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Strangers in a New Land: Rural School Personnel's Perceptions of the Implementation of an International Student Program

Caryn A. Lasky*

Coe-Brown Northwood Academy, New Hampshire, USA

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Many high schools in the northeastern United States have suffered from declining enrollment due to a declining population of school-age children in the region. Administrators, counselors and teachers perceive many impacts of the implementation of an international student program at a rural high school. This qualitative case study reveals that the rural high school's unique nature impacts international student programs, international students influence both school culture and programming, and international students suffer from isolation. School leaders would benefit from considerations in the form of professional development both prior to implementation of an international student program and ongoing throughout its duration. It is important for schools to find ways to respectfully honor student cultures and optimize learning experiences. School leaders would be wise to determine desired size of international student programs and make efforts accordingly to achieve that size for optimal effectiveness for the benefit of both host and international students. Implications and recommendations for future research include further exploration of the perceived experiences of European and Chinese international students, understanding the unique nature of rural high schools and international student experiences, and examination of school practices.

1. Introduction

Many high schools in New England of the United States, including New Hampshire, have suffered from declining enrollment due to a declining population of school-age children in the region (Barrick, 2015;[2] Brooks, 2015;[10] Feely, 2015;[18] Francese, 2016).[19] Specifically, the State of New Hampshire shows a total of 203,359 students in public school in 2003, while 2012 reports a total of 181,900 (N.H. Dept. of Ed., 2014).[31] This is a significant decrease statewide that has caused school reductions in force, closures of small schools, and the consolidation of districts.

Due to the concern over enrollment issues, multiple rural schools have looked to supplement their tuition revenue by turning to a unique strategy: implementation of an international student program. However, a key problem facing school leaders is the lack of information available to schools concerning the perceptions of key personnel regarding the process of implementing an international program in the high school setting to ensure positive

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Caryn A. Lasky,
Assistant Headmaster, Coe-Brown Northwood Academy, New Hampshire, USA;
Email:laskyemail@yahoo.com

transition experiences for both local and international students (Jesness, 2004;[24] McCall-Perez, 2000;[29] Roessingh, 2006).[34] There is a scarcity of information about international minors transitioning to American high schools, while several rural New Hampshire high schools have implemented an international student program as part of a response to declining enrollment and reduced tuition revenue (Bishop Brady High School, 2017;[6] Bow High School, 2017;[8] Coe-Brown, 2017).[15] It is of critical import that high schools that undertake this endeavor do so with adequate knowledge for the appropriate implementation of an international student program for the benefit of both host and international students.

While many studies have examined transition experiences of college students, few studies exist that examine these programs at rural high schools. Little valid and reliable information concerning perceptions of key personnel of the implementation of an international student program is available to schools to use as guidance in implementing a new program. Significant research exists concerning adjustment and best practices for international students at the college level (Arenas, 2009;[1] Brisset, et al., 2010;[9] Cemalcilar, 2008;[13] Chen, 1999;[14] Dogan, 2012;[16] Duffy et al., 2003;[17] Kilinc & Granello, 2003),[26] but equal consideration should be given by researchers about the high-school aged international student. Lack of knowledge about the implementation process is notably concerning when initiating a new program that has the potential to impact both host and international students significantly. The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of the process of implementing an international program at a rural high school and to reveal practices based on a study of faculty, counselors, administration, and English as a Second Language (ESL) personnel working with new international students at a rural high school.

2. Background

The implementation of an international student program in a rural school poses a significant potential change to school culture, classroom expectations, and administrative support structure. Howley et al. (2014)[21] discuss that school leaders must build on community culture in order to address issues of social class, race, and culture for the benefit of all students. Li (2004)[27] determined there were many programming changes high schools should have implemented, but did not. Ishimura and Bartlett (2014)[23] affirm that schools need to implement specific strategies in order to better their international student programs; specifically, staff training highlighting cross-cultural training and cultural sensitivity training is recommended. Too often, little changes about school programming with the

implementation of the international student program.

Hwang et al. (2014)[22] examines the use of school counseling services by international students and determined there were four presenting concerns: relationships, anxiety, mood, and adjustment/learning issues. Zhang and Goodson (2011)[40] concur, by stressing that school counselors should focus on stress, social interactions with Americans, and perceived discrimination by international students. These factors, and school counselors' responses to those factors, have a key influence on psychosocial adjustment of international students (Zhang & Goodson, 2011).[40] Chen (1999)[14] encourages school counselors to seek out international students, rather than waiting for those students to appear at their office door. Chen (1999)[14] affirms that school counselors must concentrate on coaching and modeling effective behaviors for international students.

The role of host families also plays a significant part in social connections for international students. Spenader (2011)[37] affirms that a poor match between students and host communities can severely impede cultural adaptation and language learning. In addition, Hendrickson et al. (2011)[20] share that international students with national friendships reported that they are significantly more satisfied and feel more socially connected than their counterparts. It is recommended that international students be housed with local students rather than grouped together as it provides an immediate social relationship with local students, although it might be weak to start (Hendrickson et al., 2011).[20] This first social connection of a host family and student has the potential for significant impact on social connectedness.

