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**SPIRALING TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY: AN INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>****Don Adams and Mark Ginsburg<sup>2</sup>****Introduction**

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed increased international concern for educational quality (Chapman and Carrier, 1990; Fuller, 1987 and 1994; Hallak, 1990; Heyneman and Loxley, 1983; Ross and Mahlek, 1990), typically defined in terms of student achievement (for other definitions, see Adams, 1993). This renewed attention on quality, to some extent, has shifted the focus of educational debates and reforms from educational growth to the discovery of those combinations of inputs, processes, and outputs which are assumed to define or cohere to improved patterns of education for all children (e.g., Inter-Agency Commission, 1990).

This increased interest in educational quality has taken place during a period of ripples of optimism flowing from two bodies of empirical research literature. Such school effects and effective school research suggests that certain manipulable school inputs can affect average student achievement and that the characteristics of high quality schools are not only known, but to a degree, are common across a range of cultures. At the same time such approaches to studying and

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<sup>2</sup> This paper builds in part other work (Adams et al., 1995; Campbell, 1994; Ginsburg et al., 1996). The authors also wish to thank Tom Clayton, Martha Mantilla, Jane Schubert, Judy Sylvester and Yidan Wang for their comments and suggestions.

improving school quality have been criticized, and alternative models for linking research to educational policy and practice has been proposed and pursued. Rather than making policy and practice decisions centrally based on a single, large-scale study, the alternative models promote a more iterative and decentralized process -- a series of studies conducted at the classroom, school, community, and national level being linked with a series of decisions to revise or refine educational policy and practice. These proposed alternative models have affinities to two dynamics with respect to administrative structures and policy planning and implementation procedures within educational systems.

The first dynamic consists of increased experimentation with various forms and meanings of educational decentralization and center-local partnerships (Adams, 1994; Bray and Lillis, 1988; Cummings, 1992; Moyle and Pongturlan, 1992; Special Issues on Education, 1992; Tyack, 1993). Although counter moves have also occurred, rhetoric and action have promoted downward shift in responsibilities has meant increased involvement of lower governmental echelons, school administrators and, at times, teachers and parents, as participants in making decisions about educational policy and practice (Ginsburg 1991; McGinn, 1992). This trend away from an exclusive reliance on detailed educational plans and mandates from the center is partly in response to the perceived weaknesses of top-down policies and attempts at expert-driven, programmatic development of educational reform. It is argued that although inputs of technology, equipment, curricular materials, staff development designed and implemented in the center have in some cases improved school quality, often such center-orchestrated efforts have marginal impact on the way teachers and students operate in classrooms and schools.

The second dynamic entails a move away from technicist approaches to planning and implementing changes in educational policy and practices. Thus, the traditional linear planning sequence (i.e., goal setting--needs assessment--program specification--target identification--evaluation) has become less favored compared to iterative, participatory process of initiating and sustaining educational change. The latter process involves, and preferably begins with, critique, evaluation, analysis and feedback at the school and local levels.

This is the context in which the Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) project was conceived and implemented. Initiated in 1991 as a five-year, USAID-funded project, IEQ's main objective was to design practical ways to improve learning in classrooms and schools within the context of national educational reforms in selected developing countries. Four principles underly the IEQ Project. IEQ is designed to define and improve educational quality by (see Schubert 1994):

1. forming partnerships between teachers, researchers and other stakeholders,
2. focusing research on school and classroom performance and experience,
3. connecting research to reform priorities in each country, and
4. measuring the value of research by its utility in achieving specified quality objectives.

In the three countries supported under the core contract -- Ghana, Guatemala, and Mali -- IEQ has formed partnerships with one or more host-country institutions to: assist in the enhancement of country research capacity and application; collaboratively design and implement classroom research at the primary school level; and link findings to practice and policy at various levels (from classrooms to national ministries) of the educational systems. Research teams composed of local researchers and, over time, teachers, develop their capacity and are empowered to collect, analyze, and interpret data in the context of classroom-anchored research. IEQ studies

examine how children of different characteristics (gender, language proficiency, ethnicity) interact with ongoing or modified school practice. Additionally, the types of data collected lead to profiles of more and less effective classrooms.

