Internationalization as an internal capacity builder for school improvement: a case study

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This study focuses on understanding how internationalization at one Swedish upper secondary school can be understood from a school improvement perspective. More specifically, the study aims to examine whether the school’s work with internationalization can support and build internal capacities in the school. In the study, the meaning of the principal’s leadership for working with internationalization is also examined.

Research on internationalization in education primarily deals with higher education and aspects of economics and policy issues in relation to the development of knowledge in school subjects (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Dolby & Rahman, 2008; Yemini, 2012). According to Pérez-Karlsson (2014), only a few studies that focus on secondary schools exist. More specifically, Pérez-Karlsson claims that there are few studies about internationalization in upper secondary schools from a school-improvement perspective.

In Sweden, schools have a mission to work with internationalization that stems from the national curriculum. According to the national curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2013), an international, intercultural, and global perspective – internationalization – ought to permeate education at all levels, from kindergarten onward. This mission is compulsory, but the way to achieve it and
organize education to reach the official goals is every individual school’s responsibility. However, it is unusual for Swedish schools to work extensively or sustainably with internationalization. The school in this study has expressed internationalization as a distinct identity and area for development and was chosen for this study because of its extensive and sustained work with internationalization over more than 10 years. The concept of internationalization (see De Wit, Hunter, Howard, & Egron-Polak, 2015) is defined as an intentional process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions in education to enhance the quality of education for all students and staff. In this study, the work with internationalization is viewed as a form of external collaboration (Björkman, 2008) – that is, an intentional process for organizing and creating collaboration between schools in other countries to build intercultural understanding.

Although the focus of this study is on a national and local context, its contribution is of global interest as it provides in-depth insights into a particular cultural context. By doing so, wider understandings of different cultural contexts are enabled as well. In a globalized world with increasing interconnections and diversity (Jackson, 2008), the emphasis on international perspectives in education is distinct (Yemini, 2012), which implies that creating an intercultural competence and understanding is a worldwide concern (European Parliament, 2006; Tupas, 2014; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018). Working with internationalization in school and education, whether or not it is curriculum-oriented content as in this study, is therefore a valuable contribution to a wider international perspective.

The aim of this study is to examine how the work with internationalization at one Swedish upper secondary school could be understood from a school improvement perspective. More precisely, we aim to examine if and how the work with internationalization can build internal capacities for school improvement, but also examine the meaning of the principal’s leadership in relation to the work with internationalization. The research questions that frame the study are: Can a school’s work with internationalization be an internal process that builds internal capacities for school improvement, and if so, how can these internal capacities be depicted? How can the meaning of the principal’s leadership be understood regarding a school’s work process with internationalization?

This study begins with previous research on internationalization in upper secondary education, followed by the theoretical perspectives of capacity building and internal capacities for school improvement. It then provides a description of the methodology, analysis of the conducted study, and finally, concluding remarks and implications for future research.

**Internationalization and secondary education**

In the context of education, the concept of internationalization is increasingly connected to the process of including an ‘international dimension’ in education (Yemini, 2012). In compulsory and secondary education, internationalization traditionally relates to international schooling notions that started from schools providing education for the children of diplomats. In recent years, this term grew into the broader context of educating the ‘global citizen,’ and has grown and become more common in local schools around the world (MacKenzie, 2010). Internationalization is a concept with
diversified meanings and is interpreted and used in different ways in various educational settings, though the definition of the concept has evolved over time (Knight, 2003). There is a newly articulated definition of internationalization that offers a reminder that internationalization also must fulfil societal purposes. De Wit et al. (2015) has developed a new definition of internationalization, using the classic Knight (2003) definition of internationalization and has added a few key aspects. In this study we depart from the concept of internationalization as De Wit et al. (2015) defines it:

Internationalization becomes the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of (post-secondary) education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (De Wit et al., 2015, p. 29)

As stated above, research about internationalization in school is limited, though Dolby and Rahman (2008) state that research in the field of internationalization of school education (K–12) exists in a broad sense. However, it does not represent a unified research field, but rather includes four areas practiced in schools: peace education, global multicultural education, human rights education and environmental education. Yemini (2012) claims there is inadequate attention paid to internationalization in public local schools, in terms of both research and practical focus.

