

Bridging the Gap of SIFE Students

by

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Abstract

Students with Interrupted/Inconsistent Formal Education (SIFE) are at great risk in the United States education system due to social, emotional, and financial factors far beyond their control. These students face enormous barriers that keep them from being able to reach their highest potential, thus holding them back in society. Educators are rarely given support and resources for how to best teach SIFE students. The literature shows there are actionable practices to best accommodate SIFE students. At College Point Collaborative, professional developments will be held, including an open-house event for families to attend. The goal of these PD opportunities is to address common problems among SIFE students such as high drop-out rates, social-emotional issues, and the overall lack of resources for not only SIFE students and their families, but for their educators as well. Recommendations include building culturally responsive classrooms where every student feels welcome and a sense of belonging, forming relationships with families to support their needs, keeping families informed on student progress and graduation requirements, and partnering families with school and community programs.

Keywords: SIFE, parental involvement, culturally responsive teaching, professional development, social-emotional wellbeing, community and home collaboration

Chapter 1: Introduction

The United States has had an ever-growing population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in our education system. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), roughly 10% (or fifty million ELLs) were served in American public schools in 2021. These ELLs including Students with Interrupted/Inconsistent Formal Education (SIFE) face social, economic, and academic struggles. According to NYSED (2022), SIFE are English Language Learners who have:

attended schools in the United States...for less than twelve months and who... are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language and/or two or more years below grade in math due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the United States. (p. 6)

Indeed, SIFE students face even more hardship than that of their non-SIFE counterparts. They are years behind in schooling yet must meet the grade level-standards in order to graduate. It is our job as educators to bridge the home language literacy and mathematics gap that exist for SIFE on a national and local level.

In the New York City public school system, it is not uncommon for a newcomer ELL to be labeled as SIFE. Often, my school has students enroll from another country then disenroll for periods of time just to return at another point later. These students are moving here from war-torn countries, have faced civil unrest, or even experienced environmental catastrophes (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). In addition, it is very difficult for these students to adjust to new life in America, especially in middle school. They have trouble fitting in and getting accustomed to new American culture, learning a new language, and worrying about their life back home.

At my school, an eighth grader named Yandris moved to Queens, New York from the Dominican Republic. Yandris came here in sixth grade but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, went back to the Dominican Republic. He attended online schooling, but for four months, rarely showed up or submitted any class work. He returned in-person the following year only to be academically behind and having missed months of necessary schooling. Upon looking closely at Yandris' beginning of year assessment scores, he scored a grade four in mathematics when he should be on-grade (grade eight). This puts him three grade-level years below where he should be and thus able to classify him as SIFE. Through the use of individualized learning and getting to know Yandris's strengths and weaknesses in the classroom, his teachers were able to move him up three grade levels by the end of the year. Still below where he should be, but leaps and bounds closer to his academic on-grade level goal.

My school has about a 25% ELL population according to our EDAT (ELL Data Analysis Tool)¹. Most of our ELLs come from Spanish-speaking countries such as Columbia, Ecuador, and Dominican Republic, and it is projected that Latino populations will grow by three times by 2050 (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017). With this knowledge, the United States continues to put immense pressure on public schools. Yet schools face challenges on how to ensure SIFE students pass standardized testing and graduate (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017). According to our school's diagnostic results, about 63% of ELL students were two or more grades below in math and 83.5% of students were two or more grades below in ELA (I-ready Diagnostic, 2023). These results are consistent with the following statewide and nationwide data. According to Kim (2017), 50% of ELLs experience what is known as 'gaps' in their education.

¹ Data not yet public.

These gaps are best described as holes or periods of time where no learning has taken place either due to disruption in education, missing entire grades or illiteracy in their home language (L1). These conditions are even exacerbated for SIFE. For one, the dropout rate for SIFE students is 7x higher than ELLs without interrupted education (Chang-Bacon, 2021). SIFE are still being held to the exact same testing procedures as non-SIFE ELLs.

In this paper, I aim to inform readers about the reality of SIFE students in American school systems. The academic and social/emotional effects of lost learning and actionable practices teachers can take to bridge the gaps in their schooling. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature related to SIFE students' experiences in the United States and ways to ensure they receive the necessary support to succeed academically and socially. In Chapter 3, I will describe a professional development opportunity aiming to help educators take actionable practices that best serve SIFE including resources, tools and techniques. Chapter 4 will conclude with implications for student learning, implications for teaching, as well as recommendations for future work with SIFE students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As stated in Chapter 1, SIFE are emergent bilinguals who are two or more grade levels behind in their academics and have little to no literacy in their home language and are not fluent in English as well. This Chapter highlights theory and research that explain the experiences of SIFE in schools. Research has explored SIFE students' academics, drop-out rates, gaps in education, and use of standardized testing (e.g., Drake, 2017; Kim, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2022). These issues and ways to address them can be explained by the conceptual framework of Steele's (1997) stereotype threat theory and Krashen's (1985) input (comprehension) hypothesis.

