

**Working with School Age International Students:  
Considerations and Strategies for School Counselors**

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Abstract

The number of school age international students and their parents matriculating in U.S. schools continues to increase. These students and their families have a myriad of unique needs that are multidimensional and continue to evolve as they transition into U.S. culture. Strategically placed to help these students become familiar with school culture, school policies and procedures, and classroom expectations, school counselors must have a strategic plan to facilitate transitions for this population. This strategic plan includes cultural competence, self-awareness, and systemic advocacy skills to address potential bases that may interfere with these students' educational experiences.

*Keywords:* international students, school counselor, multicultural, counselor competencies

## **Working with School Age International Students:**

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*This is a totally different environment than I have been used to.*

*The change is different because it upsets the kind of life I had.*

*It was different back home. School was different, teachers were different.*

*I feel depressed because I miss my friends in my country.*

Immigrant Child from China, Age 11  
(Igoa, 1995)

In the age of globalization, individuals are travelling more frequently across the flattening borders of the world. One group of sojourners navigating these borders is international students. International students are temporary sojourners who travel overseas to engage in educational activities either on the primary, secondary, or tertiary level (Lin & Yi, 1997). Quite often students in primary (elementary) and secondary (middle and high) schools are the children of parents attending tertiary (collegiate) institutions. In fact, approximately one-third of international students, attending tertiary institutions, bring their spouses and children with them (Chittooran & Singaravelu, 2004). This means that as the number of international students in tertiary education and their families continue to increase, there will be more school-aged international students (SAIS) attending U.S. primary and secondary schools. As the number of these students increase, it would behoove school counselors, and other helping professionals to understand and address the needs of these individuals (Andrade, 2006). This understanding is especially important because for SAIS and their parents, like other sojourners, the adjustment to U.S. culture is often foreseeably stressful (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Moreover, counselors have a major role in responding to the transitional needs of international students as they navigate the many changes associated with living and learning across cultures (Arthur, 2004). For SAIS, this is especially crucial since schools often serve as the entry point into U.S. culture; schools also

serve a critical role in helping these students adjust to a new culture (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007).

This article will provide an overview of some of the adjustment issues, academically and socially, that SAIS and their parents can experience in entering the U.S. educational system. The article also presents a description of factors that could potentially affect academic performance and a discussion of ways to help the parents of SAIS to engage actively with educators to support the school success of their child. Finally, the article presents a checklist of possible issues and suggestions for possible interventions.

### **The SAIS and School Experiences**

#### **Adjustment to Academic Culture**

SAIS are plunged into the everyday life of school, peers, and teachers, and are expected to adjust to a new way of functioning (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). These students face being able to manage the differences in classroom procedures, teacher-student relationships, and interactions and pedagogy of U.S. schools (Lin & Yin, 1997). Beyond the usual stresses of learning the routine of how to survive in a U.S. school, such as using school lockers, and moving from class to class (Juntunen, Atkinson, & Tierney, 2003), SAIS may experience major cultural barriers that may prove challenging. For example, SAIS may struggle with the U.S. education system that values and rewards assertiveness and verbal fluency (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). These attitudes may directly conflict with the values inculcated by these students' culture of origin (Banks & Banks, 2003). Students from cultures where teachers are more authoritarian than democratic and communication is more linear than egalitarian may not feel comfortable with teachers who expect verbal participation in class discussion or classroom interactions. Teachers who promote a democratic or egalitarian classroom may consider SAIS passive and

disengaged, particularly if the students' culture of origin views linear communication with the teacher (i.e., authority figure) as challenging and inappropriate (Sue & Sue, 2003). Further, students coming from a collectivist culture, which emphasizes interdependent self and a group reference point, may experience some dissonance when entering the U.S., which values an individualistic cultural approach that emphasizes independence and self-reliance (Helms & Cook, 1999). Finally, SAIS may come from cultures that foster conformity to parental expectations during the educational decision-making process. For example, school counselors may ask students to make decisions about what foreign language to take or curricular emphases such as college or vocational/technical but some SAIS cultures value the perspectives and direction of elders when making decisions about educational paths. Generally, students from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East come from predominantly collectivist orientations (Institute of International Education, 2005).

