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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Educational Research

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1016/j.ijer.2017.02.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.02.009)

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Egekvist, U. E., Lyngdorf, N. E., & Du, X. (2017). Internationalization in schools - perspectives of school leaders. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 83, 20-31. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.02.009>

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# Internationalization in schools—Perspectives of school leaders



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 9 December 2016

Accepted 11 February 2017

### Keywords:

Internationalization

Leadership

Primary and lower secondary school

School leaders

Education

China

Denmark

International experience

Learning

Reflection

## 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 schools<sup>1</sup> 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

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

become involved, expand on the original idea or vision, and feed it back to the leader. This creates a positive spiral that lifts the vision to new heights (Heyl and Tullbane, 2012). Thus, it focuses on stimulation of change through bottom-up participation and engagement (Hallinger, 2003). In line with this, Xing and Dervin (2014) propose four principles of successful educational leadership practice; (1) Setting directions through visions, goals, and action, (2) Developing people through individualized, intellectual, and emotional support, (3) Redesigning the organization through building a collaborative culture, developing structures to facilitate work, and establishing external communications and connections, and (4) Managing the instructional program.

With regards to internationalization, leaders play a vital role in bringing it into effect by actively facilitating and actualizing the initiatives. In the context of higher education, Nolan and Hunter (2012) accentuate strong visionary leadership by passionate and patient leaders as being imperative to initiating and engaging the community in the process of internationalization. Correspondingly, Heyl and Tullbane (2012) consider leaders to be important agents of change who can significantly influence an institution's future by being familiar with all initiates, by shaping those that have the potential to truly internationalize the entire institution and that encourage students' development of intercultural competences.

In the context of school education, an active, or at least supportive, head of school is essential in order for transnational cooperation to have an impact on the school and lead to a process of internationalization (Heidemann, 1999a). Furthermore, international coordinators with clout can play a significant role as leaders of internationalization initiatives (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2003).

### 2.2.2. Embedders of change

Drawing on the idea of transformational leadership, the engagement of followers is imperative for successful internationalization (Hallinger, 2003). Nolan and Hunter (2012) emphasize that faculty members become the embedders of change in higher education, and that engagement is required in order for this change to be sustained. Similarly, in the context of school education, passionate teachers working tirelessly to facilitate, organize, and put internationalization into practice are indispensable in the process of implementing change. When teachers understand the meaning of a particular project, they are willing to invest in it, and thus bring about changes (Heidemann, 2003). The role of teachers is to work as a group towards the common goal of implementing internationalization in their teaching in order to facilitate student development of intercultural competence, that is, to achieve the expected outcome of internationalization efforts at the school level.

### 2.2.3. Policy support

The importance of policy mechanisms to sustain internationalization is emphasized in higher education. The vision of internationalization requires support through a strategy that clearly sets out timelines and key objectives. Furthermore, procedures of evaluation and new or modified strategic support may be required in order for those involved to drive the internationalization process forward (Nolan and Hunter, 2012). Likewise, making internationalization a focus area and developing an internationalization strategy and support structures at the macro and meso levels have a positive effect on internationalization in schools (Holm-Larsen et al., 2002; UVM, 2014).

### 2.2.4. Financial support

People and policies are limited by the availability of financial resources. However, while financial resources is a key enabler of successful internationalization (Nolan and Hunter, 2012), research in the context of school education has shown that successfully internationalized schools received less than average financial support for internationalization (Heidemann, 2003). Instead, schools have had to find the means themselves. Thus, innovative thinking is needed in order to obtain financial resources (Nolan and Hunter, 2012:132).

In summary, in this study, internationalization of education is considered to be the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, function, or delivery of education (Knight, 2003). It involves a transformational process in which educational leaders and staff adapt an institution to function in an international context (Heidemann, 1999b). We recognize that internationalization involves the macro, meso, and micro levels of education, in which leadership, engaged embedders of change, policy support, and financial support are key enablers. In particular, the role of educational leadership at the macro and meso levels is accentuated and imperative for initiating successful internationalization.

