Chapter 1  Introduction and Research Questions

1.1  Introduction and research problems

Educational reforms and changes in schools and educational systems are never easy. Resistance to change is endemic and has a systemic character (Creemers and Hoeben, 1997). It has been increasingly necessary to clarify the factors that foster or hinder school improvement and educational reforms. Moreover, there has been a growing need to find effective strategies for school improvement and for educational system change worldwide. One recommendation is effective school improvement, through which the capacity of schools can be increased to take charge of changes and to meet the challenges posed by the “permanent white water”– continuous environmental turbulence and change.

From 1998 to 2001, four northern European countries (the French-speaking Belgium, Finland, England and the Netherlands) and four Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) participated in a large European Commission research project entitled *Capacity for Change and Adaptation in the Case of Effective School Improvement* (ESI). This project, initiated, launched and coordinated by the Groningen Institute for Educational Research (GION) of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and funded by the European Commission, aimed to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework based on theoretical integration and the empirical analysis of effective school improvement programs. The theoretical integration blended two different theories: school effectiveness theory and school improvement theory. In addition, it integrated various other related theories such as curriculum theory, behavioral theory, organization theory, organizational learning and learning organization theories, and public choice theory. The empirical component comprised of over thirty case studies contributed by the eight participating European countries. The ultimate goal of the ESI project was to develop strategies for school improvement resulting in effective schools that might be applicable across countries (Creemers and Hoeben, 1998; Reezigt, 2001; De Jong and Stoll, 2002). The project consisted of three different parts: the analysis and synthesis of the relevant theories; the analysis of the selected school improvement programs in the eight participating countries; and the re-analysis of other effective school improvement projects in the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA.

As in any international project, the ESI project had to accommodate different national contexts. Although research focusing on *international or national contexts* is rare within the field of school effectiveness research, the importance of the ‘context’, particularly in creating conditions for efficiency and for improvement, has been acknowledged by some school effectiveness and school improvement researchers (Creemers, 1992, 1994; Hoeben, 1998a; Scheerens and Bosker, 1997; Reynolds, 1994; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2001; Hopkins et al., 1994; Stoll and Fink, 1996; De Jong, 2000b; Reezigt, ed. 2001; MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001; Van der Werf, 1995, Hofman, et al., 2002). Recently, context has been highlighted as a central issue for school effectiveness and improvement (Creemers et al., 1998: 130). There is growing awareness of the importance of contexts, particularly the importance of the national context, for effective school improvement. The recently published book “World Class Schools” (Reynolds et al., 2002) has moved beyond “international horse races” between countries based on their test scores achievement by deliberately introducing contextual factors within countries as potentially important determinants of “what works”. Convincingly, it has “intellectually advanced
the entire school effectiveness paradigm and research community as well as the rather moribund comparative education tradition” (ib: 10).

Three main contextual factors that can foster or hinder effective school improvement have been identified in the ESI project. These factors are (Reezigt, ed. 2001, see Appendix 1):
- Educational goals
- Pressure to improve (market mechanisms, external evaluation and accountability, external agents, participation of society in education and societal changes)
- Resources for improvement (autonomy granted to schools, financial resources and favourable daily working conditions for teachers and schools, local support)

These factors have been derived not only from the integration of the theoretical literature and the analysis of the effective school improvement programs but also from discussions within the international team and during the national conferences held in each of the eight European countries. Essentially, the main focus of the ESI project was at the school level, both theoretically and empirically. As a consequence, little information is available regarding the national contextual level. In addition, the strict time schedule of the ESI project left no room for the international team to focus carefully on examining or analyzing the contextual level factors. It is no wonder that the final ESI project report admits “up till now, the importance of the context has rarely been acknowledged and analyzed” (Reezigt, 2001: 72). Owing to the importance of context for effective school improvement, this study intends to go one step further – to implement a more in-depth and thorough analysis of the national contextual factors, both theoretically and empirically. To this end, a literature review of five relevant theories will focus on deriving more precise contextual level factors and indicators. It was assumed that the literature review would result in a framework of the influence (positive or negative) between contextual factors and effective school improvement. This framework will be validated for analysing the school improvement programs (see for details in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4). The theoretical and empirical analyses are intended to answer the following research questions:

1. Does the contextual level, particularly the national contextual level, globally influence effective school improvement (ESI)?
2. If so, what are the concrete factors at the contextual level which influence ESI?
3. Are there any differences between the influences they exert on ESI (strongly or less strongly, positively or negatively)?
4. Can common issues be identified in their influence on ESI across the eight European countries?

1.2 The design of this study

Owing to the nature of the research questions, particularly owing to the resources or data available, the approach used in this study will be mainly qualitative with some quantitative features. It will be composed of three parts:
- Literature review (1.2.1)
- Empirical analysis (1.2.2)
- Conclusions and discussions of the findings (1.2.3).