A previous study of a short-term exchange between upper secondary schools in Sweden and Chile showed positive effects in terms of enhanced learning and pupils’ personal development (Pérez-Karlsson, 2014). The study also revealed shortcomings in the upper secondary schools’ ability to validate the knowledge generated in the form of points or ratings. Pérez-Karlsson emphasized that international exchanges of shorter length also provide something the usual classroom situation cannot offer in terms of a holistic approach and deeper holistic learning. Another study by Wingård (2011) about international educational exchange projects in secondary schools showed that international collaboration can lead to the pupil’s own personal development, in-depth subject knowledge, and a broader worldview in addition to what usual teaching provides. According to Wingård, the driving forces for international collaboration are fruitful meetings between teachers and pupils, the promotion of school programs where the projects are conducted, and perceived increased collaboration between the teams (2011). Another study of interest is Brodow’s (2003) study, which examined elementary schools’ work with internationalization from a school-development perspective. According to Brodow, there are several aspects that add value in the work of internationalization. For example, teachers are challenged in their own practice and discover differences and similarities with the way they teach; additionally, internationalization gives new inspiration to change, deepens their intercultural competence, and contributes to sustainable contacts over time with teachers from other countries. There are tendencies for increased collaboration at schools that succeed in their work with internationalization. Support from school management is important to create support for sustainable internationalization efforts and particularly important at the beginning of projects. There must be someone in charge of internationalization who can serve as ‘the principal’s extended arm into the business, a person who has the mandate to lead the work with internationalization’ (Brodow, 2003). The reason that projects do not stand or fall with one person is that there are more people involved in the project (Brodow, 2003; Wingård, 2011).
Upper secondary schools in Sweden have emphasized internationalization since the 1990s, which can be traced to both national and European policy documents. The Swedish upper secondary school has a mission to work with internationalization, and internationalization can be found in the national curriculum as part of the mission of the school’s fundamental values (SNAE, 2013). An international perspective can also be found in the European context as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning. Future generations are supposed to be in need of an ‘intercultural understanding,’ which is assumed to be of particular importance to future societies (European Parliament, 2006). Including international perspectives is mandatory in Swedish upper secondary schools, but defining how to organize the work to achieve that goal is up to each school. The Swedish national curriculum for upper secondary schools mandates that the school has a responsibility to enhance pupils’ and teachers’ ability to understand and empathize with other people’s values and conditions (SNAE, 2013). An ethical, international perspective and an environmental perspective should characterize school education. The national curriculum also stresses the importance of an international perspective to develop greater understanding of one’s own reality in a global context and to create international solidarity (SNAE, 2013). International links and education exchange with other countries should be supported (SNAE, 2013).

In Sweden, some schools are multicultural (Lahdenperä, 1997) and other schools are more of a monocultural character—that is, some schools are distinguished by their local context and traditions rather than reflecting diversity or multiculturality. Schools that are more monocultural need to actively work to create active internationalization work through meetings for pupils with other cultures, although it is possible to argue that internationalization work is as important in multicultural schools as in monocultural schools. In many schools of a more multicultural character, ‘Swedishness’ forms the basis, norms and goals for teaching (Lahdenperä, 2000, p. 201). This is a strong argument to support the work with internationalization in all schools, and Lahdenperä (2000) and Tupas (2014) emphasize the intercultural approach to teaching as a worldwide concern.

In sum, international collaboration and international exchanges seem to have effects in terms of enhancing pupils’ learning and personal development and also seem to add a broader worldview or more holistic perspective. Increased collaboration between teachers and teacher teams, as well as the fact that teachers are challenged in their own teaching practice, are also mentioned in these studies. Last but not least, leadership is mentioned as an important factor for sustainable internationalization efforts. Capacity building and internal capacities for school improvement are considered important vehicles for school improvement. With this study, we aimed to examine how the work of internationalization at one specific upper secondary school could build internal capacities for school improvement, and also to examine the meaning of the principal’s leadership in relation to this work. The two theoretical perspectives used are elaborated next.

**Theoretical perspectives**

Two theoretical perspectives guide the analysis of the collected data: capacity building, and internal capacities for school improvement. Capacity building for school improvement is the overall theoretical perspective, while the theoretical perspectives of internal capacities can be seen as a demarcation within the capacity building perspective in this
study. Hence, in our analysis, internal capacities are in the foreground as the theoretical perspective used to understand the studied phenomenon, internationalization. Capacity building is more in the background as a foundation for our understanding of the internal capacities: collaboration form, staff development, and leadership.

**Building capacity for school improvement**

There is an increasing amount of evidence within the school-improvement field that emphasizes the importance of capacity building as the basis of sustaining improvement (e.g. Crowther, 2011; Fullan, 2001, 2011; Harris, 2004; Hopkins & Jackson, 2003; Lambert, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007; Stringer, 2009, 2013). Capacity building is concerned with creating conditions, opportunities, and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning (Harris, 2001). Stoll (2009) identified and pinpointed the relationship between school improvement and capacity building as follows: ‘Improvement is a series of concurrent and recurring processes through which different partners collaborate to enhance pupils’ experiences and outcomes, while creating the capacity to take charge of change and sustain learning’ (p. 124).

Capacity and capacity building have to be perceived as a more holistic concept (Stoll, 2010) to understand what makes schools and the people within them capable learners. Additionally, capacity building is not restricted to individual members of an organization, but rather involves the organization as a whole. Capacity building for the learning community includes personal, interpersonal, and organizational dimensions (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, 2011). Harris (2011, 2012) argued that the single most important factor in leading successful system-level improvement is capacity building. Internal capacities for school improvement have been emphasized in previous research as important to support and enhance the school improvement process (Harris & Muijs, 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001, 2011; Stoll, 1999; Stringer, 2009).

**Internal capacities for school improvement**

A school with internal capacity can take charge of change because the school is adaptive (Stoll, 1999). Harris (2000) argued that the basis of school improvement is that neither external nor internal strategies for school improvement will affect pupils’ progress unless the strategy impacts different levels within the school at the same time. The key influences on internal capacity are threefold, according to Stoll (1999): the individual teachers within the school, the school’s social and structural learning context, and the external context. According to West (2000), research has shown that support from outside the school is required to build internal capacity and is also a prerequisite for successful school improvement. This was underlined also by Mitchell and Sackney (2001, 2011)) and is of importance for this study. This study uses Björkman’s definition of internal capacities for improvement.
Björkman’s analysis of earlier research on effective school improvement and capacity building in schools pointed out three important internal capacities for school improvement: internal and external forms of collaboration, staff development, and leadership. These three capacities are vital pre-conditions for a school’s ‘collective improvement process’ (p. 72). Thus, this study will develop these notions further.