## 2.3. Context: Internationalization in Danish schools

Traditionally, school education in Denmark has been oriented towards national aims, thus the internationalization of schools is not a "natural" process (Kemp, 2013). In recent years, the importance of the internationalization of schools has been emphasized in ministerial reports (2010; 2014). However, schools are often overlooked in connection with internationalization efforts, despite this being fundamental to the abilities and future educational studies of the students. In general, internationalization in Danish schools has been considered unsuccessful with only 1/3 schools having worked with internationalization (Styrelsen for International Uddannelse, 2010). The absence of common objectives at the national level is considered a problem, because internationalization is let to be the affair of foreign language teachers or particularly passionate teachers in the schools. Various recommendations have been provided regarding the initiation and support of

internationalization, such as the establishment of cooperation programs outside Europe and the strengthening of foreign language programs (Styrelsen for International Uddannelse, Denmark, 2010).

In Denmark, school education is a municipal matter, with the municipal council outlining the targets and framework for activities for schools within the provisions of the School Act. Amendments to the School Act came into effect in 2014, though the aims of the Danish school education system have remained unchanged since 2006. The Act states that the school shall:

- Provide students with knowledge and skills
- Contribute to students' individual all-round development
- Make students familiar with Danish culture and other countries and cultures
- Contribute to students' understanding of man's interaction with nature
- Create a framework for experiences so that students develop awareness, imagination, and acquire confidence in their own potential and a background for committing themselves to taking action
- Urge students to learn more
- Prepare students for participation, joint responsibility, rights, and duties in a society based on intellectual freedom, equality, and democracy (Danish Ministry for Children Education and Gender Equality, 2015).

Inspired by Knight (2003) and Heidemann (1999b), internationalization at school level in Denmark is defined as the implementation of international, intercultural, and global dimensions in the teaching and organization of schools to achieve the purposes of Danish school education as stated above. The intended outcome of an internationalization process in Danish schools is the development of interculturally competent students who are able and willing to engage in and accept their responsibilities in a globalized and multicultural world.

### 3. Methodology and research design

#### 3.1. Learning from experience and through reflection

This study employed a constructivist approach to learning by emphasizing its social nature and giving attention to how individuals learn through purposeful interaction and communication with other people and their environment. Dewey (1938) argued that learning takes place through social and interactive processes, and thus emphasized doing and experiencing things that create meaning for the individual through participation in cultural contexts and interaction with others. Kolb (1984), developed an experiential learning theory that emphasized non-formal learning situations and focused on the individual's learning processes through concrete experiences, reflective observations, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. While Dewey and Kolb focused more on the individual's internal, psychological learning process, Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasized the social dimension of learning, suggesting that learning takes place in situated activities which influence the learning process.

Researchers such as Kolb (1984) have argued that reflection is closely related to the process of learning. This study found inspiration in Cowan (2006), who argued for the existence of three types of reflection, *reflection-for-action*, *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-on-action*, depending on the placement of reflection in relation to action. Reflection-for-action takes place prior to an action and involves reflections in which learners specify their needs, aspirations, and objectives of a subsequent learning activity. Reflection-in-action are reflections made in the midst of the action, which consists of both retrospective and anticipatory thoughts. It involves taking stock of the situation: What is happening? What progress has been made? What remains to be done? Finally, reflection-on-action covers reflections made after a learning experience, which attempt to analyze and summarize the experience and extract generalizations that can be carried forward into subsequent activities.

In this study we emphasize the lived experiences and non-formal contexts for learning, and take the standpoint that participation, experiences, activities, and contexts are significant elements in learning. We accentuate the role of reflections in learning processes and emphasize the placement of reflection in relation to action or experience, as well as the character of the reflections. This guided the design of the visit, the choice of methods for the generation of empirical material, and was used as a framework to present the findings of the school leaders' reflections before, during, and after their international experience in China.