1.2.1 Literature review
The literature review aims at developing a framework which contains a coherent set of contextual factors assumed to foster or hinder effective school improvement. In addition,
this review will provide an initial answer to the first two research questions. More importantly, this theoretical framework is also necessary for the analysis of effective school improvement programs. To this end, the literature review needs to explore what kind of contextual level factors can be derived from the five relevant theories – School Effectiveness theory, School Improvement theory, Curriculum theory, theories of Organization, Organizational Learning and Learning Organization, and Public/School Choice theory. Therefore, a close and reflective review of the relevant literature will be conducted. The literature review will closely examine the five theories using a range of appropriate sources, such as international publications, the related international academic journal articles, different models in the related theories, UNESCO, Eurydice, OECD publications, published project reports or evaluations, the proceedings of international conferences, government or official organization web pages from different countries, to mention just a few. In order to deal with the mass of information which may result from the literature review, an inductive approach will be used to manage the literature review section. The contextual level factors derived from each theoretical paradigm will be briefly summarized and presented. Later, they will be synthesized and classified. It is hoped that the synthesis may yield a framework that can be used in the empirical section of this study.

1.2.2 The empirical analysis
The aim of the empirical analysis is to answer the four research questions. The analysis will confront our contextual level framework and the factors derived with the data available from the case studies. It contains two parts: (1) separate analyses of the case studies within each country (intra-case analysis to answer research questions 1-3); (2) comparative analyses of the case studies across the eight countries (inter-case analysis to answer research questions 1-4). The criteria used for selecting the case studies, the collection of data and the approaches and the methodologies used for the analysis in the empirical section will be further explained in Chapter 3.

1.2.3 Conclusions and discussions
Finally, in this section, all the research questions will be answered or be discussed further. The analysis of the 31 case studies may reveal or capture how some factors have operated at different levels or in school practice. Here a distinction between answering research questions and developing propositions has to be drawn. The first operation is empirical and limited to the useable data. Propositions go one step further: they function as a theory with a hypothetical character, which can guide further analyses and future research projects. Finally, the limitations, strengths and implications of our study will be presented.

1.3 Definitions of ESI
Drawing on Hopkins, Ainscow and West’s definition of improvement, the concept of effective school improvement refers to “planned educational change that enhances student learning outcomes as well as the school’s capacity for managing change” (Hopkins et al., 1994, 1996; Creemers and Hoeben, 1998). The term “managing change” emphasizes the process and activities that have to be carried out in school in order to achieve change or improvement (Creemers, 2002: 345). Within the definition of ESI, two key terms are

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1 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
2 The information network on education in Europe
3 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
highlighted: student outcomes and school's capacity. Recognizing the fundamental changes in schools' external contexts, Hopkins et al. particularly emphasize pupil outcomes instead of broad educational goals. Furthermore, determining a school's capacity and readiness for change is vitally important for internal and external school change agents (Fullan, 1993).

1.4 Definitions of the contextual level

In this study, “context level” is defined as “all the levels in an educational system above the school level”, including the Ministry of Education or National Boards of Education, provincial educational authorities, the district boards of education at the regional level, the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) or the Local Municipalities, etc. This definition is borrowed from the comprehensive educational model of Creemers (1994) (see further section 2.1). As the target of this research is to detect the influence of the national contextual level factors on effective school improvement in different countries, the meaning of the “context level” in this study is primarily focused on the systemic level (e.g. the national level, the LEAs and their associates). The influence of parents and peers, the influence of the student’s socio-economic status (SES) and so on are excluded at this level, though they are significant and can be reasonably grouped at the contextual level. According to the idea of nested theories, higher level factors can influence lower levels, either directly or indirectly. Within the educational system, the quality of a higher level can foster or degrade the quality of the levels beneath. Therefore, student achievement is the output of all levels combined.

1.5 The general outlines and structure of this dissertation

In this dissertation, Chapter 1 briefly introduces information underpinning this study, particularly the ESI project, the research questions of this study and two important concepts: ESI and the contextual level. Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review of the five related theories. Our research model with the national contextual level factors and the indicators will be derived from the literature review. An elaboration of these factors follows. Chapter 3 elucidates the research model and methodology of this study. The selection criteria for the case studies and the approaches for data collection and analysis will be presented. Chapter 4 is the empirical section – the analysis of the 31 case studies. It intends to discover how the contextual level factors function in the case studies within each country participating in the ESI project. Chapter 5 deepens the analysis found in Chapter 4 by comparing the issues that emerged in the case studies as common or different across the eight European countries. Chapter 6 assesses the findings of the whole study, answers the four research questions and exposes the limitations and the strengths of the study. Finally, the implications of this study for policymaking, for theory building and for practice will be presented.

1.6 Summary

This chapter focuses on the information underpinning this study, the research questions and the general design. Before drawing the general outline of this research, we have briefly explained the concepts of Effective School Improvement and what the contextual level means. From here we turn to our next chapter – the theoretical literature review.