A literature review of the state of rural schools, program design considerations, and transition experiences of international students reveals clear indications for school leaders such as administrators, teachers, counselors, and ESL tutors. School leaders must be mindful of the potential issues discussed above in their preparedness procedures. However, even with all these key contributions of information, the literature reveals many more questions that yet need to be answered. Specifically, what direction can be given to rural school leaders looking to implement this type of program for the benefit of the school community? While each of these studies reveal important aspects of rural schools, international student transitions, and international student program design, there is too little information yet to establish a wide-ranging set of best practices.

Current literature has verified the importance of the integration process for both groups of students: local and international. Supporting the concept of a complex,

multi-layered transition process, Casto, Steinhauer, and Pollack (2012)[12] note the social challenges that developed between local and international students. Both local students and international students would benefit from careful consideration of appropriate support systems and programmatic changes necessary for the effective implementation of an international student program. Li (2004)[27] emphasizes that a lack of specific programming preparation is felt keenly and directly by international students; therefore, school leaders are remiss if careful consideration is not given to these issues. With limited research on high school age international students, studies completed in this area, such as this one, will begin to fill in the large gap that exists.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Site & Data Collection

The research site chosen for this study was a high school in rural New Hampshire that had recently implemented an international student program starting with one student and expanded to five students. It is important to note that New Hampshire is a small state in New England that has a primarily white population (see Table 1) which had significant relevance to this study.

Table 1. State Comparisons of Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity

State	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	American Indian/ Alaska Native	Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Isl.
1. Vermont	94%	1%	1%	N/A	N/A	N/A
2. West Virginia	93%	3%	1%	N/A	N/A	<1%
3. Maine	92%	1%	2%	N/A	N/A	N/A
3. New Hampshire	92%	1%	3%	2%	N/A	N/A
5. Montana	89%	1%	3%	1%	N/A	N/A
6. Iowa	86%	3%	6%	2%	N/A	N/A
6. Wyoming	85%	1%	9%	N/A	N/A	N/A
8. North Dakota	84%	3%	4%	N/A	4%	N/A

In 2016, the Census Bureau's March Current Population Survey collected data which is adapted here from KFF.org (2016).[25] Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity[https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-raceethnicity.

As Table 1 shows, New Hampshire is tied with Maine for the state with the third densest white population. This was an important factor to note in this research study concerning international students. A total of six participants were selected through purposeful sampling who provided a range of perspectives of school personnel at the rural New Hampshire high school. In order to ensure a variety of perspectives, participants included two administrators, two school counselors, and two teachers (one ESL, one regular). Purposeful sampling ensured basic tenets of the case study design were met and that all participants had a shared phenomenon.

A variety of key personnel in a rural school are crucial to the implementation of an international student program. This includes administrators who are integral to the establishment of the program, admission standards, and student acceptance, counselors who are the first line of contact for student class placement, intermediaries between home and school, and troubleshooters for a variety of issues, and faculty, both ESL and regular who spend the most academic time with students. Their perceptions of an international program provide a great deal of valuable insight into the process of implementation. This qualitative case study, therefore, was to examine how faculty, school counselors, administration, and ESL personnel working with new international students at a rural high school perceive the process of implementing an international student program.

To guide the use of semi-structured interview questions in this case study, the researcher applied the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) theoretical framework presented by Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, and Senecal (1997)[7] which is one of several theories that has extended from Berry's (1980, 1984, 1997)[3][4][5] acculturation model. The IAM theoretical framework, along with two other theories, shifts the role of the host society to a prime, central focus rather than having only an outlying role in the acculturation process for international students. The IAM framework is based on Berry's (1980, 1984, 1997)[3][4][5] much used and applied acculturation model that remains a significant theory often utilized in studies with international students. The IAM serves to integrate several components of immigrant and host community relations into a common theoretical framework. The ultimate goal of IAM, stated by Bourhis et al. (1997)[7] is to "present a non-determinist, more dynamic account of immigrant and host community acculturation in multicultural settings" (p. 379).

3.2 Data Analysis

Analysis of the case study began by conducting document reviews of all publications and documents related to the research question. This included a review of all international student program documents, the program of study, the faculty manual, and the student handbook. In addition to the document review, multiple field observations, including a typical school day, a Friday Assembly, and an ESL tutoring session, were conducted which provided supplemental information supporting the document review and guided and shaped participant

interviews. Lastly, six interviews were conducted. Responses from participants in the interview process resulting in emerging trends. The interview questions explored three primary sections, but the semi-structured format allowed for guided discussions with spontaneous and flexible dialogue, resulting in valuable data (Merriam, 1998).[30] Focused coding, as Saldana (2016)[35] described, revealed the most frequent or significant categories supported by collected data, as shown in Table 2 below. Data triangulation was achieved by using all three sources of information and the resulting themes, reflecting the shared experiences of the case study participants, providing insight to the research question.