#### 3.2. Program design and participants

Based on the increased focus on and efforts to develop internationalization within the educational sector in Denmark, the CI AAU organized an eight-day delegation visit to Beijing, China, in late 2011. In line with the governmental recommendations made to supporting internationalization efforts at the school level in Denmark by establishing cooperation programs outside of Europe (see Section 2.3), the intention was to develop ties between Denmark and China, which is becoming an increasingly important player in the global community, create mutual understanding and educational inspiration, and possibly lay the groundwork for future cooperation between Danish and Chinese educational institutions as part of an internationalization process.

**Table 1**  
School leaders' backgrounds.

	Participants	Schools represented	Municipalities represented
Municipal head of schools (No. 1 and 2)	2	–	2
Municipal international coordinator (No. 19)	1	–	1
Leader at institutional level (No. 3–17)	15	15	8
International coordinator at institutional level and teacher (No. 18)	1	1	1
Sum	19	16	8

All interested school leaders in the North Denmark region were invited to join the delegation visit, which was financed (excluding visa and airfare)<sup>2</sup> by the Confucius Institute Headquarters and Beijing Normal University, China. Twenty-six Danish school representatives joined of whom nineteen (twelve male and seven female) were related to public school education and held an educational leadership position either at a municipal (macro) or institutional (meso) level. This group of public school leaders was the focus of this study (see [Table 1](#)).<sup>3</sup>

In practice, the delegation visit provided the school leaders with experiences, both through organized and independent tourist activities and through planned visits to educational institutions in Beijing, including three schools, a high school, a university, and a research center. These visits involved knowledge sharing with Chinese school leaders, teachers, and educational researchers.

We, the authors, were part of the organizing team and participated actively in the delegation visit process. The design and research of the delegation visit was guided by our framework of the internationalization of education and by our understanding of learning and the significance of reflection in learning processes.

### 3.3. Empirical material and analysis

Multiple qualitative methods were applied to explore the school leaders' reflections before, during, and after their international experience in China. Initially, during the informational meeting prior to departure, the school leaders filled out a qualitative questionnaire regarding, for example, their expectations of the upcoming experience and the current status of internationalization at their school or municipality (see [Table 2](#) and Appendix A in Supplementary data).

During the visit to China, brief on-the-spot interviews of up to ten minutes' duration were carried out with twelve school leaders on the sixth and seventh days, focusing on their ideas and reflections in relation to their experience (see [Table 2](#)). Additionally, to complement the interview material, seven hours of video recordings were made during formal meetings, and the school leaders raised over 150 questions, giving an insight into the processes of developing an understanding of the Chinese context, as well as their ideas of future possibilities and challenges based on this. Hence, these are considered to be indications of reflections-in-experience.

Immediately after the visit, the school leaders filled out a qualitative questionnaire, which mainly focused on their future plans and reflections in relation to internationalization through Chinese language and culture activities at the school level (see [Table 2](#) and Appendix B in Supplementary data).

The empirical material was analyzed based on meaning condensation and common patterns among the participants in relation to the existing literature formed the basis of the analysis ([Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009](#); [Nielsen, 2007](#)).

## 4. Findings

Following [Cowan \(2006\)](#), findings from this study will be presented with the school leaders' reflections before, during, and after their international experience in China.

### 4.1. Reflection-for-international experience

#### 4.1.1. Expectations and objectives

The findings show that the school leaders' main reasons for joining and their expectations regarding the delegation visit were:

- An interest in establishing cooperation with a Chinese school

<sup>2</sup> Eight participants from the same municipality received some municipal financial support.

<sup>3</sup> The remaining seven participants were representatives from a high school, a private school, and two boarding schools, and fall outside the scope of this particular study.



**Table 2**  
Empirical materials.

	Questionnaire before China	Interview in China	Questionnaire after China
Municipal head of schools	2	1	1
Municipal international coordinator	1	–	1
Leader at school level	15	11	14
International coordinator and teacher	1	–	1
Sum	19	12	18

- To gain insight into Chinese culture and its school system
- Networking opportunities with Danish and Chinese leaders
- To develop initiatives for internationalization.