Knowing how individual pupils perform is a necessary but insufficient condition for identifying, developing and sustaining changes that improve educational quality. Thus, IEQ also stresses feedback to, and dialogue with, teachers, headteachers, district level supervisors, and parents as being integral to the research process; and, as appropriate, teachers from other regions and officials from the Ministry of Education become actively involved in reviewing and analyzing the process and results. The project accepts the assumption that quality can and does exist in (rural and urban) schools, and through the action-research, classroom-focused process in which IEQ is engaged, teachers and headmasters will be able to improve the educational quality of their classrooms by using existing resources in new and different ways.

### **Research on Educational Quality**

Traditionally, research on educational quality may be categorized roughly in two methodological and conceptually distinct approaches: school effects and effective schools. *School effects* research, often using large sample sizes, attempts to examine the impact of a number of in-school and out-of-school variables hypothesized to be significant determinants of student achievement. Frequently, this approach employs multiple regression analyses to investigate linear and additive relationships between a set of explanatory variables (e.g., per-pupil expenditure, class size, teacher and administrator background, economic level of the community, parental educational attainment and income) and a standardized measure of students' achievement outcomes. This

approach to the study of educational quality is built on a variety of assumptions, the most relevant ones for this paper are: (1) many educational objectives are the same from one school to another and even from one country to another and (2) much of the educational process linking inputs to student performance is universal rather than situation specific (Hanushek, 1994; Heyneman and White, 1986). Under these assumptions, results from empirical studies, replicated in multiple countries, warrant generalization and thereby have both theoretical and policy implications.

Perceived limitations of the school effects research approach (Riddell, 1989) and the widespread belief among educators that some schools are demonstrably more successful than others, stimulated interest in a school-focused approach to the study of pupil achievement and performance. Commonly known as *effective schools* research, this approach reflects an underlying assumption that the organization and culture of the school and the behavior of the teachers and administrators do affect student performance. Performance remains mostly defined as achievement on standardized tests although some attention is given to curriculum-based assessments. Factors of effectiveness typically included: instructional leadership by the principal, an emphasis on basic skill areas (i.e., reading and mathematics), high expectations for pupils by teachers, enhanced time on task by pupils, an orderly school environment, and frequent assessment of pupil progress (see Bashi and Sass, 1992; Edmunds, 1979; Lezotte, 1989; Mortimer, 1988; Rutter et al., 1979; Scheerens et al., 1989; Williams and Jacobson, 1992).

Critics have noted the following limitations of both the school effects and the effective schools research approaches: a) standardized measures of pupil achievement are not as sensitive to quality improvement efforts as curriculum-based assessments; b) indicators other student cognitive achievement measures (e.g., student self concept, student behavior in school and in the community,

student retention, teacher attitudes, and teacher behavior) are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational quality improvement; c) using school level indicators or aggregating student data to the school level can mask differential effects of factors on different groups of students (e.g., gender, ethnic, and social class differences) in the same school; d) the research is unlikely to provide prescriptions readily adaptable across societies, regions or even school sites; and e) the research says little directly about the process of improving education, that is, implementing the policies and practices derived from such research activities.

In response to the latter criticism, particularly, researchers have developed different models for linking (qualitative and quantitative) research to educational policy and practice.

### **Linking Research to Educational Policy and Practice**

Too often research conceived of in relation to efforts to shape or improve educational policy and practice is done by researchers (in isolation from policy makers and practitioners) and the findings from such research are disseminated through conference presentations, research reports, articles, or books (targeted primarily to an audience of other researchers). The assumption seems to be that “good science” (Whyte, 1991, p. 8) will “trickle down to the level of practice and inform practitioners on what to do and what not to do” (Gitlin et al., 1992, p. 25). However, in recent years educational researchers in conjunction with policy makers, administrators, and teachers have sought to employ (and write about) strategies for strengthening the links between research and educational policy and practice. Here we will describe three models: decision-oriented research, collaborative action research, and research as collective praxis. These models differ with respect to the nature of

the roles played by “researchers” and educational “policy makers” and “practitioners.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the models are built on different notions of what constitutes collaboration and empowerment (see Kreisberg, 1992) of researchers, policy makers, practitioners.

