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# Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs): Actionable Practices

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## **A Letter from the Editor and Co-Editor**

In this issue of the *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*, members of the bilingual community continue to document and disseminate the outstanding work and research taking place in universities and school campuses across the nation and internationally as they engage in activities associated with NABE's mission—to advocate for bilingual and English learners and families, and cultivate a multilingual multicultural society by promoting policy, programs, pedagogy, research and professional development that yield academic success. All of these themes are addressed in Volume 8.

Volume 8 includes ten outstanding articles in both English and Spanish that focus on a variety of timely topics, including: (1) preparing a community for two-way immersion; (2) language transfer in dual immersion program; (3) students with interrupted formal education; (4) teachers' perceptions of mainstreaming and ESOL classroom teaching; and (5) negotiating co-teaching identities, among others relevant topics. The issue includes two outstanding articles written in Spanish, *Inmersión lingüística para profesores AICOLE: Un enfoque comunicativo y práctico* by Dra Virginia Vinuesa Benítez and Xavier Gisbert Da Cruz of Madrid, Spain, and *Más allá de poly, multi, trans, pluri, bi: ¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos del translingüismo?* by Drs. Blanca Caldas and Christian Faltis.

This issue would not be possible without individuals who were successful in having their manuscripts accepted for publication—representing a 30% acceptance rate for Volume 8. Their work reflects the successful, informative and innovative research currently underway in sites across this nation and beyond. The presentation of articles in this issue would not be possible without the dedicated professionals involved with the publication of this Volume. Special thanks are due to members of the Editorial and Review Boards for their assistance in reviewing manuscripts in a timely manner. Special thanks are also due to our Editorial Assistant, Cinthia Meraz Pantoja, a graduate student at UTEP.

Lastly, we welcome Dr. Virginia Vinuesa Benítez as co-editor of the NJRP. Dr. Vinuesa Benítez is a professor at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos 1 in Madrid, Spain where she teaches courses in bilingual education in the teacher preparation program.

Dr. Josefina (Josie) V. Tinajero, Editor  
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June 2017





**Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs): Actionable Practices**

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## Abstract

Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are underrepresented in the professional literature. The purpose of this research brief is to contribute to an emerging line of research by documenting the variable of existing programs which were created specifically to meet the unique needs of the growing SIFE population. The delivery models and actionable practices for SIFEs reported in this paper are a result of a year-long study conducted in three diverse, near-urban school districts. An analysis of the programs and recognition of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their documented impact, benefit, and success for learning were considered. Findings indicated that with strong teacher involvement, district-wide planning, access to quality materials, and a keen understanding of the cultural and economic circumstances of the SIFE population, academic success is achievable. This study adds significantly to the emerging scholarly dialogue noting which factors support successful SIFE programs, while acknowledging the unique cultural and academic needs of SIFEs (Marshall & DeCapua, 2013).

*Keywords:* Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), high-needs population, English Language Learners (ELLs), Mutual Adaptive Learning Paradigm: Teacher Planning Checklist (MALP), service delivery model

## **Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs): Actionable Practices**

In a recent report issued by the Advocates for Children of New York (2010), there is clear recognition that in order to increase overall English language learner (ELL) graduation rates, schools must specifically address the needs of the subpopulations of ELLs such as Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs). In addition, this report calls for extended graduation timelines for SIFEs. With such distinct demands for policy reform, researchers need to investigate effective interventions and educators must come together to discuss innovative initiatives and research-based practices to improve education for Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFEs) or Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFEs) (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011). These students are considered a subgroup of English language learners (ELLs) with a unique set of academic, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic challenges as newcomers to the United States. The purpose of the research study is to synthesize features of effective instructional approaches, and service delivery models for SIFEs, which may help them to succeed academically. In turn, such effective practices may place them on the track for graduation and bolster their future employment opportunities.

In response to the overarching concern for the increasing number of SIFE students in a large metropolitan area, this study examined three diverse, near-urban school districts with growing SIFE populations. The primary objective of this study was to document diverse existing actionable practices—designed and implemented in response to the growing SIFE population at the secondary level in select school districts—that may be transferable to other contexts and, as such, may significantly impact school districts around the nation. The three focus areas were to (a) recognize program designs which meet the needs of SIFEs, (b) document successful SIFE programs that may be reproduced in comparable educational settings, and (c) make researchbased, actionable recommendations for educational policy.

### **Theoretical Foundations and Background**

According to the United States population progression for 2005-2050, close to one in five Americans will be immigrant in 2050; the Latino population will triple in size reaching close to 30% of the U.S. population (Passell & Cohn, 2008). According to the Census Brief 2009: Language Use and English-Speaking Ability, with a record number of 43%, California had the largest percentage non-English speakers. Next listed were New Mexico (35.8%), Texas (34.3%), New York (29%), Nevada and New Jersey in a tie (28.5%), finally Arizona (27.7%) and Florida (26.6%). These statistics translate to an increasing number of school-aged children who are recognized as English Language Learners (ELLs).

