

CHALLENGES OF SIFE STUDENTS

**Examining the Challenges of Students with Interrupted or Inconsistent Formal Education**

by

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### **Abstract**

The social, emotional, and academic success of students with interrupted or inconsistent education, also known as SIFE, is at risk in United States schools due to the lack of teacher knowledge about English language learners. Previous research has explored SIFE student experiences and needs in the United States after migration. This capstone project aims to support school faculty who will work with SIFE students. At Duffield Elementary School, there are few SIFE students and because of this faculty do not know how to accommodate to their specific needs. Solutions to the problem at Duffield Elementary School include a professional development presentation and discussion, as well as resources for teachers to use with their SIFE students in their classroom, such as “getting to know you” activities, differentiation techniques, and lesson plans. Several conclusions are relevant to supporting SIFE students’ needs in order to be successful in school, including major themes of student well-being, social and emotional support, academic performance, and teacher preparation. Recommendations include staying up to date on SIFE student population within Duffield Elementary school, as well as, annual professional development opportunities to learn about support SIFE students’ needs.

*Keywords:* SIFE, social, emotional, and academic success, teacher, professional development

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### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

English language learners (ELLs) are at an academic disadvantage. This is due to the fact that most facets of education such as teachers, curriculum, and resources are not suitable for ELLs. Many teachers are not equipped with adequate, or any, training on how to teach ELLs. Therefore, due to inadequate support, teachers are not able to meet the needs of ELL students. In addition, there is a lack of aligned curricular materials for ELLs which also contributes to the prevention of academic success. The materials and resources used to teach the curriculum do not align with ELLs culture's and do not build upon previous learning. Although, some ELLs may not have had previous learning and experience inconsistent or interrupted formal education (SIFE). SIFE students' school performance and general well-being are at great risk (Hos, 2020). Thus, English language learners need teachers that can help them navigate through the challenges that result from inconsistent or interrupted education.

What sets apart SIFE students from a "typical" English language learner is their previous learning experiences. Some students may have never attended school before, which results in SIFE students performing significantly below their grade-level peers (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). To support these students, teachers need to use culturally responsive teaching and strategies such as modelling and scaffolding. Teachers must get to know their students in order to reflect SIFE students' life experiences. However many teachers may not have experience with culturally responsive teaching and using such strategies to accommodate to their students' needs. Indeed, teachers struggle to teach SIFE students due to a lack of "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" (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017, p. 169).

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Therefore, teachers must be aware of such information. This year I had the opportunity to teach Anaelle who migrated from Haiti and had no prior schooling in Haiti. She entered elementary school as a first grader, a student for the first time. Anaelle did not understand or speak any English and many of my colleagues were unable to speak French Creole, the students' native language. To support Anaelle in growing socially, academically, and cognitively, I had to learn about her background and needs. Like Anaelle, many SIFE students face the challenge of being socially isolated from mainstream students (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020). Isolations may occur because students are not equipped with the necessary social capital to navigate through their new surroundings (Hos, 2020). Additionally, students may fear rejection of their home language and culture, which can foster alienation (DeCapua, 2016). Teachers must also know that SIFE students typically live in areas of poverty and lack contact with a broad range of Americans, which can affect their learning and "the networks that are available to them, and the quality of the local schools" (Hos, 2020, p. 1023).

Academically, students are at risk of being far behind grade level expectations compared to their peers. Research demonstrates that interrupted or inconsistent education is found to have a negative impact on students' academic performance, especially in areas of literacy education (Laberge et al., 2019; Newcomer et al., 2020; Potochnick, 2018). Due to students' gap of knowledge the expectations of what they are expected to do versus what they are able to do, are far too great (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Chang-Bacon, 2021). The academic challenges students endure has led to "self-doubt and blaming oneself for academic failure" (Lemke & Nickerson, 2020, p. 530). Thus, education interruption can significantly affect not only a students' academic achievement, but their sense of belonging in schools which can have effects such as school drop-out (Hos, 2020).

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Students with inconsistent or interrupted education face great hardships in their educational journey. Thus, this project aims to help teachers recognize SIFE students' experiences and ways to support them. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature on SIFE students' experiences including challenges from interrupted or inconsistent education. In Chapter 3, I will present solutions to these challenges for teachers to learn and use to help educate SIFE students. Chapter 4 will conclude with implications for student learning and implications for teaching, as well as recommendations for future research.

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### **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This Chapter reviews learning theories and the literature on SIFE students' school experiences including the challenges resulting from interrupted or inconsistent education. Indeed, it is important to understand how these challenges put SIFE students at risk. As described in Chapter 1, when students first arrive in the United States they may live in areas of poverty (e.g., Hos, 2020; Lemke & Nickerson, 2019; Potochnick, 2018; Newcomer, et al., 2020), which can lead to unfavorable outcomes for students such as substance abuse or behavioral problems (Lemke & Nickerson, 2019) and drop out of school (Hos, 2020; Potochnick, 2018). The existing literature has revealed factors that influence SIFE students' school experiences including trauma, emotional well-being, academic gaps, and teachers' instruction. Before discussing each of these themes, I will present Stephen Krashen's (1982) theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) which sets up a framework for researchers to understand what SIFE students need in order to learn, and explains what SIFE students are lacking in their educational environment.