These theories are relevant in understanding why SIFE students face literacy struggles and without proper recourse from educators, fail to ever catch up to peers, experience deep frustration and drop out of school. After presenting the conceptual framework, I will discuss problems with high-stakes testing including pressures from national and local governments, graduation and dropout rate, obstacles with academic achievement and social-emotional factors of SIFE students.

Conceptual Framework

Claude M. Steele's (1997) Stereotype Threat Theory suggests that individuals from marginalized groups may experience anxiety and discrimination based on certain characteristics such as cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As described in Chapter 1, SIFE students may have experienced civil unrest, anxiety about family in their home country, and low socio-economic status that affect their academic performance (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Drake, 2017). Their academic underperformance may confirm negative stereotypes about them. In other words, negative stereotypes will negatively affect SIFE students' abilities, and confidence (Rodriguez &

Arellano, 2016). These negative stereotypes will also raise students' affective filter (Krashen's, 1985).

Affective filter is a concept in Krashen's (1985) second language acquisition theory that posits that emotional factors including low self-esteem, anxiety, or fear of judgment can impact language acquisition. When learners have a low affective filter (meaning feeling relaxed and experiencing positive emotions), they are more open to receiving input and acquiring the language. In contrast, when they have a high affective filter (meaning experiencing anxiety and negative emotions), they may not be able to receive input or learn the language. Overall, these emotional factors can raise the affective filter and thus compromise the amount of input getting through to the learner. In other words, the affective filter is responsible for allowing how much comprehensible input is able to be received by the learner (Krashen, 1985; Wright, 2015).

Comprehensible input is another concept of Krashen's (1985) second language acquisition theory. His formula, $i+1$ demonstrates that literacy is developed by using previously acquired language with slightly above-level linguistics (Wright, 2015). SIFE students are many levels behind where they should be at. The input they are receiving in their English as New Language (ENL) programs is going to be much more advanced than what their linguistic level is capable of processing and understanding. In fact, ENL programs have been designed for students with some level of literacy skills and the linguistic demands put forth on SIFE students is far too great (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020).

In principle, Steel's (1997) stereotype threat and Krashen's (1985) affective and comprehensible input hypotheses suggest that educators must support SIFE students by highlighting their strengths and promoting their confidence through reinforcing positive beliefs about their abilities. Indeed, many SIFE students are preoccupied with stressors revolving around

home life, school life and family in their home country. Mandatory state tests, ENL assessments, and graduation requirements implemented by school and state can put unnecessary pressures on students. Thus, ENL programs should consider barriers of SIFE students in order to create welcoming, low-stakes environments where students can learn to their fullest potential without judgment from others or fear of ridicule. SIFE students should be able to opt-out of state tests that do not accurately measure the students' knowledge, but instead focus on the deficits.

In addition, educators must provide language input that is tailored to these students' proficiency levels and accompanied by additional support such as simplified language and visual aids. These supports facilitate the acquisition of English language skills among SIFE students (Aydin, 2019; Bicen & Beheshti, 2022). Without supports in place, SIFE students feel extreme levels of frustration in their academics due to the high demands of literacy skills in their ENL (English as a New Language) classrooms. This can lead to students with low self-esteem, low motivation, and anxieties.

Overall, understating Steele's stereotype theory and Krashen's comprehensible input and affective filter hypotheses can help schools and educators to create a supportive and inclusive classroom where SIFE students are provided with comprehensible input, which can reduce their affective filter, and in turn contribute to their academic and linguistic progress. In the following section I will begin to dissect problems surrounding these barriers SIFE students face in their academics.

Barriers of SIFE Students in Schools

In this section of the literature review, I will highlight the most prominent barriers that SIFE students face in mainstream schooling in America including high-stakes testing, obstacles toward graduating, social-emotional factors, and missed schooling. These barriers have

tremendous effects on a SIFE student's ability to do well and be successful in school (e.g., Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Cho et al., 2019; Newcomer et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2022).

High-Stakes Testing

At many schools across the country, standardized testing is a very difficult challenge for SIFE students. At some schools, standardized testing is a priority over curriculum-based instruction. For example, in California students must pass the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) in order to obtain their diploma. The purpose of this examination is to improve student achievement and thus close the achievement gap. For minority groups such as ENL and SIFE, this exam leads to underperformance and an increase in dropouts (Drake, 2017; Kim, 2017; Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016). Students who do not pass this test and have completed all other graduation requirements are considered a dropout. Schools have taken different approaches and viewpoints of the CAHSEE. At one school, administration highly prioritizes this test. They implemented advisory periods and Saturday school to help fulfill this obligation. Whereas at another school in California, administration recognizes that concerns for Secondary Newcomer Programs to learn basic, functional English is much greater than any exit exam (Drake, 2017).