Table 2. Interview Coding

Parent Code	Code	Sample
Assimilation into Host Culture	Involvement in school community	"Especially with international students as opposed to exchange students because they become really a part of the school community."
	Blending in with host students	"You wouldn't even know necessarily that they're one of the international students because they fit right in and quietly become a part of our community."
	Social groups	"Other kids, they just fit right in and they are part of the group, part of gang."
	Treated the same	"We are so interested in treating them the same and we look at them the same and expect them just to be like everyone else, like an American student."
Non-Assimilation into Host Culture	Missing home	"He really wanted to be home and he really was not happy here."
	Language barriers	"I think the language made it really difficult for him to connect with the students."
	Course placement	"It was quite a while before we actually had him in semi appropriate classes."
	Self-isolation	"They were never isolated, but they isolated themselves."
	Physical appearance	"Sometimes I think it depends a bit on their physical look as well, Chinese versus other cultures. The way they look can dictate how they blend in, if the kids can tell or not."
International Students Changing Host School Culture	Cultural diversity for host students	"It provides an opportunity for our kids to learn about the world and open their eyes."
	Sharing aspects of culture	"He had a classroom full of our students that attended after school, and he brought in food and just talked about his cultural and gave some education."
	Classroom experiences	"The faculty tries to bring some of that culture and have them do some education to the class about where they're from, their culture, their family."
Rural NH Culture	Isolation	"The kids too are really shocked at what rural means. On the map, we're really close to Boston, but in reality…"
	Lack of evening activities	"They had a hard time with nothing to do, because they were also from larger cities."
	Lack of transportation	"They're used to hustle and bustle and riding trains and subways and public transportation and just kind of getting everywhere ..."
Importance of Homestay Culture	Communication & Advocacy	"I don't think that any of them are as strong an advocate as they could have been."
	Providing opportunities	"The first host family, there was not a lot of, there was good intention, but not a lot of things going on in the family."

The parent codes revealed from this study tightly aligned with the IAM framework (see Figure 1) as each code pertained directly to a key component of the framework. Data concerning the rural New Hampshire culture, the school community, and the homestay culture all served to further understand Bourhis' "host group" in terms of this research study. Parent codes discussing the assimilation experiences of international students were in direct correlation with the IAM framework.
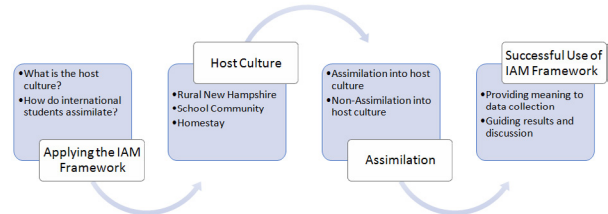

Figure 1. Parent Codes and IAM Framework

4. Results

Several major themes and patterns emerged from the analysis of the interview data which addressed the research question of how faculty, school counselors, administration, and ESL personnel working with new international students at a rural high school perceived the process of implementing an international student program. These five major themes were identified from analysis of the interview transcripts and supported by data triangulation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Data Triangulation

General Themes	Supported in Interviews	Supported in Field Observations	Supported in Document Review
International students are often treated just as domestic students, and are expected to culturally blend in seamlessly.	X	X	X
International students are often isolated from domestic students.	X	X	X
Sharing of culture by international students has a profound impact on the school community.	X	X	
The rural nature of NH culture has a significant effect on international students.	X	X	X
The homestay culture contributes to the assimilation and happiness of international students.	X		X

Theme 1: International students are often treated just as domestic students, and are expected to blend in seamlessly. This theme was prominent across all data sources, all types of school personnel, and carried repeatedly throughout the case study research process. From the very beginning of data collection with the document review, it was evident that there was little specific programming, coursework, or formal support established for international students. Field observations also supported this theme as international students were not a visibly separate entity and were absorbed into the school culture. The interview data supported this theme most strongly. As Administrator 1 noted, "they are just another student in the crowd. Which, maybe it is a positive thing, too, that, you know, everybody's alike in

some ways. They are just another face in the crowd."

Theme 2: International students are often culturally isolated from domestic students. A common thread between all interviews was the perceived isolation of international students. This carried through from home life to school life and often was noted that the isolation might have been self-imposed. Isolation was easily seen in social situations such as the lunchroom at school, as Teacher 2 pointed out:

> They were never isolated, but they isolated themselves. They would go to lunch and they would just sit on their phone and not interact. I would have to push them and say 'Go sit with your friends. Don't sit with me at lunch. Get out of your comfort zone.'

This was observed by other participants as well, with Teacher 1 sadly reflecting on the discomfort that seemed to be felt by some international students, sharing that "Yan didn't go to the lunch room for a really, really long time, and Chen didn't eat or do anything… He always sat with an adult, because he just didn't know. He was not comfortable." Interview data, specifically by those working closest with international students, revealed the perception that some international students experienced cultural isolation that made it difficult for them to assimilate into the school culture.