#### **Understanding Krashen's Second Language Acquisition**

Krashen's (1982) theory of second language acquisition includes five hypotheses that can affect a student's ability to acquire a new language. The five major hypotheses affecting language acquisition are, the acquisition learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. Together, these hypotheses explain how language acquisition is possible. The two-part hypothesis, the acquisition-learning hypothesis, first claims "that acquisition is the product of a subconscious process" (Schutz, 2019) that requires meaningful interaction in the second language. The learning is formed from a conscious process from formal instruction and results in knowledge about the language. According to Krashen (1982), one of the most effective language acquisition concepts is

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comprehensible input. Comprehensible input is one level beyond the level of competence in which the learner needs a variety of language input for best acquisition. The monitor hypothesis is a conscious process in which the learner corrects deviations of speech from what they've learned. The natural order hypothesis suggests that the acquisition of grammatical structures follows a natural order. However, Raju and Joshith (2018) argue that language acquisition can only occur when the learner is in a free and fearless environment. According to the input hypothesis, when a learner receives comprehensible input in a natural order, the learner improves and progresses.

The affective filter hypothesis, defined as the allowance of cognition to either be enhanced or blocked, is a key justification for SIFE students' challenges in the education system (Gonzalez, 2020). A student's attitude and emotions play a critical role in their success in second language acquisition. Enhancement or blockage of cognition is caused by emotions. When a student feels a negative emotion such as anxiety, embarrassment, or stress their affective filter will be raised causing them to shut down and unable to comprehend language. On the contrary, when a student is feeling relaxed, calm, or comfortable their affective filter will be lower allowing them to develop higher levels of acquisition (Gonzalez, 2020). Emotional factors influence a student's ability to acquire new language, which in turn influences their participation, motivation and effort (Birman & Tran, 2017; Linares, 2018)

Students that have interrupted or inconsistent education may not have confidence, especially in a new environment causing their affective filters to be raised. Educators must help SIFE students adjust by accommodating their needs. For instance, language games that are interesting and simple can help students acquire complex inputs in a mild manner (Raju & Joshith, 2018). It is up to teachers to promote engagement and participation in their classroom.

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Teachers can act as a motivator for learners by making class activities more feasible for each and every learner, which in turn will reduce levels of anxiety (Raju & Joshith, 2018). The dedication of teachers can enhance SIFE students' experience in school, calling for all educators to understand SIFE students' needs.

### **Factors Influencing Students' Well-Being**

The sections, pre- and post- migration trauma and emotional unwellness, will demonstrate how past experiences of SIFE students influence their experience in school. The experiences SIFE students may face can have lasting effects on their well-being.

#### **Pre- and Post- Migration Trauma**

Students' school experience in their home country may differ greatly from a typical school experience in the United States. In fact, many SIFE students do not have experiences in school, at all, in their home country. The home country to many SIFE students include regions in Latin America such as Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Potochnick, 2020). In Potochnick's (2020) longitudinal study with 15,890 10th grade student participants, from 750 schools across the United States, 44% of the immigrant students are from Mexico/Central America and 8% are from another Hispanic region. Likewise, Custodio and O'Loughlin's (2020) review synthesizes that the highest percentage of SIFE in the United States comes from Latin America. Students that have lived in these foreign countries may have had to work instead of attend school. Many SIFE students come from families that require children to work in order to provide income for the family (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). In this sense, SIFE students have more adult responsibilities from a young age in their home country.

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Not only may SIFE students lack school experiences from their home country, but SIFE students may have also had experiences that are life-threatening or inflict stress. Many researchers have found that when observing SIFE students, the students share stories about the dangers they have endured in their home-country (Bousalis et al., 2021; Hos, 2020; Lemke & Nickerson, 2020). Bousalis et al (2021) illustrate the global issues students experienced in their mixed-method study of 78 teachers across Europe that teach SIFE students. Teachers reported that 32% of their students fled their countries due to civil wars and 24% of students fled due to drug cartels or gangs. In addition, Hos' (2020) study of the experiences of 19 adolescent refugee SIFE in a secondary newcomer classroom, shines light on a traumatic experience shared by one of the student participants. This student shared with his teacher about a time in his home-country that he fought with Burmese soldiers because they killed his friend. From this interaction, he wound up alive but with a gun wound in his stomach. The memory of the trauma that students go through in their home country can be retraumatizing when they come to the United States.

These traumatic experiences are evident reasons for a student to leave their home country, with or without their family. However, migrating to the United States can also induce trauma for students. The relocation process to get to the United States can present trauma for SIFE students. Students that face forced relocation do not always migrate with their families. Potochnick's (2018) analysis of the Educational Longitudinal Study (2002) that includes a cohort of 15,890 tenth graders drawn from 750 schools, revealed some children migrate alone while others are rejoining one or both parents who migrated earlier. Also, others are found to migrate with their family, but experience familial disruptions during the migration process (Potochnick, 2018). Newcomer et al.'s (2020) qualitative case-study of two fourth grade teachers that taught refugee background students in Washington State found that SIFE students did in fact face

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traumas from migrating. One student in the study shared that her father did not make it over to the United States with the rest of her family. Traumatic experiences pre- or post- migration can have altering effects on a students' well-being. Students may not be able to disassociate from these experienced traumas causing them to have social and emotional challenges in school.

### **Social and Emotional Unwellness**

It is challenging for SIFE students to recover from their past traumas resulting in most students having fragile emotional states. Montgomery's (2011) review of four empirical case studies that investigate the evidence of trauma and exile-related mental health in young refugees through qualitative and quantitative measures, found that 238 of the 311 children (77%) suffered from anxiety and/or depression. After one year, follow-up interviews were had with parents and children as well as participant questionnaires. Findings indicate that 25.9% of children still suffered from clinically relevant psychological symptoms. Students that have suffered from traumatic experiences are likely to require time to recover, and in the meantime display emotional behaviors. Likewise, Somali Bantu refugees in Birman and Tran's (2017) study highlighted the extreme social-emotional challenges students faced in a Chicago elementary school. Over the course of two years, 19 Somali Bantu refugee students were studied through field notes, interviews, memos and classroom observations. Students were observed demonstrating behavioral actions such as stealing, showing disruptive behaviors such as aggressive acts or getting out of their seats, and complaining. Students' attitudes were found problematic by the school and students were often disciplined. Teachers highlighted the importance of relational engagement, such as relationship building and affirmation, and one-on-one attention (Birman & Tran, 2017). In principle, SIFE students lack the ability to regulate their behavior and emotions due to past life experiences.

