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# INTRODUCTION TO STUDENTS WITH INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION

## **STUDENTS WITH INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION (SIFE): DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND**

Students with interrupted formal education, also known by the acronym SIFE, are a relatively small proportion of recently arrived English learners, probably somewhere between 10% and 20% (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). However, these students often represent the neediest of our English learners because of their limited first-language literacy, frequent gaps in academic knowledge and skills, and sometimes, critical social and emotional needs.

As discussed in the preface, it is the belief of the authors that educators and other professionals who have the responsibility and the privilege of getting to know these students, and who will be helping them to reach their full potential, need to have an understanding of where these students have been and why they may have certain gaps in their academic knowledge. This knowledge will build empathy for the students. It can also help classroom teachers discover the most effective methodologies and materials that will bridge the gap between what SIFE already know and can do, and what they will be expected to be able to do in their new academic setting. Since most English learners (ELs) spend the majority of their school day in mainstream classrooms, we hope that all teachers will see the value in knowing more about the background of their students

and how their previous educational experiences (or lack thereof!) impact their ability to perform on a daily basis.

So, who are these students, and where are they coming from?

These students come from all over the world—from countries experiencing war, conflict, or environmental catastrophes. They come from refugee camps and isolated rural communities and many have been in transit for a number of years. In all these circumstances, their formal education has been limited, interrupted or even non-existent. (*English Literacy Development*, 2014, p. 1)

The highest percentage of SIFE in the United States are coming from Latin America, mainly Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Refugee children make up the second highest number, with students from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Other smaller groups are composed of immigrant children from countries where schools were poorly equipped, teachers inadequately trained, or where school was not accessible due to geography, economics, or religion.

Students who have these characteristics [of being SIFE] could be refugees, migrant students, or any student who experienced limited or interrupted access to school for a variety of reason, such as poverty, isolated geographic locales, limited transportation options, societal expectations for school attendance, a need to enter the workforce and contribute to the family income, natural disasters, war, or civil strife. (*Focus on SLIFE*, 2015, p. 1)

Chapter 2 will explain in detail the issues that are pushing students out of several Latin American countries and pulling them to the United States. Some are coming for economic reasons and others to join family members already living here. Some had strong educational experiences before beginning the trek north; others had experienced sporadic schooling in poorly equipped facilities. Most have gaps in their schooling because of the rigors of the journey and the length of the trip.

Chapter 3 will look at refugees and the challenges they face entering schools in the United States and Canada. As schools ramp up the expectations for students with higher academic standards, mandated assessments, and tougher college entrance exams; refugee students are often coming with the most rudimentary of skills. After years of war, **trauma**, and life in a camp, adjusting to rigorous secondary coursework requiring high levels of academic English can be overwhelming. Suggestions for assisting these students will be given in the second half of this book.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SIFE

What specifically defines these students and sets them apart from a “typical” English learner? David and Yvonne Freeman (2002, p. 33) created this list to describe a student with limited formal schooling. They stated that these students

- are overage for their grade-level placement due to their weak academic skills and limited or inadequate formal schooling,
- have needs that traditional ESL [English as a second language] and bilingual programs, and regular ESL programs, can’t or don’t meet,
- have low or sometimes even no literacy skills in their first language and/or in English, and have little academic content-area knowledge,
- are socially and psychologically isolated from mainstream students,
- need approaches and materials that will help them catch up to and compete with mainstream students, and
- are at risk of failing or dropping out in traditional academic programs.

The final bullet point, the higher dropout rate of SIFE students, is especially disturbing. Richard Fry, of the Pew Research Center, estimates that about 70% of the recent immigrants with interrupted schooling drop out of high school (Fry, 2005)! Why are we seeing this huge number? One strong possibility is that the support these students are currently receiving is not adequate to meet their needs.