Theme 3: Sharing of culture by international students has a profound impact on the school community. School personnel felt strongly that the international student program had a significant impact on the school community and culture, affecting students and staff alike. This was supported in field observations, but was highly evident in hearing the many, varied stories of interview participants. While it was noted that international students might blend into the overall school culture, it was apparent that these students had a substantial impact in the classroom. Teacher 1 spoke enthusiastically of the experience, sharing that it was highly beneficial for all involved:

> We should have way more kids coming from other countries, because it was eye-opening for these kids and she did a presentation, and all of a sudden, she was like this… 'Oh, my gosh, Yan, you're amazing!' and the kids were giving her all this support and saw her as a kid just like them.

Teacher 1 was notably taken by the differences between cultures and stated that, "I guess I didn't know how different their educational system was and not even that, but how their culture, obviously their culture is different, but I didn't know how different." Teacher 2 felt keenly that the sharing of culture was very much needed in the school community. He said, "It's like there's so much

misunderstanding between ourselves and other countries, not just China, so it was good that they're able to get that kind of grasp of how things really are." The international students shared their culture in many impactful ways.

Theme 4: The rural nature of NH culture has a significant effect on international students. The rural nature of the school had a notable impact on the cultural assimilation of international students. Field observations generally supported this theme as the highly rural nature of the school, campus, and activities were immediately evident and visual. Participants noted the unique aspects of the rural town of the school and reflected that many international students were coming from very large urban areas. Several participants discussed the lack of racial diversity in rural New Hampshire and its possible effect on experiences of international students. Administrator 1, who oversees the student body, reflected that:

> This is a very rural, northern New Hampshire community. Pretty much white bred kind of community… I would still say we are 95% white. In the period of time that I have been here we have had faculty pretty much the same. I think we have had one African American and maybe one Hispanic [faculty]. In terms of diversity, we are never going to change our local community.

Teacher 1 discussed further how this lack of diversity might have affected the experiences of international students, saying "I think they thought it was going to be more diverse. I think they were surprised that they were surrounded by, really, very white people." Administrator 2 also questioned the impact of being non-white in rural New Hampshire:

> It highlights how white we are here in rural New Hampshire. Other schools are so diverse, but here we have a few black kids, one Hispanic family. It's a matter of being or looking different causes kids to not approach them.

There are many cultural aspects of rural New Hampshire that impact international students. The lack of transportation, largely white population, emphasis on outdoor living, and lack of social opportunities all were perceived to impact their experiences.

Theme 5: The homestay culture contributes to the assimilation and happiness of international students. Interview participants spoke in varying degrees about the homestay families and the impact they had on international students. Teacher 2 reflected on the powerful impact the homestay culture had on creating a true sense of family for international students:

> Really establishing communication with the student and include, not just making them feel special in the

house, but making them actually feel like they are one of the house, like family. Because that way, they'll actually feel like they belong there and they feel comfortable there.

He further expanded by saying:

I know it's a lot easier said than done, but establishing a kind of open communication and kind of family atmosphere is really, really important. I see homestay families just kind of crumble because these students will go home and they won't talk to anybody. They would go to their rooms, and that's when they start… to feel more isolated, they start to feel more depressed.

Other participants noted the importance of homestay families making efforts to share their culture with international students and to coordinate rewarding cultural experiences for them. Administrator 1 spoke of Chen's first homestay experience, saying, "I think in the first host family, there was not a lot of, there was good intention, but not a lot of things going on in the family." Participants acknowledged that the homestay experiences varied and seem to improve as the program continued, but shared their concern at providing better homestay experiences.

5. Discussion

Results of this case study research project provided significant insight to answer the research question. Validation and reinforcement of the findings can be found in triangulation of data (see Table 4) which presents the findings in the lens of each data collection method. The resulting triangulation of data provided an understanding of the unique phenomenon of international students attending a rural New Hampshire high school and produced three findings: a rural high school's unique nature impacts international student programs, international students influence school culture, and school personnel perceive that international students suffer from isolation. As Table 4 shows, each finding was supported in different ways by each method, with the semi-structured interviews providing the most significant contribution.

Table 4. Findings and Triangulation of Data

Findings	Semi-structured Interviews	Field Observations	Document Review
A rural high school's unique nature impacts international student programs.	A wide variety of attributes of being located in a rural area was perceived to have a significant impact on international students.	All observations embodied the rural nature of the high school including a typical school day.	The program of studies, faculty manual, and student handbook identify the rural nature of the high school.
International students influence school culture and programming.	All participants noted the significant impact the international student program had on many aspects of the school culture.	Observations of the Friday Assembly, the typical school day, and the ESL tutoring session demonstrated school culture.	The faculty manual, program of studies, and student handbook revealed aspects of the school culture.
School personnel perceive that international students suffer from isolation.	Participants noted that isolation was at times self-imposed and was a result of language barriers, physical appearance, and more.	Observations of a typical school day revealed international students in isolation.	The international student program documents and faculty manual address expectations for students.

The three major findings of this research study: a rural high school's unique nature impacts international student programs, international students influence school culture, and school personnel perceive that international students suffer from isolation were supported by all methods of data collection and encompassed all five major themes that emerged from the coding process.