In their book on the subject, Cooley and Bickel (1986, p. 3) describe *decision-oriented educational research* (DOER) as "research designed to help educators as they consider issues surrounding educational policy, as they establish priorities for improving educational systems, or as they engage in the day-to-day management of educational systems." A key element in this model from the researcher's standpoint is a "client orientation," operationalized through an "on-going educational dialogue" (p. 27) in which the researcher "works hard at trying to understand the information needs of the client and to meet those needs" (p. 36). Within the DOER model the researcher works with a client (usually defined as policy makers or administrators, though there is no logical reason to exclude teachers, students, parents, etc.) to provide “facts” about education and society, whether based on quantitative or qualitative data, needed by the client to make certain decisions. The researcher is in dialogue with the client, but each has his or her own specified and fairly distinct role: researcher and policy maker or practitioner. The researchers are not directly engaged in the making policy or educational practice, and the policy makers and practitioners are not active participants in the research process.

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<sup>3</sup> Arguably, these three models of linking research to educational policy and practice have closer affinities with three scientific paradigms (see Ginsburg et al., 1996). Thus, although proponents of each model subscribe to some form of methodological eclecticism -- usually framed as using quantitative and qualitative data, it seems like the decision-oriented research model fits best with positivist science, collaborative action research with interpretivist science, and research as critical practice with critical science (for descriptions of these scientific paradigms see Popkewitz, 1981).

Similar to the DOER model, *collaborative action research* (see Stenhouse, 1975)<sup>4</sup> concerned with enhancing the use of research by educational policy makers and practitioners. However, in contrast to the DOER model, collaborative action research model entails not only dialogue about, but also joint participation in, research by "researchers" and "educators" (usually defined as teachers, although there is no logical reason to exclude educational administrators, policy makers, etc.). This model builds on the notion that educational practitioners are normally engage in inquiry and that their practice can be enhanced by making it possible for them to commit more time and energy to a more systematically planned and implemented process of research (Brause and Mayher, 1991; Kincheloe, 1991; Wagner, 1990). Nonetheless, a division of labor still seems to exist. Even though the "practitioner" assumes rights and responsibilities in the research process, the "researcher" is involved primarily as a collaborator in research design, data collection, and data analysis, remaining somewhat detached from the "professional" and "political" activity of educational policy making and practice (see Whyte, 1991).

The third model, *research as collective praxis*, shares some of the elements with, but is also framed in contrast to, the other two models. In her chapter on "Research as Praxis" Lather (1991, p. 56) comments that: "I am arguing for an approach that goes well beyond the action research concept. ... The vast majority of this work operates from an ahistorical, apolitical value system" (see

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<sup>4</sup> Although Stenhouse (1975) and his colleagues at the University of East Anglia in England popularized and legitimized collaborative action research in education, Corey (1953), drawing on ideas of Dewey (1947) and Lewin (1946) -- who coined the term, action research, may have been the first to promote this approach in education through his book, *Action Research to Improve School Practices*. Proponents of collaborative action research go beyond the Richardson's (1994, p. 5) conclusion that "practical inquiry undertaken by practitioners in improving their practice ... is more likely than formal research [undertaken to contribute to an established and general knowledge base] to lead to immediate classroom change" to argue that practical inquiry should be undertaken by researchers as well as practitioners (and policy makers).

also Bodemann, 1978; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Gitlin et al., 1992). Similarly, McTaggart (1991, p. 176) describes a "process of using critical intelligence to inform action, and developing it so that social action becomes praxis through which people may consistently live their social values." Crucial to the model of research as collective praxis is the researcher acknowledging and acting upon her or his political commitments in the context of theorizing and practice with others -- collective praxis -- in a settings including "non-professionals" such as students and community members (Fine, 1989; Gitlin, et al., 1992; Reinhartz, 1984; Vio Bossi and de Wit, 1981). In this way the line between "researcher" and "policy maker" or "practitioner" becomes blurred as those who identify (or are typified) primarily as in one of these roles, in fact, play both. Not only do policy makers, administrators, teachers, students, and community members participate in research, but "researchers" become active participants in the settings working with others to understand and change schools and society.