**Collaboration forms as an internal capacity for school improvement**

A collaborative work practice and collegial relations are essential aspects of building capacity for improvement (Harris & Muijs, 2005), and the positive relationship among forms of teacher leadership, teacher collaboration, and capacity building for school improvement are also promoted (Harris, 2003; Lambert, 1998). The collaboration has to be learning-oriented, have a growth-promoting approach to teaching and learning, and involve both a shared responsibility and shared decision-making for the educational practice (Hargreaves, 1994; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001).

A collaborative structure and culture must be present in the school as a whole to be considered an internal capacity for school improvement (Björkman, 2008; Hargreaves, 1994; Harris, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). The results of Björkman’s (2008) study of more and less successful schools showed that the more successful schools described themselves as team-based (p. 147), involving, and collaborative (p. 149). Forms of collaboration are both an internal and an external process. The internal collaboration forms observed in the more successful schools were based on a vision that was affirmed and communicated between the principal and the teaching teams as a collaborative direction for practice in the school (Björkman, 2008).

**Staff development as an internal capacity for school improvement**

There is a consensus among researchers (e.g. Blossing, 2000; Bredeson, 2003; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2001) that principals have to invest in people to achieve school improvement. Mitchell and Sackney (2011) discussed the idea of the learning community as a vehicle for professional learning and school development, by which they meant that the learning community develops in response to capacity building in three domains: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. Building a learning community is a dynamic process that engages the individual, the group, and the organization in embedded interdependencies and mutual influences (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Job-embedded professional development, from the viewpoint of teacher learning, has been found to generate more effective school improvement when teachers work in collaborative groups on a specific practice (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). To consider staff development an internal capacity for school improvement, it has to be incorporated as a part of the overall orientation of the school (Björkman, 2008). It should connect to the everyday work in school and be linked to teachers’ professional learning and growth in order to support pupils’ learning (Bredeson, 2003). Björkman (2008) concluded that in the more successful
schools, staff development is generally used as a lever in the planned improvement process for the whole school, while staff development in the less successful schools is generally more intentional and individual.

**Leadership as an internal capacity for school improvement**

In international school leadership research, school leadership is described as an important factor in the quality and development of the school, and leadership is considered important to create a developing and learning school organization (Harris, 2002; Johansson, 2004; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012; Senge, 1990). In order to have a good impact on school improvement, leadership needs to be both positioned, with the principal as manager, and distributed, with the principal as leader (Johansson, 2000; Mulford, 2007). To ensure sustainability, leadership has to be distributed within the school and embedded within its culture (Stoll, 2009). This is in line with Hargreaves (2007), who argued that teacher participation and distributed leadership are preconditions for successful and sustainable school improvement. The formal leader, however, is important. Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss’s (2009) study showed the critical role formal school leaders played in helping foster apparently productive forms of distributed leadership (Leithwood et al., 2009).

Distributed leadership can be defined as ‘shared influence that can contribute to positive organizational improvement and change’ (Harris, 2014, p. 12). Distributed leadership is spread over a number of individuals and is accomplished through the daily collaborations of several leaders (Spillane, 2006). In Sweden, distributed leadership and teacher teams are an ‘institutionalized practice,’ but despite this, sustainable school improvement is a challenge to realize (Liljenberg, 2015a). Liljenberg (2015b) concluded that formal school leaders must play an important role in building distributed leadership at local levels if capacity building and school improvement are to occur. Björkman (2008) concluded in his study that leadership in the more successful schools is to a greater extent distributed among teacher teams in order to generate a leadership practice of extended involvement and participation. Another conclusion from Björkman’s study is that leadership in the more successful schools was understood as part of the schools’ internal capacity for school improvement.

From the research above, capacity building and internal capacities are considered key vehicles for sustainable school improvement. The professional community, distributed leadership, learning-oriented collaboration, and mutual learning are highlighted as essential aspects of building capacity for improvement. The importance of shared responsibility and decision-making in schools is emphasized, along with involving the organization as a whole to build capacity.

**Method**

This is a case study in which aspects of capacity building and internal capacities for school improvement constituted the theoretical points of departure. The study aimed at deeper insights into the concept of building internal capacities for school improvement in the case of internationalization at one school site, and answers the questions ‘how’ and ‘why’ regarding process-related issues (Yin, 2007). We chose a case study design based on different aspects; case studies are appropriate to examine what happens here
and now (Yin, 2007). As Stake (1995) wrote, ‘The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization’ (p. 8). Another argument that supports a case study design is that a case study can be defined as a holistic description and analysis of a single entity or phenomenon (Yin, 2007). The case in this study, ‘the quintan’ (Stake, 1995, 2006) was internationalization, and the example was a Swedish upper secondary school’s work with internationalization. In this case, the interest was particularly focused on the school’s internal processes and the principal’s leadership. This work is an ‘intrinsic case study’ (Stake, 1995), which is typically undertaken to learn about a unique phenomenon, and this case is understood as a unique phenomenon in the Swedish setting. We were curious about how a specific Swedish secondary school worked extensively and sustainably with internationalization and international collaboration, how the work could be understood in relation to building internal capacities and also examining the importance of the principal’s leadership in relation to the work with this process.