Their objectives for utilizing the experience were related to the reasons and expectations stated above. Therefore, many sought to establish contact with Chinese schools in order to cooperate on international activities, such as communication via e-mail and webcam. A municipal head of school explained:

I have a clear expectation that the visit will support and provide inspiration to the municipality's development of a comprehensive international strategy. The group of school leaders is given insight into the visit, the Chinese culture and educational system through presentations. I hope that the visit will foster the establishment of partnership agreements, which allow for academic cooperation through IT and possibly student exchange (study visits). [No. 1]

Some school leaders aspired to use the experience for inspiration, both in general and specifically in relation to internationalization, in order to:

Get a deeper insight into the country, its education system, and its culture. This I can use to spread knowledge in my own organization and increase focus on the international aspect. [No. 15]

Get inspiration from Danish colleagues on how to implement the international dimension in the teaching. [No. 14]

Furthermore, some sought to establish future contact and teaching agreements with the CI AAU, while others wished to further develop previously established cooperation with the CI AAU on Chinese language and culture activities<sup>4</sup> in their schools.

#### 4.1.2. Internationalization

Everyone considered internationalization important, with references made to globalization and issues such as peaceful human coexistence and preparation for entering the international job market. Chinese language and culture activities were mentioned several times as being potentially beneficial for internationalization at the school level:

I find it very important that the schools prepare students to live in a globalized world in which international cooperation becomes a cornerstone. In connection to this it appears particularly relevant to give students insight into Chinese culture since China has become a very important collaborator. [No. 1]

The world today is "small". We can get anywhere. We must give Danish children/adolescents understanding to achieve peaceful coexistence and tolerance. [No. 8]

My school has children with many different backgrounds. We see it as a strength and want to give this focus. A focus on Chinese [language and culture, eds.] will be able to support this. In addition, focus on Chinese could dress students in relation to a future career. [No. 5]

Statements indicated that the internationalization efforts in the represented schools and municipalities are diverse, however the majority of the schools represented did not have an internationalization strategy. In fact, only one school leader clearly stated that her school had an internationalization strategy:

Yes, we have [an internationalization strategy]. We have a fundamental idea in relation to the world citizen line of thinking – think globally – act locally. Every year group works with the international dimension for shorter or longer periods of the school year. Furthermore, we participate in various Comenius projects and have language assistants. [No. 4]

The remaining schools did not have an internationalization strategy, but half had some or numerous international activities, themes, or focus points at their school.

<sup>4</sup> Chinese language and Culture activities included both mandatory and elective classes in school and elective classes as an after-school activity – all for a shorter or longer duration.

#### 4.1.3. Challenges and possibilities of Chinese language and culture activities

At the school level, all possibilities stated for implementing Chinese language and culture activities in a Danish educational context were related to the international dimension, either as inspiration, motivation, or as a specific area of focus in subjects. Challenges were related to economy, time, the practicalities of hiring teachers, and developing an understanding of the importance of such activities alongside other tasks and challenges in schools.

At the student level, the main possibilities stated were the preparation and qualification of students to participate and live in a globalized world, and to develop students' understanding of cultural similarities and differences. The challenges were related to the meaningfulness and importance of Chinese language and culture for the students, and their prioritization of these activities.

More specifically, one participant reflected upon the challenges and possibilities of implementing Chinese language and culture activities in Danish schools as follows:

The predominant advantage of bringing Chinese culture and language into the primary and lower secondary school is that the teaching provides students with insight and knowledge about cultural similarities and differences—an insight and understanding, which is very important for qualifying the students to actively participate in a globalized world. The primary challenge consists of building understanding for the importance of the task in the light of the many other tasks and challenges of the school. [No. 1]

#### 4.2. Reflection-in-international experience

Findings from interviews and videos covered two main themes: internationalization (experiences, expectations, and the establishment of Danish-Chinese cooperation), and schools and school systems (structure of Chinese schools and the school system, work structure for Chinese teachers, classroom management and discipline, and teaching methods). While questions asked during meetings showed the school leaders' interest in understanding and learning from the Chinese context and in developing a foundation for future cooperation, the interviews provided detailed insight into the development of ideas based on their experiences in China. The following sections provide accounts of findings from the interviews.