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In addition, social wellbeing may be affected due to challenges students have with forming peer relationships. In a study conducted about teachers' opinions of the challenges that SIFE students have in their classroom, 54% of teachers found the greatest variance to exist between SIFE students and their native peers were social differences (Bousalis et al., 2021). Indeed, students must have knowledge and confidence in order to build relationships, which SIFE students often lack (Newcomer et al., 2021). Nearly 49% of the 78 teachers that responded to the survey in Bousalis et al.'s study reported that their classrooms consisted of 6-15 refugee students, who were unable to form relationships. SIFE students are shown to have a more difficult time forming relationships than their non-SIFE peers.

Students that demonstrate difficulty forming relationships on their own may be due to reasons such as feeling alienated or psychologically isolated from mainstream students (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; DeCapua, 2016). Isolation may occur because of student differences in their past experiences, language barriers or cultural differences. SIFE and non-SIFE students experience different childhoods and because of this, might struggle to build a bonding connection. Students may also fear rejection of their home language or what others might think of their ethnicity and culture (Bousalis et al., 2021; DeCapua, 2016). In addition to the social-emotional challenges that SIFE students face in school, SIFE students also have major academic challenges.

### **Effects of Inconsistent or Interrupted Education on Academic Performance**

The following sections represent and discuss the themes discovered during the literature review of SIFE student challenges in school: academic differences between SIFE and non-SIFE students, teacher and classroom influence, as well as SIFE students' needs. While each of these

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topics will be discussed individually, the topics work collaboratively to impact a students' educational experience.

### **Academic Differences Between SIFE and Non-SIFE students**

There is an academic gap that exists between SIFE students and non-SIFE students. Research has revealed that interrupted or inconsistent schooling affects students' performance and results in achievement gaps between ELLs and non-ELLs (Bousalis et al., 2021; Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017; Hos, 2020; Potochnick, 2018). Reasons for such academic gaps include SIFE students' lack of background knowledge and little to no knowledge of the English language or the inadequacy of the United States education system (Bousalis et al., 2021; Hos, 2020). Factors such as classroom placement, academic content, curriculum, and teacher misunderstandings influence academic performance.

Due to a lack of knowledge about a students' educational history, students will often be placed in a classroom that is not suitable for their needs. When coming to the United States and starting school, SIFE students' age and grade-level are typically not aligned. These students tend to be placed in grade levels lower than their age, due to their weak academic skills and limited formal schooling (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). In a year-long ethnographic study of 19 students' experiences in a newcomer program at Georgetown Highschool, students had to complete extra schooling causing them to fall behind grade level peers (Hos, 2020). Hos (2020) found that students were expected to learn enough English and academic content before enrolling in mainstream academic classes. The background knowledge required to enter academic classes resulted in students of various ages attending the same class. Chang-Bacon (2021) shares an alternate perspective of the formal education systems view, which is that students at particular grades will have mastered certain standards or skills. Instead, Chang-Bacon (2021) argues that

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educators should be focusing on meeting the learner where they are, not where they should be. In order to view education in this way, Chang-Bacon (2021) emphasizes differentiated instruction with heterogeneous groups, or self-paced learning where curriculum is catered to students' individual needs and interests.

Students often have trouble with learning and understanding academic content such as reading or math. Research shows that SIFE students have large gaps in non-existent content knowledge and are unfamiliar with academic ways of thinking (DeCapua, 2016). Students with interrupted schooling miss out on learning the fundamental skills that will ultimately help them to achieve higher mastery of academic content. By not having participated in formal education, SIFE students have different ways of thinking and begin the task of learning basic concepts that their classmates have often already mastered (Bousalis et al., 2021; DeCapua, 2016). In fact, Potochnick's (2018) longitudinal research on language minority students found that just one year of interrupted schooling can reduce test scores in reading and math by 10 to 15%, even after the students have been in the United States for many years. Results of 15,890 tenth grade SIFE students' test scores across 750 schools are shown to be 11 percent lower in reading and 16 percent lower in math compared to students with continuous schooling. Indeed, interrupted or inconsistent education can have a negative impact on a student's learning.

### **Influence of the Teacher and Classroom**

The United States education system inhibits SIFE students' ability to learn. Most classrooms lack accessible resources and materials for SIFE students, use monolingual approaches and standardized tests that do not accurately assess language learners' progress (Birman & Tran, 2017; Bousalis et al., 2021; Linares, 2018). According to Lemke and Nickerson (2020), there is a lack of appropriate leveraging of policy and programming support for SIFE

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students. Similarly, Hos (2020) concludes that systematic barriers and policy failures limit students from achieving their aspirations. When researching how a school system prepared teachers to instruct refugee students, Bousalis et al. (2021) found that teachers needed to create their own materials in dual languages. The teachers heavily relied on the internet to create or retrieve resources to supplement with the curriculum. These findings present the importance of engaging teachers in professional development opportunities to help accommodate the needs of SIFE students.

