of the Ministry of Education, the actors in the steering networks are far from puppets on a string. Actors in a steering network have their own autonomy and role to play. Our research gives various examples that actors do use their autonomy to further their own interests. Steering by and through networks therefore also poses a trade-off for government between gaining help and support for implementation on the one hand, and the risk that actors have it their own way on the other. This is an illustration of one of the starting points of Foucault's framework postulating that the categories 'steering subject' and 'object of steering' are blurred and, as a result, a strict distinction between autonomy and control is not

sustainable (see paper #1 of this symposium, Hooge et al., 2017). The Ministry of Education and the various actors in the steering networks perform a balancing act using and exploiting each others' steering in order to gain and maintain their own autonomy.

To conclude: the question arises as to whether this advanced form of agile network steering is the result of deliberate and intentional action on the part of the Ministry of Education, or whether it has unfolded and emerged over time. If the latter is true, this could be a consequence of the dilemma facing central government when steering education. For on the one hand, government has traditionally had to exercise restraint in education steering and policy, due to the principle of the freedom of education that is grounded in the constitution. On the other hand, there is increasing demand from society and politics for educational steering and policy, promoted by rising expectations of education and calls for greater transparency and accountability in public spending. 'Invisible steering' through agile networks may provide central government with a tempting way out of this dilemma. Whether such 'invisible steering' can be justified from a democratic point of view or the perspective of 'good governance' remains a question. Just as important, whether this solution is favourable for education ultimately depends on the impact of agile steering networks at the system-level for the daily practice in schools. The fourth paper of this symposium will, among others, address the latter.

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APPENDIX   STEERING NETWORKS IN THE PICTURE

TRANSLATION OF DUTCH TERMS AND NAMES IN THE FIGURES

On the right side of each figure are displayed:	
Besturen en intern toezicht	School boards (including supervisory boards)
Scholen, directies and schoolleiders	Schools and school principals
Docenten / onderwijsstaf	Teachers and education staff
Leerlingen en ouders	Students and parents

Figure 1 Main actors in the Raising Standards steering network	
Cie-Bosker	Committee on Numeracy Reference Levels
Cie-Steur	Committee on Raising Numeracy Standards
CITO	National Institute for Curriculum Development
CvtE	Centre for Tests and Examinations
Inspectie van het Onderwijs	Inspectorate of Education
Leraar24	Teacher24
Ministerie van OCW	Ministry of Education
Onderwijsraad	Education Council
Raamwerk Rekendocent	Framework for the Professionalisation of Numeracy Teachers
School aan Zet	School have the Initiative Programme
SLO	National Institute for Curriculum Development
Steunpunt Taal en Rekenen	Support Office on Raising Standards
VO-raad	Council for Secondary Education

Figure 2 Main actors in the Learning Organisation steering network	
Inspectie van het Onderwijs	Inspectorate of Education
Leraar24	Teacher24
Ministerie van OCW	Ministry of Education
Notitie Samen Leren	Learning Together
Onderwijscoöperatie	Education Cooperative
Onderwijsraad	Education Council
School aan Zet	School have the Initiative Programme
Stichting Leerkracht!	Association Teacher!
Stichting van het Onderwijs	Education Foundation
VO-raad	Council for Secondary Education