### **Linguistics and Academics Performance**

Language plays a vital role in the academic success of students in school, whether or not the individual's primary language is English. This is no different for SAIS. Younger students seem to acquire English language skills more quickly than secondary school students (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Additionally, there is a strong positive correlation between older students with literacy and language skills learned in their primary language and their academic success in U.S. schools (Ovando & Collier, 1998). Moreover, Ovando & Collier (1998) also state that factors such as age and the extent of prior schooling experiences in their home countries affect the academic performance of SAIS. Students who are older, and who have had more academic experience, tend to do better academically than students who have had limited school experience.

Not only is the spoken language important, an awareness of the fact that there are language differences in the written language is important. This is true for even an English speaking SAIS. For example, a SAIS from a country that uses the British English (BE) may spell words as they appear in the British vocabulary. For instance, the student may spell “centre” (BE) instead of “center” or “behaviour” (BE) instead of “behavior.” Educators should not assume that these students are academically slow or having difficulties with spelling. Factors such as these may also affect the performance of SAIS on standardized tests such as the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) or the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) which could affect the student being able to smoothly progress through their academic paths.

Another linguistic factor that may affect the performance of SAIS is avoidance of public speaking. Given that teachers can consider English linguistic fluency as an indicator of intelligence, some of these students may avoid speaking in the classroom because of their accents. The SAIS may perceive that others misjudge them and their academic ability based on their different intonation and even their written language; SAIS may also fear others’ misperceptions of them as less fluent or eloquent by their peers and teachers (Roysircar, 2004). Again, educators err in presuming that these students have cognitive or academic deficits and assuming that these students lack interest in classroom activities because they remain silent in the classroom. To facilitate academic success for students with language differences, school counselors can assist SAIS by helping educators focus on students’ language assets rather than focus on perceived language deficits. Focusing on assets will help educators recognize that perceived language deficits do not automatically mean that the student has limited intellectual potential (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). These linguistic matters may also influence the social interaction of SAIS.

## Social Adjustment

### School Age International Students

Not only do SAIS have to adjust academically to a new school system, they also have to navigate socially U.S. culture. Younger children, primary school students, seem to make a smoother social adjustment (Larson & Ovando, 2001). They also seem to have less developmental crises because of age (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). It appears also that younger children still see their parents as authority figures in their lives and hence they have less conflict with their parents regarding social interaction and influence in the host culture. Adolescents, on the other hand, seem to have more difficulty adjusting socially (Coll & Magnuson, 1997). Normal developmental tasks of SAIS adolescents can intensify when they enter the U.S. during secondary school years (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Larson and Ovando (2001) stated that adolescent SAIS may have an even more difficult time if they were not included in the decision making of leaving their home country and familiar surroundings for a place they know little if anything about (Larson & Ovando, 2001).

Issues of identity development become prominent during adolescence (Erikson, 1968), and for the SAIS identity development is no different. However, SAIS have the added pressure of establishing identities in two different worlds that frequently have conflicting value systems (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). For instance, adolescent SAIS from cultures that foster conformity to parental expectations regarding social interaction, such as friendships, may struggle with wanting to fit in socially with peers and the competing expectations of their parents (Helms & Cook, 1999). Additionally, SAIS may want to be involved in extracurricular activities. However, the families of SAIS may consider involvement in extracurricular activities as a distraction from schoolwork (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes). Hence, these SAIS adolescents'

parents may also restrict them from social peer interactions because of the perception that the U.S. adolescents may “corrupt” them. Parents with this belief may view activities like going to a coeducational school dance as unacceptable and as a result, SAIS may not be allowed to attend even though the activity has the potential to foster developmentally appropriate social interactions. These restrictions could lead to conflict with their parents.

### **Parents of School Age International Students**

Parents of SAIS may find parenting their children in an unfamiliar cultural environment stressful, particularly if parenting without a social support system similar to the one available in their country. These parents often deal with the pressure of trying to navigate their own academic and social experiences (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). Factors such as these may affect how they parent their SAIS, including their involvement in their child’s education, interactions with the school, and the level of social involvement they allow their children to have with U.S. children.

