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Relations on the Dutch educational market and the Wet Gratis Schoolboeken

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**Relations on the Dutch educational market
and the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken***

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Table of content

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction	5
Background	5
Politics and the <i>Wet Gratis Schoolboeken</i>	6
Research and goals	8
Theoretical Framework	9
Interest groups	9
Hierarchy	9
Market	10
Network	12
Hypotheses	13
Methods	16
Operationalization of concepts	16
Data collection	17
Method of analysis	18
Empirical findings	19
Schools	19
Schools and interest groups	19
Schools and individual private organizations	20
SIVON	21
SIVON and interest groups	22
SIVON and individual organizations	22
Publishers	24
Publishers and interest groups	24
Publishers and schools.....	24
Publishers and distributors	25
Distributors	26
Distributors and interest groups.....	26
Distributors and schools	27
Distributors and publishers.....	28
VO-council	28
VO-council and its members	29
Edu-K	29
VO-council and other interest groups.....	29
MEVW	31
MEVW and its members	31

MEVW and other interest organizations	31
KBb-E	32
KBb-E and other interest groups	32
VDOD and digital service providers	33
VDOD and its members	33
Case study in complexity.....	34
VDOD and other interest groups	34
Ministry of OCW	35
OCW and interest groups	35
OCW and markets	36
OCW's expectations and predictions	36
Analysis	37
Hierarchy	37
Market	38
Networks	39
Conclusion	41
Reflection	42
References	43
Interview list	47

Introduction

The Dutch secondary educational system has always been unique, even in its approach to monetizing it. Dutch Children learn early on about the Childrens law of Van Houten (an early 19th century political exchange that provided religious schools with funding in exchange for universal suffrage). The educational material in this system was paid for by the parents for a long time, while the schools decided upon the material needed for the children's classes (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009). This all changed in 2008 with the introduction of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. This law overhauled the way in which educational material was acquired, shifting the requirement of payment to the schools instead of the parents. A governmental fund was created from tax money to pay for the educational material for the children in secondary education. This change was made in order to relieve parents of the financial burden of the education of their children and can be seen as a form of welfare policy. It further tries to improve the supply and demand interaction in the school book market (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009).

Prior to the introduction of the law, school books made up about 40 to 45% of the educational costs for a family and the new policy simultaneously tries to address these high costs and market failure. In the previous situation schools decided which educational material was needed, while the party that paid for the products, the parents, had no say in the required products. This caused an imbalance in the demand side of the market. The negative consequence of this imbalance was believed to be the higher than expected increase of the prices for school material (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009). The policy makers hoped that the change in policy, making the demand side a unitary actor, would create a more stable market, thus halting the rate of price increase. Furthermore, they hoped that educational material would become better and more suited to the demand of the schools as the suppliers and the schools would now be in direct contact with each other (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009).

While the law's financial benefits and negative consequences have long been researched, we focus on another aspect. In the initial research I found a market where individual publishers, distributors and schools tend to be incentivized by making and saving money, while these same actors need a degree of partnership in order to make the market work. Therefore, this research delves into the actors in the field of educational material and the relationship between them. We also study the effect of the implementation of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* on said relationships. The question this paper will try to answer is:

How has the Wet Gratis Schoolboeken impacted the relationships between actors, both public and private, in the educational industry?

Background

In order to research this question, we first have to give some background information on the organization of the market, its players and how the law came to be. The field consists of three main types of actors: the publishers, the distributors, and the schools. These groups all have their representative organizations. The publishers provide the material, the distributors make sure that the schools get said material, and the schools are on the demand side of things. A lot of changes have happened in recent years, but it is important to know that there are three main actors on the publishers side. These companies are called Malmberg, ThiemeMeulenhoff and Noordhoff. The MEVW is the interest group for publishers and 95% of the publishers are a member of this organization (Interview 2).

Distributors also have three large organizations in secondary education: The Learning Network (previously Van Dijk), Iddink voortgezet onderwijs, and Osingadejong (Interview 3). Distributors

make sure that the books get into the hand of students. They can do this in several ways, depending on the amount of services a school is willing to pay for. The distributors are represented by the KBb-E.

Lastly, we have to talk about the demand side of the market, the educators themselves and the students. Students (and their parents) rarely bought the books directly from the publishers or distributors. There were four general methods to acquire the books: an External Book Fund (EBF), Facilitated Book Fund (FBF), Internal Book Fun (IBF), and directly from a bookstore (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009). Especially if a fund was involved distributors played a large role. The funds differ in two aspects: the ownership of the books and the provision of additional services like intake and lending, invoices and deposits. With EBF the distributor remains the owner of the books, so the books are borrowed by the schools and all services are provided by the distributor. With FBF the school owns the books but the services are provided by the distributor. And with IBF the school owns the books and takes care of the services themselves. EBF tends to be the most popular form (SEO Economisch Onderzoek, 2021). There were few price incentives, because schools did not have to deal with budget restrictions, as the parents paid for the books. There were, however, transitional costs in switching methods, funds and distributors, so schools tended to stick to their original decision and rarely overhauled their material choices. Another detail that is important to know is that in the years prior to the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* a European law got introduced that required governmental organizations to enact a tender procedure if the budget got above a certain threshold (Ministerie van Economische Zaken, Landbouw en Innovatie, 2019).

The public educational organizations are organized in different councils corresponding to the level of education. Primary education schools were represented by the PO-Council, secondary education schools were represented by the VO-Council and post-secondary vocational education school were represented by the MBO Council (Interview 5). These councils in turn propagate the interests of their members.

These three types of actors have close connections to each other and therefore a platform was founded to facilitate the discussion between the different lines of industry. This platform, named Edu-K, consists of the PO-Council, VO-Council, MBO Council, MEVW, KBb-E, VDOD (interest group for the supplier of digital educational services) and the ministry of education, culture and science (*Deelnemende partijen*, n.d.). Edu-K seems to be a very coherent and coordinated group of organizations in which the government has a seat as well. They lack a clear policy framework, but provide position papers to steer the public debate in directions they see fit. The four themes Edu-K discusses are: selection- and learning process, accessibility of learning material, privacy, and continuity and security (*Over Edu-K*, n.d.).

Politics and the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*

Now that we have described which actors are part of the complex system of educational material, it is time to look at the introduction and the establishment of the law in question. The first indication of the sentiment for free educational materials can be found in 2000 by the interest group Ouders & Co (Verslaggevers, 2000). The interest group claimed that the rising prices of educational material was a heavy burden on parents. It took a few years, but the idea of this interest group found its way into the political parties of CDA and PvdA in 2006, where members of these parties voted to incorporate the idea in the election manifesto (Walters, 2006). As both these parties entered into a coalition, and thus the government, in 2007 it was expected that the promise they made in their election would be carried out, as they had previously agreed to do (*Kabinet-Balkenende IV (2007–2010)*, n.d.; Walters, 2006). This was, however, easier said than done. There were differences of opinion on how it should be implemented between ministries (van der Laan,

2007), questions on the legitimacy involving public tender laws and its procedures (van der Wind, 2008; Walters, 2008), and on the free choices school had for their desired materials as a result of it (Walters, 2006). Even the Council of State, the most important advisory body of the government, seemed to disagree with the law (van Gorp, 2008). Despite a fierce opposition, both from within and from the outside of the governmental parties, the last hurdle was taken when the *Eerste Kamer* voted on and passed the legislation in the year 2008 (*Gratis schoolboeken (31.325)*, n.d.; van Gorp, 2008).

Research and goals

Now that the *Wet Gratis Onderwijs* and the parties involved and the background of the law have been explained it is important to point out why we want to research the impact of the implantation of the law.

This topic was chosen for a few different reasons. First, reflecting on the changes a policy caused in the relationships between partners is scientifically interesting. A study in which we increase our understanding of a process is often scientifically significant. In our case we are looking at the effect of a law on the interactions between organizations. Especially in the educational field this has not been sufficiently researched in cases where private actors and public actors meet. This happens both on an individual level and via representative interest groups. We have an interesting mix of public organizations and private organizations with differing interests and shared goals, which gives complicated relations and adds to the intrigue of the situation. Furthermore, we are researching the representativeness of the interest groups for both the public and private organizations. So we do not only look for interactions and changing relations between parties, but also within parties. It is interesting to see if things between the private actors and their interest group get lost in translation for example. There are plenty of theories on interactions and the duality of this study hopes to make use of them in multiple ways.

Secondly, this research has a practical implications as well. The allocation of money for education is often subject of public debate and it is therefore necessary to take a closer look at the actors within the field. It is useful for the government to know their values, motivations, preferred courses of action and the interpersonal relations of all partners. These findings cannot only be used in political debate, but can also provide the government guidelines on how to interact with certain actors in order to improve education for the next generation of Dutch citizens. It also provides the government with an idea of the degree of representation the interest groups provide for their members. If the world of educational material is thoroughly looked into and explained, society as a whole can benefit from it. Furthermore, this case study can be used in other fields as well, to see how law changes can impact relations in a certain economical sector.

Theoretical Framework

After showing the scientific and practical relevance of this study we look towards existing theory in order to give us guidance in researching and explaining the relations we are interested in in this study. In this chapter we will do just that by first addressing theory and concepts borrowed from other scientific work, then applying it to our case and, lastly, to describe the expected changes in the relationship following from the theory.

Interest groups

In order to address the relationships between the actors in the educational material space it is first necessary to characterize the nature of the actors themselves. The previously mentioned MEVW, KBb-E, VDOD, VO-council, PO-council, and MBO-council are interest groups, who represent the interests of their members. This aligns with the Advocacy Coalition Framework, which assumes that actors form advocacy coalitions consisting of individual public and private organizations and actors with a shared set of normative and causal beliefs (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). These coalitions are built within a subsystem like energy policy, where environmental and economic coalitions exist. It is important to note that while not all members of such an advocacy coalition may have the same views on every detail, they share a general core of beliefs, which is often unshakable. This does not mean, however, that their policy beliefs are not subject to change. The ACF further mentions that these coalitions adopt strategies in order to achieve the goals in accordance with their belief system, but that policy brokers are often needed to achieve a compromise between the different advocacy coalitions (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). Additionally, actors are willing to sacrifice the minor aspects of their belief system or change their tactic in order to retain their core beliefs and propagate it effectively. The only real change to the policy beliefs of coalitions occur when there are significant external shifts that impact the subsystem in which the coalition resides (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994).

Hierarchy

Now that the nature of interest groups has been explained, we move on to types of relations that can exist between different actors. Lowndes & Skelcher (1998) separate partnership as an organizational form from different modes of governance. Each of these modes of governance can exist simultaneously, but are more predominant at different times in the partnership life cycle. The three distinct ideal types of modes are hierarchy, market and network. Firstly, we address hierarchical relationships. These relationships tend to be the most formal, though this does not have to be the case (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Actors in these relationships thrive on clearly defined roles, responsibilities and reporting. Accountability is a key term and, due to the nature of reporting lines and defined roles, these arrangements are often inflexible. Actors in hierarchical relationships have an unequal power balance with one actor having control over the other and fulfilling a supervising role. An example of such a relationship is employers versus employees and in hierarchies individual actors fulfill their assigned roles with routines. They are committed to their work to a certain degree and are dependent on other actors within the relationship (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Teisman & Klijn (2002) claim that an hierarchical structure is the preferred modus operandi of governmental agencies as they are used to work in a certain framework. They even go as far as to say that the government is unable to devolve from this type of arrangement, as they see the need and use for other collaborative governance methods, but are unable to let go of clearly defined goals, product specification and tender procedures.

Hierarchical relations can be seen through the lens of principal-agent theory and it is useful to

incorporate this perspective in studies involving a cooperative element, like we do here (Eisenhardt, 1989). Classical principal-agent theory, or agency theory, focusses on the separation of ownership and control, where one party, the principal, delegates authority to another party, the agent, and the first party is reliant on the choices of the second for their well-being (Vanhuyse & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2009). This in turn leads to an agency problem, because the goals of the principal and agent are different, the actions of the agent are hard to monitor, and there is an information asymmetry in favor of the agent. The agent will therefore take advantage of their extra information and lack of oversight to achieve their own goals. For example, employees work in order to make money, while employers want the company to succeed. This can lead to employees putting in less effort as their salary is often not tied to the success of the company.