Finding 1: A rural high school's unique nature impacts international student programs. This finding was a combination of the last two themes and was pervasive throughout much of the data collection process. In fact, this finding, since it acknowledges a very basic attribute of the research site, underlined all aspects of the research study. Much of the school culture was affected by the school size, close-knit community, and long-standing tradition as a local high school. However, this finding moves further beyond, acknowledging that the very nature of a rural high school had a clear impact on the international student program. All participants discussed some key attributes that made a substantial difference, notably the lack of diversity, lack of transportation, lack of cultural activities, and focus on nature and outdoor living. Each of these presented challenges to the program and it was perceived to have affected the adjustment experience and assimilation process for international students.

Homestay culture was an important part of the rural experience. Due to the lack of transportation, the homestay family is key to ensuring that international students are exposed to a variety of experiences that benefit assimilation. Placement into homes and families that will serve international students well is of utmost importance. However, ideal placement did not always occur at homestays at this research site. As Administrator 2 noted:

I think we had some families who that was not their expectations or not their ability [to expose student to places and events] or their interest, where others I think have done a lot with their kids and taking them around… and we have no control over that because we don't know who the host families will be and who would be a good host family or not. So, a lot of… issues… may have come up.

The homestay culture had a significant impact on the student experience. Spenader (2011)[37] affirms that a poor match between students and host communities can severely impede cultural adaptation and language learning. In addition, Hendrickson et al. (2011)[20] share

that international students with varying and many host national friendships report that they are significantly more satisfied and feel more socially connected than their counterparts.

In particular, the lack of diversity in rural New Hampshire was noted to cause non-European students to stand out much more than European international students. Several participants questioned the extent to which this created different experiences for those students. However, this lack of diversity was also perceived as being a prime reason for implementation of the international program, noting that that impetus was, as Administrator 2 stated, to "add to our diversity, add to our amenities and the services we offer, not only to those students, but to just our own population, and how enriching it is for the kids who live here anyway. It's kind of like a win-win on both sides." Alternately, it was also implemented, as stated by Administrator 1, to address the enrollment concerns that occur in rural areas:

> Well, we were looking at the diversity issue and we were looking at enrollment issues. Those were probably the two big drivers to the program. We haven't crashed in terms of population like it looked like we could for a while. But, that is still something that always could happen.

Putnam (2000)[32] offers strong support for the small, rural school and found great benefit of small schools in rural communities. Reynolds (1999),[33] in a research study in Iowa, found that rural school closings in that area were an appalling failure. There is a great deal of evidence in the literature for the continued existence of small rural schools, but enrollment is a constant concern. School leaders strive to ensure steady enrollment streams, as demonstrated by the participants in this study. It was perceived that the addition of international students was a significant anomaly in the largely white population of the school and in the community; benefits to domestic students seemed clear, but participants shared concern about the isolation experienced by international students.

It was clear that the rural nature of the school was perceived by school personnel to be an important factor. The international student program was important and effective in impacting the rural nature of the school and residing town. Counselor 1 noted the effectiveness:

> Especially being such a rural community, I think it is especially great for our students who don't get a lot of exposure, you know, to different cultures and to different countries, to be able to meet these students and connect with them and learn about their culture and community.

Participants felt that the rural community and student body was lacking diversity and greatly benefited from exposure to international students. Aspects of the rural nature of the school were acknowledged to present some difficulties to international students, enough so that school personnel were concerned about isolation experienced by international students. Therefore, the process of implementing an international student program in this rural high school was considered to have both positive and negative implications for the school.

Finding 2: International students influence school culture and programming.

Most exciting in analyzing the research data for this study was the intense enthusiasm participants held for the international student program. Participants felt strongly that they, as school personnel, domestic students, and the school culture overall was greatly enhanced by enrolling international students. Howley et al. (2014)[21] discuss that school leaders must build on community culture in order to address issues of social class, race, and culture for the benefit of all students. The third theme was embodied this finding and was expanded on in a multitude of ways throughout the research project. Participants gave examples of how students, teachers, and school culture were impacted.

Participants discussed the challenges they faced by working with newly enrolled international students, which was considered to be very important work. Spenader (2011)[37] finds that language learning and adaption to the new culture occurred best in the classroom. Some of them spent significant time working with them and struggled with issues involving academia and communication. Individual classroom teachers also struggled at times as Teacher 1 noted:

> I think it was good that I had Chen as the first student because it is such an immense challenge, learning how to actually just communicate to him. The first couple of weeks it was all just conversations to google translate and that's spotty at best. So, it was good, but initially I felt like I was out-turned pockets, like, 'What the heck am I supposed to do with these kids?'

Administrator 1 agreed, noting that, the education portion of their experience was a difficulty for some, saying, "academically, some of them are pretty much strangers in a strange land." Brunton and Jeffrey (2014)[11] stress the importance of teachers having greater cultural awareness as well as greater appreciation of the educational needs of international students in the classroom, in order to make it more inclusive.

However, all participants, including those who recognized the difficulties they had with international

students, noted the intense personal benefits achieved by having those students in the school population. They shared that their world view had changed, they were exposed to a greater number of cultures, and they felt a great deal of personal satisfaction. Teacher 1 stated:

> I felt very strongly about the program being a good program… I dove right in and I volunteered to do whatever I could to help these kids, because I didn't want to see them fumble and I didn't want to see it be unsuccessful, because I would have hated to see it disappear. Because I felt that it was an incredible opportunity for a school.

