

How to Support ELL Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs)

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"I didn't know how to read in my own language. I didn't know how to write. I only know how to speak and how to go to work."

— Johnny Romah, Student

In 2008, readers of **The Vancouver Sun** had the opportunity to meet Johnny Romah, a student who had survived a treacherous journey and experience in a refugee camp before coming to Canada. Darah Hansen, the reporter who covered the story, wrote,

Johnny Romah was 17 on his very first day of school. A member of the Montagnard — or mountain — people of Vietnam, Romah arrived in Vancouver in 2005 after an exhausting year spent in a refugee camp in Cambodia.

He'd fled his impoverished village at the age of 16, fearing arrest — even death — at the hands of Vietnamese government forces, which have long been in brutal conflict with the country's indigenous people ... Before coming to Vancouver, he'd never spent a single day in a classroom, never read a book, and only once, in the refugee camp, could he recall ever attempting to put pen to paper.

(2008)

Johnny is one of 200 **refugee students** in the Vancouver school district, and is what many educators consider a Student with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). Even if Johnny had known how to read in his native language, the process of learning English and succeeding in a new country would have been daunting. The fact that he never learned to read, however, is what makes his efforts to read and write in English so challenging, and so heroic.

As Canada's refugee and immigrant population continues to grow, the nation's schools are facing many of the same issues that U.S. schools are facing when it comes to educating students with little or no educational background. The challenge isn't simply a question of teaching students with interrupted schooling how to read or speak English, however; these are students who may also experience a high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder, struggle with "cultural adjustment" or identity issues (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, 2004, p.8), and need intensive literacy and content instruction as well as an introduction to the basics of the American school/classroom culture (p.5).

While educating students with interrupted education may seem overwhelming at first glance, they can indeed obtain a high school diploma with the right kind of support, and go on to future academic and professional success. This article provides a profile of SIFEs and their needs, recommendations of best practices, and examples of the kinds of quality support that will accelerate their academic achievement.

Who are Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs)?

Senior Research Scientist and Professor Margarita Calderón of John Hopkins University suggests that SIFEs usually have experienced one of the following patterns in their schooling:

- They are newcomers with two or more years of education interrupted in their native country
- They have attended school in the U. S., returned to their native country for a period of time, then returned to the U.S again
- They have attended kindergarten in English (L2), 1st and 2nd grade in their first language (L1), then jumped into L2 in 3rd
- They have attended U.S. schools since kindergarten but have language and literacy gaps due to ineffective instruction
- They have attended school in one location for a few months, then moved to another location for a few months, and perhaps had some weeks in between these changes when they does not attend school. (Calderón, 2008.)

Although Calderón categorizes SIFEs as 4th-12th grade, one could make the case that students who have not had an opportunity to attend preschool or early years of primary school due to transience or the situation in their home country are indeed also students with limited or interrupted education. In short, the student with interrupted education, through no choice of his own, is starting school one or more years behind his grade-level peers.

Which countries do Students with Interrupted Formal Education come from?

SIFEs may come from countries where poverty, disaster, and civil unrest affect the development of literacy and opportunities for education. They may also come from countries where persecution or strict rules about gender, social class, or ethnicity prevented them from attending school. According to UNICEF and UNESCO, as of 2006, **93 million children of primary school age** were not attending school (UNICEF Global Databases, 2007; and UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Global Education Digest, 2007). This number has decreased from 115 million children in 2002, but the unfortunate reality is that many children around the world still aren't receiving an education. Gender inequities are also more prevalent than we might suspect: **girls in one third of the world's nations** still don't have equal access to education (UNICEF global databases, 2007), which is particularly concerning in nations where girls can only attend classes taught by women.

These statistics remind us that when students who have grown up with little or no education experience enroll in U.S. schools, they have much more to learn than just the English language; in order to be fully functional at school, they must learn how to read, how to complete assignments and follow instructions, how to use school supplies, how to follow a school schedule, how to take the bus, how to interact with students from different cultures, and how to participate in school activities — all while adjusting to a new country and new social norms, and possibly taking on family responsibilities such as working, caring for younger siblings, or doing a significant share of housework.

SIFEs may also have been born or raised in a developed nation but in impoverished circumstances that affect their family's stability. For example, many migrant workers in the U.S. move frequently based on agricultural seasons, and as a result their children move from one to school to another, making it nearly impossible for children to stay caught up with their peers.

What makes the SIFE's needs unique?

While needs of the SIFE population may overlap with those of English language learners (ELLs) in general, SIFEs are likely to need additional support and instruction in basic skills for a number of reasons (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, 2008, p.1):

1. Stress: A student's formal education may have been interrupted by migration, war, lack of access to education, and/or socioeconomic or cultural circumstances (p.1). As a result, the student may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, may be under severe distress, or may be completely overwhelmed by the need to assimilate to a new school environment in a new language.