##### 4.2.1. Internationalization

Several ideas for internationalization at home were presented, such as online communication with Chinese students, Chinese language and culture teaching, and cultural cooperation with local businesses with an interest in China. Some also used the delegation visit for teaching purposes at home, such as through Skype communication with a 9th grade class about the experience and by collecting material to guide discussions of differences with students and teachers upon returning to Denmark.

Similarly, ideas were presented for student mobility, organized by individual schools or at the municipal or cross-municipal levels for a group of schools with a handful of students from each. A school leader elaborated on the idea of approaching internationalization with China through a process of, firstly, Chinese language and culture teaching, secondly, cooperation with a Chinese school, and lastly, student mobility. The school leader emphasized quality, stating, "it should not just become such a tourist thing" [No. 3]. Another school leader expressed a wish to try replacing formal language teaching with travel experiences.

A meeting with a Chinese professor emphasized the importance of intercultural meetings in internationalization activities:

It was very exciting, because it really confirmed that when we encounter something unfamiliar, we actually get an opportunity to appreciate why we are different and we gain an understanding of our cultures, and that insight is so important for the cooperation we need globally. So there is no doubt that whether it's China or elsewhere in the world, we can learn a lot from meeting each other to get this understanding. So I think it may be vital to realize that despite our differences, it is very important for us to meet and be in dialogue to actually create an understanding of each other. [No. 1]

Furthermore, a school leader reflected in general terms on the experiences, and on how and why it was meaningful as a context for inspiration and learning:

I get many ideas by walking around and looking. I get more ideas by walking around, using my eyes, and seeing, than by listening to the discussions, but that's because I'm such a visual person. But that is how it is! We are all different. So I absorb impressions. [No. 8]

Several suggested that the crucial element in the realization of internationalization through activities with China would be their ability to inspire their schools' team of leaders<sup>5</sup> and teachers to engage in the process:

I think there are many angles here. And I have not got a fixed idea so I can say:

"Yes, this is how we do it!" I must go home and talk to somebody about it. [ . . . ] Actually, I would have liked to have someone from the school leader team here to discuss this with. Because one thing is to come home and tell people about it

<sup>5</sup> In Denmark school leadership involves a team of leaders.



and another thing is having experienced it ourselves. This new vision gives us a different kind of motivation, which must now be communicated. We have pictures, we have stuff we can communicate with, but being here is what makes the difference. [No. 3]

#### 4.2.2. School and school system

Having visited and experienced Chinese schools, the school leaders proposed ideas for and reflections in relation to their own school, including physical activities, the school environment, and classroom management. Some reflected on ideas of physical activities during the school day, such as eye exercises, morning gymnastics, and running. Others considered playing music instead of ringing a bell between classes, designing a psychological counseling activity room for students, and introducing student group leaders or school uniforms.

Further reflections dealt with the differences between China and Denmark, and what the Danish school system can learn from the Chinese. Chinese discipline and classroom management were sources of inspiration, but the importance of taking into consideration the different contexts and traditions in the two countries is also emphasized:

The Chinese, for example, are good at structuring and managing classes and the teachers know where they want to go. That is one of the things we certainly could do more of in our daily teaching. But it must be linked to our view on learning where children are active and involved and help construct their own knowledge. If that link is possible I think that it can be really, really exciting, because I have seen at least some of the teachers use significant one-way communication. I do not think we should accept that, but we should learn from the way they structure and guide the class and make the teaching distinct. They are very clear on this point. I think that is very exciting. [No. 1]

What I think I will bring home from here is that when we began to develop an educational platform based on the 1960s, perhaps we threw away a little too much of the discipline and professional focus, and we could do with some of it again. [ . . . ] But in general I would say that we have a proud educational tradition which I think we should be careful not to throw away. [No. 15]

Another reflection regarded the Chinese's facilitation of very simple and focused as an inspiration for Danish schools with regard to the inclusion of students with special needs:

[ . . . ] Facilitation of small ideas that can turn into big ideas if we talk about inclusion. Thinking big might arise when you narrow it down to something smaller. How can we limit some things that might just need to be sharper? In Denmark, when we formulate a project, we have a tendency to make it big, wide and well-articulated. What I also see here is that they keep one thing absolutely straight. One tiny thing. Then they take only that particular thing and do it. For example, when we saw the morning gymnastics yesterday. It was very simple; it was one thing they do, and they all do it. [No. 13]

Finally, an important side benefit to the international experience was considered to be the general reflections and ideas that were derived from knowledge sharing within the group of Danish school leaders.