### **Planning, Initiating and Sustaining Research-Based Educational Change**

Paralleling and reinforced by the frequently unsuccessful attempts to translate studies of educational quality and effectiveness into policies and programs has been an attempt to reconceptualize the process of initiating and sustaining educational change. Traditionally in most countries, and particularly in developing countries, the linkages are weak between educational research and practice and also between research and planning. Research is often said to generate knowledge whereas those engaged in practice and planning are seen as applying knowledge. These linkages are constrained by a typical division of roles and responsibilities wherein the central

educational authorities are expected to initiate reforms and innovations and local schools are expected to participate, largely as implementers.

Those who seek to build a new model try to avoid what they see as two important weaknesses of past approaches to planned educational innovations and reform:

- (1) top-down or centrist-led reform, although potentially important in developing a supporting context for policy and planning, by itself usually does not come to grips with basic issues of how learning takes place; and
- (2) reform exclusively defined at the national level may successfully demand compliance but often fails to gain commitment from administrators and teachers, let alone students and parents. Under such reforms lower echelon administrators and teachers may be asked to follow without question the educational and political agendas and interpretations of a few policy makers, fostering further deskilling of teachers and what has been called a "culture of dependence."

The following assumptions characterize the newer approach to initiating and sustaining educational change:

- (1) lasting improvement in educational quality requires knowledge and insights of those professionals closest to the processes of teaching and learning, i.e., teachers, headteachers, local supervisors;

- (2) local level personnel and institutions by themselves often lack fiscal and technical resources to effect continuing change;
- (3) sustained improvement in educational quality requires involvement of actors from different levels of the system; and
- (4) parental and community involvement are necessary in both the planning and implementation of successful educational change.

Traditional planning of educational change has tended to ignore uncertainties and complexities and focus instead on simplifying and standardizing innovations for quick dissemination. The newer approach draws from the extensive local and regional experiences of many countries in initiating and implementing school and classroom level innovations (see Buckley and Schubert, 1983). Successful educational change recognizes the complexity of developing viable change and gives less attention to rigid plans or outcomes. Such planned change is assumed to "begin with a few readiness principles" (e.g., adequate resources, acceptance of validity of the new practice), require "pressure" (from below), "support" (from above), and "continuous negotiation" (between system levels). Specific, detailed, centralized plans are devalued as initial guides to new practice because "plans follow culture" and "mission follows (rather than precedes) enactment of principles."

## **Policy--Practice--Research--Dissemination/Dialogue Spirals**

The Policy--Practice--Research--Dissemination/Dialogue (PPRD/D) spiral is an orienting concept or a heuristic device that we employed in analyzing the activity undertaken within the three centrally-funded "core" countries of the IEQ Project (see Figure 1). This spiral concept orients us to examine what is considered, planned, and accomplished by various individuals and groups with respect to each of the following components:

*Policy* (i.e., policy statements and plans for action at the national, regional, local, and school levels as well as the activities of educational administrators at the national, regional, local, school, and [particularly] classroom levels that may or may not constitute the implementation of policy statements and plans for action);

*Practice* (i.e., classroom organization, instructional materials, and instructional activities and other teacher behaviors);

*Research* (i.e., the process of designing and conducting studies -- framing research questions, selecting samples, developing instruments and other methods of gathering data, collecting data, analyzing data, identifying and interpreting findings); and

*Dissemination/Dialogue* (i.e., the processes of researchers reporting to or discussing with policy makers, administrators, supervisors, teachers, and parents the results of the

research, the implications the research has for educational policy and practice, and future interventions and research that should be undertaken to improve educational quality).