2. Literacy and academic gaps: Students may not be able to read or write in their native language, and may also lack an understanding of the basic concepts, content knowledge, and critical thinking skills that their peers will have mastered (p.1). This situation presents a challenge to educators because,

On the one hand, these learners require instruction in the basic concepts and skills necessary for academic success, including how to study and take notes, and how to participate in class discussions. On the other hand, their academic success rests on meeting increasingly sophisticated standards and English-language assessments. So, even when students are not fluent in English or are not formally educated, rather than focusing exclusively on basic and/or remedial skills, it is important to offer lessons designed to develop critical knowledge, using content that reflects students' lives, interests and culture. (DiCerbo and Loop, 2003)

3. Frustration: A SIFE may be very excited to finally attend school regularly, and may have high hopes for his ability to work and support his family; however, the discovery that he is in fact far behind his peers can be a source of great frustration. Even as he makes great academic progress throughout the year, he is still chasing a moving target because English-speaking, grade-level peers are continuing to learn as well, and the realization that meeting his goals will be harder than expected may be devastating.

4. High risk of dropping out: SIFEs are considered to have a high risk for dropping out of high school given the precarious nature of their relationship with school as indicated by this statistic: "At-risk Hispanic students aged 16-19 who judged themselves as not speaking English well were four times more likely to drop out of high school than were their peers who spoke English well." (Fry, 2003 as cited in Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, 2004, p.8)

While these reasons present numerous challenges to school educators and administrators, students with limited or interrupted schooling can succeed if their school makes a commitment to help them achieve that goal. The following lists of suggestions offer some ideas that educators can implement to support SIFEs throughout the school and in the classroom.

Ten Ideas for Providing School-Wide Support to Students with Interrupted Formal Education

Schools can support SIFEs in a number of ways. The ability to implement these measures will vary greatly by school and district, as well as by the involvement and investment by administrators, teachers, counselors, and staff. While not all of these suggestions will work for your school or student population, consider reviewing them with your colleagues to see which suggestions may be viable options in your school.

1. Build supportive environments that respond to the immediate social, cultural, and linguistic needs of immigrant adolescents with limited schooling (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, 2004, p.11). An educational environment that is supportive of SIFEs will have staff members who are well-educated on the needs and backgrounds of their students, and highly attuned to the emotional strain these students may experience as they adjust to a new country, language, and customs. Students may be facing complex identity issues, culture shock, and a sense of loss of having left their home behind, particularly if they didn't want to move to a new country (p. 12).

A supportive environment is often created by one or more of the following:

1. bilingual/bicultural staff from the students' home country
2. a teaching staff highly trained in cross-cultural communication, the cultural and historical **backgrounds of the students**, and instructional methods that are designed to accelerate the academic achievement of SIFEs.
3. student and parent access to support services (ideally in the family's native language) provided by counselors, tutors, mentors, and parent coordinators. (Walsh, 1991, as cited in Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p. 10)
4. a buddy system with peers or classmates who can show students around and help them adjust to the daily schedule (p.4)

2. Implement newcomer centers and/or programs to ease transitions for newly immigrated students (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, p.11). Newcomer centers and programs are very effective when a district needs to meet the needs of many SIFEs. A newcomer center may provide numerous services included in the newcomer program, such as academic support, language instruction, an introduction to basic school activities and skills, and community

resources for immigrant families (p.13). Enrollment in a newcomer program, which is often transitional, allows the student time to adjust to the U.S. educational system in a supportive environment with instructors who understand their needs and have been specially trained to assist in accelerating SIFEs' academic achievement while monitoring cultural and emotional adjustments.

Even as SIFEs learn the basics such as the alphabet or how to hold a pencil, they can also begin developing academic content concepts and language through bilingual or sheltered instruction content courses. When SIFEs leave an effective program at a newcomer center after 1-2 years and transition to a mainstream educational environment, they will be much better prepared to participate successfully.

3. Create collaboration models across high school academic departments to support simultaneous linguistic and academic development (p. 11). A collaborative instructional model reinforces student learning and accelerates SIFEs' academic progress. For elementary-level teachers this may come more easily since classroom teachers are responsible for more than one subject, and they often work collaboratively in grade-level teams. For secondary-level teachers this may be more challenging and may require a review of the instructional system, curriculum and content, school resources, and teacher planning schedules (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p.1).