While recent arrivals who had schooling difficulties before migration clearly have elevated dropout rates, are there enough of them to make much of a difference? In the aggregate, the answer is clearly yes. For most countries of origin, there are enough of these youths and their dropout rates are high enough that they constitute a significant portion of the dropouts from that country. More than half of the dropouts from Guatemala are recent arrivals who had schooling difficulties before migrating. And 10 percent of the dropouts from the Caribbean (other than Puerto Rico) are recent arrivals with interrupted schooling abroad. The importance of recent arrivals with relatively low schooling upon arrival is pertinent to understanding the schooling difficulties of youths from countries of origin besides just Mexico and Central America. (Fry, 2005, p. 12)

In addition to the dropout rate associated with students with interrupted education, there is the strong possibility that many of these young people never bother to enroll in school at all. While this book will look at

what educators can do to provide assistance and support for the students who enter our classrooms, a larger societal issue is the number of students who choose work over school.

The dropout rate for teens with school problems before migration is in excess of 70 percent, in comparison with 8 percent for other foreign-born youths. And their characteristics, especially for males, suggest that many of them are labor migrants. Their purpose in migrating was probably to seek employment in the labor market, and they may have never enrolled in U.S. schools. Recently arrived males who did not make adequate school progress before migration are twice as likely to be working as other foreign-born males, and nearly 40 percent of them are in the agriculture and construction industries, in comparison with 10 percent of other foreign-born youths. In contrast to the living arrangements of other foreign-born youths, the majority of recent arrivals with prior school problems do not reside with any parent in the household. Given their participation in the labor market and the degree to which they were behind in school, the prospects of enrolling these youths in traditional high school settings appear to be remote. (Fry, 2005, p. 1)

What can be done to find and assist these adolescents is an issue beyond the parameters of this book, but it is a situation that needs to be addressed.

Chapters 4 and 5 will offer specific suggestions and recommendations for providing support systems for SIFE that will help them overcome the missing years of education and adjust to life in their new environment.

Unfortunately, the programming designed for ELs with academic skills and first language literacy, as well as for the students who have been in Western schools for most if not all of their education, is not sufficient for most students with interrupted schooling. The gap between what students are expected to be able to do and the skill set that students have at their disposal is often too great, and students frequently give up.

Immigrant students with some academic skills are often able to make up the years they have lost to poverty or political strife in 2 or 3 years of concentrated coursework in content areas that is adapted to meet their language needs. In contrast, immigrant students lacking rudimentary literacy skills in their native language

are especially challenged in secondary school and may need many years of intensive work in order to graduate or make the transition to an appropriate program. (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998, p. 13)

Students with interrupted education need specialized programming and assistance, above and beyond what is normally provided to English language learners. This belief is supported in a recent **WIDA** statement about SIFE: “Students with this background [SIFE] often need their emotional, psychological, and physiological needs to be met before they are able to engage fully in the educational setting” (*Focus on SLIFE*, 2015, p. 2). The second half of this book will go into greater detail on how to help students build literacy in their home language and English, fill in the gap in content knowledge, and support the emotional and social needs of the student.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (*Immigrant Students and Secondary School Reform*, 2004, p. 11) created this list of supports they recommend for secondary newcomers (including those with interrupted education):

1. Build environments that respond to the immediate social, cultural, and linguistic needs of immigrant adolescents with limited schooling.
2. Create structures that transcend high school academic departmental divisions to support simultaneous linguistic and academic development.
3. Form newcomer centers to ease transitions for newly immigrated students.
4. Implement flexible scheduling to reflect real needs and obligations of high school immigrants.
5. Align high school programs with higher education and adult education.
6. Use the full resources of the community to support immigrant students.

## IDENTIFICATION OF SIFE

One of the challenges of working with students with interrupted education is simply identification. Many school districts don’t keep track of how much education students have received in their home country and

their level of first-language literacy. Even when schools do ask, the answers are not always as helpful as it is assumed they would be. First of all, parents may state that their children have 6 or 8 years of schooling, but attendance may have been sporadic; they may have attended one-room schoolhouses with poorly trained teachers; or school may have only been for a few hours a day. Sometimes, the parents do not want to admit that their child was not in school regularly out of fear that they may not be permitted to enroll. They may not want to admit that the child was not able to attend because of the inability to pay for required books or uniforms, or that the child stayed home regularly to provide needed income for the family. In some countries, children with learning issues are not able to be provided for in a regular school setting, and the child simply stays home. To guarantee that their child will be admitted to the new school, certain facts are not disclosed, or the parents may not realize how schooling is different in their new setting.

