Summary in English

Dissatisfied with the knowledge bases of School Effectiveness (SE) and School Improvement (SI) paradigms – the former being strong at discovering “what works and why” but relatively weak at describing “how” it works, while the latter being strong at discovering “how to improve and change” but relatively weak at finding “what” works – the Groningen Institute for Educational Research (GION), within the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, initiated, launched and coordinated a large international project entitled “Capacity for change and adaptation in the case of Effective School Improvement” (ESI). The ESI project, funded by the European Commission (1998-2001), attracted research teams from four northern European countries (French-speaking Belgium, Finland, England and the Netherlands) and four Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain). Its findings have proven well worth the effort, producing a theoretical integration of different yet relevant theories and a framework for effective school improvement based on theoretical integration and empirical analysis of effective school improvement programs contributed by the eight participating countries in Europe. The focus of the ESI project was located at the school level.

In completing the project further questions arose. Does the contextual level, particularly the national contextual level, globally influence ESI? If so, what are the concrete factors at the contextual level which influence ESI? Are there any differences between the influences they exert on ESI? Can common issues be identified in their influence on ESI across the eight European countries? Embraced by yet complementary to the ESI project, this research started its journey. It focused on the national contextual level and aimed at discovering the influences of the factors at the contextual level, especially at the national level, on effective school improvement within eight European countries and across these eight European countries.

As in any research in a newly established research field, this study intended to draw useful input from various theoretical traditions so as to establish a sound research model that would facilitate answering our research questions. Using the content analysis method, we have critically reviewed and integrated five theoretical paradigms: School Effectiveness theory; School Improvement theory; Curriculum theory; theories of Organization, Organizational Learning and Learning Organization; and Public Choice theory. This resulted in a “goal-pressure-support” research model of ten contextual level factors and their indicators: (1) national goal-setting in terms of student outcomes, (2) national goal-setting in terms of school improvement, (3) strong centrally steering and empowering ESI, (4) external evaluation and external agents, (5) market mechanism, (6) school accountability, (7) the provision of adequate time, financial and human resource support for ESI, (8) local support for ESI, (9) offering schools some autonomy and (10) engendering a culture in support of ESI. We thus transcended the limits of any single theory (see Chapter 2 and 3). These factors could be used consistently as ten “filters” to closely analyze the case studies in the empirical section of this research.

Once we had constructed a theoretical framework and developed a research model for the contextual level factors, we were able to proceed to the empirical study phase. To this
end, the 31 school improvement programs contributed by the eight European countries were mainly relied upon. Multiple methods were used to collect the required data (see Chapter 3) and to analyze the 31 case studies. In our case, the case study method fulfilled a double function: exploratory, in providing evidence for the contextual factors of influence, and explanatory, in that data may enable the initial answers to the research questions to be obtained. Comparative and contrasting approaches were constantly used to detect similarities and differences, first within the eight countries studied (intra-country-case analysis, see Chapter 4) and second, cross-nationally (inter-country-case analysis, see Chapter 5). Our theoretical and empirical findings offered an initial set of answers to our research questions and allowed us to present theoretical propositions for further analysis and research (section 6.2).

Our findings indicate that education is intensively guided and shaped at the national level. Setting national goals appears to be essential but insufficient because goals can only be effective if they are complemented by effective pressure as well as by empowering support. The ten factors at the national contextual level appear to have positively or negatively influenced effective school improvement in these eight countries, at least at the level of the cases under study. Such influences reflected in the case studies vary in form, degree and context (see Chapter 4). However, our comparative analysis reveals some issues common to all eight countries (see Chapter 5). Given these, we can tentatively conclude that the goals-pressure-support framework can be used as a comprehensive strategy for educational policymaking at the national contextual level. Our findings permit the conclusion that centralization or decentralization – as is often said and taken for granted - may not be the decisive factor for effective school improvement. On the contrary, strengthening the driving forces and establishing a strong national monitoring, assessment, feedback and reinforcement system for ESI is crucially important. Furthermore, our findings underline the necessity of offering schools a moderate degree of autonomy in certain domains – particularly in the domain of school personnel decision-making, in the aspects of recruiting/dismissing, supervising, evaluating, rewarding and promoting teachers and school staff members. Moreover, our findings further stress that offering schools some autonomy should go hand in hand with school accountability. Additionally, some recommendations for policymaking, for theory building and for practice are presented in section 6.5.

In conclusion, we highlighted the fact that the kinds of strategies used by the central government of a nation to spur ESI greatly depends on the nature of its vision for education, which is more deeply rooted in the values and the culture of that society. However, values and cultures can be changed and do change, although this is no easy task. Therefore, to engender a culture in support of education may result in both pressure and support for ESI. The national government has a significant role to play in the process of shaping its national or educational culture. An analysis like ours indicates that the national context has to set goals, to provide means and to control outcomes while simultaneously providing support and autonomy for schools in order that they may become effective teaching and learning organizations. Therefore, the government, at whatever level or in whatever country, tremendously influences its people’s cultural attitudes towards education and thus towards effective school improvement.