

ALL STUDENTS ARE NOW SIFE: THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC HAS TURNED ALL LEARNERS INTO STUDENTS WITH INTERRUPTED FORMAL EDUCATION

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Heading into the 2021–2022 school year, there is much talk about how the education system is going to “close the gap.” In a March 2021 survey of almost 1,000 K–12 educators, over 97% reported some learning loss in their students compared with children in previous years (Horace Mann, 2021). This “gap” is the perceived deficit in the knowledge and skill set of students who are, in many cases, returning to a traditional school environment for the first time since March 2020. An internet search for “addressing the COVID slide” results in numerous claims from for-profit education companies that their products can get students “back on track.” This paper calls on our education system to recognize that all students have now had a period of interrupted formal education. In order to best meet the needs of our learners, it is time to seek guidance from those who have long advocated for and educated English language learners—students with interrupted formal education (SIFE).

In spring 2020, New York State governor Andrew Cuomo issued a shutdown order that closed school buildings across the state. Overnight, 4.2 million New York students became remote learners, and educators charged with providing distance learning materials. In October 2020, only 26% of New York City students attended some in-person classes (Shapiro, 2020). Many students who attended in-person classes did not attend every day, and in-person classes were disrupted when groups of students switched to remote learning following mandatory quarantines.

All students, whether they have engaged in remote, hybrid, or in-person learning over the past year, have experienced some degree of interrupted formal education, some break from the traditional schooling models that existed prior to March 2020 in the United States. Thus, one outcome of the pandemic is that, in a general sense, *all* students are now SIFE. The English-speaking, U.S.-born students in our classes are now SIFE. Every single student who has transitioned from in-person classes to remote classes is now a SIFE. Every student who missed class due to tech issues is now a SIFE. Every student who has been affected by the pandemic in any way is now a SIFE. All students now face some of the struggles that our English language learner (ELL) SIFE population has long faced. Of course, this paper does not seek to diminish the impact of trauma, violence, poverty, and war that true SIFE may carry with them; instead, it seeks to recognize how a shift in the perception of SIFE and an examination of best practices to support them may be unintended yet welcome outcomes of the pandemic.

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) CR Part 154 defines a student with inconsistent/interrupted formal education as:

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English Language Learners (ELLs) who have attended schools in the United States for less than twelve months and who, upon initial enrollment in such schools, are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language and or two or more years below grade level in math due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the United States. (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2016, p. 1).

This paper focuses on the inconsistent and or interrupted formal education component of the SIFE definition. Students with interrupted formal education arrive in the United States with gaps in their education, often due to periods of immigration and also as a result of poverty, civil unrest, persecution, or gender inequalities. When these students arrive in the United States, they commonly have missed months or even years of formal education (DeCapua et al., 2009). When working with SIFE, educators face the daunting task of closing the gap, supplying background knowledge, supporting basic literacy skills, providing English language instruction, and facilitating a smooth transition to school with social and emotional support, all while teaching grade-level content (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017).

As we look to the future of education in a post-pandemic world and a return to the traditional in-person education model, we have an opportunity to shift the way we view and serve SIFE. Once we can view all learners as SIFE, we then need to utilize best practices to fit and enhance the unique backgrounds and experiences that our students now bring to class.

Advocates for SIFE emphasize an asset perspective, concentrating on what the students can do instead of how far behind they are (Moll et al., 1992). They focus on student progress, setting goals for SIFE that are attainable, and providing the necessary scaffolds for students to achieve these goals. SIFE educators must also prioritize what learning needs to occur at a given time so that students can meet content and grade-level standards (Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, 2020, p. 3). A SIFE cannot be expected to make up three grade levels of work during the time period that another student is expected to complete only one grade level of work. Efficient use of instructional time with a focus on priority standards will provide students a solid foundation that fosters progress. General education and content area teachers must utilize research-based strategies in order to support our SIFE populations. Explicit instruction with clear and concise verbal and written directions will benefit all learners (Goldenberg, 2013; Saunders et al., 2013), as will the use of visual representations (Facella et al., 2005) and teacher modeling (Barr et al., 2012). Finally, educators need to support the whole learner. SIFEs may have experienced trauma due to war, poverty, family separation—and now the pandemic. In a recent statement about SIFE from World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA), an educational consortium focused on language development: “Students with this background often need their emotional, psychological, and physiological needs to be met before they are able to engage fully in the educational setting” (WIDA, 2015, p. 2). In consideration of this possible trauma, educators must provide social/emotional support to SIFE because they recognize that these students need to build relationships to feel supported. The development of a nurturing and inclusive classroom environment promotes collaboration and dialogue for ELLs and benefits all learners (Gay, 2010).

Conclusion

In essence, the pandemic has opened a door for the educational system to recognize that the proper support that ENL educators provide SIFE are now best practices for *all* students. The danger is in *not* providing students this support.

According to the Pew Research Center, an estimated 70 percent of immigrants with interrupted schooling drop out of high school (Fry, 2005). This rate may stem from inadequate levels of support to meet their unique needs. We can support *all* of our students post-pandemic by taking cues from SIFE educators and recognizing that students with interrupted formal education from any cause face unprecedented challenges and bring meaningful background experience and a unique set of skills to our

schools. A shift in the perspective of our educational system to one that values the assets of all students and utilizes ENL best practices for supporting SIFEs will benefit all learners.

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