In addition, the time spent on standardized testing takes away from crucial instruction time for SIFE students who are already behind in academics and who need every moment of instruction they can get (Rodriguez & Arellano, 2019; Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove & Zúñiga, 2018). Often, parents and school staff encourage students to retake these tests multiple times until desirable outcomes are achieved.

In their study to discover if multiple attempts of the CAHSEE would improve students' score, Rodriguez and Arellano (2019) found negative correlations between exam scores and test attempts was seen throughout their findings. The study used 2,991 seniors from six different high

schools in California. Among the population were a majority of Latino/a students, of which contained ELLS and SIFE students. The attempt data ranged from one attempt up to eleven attempts, with scores only slightly increasing after the fourth attempt, but never surpassing the score from their first attempt. This finding shows as the number of test attempts increased, the exam scores tended to decrease, which suggest:

...not passing the exam leads to a negative stereotype about the individual's academic capabilities, thus each time the student does not pass the exam, they further internalize these negative feelings of themselves, which are manifested in the test scores. (Rodriguez & Arellano, 2019, p.129)

This underlying, subconscious notion that ELLs face, whether they believe it to be true or not, impacts their performance on the CAHSEE and thus jeopardizes their ability to meet graduation requirements.

Another connection between dropout rates and exit exams can be seen in British Columbia. In order to obtain a high school diploma, students must pass the BC provincial exam. The exam contains curriculum from 10th-12th grade English, Science, Social Studies and Math (Murphy Odo, 2012). Murphy Odo (2012) compared BC examination scores between ESL students and non-ESL students and found ELLs “consistently had failure rates that are approximately double those of all students” (p. 4). The consequence of these failures is that graduation is jeopardized.

Graduation Rate and Academic Obstacles

SIFE students have a much lower graduation rate than that of their non-ELL counterparts. The dropout rate for newcomer ELLs in the State of California and Texas is over 20%. (Flores, 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022). As stated before, The CAHSEE is a great limitation for ELLs and

SIFE students alike to obtain their diploma and acts as a barrier for their graduation from high school. Schools in California must accelerate through the curriculum in order to meet graduation requirements, including preparing students to take the CAHSEE. SIFE students already come to the country under-prepared and behind in schooling, thus creating more anxieties and frustrations which leads to higher drop-out rates (Drake, 2017; Flores, 2022). Academic and socioeconomic challenges are among the many factors that contribute to the high dropout rate among ELL's.

Academic challenges facing SIFE students play a large role in the drop out rate of students. For starters, many SIFE are unaware of the requirements in the United States to graduate. Hos (2016) learned through interviewing refugee students about their academic experiences, that they were unaware of how many credits are needed to graduate, if they were earning proper credits and how to apply to college. Understanding the basics of the United States public school system is crucial to navigate it. This includes the passing of necessary state examinations. In their study to understand perceptions of 65 school staff members including teachers, administrators and counselors on the academic challenges of SIFE students, Rodriguez et al. (2022) found academic challenges and family or socioeconomic challenges are among the main factors contributing to student drop out.

In particular, Rodriguez et al. (2022) found that among the academic challenges, 63% of participants indicated ELLs were unable to pass NYS Regents which are required for graduation, and 68% of participants indicated inadequate or poor academic preparation. Surprisingly, only 31% indicated a "difficulty in catching up content and language at the same time" (Rodriguez et al., 2022, p.12). Potochnick (2018) studied the academic achievement differences among students with interrupted schooling and students with continuous schooling. Her study indicated that SIFE students performed lower in reading and math than non-SIFE students. Math scores

were 2.21 points higher than that of SIFE students. Her study also indicated that SIFE students continue to underperform in math even post-migration.

Socioeconomic factors also contribute to the graduation rate of SIFE students. In the same study, Rodriguez et al. (2022) noted that 68% of school staff cited home issues. For example, 62% indicated the need of these students to hold a job while going to school simultaneously. Many SIFE students live in poverty and must help support their families, whether here in the United States, or back in their home country. This can be seen in a study by Newcomer et al. (2021) where teachers of refugee students were interviewed. One teacher indicated that most of her students live in poverty. Niehaus et al. (2017) also found that poverty, among other socio-economic factors, create overwhelming stressors in and out of the classroom. Their study included a portion for a self-description questionnaire (SDQ) that revealed that Spanish and Asian-speaking ELLs reported much higher statistics on the socioeconomic questions than the English-monolingual students who were also part of the study. Socioeconomic problems exist for SIFE students and their families for many reasons such as impoverishment, need to support family America, or supporting family in their home country. Hos (2016) also interviewed refugee students to learn more about their experiences in a secondary newcomer classroom. One student named Haoh stated that as the eldest child, he had to miss school to do masonry work in order to support his family, “I went to school for three years and then didn’t go to school because I did masonry work. I worked in a small place. I didn’t go to school because we needed money (Hos, 2016, p. 1034).