#### 4.3. Reflection-on-international experience

Due to several overlaps with the reflections-in-action, the presentation of findings in this phase focuses on those school leaders' reflections that added something new and which had a special emphasis on the school leaders' reflections on plans for the future.

##### 4.3.1. Future plans for internationalization

Plans for the implementation of ideas and knowledge gained during the experiences in China involved all levels of internationalization. A municipal school leader planned to use the experience as a point of departure for developing a municipal strategy for international cooperation and an international dimension in their schools. Other plans included internationalization through mobility with China and in cooperation with other schools at municipal or cross-municipal levels.

At the school level, the leaders' reflections involved plans for activities and ideas regarding organizational aspects of internationalization through Chinese activities. While the experiences and actual plans needed to be discussed with co-leaders and teachers at home, many planned to make use of the CI AAU's teaching offers (possibly in cooperation with neighboring schools) and aim for mobility opportunities in the future. Some also expressed an interest in the possibility of establishing a Confucius Classroom<sup>6</sup> at their school, giving Chinese language and culture a central role, and gaining financial support in the process. Economic considerations are important and pose a challenge to internationalization through mobility with China as public schools are free of charge. Another consideration of the reflections was the value of providing an opportunity for both a school leader and a teacher from each school to replicate delegation visit to China, since "the teacher has to do the work in the future" [No. 19].

<sup>6</sup> Confucius Classrooms can be established in primary and secondary schools in order to support the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture. Confucius classrooms are connected to the local Confucius Institute.

At the student level, plans involved both Chinese activities at school, in cooperation with the CI AAU, and the school leader sharing their knowledge from the delegation visit with students. Lastly, it involved future student mobility with China.

Several school leaders emphasized the CI AAU as an important collaborator at all levels in establishing and supporting the process of developing internationalization through school activities related to China, for example by providing Chinese language teachers and facilitating contact with Chinese schools.

#### 4.3.2. International inspiration for the school and school system

While some ideas can be transferred directly into Danish schools (e.g. using music as a bell), others will need adjustment. The reflections posed questions of how the Danish tradition for learning with a focus on the development of innovative competences in students can be combined with a more disciplined classroom environment. In this case, the Chinese style of discipline is not the aim, but can be used for inspiration in the Danish context. Other ideas inspired by the Chinese school system included developing ways of focusing on supernormal children<sup>7</sup> and introducing more physical exercise during schooldays. However, while new ideas are manifold, a few school leaders were more reserved:

For now, I don't expect to make any changes at home. It is more about telling about the visit and providing students and teachers a look into the Chinese culture from my experiences. China is a lot of things and I've only seen a small part that cannot be generalized. [No. 10]

For the school system in general, some were inspired by the Chinese approach to teaching at the schools visited, which involved teachers' teaching only one subject and having fewer teaching hours per week, and continuous collaboration with colleagues for professional development. On the other hand, a school leader reflected upon the values upon which the Danish school education is based, stating that the delegation visit to China "has confirmed that children have only one childhood. Not only school, thank you!" [No. 8].

## 5. Discussion

The discussion is divided into two parts. Firstly, we discuss how the school leaders reflected on their international experiences in terms of developing ideas for internationalization. Secondly, we discuss the possibilities and challenges to utilizing international experience in educational leaders as part of an internationalization process at the school level. For this part, we integrate our model of internationalization of education and the key enablers: leadership, engaged embedders of change, policy support, and financial support.

### 5.1. Learning and developing ideas

International experience for leaders bears many similarities with study visits abroad for students: going abroad, experiencing another country, culture, and school system, and the opportunity to learn through reflections on these experiences (Tinkham, 2011). It raises awareness of the possibilities of experiential learning as well as non-formal and informal contexts of learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). However, the design of such international experience requires meaningful activities that lead to purposeful social interaction in cultural contexts (Wenger, 1998).