Within the ELL population, there are several subgroups including immigrants who are new arrivals to this country, often referred to as newcomers (Constantino & Lavadenz, 1993). Many of these children are placed in schools based on their school transcripts, or lack thereof, and considered students with interrupted formal education or SIFEs (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). The SIFE population can be found in urban, suburban, and rural districts (Marshall, DeCapua, & Antolini, 2010). SIFEs or SLIFES may have never participated in any type of schooling before coming to the United States or experienced an interruption in education due to “war, civil unrest, migration, or other factors” (Marshall et al., 2010, p. 50).

Although the literature on ELLs is well established and contains sound recommendations, a variety of service delivery models, and comprehensive instructional designs for teaching and

learning (Collier & Thomas, 2002; Cummins, 2001; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), the same research and recommendations are not currently available for SIFEs. Most state departments of education do not officially recognize or have a category for the learning backgrounds of these children. Additionally, there is limited information about how to best educate these students, facilitate their transition to the U.S. school system, design educational programs to meet their unique needs, and enhance their future employment opportunities.

## **Methodology**

This research study had a dual focus to explore (a) service delivery models, and (b) instructional practices designed by selected secondary schools with diverse student populations in response to the needs of students with interrupted formal education (SIFE).

The project focused on teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators who work directly with the SIFEs. The on-site research was conducted by two researchers and included classroom observations as well as in-depth interviews of teachers and administrators working with the SIFE populations. An adapted version of the Mutual Adaptive Learning Paradigm: Teacher Planning Checklist (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011) was used as an observational tool. Classroom materials such as student work samples and lesson plans were collected for a documentary analysis. Additionally, participants were asked to share any pertinent documents, such as meeting minutes, letters to teachers or parents about the program, the school's mission statement, curriculum maps or curriculum guides, or other artifacts that document the district's response to the local educational service delivery models for SIFEs. The two research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What English as a second language service delivery model(s) have been designed and implemented to address the unique needs of SIFE students in select suburban districts?
2. What types of instructional practices are being implemented to support SIFEs' language acquisition, literacy development, academic content attainment, meaningful school participation, and active engagement?

The analysis was conducted at both macro- (institutional) and a micro- (individual) levels. Thus, the research investigation as well as the outcomes of the study were considered from both the broader institutional (school and district) and the narrower, individual perspectives. This dual approach to the research study led to a more robust set of data and more comprehensive conclusions.

## **Data Sources**

The data sources for this study were comprised of (a) surveys, (b) observations, (c) indepth interviews and, (d) authentic documents subjected to systematic qualitative analysis. In the first phase of the project, the surveys were completed on-line anonymously by both administrators and teaching staff who had previously agreed to participate in the study. The survey contained both multiple choice and open-ended questions. The responses from the 9 administrators represented a 90% participation rate and the response rate from the 12 teachers and 2 teaching assistants was 100%.

In the second stage of the project, the two researchers visited each teacher and conducted on-site observations of the SIFE program in each of the three districts and collected authentic artifacts that were made available for research purposes. The interviews were conducted in middle

school or high school settings with a 100% participation rate. The in-depth interviews were conducted in person or, if needed due to time constraints, by telephone. The questions for the interview were similar to those of the survey in an effort to gain as much empirical data as possible and to triangulate the data sources. Prior to data collection, a pilot study analysis (Babbie, 1973) was used in an effort to fill in “the empirical blanks, noting unexpected developments, and elaborating on them” (p. 213). The questions were piloted and revised based on the critique received from select educators considered experts in working with SIFE populations.

All interviews were digitally or manually recorded, transcribed, and coded using a thematic analysis. The researchers applied a priori coding to the data, according to which “the categories are established prior to the analysis based upon some theory” (Stemler, 2001, para 13). The data coding was accomplished by two researchers and a research assistant to achieve triangulation. The findings were considered from both a macro (institutional) and micro (individual) level. All participants completed release forms and an IRB was granted by the authors’ institution of higher education. No students were directly involved in the study.

## Results

The overall findings indicated that with strong teacher involvement, district-wide planning, access to quality materials, and a keen understanding of the cultural and economic circumstances of the SIFE population, academic success is achievable. There were eight themes that emerged from the analysis of the data in response to the two key research questions (four themes for each question): What English as a second language service delivery model(s) have been designed and implemented to address the unique needs of SIFE students in select suburban districts?

- The SIFE service delivery was most successful when it was implemented district-wide with support from the teachers and administration. The strongest programs observed by the researchers brought the SIFE population to a central location which served as the “hub” of learning. This was a plan that supported newcomers and was flexible enough to respond to the transient nature of the adolescent student with interrupted formal education.
- Teachers benefited from “time” and “space” allocated for collaboration and planning.
- The most effective programs had administrators that took both an interest and an active role in program design, including after-school activities. In these SIFE programs, the students flourished. Similarly, guidance counselors, social workers, bus drivers, psychologists and nurses were seen as direct supporters of these students and met in large group meetings to discuss and plan for students of concern.
- The most effective educational practices considered the students’ abilities upon arriving in the United States. Programs with built-in English support—prior to placing students in classes with standardized testing—kept the SIFEs enrolled without unfair assessment/evaluation practices or pressure. Students were given recognition for attendance and participation without earning failing grades.