Parents of SAIS, like other parents, play a major role in the academic success and social adjustment of their children. For parents of SAIS, active involvement in their child’s schooling can hinge on a number of factors that include their perceptions of U.S. school systems and knowledge of school procedures. Moreover, the parents’ understanding of the school’s day-to-day expectations of students and possible conflicts between parental and school expectations of parents can also affect SAIS’s school adjustment (Juntunen et al., 2003). Parents from cultures where parent-school collaboration is not the norm may not be as involved in their child’s progress. Schools serve their SAIS well by considering this norm in a cultural context rather than as a lack of caring or concern for their child’s success at school (Juntunen et al., 2003).

Not only do the parents of SAIS have to adjust to the expectations of an unfamiliar school system, they also have to adjust to the societal/social differences of the host culture. Included in this adjustment is getting used to the social expectations of parenting, which could prove challenging as parents of SAIS raise their children in an unfamiliar culture (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). For instance, the social pressure of conforming to discipline styles in the U.S. could prove to be a challenge. For example, parents coming from a culture where corporal punishment is acceptable may not understand why they could potentially get in trouble with the law for disciplining their child in that manner. In addition, parents may have to adjust to their children's immersion in the host culture, which can create cultural conflict between the home culture and the host culture (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). Parents of SAIS may have some difficulty with their children's increasing independence resulting from exposure to an individualistic culture at school (Bemak & Chung, 2003). Their perceptions of their child becoming more "Americanized" than they would like may push some parents to become hyper-vigilant and increase their control to limit their child's exposure to the U.S. culture. They may restrict their child from participating in age appropriate extracurricular activities like a school dance or sleepovers. This increase in control as well as the other parental challenges of raising their child in an unfamiliar culture may cause the child to respond with defiance (Segal, 1998). The dissonance and sometimes conflict within the family may affect the SAIS's performance in school and necessitate for the school counselor to assist in the adjustment process.

#### **Issues SAIS may face and Possible Interventions for School Counselors Working with SAIS**

<b>Academic Issues</b>		
Possible Issues	Possible Reasons	Possible Intervention
Student performs poorly academically and seems to need remedial classes.	Student's primary language is not English.	Counselor may work with teacher(s) to identify

	<p>Student (even if English speaking) is unfamiliar with the some of the vocabulary of the host culture.</p> <p>Student is having difficulty adjusting to the teaching style of the host culture.</p>	<p>possible deficit and to help student get the necessary resources to do well.</p> <p>Counselor may conduct small groups with students to help them develop the skills necessary to be successful in a U.S. classroom.</p> <p>Counselor may reach out to parents in community settings to teach about school culture and provide skills so that parents can assist their child at home.</p>
<p>Student appears to be slow, non-responsive, or withdrawn in the classroom.</p>	<p>Student has not adjusted to the American classroom style of teaching.</p> <p>Student may not be comfortable speaking because of her/his accent.</p> <p>Student may be familiar with an authoritarian method of learning in home culture and not used to democratic approach to teaching.</p> <p>Student may be new to interactive learning and more familiar with rote memory.</p> <p>Student may be experiencing symptoms of culture shock that affect their social integration into a peer group.</p>	<p>Counselor may teach large group counseling lessons on accepting cultural differences and persons who speak with accents.</p> <p>Counselor may work with students to understand the expectations about participating in the classroom in the U.S.</p> <p>Counselor may provide individual counseling with the student to discover ways that she/he may feel comfortable in the classroom.</p> <p>Counselor can confer and consult with the teacher to share information about the student's cultural expectations and ways to adapt the classroom format.</p>
<p>Student performs poorly on standardized testing.</p>	<p>Student may have difficulty with content of exam since there may be a cultural skew; unfamiliarity with colloquial language on the test; or</p>	<p>Counselor could provide resource information to parents regarding standardize test preparation.</p>