In the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition's **Interrupted Formal Schooling** Toolkit, DiCerbo and Loop write,

Schools that are prepared to meet the needs of students with interrupted formal education do not require classroom teachers or individual resource teachers to take on these responsibilities alone. Instead, administrators, counselors, classroom teachers and resource teachers need to work together to ensure that the students and their families have the necessary information needed to provide school supplies, documentation for meal programs, and other requisites for assimilation. Working together to create a climate of acceptance and accountability ensures that the student's academic success is secured on many levels. (2003)

Regardless of how the collaboration is done or at what grade level, the important thing for teachers to keep in mind is how to continually reinforce new concepts and language in academic instruction and integrate concepts across content areas and language/literacy classes. For example, if students are learning about aquatic life in science, the math teacher can teach mathematical examples that reinforce the scientific concepts while applying math skills, and the language arts teacher can review the language structures and vocabulary used in the math problems and science lessons being taught. Teachers who collaborate have the opportunity to be intentional about the academic language and skills they want students to learn and practice, and they will begin to make connections across content areas to reinforce learning.

4. Implement flexible scheduling to reflect real needs and obligations of high school immigrants (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, 2004, p.11). A flexible schedule allows students with interrupted schooling the opportunity to balance home and school responsibilities, a chance to spend extra time in school to accelerate learning, and the opportunity to keep working while attending school. Many SIFEs come to the U.S. with the goal of working and financially supporting their families (p.13). Without an education or fluency in English, students may not have a lot of choice as to what kind of job they find or the hours they work. It is common for SIFEs to have to work very late hours or two jobs, and this becomes a barrier to education due to fatigue and conflict with the school schedule.

If there comes a point in which the students cannot both work and attend school, they may choose to drop out of school in favor of working without realizing that "the educational sacrifices made for short-term financial gain tend to lead to limited long-term financial success." (p.13)

Schools that can offer "non-traditional" school hours, such as afternoon, evening, or Saturday schedules, will help more SIFEs have access to education. Also, schools that offer longer school hours and a year-round school calendar ensure that there are many opportunities for students to make up for lost time (p.14).

5. Increase sheltered instruction (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p.2). Often when SIFE student enroll in a U.S. school, the gaps in their educational record lead to them being placed in remedial courses. While this kind of instruction may be necessary or helpful for some students, native-language instruction and sheltered instruction may provide a viable alternative to remedial instruction (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, p.13).

Sheltered instruction is English-language instruction that is modified so that subject matter is more comprehensible to students with limited vocabularies (American Federation of Teachers, 2002). Sheltered instruction strategies may include the increased use of visuals, collaborative learning activities, and demonstrations (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p.2). Learn more about sheltered instruction in Colorín Colorado's webcast, **English Language Learners in Middle and High School**.

6. Consider how standards and the curriculum can be adapted so that SIFEs learn critical material in a way that is effective, accessible, and age-appropriate (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, 3). Even though state-wide standards in their original format may be too advanced for SIFEs, it is possible to adapt standards-based lessons so that they cover the most important information in a way that is accessible, culturally relevant, and age-appropriate. The Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education offers this example:

Instead of giving a 2nd-grade book to a 17-year-old immigrant from Ghana who reads at a 2nd-grade level, a teacher might work, for example, with the social studies instructor and provide the student with ESL materials on U.S. history. (p.3)

Schools may also consider using thematic curriculum, individual learning plans, or alternative ways of gaining course credit (such as an independent study or an internship) (Walsh, 1991, as cited in Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p. 10).

7. Provide intensive literacy/language instruction. Many researchers and educators are implementing new programs designed to teach adolescent readers the basics of literacy (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p.6). Among some of the most important recommendations include explicit instruction in an age-appropriate manner of the five components of reading - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension(p.7), increasing student access to literacy-rich environments and print materials, and unifying language and content instruction (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, p.30). SIFEs may also benefit from increased time in language development or ESL courses, particularly if the class sizes are small.

8. Teach students learning strategies that they can use in the future. These strategies may include how to recognize cognates, looking for the heading of a chapter in pre-reading exercises, using a dictionary, or how to take effective notes (p. 28). Remember that SIFEs haven't learned the basic skills that many students have learned at a young age, and may have no background knowledge in the areas that you expect them to have learned.

9. Build partnerships with local businesses, higher education and adult education programs (p. 11, Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, p. 4). It can be very helpful for schools to make a partnership with local businesses, adult basic education, or higher education programs in order to provide a seamless transition for SIFEs who will need more than four years to graduate or are older and will "age-out" before completing high school graduation requirements. Students are allowed to attend high school until the age of 21, and if a connection exists with the adult basic education or local higher education institution, SIFEs are much more likely to continue their education and complete a high school degree. A connection with a local business may also boost students' confidence and provide opportunities that might not have been available.