The findings show that by participating in meaningful activities with international school leaders, teachers, and researchers during an international experience, it is possible for school leaders to develop a broader understanding of the universalities and particularities of, for example, school education and societies. The school leaders' reflections show that knowledge sharing through active engagement in interaction with international colleagues brings insight into the similarities and differences of school systems and societies in general. This then creates a foundation both for mutual learning and for the understanding of the possibilities and challenges of future international cooperation. Furthermore, through lived experiences from schools and knowledge sharing with international colleagues, it serves as a context for discovering new ways of approaching aspects of school education, and thereby provides opportunities to develop new ideas for schools at many levels and in many ways. As Heidemann (2003:146) states, differences first become a value when you aim for cooperation with someone who differs from you. Differences can initiate reflection on one's own practice, and can lead either to an appreciation of why things are done in a specific manner, or to inspiration for new approaches. These findings support the research conducted by Tinkham (2011), who found that short-term studies abroad for school leaders led to transformational learning.

This study found several reflections relating to knowledge sharing within the delegation group during the experience regarding issues related to internationalization and school education in general. These reflections play a significant role. Thus, the development of ideas is based not only on international, but also on inter-municipal and inter-institutional inspiration during the international experience. In addition, during the visit some used the Internet to share knowledge with students at home, and further knowledge sharing with key people at the schools is expected to take place following the visit.

<sup>7</sup> Research of "supernormal children" was discussed with a professor, and a visit was made to a special class for this group of students.

## 5.2. Developing successful internationalization: from idea to reality

### 5.2.1. Leadership

As previously stated, internationalization at the school level requires engaged school leaders who prioritize international, intercultural, and global aspects in the aim, function, and delivery of school education (Heidemann, 1999a; Knight, 2003). The task of school leaders is to direct the activities of teachers toward a shared goal of internationalization (Cotae, 2013), and to develop an understanding of internationalization as something to be integrated into, rather than peripheral to, the core mission of school education (Hudzik and Stohl, 2009). International experience provides the opportunity for school leaders to go abroad and lead the way in a global world, and to use the experience to inspire teachers and students both during and upon their return. Much research shows that the educational leaders' ability to influence the school conditions, motivate teachers and unleash the potential in the school is significant for the students' learning (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Thus, students' intercultural learning is also closely linked to educational leadership.

Furthermore, as previously discussed, it provides experiential learning possibilities through knowledge sharing with other leaders, both local and international, which can motivate leaders to engage in a process of internationalization. As argued by Xing and Dervin (2014), continuous professional development is needed for educational leaders, and the establishment of links between the schools and external connections locally, nationally, and internationally is essential to become successful. Also, Heidemann (2003) characterizes school leaders at internationalized schools as very passionate, but some school leaders may need to develop such passion. Thus, "best cases" of internationalization, or at least international activities, can illuminate the way for other schools (Nolan and Hunter, 2012).

The challenge remains how to move from the idea of internationalization to the realization thereof. International experience for leaders accentuates leadership as a vital enabler of successful internationalization, and in order to initiate an internationalization process in schools it is important to first raise awareness of the imperative role of leadership engagement, both at the municipal and institutional levels. Despite Danish school leaders working in teams, we agree with Tinkham (2011) that support structures are needed for leaders to reflect upon and share experiences after the sojourn period. As suggested by several participants, the CI AAU could be a liaison, though online platforms would provide more direct communication.

### 5.2.2. Embedders of change

As discussed, teacher engagement is an important factor in the implementation of internationalization initiatives. For teachers, the opportunity of international experience for leaders means having a leader who has developed an understanding of international school education and international activities through lived experiences, which can be shared with the teachers and used as a point of departure for an internationalization process. It provides a leader who shows the importance of going abroad and emphasizes internationalization through his/her actions.