SIFE students have taken on enormous responsibilities outside of their already challenging school life. Thus, educators, school supports, administration, community entities, and policy makers have great work ahead of them to make equitable changes in support of SIFE

students. Balancing the effects of stressors from school and home can lead students to feel overwhelmed and eventually see no other option but to drop out from school. In the next section, I will discuss how school and personal life can affect the social-emotional wellbeing of SIFE students.

Social-Emotional Factors

Critical social-emotional factors can greatly impact a student's ability to learn. The aim of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is to create equity in the classroom for all students to be able to learn to their highest potential (Jagers et al., 2019). For SIFE, their needs are far greater than their non-minority sub-group counterparts which can impede their ability to learn. According to Custodio and O'Loughlin (2020), SIFE students "are socially and psychologically isolated from mainstream students" (p.10). Special education students, including those of ENL, feel a sense of segregation from their peers due to the nature of their program, including but not limited to the use of pull-out services (Barton, 2016; Drake, 2017). School climate plays a tremendous role on SIFE students' feelings towards their classroom environment.

Societal barriers such as differences in languages and lack of classroom culture can further isolate SIFE students from their peers (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2016; DeCapua, 2016). In other cases, students fear deportation or separation from their loved ones (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Flores, 2022). Immigrant students come to the United States often seeking refuge or asylum and bring with them traumas of their home country. In certain cases, these students come to the country unaccompanied by an adult (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018). This makes the demands of the classroom teacher and school support staff such as guidance counselors and social workers far greater in order to provide proper services to these students.

When refugee students come to America, they are often unaware of social norms that take place in American school culture (Birman & Tran, 2017; Cho et al., 2019; Newcomer et al., 2021). These norms can include lining up, not talking when the teacher is talking, raising your hand or waiting your turn to talk, etc. In their study, Cho et al. (2019) interviewed teachers of newcomer refugee students. The teachers were asked about the social awareness the students had of classroom rules and procedures. Their responses indicated that their lack of social awareness caused disruptions to the class. An interview with one teacher Ms. Campbell, revealed,

Sometimes, also they don't know right away that something's not okay. They don't know that when you line up, you go behind the next person. So, they might budge to the front of the line.... I think of this one little friend too in my class who would keep budging or kind of moving kids aside. (Cho et al., 2019, p. 47)

The lack of social awareness in the classroom can often cause conflict among students and also lead to social isolation (Cho et al., 2019; Niehaus et al., 2019). The teachers in the interview mentioned a concern for relationship skills among the refugee students. The difficulty the refugee students faced caused them to “consistently” be unable to get along with others (Cho et al., 2019) and face issues regarding academic achievement (Niehaus et al., 2019).

Niehaus et al. (2019) summarized their findings:

Spanish-speaking ELLs reported more social and emotional difficulties compared to their EM (English-monolingual) peers, while teachers reported that Spanish-speaking ELLs had fewer socioemotional problems in the classroom. (p. 260)

Results were similar for that of Asian-speaking ELL students. Again, teachers reported few social-emotional concerns in the classroom. Many reasons can account for the discrepancy in SEL needs. For one, students may not feel comfortable approaching the teacher about issues in

the classroom or lack self-awareness (Cho et al., 2019; Niehaus et al., 2019). Another answer could be that ELL students are seen as being more quiet and shy in the classroom and therefore do not cause problems or encounter issues (Newcomer et al., 2021; Niehaus et al., 2019).

Regardless, it is clear that social-emotional issues do exist in the classroom.

To Newcomer et al. (2021), many refugee students often have little to no control over what they say or do in the classroom due to the traumatic experiences they have faced in their lives. Also, poverty was noted as a reason why refugee students act differently than their peers (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Flores, 2022; Newcomer et al., 2021). The teachers interviewed in this study stressed the importance of family engagement to combat cultural differences and to support social-emotional learning in the classroom (Newcomer et al., 2021). Negative feelings towards school will cause a student to want to stay home more and miss class. Increasing SEL (social-emotional learning) strategies in the classroom will create positive environments that students will want to be involved in.

Missed Schooling

As stated previously, SIFE students are two or more grade levels below in English and/or math. Part of the reason for this is due to severe absenteeism or months to years of missed schooling (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015; Potochnik, 2018). Potochnik (2018) addressed the possible reasons as to why missed schooling is so prevalent among immigrant students. It includes the fact that these students come from low socio-economic backgrounds and therefore must work to help support their family. The balance between school, work and family becomes too much for the student to handle. Familial disruptions may also affect their family structure and support system (Potochnik, 2018). An immigrant student moving to America may be arriving

with one or none of their immediate family members. School attendance is not their first priority with the many distractions and stressors around them.