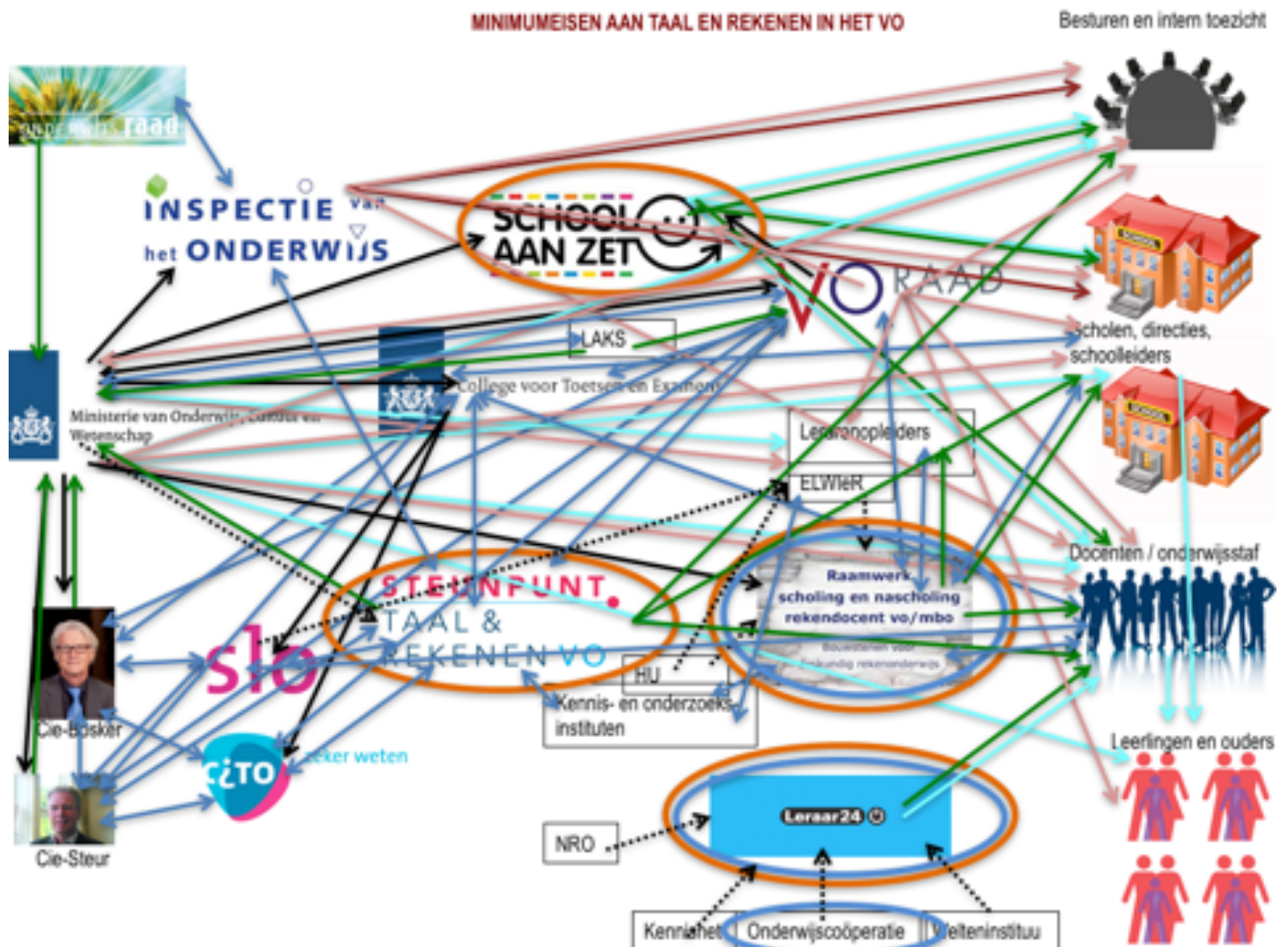| Figure 3 Main actors in the Civic Education steering network	
Alliantie Burgerschap	Civic Education Alliance
Inspectie van het Onderwijs	Inspectorate of Education
KPC Groep	Schools Advisory Service
Leraar24	Teacher24
Ministerie van OCW	Ministry of Education
Onderwijscoöperatie	Education Cooperative
Onderwijsraad	Education Council
SLO	National Institute for Curriculum Development
Stichting School en Veiligheid	Association for Schools and Security
VO-raad	Council for Secondary Education

LEGENDA

Actor displayed with logo/picture: main actor in the steering network
Actor displayed in rectangle: involved actor, not identified as main actor
Actor displayed in yellow oval: actor funded by Ministry of Education for this policy issue
Actor displayed in blue oval: composite actor, multiple actors have established this actor

