

## **The Internationalization of U.S. High Schools: Avenues for Future Research**

Tara P. Nicola  
*Harvard Graduate School of Education, USA*

---

### **ABSTRACT**

Although the internationalization of the U.S. education sector is perhaps the most salient at the postsecondary level, U.S. secondary schools have increasingly experienced the effects of globalization. In recent years, these schools have witnessed a surge in their population of international students. However, there is relatively little scholarship focused on this student population. This Research in Brief article first highlights recent research on nonimmigrant, international high school students in the United States. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as a framework, the article then identifies areas where future research is needed to more fully explicate the unique experiences of these students and their effects on the U.S. secondary education sector.

**Keywords:** ecological system theory, high schools, international students, student experience

---

Historically, the effects of internationalization in the U.S. education sector have been most salient at the postsecondary level. Over the past decade, the population of international students, defined as those who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents and who have entered the country on a nonimmigrant visa, has increased by 60% at U.S. colleges and universities, although the rate of growth has recently slowed (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). Yet, internationalization is not just limited to the postsecondary sector.

Albeit smaller, the population of foreign students on nonimmigrant visas enrolling in U.S. high schools has grown as more individuals consider pursuing educational opportunities outside of their home countries. Largely, families enroll

their children in U.S. high schools in order to increase their chances of acceptance to top American colleges (Farrugia, 2017). In many ways, these international high school students experience the same challenges as their college-age counterparts. Homesickness and social isolation, struggles with English language proficiency, and difficulty adapting to American culture and its idiosyncrasies are just a few of the potential issues these students face. The population of international secondary school students, however, is distinct, as these pupils arrive in the United States during a stage of formative development—early adolescence.

Despite the recent surge in the number of international students attending U.S. high schools, little scholarship has focused on this student population. In this article, I first discuss recent studies that have focused on international high school students and highlight potential reasons why a relative paucity of research on this student population exists. Then, using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as a framework, I identify areas where future research can more fully explicate the unique experiences of these students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **International Students in U.S. High Schools**

Although the United States hosts more foreign secondary school students than any other anglophone country, international students are an overlooked demographic within American high schools. Visa data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Student and Exchange Visitor Information System indicated there were 22,589 exchange students and 59,392 diploma-seeking students attending U.S. high schools during the fall of 2016 (Farrugia, 2017).

This segment of the student population has experienced unprecedented growth, particularly with regard to the number of students pursuing full diploma studies on F-1 visas. Whereas participation in short-term exchange programs on J-1 visas grew only 5% between 2004 and 2016, the enrollment of overseas pupils in diploma programs increased by almost 300% during the same time period (Farrugia 2014, 2017).

Until recently, little was known about the composition of this particular high school population. Farrugia (2014) undertook the first detailed quantitative analysis of international student enrollment trends at the secondary level. Drawing upon Student and Exchange Visitor Information System and National Center for Education Statistics data, she found that China, South Korea, Germany, Mexico, and Brazil were the top five countries of origin for international high school students, with Chinese and Korean students alone representing 42% of all foreign pupils on J-1 and F-1 visas. Whereas Asian students overwhelmingly enrolled in diploma programs as a means of improving their chance of admission to U.S. colleges, European and Latin American students were more likely to participate in short-term exchanges that emphasized English language instruction and the development of cross-cultural relationships (Farrugia, 2014).

As Farrugia (2017) highlighted in a follow-up report, international high school students are now found in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia,

although J-1 and F-1 enrollment patterns vary across the country. For example, the majority of F-1 students tend to study in California and Northeast states such as New York and Massachusetts; by contrast, exchange students typically attend schools in Michigan, Wisconsin, or Texas.

### **The Student Experience**

Despite the growing presence of international pupils in high schools across the country, only a handful of published studies have investigated this population. For instance, Fontana (2015) and Shea (2019) undertook qualitative studies examining the experiences of Chinese students enrolled at American high schools. The findings from the two studies are largely in concordance, finding that pupils encountered a number of challenges including homesickness and low self-esteem, difficulty navigating classroom and social interactions, and institutional barriers stemming from homestay agencies that inhibited their smooth transition to the United States.

Other work has examined the sociocultural adjustment of international students. For example, in her study of 12 Chinese international high school students, Chan (2019) underscored how they perceive building friendships with American students as an important acculturative experience but that acculturative stressors like communicating in English as well as discrimination from American peers can leave international students feeling isolated.