Beliefs surrounding the purpose of school can change based on how much prior education the student received. For example, in Drake's (2017) study one teacher stated that a student who has been enrolled in school their whole life has a mindset of graduating in order to obtain a diploma and go to college. On the other hand, a student who just came to the country is only coming to school because it is the law (Drake, 2017). Teachers who think this way contribute to the problems of the inequity in our schools and having predisposed dispositions and stereotypes will only hurt students regardless of prior schooling. In other interviews, school leaders and teachers saw school as a chance for social and economic mobility. The purpose of school for under schooled immigrant students focused heavily on the following: providing a safe place to meet basic needs, learning foundational English skills, functioning in mainstream classes, graduating, getting a job, going to college, building relationships, learning to navigate cultural/social systems and thus, economic and social mobility (Drake, 2017).

In the next section, I will discuss possible solutions to the problems I have mentioned previously and ways for educators, school counselors and families of SIFE students to mitigate the many stressors they face.

Potential Solutions

The previous section of the literature review has demonstrated the many barriers SIFE students face including low academic achievement, challenges towards graduating, social-emotional needs, and missed schooling. In this section I aim to provide possible solutions that school districts, educators, and administrators can enforce to lessen the burden on SIFE students and support their needs. These solutions can increase their self-esteem and perspectives on

academics, motivate SIFE students to attend school more and decrease the graduation requirements, thus improving the graduation rate (Chang-Bacon, 2021; DeCapua, 2016; Flores, 2016; Newcomer et al., 2021).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

The use of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in classrooms can result in higher levels of learning for SIFE students (DeCapua, 2016; Flores, 2016; Jagers et al. 2019.) CRT is a way of teaching that uses a deep understanding of students' cultures in the classroom and differences in thinking and learning. These differences are seen as an asset rather than a deficit and the classroom environment is extremely welcoming of these differences (DeCapua, 2016). One important component of CRT is effective classroom instruction. Flores (2016) interviewed SIFE students attending traditional schools and alternative schools about their positions on their current classroom climates. Their English-dominant classrooms made them feel inadequate and below their English-speaking peers. One student named Juan summarized his feelings toward traditional school:

I had two hours of algebra and I watched ... but I understood nothing since they only spoke English ... and I felt like where am I, and what am I doing here. It felt very strange.
(Flores, 2016, p.11)

Conversely, students were also interviewed who attended an alternative school. These alternative schools are for students at-risk of failure, and have needs that traditional schools cannot meet. Teachers at this school are bilingual and students do not earn a high school diploma, but rather receive vocational training in cosmetology, culinary arts, or automotive training (Flores, 2016). Juan, who stated his feelings about traditional schools, was able to enroll in alternative school for three years. He stated, “[I like everything that has to do with this school but mainly the teachers;

their attention and the help they offer us.] (Flores, 2016, p.12). DeCapua (2016) reinforces the ideas of CRT by asserting that immigrants and refugees adopting American language, beliefs, customs, and norms may not be the way to success and can rather lead to alienation and high pressure. He insists that Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP) is an effective way of implementing CRT. MALP promotes collaboration and individuality to learn accountability as well as teaching foundational literacy skills often taught to young children. Culturally Responsive Teaching can support social-emotional wellbeing of SIFE students since it is directly tailored to their needs and students feel more supported in school. Overall, it can make a key difference in students' perspectives on the classroom as well as their general feelings toward school.

Supporting Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Being behind in school and fearing the possibility of not graduating on time creates anxieties and pressures among SIFE students which causes some students to give up or stop trying. According to Chang-Bacon (2021), schools must have social-emotional support in place, for example, mental health services. These services aim to decrease stereotypical stigmas and provide access to network with school-based programs, though they require increased school funding.

While some schools may not have the funding for additional mental health services, other schools have found alternative methods of providing socioemotional well-being in classrooms. Newcomer et al. (2021) described a school where teachers open up a safe space for students to share personal experiences and lives during lessons.

Students often shared stories from their daily lives during lessons – tales of petting a friend's dog during a lesson on homonyms, or anecdotes about a relative living on the

coast when discussing lifestyles of coastline Native American tribes. (Newcomer et al., 2021)

Offering opportunities for students to share about their past experiences also teaches more about the students' circumstances and things that have shaped their lives. Understanding cultural differences also becomes key when working with diverse groups of families. Educators must strive to understand the nuances between different cultural groups, religions, and languages in order to fully be able to understand and empathize with students who come from diverse backgrounds.

Community and Home Collaboration

Building a bridge between school and home life is beneficial for teachers and students as it will motivate students to do well and inform parents of expectations and requirements of American public schooling. Newcomer et al.'s (2021) programs at an elementary school in Washington State helped adjust refugee students to new life in their American schools. The schools' 'Culture Night' proved to be a big success for families from different backgrounds to come together and teach others about what is most important to them. Events like this can create more welcoming and unified school environments, as well as create communicative ties between home and school life. According to Cohan and Honigsfeld (2017), high levels of engagement among students is accomplished through collaborative practices among staff members, administration and parents. As we have seen, SIFE students need support in and out of schools, which can require help from outside networks.