Gaps in school attendance are often due to sensitive matters; parents/guardians may be embarrassed, distressed, or feel threatened if they sense in any way they are being censured or blamed for the lack of complete [and accurate] school records or their children's incomplete prior educational experiences. (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009, p. 10)

However, it is important that schools collect as much data as possible about each student and share that information with the classroom teacher. Providing the best instructional program for each child requires knowledge of previous literacy and content instruction. A sample data collection form is provided in Table 1.1 that can be adapted to the needs of the school/district.

## **PLACEMENT AND ENROLLMENT**

The sample form in Table 1.1 contains suggested information to be collected upon enrollment to determine the type and level of previous education for each student. Obviously, the interviewer needs to speak the language of the family or have access to a translator that the family trusts. As much as possible, it is important to explain the reason for the questions; that the answers will be used to help provide the most appropriate schooling for the child; and that the answers will not determine if the child is permitted to enroll.

Table 1.1

Placement and Enrollment Information Form
What is your child's home country? _____
At what age did he or she leave the home country? _____
What is your child's home language? _____
Was this the language of instruction in his or her school? _____
If not, what was the language used in school in the home country? _____
Is your child literate in his or her first language? Yes / No
At what age did your child begin attending school? _____
How many years of education were completed in the home country? _____
What was the last year of schooling for your child? _____
Has your child studied English before arrival? Yes / No
For how many years? _____
Does your child have complete records from the home country? Yes / No
Has your child attended school in another school in the United States? Yes / No
Where and for how long? _____
Did you bring the records? Yes / No
Before coming to the United States, was your child separated from other family members? Yes / No
For how long? _____
Has your child ever lived in a refugee camp? Yes / No
<i>Notes for placement:</i>
Number of years behind peers in schooling (if applicable): _____
Records/transcripts from home country: Yes / No

**Note for Schools:** It is highly recommended that students be placed with children of the same age, even if the student has received little or no previous education. Placing a child back with younger children can have serious social and emotional consequences.

## ELEMENTARY STUDENTS WITH INTERRUPTED EDUCATIONS

Although most programs for SIFE are developed for secondary students, elementary age students may have difficulty adjusting and meeting classroom demands as well. The challenges increase with the grade level, as the gap between what the student is capable of doing and the requirements of the classroom grows. This is true for all students with an interrupted education, but especially true for refugee children.

Having spent much of their childhood years in refugee camps, or even having been born into a refugee camp, elementary age newcomers may arrive with extremely limited or no formal schooling. Their daily experiences may not have included reading or writing activities in any language due to limited resources, including native language reading and writing materials. Without any formal education, elementary students would have little or no sound–symbol correspondence understanding before arriving in U.S. schools. They may never have held a pencil or scissors, used crayons, colored pencils or markers, handled **manipulatives** (e.g., dice, counters, etc.), or written on paper. They lack understanding of school repertoires, including sitting for extended periods of time at a desk or table, working cooperatively with classmates, eating in a lunchroom, using an American-style lavatory, and participating in conventional classroom, physical education, art, and music activities.

There are many school challenges for these newcomers. They will need to learn how to wait in line, take turns, stay in one place at a desk for long periods of time, and use school instruments (e.g., pencils, notebooks, textbooks, manipulatives, and technology). They will also be introduced to new foods and hygiene routines. Teachers will need to be patient, as processing new and unique information, understanding of patterns of behavior, and understanding school expectations will be learned very slowly. The overwhelming amount of input, classroom, and school noise (e.g., school bells, fire drills, hallway movement, cafeteria, and playground) may be difficult for new students to endure at first and impact their ability to learn.

Teachers should consider introducing elementary newcomers to classroom routines slowly with lots of repetition. Introduce vocabulary and new concepts both in print and visually through pictures, **realia**, and **TPR** (Total Physical Response). Pair the **newcomer** with another student (“classroom buddy”). Modify lessons to meet the student at his current learning level. Focus on key concepts for any new learning, and introduce new information by building a base of background knowledge that the newcomer has not experienced. When introducing sounds, letters, phonics, and word-building skills, remember that the newcomer has possibly not heard nor

spoken English before entering the elementary classroom. In addition, even elementary teachers who have been trained to teach the basics of reading to a typical English learner may not think about the specific challenges of students with limited background knowledge due to interrupted schooling.