Principal-agent theory is however not that cut and dry. Agents can have multiple principles, which decreases the ability of the principals to influence the agent as the agent in its self-interest can pit the principals against each other (Huber, 2000). Vanhuyse & Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2009) describe that the principal and agent roles are not as rigid as previously thought, as school boards act as a principal in the bureaucratic dimension, but as an agent in times of elections in the United States. Vice versa teachers are able to influence elections and can elect school boards themselves as principals, while being an agent in the bureaucratic dimension as they have to adhere to the decisions of the established school board. Roles are therefore interchangeable and multifaceted.

Additionally, Zardkoohi, Harrison & Jesefy (2015) claim that there are not just a principal and an agent to be concerned with, but also third parties. Agent opportunism does not only affect the principal, but also affects third parties, like the public. On the other hand, principals can also show opportunism towards agents. Naturally, principal opportunism can also affect third parties. Lastly, there are situations in which the interests of principals and agents align, but the public still experiences negative consequences. Zardkoohi et al. (2015, p.7) call these situations confluence problems: “Agents will find confluence of interest with principals when the mutual gains obtained from costs imposed on third party stakeholders exceeds agency and principal costs.” Confluence problems can be both direct and indirect. Examples of direct confluence problems are the 2008 economic crises, where principals and agents steered towards making riskier and riskier financial decision for mutual gain resulting in economic collapse, and pollution, where the natural environment and inhabitability of the planet are sacrificed in order to get rich from natural resources. Indirect consequences generally have to do with the influence of big money on governments and regulations. Zardkoohi et al. (2015) add the institutional environment and the consequences of both decisions made by principals and agents on each other and said environment to the mix.

Market

Secondly, the market mode of governance deals in terms of contracts (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Actors act independently from each other and have a high degree of flexibility in forming alliances. In turn, trust and commitment to the shared project are relatively low, as actors often only make favorable deals in their own interest with partners who they deem useful and actors rarely go beyond what is contractually mandated from them. These relations are highly competitive and involve a lot of bargaining in order for actors to optimize their gains from said contract. This happens both when selecting potential partners and when allocating funds to existing partners. In turn it leads to suspicion towards other actors in the field and this can impact the willingness to work together. Organizations often have to make assessments of other organizations in the field and determine if they are allies or competitors (Lowndes & Skelcher,

1998). However, collaboration and competition are two sides of the same coin in this case and often coexist.

Just like routines are a staple in hierarchies, market relations almost always involve price. Market relations are involved when there are tender procedures and contractual agreements are being discussed (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Actors look for partners who can fulfill their needs at minimum costs. Teisman & Klijn (2002) agree that after deliberation on the specifics with government in the lead, they will move towards tender procedures where the most suitable partner will be chosen. So while every potential partner is on equal footing, an imbalance in supply and demand can give one party leverage over the other. Partners can, however, always choose to walk away.

There are other options than just simply contracting out in market relations between private and public organizations (Bovaird, 2006). Market relationships are not just a product of market condition, but are socially constructed in the bargaining and procurement process. It also involves the clients of policy programs, who can actively co-produce and provide value that neither governments nor commercial providers are able to deliver. There are two dimensions in which we can fit categories of market relations, the amount of commissioners and the amount of providers (Bovaird, 2006). The previously mentioned contracting out arrangement is when there is a unitary commissioner and multiple providers that bid for the job. Furthermore, governments can take it upon themselves to provide the good they desire opting for in-house provision. This means there is a single provider and a single commissioner and there is no need for an external relationship. On the other hand governments can also choose a specific partner to provide the good or service in order to get a collaborative advantage. A lot of trust and openness of both parties is needed in order to make relational contracting work, as parties have to be willing to share and not stick to their traditional mode of working (Bovaird, 2006). That is why relational contracting is still a rare phenomenon.

Governmental organizations are increasingly willing to jointly commission goods and services as holistic approaches of government seem to be the goal. When they engage in this with a single provider this is called partner procurement, while if they approach multiple it is either a purchasing consortia or distributed commissioning (Bovaird, 2006). An example of partner procurement is a contractor providing a single building for multiple government agencies. Purchasing consortia and distributed commissioning differ in terms of their involvement. In the former, the goal is often lower transaction costs by purchasing in bulk, thus little coordination is needed. This is very close to the market ideal type, while the latter are genuine public-private partnerships who seek to collaborate and cooperate on multiple aspects of the transaction, showing more signs of networking governance and can be seen as a hybrid between the two.

Individual partners in these distributed commissioning arrangements often bring their expertise to the collaboration in order to get the best policy outcomes and this is needed to form a public-private partnership (Bovaird, 2006; Forrer et al., 2010). There are three conditions to classify as a public-private partnership. The contact between the partners has to be long term, the private sector is involved in both the decision-making process and the provision of the previously public service or good, and both the private and public partner assume risk and responsibilities. Thus, in a public-private partnership the government ultimately is responsible for the good or service to come into existence, the private partner helps in establishing it and has decision-making powers (Forrer et al., 2010). This can be the case in market governance and networking governance relationships if the private partner is involved in the decision-making process.

Network

The last of the modes of governance is network governance (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Networking governance occurs when actors identify complementary interests and actors often voluntarily join such collaborations. The actors are interdependent and combine their strengths in order to achieve the policy goal. Relations are central in networking governance and the “currency” exchanged between partners is reputation. Conflicts are resolved within the network as the partners tend to look out for each other. Networks require high commitment by its partners as maintaining relationships requires time. Networks are semi-flexible as partners cannot just walk away, but are not locked into formal roles and reporting structures. Networking governance happens in the pre-partnership collaboration and partnership termination/succession stages, as partners have to actively decide to work together, decide which partners they want to work with and how and if the partnership should continue (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). There is an emphasis on trust and informality.

Carlsen (2021) zooms in on the collaboration between public and private partners in education and says it can be seen as a neo-liberal movement of introducing privatization and marketing in education. Actors, both public and private, however, generally seem to adhere to public values. This does not mean that collaboration is easy, as there are conflicts of interest. Moreover, people are uncertain on how to relate to each other, find it difficult to manage their expectations and are unsure of the type of partnership they are to build (Carlsen, 2021). This is all underlined by the difference between policy discourse and enacting policy in practice. There is also the question of the formalization of the contact between partners, but generally informal contact seems to be of great importance. This means that trust, frequent sustained contact and aligning moral capacities are factors to keep in mind (Carlsen, 2021). The level of formalization and the need for trust depend on the governance style, but trust is especially vital for the networking style (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998).

In the public-private discourse in education actors tend to have different needs in order to establish the partnership (Carlsen, 2021). While some actors are fine as long as they can pinpoint a common long-term goal, others need more central direction. Governmental agents are vital in binding the different actors in the field together and thus should play a facilitating role and provide the needed central direction. In doing so the government creates opportunities for inspiration and a channel for discourse in which ideas and views on education can be shared. This facilitating role of the government can be seen as a form of policy brokering as previously mentioned by Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier (1994), but it can also be used to define different types of networks.

Provan & Kenis (2007) take networks as their object of study, rather than modes of governance including networking, like Lowndes & Skelcher (1998) and see a division along two dimensions. Networks may be brokered, with few organization-to-organization interactions, or not be brokered, which results in a decentralized network with many interorganizational interactions. The second dimension is the level of involvement of the broker. They can be either a member of the network which is taking the lead or be an external entity.

These dimensions result in three distinct types of networks: shared governance networks, lead organization-governed networks and network administrative organizations (Provan & Kenis, 2007). A shared governance networks has few members most of the time and they all pitch in to make sure the network goals are achieved as they are themselves responsible for managing the network. The influence the individual members have on the network is more or less equal. Trust and goal consensus are at the basis of this organizational form. On the other hand, lead organization-governed networks have a clear hierarchical structure. The organization that leads

the network plays a pivotal role in providing the administration and facilities for the activities of the network and are a central point in it. Because of this centralization there is little need for a high density of trust and relations between all the partners in the network, as the communication often is done via the lead organization. The networks often does not have shared goals, as the lead organization's goals take precedence. With the organizational skills of the lead organization these networks tend to consist of a moderate amount of members. Lastly, network administrative organizations are formally centralized. A network broker coordinates the activities of the network and deals explicitly with network governance, which enables the network to attract more members than the other organizational forms. Goals of network administrative organization are often on the network level, thus there is a level of consensus between the member. The individual member might have different goals in mind for the path the network is heading, but if the broker does their job correctly a consensus will be found where no organization takes precedence over the others. There has to be a level of trust between the members of the network to accomplish this especially because they are monitoring the network broker together. If the network broker fails to do their job the members might have to step in. These organizational forms are not rigid either and they can develop over time. It depends on the needs of the partners to determine what organizational form suits them. However, once a network administrative organization has been established it often remains in place (Provan & Kenis, 2007).

Hypotheses

After explaining hierarchical, market and network relations we apply them to our case in order to draw hypotheses about the relations between actors and how they have changed as a result of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. In order to do so we first have to categorize our actors. The first dimension we look at is public versus private. Distributors and publishers are private parties, while governmental organizations are defined as public. Note that schools fall into the second category (CBS, 2018). The second distinction is interest group versus individual organization. This is in line with the advocacy coalition framework and we can see the interest group as a separate organization from its members (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). We can therefore categorize our actors in the following way:

Table 1

Actors.

	Private	Public
Individual	Publishers, Distributors, digital service providers	Schools, Ministry of OCW
Interest Group	MEVW, KBb-E, VDOD	PO-council, VO-council, MBO-council

This means we have three types of connections we want to discuss. Firstly, the connection between an interest group and its members. We assume this relation is hierarchical as the highest body in member organizations that double as interest groups is usually the general member assembly. This can be compared to shareholders being the principal in the relation versus a board that acts as an agent to keep the organization running. These organizations often have legally defined articles of association and procedures and thus there is a high level of formality which indicates a hierarchy (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Due to high amount of members these organizations have we can assume that the multiple principle problem is part of the equation (Huber, 2000). Furthermore, we can image that the principal and agent roles can be reversed when members have to adhere to rules

made by their representative interest group with other interests groups and that third parties (children, parents and members of other interest groups) are affected by the decisions made by these principals and agents (Vanhuysse & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2009; Zardkoohi et al., 2015). The interest groups additionally resemble advocacy coalitions, albeit formalized, who can change their policy beliefs as a result of external shifts (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). A change in legislation qualifies as such an external shift and the expected policy shift will likely impact the relation between the members and the interest group. Our hypotheses, therefore, are:

H1: The relationship between interest groups and their members resembles a hierarchy, where the members act as principles and the board of the interest group as their agent.

H2: The change in legislation impacted the relation between interest groups and their members as a result of a change in policy beliefs in the advocacy coalition.

The second relation we have to examine is that of individual actors with each other. Schools on the one hand and publishers and distributors on the other resemble the supply and demand sides of a market, where both parties look out for their own interests (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Contracts were always involved even though the schools initially did not put up the money. There is little shared commitment outside of the contractual obligations and teachers can feel wary of private interests in education. The introduction of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* made schools implement tender procedures to procure their educational material and this in turn leads to a different kind of market relationship. Publishers and distributors used to focus on building relations with schools, but due to the anonymous tender procedures this does not produce results for the private companies anymore. Relational contracting has therefore been replaced with contracting out (Bovaird, 2006). Furthermore, the relation between publishers and distributors might change as a result of the introduction of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. The shifting educational market provides new possibilities and threats and this uncertainty combined with low trust in other players on the market can make the relation more adversarial (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). We find that:

H3: The relationship between individual actors can best be described as a market relation with a supply and demand side, alliances as a result of self-interest and competitors.

H4: The change in legislation shifted relations between schools and publishers/distributors from relational contracting towards contracting-out relations.

H5: The uncertainty of a shifting market as a result of the new legislation combined with the low amount of trust made publishers and distributors increasingly view each other as competition.