Aside from parent involvement, schools should also work to partner with community programs for students. Chang-Bacon (2021) asserts that schools should network with local health and social service organizations to support SIFE students and their families. Schools can

facilitate opportunities for continuing education, social gatherings, and family engagement through these partnerships. Not only will students feel more connected to their school, but it will also build self-confidence and esteem in themselves which will lead to future success.

Conclusion

Through this research, it is clear that SIFE students face extreme academic and social-emotional barriers within the school context. These barriers include the use of high-stakes standardized testing, unattainable graduation requirements, missed schooling due to unforeseen circumstances, and low social-emotional wellbeing. However, there are techniques that can be implemented and best practices for educators to use in schools with SIFE students to mitigate the anxieties and stressors of everyday life for these at-risk individuals. It is important for teachers to stay up-to-date on best practices by attending frequent professional developments offered by schools and districts. In addition, schools should offer opportunities for parent involvement.

In Chapter 3, I will aim to resolve some of these issues through professional development for school faculty to educate staff on the needs of SIFE students and stress the importance of being up to date in best practices and techniques in the classroom. In addition, there will be an open house night for parents to attend in order to understand the requirements of graduating, new school norms and build relationships between teachers and families.. This will work toward the ultimate goals of limiting barriers SIFE students face, increasing attendance and the overall social-emotional wellbeing of our SIFE students.

Chapter 3: Description of the Product and Tools

As stated in Chapter 2, SIFE students face enormous hardship in schools which lead to low graduation rates, dropouts, poor academic performance, and social-emotional struggles (Drake, 2017; Kim, 2017; Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2022). In this Chapter, I will present an agenda of events for a professional development opportunity focused on best practices for teaching SIFE students. As of 2021, there were 7,424 ELLS enrolled in my school district, district 25, alone. Of those ELLs, 106 were identified as being a SIFE student (NYSED, 2021). Therefore, the goal of the in-house professional development will be to inform teachers in my school building on the hardships SIFE students face in the American public school system and ways to support them within the classroom.

There will also be an open-house event designed to inform families about academic expectations as well as build relationships between faculty, parents and students. As a New York City public school teacher, I have noticed an overwhelming need to support teachers with SIFE students. There are roughly 140,000 ELLs enrolled in schools across the five NYC boroughs (NYCDOE, 2021). Many of the strategies presented in this Chapter will not only be helpful for teachers of SIFE, but teachers of all ELLs as well.

Description of Participants

I will be inviting all core general education and special education teachers at my middle school in Queens. These teachers are departmentalized, meaning they teach multiple sections of one specific core subject; mathematics, English Language Arts (ELA), social studies, or science. The students they teach are in middle school aged 11-14. As mentioned in Chapter 1, our school has a 25% ELL population and has been continuing to grow rapidly each year. The school has

only been open for five years and has already had several SIFE students come through, which shows the need to support teachers with this topic.

Agenda of Events

The professional development will take place during teacher orientation on September 5, 2023 and September 6, 2023. All 6th through 8th grade general education and special education teachers will be invited to the school's cafeteria from 8am to 9am on the first day to learn about the needs and challenges of SIFE students. Participants will take part in hands-on learning that includes small group break-outs, turn and talks, and open forums. On the second day, all parents of SIFE students will be invited to the school for an open house event with their student. At this event, students will get to meet their future teachers, get a tour of the school, learn about middle school and most importantly, build relationships with all school staff. We can expect about 10 families to attend. This event will take place in our school's library with three separate 45-minute sessions to accommodate families. The times will be 9am-9:45am, 11am-11:45am, 1pm-1:45pm. Both professional developments will be presented using a PowerPoint presentation and the second session will be posted online and sent directly to families to support those who cannot be in attendance, or students who get registered late in the year.

Session 1: September 5, 2023

The first day of professional development will be focused on why there is a need to support our SIFE students to provide background and context for teachers who may not know a lot about this subgroup of high-needs students. My goal for the first day is to put educators in SIFE students' shoes and see life from their perspective. I will open up the PD with a think-aloud for all to be engaged in. The question on the board will say: think of a time when you went somewhere new and didn't know anybody there. How did you feel in this unfamiliar place with

unfamiliar people? I will give the audience two minutes to think and then we will have a share-out. I will link this back to a SIFE student on the first day of school; new to the school, having nobody to talk to, possibly not understanding the language and possibly never having been in a traditional classroom setting before. As educators, it is important to be empathetic towards our students and this is a great way to really see from their point of view.

