



Internationalization in schools—Perspectives of school leaders



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how internationalization ideas in primary and lower secondary schools can be developed through the acquisition of international experience abroad by leaders. The study was inspired by existing literature on internationalization and leadership, and theories of experiential learning and reflection. Empirically, qualitative material was derived from a study of nineteen Danish school leaders participating in an eight-day delegation visit to China. This study shows that international experience for leaders can be used to develop ideas for internationalization at the school level through reflections of lived experiences, participation in meaningful activities, and active engagement in interaction with international and local colleagues. However, the realization of ideas depends on various elements, including leadership, teacher engagement, policy support, and financial support.

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1. Introduction

Internationalization is a focal point within education systems around the globe, primarily in higher education where this concept has been widely researched, discussed, and applied (Deardorff, Wit, Heyl, & Adams, 2012; Luring and Selmer, 2010). Other educational contexts, such as primary and lower secondary schools (referred to as ‘schools’ in the following), are also displaying a burgeoning interest in internationalization, although research remains scarce (Byram, 2012; Heidemann, 1999a, 1999b; Yemini, 2012, 2014; Yemini & Giladi, 2015). The importance of leadership has been widely emphasized in the successful internationalization of education (Heidemann, 1999a; Heyl & Tullbane, 2012; Nolan and Hunter, 2012), but leaders are rarely the subjects of internationalization research (Lin and Chen, 2014; Tinkham, 2011). With that in mind, the processes of internationalization at the school level and with regard to leadership require further research. In this article we ask the following questions:

- How do school leaders reflect on their international experiences in terms of developing ideas for internationalization?
- What are the possibilities and challenges of utilizing leaders’ international experience as part of an internationalization process at the school level?

This paper draws on research on internationalization in education and leadership, and on theories of experiential learning and reflection. Multiple qualitative methods were used to collect the empirical material for this paper, including qualitative

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questionnaires, interviews, and video recordings. The material was derived from a study of a group of Danish school leaders participating in an eight-day delegation visit to Beijing, China, organized by the Confucius Institute for Innovation and Learning at Aalborg University (CI AAU) in order to bridge between Denmark and China. Twenty-six school leaders participated of which nineteen were in positions related to public primary and lower secondary schools¹ and were the focus of this paper.

2. Internationalization of education

2.1. Understanding of the internationalization of education

Internationalization of education is considered an education system's response or reaction to globalization (Killick, 2011; Rumbley, Altbach, & Reisberg, 2012). However, currently no generic understanding of the term exists (Knight, 2004). In the context of higher education, Knight proposes the definition of internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2003:2). This definition accentuates the nature of internationalization as an ongoing process, while the inclusion of the three dimensions, international, intercultural, and global, gives richness to the term. It also emphasizes the importance of integrating internationalization into the purpose of education at a policy level, and in the function and delivery of teaching and activities (Knight, 2004).

In the context of school education, Heidemann proposes the definition of internationalization as "the transformation process that takes place when transnational cooperation has clout at school" (Heidemann, 1999b:8). Internationalization involves a process of transformation during which leaders and teachers adapt the school to function in an international context, based on transnational cooperation at an institutional level (Heidemann, 1999a). Thus, internationalization of schools includes more than the implementation of international activities; it also involves the school as an organization.

In practice a variety of approaches to internationalization exist, at both the macro and meso levels, which reflect or characterize "the values, priorities, and actions that are exhibited during the work towards implementing internationalization" (Knight, 2004). Hudzik and Stohl (2009) state that internationalization efforts need to contribute to the core missions and values of an educational institution. Internationalization is not an end in itself, but a means to reach the core goals of an institution, thus the outcomes of internationalization should be studied in relation to the missions and values of a particular institution. Therefore, the same definition may be implemented in a variety of ways by particular institutions. For example, some approach internationalization in terms of different activities, while others create an atmosphere at the educational institution that promotes international and intercultural understanding and emphasizes local activities (Knight, 2004).

Internationalization of education is often based on the normative assumption of internationalization as a positive phenomenon (Byram, 2012). The intention is to engage in internationalization efforts in order to achieve the mission objectives of the institution, with the expected outcome at the micro level being the development of students' intercultural competences, i.e. their ability to interact effectively in intercultural encounters (Deardorff, 2009). There may, however, be unexpected results. Negative consequences are also possible (Deardorff & van Gaalen, 2012:168) such as the reinforcement of stereotypes through intercultural encounters (Derwin, 2009 and XXX) or programs and policies being unsuccessfully added without much consideration for the particularities of different context, such as different educational levels or different national educational contexts. Therefore, internationalization efforts cannot solely be approached in a quantitative manner such as by exchanging large numbers of students. The quality of the experiences and initiatives requires careful consideration in order to achieve the expected positive outcomes.

2.2. Model of internationalization in education

Nolan and Hunter (2012) pinpoint the four most essential and closely interconnected enablers for the successful implementation of sustainable internationalization in higher education as being leadership, faculty engagement, policy support, and financial support. Research from the school context indicates similar enablers: leadership, teacher engagement, policy support, and financial support (Heidemann, 2003; Holm-Larsen, Ledstrup, & Stampe Rasmussen, 2002).

Inspired by these works, we propose a model of internationalization in education that combines the macro, meso, and micro levels of education with these four dimensions: leadership, engaged embedders of change, policy support, and financial support. While all dimensions are closely interrelated, leadership is arguably the most essential dimension to facilitate an internationalization process.

2.2.1. Leadership

Leadership consists of coping with change and leading others through a process of change (Cotae, 2013). While there are diverse theories on leadership, this particular study has been inspired by the concept of transformational leadership that involves a bottom-up approach to educational leadership (Hallinger, 2003). Originally proposed by Burns (1978), this theory suggests that a leader engages his or her followers in an idea or vision that is sufficiently convincing to motivate them to

¹ In Denmark, "grundskole" (primary and lower secondary school) covers grades 0–9/10 with students aged approximately 6–16.

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