The last relation we are interested in is the relations between interest groups and the ministry (despite being an individual organization, we can also see them as an advocacy group for political interest and they tend to work with interest groups). These interest groups have the same goal in mind, namely a working educational material chain. Their organizations all depend on it and therefore the groups are highly committed and if one link in the chain does not function correctly, all other organizations suffer from it. The level of commitment and interdependency lead us to believe that were a dealing with networking governance (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). The *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* brought up challenges for these partners and in order to deal with it they probably increased their amount of contact and in extension trust in each other as partners (Carlsen, 2021). With the newly established trust, albeit wary of the

differences between public and private interest, and the network oriented goal is therefore likely that a network administrative organization is formed (Provan & Kenis, 2007). This suggestion is further supported by the seemingly lack of a lead organizer and substantial amount of members. We can conclude that:

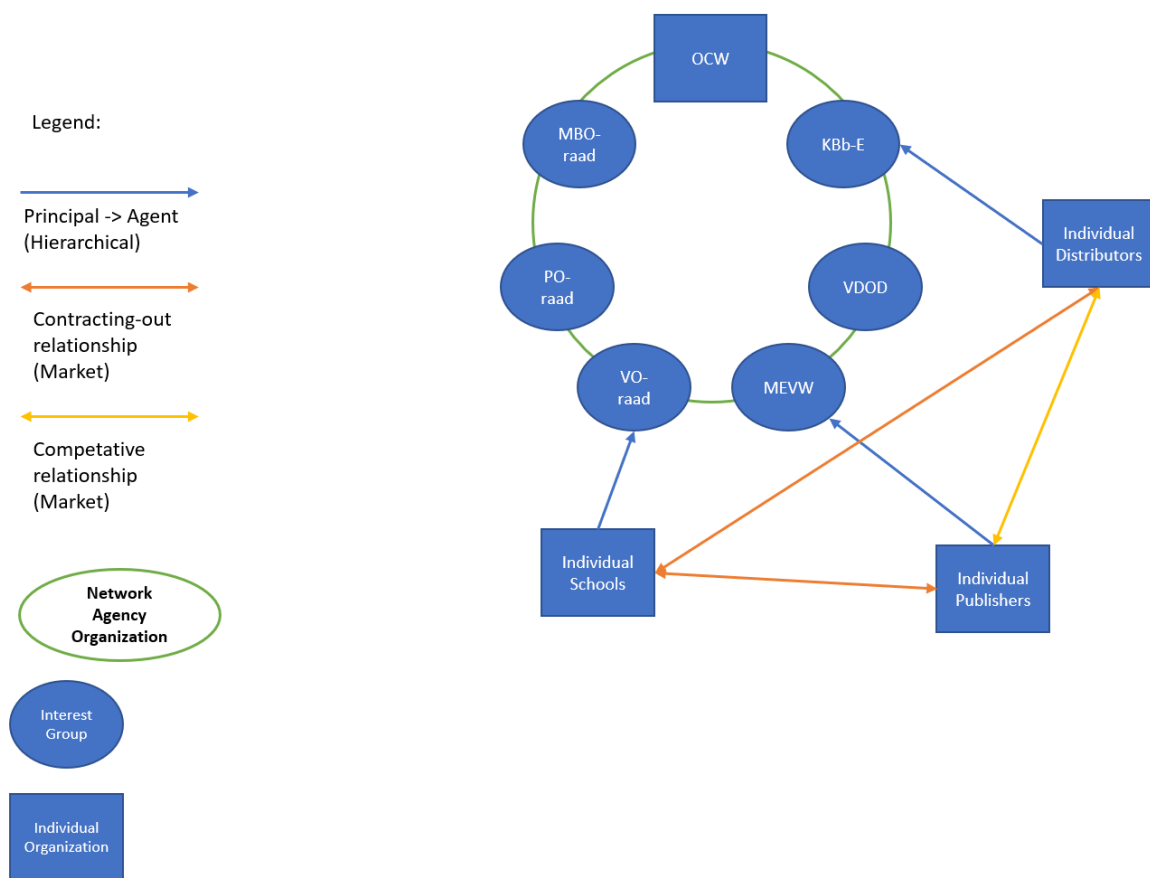
H6: The relationship between interest groups can best be described as a network due to the highly committed and interdependent members with a shared goal.

H7: The increased contact and, in turn, trust as a result of the introduction of the legislation led to the forming of a network administrative organization.

Lastly these assumed connections are visualized in figure 1. Though simplified, as all interest groups have their members, the important connections are displayed.

Figure 1

Expected connections in the educational material chain.



Methods

In this section we explain our research approach, operationalize the concepts we use, shed a light on our data collection, and finally describe our method of analysis.

Our research approach is qualitative in nature. This is because qualitative research gives insight in actors behaviors, motivations and preferences as well as assisting in understanding processes like changing relations (Billups, 2020). Our goal in this research is to understand our actors and why they interact with others in a certain way, therefore qualitative research seems a good fit. These intricate subjects can hardly be described by numbers or have clearly defined causal relations like X influences Y, thus quantitative research is not an option (Billups, 2020).

Operationalization of concepts

The next step is to describe the concepts we are looking for in our research. Evidently, we start at relations. We define relations by the amount of sustained contact between actors and a certain amount of trust (Carlsen, 2021). Trust can then be described in terms of reputation and the result of previous personal experience. We look towards our subjects and how favorably they rate their interactions with others. We define three different types of relations: hierarchies, market relations and networks. We judge relations on their normative basis, means of communication, methods of conflict resolution, degree of flexibility, amount of commitment among parties, tone or climate, actor preferences or choices, equality of parties, goal alignment, and basis of interaction (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). These are represented in table 2:

Table 2

Modes of governance – hierarchy, market and network

	Hierarchy	Market	Network
Normative Basis	Control	Contract	Complementary strengths
Means of communication	Routines	Prices	Reputation
Methods of conflict resolution	Administrative fiat – supervision	Bargaining	Reciprocity – reputational concerns
Degree of flexibility	Low	High	Medium
Amount of commitment among the parties	Medium	Low	High
Tone or climate	Formal, bureaucratic	Precision and/or suspicion	Open-ended, mutual benefits
Actor preferences or choices	Dependent	Independent	Interdependent
Equality of parties	No	Yes	Depends on network configuration
Goal alignment	No, agency problem	No, conflicting	Depends on network configuration
Basis of interaction	Principal – Agent	Personal gain	Voluntarily

Based on *The Dynamics of Multi-organizational Partnerships: an Analysis of Changing Modes of Governance*, by Lowndes & Skelcher (1998), p. 319 in *Public Administration*, 76(2).

Zooming in on hierarchical relations, the relationship between the interest group and its member is again based on trust, but also agreement with policy outcomes of the interest group network. Furthermore, we define a change of policy beliefs as shifting goals of the advocacy group (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994). Different market types of relations are definable by the number

of providers and commissioners (Bovaird, 2006) An additional distinction is made in the single provider, single provisioner category between relation contracting, where an external provider is part of the relationship, and in-house provision, where the organization provides for itself. In the many, many category we can also differentiate between purchasing consortia and distributed commissioning. In the former the goals are mainly economical and the involvement of partners is limited, while in the latter the goals are broader and the involvement of the partners is high. If publishers and distributors view each other as competition is based on (a lack of) trust and a perceived infiltration of their side of the market (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Lastly, on the network side of table 2 we can distinguish between three different types of network configuration: shared governance, lead organization, and network administrative organization (Provan & Kenis, 2007). These governance forms differ in their level of trust, number of participants, equality of parties, the characteristics of the network broker, and goal alignment. Table 3 displays the differences:

Table 3
Network governance forms

	Trust	Number of participants	Equality of parties	Network brokers	Goal alignment
Shared Governance	High density	Few	Yes	No	High
Lead organization	Low density, highly centralized	Moderate	No	Lead organization	Moderately low
Network administrative organization	Moderate density	Moderate to many	Yes	External	High

Based on *Modes of Network Governance: Structure, Management, and Effectiveness*, by Provan & Kenis (2007), p. 237 in *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 18(2).

Data collection

Data on relationships is rarely sufficiently documented. While there are evaluations made of the law in 2011, 2016 and 2021 (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009; SEO Economisch Onderzoek, 2016; 2021) they do not focus on the educational partners and their relationships, but rather on the costs and benefits of the law. In order to fill this gap semi-structured interviews are conducted. The benefits of semi-structured interviews are detailed answers with a high internal validity and flexibility (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.). The high details the interviewees provide are necessary to see if their answers line up and are able to be compared. The flexibility additionally allows us to explore all aspects of the relationships they have and their motivations. While semi-structured interviews tend to be less applicable to events in the past, and 2008 is sufficiently in the past, it can still be a useful source of information if there is no full picture documentation as is the case here (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.). An added benefit of (semi-structured) interviews is that it gives access to information that is usually kept from the record like thoughts of the partners on their relations with each other, their thought processes and opinions in regards to the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*, and their feelings regarding the position they occupy in the educational material industry. This can enhance the internal and external validity of the research (Lynch, 2013).

As we want to know the in-depth relations between partners in the education industry, especially focused around Edu-K, the logical conclusion is to talk to the partners themselves. We want to interview people who are in the know about the process of the introduction of the law and/or have insights on the parties involved and their relations and motivations. Therefore, we are purposefully seek out these partners, which is a suitable method for the purposes of this study (Lynch, 2013).

Another method we used to find interviewees is snowball sampling. After we made the initial contact with an interviewee who has worked in multiple facets of educational material industry and the head of the interest group for publishers, contacted via the Edu-K secretariat, we asked them which people might be relevant to interview. Lynch (2013) mentions the enhancement of access to relevant respondents as a benefit of this method.

Additionally, we have to talk about how the semi-structured interviews are used. Initially, we used interviews as a preliminary research method. Lynch (2013) mentions the use of preliminary interviews as a quick and effective way of scoping out which avenues of research might be (un-)interesting, refining concepts, exploring the structure of the field in which the research takes place, and forming initial hypotheses. Furthermore, the preliminary interviews were used in order to make use of the previously mentioned snowball sampling. Later on we used the semi-structured interviews as our main source of data in order to answer the research question. We continued interviewing people until we reached enough data to get a complete overview of the market and its actors (Universiteit Leiden, n.d.).

Method of analysis

In order to process our data we used recordings in Microsoft Teams as well as the automatically generated transcript provided by Teams. We read the transcripts holistically, while simultaneously listening to the records in order to find inconsistencies in the transcript. This gave us an idea of the contradictions and agreements the interviewees talked about. Special attention was paid to the moments where the interviewees talked about their relationships to others. While coding the data is recommended, we opted for a constant comparative approach (Billups, 2020; Thorne, 2000). The relatively small amount of data (around eleven hours' worth of interviews) made this possible. Our study tries to generate knowledge about the types of relations that might occur and is grounded in theory (see previous chapter), which the constant comparative approach is suited for (Thorne, 2000). With every new interview taken another data set was compared to the existing data and this led to the creation of our concepts and the answers to our questions.

Empirical findings

In this chapter the interviews will be the focal point and the feelings of our interviewees towards the relationships organizations have will be laid bare. In order to do so, we will center our attention toward an individual (group of) actors and describe their relationship with the others meticulously. This also means that we must explore if relationships exist that were not assumed. If needed the nature of an actor will also be explained. In an effort to maintain a manageable overview we will have subdivisions corresponding to the actors and below that subchapters describing their relationships. The PO-council and the MBO-council will not be discussed as the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* has little to no effect on its members. Additionally, the relationships of individual digital service providers and their corresponding interest organization the VDOD will be discussed to a lesser extent as they fall outside of the scope of this project as the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* does not impact them directly and they have therefore not been mentioned in the hypotheses. However, the interesting nature of these organization and their relation to each other will be mentioned. As a last disclaimer, the ministry of OCW will be discussed in the interest group section as they tend to act like one.

Schools

There are different kinds of schools in the Netherlands. There are distinctions between schools on the basis of philosophic didactical or religious believes and schools without it, respectively called *bijzonder* and *openbaar onderwijs*. There are schools attending to the needs of special-needs children and schools teach secondary education on different levels. Schools can be organized regionally as well as on the basis of their didactic or religious convictions (Interview 5). The one thing they have in common is that they all need educational material in order to teach children and in order to get these materials they have to make connections to other actors. Schools consist of multiple sections with educators who teach a certain subject (Interview 7). These subject sections are consulted and are the main deciding force on educational material and often value a method as a guideline to organize their classes (Interview 7). It is time intensive for teacher to make or compose their own teaching methods, thus this is an exception rather than the rule (Interview 7). Methods are seen as viable for around four years, thus every four years the current method is evaluated and competitors are compared. This happens in a layered manner, because the costs would be too high if all sections wanted new material at once (Interview 7). The board of directors of the school is in charge of de budgeting and see the bigger picture of all materials within schools and their costs, thus limiting the possibilities for these subject sections (Interview 7).