## **SPECIFIC CHALLENGES OF SECONDARY NEWCOMERS WITH LIMITED FORMAL SCHOOLING**

While students of any age may enter U.S. schools with limited or even no previous education, the most critical challenges accompany students at the secondary level. By middle school, the type and amount of coursework carries with it the expectation that the student have a strong level of background knowledge of the subject (whether science, social studies, math, etc.) and a sufficient grasp of English to understand both the teacher and the text. Even in cases where there are courses available in the native language of the student, these courses will probably follow grade level expectations and are not designed to be remedial. And in many cases, bilingual classes are not an option, either because of funding, politics, or low numbers. Regardless of the cause of the problem, the result is the same. Interrupted education causes a serious disruption in the learning of the child. Students and teachers feel frustrated and overwhelmed, attempting to bridge what may at times seem like an unbridgeable gap.

In the final chapter of this book, we will offer some suggestions for programming and support for students with interrupted schooling, but first we look at why this is a particularly critical issue for adolescents.

A large-scale study published by Jorge Ruiz-de-Velasco and Michael Fix in 2000 studied the challenges faced by immigrant teens that arrive in the United States with significant gaps in their schooling. They looked at available research on this topic; then visited several schools where these students were enrolled. They found that

many schools are admitting growing numbers of newcomer teen students who arrive in the United States with significant gaps in their formal schooling, having often been out of school for three or more years before entering this country. This trend is particularly evident in schools, like those we studied, that receive refugee students or proportionally large numbers of students from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Publicly supported schooling in many of those countries ends at the equivalent of 6th grade; in some countries adolescent students are only required to attend school part-time.

Schools rarely collect data on the immigrant student's prior schooling, so it is not known how many underschooled newcomer teens there are in American schools. Nevertheless, data on LEP (limited English proficiency) students (which include first-generation newcomers as well as second-generation students) suggests that the number of underschooled LEP immigrants in secondary schools has grown significantly in the past two decades. One published estimate, for example, indicates that 20 percent of all LEP students at the high school level and 12 percent of LEP students at the middle school level have missed two or more years of schooling since age six. (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000, p. 46)

## **SPECIAL ACADEMIC PROGRAMMING MAY BE NEEDED FOR SIFE**

Traditional programming for second language students, even specific courses for new arrivals, may not meet the unique needs of this population. Most bilingual and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes are meant to provide support and assist students to reach a level of language proficiency that they are able to be self-sufficient in academic classes. The focus is on developing the four domains of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while also filling in the gaps. For example, a ninth-grade ESL class might have students reading about events in American history to prepare them for their social studies classes while at the same time building their reading skills. This would be adequate for students who need to further develop their reading skills, or for new arrivals who never took American history classes; but for students who have limited home language literacy or who have little or no English skills, this activity would be meaningless. They must first develop basic literacy, in their home language if possible, and definitely in English. For some students with no educational experience, they may actually need to start with the basic concepts of print. Most ESL or bilingual heritage language classes are not prepared for students who are so far below grade level.

Other issues facing secondary newcomers with limited formal schooling involve the increasingly rigorous state standards that are in place across the country and the assessment-driven atmosphere of most school districts. Hopefully, with the newly authorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2015 (known as Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA) there will be some relief for SIFE, but much of the pressure to make years of progress in months will remain. And even where the

external pressure is minimal, the students feel the pressure internally to catch up to peers and experience academic success. Especially for high school students, the need to earn credits, pass required graduation tests in many states, and prepare for post-secondary options often seem like insurmountable barriers.

Even in schools with specialized programming for SIFE, finding and training teachers to work with these students may pose a challenge. Secondary teachers are seldom trained to teach primary reading and math skills, while elementary level-trained teachers are not prepared to assist secondary students make the transition from basic skills to courses like algebra, physical science, or even high school language arts classes. Moving a student from learning the alphabet to reading an adapted version of *Romeo and Juliet* in one year takes a unique set of skills.

DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang talk about these issues in their book, *Meeting the Needs of Students with Limited or Interrupted Schooling* (2009). They state that

[t]eachers—even ESL teachers—frequently lack adequate training because this population has specific literacy development and content-area knowledge needs that are markedly different from other ELLs [English language learners]. There is also a lack of textbooks and materials specifically designed for these students at the secondary level. Furthermore, most schools do not offer a clear support structure with teachers, guidance counselors, parent coordinators, social workers, and the families all involved. Finally, there is a lack of in-depth proven research on what works with **SLIFE** [students with limited or interrupted formal education]. (p. 4)

Even with all the barriers and challenges listed above, it is critical that teachers, schools, and school districts realize that with the proper support these students can succeed. As we will see in Chapter 4, students are resilient. Many of these students have overcome obstacles we cannot even imagine. They have faced challenges and moved on. They have a dream and will not give up, despite the difficulties. In a study on students with limited educational backgrounds, a team of researchers looked at what schools can do to help students with significant educational gaps, and they found strong, determined people with a drive to succeed. And they also saw that “even though most immigrant students with limited schooling have a lot of catching up to do, they can achieve at break-neck speed if the work begins at a level they can understand.” (Mace-Matluck et al., 1998, p. 24) We, as educators, just need to provide the vehicle to put them on the track to success.

Another issue for older adolescents is the fact that they may literally run out of time to complete the requirements for high school graduation before the state-determined time to attend public school. This is especially true for students who come at age 16 or older without a transcript showing some completed high school courses. For most of these students, especially those with limited formal schooling, they not only have to learn English as quickly as possible, but they also do not have the content knowledge to move directly into rigorous academic courses like algebra or advanced science. Some schools offer remedial math or science class, and basic English proficiency courses, but the time they spend in these classes that may not count for high school graduation eats up valuable months or years. The students may “age out” of high school attendance and be forced into adult programs that also were not designed for their unique needs. All of these challenges contribute to the staggeringly high dropout rate mentioned earlier of up to 70% for recent immigrants with interrupted education (Fry, 2005).

In addition to the academic challenges faced by students with an interrupted education, many of these students are also dealing with emotional and social issues as well. Most refugee children and many Latinos, especially those who come as **unaccompanied minors**, have experienced serious traumatic events that are still having an impact on their ability to cope with the many changes in their lives. Many schools are not prepared to deal with these emotional and psychological needs even when the students share their situations; and many times, children are uncomfortable or even afraid to let others know about their personal lives. Chapter 4 will offer some suggestions for helping students build an inner **resilience** that can help them deal with and live through the upheaval in their lives; but some situations are so severe that counselors and other professionals may need to step in to provide additional support. In these cases, a support team can decide on the best type of assistance and where and how it can be provided.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the numbers of students entering our schools with limited or even no previous educational background is growing. In too many cases, the programming and services in place for English language learners is not adequate to meet their unique set of needs. The purpose of this book is to help raise the awareness of educators to the existence of this specific population, to explore the causes of interrupted education, to build empathy for their situation, and to offer practical support systems that can help these students not just survive, but succeed.

**For Further Study**

1. Does your school collect data on previous educational experiences for incoming students? If not, what could be added to the enrollment process to help identify students in need of additional services upon entrance?
2. Does your school or school district provide assistance to elementary students who have interrupted schooling? How is this program different for newly arrived elementary students from the traditional pull-out or push-in (co-teaching) or bilingual self-contained classes?
3. Does your school offer programming for newly arrived secondary students with interrupted education? How is this program different from the traditional ESL or bilingual courses?
4. Consider forming a study group in your school. Invite a representative sample of the members of your faculty, administration, child services team (school social worker, psychologist, etc.), paraprofessionals, and so on, to join the study group. Before beginning your work together as a study group, gather information/data about the English language population in your school, whether currently being served in an **English Language Development (ELD)** or bilingual program. As a study group,
  - A. Set a regularly scheduled day and time to meet.
  - B. Create a reading schedule calendar.
  - C. Determine which “For Further Study” question(s) at the end of each chapter would be most beneficial for the teachers, administration, and paraprofessionals in your setting.
  - D. Encourage study group members to work in partnerships to explore and report to the group. What will be the impact of this question on future programming, instruction, social, and interactional activities in our school?