Before I get into teaching about SIFE students, I want an idea of what staff members already know. I will use a KWL chart for this reason and to also track what knowledge was gained. The audience will have about five minutes to fill in what they already know and what they want to learn. The last section will be left blank until the end of the PD. This will lead us to what makes an ELL student SIFE. I will present the components that categorize students as SIFE, according to NYSED (2019). It is important to note the differences between an ELL student and a SIFE student. I will present a side-by-side comparison to show that the emotional, academic, and social needs of SIFE students may be much higher than that of an ELL. This will bring us to a turn-and-talk among the audience which asks what do you notice about the differences between these two groups of students? What can you anticipate to experience from a SIFE student in your class? This will open up honest conversations about the responsibilities of educating a student labeled SIFE. I will then present characteristics of SIFE students as defined by Custodio and O'Loughlin (2020). It is important for teachers to understand that SIFE students may have gaps in their prior schooling, incomplete years, or in some cases, no educational background at all (Chang-Bacon, 2021; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Flores, 2022).

To wrap-up the first day of professional development, we will return to the KWL chart and fill out the last section titled what we learned. Volunteers from the audience will then have a chance to share-out what was surprising to them or something they learned that they didn't know

before. We will end with a short discussion on the following day's agenda for the open house event for families. It is essential for teachers to understand that they are the bridge between school and home that must be linked for the success of students.

Session 2: September 6, 2023

Building a bridge between home and school is a key factor in the success of a student, especially when it comes to SIFE students. In a study by Hopkins and Schutz (2019) bilingual teachers and parents of emergent bilinguals were interviewed on the frequency of contact between teacher and family. One teacher stated, "If your child is successful, it's not because of me, it's because of us. We did it..." (Hopkins & Schutz, 2019, p. 105). According to Epstein (2011), partnership between schools and families leads to higher success rates of students due to guiding students, solving problems and celebrating success.

Three open-house events will be held in the library of the school at different times throughout the day to help support working or busy families. The event will also be live-streamed for parents who are unable to attend, and all materials will be copied and sent to those parents in their native language as well. The day will start off with a quick meet-and-greet of the school staff. On-site translators will also be in attendance to support families of different backgrounds. Next, there will be a tour of the school to get students comfortable with the layout of the new school and feel prepared for the first day. The tour will include important destinations such as the cafeteria, bathrooms, lockers, gymnasium and each subject's hallway.

We will then return to the library for a presentation of graduation requirements for middle school, to assure students and families are aware of the requirements for high school. Hos (2016) argued that many SIFE students were unable to graduate due to having very little knowledge about the requirements of graduation. We want to ensure that students are aware of the grade

needed to pass, summer school eligibility, and necessary state tests. Lastly, will be a Q&A session for all families to be able to voice any concerns or ask questions. It will also be a time for any final paperwork to be filled out while staff can be there to support them if they need help.

Importance of Community

The community created between a school and families of students can support the social-emotional wellbeing of SIFE students. Teachers can create supportive environments for SIFE students when parents are used to collaborate. Newcomer et al. (2021) state that families who are actively engaged in their students' classroom can make a big difference in the students' educational experiences. For example, educators should provide materials in the home language of a student, invite parents to the school for events and provide community recommendations to help network families with outside programs.

One important outside program we will inform families about is the local food bank for families with food insecurities. As stated in Chapter 2, many SIFE students come to America and live in poverty (Niehaus et al., 2017). For this reason, I will provide families with the address, hours, and phone number to the closest food bank to school. Families will also be informed of the partnership made with the food bank where they will come to the school once a month to support families in need. Bajaj and Suresh (2018) stress the importance of networking families with outside community programs and supporting families not only with their strengths, but their challenges as well. One study performed by them informed them of a community walk one school in California did where students and staff members visited students' communities and were shown important landmarks or cultural centers nearby (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018).

Intended Outcomes

The professional development and open-house event will enlighten teachers and staff on what it is like to be a SIFE student, and challenges they face in their academics, home life, and social life. The first day will give teachers information on how to prepare for educating a student labeled SIFE and their needs in the classroom. It will make teachers become more empathetic toward these students and perhaps step into their shoes. The second day will support families on the upcoming middle school years, so they are aware of the expectations to graduate and succeed in American public schools. It will also provide networking for families for essential community programs like the food bank. Lastly, it will open-up communications between parents and educators for the sole purpose of promoting success of the student. Relationships can get built and bridges can be formed from school to home in order to support the emotional, academic and social needs of SIFE students.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to identify the barriers that exist for SIFE students in the United States public education system, and ways to address these problems to better support their needs. This project has explored the many obstacles SIFE students face in school due to social, emotional, academic and financial factors that exist in their lives. In order to fully understand what needs a SIFE student might have, it is imperative to understand their experiences in their home country, their home life circumstances, and previous schooling. Only then can we as educators begin to tackle the barriers faced by these students. In this Chapter, I summarize the literature to draw conclusions on the barriers SIFE students face and ways to best support them. Then, I will discuss implications for student and teacher learning and finally provide recommendations for future work related to SIFE students.