Schools and interest groups

As visible in figure 1 the representative for schools is the VO-council. The VO-council in actuality represents the school boards, not the students or the teachers (Interview 5). School boards have even described the relationship as a type of employer-employee relationship in which the VO-council makes clear to its members what the agreements are that they have made with the ministry and other organizations (Interview 7). Schools boards are the ones in contact with the VO-council as the communication often is about administrative subjects. There is no direct connection between the VO-council and the teachers and students at a school (Interview 5; 7). School boards have multiple reasons for being a member of the VO-council: there are projects to improve education (involving funding), it is an organization of peers which you can discuss topics with, they provide judicial information and advice, and they have an academy for extra training and informative meetings on specific topics (Interview 7). Especially during Covid-19 it was useful for schools to know how to deal with the pandemic. It is up to the members themselves to determine their level of involvement (Interview 7). There are multiple ways in which the members

can influence the direction of the VO-council. The most direct way is the biannual general member assembly. This is the top level of decision-making in the hierarchy of the organization and every member is involved (Interview 5). School boards can get further involved by joining the board of directors of the VO-council, but there are also other places where they can have influence (Interview 5). There is a members' advice council with room for twenty-five schools and another advice council specifically for heads of schools with twenty to twenty-five openings (Interview 5). Individual members can even make suggestions and propose policy and the level of involvement of the boards is up to them. The last option for schools to get involved is working groups for specific subjects. Educational and didactic themes are discussed here, for example the curriculum for French, and this way the VO-council is informed what schools want on the educational side of things as well (Interview 5). The level of activity member have within the VO-council is up to them and entirely voluntary (Interview 7).

While conducting interviews a party that got often mentioned is SIVON (Interview 1; 4; 5; 7; 9; 10; 11). SIVON is a cooperative organization that is allowed to make legally binding agreements in name of their members (Interview 5; 6; 8). These members are just like the VO-council school boards. They are in essence an extension of these school boards and these boards are in charge of and direct SIVON (Interview 8). The origin of SIVON and its precise function will be mentioned later, for now it is important to know that school boards have another representative next to the VO-council and that they are able to influence both interest groups. Additionally, the degree of involvement with SIVON is also determined by the school (Interview 8). School boards can be members of SIVON for different reasons. A school can want their Wi-Fi to be taken care of by SIVON, while other schools place great importance in the unitary voice on the educational market for educators which they represent (Interview 8). The feeling that SIVON is there to help schools predominates (Interview 8). School have a huge say in the organization as they are regularly invited to participate in working groups on specialist subjects and drafting, reviewing and judging contracts (Interview 6; 8). Furthermore, there is a member council with thirty-four differing school boards that determines the agenda for the next year. Even the board of SIVON consists solely of members, five voluntary and one that got onboarded into the organization (Interview 8).

Schools do not talk with interest groups of private organizations, with the exception of the MEVW when they need an intermediary to small publishers (Interview 6; 7; 8). Schools can form a relationship with the ministry though, albeit often indirect. They are subsidized via DUO and there is an inspection that reports to the ministry in order to evaluate the quality of schools (Interview 7). The only direct contact is in applying for subsidies, but if they are accepted the execution is done by DUO again. Some schools have teacher/civil servants (Interview 7). These people work part time at the ministry and part time at the school. This direct connection with the ministry is useful for schools as they are more aware of developments in education and can be easily directed towards the right entities with questions.

Schools and individual private organizations

Publishers, distributors and digital service providers all are possible partners for schools. SIVON made it possible for publishers to directly apply to tenders, thus creating more competition, which hopefully results in better outcomes for the schools (Interview 6). The contact with these three groups therefore is similar and consists only of contractual obligations and requirements for the deliveries (Interview 6). The demands for the content of the educational material (i.e. what should be taught) is up to the schools themselves. Some tenders have been won by publishers, so they have entered into a contractual relation with schools as well (Interview 8). These tenders will be explained in the SIVON subdivision. The *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*

changed a lot for the schools in their contacts with individual private organizations. The most apparent is that tender procedures got introduced by the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. Initially schools slowed down their expenses as they did not know what to expect (Interview 7). The decisions for new methods were pushed back and schools increasingly looked for alternative learning material from, for example, NGOs (Interview 7). There was an expectation that schools could push for a demand-driven market and therefore would have a lot more influence on the educational material market (Interview 11). This might even help in the professionalization of teachers as they were more involved with the selection and creation of material. These expectations would not come to fruition. Teachers valued the existing methods as a guideline for their lesson plans and the additional workload associated with material creation and selection often proved too much (Interview 7). Schools are rarely involved in creating their own educational material, but it does happen from time to time. There was also hope for a more differentiated selection of educational materials, but the market was slow to adjust to the new conditions (Interview 11). VO-content is the exception.

The expected drop in costs as a result of competition stayed away, as all educational material packages seemingly had costs that were exactly the same as the allotted amount of money allocated by the government (Interview 5). What we have seen is that school boards were unhappy with the increased workload that the tender procedure causes (Interview 5). For-profit bureaus entered the market in order to help schools with the tender procedures (Interview 10; 11). Internally, school boards became a more prominent factor in the decision-making for educational material and they often leaned towards tenders with more complex services to reduce the burdens put on the school (Interview 5; 7; 8). This meant a shift from internal (IBF) to external book funds (EBF) to relieve the pressure.

The board of directors as the final decision-maker do not often have contacts with individual publishers, but rather with distributors as an intermediary (Interview 7). Schools value the quality of life increases that distributors make, like providing overviews of material and taking care of the fine distribution (Interview 7). It is easier for schools to work with a distributor with knowledge of the educational market as they do not have to talk with every individual publisher and they help them immensely logistically. One of the interviewees referred to unusable gyms, because they were full of books for the first three weeks of the year and letting the distributors take over the logistics prevented this from happening (Interview 7). The price distributors ask for these services can lead to dissatisfaction within schools.

Another development is the increasingly collaboration between schools in order to have increased bargaining power in these tender procedures, which eventually led to the creation of SIVON (Interview 5; 6; 11). With the introduction of tender procedures the applications came not only from distributors, but publishers directly applied to them as well (Interview 6). Licensing Folio (LiFo) got introduced where not the books but the license to use them became the good to be bought. Schools initially pushed for this change as students would be able to look back at material from previous years (Interview 4). Unfortunately, schools do not have to option to buy material from just one year, thus the cost and the dissatisfaction with LiFo and the publishers increased. Schools became increasingly aware of their educational material policy as an indirect result of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* (Interview 11).

SIVON

As briefly mentioned SIVON is an organization with 68% percent of school boards as its

members (Interview 5; 8). It is a relatively new organization, which got founded as an off-shoot of Kennisnet dealing with ICT issues, as there was little specialized knowledge in schools for these issues (Interview 6; 8). Schools decided to bundle their efforts and created this organization with help from Kennisnet and funding from the ministry of OCW (Interview 8). Quickly, the schools realized that if they were working together on ICT it might be a good idea to bundle their powers in the purchasing of educational material as well, as the legal demands are similar (Interview 8). SIVON, therefore, now represent the demand side of the educational material market, including digital services and represent the interest of their members on these topics (Interview 6; 8). It was important for schools and the ministry that there was a joint voice in the contract negotiations with private partners so that individual schools did not get overwhelmed by the bigger private parties. Kennisnet was not legally able to do that, thus SIVON took up that mantle (Interview 6; 8). This unitary voice also gives schools more influence in the educational market (Interview 8). The employees of SIVON number plus-minus twenty and are a mix of inhouse employees and external employees, mostly from Kennisnet, and they make contracts with private partners that transcends individual schools, but you are not obliged to join in with SIVON in every contract as a member (Interview 6; 8). This means that schools monitor their own contract with private partners, but SIVON takes care of the school specific transcending issues (Interview 6). SIVON thus provides services, like Wi-Fi and contracts, but on the other hand represents their interest to private partners. These roles do not conflict, but rather enhances their ability to do both (Interview 8).

SIVON and interest groups

OCW, the VO-council (and the PO-council) and SIVON have similar interests as they all want a strong public educational sector (Interview 8). It is in the interest of all parties that SIVON remains to a degree independent as there are legal difficulties with subsidies and the amount of members if they are a governmental agency. They fulfill a niche, namely the possibility to make legally binding contracts for their members, and this should be safeguarded (Interview 8). However, the VO-council can nominate a member for the supervisory board of SIVON and there are regular meeting with the VO-council (and the PO-council), SIVON and Kennisnet. They have a cooperative agenda with these parties and also work together in differentiation programs (Interview 8). SIVON also meets with OCW if there are political questions on topics regarding tenders and they sometimes ask high-ranking public officials to join meetings with large private companies to signify the importance of the meeting and force private companies to take them seriously.

The need for independence is also desired in relation to private interest groups. SIVON feels like it would be less effective in bargaining with the members of those private interest groups if they are too cozy with the interest group (Interview 8). SIVON is happy with the collaboration between public and private interest groups, but does not see it as their place to join them (Interview 5; 8; 11). They are sometimes called upon to provide expertise for these interest groups, but if they want to influence the topics discussed at these tables they ask the VO-council to do it for them (Interview 8; 11). Outside of the occasional provision of expertise SIVON does not communicate with private interest groups.

SIVON and individual organizations

SIVON has warm relation with their members and prioritize service provision, as working together is less important than having the right materials at schools (Interview 8). There is an understanding from SIVON towards the schools and there are specific relation managers with

schools that joined into a contract. As mentioned in the school subdivision schools have a lot of influence in SIVON and the members are free to choose the services they want SIVON to provide for them (Interview 6; 8). The unique ability of SIVON to make legally binding contracts on the behest of its members combined with its legal expertise makes it the premier bargaining partner for unitary private actors. As they have a lot of members, they have a substantial amount of weight in the contractual negotiations and hope to reduce the costs for their members by exercising their influence (Interview 6).

We will now shed a light on the tender procedure and its regulations. It is important to keep in mind that individual schools can opt to do the bargaining themselves and join into a contract with an private organization on their own accord and this procedure works similarly to the following description of SIVON's tender procedures, without the need for feedback from member organizations (Interview 6).

The relation with the private organizations is described as businesslike, as the interests are large due to the large amount of money that is involved (Interview 6). Before the tender procedure even starts there are two rounds of exploration: within the schools to see what the demands and wants are and the other in the field to see what is possible and where the companies are heading with their products (Interview 6; 8). This is done in order to avoid a tender procedure where no market party applies, because of the immense demands (Interview 6). This does not mean that SIVON has to adapt to everything the private partners communicate, but they can gauge the situation (Interview 6). Together with schools they write a draft tender and check if their members agree and if the market can satisfy the demands. Private parties in turn can write quotations and ask for changes. This is first communicated back to the school boards in order to get an approval for the general tender. When approved the schools in turn publicize their version of the tender and the private organizations can ask them for additional information before applying. When it is not approved, but this rarely happens, SIVON gets sent back to the drawing board and the process starts again (Interview 6). After this exchange of information the private organizations apply for the tender and assessment committee of SIVON selects a partner to enter into a contract with. This can be as a collective or individual schools can make their own decision depending on the type of procedure. This decision is provisionally awarded as we first enter a stand still period of three weeks in which the losers can object to the decision. The motivation behind the choice and the procedure are of utmost importance, because if schools cannot explain correctly why a certain company won the decision it is legally void (Interview 6). SIVON has an important role in this stand still period as it protects its members from the private parties and their objections by taking the responsibility in the motivation and in the negotiations.

There is a feeling that distributors easily start an objection procedure as they have nothing to lose and a world to win (Interview 6). If there are changes in this process, schools have to individually accept them, but SIVON gives them advice. This whole procedure results into an overarching contract with SIVON with underlying contracts with individual schools which then gets implemented (Interview 6; 8). When there is a contractual relation with a private partner this will be evaluated three times a year (Interview 6; 8). Naturally the contract is monitored and if a private company does not comply with the contract there are options for sanctions and even dissolution of the contract. These in turn are the responsibility of the schools themselves to either accept or reject, but SIVON advises them in this decision (Interview 6; 8). SIVON is a vital part of the educational material chain and must be taken into account when discussing connections in this space.