The expansion of world view was thought to have been experienced by students who were in close proximity to the international students, such as those in classes or on teams with international students. Participants felt that domestic students benefited from exposure to cultures they would have no opportunity to know otherwise. Straffon (2003)[38] found that the longer the time a student is in contact with students from other cultures, the more sensitive those students were to those other cultures. It was frequently noted that the school community was homogeneous in its white population and suffered from a lack of diversity. Establishment of the program was thought to have been a response to lack of diversity and students were thought to have been enriched by international peers.

Participants were especially thrilled with the Chinese Club that was started by some international students. Hendrickson et al. (2011)[20] found a significant, positive relationship between the feelings of international students of being socially connected with the feelings of satisfaction and contentment. The enthusiasm expressed by the participants was due to the fact that many domestic students attended the club meetings and showed excitement for cultural exploration, respect for differences in culture, and a shared cultural experience with international students at the center. As Teacher 2 noted, the cultural exchange was beneficial to both students as he said, "I think it is funny how one of the benefits for our students was the same as for them!" The implementation of the international student program was perceived to have many benefits for the school community as a whole and was a positive programming change. Hendrickson et al. (2011)[20] share that international students with varying and many host national friendships reported that they are significantly more satisfied and feel more socially connected than their counterparts. This was clearly evidenced in this research study.

While other findings of the study noted some of the difficult aspects of implementing an international student program in a rural school, this finding reveals some of the most exciting aspects and benefits to the participants in the study. Participants were largely enthusiastic about the incorporation of these students in their school and highly positive about the benefits to school culture and programming. In fact, many stressed the desire to increase and intensify the program, even after noting some of the other difficulties (addressed in Findings 1 and 3). Said Counselor 1:

> If it could be bigger and broader as we get more student in, I think it would be great. Anytime you can expose students and the overall community with these students coming in from a different place with different things they can share with us, yeah, I think that is great; that would be great to have an impact of even more.

An important answer to the research question is that participants perceived that the international students provided a world view that the host group would never have experienced without those students. Many participants not only saw the benefit for host students, but also perceived an intense benefit themselves.

Finding 3: School personnel perceive that international students suffer from isolation.

The third finding of this research study combines the first two themes that resulted from the coding process. Participants in the study often commented on the perceived isolation experienced by international students, which was seen to be a result of both self-isolation and a bi-product of the school's expectation that international students blend seamlessly into the school culture. This was an important finding as it reflected the participants' perceptions of the acculturation experiences of international students, but also addressed aspects of programming that were perceived to contribute to this experience. Participants noted international students often sitting by themselves; however, it was observed that much of this time, those students spent thoroughly absorbed in their phones rather than reaching out to connect with others. Administrator 1 noted:

> He was a challenging student, not in a negative way, but because he just wasn't really here. He was putting in his time kind of thing. Maybe, I don't know if this program was his idea or his family's idea or why he was here. But, any free minute, he was on his device communicating with home, or his girlfriend at home, and eventually that led to him leaving us before the program was finished.

This was a comment that was supported by all other participants as well. Counselor 1 noted, "the Chinese students were apart because they were so, couldn't speak the language, they culturally were from these big cities

in China and I think they just had a really hard time connecting with our students because of the differences." These observations about adjustment of international students are supported by a great deal of literature. Chen (1999)[14] affirms the common stressor experienced by international students of social isolation. It is also noted that there is a tendency for the international students to group themselves together, as seen in this research study, creating an additional level of isolation, even while integrated with American students (Casto et al., 2012).[12] Sherry et al. (2010)[36] concur with that assertion, stressing that the lack of friendships with American students was common and impactful to international students, leading to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction. This finding supports prior research in this field.

Participants also observed that there may have been aspects of school programming that contributed to international students' sense of isolation. Many comments were made about expectations of international students to adapt to the school culture and to blend in. Administrator 1 said, "they are just another face in the crowd." The overall consensus was that international students were expected to simply adapt to what was already in place at the school. It was also noted that there was a lack of school-wide effort to particularly highlight international students at the school. Teacher 1 proposed a change in programming:

> But if they come in saying, we have an international club and you guys are the core of it. How do we want to get everybody else to be a part of this? We make food. We make dinners, like that kind of thing. Invite it, make it fun, educational, slides, whatever. This is where I'm from. They are the stars. They shine. They know, more than anybody else. That's what I would like to see, if we continue to do something like this.

At that same time, however, she also doubted whether they would truly want that, asking, "Would they like to be pointed out as different? I don't know that would be something to ask them. You know, to see, would that be best for you?" The literature supports evidence of tendencies of international students to be culture-free and to blend in and the need for school programming to be specific. Using the lens of racial formation theory (Winant, 1994),[39] which addresses the shifting meanings and power relationships accompanying the concept of race, Marinari found that international students tend to adopt a neutral racial project, an environment that works to present as culture free, avoiding issues and discussions of diversity (Marinari, 2005).[28] These international students downplay the traits of their birth culture and work to adopt all attributes of their new culture, as was seen in

this research study. Ishimura and Bartlett (2014)[23] affirm that schools need to implement specific strategies in order to better their international student programs. Li's (2004)[27] study finds that the lack of programming changes negatively affects the international students' performance and transition processes. This third finding is well-supported by previous work of researchers in this field of study.