Comparable to the curriculum, teachers are often unprepared to teach SIFE students. Educators may have prejudicial beliefs, misconceptions, or lack of knowledge about this population of students (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021). DeCapua (2016) claims that in the United States formal education system, teachers are generally removed from their students' communities and daily lives. Forming close relationships is said to be the exception, rather than the norm. One of the largest barriers may be the inaptitude to relate to SIFE students' experiences (Newcomer et al., 2021). Newcomer et al. (2021) recommend that teachers position themselves as learners, seeking to learn all they can about their students' lives. Their findings indicate that willingness to learn about students' lives provide students with understanding and compassion. This aligns with Linares' (2018) ideology that it is necessary for teachers to access students' existing repertoires of knowledge as a foundation for future learning and to teach in ways that reflect care for students' well-being and academic success. Linares (2018) examined the literacy development and practices of 5 Guatemalan SIFE students during their first year of schooling in the United States. Literacy-related artifacts, including dialogue journal entries were taken, along with interviews, participant check-ins and observations. Through using dialogue journals, a space where students and teachers could share their voice, ask questions and learn

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more about one another, students' confidence as writers and learners were built upon. Teachers are not taught or trained how to teach students with interrupted or inconsistent education and often have to come up with ways, themselves, to help these students succeed.

### **SIFE Students' Needs**

The literature has demonstrated the challenges that SIFE students face, presenting the need for educators to intervene. To address the challenges that SIFE students face in school, and the factors that contribute to their academics and well-being, school professionals need to be educated on the ways they can help SIFE students achieve. This can be through a multitude of instructional strategies, such as culturally responsive teaching and building learner-centered environments. Educators can also help SIFE by implementing language teaching such as translanguage or bilingual strategies, and through implementing various supports for students in their teaching.

Interventions need to be utilized by school professionals to meet the needs of SIFE students. To ease students' emotional well-being teachers, counselors and administration should all take an active role in assisting the students. In their study of how schools can engage students in a culturally responsive approach to student learning, Lemke and Nickerson (2020) found that a culturally-responsive climate helps to prevent student re-traumatization. Lemke and Nickerson (2020) argue that educational settings are documented to be important sites of rehabilitation for displaced youth, yet educators are often unprepared to address psychological needs. Likewise, through studying newcomer students from Thailand, Nepal and Yemen, Hos (2020) found refugee students demonstrated the need for psychological support, through different expressions, which the school was not readily prepared to give. The teacher participant, Mrs. Smith, in Hos (2020) study, took the time to support her students' psychological needs by understanding their

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past experiences as well as the emotional stress that influenced their adaptation to school. These findings suggest that deep knowledge of student background is essential to youth healing and successful transitions during resettlement.

Culture plays a substantial role in one's life. Not only does culture define one's identity, but also influences a person's attitude and perspectives. SIFE students have unique cultural identities, therefore teachers need to be understanding and receptive to learning about their students' culture. Newcomer et al. (2021) suggest understanding the background of SIFE can deepen relationships and open the opportunity for culturally responsive teaching, defined as an "environment in which the teacher celebrates the students' diverse cultures and strengthens and leverages these to best support student learning" (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021). Much of the literature about SIFE students explores the impact of culturally responsive teaching as an approach that recognizes the nature of structural oppression in the education system (Lemke & Nickerson, 2020) on SIFE students' learning (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021; Linares, 2018; Newcomer et al., 2020; Potochnick, 2018).

Many SIFE students do not have English language proficiency and need strong language support. SIFE students come to the United States speaking and understanding languages other than English. It is the United States education system that forces students to learn English, while simultaneously failing to support the students' native language (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021). In fact, "many schools serving ELs in the United States, even those that recognize the value of students' first language, have adopted a monolingual approach to biliteracy development" (Linares, 2018). Auslander and Beiting-Parrish (2021) explain the importance of encouraging students to rely on their home language. When students apply their home language to their learning, it gives them a scaffold for understanding new language (Auslander & Beiting-

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Parrish, 2021). Likewise, in their study instructional practices designed for the needs of SIFE students, Cohan and Honigsfeld (2017) demonstrate the need for including students' native language in instruction. The analysis of classroom observations, interviews with teachers and administrators working with SIFE populations, surveys, documents including student work samples and teacher lesson plans revealed achieving meaningful language acquisition includes bilingual support classes. In these classes, the teaching assistant spoke the native language and often worked in small groups. Teaching assistants were found to be the best advocates for these students both academically and socially. Not only was a bilingual environment helpful, but the instructional techniques used amplified students' learning. Another language support that proved to be helpful to student learning was found through Linares' (2018) study of how a dialogue journal can serve as a dialogic, caring literacy practice. In this study, dialogue journals were used as a method of communication between the teacher and students. Students were given open-ended prompts to share their thoughts and were encouraged to use any language they felt comfortable with. Results imply that the teacher was able to learn about her students' lives outside of the classroom. The teacher also became aware of students' socioemotional needs. By taking the time to get to know her students' experiences and sharing aspects of her own identity, the teacher built positive, trusting relationships with her students.

In addition, students that have interrupted or inconsistent schooling need individualized, unique forms of instruction. Various studies have found different techniques and methods to help SIFE students learn and achieve success (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021; Birman & Tran, 2017; Bousalis et al., 2021; Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020). Through using a mixed-method study of observations, interviews, student work, and assessment data, Auslander and Beiting-Parrish (2021) encourage translanguaging, "a process in

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which the two or more languages of the multilingual speaker interact and are in a dynamic relationship with each other such that the features of both languages are integrated into one language” (p. 3). Auslander and Beiting-Parrish focused on if the use of home language arts, a curriculum designed by the teacher participants, could be a method for using home language to access new language. Teachers in this study began teaching home language arts in the fall of 2019 until the Spring of 2020. Findings indicate that the biggest benefit of using home language arts is that it supports a process of translanguaging, where students could leverage the skills they have in their home language to support their English acquisition. Similarly, Cohan and Honigsfeld (2017) studied instructional approaches to help SIFE students to succeed. Data sources such as surveys, observations, in depth interviews, and authentic documents were analyzed. In total, 9 administrators, 12 teachers and 2 teacher assistants throughout 3 school districts participated in the study. Results show that amongst the most effective instructional practices was bilingual support classes. Through the bilingual support classes students were able to have extended discussions with turn-and-talk strategies to support their content learning (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017). Allowing SIFE students to incorporate their home language into instruction can be utilized for their English language learning.