Publishers

Publishers are the educational content providers for the children in school. They differ in sizes and in expertise, but the market is dominated by ThiemeMeulenhoff, Noordhoff and Malmberg (SEO Economisch Onderzoek, 2021). Their goal is providing educational material to schools and improving said material, while making a profit in doing so (Interview 2). Having material that fits the desires of teachers and schools in general helps them in increasing their market share and their profit.

Publishers and interest groups

The interest group for publishers is the MEVW (Interview 2). This means that publishers can join the organization and that it will represent them in the contacts with other interest organizations. While the publishers might compete in the market, they have common interests and the MEVW advocates these (Interview 2). Publishers of different sizes have differing needs. Where small publishers might want easy access to schools to sell their material, big publishers profit from barriers of entry to the market in order to maintain their market share. The MEVW tries to balance these kinds of desires, while advocating for common goals, like sufficient implantation time for new curriculums (Interview 2). We can imagine that the relationship between the MEVW and an individual publisher might be adversarial at times, but our interviewees show a different world (Interview 1; 2). This might be because the MEVW listens to their members and invites them to participate in strategy discussions and making policy proposals. Publishers are often invited by the MEVW to plead their case. This happens within the organization, but also to other organizations (Interview 2). In the latter role the individual publishers act as adversaries of the MEVW.

Publishers rarely speak to interest groups or the ministry other than the MEVW as interest groups are not interested in purchasing their goods. The exception here of course is SIVON. As SIVON can enter into contract with publishers, publishers apply to their tenders. This has been successful in the past (Interview 8). After a contract is established they have regular meetings with SIVON to see if everything goes well in the provision of materials (Interview 6; 8). If there are difficulty in delivering the products, conversations are had in order to solve the problems or find other ways of solutions like discounts (Interview 6).

Publishers and schools

The most important relation for publishers is with the schools. Before and after the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* the schools decide the educational material they want to provide for their students. So publishers treat schools like costumers (Interview 1). This means that they try to adjust their product to the demands of schools. Publishers focus their attention on subject sections and try to convince them of their methods, as they are didactically strong (Interview 7). It is, as a result of digitization, increasingly easier to provide different versions of the material. This can be either different content, because the schools provide for certain subject matter themselves, or different ways of how content is provided (Interview 1; 2). The use of digital material and one-use books for example is on the rise, while physical textbooks are on the decline. Before this flexibility was possible publishers often had relationships with schools to test out their material in return for a discount on the books, but this is not the case anymore (Interview 1). Publishers are keen on discussing the wants and needs of schools in order to provide them with the material they desire and, as a result, hope to get selected as the preferred educational material provider. Some publishers even provide pre-made tests connected to the material to decrease the workload of the teachers. You might think that schools help in creating the material as well, but this is not

the case (Interview 1). In the past individual teachers helped in creating material, but this was done without the context of the school. Nowadays, publishers have their own staff for creating didactic material. Publishers feel valued in their role and think the partners who they are in contact with see their added value to the educational material chain (Interview 2; 11).

When the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* got announced publishers and the MEVW were initially scared. In the new situation the schools would buy the books instead of individual parents, which meant that European tender procedure had to be followed. Publishers were afraid that because of this system schools were not able to select their preferred learning method anymore and schools would buy less books. That is why the MEVW predicted a drastic decline in providers of educational material, because of the inability for small publishers to win tenders (Interview 1; 2). This got prevented, because politicians were made aware of the dangers a small amount of options would cause for schools and lobbying for another solution worked (Interview 2). The eventual law that got passed calls for a tender procedure on the distribution side of the market, but not for the publishing side. This meant that publishers were kept out of harm's way. However, the indication that schools would be more mindful of their spending came true (Interview 7). This led to at least one publisher investing in contacts with not just the teachers, but also with the board of directors of the schools. The idea behind this was that while teachers made the didactic decisions for material, the boards would make the monetary decision. It was in the interest of the publishers to have a seat at both tables to, on the one hand, make the methods they provide appear interesting and, on the other hand, try to influence educational material policy of the school by offering advice. The latter of the two was not a huge success and the effort was abandoned, as a decline in material purchasing dropped (Interview 3; 7).

One of the reasons this happened was non-profit organizations providing educational material (Interview 1; 7; 11). An example is VO-Content, but also organizations like museums provided lessons. The impact of this seems limited as teachers are used to and attached to their learning methods. What we have however seen is the decline in physical textbooks. Another trend that happened is the move towards license first (Interview 1). This means that the material itself is not that important anymore, but the right to use the material is. License Folio (LiFo) is the combination of a digital license and physical workbooks. This gave publishers the ability to directly approach schools in tender procedures and win contracts with them. This is a substantial shift in their relationship with schools (Interview 1; 2).

Publishers and distributors

Publishers have a complicated relation with distributors. One of the interviewees described it as a love/hate relationship, while others view it more positively (Interview 1; 2; 4). The publishers and distributors often have worked together for years, so there is a mutual respect and trust, but they can also see each other as competitors. If publishers can directly sell to schools, without the interference of a distributor, they often will make that decision in order to gain more profits, but there are services that the distributor provides that publishers cannot or do not want to do (Interview 4). LiFo made the direct selling to school possible. This increased tension between publishers and distributors as publishers directly applied for tenders of schools, thus passing over the distributors (Interview 1; 4). Publishers are encroaching on the turf which was

previously exclusively held by the distributors. How the distributors dealt with this will be described later, however collaboration and mutual reliance on each other remains part of the equation (Interview 2). It does contrastingly mean that publishers and distributors are competing even more than before.

The main contention is bulk discounts, as distributors often try to offer them to schools in order to secure the contract, but it is not necessarily clear if that cuts into the profit margin of the publisher or the distributor (Interview 1). Distributors often take 20 to 30% of a margin on their sales and this can cause scorn with the publishers. While this may be the case, the educational market is described as a gentlemen's market (Interview 1). Distributors buy in bulk from the publishers and have need of their didactic knowledge, while publishers need the connections distributors have built with schools in order to get their material in the hands of more students (Interview 2).

Distributors

These actors do exactly as their name implies, they distribute educational material to the students who need it. Not all distributors are alike as some sell to primary education, while others focus on secondary or post-secondary education (Interview 3; 10). For our subject the organizations dealing with secondary education are the focus and these consist of three big players The Learning Network (previously Van Dijk), Iddink group and Osingadejong (Interview 3). Even though the members might operate in different markets they have a lot of similarities and there are little conflicts between the members (Interview 10).

The *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* impacted the distributors a lot. The European tender procedure had a weird effect on the relatively small closed-off Dutch book market (Interview 10). It was not expected that distributors from other countries would try to enter the market as distribution and location are heavily interlinked. The effect of the tender procedure was not well thought out according to the distributors and the Council of State, an important advisory board for the government, seemed to agree. However the general feeling was that they just had to deal with it (Interview 3). The tender procedure made schools ask for extensive services, which not all distributors could provide. In turn the amount of distributors diminished drastically. Diversity and choice disappeared from the market and schools wanted to guard themselves against the large distributors. There was a fear for a market similar to a political two party system, where distributors were able to divide the market between themselves (Interview 10).

Distributors and interest groups

The interest group is called the KBb-E, which stand for the *Koninklijke Boekverkoopersbond Educatief* or, translated, the Royal Booksellers collective Educational (Interview 3; 10). The KBb-E has only thirteen members and each member sells books in one form or another (Interview 10). Individual members describe the relationship with their representative as warm and are often asked to pitch in as experts in meetings with other organizations and members say they are often on the same wavelength (Interview 3). Even though the members might operate in different markets they have a lot of similarities and there are little conflicts between the members (Interview 10). There is no hierarchical relationship between the different distributing organizations within the KBb-E (Interview 10). The KBb-E represents their members in meetings with others in the educational chain and advocates for a diversity of choice in the market and, as the distributors seem to agree on most if not all policy proposals

regarding distributing, the KBb-E follows their direction (Interview 10). Due to the low amount of member organizations they have close ties to each other and the importance of the interest group has increased. Similarly to publishers, distributors rarely deal with interest groups outside of their own representative and the ministry. The same exemption is made for SIVON if they are in a (pre-)contractual relationship (Interview 6).

Distributors and schools

In order to talk about the individual relationships distributors have, it is good to point out that there are differences between primary and secondary education. While the Wet Gratis Schoolboeken has little to do with primary education pointing the differences out can help in understanding the differences of distributors within the KBb-E. The contacts with schools regarding education material is seen as less intensive in secondary education compared to primary education (Interview 10). This is because the subject sections of teachers have more expertise on their subject than teachers in primary education who teach all subjects. They need less help from the distributors in their decision-making and course material is often provided individually to students.

That is why distributors focus on the contacts with school boards and coordinators for educational material as the publishers discuss the didactic knowledge (Interview 3). Distributors do not only provide books and licenses for digital material, but can also provide hardware or, more importantly, information (Interview 3; 10). This information ranges from the availability of material to comparing costs for a specific year of a specific level to schools in the neighborhood (Interview 3). The amount of content, both digital and physical, that is available gives rise to the need for order so that schools can make the right decisions. Distributors jumped into that untapped market.

Schools can ask multiple things from distributors, from just providing books and other material to schools to other services like information on their decisions, distributing books to individual students instead of the schools, and billing (Interview 3). If the distributor provides books to students directly ownership of said books remains in the hands of the distributors, which corresponds to an external book fund (ECORYS & ResearchNed, 2009). If schools order in bulk and distribute the books to their students on their own they hold ownership most of the time and this is a calculated investment (Interview 3). It is important to note that this is only the case with textbooks, as working books are one use only and thus do not have to be taken in again. Digital or physical material is similar in purchasing, but differs in execution, because digital material requires login codes and digital availability instead of hard copy books delivered to your doorstep.

On the educational material side of things we see developments away from physical material and towards digital (Interview 3). Schools had to be more critical about the choices they made and this caused textbooks to phase out in favor of digital licenses. The learning books, in which students could make exercises are increasing turning into a textbook/learning book combinations (Interview 3). The expectation, however, remains that for the coming years hybrid learning will be the standard, thus combining digital and physical aspects (Interview 3). Another development regarding the material is the shift away from ownership of the books by the schools towards the distributors. The feeling is that if a tender procedure has to happen,

schools can also ask for more quality of life services. In general distributors diversified, especially in regards to offering more (digital) services, while schools sometimes opted for a separate tenders for services and material (Interview 3). Costs for schools changed little on average, but the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* has had different impacts for different levels of school. Vwo schools typically teach more subjects per student, so they had to be more critical than vmbo schools in deciding their material needs (Interview 3). This means less money per subject per student for higher levels of education, because of the standard budget per student. It is also important to note that additional material for the more practical courses, like tools, are not covered under the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* (Interview 3).

The relationships have changed as well. The market has hardened because of the tender procedure, so there is less room for a personal touch (Interview 3; 10). The procedure is very rigid, so distributors cannot convince schools anymore by personal conversation or feeling like you are a good match for each other. Distributors have noticed that it is hard for schools to put the desired requirements in the tender procedure, causing happy costumers to have to change distributors (Interview 3). As a result of this the conversations have changed and are more businesslike, because costumers cannot automatically stay at a distributor if they want to. The conversation has moved towards the board rooms and distributors have to increasingly focus their attention towards educational material coordinators and school boards (Interview 3).

As the tender procedure entered the Dutch book market schools increasingly asked for extensive services, which not all distributors could provide (Interview 3). Distributors disappeared and few remained, but the remaining ones had a substantial power position as schools had little options to choose from. This led to clustering on the demand side of things, for example SIVON, which made the standards for distributors even harder to reach as the requirements are usually higher and not every distributor can match these demands (Interview 10). This can be seen as a downward spiral as even more distributors disappeared.

Distributors and publishers

Next to schools, distributors have good connections with digital service providers and especially with publishers (Interview 3; 10). In the case of the latter they usually have a bond of trust dating back years and distributors are large clients of the publishers and this bond is not easily broken (Interview 3). Publishers are more often than not seen as a competitor instead of the partner that they used to be, because they can apply for tenders themselves now as well as a result of the increased focus on digital material (Interview 3). So in order to survive the encroachment of publishers on their turf, distributors diversified their portfolio of services. This does, however, not mean that there is no resentment towards the publishers (Interview 3; 4).