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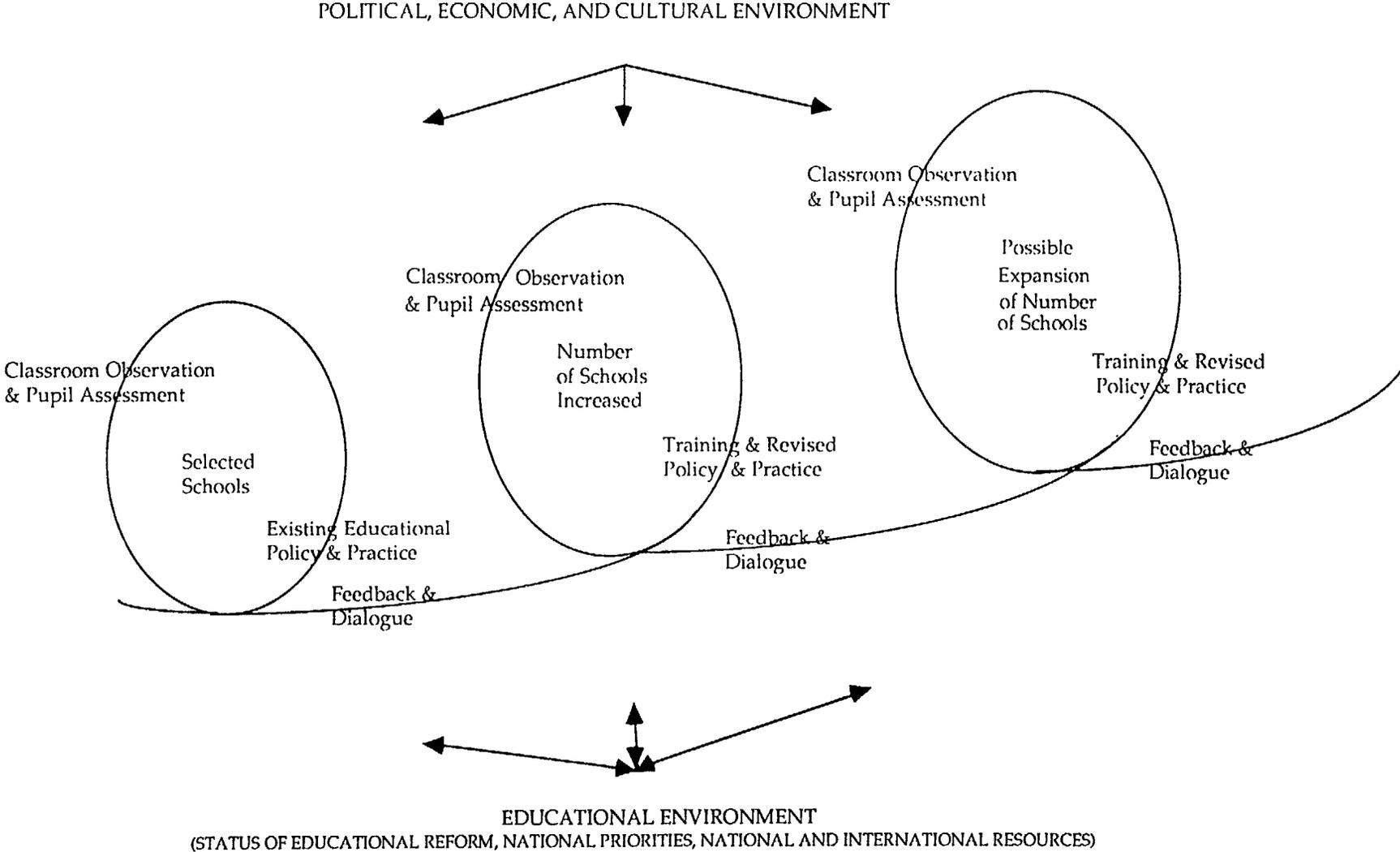
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The PPRD/D spiral concept orients us to the possibility of linkages between these components. For instance, we can investigate how research is shaped by existing educational policy and practice, how research is drawn upon in dialogue/dissemination activities, and how ideas for improving educational quality are constructed during the process of research-related dialogue/dissemination. It should be noted that, while employing the spiral concept, we can also examine breaks in the spiral (e.g., when something other than the dissemination of or dialogue about research findings shapes educational policy and practice initiatives). Indeed, such breaks in the "ideal type" spiral are an important focus of our investigation. Additionally, the research spiral concept does not require us to consider only people or institutions endogenous to each of the countries. Thus, in addition to focusing on government ministries in Ghana, Guatemala, and Mali, we examine the activity of USAID (and other international organizations and bilateral aid agencies) in relation to each country. And besides highlighting the work of Ghanaian, Guatemalan, and Malian researchers (who are members of the respective Host Country Research Teams), we pay attention to what U.S. consultants (who are designated as members of the U.S. Research Support Teams).