Different types of instruction can also improve student learning and engagement. Bousalis et al. (2021) assert that teachers should educate SIFE students through a sheltered-instruction approach, “a process that simultaneously teaches students English language, content knowledge, and academic skills, and evaluates students through informal assessments” (pp. 72-73). Their research revealed that 85 percent of schools administered standardized testing to evaluate SIFE students. However, Bousalis et al. (2021) suggest that students should be assessed through techniques such as observation checklists, rating scales, anecdotal records, or portfolios

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for assessing students fairly. Laberge et al. (2019) used one of these suggested methods to assess students' listening. To find out if the implicit teaching of listening strategies will help foster oral comprehension, Laberge et al. (2019) conducted a small-scale mixed-methods study. Throughout a 5-week training session, two experimental groups received implicit training of listening strategies, while the control group viewed the same documents without the strategy training. Assessment of the experimental and control group was completed through verbalizations. During the first and last implicit training sessions, there were no comparable results to be found. This may be due to the fact that all three groups had different teachers, and what the teachers taught was not monitored. Teachers may have influenced students' performance in this study. This is an indication that teachers play a significant role in students' educational journey.

Not only do SIFE students need instructional support, but also emotional support as well. Building off of Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis students need a learner-centered environment, defined as an environment that pays close attention to students' cultures, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Types of Learning Environments, 2018). In the learner-centered environment the teacher builds off of the conceptual and cultural knowledge acting as a bridge between new learning and the students' background knowledge (Types of Learning Environments, 2018). Strategies used by teachers in Birman and Tran's (2017) longitudinal study of Somali Bantu students prove Krashen's affective filter hypothesis to be true. Through classroom observations students were more receptive to learning when their teachers provided affirmations, gave students one-on-one attention and shared meaningful materials (Birman & Tran, 2017). The teachers' actions made students feel comfortable which helped aid the students' learning. In another study of newly arrived English learners Linares (2018) studied a teacher's use of dialogue journaling, a way to communicate with students. The dialogue journaling

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provided students with a safe, comforting method of communication that was a private space to share personal thoughts (Linares, 2018). After 7 months, through the collection of student work, Linares (2018) found that students began to write independently and integrate more English language into their writing. In order for students to make advancements in their learning, it is imperative that they form a connection to their environment and reflect ideologies of motivation and self-confidence.

### **Conclusion**

In principle, the reviewed literature has made it clear that SIFE students need social, cognitive and academic support for their school experiences. For one, SIFE students have unique backgrounds that can influence their wellbeing, causing memories of trauma to resurface. Secondly, students may have trouble interacting with their school peers due to age differences, lack of similar experiences or cultural differences. Culture can impact a students' school experience by affecting how they understand academic content. Many SIFE students do not have the background knowledge needed to comprehend lessons. Additionally, the United States education system does not have enough resources to accommodate SIFE students' backgrounds. Plus, teachers are not trained to teach SIFE students and support their needs. The research shows a strong need for educators to understand SIFE students, their unique backgrounds and needs to improve school achievement and wellbeing.

In order to resolve the current issues SIFE students face in their educational experiences, I will create a professional development plan for school faculty described in Chapter 3. The professional development will consist of a presentation for school faculty educating them on the characteristics of SIFE students and their unique needs. I will provide tools and tips that teachers can use in their classrooms to teach SIFE students. The professional development is essentially

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designed to educate school professionals on the ways they can support SIFE students' academics and social-emotional wellbeing. This will afford SIFE students the opportunity for faculty to promote social integration, academic success, and to provide a positive atmosphere for overall well-being.

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### **Chapter 3: Description of the Product and Tools**

In this Chapter I will present a professional development seminar and a hands-on experience that offers an opportunity to learn about SIFE students, the challenges they endure in the United States education system and ways teachers can help them succeed in their classroom. Being a teacher of a SIFE student has helped me realize that Connetquot Central School District does not prepare general education teachers to teach this group of students. As discussed in Chapter 2, there is a need for teachers to learn about SIFE students and the ways they can teach them (Birman & Tran, 2017; Newcomer et al., 2020). In this Chapter, I will discuss the components of the professional development based on SIFE students' needs and actionable practices that teachers at Duffield Elementary School in the Connetquot Central School District can implement in order to help SIFE students overcome the challenges that result from inconsistent or interrupted education.

I will first present an overview and rationale of the professional development followed with an in-depth explanation of SIFE students. Next, I will discuss activities that teachers will be engaged with and that can help them teach SIFE students in their classroom. In these activities, teachers will learn how to set up the teaching environment and teaching practices such as culturally responsive teaching, bilingual support, and differentiated instruction.

#### **Description of the Professional Development**

Over the course of two days during the Superintendent Conference Day and Teacher Orientation Day on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022 and September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, the SIFE professional development will be an opportunity for all faculty of Duffield Elementary to join through an in-person presentation in the Duffield Elementary School library from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. On August 31, all Duffield faculty will be invited to attend the professional development meeting to learn

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about SIFE students. Since all faculty will have experiences with SIFE students, whether they are custodial or cafeteria, it is important for all to understand these students' needs. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, only the general education teachers of Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade students will attend the second professional development meeting in Duffield Elementary School's library from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. Teachers will participate in hands-on activities that they can implement in their classrooms with their SIFE students.