It was perceived by participants that there were many contributing factors to the resulting isolation. Participants noted that some isolation might be self-imposed, by international students failing to reach out to become a part of the community, or might be a result of a significant language barrier. However, participants also noted that there were aspects of school programming and culture that may have also increased this perception. Participants shared concerns about this isolation and reflected on ways the school could change for the better.

6. Implications

The description of research findings provided great insight to the research question. The research study served to demonstrate the value of applying the IAM theoretical framework as a lens to view the perceptions of the implementation of an international student program in a rural high school. Several exciting considerations for improvements in this field resulted from this research study as participants gave perceptions of their shared experience. These included considerations in the form of professional development, support for international student transitions, honoring student cultures, and striving for effective size of the international student program.

Professional development/preparing faculty & staff. An important implication for practice as schools undertake the implementation of an international student program is the need for carefully planned and ongoing professional development tailored to specific needs. Experiences at this research site reflected the lack of guidance received in implementation as Administrator 1 noted, "we've only been doing this for a couple of years and there's no handbook for this kind of thing for a school our size. You kind of have to stumble around in the dark and hope you find the right combinations that work." This shows, from administration, that there was little guidance for rural schools and a lack of information about what to be expected or how to prepare the school for the start of the program. Specifically, classroom teachers were noted to have a lack of understanding of expectations for grading, differentiation, and amount of support to give international students. As Teacher 1 noted:

> I think that those teachers, maybe, needed somebody to do some training with them as well... What are

the expectations of the administration, as far as, are we expecting them to do what all the other students are doing, or are we going to treat them more as an identified student, who maybe needs accommodation initially?... People like to know what's expected.

Teachers would benefit from clearly established expectations for having international students enrolled in their classes. Specifically, limitations of language could have significant impact on the curriculum expectations of a course for a student. Careful procedures and/or policies in place prior to student acceptance would be helpful. Administrator 1 in this study reflected this by conceding that, "Probably we could have done more, but, at the time, we didn't know enough to know what we needed." The study revealed the many benefits of having international students in the mainstream classroom, but administrative guidance on expectations for those students would be helpful to teachers.

Transition support. An important guidance for schools that came from this study is the need for established support for international students as they transition into a rural American high school. The transition experience is important for the positive integration into the school community and this research study found that lacking in their experiences. Teacher 1 shared:

> I think it would have been really helpful for them to have some sort of adjustment, orientation period, that was just for them so they could understand the basics of waiting in line, how you behave in a class… And so I think that would have been really helpful; I think any kids coming in should have some kind of orientation program on what America's like.

This was perceived to have been something that should have started even prior to the students' arrival. In addition, this study affirmed the importance of the school counselor in the process of transitioning. As the primary contact between school and home, counselors have an important, central role in an international student's experience. Administrator 2 felt that:

> We need to do a better job at the very beginning, of really looking at. You know we get their records, the counselors fit them into classes they want… Then I think, maybe, we drop the ball a little bit there. Probably as counselors we probably should be a little more proactive with these kids…. I think sometimes we assume kids are just fitting right in and doing well and [we're] not really getting to know them.

Schools looking to implement an international students program would benefit from thinking critically about personnel in their schools, determining who could best meet the inevitable needs of international students, and

communicating expectations clearly.

Carefully choosing homestay families. The research study clearly emphasized the importance of the homestay family placement. Not only do international students need safe and healthy housing, but they also need to become part of the family dynamic. As participants noted, international students in their school sometimes failed to make connections with their host families, saying that they were sometimes isolated, lonely, or "trapped" as some homestay families did not make efforts to travel with them and expose them to events and activities. Teacher 1 agreed that the importance of the homestay warranted greater scrutiny, saying that:

> I think the placement in the families has got to be more careful. Not that the people were mean, there was nothing like that that happened, but I think that there should be students living in the home and it should be a home that understands that their job is to try to make them a part of the school community.

School leaders whose job it is to place students in homes and who are charged with the task of monitoring their wellbeing would be wise to carefully consider homestay placement as a significant priority. Vetting homestay families should be a key task prior to accepting international students and a clear procedure should be established for check-ins with international students, regular and frequent home visits with the families, and ongoing support for a successful relationship.

Honoring student cultures. It was evident that it is important for a school to proactively acknowledge what kind of learning community is desired and to determine what role an international program will play. As the document review of this study showed, it was important to the school to develop students who are a part of a "global society" and to promote learning outcomes that "reflect and meet the needs of students in a multi-cultural society." However, it was perceived that it was expected that international students blend into the school culture, rather than highlight their individual cultures. As schools consider how to do this, it is important to determine the extent that international students even want to stand out and the appropriate balance between sharing cultures and putting students on display. Administrator 2 asserted that, "they need to maintain their own identity and so I think that it's important that they have opportunity to be able to relate to other kids." Teacher 1 agreed with the importance of international students retaining their own culture and felt it worthwhile to honor and share that culture:

> I honestly don't think they should ever give up their culture, that's what they're here for. They're here to share it and become part of us, but to somehow find a

way to do both, to try the different things that we have, and make some decisions.