VO-council

The VO-council is a member organization consisting of school boards, as previously indicated (Interview 5; 7). Its main goals are representing the interest of the educational sector in secondary education and the development of the educational sector (Interview 5).

VO-council and its members

The VO-council claims to have 98% of the schoolboards as members, which represent 99% of the students. Even though the VO-council does not represent the entire sector, its agreements apply to the whole sector. The board of directors has two full-time executives and eight people selected from their members (Interview 5). If a school has a person on the board, they usually send someone else to the general assembly. Agreements and decisions are thoroughly checked by members as they have to pass both advice councils and they can suggest changes or decide it is a bad idea in general. This means that almost all suggestions get passed by the general assembly as they have been vetted and changed if necessary beforehand. It is important to note that because the organization has so many members, these members are not a unitary actor, but have rather pluriform ideas and views (Interview 11). On the one hand this is a strength, as the VO-council truly represents all walks of life in the educational field, but on the other hand it means that not every member will be happy with every decision on every subject.

Edu-K

In order to explain the interactions between the different interest groups Edu-K first has to be explained. Edu-K is a deliberative body in which all interest groups meet (*Deelnemende partijen*, n.d.; Interview 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 8; 9; 10; 11; *Over Edu-K*, n.d.). This is entirely voluntary and does not have a formal structure (Interview 2). There is an administrative consultation where seven different groups (MEVW, KBb-E, VDOD, VO-Council, PO-Council, MBO-Council, Ministry of OCW) each have two seats without one party having authority over another. Every decision is made based on consensus and in the interest of the public. Next to the administrative consultation there are policy consults and working groups build around certain themes like privacy. These working groups are based on expertise and organizations can send their representatives (Interview 10). The policy consultation is the preparation chamber where subjects are hashed out before they make their way into the administrative consultation. The individual members of the interest groups are also consulted in this stage. The meetings of the working groups are more in depth discussions on a specific subject. Working groups have a task assigned to them and often result in suggestions for solutions. Edu-K's only members that are not aligned with an interest group are the president and the secretary (Interview 11). The *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* predates the foundation of Edu-K by a few years as the first meeting was held on 3 December 2016 (Interview 11; T. Plas, personal communication, June 7 2022). However, some member suggest that the increased contact as a result of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* indirectly lead to the creation of Edu-K (Interview 9; 10; 11). One of the goals of Edu-K is to provide schools with an abundance of choices so that they can design their education to fulfill their desires. Therefore, applications like student administration systems and electronical learning environments should be compatible with each other. This is also a desire of SIVON (Interview 3; 4; 5; 6; 8; 10)

VO-council and other interest groups

We return back to 2008 with the introduction of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. It is big policy change and all parties in the educational material chain had to come together to implement it in a correctly (Interview 2; 4; 5; 9 10; 11; *Over de VDOD*, 2021). Expertise of all parties is needed and the VO-council provides the perspective of the schoolboards as most are struggling to write

tenders, especially in the case of ICT issues (Interview 6; 8). The VO-council actively helped in the establishment of SIVON by encouraging their members to join SIVON and sent out newsletters on important discussions between private organizations and SIVON to raise awareness (Interview 5). They see their relationship with SIVON as symbiotic as the VO-council sets the conditions and the framework, while SIVON fills out that framework in their tenders and requirements. They are a proponent of SIVON as they bring something new to the table that the VO-council is legally unable to provide and does not have the needed expertise on (Interview 5).

The connection between the VO-council and OCW is special and described as warm. OCW is the primary financier of the members of the VO-council and the members in turn finance the VO-council to lobby for them to OCW (Interview 5). The VO-council advocates for clarity on behalf of the schools and for public values. Over the years they succeeded more and more in convincing OCW to play an active role in policy making and not just arrange conversations and let the market do its thing (Interview 5). Education should not be seen as a company according to the VO-council and that means that private companies should have limited influence on it (Interview 5; 11). In turn this means that there should be clear guidelines from the ministry, not on the market side, but on the side of the schools on what their rights and duties are (Interview 5). The VO-council sees their connection with OCW as a collaboration with the shared goal of instilling public values, as they represent schools and the ministry represents the political side of education and this is one example of that (Interview 5).

The connection with the other interest groups mostly occurs via Edu-K since its founding. As the VO-council is one of the two parties, the other being Kennisnet, that pushed for it (Interview 11). The first secretary was even an employee of Kennisnet, an organization funded by the ministry of OCW. The added value of Edu-K is clear to the VO-council. It is the place where the conditions and technical framework for the entire educational chain are discussed and is therefore important to every organization involved in this chain (Interview 5). Edu-K is not just a collection of individual interests, but it serves a higher purpose. However, some individual interest always remain and the VO-council represents school boards in matters of implementation and conveys the wishes of their members (Interview 5).

They rarely speak to individual publishers, distributors or digital providers as they say it is up to the schools themselves to make connections with them. There are two exceptions: when there are problems in the supply chain for the schools they represent and one case where a digital service provider had a difficult relation with the VDOD (Interview 5). It was desirable for the VO-council and, according to them, the whole chain that those difficulties got resolved to make sure that the single provider would also adhere to the decisions made in Edu-K. In order to make that happen they stepped in and mediated between said service provider and the VDOD. Apart from these instances they do not talk to individual members of other interest groups as the content of the education and the contracts made between schools and private parties are up to the schools themselves.

The VO-council does advocate for multiple methods of content provision for schools (Interview 5). For example, they think it should be possible to provide material on multiple occasions in the year to schools in this digital age, not just at the start of the school year. In

this case the MEVW felt that the VO-council took too many liberties and that it was their prerogative to decide on their product and way it gets delivered. As a rebuttal the VO-council claims they do not want to change the way the publishers deliver products, but want the possibility for a change in deliverance to exist (Interview 5).

The VO-council also rarely talks with the private representatives outside of Edu-K (Interview 5). This is because they deem their scope of topics they cover is bigger than it is for the private parties. They see little added value in talking with the private parties on an individual basis, but the VO-council gets the feeling that they are an important partner for the MEVW, KBb-E and VDOD. These interest groups have a big need to talk to the VO-council, as they represent their potential customers, while this need is of less importance the other way around. This gives a disbalance in the need for contact, though the VO-council stresses the importance of maintaining good relationships, preferably in Edu-K (Interview 5).

The VO-council is described as especially constructive and helpful within the confines of Edu-K and is one of the main proponents of deepening this collaboration, while being acutely aware that their members can make their individual decisions in regards to preferred contract partners (Interview 11).

MEVW

The goals of the MEVW are twofold: keeping the market a level playing field and pluriform (Interview 2). This means that the organization prefers diversity in supplies and suppliers in the educational marketplace where everyone has the same possibilities. The MEVW main task is therefore representing and supporting their members.

MEVW and its members

In order to represent their members correctly, the MEVW regularly invites the publishing companies to participate in forums where all publishers relevant to a certain topic can send representatives to talk about their wants and needs (Interview 2). These will then be taken into account in order to form an idea of the goals the organization should strive for. The MEVW furthermore calls our attention to specialized publishers. These are often small and therefore are unable to adhere to very detailed rules in regards to digital material exchange (Interview 2). In order to work towards the goal of plurality in educational material it is important to protect them by keeping the requirements for entering the market minimal within reason. This might be against the interest of the bigger and well-established publishers, because it protects their competitors. However, as these competitors are also members this is not a conflict of interest between the MEVW and their base. So while the MEVW might go against the interest of one of their member organizations, it is unlikely that they act purely in a self-serving way, as they try to protect the body of members as a whole. The MEVW acts as a representative for its members in discussions involving other interest groups.

MEVW and other interest organizations

The MEVW does not interact with SIVON as they deal in contracts and the MEVW does not have the legal authority to sign contracts for its members and does not think it is their place to do so if they could. They do want to contribute towards public value and have mentioned it multiple times in their interview (Interview 2). The MEVW values the cooperative spirit of Edu-K and says that these hard-to-tackle subjects, like privacy, give meaning and are the basis

of the existence of Edu-K (Interview 2). The MEVW is described as being especially cooperative and keen to the agenda-setting function of Edu-K (Interview 11). They understand their own position and that of others well and are praised for rising above the commercial interests of their individual members (Interview 11).

Furthermore, the participating parties might be in talks with each other outside of Edu-K as well, but this is mostly based on the need resulting from the subject matter that is discussed. There are no structural meetings between the MEVW and the KBb-E or the VDOD, but this does not mean that there are no meetings between individual members of these interest groups.

The MEVW makes it clear that they are not involved in the business dealings of individual members as they do not think that is the task of the interest group (Interview 2). The same is the case with direct contact with schools. The MEVW used to be on the fence on establishing contact with schools directly, but decided against it and now only see boards of schools in their capacity as representatives for the VO-Council. Again the supply and demand of the relationship, the business side of things, is up to their individual member, not up to the interest group.

The relationship with OCW is different. The MEVW often seeks to consult or gets asked to consult on policy where they have an expertise on (Interview 2). It is stressed that neither the MEVW or individual publishers have a say in the material that gets taught to children, but they can give insights on the feasibility of implementation. Examples are advice on the lesson plans for students and on the production speed and planning of the publishers. They do not give an opinion on what should be in the lesson plan, but they do give advice about which amount of subjects is feasible for a student to work through in a year.

The MEVW mentions that their contact with the ministry has improved as a result of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* and that the parties find each other more easily (Interview 2). Structural collaboration in Edu-K has taken off, not necessarily because of the law, but it might have contributed to the deliberative nature and cooperation of all the parties in the educational material field, as this did not often happen before the introduction of the law. Huge shifts in policy require all partners to get on board and in order to do so conversations need to be had. The MEVW experienced this as pleasant and would like to continue the collaborative efforts and this leads to lower barriers in contacting others in the educational space (Interview 2).

KBb-E

The KBb-E has a board of five people chosen from within the ranks of the member organizations (Interview 10). There is a general assembly once a year, but this is a formality as members often agree with each other. The KBb-E represents their members in meetings with others in the educational chain and advocates for a diversity of choice in the market. They see informing their members on agreements made in these meeting as a key aspect of their work (Interview 10).

KBb-E and other interest groups

When the *Wet Gratis schoolboeken* was announced the KBb-E was one of the parties, together with the VO-Council and MEVW that got invited by the ministry to talk about the implementation (Interview 3). Since then Edu-K got founded and the KBb-E has a seat at the table. The conversations within Edu-K mostly go about digitization and the infrastructure of

the market according to the KBb-E and this happens harmoniously (Interview 10). Safety and privacy are important topics discussed and the KBb-E feels like every organization has and takes responsibility in their part of the chain (Interview 10). There is a lot of consensus, because common goals create good mutual relations. A good example is the data minimalization required by the AVG, a privacy law, which led to improved contacts with the other interest groups (Interview 10). Just like other members the KBb-E takes part in the administrative consultation, policy consultation and the working groups. The policy consultation is described as a preparation room for the administrative consultation and to gather feedback from the members of the respective interest groups, while the working groups are set up with a specific goal in mind (Interview 10). One of the interviewees pointed out that the chair of the meetings is appointed by the ministry, but that all parties are equals around the table (Interview 3). The KBb-E does not talk with the other parties outside of Edu-K, not even the ministry (Interview 3; 10). Similarly they do not have contacts with SIVON as they not in the business of contracting. The KBb-E is described as a very professional organization with close ties to their members and competitors which brings much added value to this partnership (Interview 11).

VDOD and digital service providers

The last private party we will briefly discuss are the digital service providers. Their interest group is the VDOD and there are a lot of different members (Interview 4). In 2015 the VDOD broadened its activity and goals and as result there was a big influx of new members (*Over de VDOD*, 2021). The VDOD now has about thirty members with very differing backgrounds and as a result differing interests. There are members who deal with administrative systems for students, members who develop electronic learning environments and data brokers, who just deal with getting the right data to the right place (Interview 4). The members also differentiate in size, as big tech companies and small start-ups can both apply for membership. All members identify as a platform organization and feel the need to be represented, but the representation they desire can differ (Interview 4).

It is suggested that the VDOD should make separate chambers within the organization for companies that are alike and giving these chambers individual voting power (Interview 11). The VDOD has taken this suggestion to heart and are looking to make a system where there is a division between administrative systems, electronic learning environments, and others (Interview 4). These separate parties would have a bigger say in discussions that matter to their type of company, but for the time being every member organization can weigh in on every topic of discussion equally (Interview 4).