	<p>difficulty distinguishing subtle nuances of English language.</p> <p>Student may have difficulty with exam because of language difference</p>	<p>Counselor could provide student with study skills approaches to help student prepare for the exam.</p>
<p>Student may have difficulty getting into her/his college of choice.</p>	<p>Student performed poorly on standardized test.</p>	<p>Counselor may work with parents to get student additional assistance to prepare for the standardized test.</p> <p>Counselor may help student explore other schools that may not be as stringent about standardized scores.</p> <p>Counselor may work with student on non-cognitive components of the college application, such as the statement of purpose, to strengthen the student's application.</p>
<p>Student may face roadblocks in gaining acceptance to a U.S. college due to immigration paperwork or status.</p>	<p>Student's visa status does not allow her/him to transfer automatically from a secondary to tertiary institution.</p> <p>Student may not be eligible for financial aid or scholarships based on student's visa type.</p> <p>Student's parents may be returning to home country.</p>	<p>Counselor may work with student to gather information regarding the process of getting into college based on visa type.</p> <p>Counselor provides academic counseling to the student to gather information regarding going to college in her/his home country.</p> <p>Counselor may provide individual or small group counseling with student on the transition home after living in the U.S.</p>
<b>Socio-emotional Issues</b>		
<p>Student may display irritability, depression, and crying more than usual.</p>	<p>Student may be experiencing extreme homesickness.</p>	<p>Counselor may meet with student with the intent of building a trusting</p>

	<p>Student may be experiencing intense feelings of loyalty to own culture.</p>	<p>relationship that opens the door for the SAIS to share their feelings about missing their home culture.</p> <p>Counselor may create a counseling group for SAIS to give them the opportunity to share common feelings about being away from home.</p>
<p>Student may be withdrawn and have difficulty socializing with peers</p>	<p>Student may be afraid of negative peer responses due to differences in dress or way of speaking.</p> <p>Student's family may have asked him/her to be wary of socializing with U.S. peers.</p>	<p>Counselor may collaborate with teacher(s) to provide opportunities for cross-cultural dialogues in the classroom.</p> <p>Counselor may spearhead a cultural event that highlights different cultures that represent SAIS at the school. This could give SAIS the opportunity to share about their culture and have their U.S. peers be able to engage in dialogue with them.</p>
<p>Student has concerns about dating.</p>	<p>Student may experience dissonance between her/his home culture's rules of dating and U.S. dating customs.</p> <p>Student's parents may not approve of her/him dating someone outside own culture.</p> <p>Student's parents may perceive dating to be inappropriate for adolescents.</p>	<p>Counselor may meet with student to get a better understanding of cultural norms are for dating.</p> <p>Counselor may meet with parents to get a better understanding of their concerns about their child dating.</p> <p>Counselors need to ensure that they refrain from judging the parenting styles of the SAIS's parent. This could lead to undermining the authority of the parents.</p> <p>Counselors could host a</p>

		workshop for parents of SAIS to discuss social norms and activities to help parents get an understanding of the U.S. culture.
Student has difficulty dealing with engaging in extracurricular opportunities such as study abroad.	Student may not be able afford such opportunities. Student's visa status may prohibit activities such as study abroad.	Counselors may help students find cultural activities in the U.S. that may substitute for the opportunities like going on study abroad.  Counselor may help student locate resources that may help pay for such an activity if the student is able to travel abroad.
Student may not engage in developmentally appropriate activities such as school dances and sleepovers.	Student may be uncomfortable with not being able to dress like peers at a social event.  Student's parents may deem such activities inappropriate.  Student's parents may view engaging in such activities as too Americanized.	Counselor may meet with parents to discuss their concerns about such activities.  Counselor may work with student to find other activities that may substitute for not being able to be involved.  Counselor may suggest that parents chaperone one of these events to observe what the event is like.
Student would like to have an afterschool or summer job but cannot do so.	Student's visa type would prohibit student from working.	Counselor may help student find volunteer activities that may substitute for work.
Parents may not allow the student to participate in extracurricular activities such as band, sports, or other school clubs.	Student's parents view these activities as a distraction from academics.	Counselor could meet with parents to understand their concerns about the student participating in extracurricular activities.  Counselor may share with parents information regarding the benefits of extracurricular activities