Summary

This project has demonstrated how high-stakes testing creates barriers for SIFE students to graduate from high school (Drake, 2017; Kim, 2017; Rodriguez & Arellano, 2016). Not only do many schools use it as a means to measure achievement of students, but it is used as a graduation requirement in many states across the country. SIFE students are already far behind their peers in school and tests like this take even more crucial learning time away and add undue stress and pressure to students already facing enough issues. In addition, these students come under-prepared and un-informed of graduation requirements (Flores, 2022; Hos, 2016). Overall, SIFE students have a much lower graduation rate than non-SIFE ELLs and general education students.

The pressures of testing, gaps in their learning, language barriers, and home life have caused many SIFE students to miss school and thus drop-out before graduation. Also, many

SIFE students are forced to work a job outside of school in order to take care of family at home in the United States or back in their home country (Hos, 2016; Niehaus et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2022.) Many SIFE students see school as something they must only attend because the law says so. They do not consider it to be a gateway to their future and a pathway to success.

Social-emotional factors greatly impact a child's ability to learn, and research has shown that SIFE students come from civil unrest and have thus caused irreversible damage to their social-emotional wellbeing such as PTSD (Custodio & McLoughlin, 2016; DeCapua, 2016). Immigrant students come to the United States seeking refuge or asylum and are often confronted with traumas of their home country along the way. Their experiences in school are vastly different than that of American schooling which causes social ostracism and isolation from their peers (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Birman & Tran, 2017; Cho et al., 2019; Flores, 2022). For these reasons, educators must be well educated on SIFE students and possible challenges they might face in the classroom so educators can be prepared.

Implications for Student Learning

Educators must be prepared for the high-needs a SIFE student may bring with them to the classroom. This is why a professional development opportunity is necessary for all teachers since teachers working in a New York City school will likely face a SIFE student at some point in their career. Having knowledge on the baggage that SIFE students bring with them will better support their learning environments. Creating culturally responsive classrooms will create welcoming learning spaces where each child feels seen and a sense of belonging. Offering in and out of school supports such as mental health services and food pantries will provide help to students and their families, possibly easing the worries students have from home. Building relationships between school and home will support students and create motivation to want to do well and

push themselves to make their families proud. Having support from home will make an educator's job easier and provide more insight into the needs of the student.

Implications for Teaching

School staff including ENL/Bilingual teachers, educators, and guidance counselors will benefit from this research and from the tools created. The open-house event will give a chance for all staff to meet the families of SIFE students. This will begin the journey of building a bridge from school to home life. Staff will get to learn more about each student and their families from the event and the student will feel less scared coming to school on the first day if they have already met their teacher and taken a tour of the school. Informing parents early on about the requirements of graduation will make the next years easier and will ease confusion. Families can get an idea of what is needed to graduate in order to make the necessary steps to fulfill the requirements. Many families are unaware that in NYC schools, you must apply to high school and it is not automatically zoned by where you live. This information is crucial for parents and caretakers so they can take proper action with the support of staff. These interactions will make the first week of school run more smoothly for teachers and students alike.

Recommendations

Much more can be done to support the needs of SIFE students. There are still too many standardized tests for students to take. For this reason, state and federal governments should amend the laws requiring all students to take these exams, regardless of how long they have been in the country. A 2-year minimum should be standard for students to get acclimated to new life in America before worrying about taking a standardized test. There are not enough mental health resources available to students in school. At our school, we only have a psychologist on duty twice every other week. Students in crisis deserve these services on a regular basis. Classroom

teachers should also receive basic training on de-escalation in the classroom and strong classroom management techniques specific to SIFE students' needs. Every SIFE family should be provided with a list of community programs such as food pantries, social services, religious entities and free events for all to attend. These should come from the social workers in the building to open the lines of communication between themselves and the families of SIFE students. Moreover, more differentiated and individualized curriculums should be created to support the low academic levels of SIFE students. Most students are expected to keep up with on-grade level curriculum when it is known that SIFE students are several years behind. Curriculum makers should be able to come into classrooms where SIFE students are learning and study the habits and practices of their learning needs. Only then will curriculum writers see the extreme need for better tools and resources in the classroom.

Fundamentally, education is crucial for our students to grow up and become active members in our communities and in society overall. SIFE students are at a harsh disadvantage and it is our duty to fix the problems in the American school system so that all students can learn. Only then will there be equity in the classroom and a chance for all students to succeed.

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Appendix A


“K-W-L” Worksheet

Name _____



TOPIC: SIFE STUDENTS

K: WHAT I ALREADY KNOW	W: WHAT I WANT TO KNOW	L: WHAT I LEARNED



Appendix B

School Scavenger Hunt



CPC Scavenger Hunt



Name: _____

Place a checkmark ✓ next to each item you find.

The library
(Biblioteca)



The lunchroom
(Sala de almuerzo)



The gym
(Gimnasio)



Art Room
(Sala de arte)



Boy's Bathroom
(baño de chicos)



Girl's Bathroom
(baño de chicas)



Water Fountain
(fuente de agua)



Lockers
(casillero)



Music Room
(sala de música)



Main Entrance
(entrada principal)



Appendix C

[Professional Development Presentation Slides](#)