--------->   established by

⟶   supervising

⟵⟶   administrative agreement has been set with respect to this policy issue

⟵⟶   mutually adjusting, probing, collaborating or supporting

⟶   giving advice, recommendating, facilitating, equipping

⟶   giving information, promoting, communicating

⟶   commissioning tasks / research

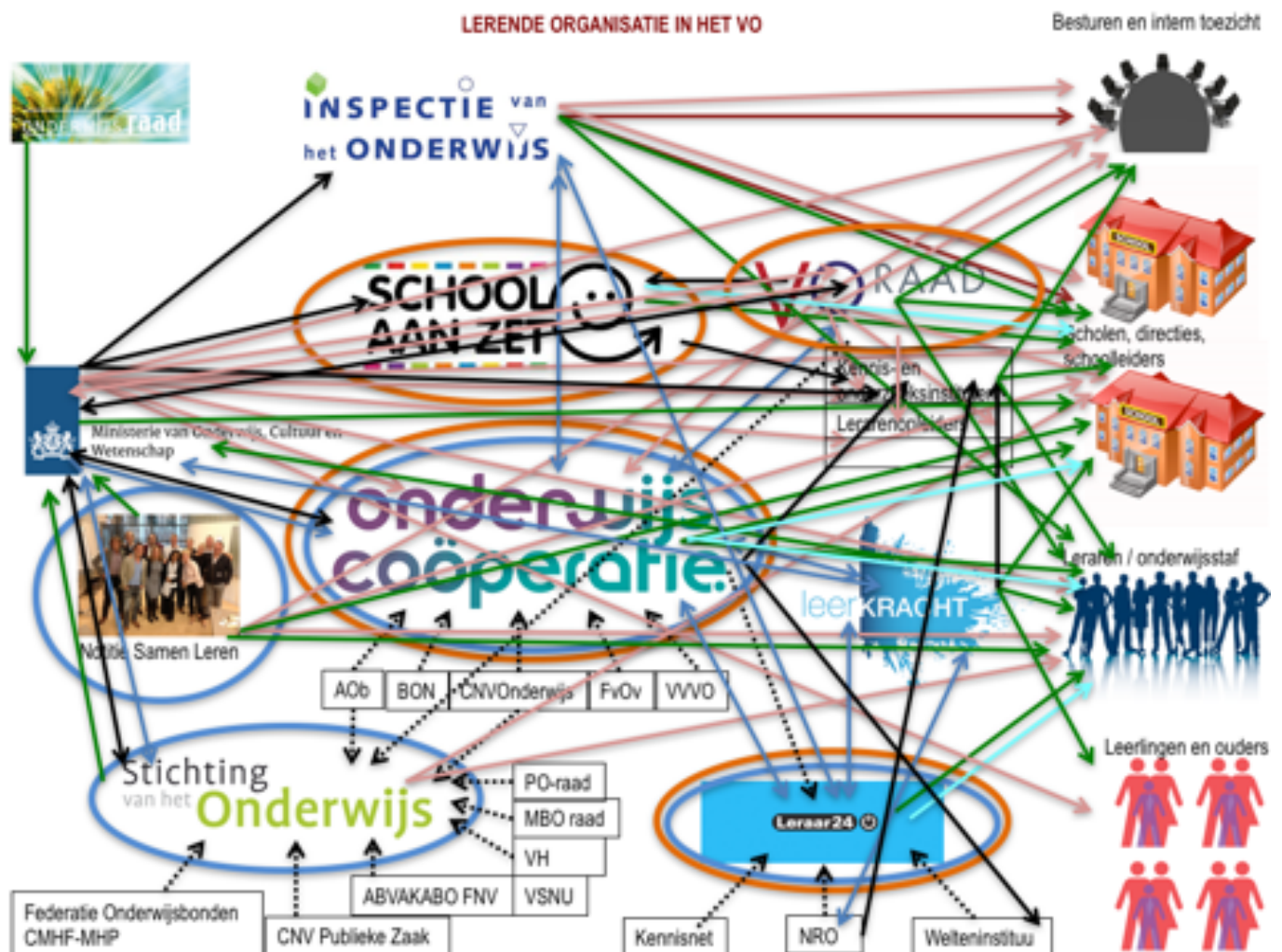⟶   assigning role to other actor with respect to this policy issue

FIGURE 1   STEERING NETWORK FOR 'RAISING STANDARDS'

FIGURE 2   STEERING NETWORK FOR 'LEARNING ORGANISATION'

FIGURE 3   STEERING NETWORK FOR 'CIVIC EDUCATION'