VDOD and its members

As mentioned the VDOD is also a member organization and the members choose a board from within their ranks (Interview 4). This board represents the VDOD and not just their own organization. The existence of the VDOD and the whole sector of digital service providers is a result of a desire for digitization and personalization from the educational sector and originated from other parties already in the educational chain (Interview 4). More on this later. Lastly, it is important to note that members are often consulted on important decisions relevant to their organizations. For example, there is a discussion about how data exchange should be done and if organizations will be allowed to charge for it. Members who deal with

data exchange are consulted and make the decisions together on these topics in order for the VDOD to rightly represent them (Interview 4). The members of the VDOD are widely different in goals, size and expertise and as a result it is almost impossible to get an aggregate policy proposal (Interview 11).

Case study in complexity

In order to explain the relations between parties in a satisfying manner we first have to discuss the intricate story of the origins of the digital service providers. We do this on the basis of the company Iddink. They were traditionally a distributor, but the decrease in the need for physical books had a big impact on their business model (Interview 4). They decided to diversify and moved into the realm of digital platforms, buying Magister and a data analysis bureau. This created different branches within the company, one focused on distribution and one on digital service provision (Interview 4). The first branch is a part of the KBb-E, while the second is a member of the VDOD. The idea for this differentiation is that schools would have a one-stop shop for all the information they needed (Interview 4). To make matter more complicated, Iddink got bought by Sanoma, which is traditionally a publishing company owning Malmberg, as they liked the platform strategy Iddink took (Interview 4). After this explanation it is time to go back to the connections individual companies have.

Iddink is convinced that schools do not necessarily want all their products from one source. They provide information, electronic learning environments and administrative systems (Interview 4). While in theory a school could let everything the school does be arranged but just one company this does not happen, thus Iddink tries to provide options. It is important for the parties involved that there is no lock-in, meaning that schools should be able to mix and match the different services they desire (Interview 4). The conversations with schools have decreased over the years, due to the tender procedure, but the abundance of choice schools have makes data important in order for them to make the right decision and the digital companies play a role here (Interview 4).

There is no preferential treatment for a specific publishers, as the companies providing the information want to seem objective and independent (Interview 4). They want to be seen as a trusted advisor and connector and their history as distributors gives them existing connections and a good reputation (Interview 4). Furthermore, individual service providers talk often among themselves as big tech companies have innovations like A.I. that can be used by the rest of the field. It is apparent that data brokers, companies that gather data, and companies that provide information to schools are mostly being represented by the same organization, the VDOD (Interview 4). This can cause problems and conflicts of interest. That is why a division between these organization within the VDOD is suggested. Individual companies rarely talk with the other interest groups, but Iddink mentioned a biannually meeting with the VO-Council and OCW in order to let them know the developments in the field (Interview 4). These conversations are not meant to influence policy, but just to inform.

VDOD and other interest groups

The VDOD is one of the partners in Edu-K just like the MEVW and the KBb-E (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). The educational material chain and in particular the digital aspects are of the utmost importance for the VDOD (Interview 4). The ability for different platforms to

communicate with each other and safe and secure data exchange is vital for its members. The VDOD mentions that they usually send board members as delegates, but that individual members are also put forward in the working groups to represent them (Interview 4). The VDOD sees Edu-K as valuable and is looking forward to the next steps in the cooperation. The contact with OCW and the VO-council is exclusively through this arrangement and they see Edu-K as the table to influence policy (Interview 4). The VDOD is seen as a complex partner, as there are much internal differences between the members. It in turn makes it difficult for the VDOD to communicate their interests unambiguously and with a unitary voice (Interview 11). Despite this complexity they are a valued party.

An interesting thing the VDOD mentions is the foundation SEM, which stands for Foundation of Educational Market parties (Interview 4). This foundation is a combination of all the private parties in the chain, thus including the MEVW, KBb-E and the VDOD. Their goals are simplifying the educational material chain and helping each other at the start of the school year (Interview 4). It is remarkable that only the VDOD mentioned this in their interview, which might mean they put higher emphasis on it than the other parties involved.

Ministry of OCW

The ministry consists of multiple departments regarding secondary education. For example, there is a team for the curriculum, but OCW insists that it only formulates the goals and it is up to school themselves to see how they want to accomplish these (Interview 9). The schools are authorized with education and its content and the ministry does not want to interfere (Interview 5; 9). There is also a team digitization and the educational material market is their responsibility (Interview 9). The ministry supports the schools and Kennisnet directly, which can lead to weird situations as the VO-council is paid by their member with public money to influence the ministry (Interview 5; 9). This is because the authorized organization, the schools, can have a difference of opinion with the state (Interview 5). Kennisnet, in turn, is an independent foundation tasked with the responsibility of providing expertise and knowledge to the educational sector and managing coordination issues (Interview 9). They are funded completely by OCW and are not advocating for individual schools, but helping the sector as a whole.

OCW and interest groups

As mentioned before Edu-K got started as an initiative of Kennisnet as a response to a need for coordination in digitizing (Interview 9). OCW is an active member of Edu-K and over the years feels more and more involved with the project (Interview 5; 9). They see Edu-K as a tool to accomplish the goals demanded from societal developments together with the partners in the educational material chain (Interview 9). They try to influence the agenda and the frame in which the parties work together (Interview 9). Creating clarity on laws and their consequences is important for the other parties (Interview 5). Questions of why things should be done or where the means to implement changes should come from are examples of this. OCW is increasingly taking a hands-on approach (Interview 9). While initially just stimulating that private and public parties should get together, they now actively help with legislation, fund organizations and are moving towards a system of governance together with the six other organizations (Interview 9). They value the independent chair and have good connections with all the interest groups involved. OCW also uses Edu-K as a gauge to see how the other parties feel about the educational market and benefit from a well-functioning organization of the market (Interview 11). Outside of the Edu-K confinements these interest groups sometimes

talk with OCW as well. Private parties are keen to signal possible difficulties and to share their concerns and interests, while on the public side the VO-council is the official collocutor (Interview 9).

OCW and markets

OCW rarely talks with individual companies, but there is an exception for work visits to scope the field and specialized problems like the Caribbean Netherlands. Furthermore, they place importance on a balance between all parties involved. Everyone should be heard, including parents and students themselves. When there are evaluations of the market, OCW puts in conditions that require every aspect of the market to be heard (Interview 9). They also regularly are in contact with SIVON, as they represent a part of the market and they want a balanced view, but the VO-council is their official conversational partner because they cover all schools and all aspects of education, not just the market side (Interview 9). OCW looks favorably towards SIVON, but the goal of SIVON is to influence the market and OCW is not responsible for the market. The market is regulated by the Authority Consumer and Market and therefore OCW is not actively involved in this aspect.

OCW's expectations and predictions

There were a few expectations of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* at the ministry. Firstly, it was expected that the costs for parents would drastically shrink, which was the case (Interview 9). Secondly, the expectation was that costs for educational material would also diminish, but this has not happened. Costs kept increasing, partly because of the costs for digitization, and the expected increase in market activity remained absent (Interview 9).

Schools, however, professionalized in formulating their desires and using tender procedures in general. This was difficult and new at the start of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*, but there was assistance from the ministry in these first years (Interview 9). As a result schools have a more active material policy and are increasingly aware of their choices and corresponding results (Interview 9). On the other hand the increased awareness of all parties involved might have led to fusions and take-overs of corporations (Interview 11). This vertical integration has been noticed by the ministry and it might be a worrying development (Interview 9).

On the Edu-K side there is an increasing need for system facilities and the importance of cooperation is a result of that (Interview 9). The further integration of the partners in the educational chain is desirable according to all parties involved with Edu-K (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). Edu-K is a successful concept, but there are often individual members of interest groups that do not comply with the agreements and the interest groups have too many members to supervise the implementation of the agreements (Interview 5; 11). That is why all involved parties are now moving towards further integration into Edu-V, which can make legally binding agreements for all the members of the interest groups. The ministry made this possible by pointing out the grow fund and all parties applied for this fund together and developed a program for this new organization (Interview 3; 5; 8; 9; 10). This new construction makes it possible to hold individual organizations legally accountable for the agreements and has the ability to kick them out of the supply chain if they do not comply. The ministry claims that increasing intertwining of all actors involved in educational material can be seen as an indirect result of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* (Interview 9).

Analysis

After all the data is gathered and presented we line it up with our expectations gathered from the literature.

Hierarchy

The first objective of our study was determining if there is a hierarchical relationship between members of an interest group and the interest group itself, which is represented by the board. The relation between the MEVW, KBb-E, VDOD, VO-council and their respective members display similarities, but are not exactly equal (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 10; 11). Furthermore, another interest group in the form of SIVON got added to the list (Interview 6; 8). The members of these organizations have significant influence in their corresponding interest groups. They are allowed to install the board, are often consulted on decisions concerning them, and can be asked to represent the interest group as an expert (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 10; 11). One member even exclaimed that the situation felt like an employer/employee dynamic (Interview 7). This does, however, not mean that we automatically have a hierarchical relationship between these actors. In order to determine this we compare our pairs of actors to our ideal type. We have to keep in mind that the roles can be interchangeable and that these principals and agents do not necessarily have to have conflicting goals and can affect the institutional environment (Vanhuysse & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2009; Zardkoohi et al., 2015). The four pairs we are looking at are: Schools & VO-council, publishers & MEVW, distributors & KBb-E, and schools & SIVON. All four pairs show formalized tones and roles (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). To have a say in the interest group members have to either join specific committees and/or vote in routinely held general assemblies, while the members are dependent on the effort and advocacy of the interest group. However, members can decide their own amount of commitment and there is no emphasis on supervision as policy and tactics are often unanimously voted through. At the KBb-E it is explicitly mentioned that all members are equal (Interview 10). The goal misalignment between the interest group and the individual member seems to arrive from the multifaceted and diverse actors rather than genuine conflicting interest between the majority of the members and the organization, especially in the case of the MEVW and the VDOD (Huber, 2000; Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 10; 11). So while the cases show signs of hierarchical relations there are too many mismatches in order to effectively view the interaction as a hierarchy.

H1: The relationship between interest groups and their members resembles a hierarchy, where the members act as principles and the board of the interest group as their agent.

H1 is therefore rejected. Continuing on, we have seen little evidence of shifting goals as a result of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. Contrarily, the VDOD actively broadened their objective and goals and consequently a lot more members joined, but this was a few years after the introduction of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. Furthermore, we have seen the coalition of interest groups tackle different problems other than the implantation of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*, like the implementation of licensing folio and the compatibility between different digital educational applications like electronical learning environments and student administration systems (Interview 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 8; 10). We have however not seen changes in policy beliefs in these interest groups as a result of these massive challenges. H2 is therefore inconclusive.

H2: The change in legislation impacted the relation between interest groups and their members as a result of a change in policy beliefs in the advocacy coalition.

Market

We can clearly describe the relations between individual actors as a market form of governance (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Bargaining between actors and contracts are the modus operandi of these relations (Interview 1; 3; 4; 6; 7; 8). Actors can both walk away from deals, thus have a high degree of flexibility and independency, while having little commitment. Every actor in these relations is either out to make money or save it. Even the teaming up of publishers and distributors serve their self-interest as distributors need the publishers content, while the publishers need the distributors outreach to potential customers (Interview 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8 10). H3 is therefore accepted.

H3: The relationship between individual actors can best be described as a market relation with a supply and demand side, alliances as a result of self-interest and competitors.

Both distributors and publishers mention that the contact between them and schools has increasingly become more businesslike (Interview 1; 3; 7). Happy customers have had to change supplier as a result of the anonymous tender procedure. This means that there is little room for relational contracting, because these relations are not valued in a tender procedure (Bovaird, 2006). The amount of schools that opt for in-house provision of educational material is also negligible (Interview 1; 2; 3; 7). However, what this hypothesis did not anticipate was the collaboration of schools in procuring their supplies. Schools tend to collaborate in order to get better deals from publishers and distributors and SIVON is a great example of this (Interview 1; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10). The relationship with multiple providers and multiple commissioners can either be a purchasing consortium or a form of distributed commissioning (Bovaird, 2006). The goal of this collective bargaining is to reduce the price by buying in bulk and not seeking collaboration or cooperation with private organization. We therefore see SIVON and other collective bargaining schemes as purchasing consortia. H4 is partially accepted, as relational contracting made place for contracting-out relations, but also purchasing consortia.