**Selection of the case**

In line with Stake (1995, 2006)), we selected a purposive sample for this study. Stake (1995) emphasized the importance of choosing a case representative to answer the research questions. In this intrinsic case study, which we understood as a unique phenomenon, the case was preselected (Stake, 1995). We chose this specific Swedish upper secondary school because of its extensive and sustained work with internationalization as part of the school’s school improvement work and our prior knowledge of the leadership of the school principal. Additional data collection and participant information is described under the heading ‘Data Collection and Procedure.’ A description of the Swedish education system, the school, and the school context is additionally provided in order to create a wider understanding of the study.

**Description of the school**

To relate this study to the national context, we will describe the Swedish education system briefly. The Swedish education system is a goal-steered system with a high degree of local responsibility. The main responsibility for schools lies with the local authorities in the municipalities (SNAE, 2015). All pupils who have completed compulsory schooling are entitled to a three-year upper secondary education from their home municipality. Upper secondary education is free and noncompulsory. There are 17 national programs, all of which are three-year programs. Pupils can choose either academic programs or vocational programs. Workplace-based learning occurs during all vocational programs in secondary schools (SNAE, 2013). The programs provide a broad general education and eligibility to study at the university or postsecondary level (SNAE, 2015).

The case studied is internationalization, and the example is the school that works with internationalization. The school is a Swedish upper secondary school in a sparsely populated municipality, in a rural area with a densely populated centre in the inlands of northern Sweden. The SNAE (2008) definition of a sparsely populated municipality is that it has fewer than 20,000 inhabitants and fewer than five persons per square
kilometre. A sparsely populated area is more than 45 minutes distant by car from a densely populated centre with more than 3,000 inhabitants. This upper secondary school is rather new (opened in 1996) and provides six different national programs.

The school also organizes nationally approved sports training in cross-country skiing, alpine sports, and biathlon. It is a small school with about 120 pupils and employs about 25 teachers, which allows pupils to work closely with their teachers in smaller groups.

The upper secondary school works actively to support entrepreneurship and collaboration with the surrounding community. It also encourages pupils to bring in new ideas and cultures, among other things, through international study trips and international collaboration. The upper secondary school has actively worked to encourage international questions and international collaborations since 2002. Its goal is to broaden pupils’ and staff’s perspectives and clarify opportunities and responsibilities in a global world through international collaborations. Since 2002, the school has worked with an organization that runs a school and orphanage in India, and since 2007, pupils have travelled to the province of Tamil Nadu in India annually to carry out field studies and workplace-based learning in health care, programming, and tourism. The project now includes primary schools and preschools in the municipality. Pupils also carry out part of their work-based learning needs with companies and organizations in India.

The upper secondary school also collaborates with an organization and school in South Africa. This collaboration is aimed at pupils in the introductory program. Currently, the school is working to develop a partnership with Austria to allow pupils to carry out some of their German language courses in Austria. Together with Mid-Sweden University, the school also has built up collaboration with one university and a school in Shenzhen, China. The first contact was made during 2008, and since then, collaboration has developed. At the time of this study, 2014, the school conducted its second study trip to China for 14 days, together with three pupils, two teachers, and the school’s principal. This collaboration was aimed at pupils in academic programs, and the aim was that more pupils would choose to study at a university after graduation. This collaboration is in line with the school’s goal and vision to broaden pupils’ and staff’s perspectives in a global world.

Data collection and procedure

Data collection

Different methods are often used in case studies to illustrate the complexity of the case (Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2007). The intention of this study was to use different data (see Table 1) to provide an extensive description of the case studied (Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995). As researchers, we studied and followed the school for a three-year period (2012–2015) within the framework of a school improvement and research project. This meant continuous school visits, field observations, field notes, local documents, formal and informal conversations with teachers and the principal, as well as individual interviews (with teachers and the principal) and group interviews (with teachers). This created a deep and broad contextual understanding of the studied case and was used to create a ‘thick’ description of the outcome of the case study (Geertz, 1973). In addition to these data, other
data were collected over a period of three months (March to May 2014). These data consisted of individual interviews with the school’s principal and two teachers about the school’s work with internationalization. The qualitative research interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) were conducted at the school (in total, two individual interviews with the principal and four individual interviews with the two teachers), and took approximately 60–80 minutes each. The first teacher has worked at the school as a teacher since 2002 and has been responsible for the internationalization work at the school for several years. She has been responsible for planning and conducting the international study trips with the school and has also participated in many of them. The second teacher has worked at the school since 1999 as a teacher and a coordinator and has been a participant teacher on several international study trips with the school. The principal has been active in the school since 1999, first as a teacher, and then as principal from 2004 to the present. The principal has been active first as a teacher in driving the internationalization work at the school, and then has continued to lead and develop the internationalization work as a principal. The interviews were conducted with the use of an interview guide in which areas of concern regarding how and why the school works with internationalization, relations to other areas of work within the school, resources for international collaborations, staff development, and issues relating to leadership within the school were raised. Each interview started with information about the purpose of the study. The interviews were recorded and saved as separate digital audio files and then transcribed verbatim (Patton, 2002).