In line with transformational educational leadership, findings from this study indicate a well-developed understanding among school leaders of the importance of teacher engagement and teachers' need for motivation and inspiration in order to embrace internationalization. However, developing an understanding among teachers of the importance of internationalization alongside other important tasks at the school level is a considerable challenge. For this purpose, upon their return leaders must identify key agents of change and connect with allies who have the skills required to drive the process of internationalization forward (Heidemann, 2003). Conversely, Tinkham (2011:193) found that "leaders' creativity, degree of reflection on the experience, and ability to involve others appear to play powerful roles in the internationalization of their schools".

The fact that international experience for leaders did not include the participation of teachers is a challenge, as several of the school leaders reflected. An inclusion of both a teacher and a leader from each school in future initiatives of international experiences would make it possible to cover two enablers.

### 5.2.3. Policy support

School education in Denmark is a municipal matter; therefore the importance of a municipal internationalization strategy has been greatly emphasized (Holm-Larsen et al., 2002; Styrelsen for International Uddannelse, Denmark, 2010). Nevertheless, none of the municipalities represented have implemented such a strategy, although one municipality has a municipal international coordinator to support internationalization in the local schools. Following the argument of Xing and Dervin (2014) successful municipal educational leadership practice must develop structures that facilitate internationalization in the local schools.

Policy support is closely linked to leadership at the school level. The possibility of international experience for leaders therefore requires an understanding of the importance of leadership among leaders at the school and municipal levels, and the need for support to initiate and sustain internationalization in the local schools.

### 5.2.4. Financial support

In general, international experience for school leaders represents a financial challenge to schools. In this particular case, the international experience was financed with significant support from China, and one municipality also provided additional financial support to its participating school leaders. Moreover, the experience included information on

opportunities for future financial support from the Confucius Institute, such as the establishment of Confucius classrooms, offers of Chinese language and culture education in schools, and assistance in creating links between Denmark and China.

This study shows that the possibility of international experience for leaders is related to innovative thinking. Thus, the idea of developing international cooperation with China among a group of schools (either at the municipal or cross-municipal levels) has been discussed and reflected upon, creating a foundation for future knowledge sharing and cooperation both within and across nations. Heidemann (2003) proposes keeping it simple by starting small, but thinking big. Cooperation among a group of Danish schools to develop international cooperation with China provides a foundation for support between schools (among leaders and teachers), and could divide administrative tasks and reduce costs.

## 6. Conclusion

The growing interest of internationalization at the school level calls for research to understand the particularities of internationalization in this specific context. The international experience in China for school leaders reviewed in this study was developed based on an increased focus on and effort to develop internationalization at the school level in Denmark. This study brings insight into the school leaders' reflections before, during, and after their international experience, their areas of interest (e.g. internationalization, the structure of the Chinese school system, classroom management, and Chinese society), and their development of ideas on how the experience could be used as an inspiration for the Danish school system. However, the extent to which the particular ideas were carried out in practice has not yet been researched.

This study suggests that international experience for leaders can be used as a context for professional development and for developing ideas for internationalization at the school level through lived experiences, participation in meaningful activities abroad, and active engagement in interaction with international as well as local colleagues. It brings attention to the utility of the leaders' experiences abroad as a context for and learning through reflection.

The study covers several layers of leadership at the school level and suggests that international experiences for leaders as part of an internationalization process can bring about both opportunities and challenges within areas of importance for successful internationalization, including leadership, teacher engagement, policy support, and financial support. International experience for leaders accentuates the importance of leadership in an internationalization process at the school level for leaders to engage teachers in the transformation process, and at the municipal level for leadership to develop an internationalization strategy or policy and structures for financial support.

In addition, it provides a context for facilitating an understanding of and motivation for internationalization among leaders, which can be used for leaders to guide the school through a globalized world. International experience for educational leaders can be used as a point of departure for facilitating teacher engagement, however by developing a joint international experience for school leaders and teachers it would be possible to facilitate learning and engagement among both groups of importance, while possibly developing a context for additional knowledge sharing. Finally, international experience for leaders can provide a context for innovative thinking to handle obstacles on the way to successful internationalization.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2017.02.009>.

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