10. Use the full resources of the community to support immigrant students (Spaulding, Carolino & Amen, p. 11). Community resources can be a very powerful tool in meeting the needs of SIFEs. The saying, "It takes a whole village to raise a child" became popular for a reason - it's true. SIFEs will benefit greatly from contacts with community resources such as health care organizations, after-school tutoring, job programs, and ethnically/linguistically based community groups. Isolation and discouragement can be two negative and powerful influences on a SIFE student's education. The more SIFEs feel connected and supported, the more likely they will be to rebound from health, economic, or cultural challenges. A Newcomer Center is often well-connected with such community resources and likely offers community organization services on-site to the students.

To see examples of programs that implement the best practices listed above, please view The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) report cited in this article, **Immigrant Students and Secondary School Reform: Compendium of Best Practices** by Spaulding, Carolino & Amen and read the SIFE program descriptions. **Effective Programs for English Language Learners (ELL) with Interrupted Formal Education** from the Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education at the Indiana Department of Education also offers more specific suggestions on support SIFE instruction in literacy and math.

SIFEs will flourish in an educational environment that is reflective of their academic and cultural needs, with an emphasis on intentional instruction to enrich their knowledge.

Ten Ideas for Teaching Students with Interrupted Formal Education in the Classroom

Even if you or your school can't implement some of the bigger measures mentioned above, there are many things you can do in your classroom:

1. Activate prior knowledge. Once you know what prior information your students have, then you want to link the new information to what they already understand. Not only can this stimulate student motivation, but it can also determine where to start instruction as well as lay out the next steps. Some strategies include: word associations, wordsplash relationships, KWL charts, and anticipation guides.

2. Provide a print rich environment. Cover your walls with lots of visuals that correspond to text (maps, charts, signs, posters with motivational phrases, the alphabet in print and script, the Pledge of Allegiance, etc.). Seek out appropriate lower-grade texts or texts that are written for a lower reading level, high interest, low ability books, native language materials, and bilingual glossaries.

3. Engage students in hands-on learning so students are physically involved. Have students write, illustrate, and record their own books, let them create their own picture dictionaries and flash cards, incorporate drama to act out events and stories, use interactive activities on a SMARTBoard, use manipulatives, reciprocal teaching, and teach to the multiple intelligences.

4. Keep the amount of new vocabulary in control. When using new vocabulary or explaining new concepts, you may need to rephrase, define in context, and simplify your explanation so as not to confuse students. Limit your sentence length, but don't patronize students by raising your voice as if they were hard of hearing. Instead, use intonation and pauses for emphasis.

5. Give frequent checks for communication. Try to avoid Yes/No answers. Instead, ask that students summarize what they understood. Increase your wait time, because students will need extra time to process your question, think of the answer, they find the words they need in English.

6. When assessing understanding, be open-minded. Provide multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding (instead of writing: explain, act out, discuss, defend, draw, compare, predict, etc.). Emphasize formative assessment versus evaluative assessment and individualize what you ask students to do.

7. Allow students to work in cooperative groups. Remember to teach the necessary social skills they need to interact productively with one another. Forming skills such as getting into groups, taking turns, and encouraging one another provide the foundation for higher-order thinking in collaborative groups.

8. If possible, build the native language content and literacy instruction in order to build on English. Otherwise, work on pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading strategies from current trends in literacy. Use of graphic organizers is very helpful to make learning visual and incorporate thinking skills, and can be done without any writing. Use reading logs and journals to incorporate reading and writing.

9. Use teaching strategies that weave together language and content instruction, such as the SIOP model (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol). Start with the concrete then build to the abstract. Try to relate material to students' prior knowledge and experience. What they don't have you can try to create for them through visuals or by using technology.

10. Keep your expectations realistic at the beginning of the year. Raise your expectations up as students reach them and keep them high enough that students will stretch to reach for them, but not too high that they give up. If you expect success from your students, supply them with the necessary tools, remain optimistic, and offer to help as they need it, they will gain the self-confidence to be successful.

As you work with your students, keep in mind that many came to U.S. ready to get a good education, become successful citizens, and leave a troubled past behind. They may be discouraged and frightened when they find out exactly what is entailed in order to reach their goals.

Don't let frustration and the seemingly insurmountable barriers affect the instruction and support they receive from you or your school. It may take your students longer to achieve what they wanted; they will succeed, however, if they have quality support and continue to believe in themselves, like Johnny Romah, who now can write, "I am happy and sad when I think about my family and all of my friends...They are all in my heart."

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Printed from: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/27483/?theme=print>

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