During the data collection period, the school conducted one of their many study trips abroad, where we participated as researchers. This study trip to China served as one example of the school’s work with internationalization. Data collected during the study trip consisted of observations. We followed the pupils, teachers, and the principal in all of the activities that took place throughout the trip. Observations and field notes documented all of the activities throughout the entire study trip, and were made as a way of reaching a greater understanding of the context of the case (Stake, 1995). The conducted observations were made in the role of ‘observer as participant’ according to Creswell (2014); that is, the role of the researcher was known.

**Data analysis**

A deductive approach using a theoretical framework, built on research on capacity building, and internal capacities for school improvement, has been used for the qualitative analysis of the empirical data. A deductive approach is useful if the general aim is to test a previous theory in a different situation (Miles, Huberman,
The qualitative analysis process can be described in terms of encoding, thematization, and summing (Miles et al., 2014). The empirical data material was prepared for analysis by verbatim transcription of the interviews (encoding). The empirical data materials were read through several times to obtain a sense of them as a whole. The text about the participants’ experiences and perceptions of the work with internationalization was extracted and brought together into one text, which constituted the unit of analysis. The whole text was then read to identify meaning units, guided by the aim of the study and a deductive approach using the three internal capacities: internal and external collaboration forms, staff development, and leadership (Björkman, 2008). Primarily, a manifest level was chosen in the analysis process, but the longer the analysis process continued, the more visible the texts’ latent content became. The analysis was done manually in a word processing program, and the text was sorted into meaning units with guidance from the research questions and the three internal capacities. Relevant data were thereafter categorized based on Björkman’s three internal capacities for school improvement (thematization). The work required several readings of the transcriptions, and after a first draft, all of the transcripts were read through again to assess the validity of the categories. Modifications and adjustments to meaning units were made several times during the analysis process. The process of analysis involved a back-and-forth movement between the whole and parts of the text (Miles et al., 2014). The next step in the analysis process was to write the analysed material in a coherent result, a case report (summary), in which additional data material was used to deepen the understanding of the case as well as to support a ‘thick’ description of the case (Geertz, 1973; Stake, 1995). The analysis was guided by the theoretical perspectives of capacity building and internal capacities for school improvement. Concluding remarks and implications for further research are described and presented at the end of the paper.

**Limitations**

Several limitations need to be identified and recognized in this study. First, the case study approach in this study, as well as the specific social context, limits the possibilities for generalizations of the findings. Second, the study was not independently selected, and the findings and analyses are linked to national and local context, which can be seen as a limitation and a strength. However, this study contributes in-depth information about a school’s work with internationalization as well as the ways in which involved principals and teachers experienced this work from the perspective of capacity building for school improvement.

**Analysis of the case**

The results of the analysis will be presented as a case report. The qualitative analysis was based on the theoretical concepts of internal capacities – and the presentation of the results will follow that logic. A rich and thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the analysis results is presented next, illustrated with suitable quotations from the empirical data (Miles et al., 2014). Some of the quotations have been edited to become more readable without taking away or changing their content.
**Internationalization as capacity building for school improvement**

In the overall picture of the school, the internationalization work at this secondary school is founded explicitly on a rural perspective. In the local goals for internationalization at the school and in the interviews, the principal and several teachers stressed the importance of using existing conditions as the starting point for running the school, which, in this case, is a rural school whose principal believes in international collaboration (internationalization): ‘Internationalization is something I believe in, especially for a rural school like ours. We have a rural perspective, and we look at the existing conditions and try to find ways forward, both locally and globally.’ The principal and the teachers at the school create the conditions to provide all pupils, regardless of socioeconomic background, with an international point of view and in so doing foster democratic values. The principal emphasized this by saying, ‘In the work with internationalization, the social goals and the democratic values in the curriculum are processed, and I think we can feel very satisfied when it comes to our pupils. Our pupils get a huge dose of democratic values.’ The principal believed that many different components based on the national curriculum should permeate the school. Internationalization work either permeates or should permeate all of the school’s activities, but the work with internationalization nevertheless provides many good values, according to the teachers and the principal.

From the perspective of capacity building for school improvement, internationalization efforts do, in fact, pervade activities throughout the school, and the principal and the staff consider the ambition of developing the school itself to be a driving force in the school’s internationalization work. This work is a constantly ongoing process, with new ideas and possible ways for improvement. Based on the group interviews with teachers and informal conversations at the school, internationalization appeared in other tasks and discussions at the school as well as in some teachers’ own development projects. It is clear that the school is generally development oriented and works on many development projects and areas simultaneously. In the group interviews with teachers, an openness towards the constant tendency to change in the school was expressed, as were reflections on the challenges of always constantly working with development at the school. One teacher expressed that it sometimes feels like ‘it can take focus from what you do in the classroom.’ Considering how the teachers and principal described the work with internationalization, and considering their goals, we grasp internationalization as an incentive for capacity building in school improvement processes at this school. How this is understood in relation to the three internal capacities is presented below.