The professional development is presented through a Google Slideshow, in addition several handouts, materials and resources (see Appendices A, B, C, D) will be shared with faculty to facilitate the discussion. The two meetings will help struggling general education teachers and faculty that are not aware of SIFE students and how to best educate them. The following topics of: SIFE student characteristics will be discussed during the first professional development meeting to all faculty. On the second day of the professional development meeting classroom environment, culturally responsive teaching, bilingual support, and differentiated instruction will be taught to prepare general education teachers to teach SIFE students.

### **First Meeting (August 31, 2022)**

The first meeting of the professional development on August 31<sup>st</sup> will focus on describing SIFE students. The goal is for faculty to become aware of SIFE students, and their unique needs, and to learn how they play a role in helping SIFE students succeed. A presentation and lecture will be presented, as well as collaboration between colleagues through guided questions and turn-and-talks. The presentation for Duffield faculty will discuss where SIFE students are from and their cultures, past experiences such as traumas they may have been exposed to, as well as the lack of school experiences they may have had.

### **Characteristics of SIFE Students**

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In order to understand how to help SIFE students succeed academically, socially and emotionally, faculty must be aware of who SIFE students are and their past experiences. As discussed in Chapter 2, a key factor of helping a SIFE student succeed is by getting to know their background and gain an understanding of their previous knowledge (Bousalis et al., 2021; Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017). The meeting will begin with the question, “Who are SIFE students?” Duffield faculty will write their response on a post-it that I will collect. A few responses will be written on the Smart board for future use. To help faculty understand SIFE students a discussion of who a SIFE student is will guide this presentation. I will present Custodio and O’Loughlin’s (2020) definition of a SIFE student, who is an English language learner that has weak academic skills due to their limited or inadequate schooling and are socially and psychologically isolated from mainstream students. As mentioned in Chapter 1, what sets apart a SIFE student from a “typical” English language learner are their past learning experiences; SIFE students will have a lack of prior schooling compared to their peers. SIFE students are shown to perform significantly below grade-level peers. In Chapter 2, the study of 15,890 10<sup>th</sup> grade SIFE students’ test scores were shown to be 11% lower in reading compared to grade-level peers and 16% lower in math (Potochnick, 2018). The academic gaps are due to students’ school experiences in their home country.

Before arriving in the United States, it is possible that a SIFE student has never attended school before. I will lecture what causes a student to have interrupted or inconsistent education throughout my slides. Reasons for a lack of education include war, poverty, migration, and religious beliefs (Bousalis et al., 2021). Students may have had to work at a young age or look after younger siblings in order to support their family. Alternatively, students may have had to fight to protect themselves or family from civil unrest in their home-country. This is critical for

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teachers to be aware of so that they can support their students' emotional needs. Students may have triggers that remind them of their traumas so it is important for all faculty to be aware and to make accommodations to their needs. This can include a fire drill, lockdown drill, or simply getting school lunch. Teachers may have to practice with students before drills to show students what to expect, or practice getting school lunch so students understand how to get food. In order for teachers to initially teach SIFE students they have to communicate with their SIFE students which creates another hardship that SIFE students face, language barriers.

Many SIFE students come from regions in Latin America (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020). According to the top spoken languages in 2018-2019 of SIFE students in New York, SIFE students' native language may include Spanish, Arabic, Somali, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Karen or French (New York State Education Department, 2021). Due to a language barrier SIFE students may have trouble forming relationships with their peers, develop anxiety, or psychological challenges. It is important for teachers and faculty to help facilitate relationships, this can be through modeling relationship building through affirmations and one-on-one attention (Birman & Tran, 2017).

After presenting all the material and facilitating turn and talk guided questions about who SIFE students are, the professional development will end with the same question that was asked in the beginning of the meeting. I will ask the question again, "Who are SIFE students?" This will allow us to notice how perceptions of SIFE students may have changed from the information that was presented during this professional development. Faculty will once again respond to the question, and write their response on a post-it. I will present the recorded answers from the beginning of the meeting on the Smartboard, so we can see how our answers have changed based

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on what was learned from the meeting. To debrief, as a group we will go over some of the key points that were discussed about SIFE students during the professional development meeting.

Indeed all faculty have an important role in helping SIFE students overcome challenges faced from inconsistent or interrupted education. Together, building-wide, faculty can support SIFE students by understanding their needs and creating a safe environment.

### **Second Meeting (September 1, 2022)**

During the second seminar, ways to support SIFE students in the classroom will be explained to general education teachers of Duffield Elementary school who may have a SIFE student in their classroom in the future. Supports include classroom environment, culturally responsive teaching, bilingual instruction, and differentiation techniques.

#### **Classroom Environment**

Students need to be surrounded by a climate in which they feel safe and encouraged (Lemke & Nickerson, 2020; Linares, 2018). Teachers can create a classroom environment that uplifts students to try their best and encourages students to not be afraid of failure. In fact, Lemke and Nickerson (2020) argue that a classroom environment can help prevent student re-traumatization. The need for student psychological support stems from the environment of a classroom. When a teacher understands their students' past experiences they can use the students' background to help support healing and a successful transition into their new environment. To create a positive environment the classroom can be filled with positive quotes, student work, and resources in the students' native language. After the information is presented through the slideshow lecture, teachers will have time to turn and talk and respond to the question, "How do you envision the environment of your classroom so that it is inclusive of all SIFE students?"