Participants noted that some international students were happy to represent their culture, with Teacher 1 stating, "Chen and Sun, I think, were proud to be different... I think they knew coming here that they were going to be different." Efforts made to honor and acknowledge cultures would assist in creating a learning community that truly encompasses all students in the school and would also provide the means for students to provide support for each other.

Striving for effective program size. Without exception, all participants commented on the desire to grow the international student program at the research site. It was perceived that greater numbers of international students would be beneficial in many ways including increased support amongst international students for each other, greater exposure to more culture for domestic students, and better continuity of the international student program. Teacher 1 said:

> I think to have more than ... So what do we have six right now? If we had ... so, let's say we had at least a dozen kids. Then they have a stronger support system with each other, even though they're not from the same countries.

Having only a few international students seemed to be perceived as a difficulty. It was thought that greater numbers of international students could assist in creating a stronger community that would provide support and a sense of belonging. It is recommended that school leaders determine the desired balance for their school population in order to maximize experiences for both international and host students.

7. Future Research

This study uncovered opportunities for research that would advance understanding on the phenomenon of international student programs in rural schools. The study revealed that there are many aspects of rural schools that create a unique experience for international students and host groups. The lack of information available supports the need for further research to be completed to create a robust body of knowledge to be used by school leaders. The use of the IAM framework was effective in guiding this study and warrants additional application to research studies in the future.

In addition, there were many fascinating aspects of rural international student programs that came to light through this study that deserve further exploration at this research site and others. It was noted many times that participants perceived the experiences of European international students to be different than Chinese

international students. Further studies examining the experiences of each geographic group separately in rural areas would be interesting and beneficial. Another important aspect in need of more study is the interaction between international student and high school curriculum. A fascinating topic for research would be curriculum prejudices confronting international students in their American high school experience. This information would serve to guide culturally responsive teaching in the classroom, which is of great importance to school leaders focusing on global citizenship and responsibility.

The importance of the homestay family cannot be overstated. The life outside of the school day is highly significant to international students and there is much to be learned about effective homestay families. Further, the efforts made to connect to international students and strategies recommended in order to help them become an active member of the homestay family is vital information that would be useful to many. Finally, this research study combined the perceptions of a variety of professionals: administrators, counselors, and teachers. Much was found to be common in their experiences of the phenomenon. However, it would be worthwhile to complete this study again, focusing on one particular professional role in the school. The research questions could be tailored specifically to that role, providing additional depths of information. For example, a study with participants of administrators could focus on goals of the program and policies, while a study including teachers could focus on classroom accommodations, differentiation of instruction, curriculum biases, etc. Additional research of this nature would undoubtedly be beneficial.

8. Conclusion

This study explored how administrators, counselors and teachers perceived the implementation of an international study program. Three major findings resulted from five emerging themes. First, a rural high school's unique nature impacts international student programs. The study revealed that the lack of diversity, lack of transportation, lack of cultural activities, and focus on nature and outdoor living all presented challenges to adjustment and assimilation of international students. Second, international students influence both school culture and programming. The research study found that school personnel, domestic students, and the school culture overall was greatly enhanced by enrolled international students. Third, school personnel perceived that international students suffer from isolation. Participants often perceived isolation experienced by international students, which was seen to be a result of both self-isolation and a bi-product of the school's expectation that

international students blend seamlessly into the school culture. This reflected the participants' perceptions of the acculturation experiences of international students, but also addressed aspects of programming that were perceived to contribute to this experience.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations were made. School leaders would benefit from considerations in the form of professional development and preparing faculty and staff both prior to implementation of an international student program and ongoing throughout its duration. The transition experience of international students required greater support than was available at this research site; established procedures and expectations for personnel would be beneficial to international students. Placement of students into homestay families deserves thoughtful deliberation and consistent monitoring as it is important to the health and success of international students. One of the perceived benefits of an international student program is the sharing of their home cultures. It is important for schools to find ways to respectfully honor student cultures and optimize learning experiences. Lastly, school leaders would be wise to determine desired size of international student programs and make efforts accordingly to achieve that size for optimal effectiveness for the benefit of both host and international students.

Rural schools are unique in many ways and the implementation of an international student program in rural schools warrants careful consideration and planning. As the world grows more connected with easier means of communication, exploration, and access to knowledge, it becomes even more important to find ways to connect with those from many cultures. Unfortunately, the greater access of the modern world has not brought us greater understanding of each other, and opportunities such as international student programs provide an important means for schools to begin to address the gap in acceptance and tolerance of others that our world sadly lacks. Efforts to continue to improve effectiveness of these programs and to increase culturally responsive learning in schools are well worthwhile with unforeseen benefits to us all.

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