**Internationalization as an external collaboration form**

In light of the theoretical concepts used in the qualitative analysis, specifically the three internal improvement capacities, the work of internationalization can be seen as an external form of collaboration at the school. It is evident from the observations conducted during the study trip to China, the interviews, and in the school observations at the local school.
Firstly, an important part of the school’s work with internationalization is the international study trips the school carries out in different countries with different groups of pupils every year. A prerequisite for good international collaboration is that both parties share the same goals regarding why it is of interest to collaborate. The principal described how he experienced a kind of goodwill in international exchanges overall when extending a hand in a kind of ‘brotherly collaboration,’ as a kind of greater purpose that laws and the national curriculum do not govern. In one of the interviews, the principal gave an example of this from the most recent study trip to China: ‘There was a goodwill to stretch a hand to other countries, and they were very proud of us visiting them.’ In the principal’s experience, the main purpose of the countries’ collaboration is to make contacts.

Secondly, internationalization efforts are not exclusively the work of the teachers at the upper secondary school; they are also to be incorporated into the surrounding community – for example, by the school inviting the general public to theme evenings and presentations as well as inviting the compulsory school pupils to participate in international collaborations. The principal sees the importance of these spill-overs not only to the surrounding community but also to the overall political standards in the municipality. The principal stressed the importance of involving as many people as possible, both at the school and the local community, to create sustainability in the work with internationalization: ‘It is a matter of involving as many people as possible to gain vitality of the work.’

**Internationalization as an internal collaboration form**

The work with internationalization at this upper secondary school is not only a form of external collaboration but also internal collaboration, which became apparent in the interviews, local documents, and school observations. The internal collaboration form for internationalization was organized both formally, with the principal distributing leadership to a specific function – a teacher responsible for internationalization at the school – and informally. The principal evidently has awareness of the importance of distributing mandates and responsibility to the teacher team as a whole: ‘A strong teacher team, as well as a teacher team that makes its own decisions, is the key to success. We try to spread the work to as many as possible in the teacher team.’ There is a pronounced expectation that the teachers themselves run their own projects, but the teacher responsible for internationalization is available for support. The task entails running, supporting, and coordinating internationalization work at the school, both internally and externally. Internally means in relation to personnel, pupils, and the principal, while externally refers to operating as a contact person with the cooperating countries and as the representative in different groupings, such as, the county’s mobility group.

The tasks of the teacher responsible for internationalization consist, among other things, of prioritizing and deciding which trips are to be carried out and the funding for which to apply, although the final decision lies with the principal. This teacher said that internationalization work cannot be something that is done alongside other work at the school. It has to be integrated into the work that the teacher does, and the internationalization efforts have to have clarity and an explicit purpose. In group
interviews with teachers about ongoing school development, several teachers gave examples of how they related to internationalization in their own projects and development areas at the school. However, there are also challenges related to the work with the study trips abroad and the collaboration between teachers working in the school. One observed example, which emerged during the study trip to China, is that all of the pupils had a study plan to follow during their study trip, but one pupil could not complete his entire study plan because a teacher did not prepare reading instructions for him in one subject. According to the teacher responsible for internationalization, determining what opportunities exist for adapting the study plan to the trip’s conditions depends on the teachers’ attitudes and abilities. Within the school, the teacher responsible for internationalization collects the teachers’ ideas and thoughts about the development of internationalization, and another part of the job is to guarantee that the internationalization efforts are in accordance with both the goals of the national curriculum and the goals that the school determines locally. This can be seen as a way to ensure the quality of the internationalization efforts and to work ‘in the right direction’ but also to make sure that projects do not collide with one another in time or in regard to financing.

However, based on school observations and informal conversations with teachers, no formalized structure evidently exists for discussions within the team and for improving the school’s internationalization work. Instead, informal discussions take place among those who are interested. In 2014, at the time of the conducted study, a plan was being prepared for international exchanges and cultural competence, during which there were also thoughts about formalizing follow-ups and weaving in discussions with colleagues. A clear vision exists of the principal having a dialogue with teachers and of dialogue taking place between teachers and the principal, with the discussions being carried out within the school to get an increased consensus about how and why the school should work with internationalization. This was confirmed in the group interviews with teachers, during which it became apparent several times that the school’s vision and direction for development was pronounced and well-known to everyone who works at the school.

Teachers expressed a desire to partly formalize the internationalization process as part of the general work towards improvement. The teacher responsible for internationalization was responsible for the formalized process and expressed: ‘I’m working to develop a long-term internationalization plan for the school formalizing our vision of internationalization, and develop our educational model for how we will work with internationalization.’ For example, information is spread to other staff members who did not participate in the trip primarily through personal accounts, in which teachers and/or pupils talk about their experiences. According to the teachers, a clearer and more formalized way of improving feedback is needed, to better integrate internationalization efforts into the school. The documentation done at the time of the study was chiefly in the form of reports written to the relevant funders as well as the internationalization plan that the school was continually developing. The internationalization plan is a document for following up on and evaluating previous and coming projects that, at the same time, provides an opportunity to reflect upon the experiences the different projects offer and the next steps in the development process.
Internationalization as staff development

A common understanding, as evident from the school observations, informal conversations with teachers, and interviews, seemed to exist between the teachers and the principal that there are many good opportunities for staff development within the framework of the internationalization efforts, both for the principal and for the school staff. The principal expressed it in the following way: ‘Sometimes, you forget that the work of internationalization is fantastic staff development for teachers as well as principals.’ A teacher said,

‘Contact with schools and teachers in other countries, doing comparisons to Sweden, makes me reflect on my own learning and my own teacher role. It creates perspective. All such international study trips make me, like the students, develop on a personal level.’