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Not only is the physical appearance of a classroom important for students to feel comfortable, but the people within the classroom contribute to the environment as well. A teacher, from the start, should model behavior that supports all students. This behavior can be shown by giving positive feedback to students, such as “great job” or “I love how you two worked together”. Another way that teachers can contribute to the classroom environment is by getting to know their students’ cultures. Newcomer et al. (2021) suggest that understanding the culture of SIFE students, can deepen relationships. The teacher can incorporate their culture into lessons so that all students are made aware and feel a sense of belonging. Teachers will be asked the questions, “How do you get to know your students? How do you develop a relationship with your students?” They will share their responses in a small group discussion.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

In order for a teacher to teach SIFE students, the teacher must know about the students’ cultural identity, including their beliefs and past experiences. The tools for this portion of the professional development are created for teachers to use as a guide to get to know their students’ strengths, weaknesses, previous experiences and culture in order to incorporate culturally responsive teaching. Teachers can start by using a “get to know you” activity (see Appendix A), in order to understand their students’ background and culture. Sharing stories of past experiences can help build connections within the classroom and create an awareness of students’ backgrounds. By knowing a students’ past, it can help build upon students’ prior knowledge. Cohan and Honigsfeld (2017) suggest teachers should continuously adjust curriculum as an actionable practice to make it relevant to students’ experiences.

Once teachers have learned about their students’ past they can tailor instruction to the specific needs of their students. Many researchers recommend culturally responsive teaching,

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defined as an “environment in which the teacher celebrates the students’ diverse cultures and strengthens and leverages these to best support student learning” (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021), when teaching SIFE students. Teachers can use culturally responsive teaching to create awareness of students’ cultures within the class. This will be the first activity that teacher participants of the professional development will participate in, with their grade-level colleagues. Each grade level will be given a task card (see Appendix B) that has a lesson that can will be taught the classroom during the year. Based on what the teachers have learned from the professional development about culturally-responsive teaching, their task is to discuss how they would make the lesson on their grade-levels’ task card culturally-responsive. Teachers will be given time to work together as a grade level, afterwards teacher groups will share their ideas with everyone.

### **Bilingual Support**

A component of culturally-responsive teaching is to bring students’ native language into the classroom. Another actionable practice found by Cohan and Honigsfeld (2017) is that teaching assistants who spoke the native language of the SIFE students in the class, were able to support students both academically and socially. Teaching assistants supported students by advocating for SIFE students and worked in small groups with students. Similarly, Linares (2018) found through dialogue journaling, when students used their native language, they were more comfortable making errors in their writing. Students learn through their mistakes, if students are not comfortable they may not even try. It is important for teachers to encourage the use of a students’ native language by speaking, listening, reading or writing.

Teachers can implement a students’ native language in their classroom even if they themselves do not understand the language. This can be done by including books in their

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classroom library that are written in students' native languages or by including authors of diverse cultures. Also, teachers may encourage students to read and write in their home language to learn content and communicate ideas. Teachers will receive a picture dictionary in which students can use throughout the year to draw pictures of a term and the word in their native language, as well as the English translation. Students can be encouraged to take out their picture dictionary any time throughout the year as a support for reading or writing.

### **Differentiated Instruction**

Not all SIFE students are the same. SIFE students may speak different languages, have different levels of proficiency in their native language or English language, have different past school experiences, and have various psychological needs. Newcomer et al. (2021) suggest scaffolding instruction based on each students' individual needs. Ways a teacher can scaffold is by modeling, schema building and contextualizing (Newcomer et al., 2021). Teachers should also get to know their students' learning styles. If a student is a kinesthetic learner, they can create opportunities for hands-on activities. A visual learner may need more visual support, a teacher can create drawings, use visual maps or graphic organizers of key concepts (Newcomer et al., 2021). To address the varying English language competencies that SIFE students have, a teacher would also use differentiated instruction by differentiating language objectives. For example, a student who is at an emergent stage of English language development a teacher may use scaffolding and sentence starters to help the student write. For a student that needs less language support a teacher can pair students to work together, giving the opportunity to engage in more linguistic tasks (Newcomer et al., 2021).

Differentiation can be incorporated into any lesson. Teachers differentiate based on their students' skill level and build upon their strengths. In the last part of the professional

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development meeting Duffield Elementary teachers will participate in another group activity.

The same grade-level groups will receive a lesson plan outline and a description of a student (see Appendices C and D). The teachers will work with their grade-level to design a lesson based on the students' needs. This affords teachers the opportunity to ask questions, collaborate differentiation techniques, as well as gain experience differentiating a lesson for their potential students. Afterwards, we will conclude the meeting with a summary review of the concepts learned- classroom environment, culturally responsive teaching, bilingual support and differentiated instruction for SIFE students. Teachers will also be given time to ask any questions they may have.

### **Intended Outcomes of the Professional Development**

By attending the two professional development meetings teachers will gain an understanding of who SIFE students are and how they can help them overcome challenges in their classroom. It is likely that each teacher will have a SIFE student in their class eventually, it is important for teachers to know how these students differ from one another. First, the professional development provides teachers with valuable information about this group of students, students that teachers may have never heard of before. Secondly, teachers are given resources and ideas of how they can get to know their students which will help teachers build connections and create opportunities for appropriate instruction. Teachers will be prepared to create a caring environment that nurtures SIFE students' psychological needs based on past traumas. In addition teachers will have academic resources at their fingertips to use in their classroom. The broad goal of this professional development is to create awareness of SIFE students and their emotional, social and academic needs.

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### Chapter 4: Conclusion

English language learners are in need of teachers that can help them navigate through the challenges that result from inconsistent or interrupted education. This capstone project has explored SIFE students' school experiences and the effects from inconsistent or interrupted education, and has given insight on SIFE students' needs. The project has provided Duffield Elementary School with education of SIFE students and how to support this group of ELL students. To fully investigate how to support SIFE students to overcome challenges, it is necessary to consider their background including possible trauma. Indeed, inconsistent or interrupted education will influence a students' social and emotional well-being, as well as their academic performance. These impacts work collectively in the development of the challenges that SIFE students face. Two overarching research questions developed from these factors are:

How do the past experiences of SIFE students influence their experience in school?