Recently, research has examined other facets of the international high school student experience. For example, Cheng and Yang (2019) explored how studying in U.S. high schools facilitated development of global consciousness and competencies among Chinese pupils, while Yin (2013) examined the spiritual, as well as social and academic, development of youth attending an evangelical Christian school.

It is important to note that all of these studies have focused on Asian students holding F-1 visas. There is a significant gap in the literature related to understanding the experiences and outcomes of cultural exchange students on J-1 visas as well as foreign pupils from other regions including Europe, Africa, and South America.

### **Drivers of the Research Gap**

Why is there such a paucity of research on international high school students, especially compared to the vast literature on their college-aged counterparts? The drastically different size of these populations is undoubtedly to blame, as the number of international secondary students pales in comparison to the 1.1 million international college students (Institute of International Education, 2019).

However, there are likely other drivers—including that these students enroll predominantly at small, private high schools. In fact, of the over 59,000 F-1 visa holders in 2016, 94% attended a private institution, the majority of which were small, rural, and religiously affiliated (Farrugia, 2017). This phenomenon stems from U.S. immigration policy, which limits international students' attendance at

public high schools to only 1 year (Farrugia, 2017). The reality is that improving outcomes of students at private institutions, especially at small religious schools, is not a pressing priority among key education stakeholders. Due to the many issues plaguing the public education sector, federal and state governments as well as major funding bodies have historically poured—and continue to direct—money into improving public schools (Gross, 2018; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014).

Furthermore, not only is the population of international students at public schools too small to gain widespread recognition, but also these students tend to enroll in cash-strapped and geographically isolated school districts that may lack the resources to adequately support their own domestic students (e.g., Casto et al., 2012). Consequently, it makes sense that directing resources and research dollars toward supporting American students would be the priority.

By contrast, research on international college students is prized in part because they are major consumers of both private and public higher education. Their tuition dollars make up for steep tuition discount rates, changes in the demographics of the domestic high school population, and cuts in state and federal funding (Hegarty, 2014). American higher education needs international students to support its bottom line, but the same cannot be said of the K-12 public education system. This reliance on international students, coupled with the fact that international students are a highly accessible population to study on college campuses, likely contributes to the research gap.

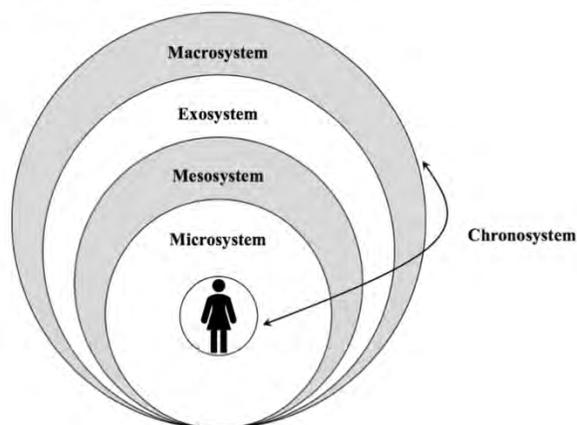
In sum, the limited scope of research on international high school students likely stems from the combined effects of these structural factors—not because the topic is unworthy of rigorous study.

### **Avenues for Future Research**

I offer Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as one organizing framework for researchers interested in studying this population. This theory suggests many areas for future research, capturing the numerous interrelated systems that influence international students' experiences and outcomes.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Ecological systems theory posits that only through fully understanding the contextual factors that shape an individual's thoughts, values, and decision-making behaviors can their experiences be fully understood. It situates individuals within five nested environmental systems (see Figure 1). The first is the microsystem, which encompasses actors that most immediately impact an individual's development. Next is the mesosystem, which represents interactions among the various actors within the microsystem. The third system, the exosystem, includes environments that are external to an individual but nevertheless influential. Finally, the macrosystem encapsulates the cultural and societal norms within which an individual lives, while the chronosystem refers to the influence of time on the nested subsystems and the actors within them.



**Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory**

With regard to the international high school student population, much of the research has been concentrated in the microsystem and mesosystem, with studies focused on foreign pupils and the actors—friends, family members, classmates, schools, and local communities—that shape their lived experiences. While these two subsystems are a critical lens for understanding the international high school student experience, they offer an incomplete picture. Studies that examine international students through the three other nested systems—the exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—are just as important and yet are largely missing from the literature. In the following sections, I briefly highlight examples of future research on international secondary students that could fall within these three subsystems.

### **Exosystem**

As an actor within a student's exosystem, the U.S. government indirectly affects international high school pupils through the policies it enacts as well as its communications. Given the nationalist rhetoric of the Trump administration, understanding how these policies and messages have impacted international students' conceptions of the United States and their likelihood of enrolling in American high schools is important. Because many small, religious schools are dependent on these students and the revenue they provide, major changes in how international families perceive the value of American education would have significant effects on the private education sector.

### **Macrosystem**

Most extant studies on foreign high school students document how they navigate American culture and customs. Less well known, however, is how

American social mores shape the racial and ethnic identity development of these students. Given cultural differences in how race and ethnicity are conceptualized, studying how American notions of race inform students' own beliefs and understandings would be a major contribution to the literature and could join in conversation with the countless papers examining this issue among international college students.

### **Chronosystem**

Research on international high school students has been cross-sectional, following students for a limited duration of time. Missing from the literature are robust longitudinal studies—both qualitative and quantitative—that track students throughout their journey in the American secondary education system and beyond. This time element is important because students' experiences and beliefs are likely to change as they become older as well as further habituated to American culture. Capturing these transformations would contribute immensely to our understanding of international student development.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

While the number of international secondary students in the United States has increased dramatically over the past decade, the number of studies investigating this unique student population has not. Although this student population often falls outside mainstream K–12 education research agendas, it is nevertheless important to study. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory as a lens, this Research in Brief article highlights potential areas for research that can paint a more vivid portrait of the international high school student experience. It argues that more research is needed that extends beyond just a student's microsystem and mesosystem and that centers on less prevalent international student populations. Such research is needed to strengthen best practices that promote international high school students' success and ensure education stakeholders have the resources they need to serve these students effectively.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) for their support of the initial study which inspired this article. While portions of this article were highlighted in a policy report overseen and funded by NACAC while I was an employee of the organization, the opinions expressed here are my own and do not represent the views of NACAC.

## REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.32.7.513>
- Casto, H., Steinhauer, A., & Pollock, P. (2012). Potential synergy: Rural school districts and international student programs. *The Rural Educator*, 34(1), 12.
- Chan, K. T. (2019). *Fostering friendships between Chinese international and American high school students* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee]. UWM Digital Commons. <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/2164>
- Cheng, B., & Yang, P. (2019). Chinese students studying in American high schools: International sojourning as a pathway to global citizenship. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 49(5), 553–573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2019.1571560>
- Farrugia, C. (2014). *Charting new pathways to higher education: International secondary students in the United States*. Institute of International Education. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Charting-New-Pathways-To-Higher-Education-International-Secondary-Students-In-The-United-States>
- Farrugia, C. (2017). *Globally mobile youth: Trends in international secondary students in the United States, 2013–2016*. Institute of International Education. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Publications/Globally-Mobile-Youth-2013-2016>
- Fontana, R. A. (2015). *Daughter's sighs: The social barriers female Chinese international students encounter when transitioning to private high school in the United States* (Publication No. 3701407) [Doctoral dissertation, California Lutheran University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Gross, R. N. (2018). *Public vs. private: The early history of school choice in America*. Oxford University Press.
- Hegarty, N. (2014). Where we are now—The presence and importance of international students to universities in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 4(3), 223–235.
- Institute of International Education. (2019). *Open doors: Report on international educational exchange*.
- Reckhow, S., & Snyder, J. W. (2014). The expanding role of philanthropy in education politics. *Educational Researcher*, 43(4), 186–195. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x14536607>
- Shea, P. (2019). *Home away from home: Chinese, female, international students attending a high school in the United States* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts-Amherst]. Scholarworks@UMassAmherst. [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations\\_2/1582](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/1582)
- Yin, L. (2013). Coming to America for spiritual or academic growth? Experiences of international students at one Christian school. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 22(2), 139–152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2013.808975>

**TARA P. NICOLA** is a PhD candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her research focuses on issues of access, choice, and equity in higher education, especially in relation to the college admission process. Email: tara\_nicola@g.harvard.edu

---