According to the principal, seeing pupils, teachers, and principals in other contexts provides a perspective for one’s own activities and profession. Knowledge is created for both teachers and pupils when they meet and find themselves in another culture. During that time, they ‘do as the Romans do,’ without having to think about the ‘right or wrong’ thing to do. Afterward, they reflect on the differences and similarities in other cultures and activities, thereby getting a deeper perspective and a greater understanding. The principal aspires to broaden the recruitment to international trips, so that everyone in the personnel group at the school will be given the chance to participate in that form of professional development. The principal sees good opportunities for professional development within the framework of internationalization efforts, both for him as the principal and for the school staff. This view was strengthened in the teacher interviews. One teacher expressed it in this way: ‘Staff development for teachers is a part that we should not forget in the work with internationalization. Through the internationalization work, you get your preconceived opinions continually challenged.’ Another teacher, who was responsible for the internationalization work, said: ‘I reflect on my own learning on all international study trips and in the same way as our students, I and my colleagues develop personally.’

Several teachers at the school described the professional development from the internationalization efforts as a catalyst in their daily work that changes and develops how they work. Based on our contextualized understanding of the case, supported by school visits, conversations with teachers, and interviews, we interpret that this creates another type of collaboration and understanding across subject boundaries that promotes both pedagogical issues and a consensus regarding pupils. The collaboration itself provides them with a kind of professional development. One teacher felt that the international trips provided experiences that, in turn, could generate credibility and an opportunity to give pupils a perspective through real-life examples of teaching history: ‘I also think it creates credibility for me as a teacher. For example, when I teach in history, I can refer to situations in the world and in countries that we actually visited.’

The teachers who were interviewed experienced the international trips as leading both to personal development and to exchanges with pupils concerning pedagogical issues not discussed to the same extent in school. They called attention to how different
trips lead to different experiences. During the trip to China, both the university and the school were in focus, and pedagogical issues were central. The context was favourable, in that the participating teachers reflected on what it means to be a teacher, how they themselves are as teachers, and what kinds of teachers they wanted to be. According to the teachers, the school’s work with internationalization is concerned with developing both the individual and the school.

The principal had a very positive attitude towards the opportunities for professional development for himself within the internationalization projects and talked about how he and the principal in China have had joint discussions about their respective activities (at their schools) and roles. This was confirmed in the observations from the study trip, with a clear example being how they identified problem areas that are similar in both Sweden and China. They also discussed difficult pupil issues, which the principal said had given him a new perspective. The principal also pointed out that new perspectives are provided by seeing how a Chinese school looks, how it is organized, what staff the principal has, and how much a teacher works there, which in turn can be reflected in the Swedish school and one’s own activities.

The teachers expressed a desire to involve more teachers and pupils both before and after the trip, for greater dissemination of experiences throughout the school. The teacher responsible for the internationalization work expressed it this way: ‘It is important that there are many teachers who get involved so that there is a lot of input from different directions.’ One explicit desire of the principal and the teachers was not only for the trips to be based on previous experiences but also for each new trip to be based on the individual teachers’ interests and ideas about what the trip is to give and develop for them and the participating pupils. During the study trip to China, the principal also shared visionary and forward-looking thoughts in different ways, such as an idea for a teacher exchange between Sweden and China. According to the teacher responsible for internationalization, nearly the whole staff saw internationalization work at the time of the study as positive and important content with which the school should continue working:

Many of the staff members thinks this is good, something we should continue to do, even those who are not actively traveling. There are many members of the staff who are interested in another pedagogy, a way to experience learning, learning through experience.

**Leadership in internationalization**

In the analysis of the overall empirical material, it is evident that leadership is an important factor in the school improvement work and is a way to create sustainability in the work with internationalization.

The principal had worked with and conducted the internationalization and school improvement work for more than 10 years and had significant experience with factors that are important in conducting internationalization work. The principal expressed it in this way:
It is partly a question of involving as many people as possible in the internationalization work to get vitality in it, and it is partly about funding, time, and commitment. Through all research, you also know that if the principal is not involved and engaged, nothing happens. It’s not enough with an individual enthusiast.

At the school, there exists clear awareness and knowledge of the role and importance of the principal in school improvement processes. This was indisputable from our school visits and formal and informal conversations with teachers and the principal at the school. The principal himself understood the importance of being involved as a formal leader at the same hierarchical level as the formal leaders with whom the school collaborates around the world as well as of being active in the decision-making process and being informed about the implications of a particular ‘project’ or a new venture. The principal therefore sees his role in internationalization efforts as central, in addition to his obligation to lead school improvement. He furthermore understood how it is not always possible to implement all of the ideas or visions that he has, as the organization is not always ready for them. One of the principal’s watchwords is to try to involve as many people as possible to bring vitality to the work. The principal also had the explicit ambition of distributing leadership to several staff members, to create a driving force and sustainability in the school’s internationalization work. The individual interviews with the principal and the teachers as well as the group interviews with teachers revealed several examples of how leadership is actually distributed in practice at the school.