		related to academic performance.
Student may have somatic complaints such as stomachaches, headaches, and sleeplessness.	<p>Student may be experiencing culture shock.</p> <p>Student may be nervous about being in a new culture and school.</p> <p>Student may be genuinely ill.</p>	<p>Counselor needs to be sensitive to these complaints and not automatically assume that it is a psychological issue.</p> <p>Counselor needs to develop a sense of trust with the student and respect the student's privacy. The student may be from a culture that considers discussion of physical ailments as inappropriate.</p>
Student may not make eye contact when speaking with adults.	Student's culture considers looking at an adult directly in the eyes disrespectful.	<p>Counselor may educate students about the perception of the student not making eye contact.</p> <p>Counselor may work with student on practicing making eye contact with others.</p> <p>Counselor may educate school personnel about the student's cultural norm regarding eye contact.</p>

### Strategies for Working with SAIS and Parents

Sandhu (1994) suggests that school counselors be proactive concerning working with students and their parents. They are in strategic positions to assist SAIS and their parents to transition into the U.S. school culture given that the school often serves as the entry point into the host culture. It would be helpful for counselors to develop a systematic transition plan to help SAIS and their parents become familiar with the new academic culture (Baird, 1997; Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). As part of this plan, counselors may want to monitor these students regularly, teach them basic survival skills, and help them clarify school processes, rules,

and procedure. Counselors could include in this plan a method for helping students understand appropriate classroom behavior, including expectations of class participation (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). School counselors are also poised to help educate parents of SAIS about U.S. culture and the U.S. school system so that they may better serve their children academically and socially. Therefore, as part of the transition plan, school counselors to can provide parents with information that explains the nature and purpose of parent-teacher relationships, the reasons for teacher conferences, and ways to actively engage in their children's learning (Sandhu, 1994). This dissemination of information could be done through parent workshops and training sessions. Such training sessions could help parents develop the necessary skills to be active participants in school-parent relationships as well as active participants in their child's academic involvement (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006).

School counselors are also in a position to serve as "cultural brokers" between SAIS and their parents, and the school (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007). As "brokers," school counselors would not only educate SAIS and their parents about school community, but also educate school personnel about the culture of SAIS (Juntunen et al., 2003). School counselors can also serve as advocates for SAIS and their parents. They would do so by educating the school's administration and teachers about some of the stressors, such as culture shock, language differences, and cultural conflict these international students face. Additionally, as advocates they could proactively foster a school climate that embraces diversity. For example, they can work with teachers to develop ways to include aspects of a SAIS's culture into class activities such as reading about a SAIS culture during story time (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007).

The needs of SAIS are multifaceted and meeting these needs requires a collaborative and proactive effort of school counselors to network with other helping professionals (Sandhu, 1994).

It is therefore crucial that school counselors demonstrate cultural competency to be effective at assisting SAIS to transition into the new environment. These competencies must be the foundation for working with SAIS and their parents (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007; Pederson, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2003). Additionally, school counselors also need to be aware of their own biases and assumptions, and their perceptions of human differences such as race, culture (national heritage), religion, gender, and sexual orientation; they must also be able to develop culturally sensitive interventions and therapeutic skills (Sue & Sue, 2003). They also need to be prepared to challenge and scrutinize personal assumptions and expectations about cultural differences and their beliefs about how these affect the counseling process (Chittooran & Sankar-Gomes, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

As the number of SAIS in the U.S. continues to increase, school counselors and other helping professionals will need to become acutely aware of the multidimensional needs of this population (Andrade, 2006). This is especially important because the needs of this population of students often remain ignored (National Education Statistics, 2002). School counselors are in a unique position to serve as “cultural brokers” between the SAIS and school personnel to ensure that these students achieve academic and social success. Counselors are also poised in positions to help parents of SAIS navigate the expectations of an unfamiliar school system to ensure that their SAIS are academically successful in a foreign land. Through reflective practice that demonstrates cultural concern and competence, professional school counselors can transform the school environment for SAIS and their parents into one that is positive and meaningful.

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