## **Design of the Documentation Research Project**

FIGURE 1. SPIRALING TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY



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As Clark (1988) conceives of it, documentation is “the careful and systematic monitoring of appropriate components, processes, and interactions of program [planning and] implementation” (p. 21) and ideally involves “a dynamic, evolutionary activity that provides for broad, continuous data collection (in contrast to pre- and post- of change), data analysis, and feedback” (p. 22). While time and financial constraints meant that IEQ documentation research did not replicate the ideal described by Clark, considerable effort was expended on this activity.

For the most part the members of the documentation team at the University of Pittsburgh (Don Adams, Tom Clayton, Mark Ginsburg, Martha Mantilla, Judy Sylvester, and Yidan Wang) were not in a position to engage in first-hand documentation of the IEQ Project components, processes, and interactions. Instead, a variety of documents were analyzed and key participants in the IEQ project in each country were interviewed.

The following types of documents and other artefacts were examined: technical proposals; weekly, monthly, semi-annual, and annual reports prepared by IIR with input from other (U.S. and non-U.S.) members of the project team; IEQ project newsletters; trip reports prepared by U.S. consultants upon their return from one or more of the core countries; research reports, other documents, and videos of schools and classrooms produced by members of the Host Country Research Team in each core country (Ghana, Guatemala, and Mali).

In addition, beginning in March, 1994, interviews were conducted with the Project Director Jane Schubert and the majority of U.S. consultants involved in IEQ and a sample of the key members of the Host Country Research Teams from the three core countries. These interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone, fax, regular mail, and via e-mail. Through these mechanisms information was gathered to clarify and augment what was included in the

documents, to focus informants' feedback on drafts of the respective stories, and to identify new activities or themes to explore.

The data gathered from documents and from interviews were used to address the following general, cross-country comparative research question: What are the similarities and differences in policy--practice---research--dialogue/dissemination cycles across countries (and across time or settings within countries)? In order to get to the point that this cross-country comparative question could be answered, a qualitative form of content analysis was undertaken in order to describe the "IEQ story" in each society, particularly as it pertained to planning and conducting classroom-anchored research and trying to link such research to educational policy and practice at the classroom, school, regional, and national levels.

To document the story in each core country answers were sought to the following general, within-cycle and within-country research questions, organized around the key components of the heuristic model used to guide the research: policy, practice, research, and dialogue/dissemination.

*Policy:* What is the content of national, regional, or local educational policies that shape or are informed by IEQ research and dialogue/dissemination activities? Who is involved in determining such policies and what information do they draw upon in their decision making? What features of the social context enable or constrain their decisions?

*Practice:* What are the curriculum-in-use, instructional resources, pedagogical approaches, evaluation strategies, student attitudes and behaviors, administrator and

supervisor actions that shape or are informed by IEQ research and dialogue/dissemination activities? Who is involved (at the classroom, school, community, national, and international level) in determining these educational practices and what information do they draw upon in their decision-making? What features of the social context enable or constrain their decisions?

*Research:* What research questions, theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, sampling strategies, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and processes for interpreting findings are employed in IEQ research studies? Who is involved in planning, conducting, and evaluating the studies and what information informs their work? What features of the social context enable or constrain their work?

*Dialogue/Dissemination:* What strategies (written documents, audiovisuals, meetings) are employed to disseminate research findings or to involve policy makers, practitioners, parents, and other citizens in a dialogue about the interpretation(s) and implications of the research findings? Who is involved in planning and participating in the dissemination or dialogue? What information is exchanged via dissemination or dialogue and does such information inform subsequent policy making, educational practice, or research efforts? What features of the social context enable or constrain the dialogue/dissemination process?

## **Conclusion**

In this introductory chapter of the monograph we have discussed different approaches to research on educational quality; different models for linking research to educational policy and practice; different conceptions of planning, initiating, and sustaining research-based educational change; the heuristic framework, "Policy--Practice--Research--Dialogue/Dissemination Spirals," developed to help us document and analyze the activities in the three core countries involved in the project; and the procedures employed in gathering and analyzing data. We are now ready to tell the "stories" of the IEQ experience in Ghana, Guatemala, and Mali. The stories presented in chapters 2-4 will then be drawn on in the final chapter where we discuss some cross-country comparisons of efforts to link research to educational policy and practice in relation to issues discussed in this introductory chapter.

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