As an example, the principal has deliberately employed a strategy to connect the internationalization work to several people on the team, based on the knowledge that internationalization efforts cannot be only in the hands of individual enthusiasts. It is important that all of the personnel – that is, all of the personnel categories – are included in the process. In addition to the importance of having the school leadership as a driving force in the efforts, it is also important that local politicians be involved in the process, and funding has to be available. There was a clear focus on the next step in the improvement process in internationalization efforts at the school and clear ideas about involving more and other personnel groups, based on the belief that exchange stimulates all personnel categories. The principal expressed the aspiration that all of the personnel would take part in internationalization efforts, including internationalization trips. The principal thought that even personnel who do not belong to the teaching category ought to travel, as that would contribute better to the integration of internationalization efforts at the school and create increased collective capacity and competence as well as distributed leadership. Another example of distributed leadership is the formal function one teacher holds to be responsible for the school’s internationalization work. The teacher at the school responsible for internationalization as part of her job can be seen as a part of the school’s distributed leadership.

**Concluding remarks**

The aims of this study were to examine how the work with internationalization at one Swedish upper secondary school can be understood in relation to building internal capacities for school improvement and to examine the importance of the principal’s
leadership in relation to work with internationalization. In this study, the theoretical perspectives have contributed to an understanding of internationalization as something more than just an external collaboration form and an individual intercultural project to fulfil a goal in the national curricula.

With special attention to the internal capacities for school improvement used to analyse the empirical data, our concluding remarks are as follows.

The main concluding remark about understanding internal capacities for school improvement in the case of internationalization is that the work with internationalization did build internal capacities at this school. The school’s work with internationalization not only served as an external collaboration form but also contributed to the internal process of strengthening leadership, staff development, and internal collaboration overall. The school’s work with internationalization as an external collaboration form appeared to contribute to and increase the collective ability to handle the internal school improvement process (see Björkman, 2008). The principal’s leadership and distribution of leadership in this process also seem to be vital.

Firstly, the results of the case study indicate that internationalization can be seen as an internal capacity for school improvement (Björkman, 2008; Harris, 2001; Stoll, 2009) at this upper secondary school. The school’s work with internationalization is an internalized part of the school’s goals that is an expressed profile run jointly by the school’s staff and principal. The work is not based on an individual enthusiast or the principal alone. There seems to be a collaborative culture and a tendency for increased collaboration between teachers at the school. These results confirm previous research (Björkman, 2008; Hargreaves, 1994; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011), and collaboration is an essential aspect of building capacity. The school’s work with internationalization also appears to be a force with which to discuss pedagogical issues across disciplinary boundaries at the school. The teachers expressed crossing disciplinary boundaries as a way of obtaining consensus and as a holistic approach to working with pupils that provides new educational opportunities.

The work with internationalization in the collected data was expressed as a resource for staff development for all staff members, traveling or not, as it gives a different perspective – an experience-based educational journey for pupils, teachers, and the principal (e.g. Perez-Karlsson, 2014). The results of the study indicate that the work with internationalization at the school is a resource for collective learning. The work challenges the perceptions of what could be a good or bad education or teacher, and it contributes to the discussions among teachers and students about global issues, both inside and outside the classroom. It challenges norms and values that are often only confirmed in their own context.

Although the results of the study indicate that the work with internationalization can be seen as an internal capacity at the school, it is not an everyday awareness (e.g. Brodow, 2003) in the school’s everyday life. Nevertheless, we distinguish the work with internationalization as an internal capacity for school improvement at this upper secondary school, although it is a systematic, ongoing effort aimed at educational change (Björkman, 2008; Harris, 2000; Stoll, 1999).

Secondly, this study confirms previous research (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2009; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012; Mulford, 2007) regarding the meaning of the
principal’s leadership for capacity building and school improvement at the studied school. Hence, the work with internationalization includes some areas of particular interest. In the school’s work with internationalization, the principal was indisputably crucial in his formal position as manager for initiating and sustaining collaboration with other schools in different countries over time. The principal was important in his formal position before, during, and after the school’s study trips abroad. Hence, the principal’s leadership was important in the external work of creating and building international collaboration as well as in the internal work at the school. We also understand the principal’s leadership as a distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), which seems vital for the school to succeed in its work with internationalization. The principal had extensive experience in managing improvement and internationalization work at the school, and he was aware of the importance of his involvement and of distributed leadership to succeed in the work with internationalization. The principal distributed leadership at the school, both in terms of distributing responsibility in different formal functions at the school but also in how he created participation for and shared influence with (Harris, 2014) the school staff. The principal involved all employees, traveling or not, in the internationalization process to create sustainability in the work (Hargreaves, 2007). This study confirms that the principal’s leadership is important in the school and for managing and pursuing internationalization, distributing leadership, creating conditions for staff, and creating a culture of collaboration.

Although the results reflect on one school’s work with internationalization as part of its school improvement process, the points of contact with other schools and with other education systems worldwide are essential. This study emphasizes the importance of working actively with internal and external collaboration processes to create sustainability and a collective ability to work with internationalization. As the intentional process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions in education and educating students to become democratic citizens, internationalization is not limited to the needs of one school, based on its being a sparsely populated monocultural school. Organizing meetings for pupils and teachers is important for creating and providing perspectives on other cultures as well as for constructing an understanding of one’s own culture and others, to increase students’ intercultural competence, regardless of whether the school is monocultural or intercultural (see Lahdenperä, 2000; Tupas, 2014), in Sweden or elsewhere in the world. Further research should also be directed towards pupils’ experience of internationalization, to form a clearer and more nuanced picture.

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