H4: The change in legislation shifted relations between schools and publishers/distributors from relational contracting towards contracting-out relations.

We move on towards the last hypothesis regarding market governance. The *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* caused uncertainty in the market. Stable relational contracting arrangements are no longer possible as a result of the tender procedure (Interview 1; 3; 7). Publishers can now directly apply for schools to provide them with educational material, which became increasingly popular due to digitalization of educational material and the LiFo arrangement of providing material. Publishers have shown that they were willing to bypass distributors in order to make more profit and the LiFo procedure made that possible (Interview 1; 2; 3; 6; 7; 8; 10). Consequently, the number of distributors that could hold their head above water dwindled and they had to adapt and provide new services in order to survive (Interview 1; 3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 10). One thing is for sure, publishers have less need of distributors in their provision of educational material to schools. H5 can be mostly accepted, because the shifting market led to new opportunities for publishers and threats for distributors and as a result they increasingly viewed each other as competitors. On the other hand, it is uncertain if a low amount of trust caused this, as the two different parties still regard each other favorably.

H5: The uncertainty of a shifting market as a result of the new legislation combined with the low amount of trust made publishers and distributors increasingly view each other as competition.

Networks

In order to answer H6 we have to look at our conceptualization of the network type and see if our actors adhere to it (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). We look towards the groups that are currently involved in Edu-K. The organizations with knowledge from both the public and the private sector and all facets of the educational material chain can certainly be described as partners with complementary strengths (Interview 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 7; 9; 10; 11). Furthermore, their reputation precedes them as, apart from the VDOD, their respective organizations (or predecessors) have existed for a long time and they enjoy not only the respect from each other, but also from their members. Leaving the network would invalidate their position with their members, thus reputational concerns are also present (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 10). The partners are relatively flexible as there are no predetermined objects that have to be achieved, but they have to be available when a new problem arises (Interview 4; 5). The members are highly committed towards a functioning educational material chain as their members, the public at large, and their organizations itself depends on it (Interview 2; 4; 5; 10). Without one link in this chain the organization would be severely less effective, thus there is an interdependent relation between all partners (Interview 9; 11). The parties are considered equal and their general goals align, while still leaving room to represent their base (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). As the interaction provided a large amount of benefit the partners joined voluntarily after being asked to join up (Interview 2; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). The relationship between interest groups in the educational material chain can be seen as the poster child of the network mode of governance.

H6: The relationship between interest groups can best be described as a network due to the highly committed and interdependent members with a shared goal.

The final hypothesis we have to discuss deals with the origin of network administrative organizations (Provan & Kenis, 2007). What we know for sure is that the eventual configuration of the network fits the network administrative organization to a tee. There are seven actors, which for networks seems like a moderate amount of participants (*Deelenmende partijen*. (n.d.); Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). There is equality between the parties, and there is a network broker in the form of an independent chairperson and a secretary to support them in keeping the network running (Interview 11). The goal alignment is high as they all want a working educational material chain (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). Furthermore, there is a level of respect and trust between the organization, but public organizations are still a bit wary for the intentions of the private organization (Interview 2; 3; 4; 5; 9; 10; 11). The question is what the origin of the collaboration is. Some actors believe that the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* was their first large joined effort which could indirectly lead towards the birth of a network (Interview 2; 9; 10; 11). While others do not see this connection (Interview 5). A hint can be found in Interview 11, where the interviewee suggests that VO-council and Kennisnet jointly pushed towards further collaboration between the partners. They could have taken the lead in organizing the network (Provan & Kenis, 2007). Carlsen (2021) theorizes that frequent sustained contact leads towards trust and the increase in trust is what is needed to turn a lead organization network into a network administrative organization and this process is irreversible (Provan & Kenis, 2007). While we do not have definitive proof for this

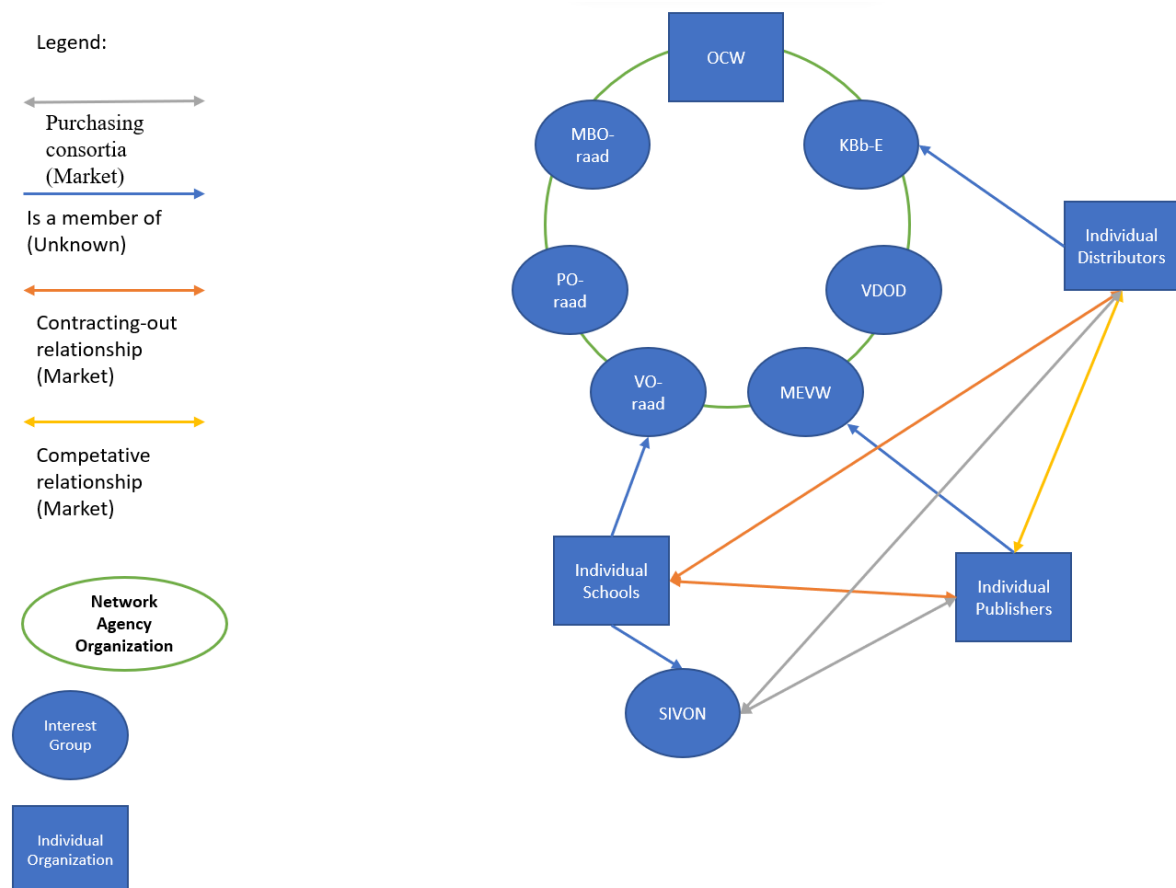
hypothesis, there is a strong suggestion.

H7: The increased contact and, in turn, trust as a result of the introduction of the legislation led to the forming of a network administrative organization.

The result of the hypotheses give us the following relations depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2

Connections in the educational material chain according to the hypotheses.



Conclusion

In this thesis we have talked extensively about the relations between different actors in the educational material chain and the impact of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. There are three different layers that are discussed: the relation between publishers, distributors, digital service providers, schools and their respective representatives; relations between the representatives amongst themselves; and lastly between the individual publishers, distributors and schools. Interviews were conducted in order to gauge how the parties felt about each other and these were compared in order to describe the relationships. Now it is time to answer the research question:

How has the Wet Gratis Schoolboeken impacted the relationships between actors, both public and private, in the educational industry?

First of all, the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* impacted the relations KBb-E and VDOD had with their members. The KBb-E's numbers significantly decreased as a result of the higher demands placed on the distributors caused by the tender procedure introduced by the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. The remaining members felt pushed out of the market and in order to survive banded more tightly together. This increased the strength of the interest group and the commitment of the members towards it. The VDOD increased significantly in members and the members became more diverse. The need for digital services in the market increased and therefore the need for representation for companies providing it as well. The pluriformity of the members makes unitary decisions difficult and the VDOD is therefore transitioning into a system with weighed voting. The MEVW and the VO-council had little change in the relationship with their members. The publishers that are members of the MEVW took on a different role and set different goals, but the MEVW is still representing them. The VO-council still advocates for schools in secondary education, but there was a need for help with tender procedures by its members which the VO-council could not fulfill. SIVON was founded by school boards in order to resolve this issue and the VO-council actively supported them. The relationships between the individual members and their representatives was thought to be hierarchical, but the evidence does not support that claim.

Secondly, the relationship between the different interest groups between themselves and the ministry of OCW has intensified greatly over the years since the introduction of the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken*. The existence of Edu-K is indicative of the formalization and increased collaboration of the parties with a seat at the table. The continuing steps towards an agreement system in Edu-V indicates that the interest groups are positive about the collaboration and want to tighten their bonds even further. There are hints that the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* was a catalyst of these developments and the lack of contact outside of Edu-K between the members displays their commitment to transparency within the group. The dynamic resembles a network administrative organization, which prides itself on high goal alignment and makes use of an external network broker in order to keep the network running, while maintaining equality between the partners.

Finally, the relationships between individual actors on the educational material market has changed as well. Publishers can now directly enter into a contract with schools as a result of the tender procedure cause by the *Wet Gratis Schoolboeken* and the introduction of LiFo as a result of digitization enhanced by the same law. This caused distributors to pivot towards other means of contact with schools and they focus more on service provision, especially information and

quality of life services. The relationship between schools and distributors changed from relational contracting to contracting-out relationships, as the nature of the relationship has become more businesslike as a result of the tender procedures. Furthermore, we increasingly see both virtual integration on the private side and purchasing consortia, like SIVON, on the public side of the market. Publishers and distributors are still mutually dependent when it comes to physical distribution, but the relationship has become more competitive due to the LiFo procedure.

Reflection

Overall this paper presents a satisfying conclusion. The method used and the amount of respondents with a direct relation to the topic give a generous overview of the market and the players in said market. There are a few things that can be improved upon. Firstly, we lacked respondents from the publisher and digital service side that had no direct position on their corresponding interest group. For the publisher side this issue was partially negated by the other interviewees which had previously held positions at publishing companies. Secondly, a deliberate choice was made to include OCW, the digital service providers and SIVON to give a complete overview of the market necessary to understand it, but this was not wholly reflected in the answer to the research question. The VDOD was included in the interest group discussion, but the interwovenness and diversity of individual digital service providers described made the individual relations unfeasible to include. This might be improved upon in further research. Lastly, not all hypotheses resulting from the theory seemed to line up with the empirical evidence gathered in the interviews. This is the result of a changed theoretical framework after the interviews were conducted. There were few questions about the advocacy coalition framework and this resulted in an inconclusive answer towards a hypothesis. Social scientist might want to expand the scope of this research.

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Interview list

Nr.	Interviewee	Date	Relevance to the Topic
1	Paul Vermeulen	21-04-2022	Former OCW and publisher employee; independent advisor in education
2	Stephan de Valk	28-04-2022	Director of MEVW; seat on Edu-K
3	Pieter Dubois	06-05-2022	Employee of Iddink distribution; Provided input for KBb-E in Edu-K
4	Ben Koers	11-05-2022	Board of VDOD; seat on Edu-K
5	Roel van Hulsten	16-05-2022	Employee of VO-council: policy advisor on digitization, privacy and information management
6	Gigi Schutte	20-05-2022	SIVON's expert on tender procedures
7	Harm van Son	23-05-2022	Board of a school; history in educational industry
8	Natasja Langerak	23-05-2022	SIVON's expert on relations
9	Florine van Berne & Jaco van Rijn	23-05-2022	Employee of OCW: specialist on WGS & Employee of OCW; coordinates primary and secondary education
10	Ellen ter Horst	31-05-2022	Board of KBb-E; seat on Edu-K
11	Pieter Hendrikse	01-06-2022	Chairperson of Edu-K