What types of instructional practices are being implemented to support SIFEs’ language acquisition, literacy development, academic content attainment, meaningful school participation and active engagement?

- Effective use of teacher-created, differentiated instructional materials led to enhanced academic language development and content attainment (Gottlieb & Ernst-Slavin, 2014). These strategies were most meaningful as they helped the students master the array of academic language demands necessary to be a successful student.

- Bilingual support classes with teaching assistants that spoke the native language and worked in small groups showed exceptional success. In fact, the teaching assistants often were found to be the best advocates for the students academically and socially. These relationships often extended to support in terms of balancing work and school. It was in this context that students were able to have extended discussions with turn-and-talk strategies which supported their content learning.
- Scaffolding techniques were systematically integrated; they included (a) visuals (pictures, photos, realia (objects from real life used in classroom instruction), video-clips); (b) graphic supports (graphic organizers, timelines, diagrams, reducing text density); and (c) interaction in English and the L1 (to activate prior knowledge, and to bridge home-, work-, and school-cultures) (Gottlieb, 2006).
- Students' funds of knowledge were valued (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). In these instances, SIFEs were recognized as contributors to the school community as documented by the artifacts.

## **Discussion and Scholarly Significance**

Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are underrepresented in the professional literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to contribute to the knowledgebase on program design and organization and best instructional practices that specifically target SIFEs. By triangulating our data sources (surveys, observations, interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis) as well as gathering information from multiple research sites, we collected qualitative and quantitative data related to existing programs in a near-urban region.

Each of the three SIFE programs included in the study was created within the local school districts to meet the unique needs of their growing SIFE population. While State Education guidelines were available and were adhered to, variations of program designs and implementation practices indicated local decision making and direct response to district concerns. Here we will discuss the instructional implications of the eight major themes that emerged from our data analysis (See Table 1).

## **Program Organization and Service Models**

At the institutional (or macro-level), administrators determine how to address the needs of all students, especially those who will not be mainstreamed upon entry. When the school and district leadership agree that SIFEs—as a subgroup of ELLs—are uniquely different from all other at-risk student populations, program design and organization decisions will be based on the set of cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and academic characteristics of these youngsters (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2013). Existing ESL and other support services can and should be utilized to serve as the foundation of SIFE programs. Yet, recognizing these learners' lack of, or very limited, basic academic experiences coupled with their need for an accelerated, attainable course of study must lead to a most careful placement of these students and purposeful design of their required credit-bearing content courses. Highly qualified teachers who volunteer to teach these youngsters—or are invited to do so based on their track-record with at-risks students—and who receive on-going professional development, peer as well as administrative support are the cornerstone of a SIFE initiative.

Table 1

Major Themes

Macro-Level Findings	Micro-Level Findings
Use of existing ESL and other support services as foundation for SIFE programs	Importance of teacher competence and professional skill set
Careful student placement	Highly individualized, differentiated approach to instruction
On-going professional development for teachers of SIFEs	Comprehensive and consistent assessment practices
Collaborative instructional and leadership practices	Curricular adaptations and accommodations

The involvement of all stakeholders in creating a SIFE program and specifying the service models is beneficial for successful program outcomes. To nurture such high levels of engagement from instructional and non-instructional staff members, administrators, and parents is best achieved through collaborative practices. Collaborative decision-making—rather than top down assignments or lack of specific direction—about program choices and locally determined service delivery options, as well as about the overall curricular goals contribute to the success of the program. The team approach—bringing teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, administrators, and school psychologists together on a regular basis—is strengthened through intentional time allotments for communication about individual students. Additionally, administrative support for teacher collaboration in all phases of the instructional cycle— planning, lesson delivery, assessment, and reflection (Friend & Cook, 2007)—has also been found instrumental in effectively monitoring student progress and meeting program goals.

**Instructional Practices**

When examining classroom practices specially designed for SIFEs, we noted several micro-level factors that were critical to the success of the program. Since the teacher is responsible for implementing the planned curriculum and for creating the most appropriate sequence of instructional tasks, his or her competence and professional skill set regarding working with SIFEs

makes a considerable difference. Effective teachers of SIFEs recognize that they need to take a highly individualized approach to instruction. They need to establish baseline data to be able to build on students' prior knowledge and skills and then provide on-going formative assessments in order to monitor student progress both in the target language and in the content area. They continuously adjust the taught curriculum to make it age-appropriate and relevant to students' life experiences as well as to the demands of the mainstream content curriculum. They engage their students in personally meaningful, highly motivating, scaffolded and differentiated learning activities that contribute not only to students' progression of learning English and academic content, but ultimately, to their desire to stay in school, graduate, enter the workforce successfully, and leave poverty behind.

## **Conclusion**

The program organization, service delivery models, and best practices for SIFEs reported in this paper are a result of a year-long study conducted in three diverse school districts. An analysis of the programs and recognition of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their documented impact, benefit, and success for learning were considered. To this end, this study contributes to the scholarly dialogue as to what macro- and micro-level factors contribute to a successful SIFE program, including program organization and service delivery choices and successful instructional practices.



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