How can educators help students overcome the challenges that contribute to their academic performance and well-being?

In this chapter, I will first summarize the literature from Chapter 2 and explain how my product helps teachers at Duffield Elementary school to resolve the challenges of SIFE students. Next, I will discuss implications for student learning and implications for teachers of SIFE students. Finally, I will conclude with recommendations for future research of SIFE students.

#### Summary

I have reviewed a multitude of research about SIFE students, their experiences in the U.S. public education system, and teachers' experiences of working with SIFE students. This research includes case studies of SIFE students' backgrounds (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020), teaching practices that support SIFE students (Auslander & Beiting-Parrish, 2021; Cohan &

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Honigsfeld, 2017; Linares, 2018; Lemke & Nickerson, 2020), the experiences of SIFE students in the classroom (Birman & Tran, 2017; Hos, 2020), the experiences and challenges of teachers who have taught SIFE students (Bousalis et al., 2021; Newcomer et al., 2020), and the academic needs of SIFE students (Laberge et al., 2019; Potochnick, 2018). Drawing upon this research has helped me to formulate the needs of SIFE students to help them overcome the challenges they currently face in school.

In relation to my research questions, several conclusions can be drawn about SIFE students' experiences in school and the need for teacher support. First, based on prior experiences SIFE students may not be able to relate to their peers which can affect their social-emotional well-being (Birman & Tran, 2017). The lack of English language skills and cultural differences can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation from peers (Newcomer et al., 2020). Second, SIFE students have gaps in their academic knowledge and skills (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020) especially in reading and writing (Linares, 2018). Teachers must differentiate instruction and take highly individualized approaches, including learning about students' lives and using culturally responsive teaching (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017; Lemke & Nickerson, 2020). Therefore, all school staff must understand how to support SIFE students.

In response to these findings, a professional development plan was created. The product seeks to educate school staff about SIFE students and their needs, to be able to support students in achieving academic, social and emotional success. To do so, school faculty will attend a meeting introducing SIFE students and the encounters they may have with these students. The second meeting aims to support teachers in their instruction of SIFE students. Many implications and recommendations for student learning and teachers were drawn from the research to create the product.

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### **Understanding SIFE needs for Student Learning**

The product will benefit SIFE students' social, emotional and academic achievement. Student learning will be supported through getting to know you activities so that teachers and staff can gain an understanding of students' prior experiences (see Appendix A). In order to support students' academic needs, teachers will participate in hands on activities to differentiate lessons. Once teachers get to know their students' cultural backgrounds they can tailor lessons to be culturally responsive (see Appendix B). SIFE student learning is also supported through lesson plans in which teachers will learn to create opportunities for appropriate instruction (see Appendices C & D). Students will benefit by providing teachers with the resources to learn about their students and differentiate instruction based on cultural needs and backgrounds.

Many teachers have not had proper training in working with SIFE students. As the SIFE student population continues to rise, all teachers will have interactions with students with inconsistent or interrupted education, at some point during their career. The professional development expands any teacher's knowledge of differentiation techniques, scaffolds for instruction, and provides time for collaboration amongst colleagues. Through discussing the needs of SIFE students, a teacher can reflect on their own teaching practices and make sure they are meeting the needs of all their students, both emotionally and academically.

### **Progressing Education about SIFE Students**

There is still a present need for educators to learn about SIFE students and their needs to be successful in school. I recommend that educators in all schools learn about this subgroup of English language learners by staying up to date on the SIFE student population within their school district. This can be achieved by principals reviewing the attendance of SIFE students each year and giving teachers of SIFE students professional development run by ELL teachers.

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Faculty must learn about the effects that inconsistent or interrupted education has on a student. More importantly, teachers must know how to best educate these students so the academic gap for SIFE students can be reduced.

### **Final Thoughts**

Migrating to a new country, attending school for the first time while unable to speak the same language as those around you can be a traumatic experience. Understanding the backgrounds and needs of SIFE students will help these students adjust to their new surroundings, while promoting well-being. There is still a dire need for educators to learn about SIFE students and their needs to be successful in school. I recommend that educators in all schools learn about the effects that interrupted or inconsistent education has on students. The more awareness of SIFE students, the better educators can help them adapt to their new surroundings and support their academic achievement.

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**Appendix A**

**“Get to Know You” Worksheet**

3 facts about my Family

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

My family has lived in the United States for \_\_\_\_\_ years.

**My Family:**  
Draw a picture of your family.

My family moved here from \_\_\_\_\_.

**Family Story:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Tell a family story, legend, or something interesting that someone in your family did. \_\_\_\_\_

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**Appendix B****Task Cards**

Kindergarten students  
are learning about  
types of communities.

First grade students  
are learning about  
species of animals.

Second grade students  
are learning about  
literature genres.

Third grade students  
are learning to  
count and add money.

Fourth grade students  
are learning about  
the branches of government.

Fifth grade students  
are writing a biography  
about a past President.

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**Appendix C****Lesson Plan**

Date:	Unit:	Lesson/Subject:
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Essential Question:
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Learning Target:	Standard Alignment:
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Instructional Strategies:	Differentiation Strategies: 1. Learning Style- 2. ELP Level-
Scaffolds:	Materials-

Informal Assessment:	Formal Assessment:
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**Appendix D****Student Description**

A new student has arrived in your classroom from Haiti. The student is a girl that is in 2nd grade. She has limited proficiency in her native language, French Creole. She cannot read or write in her native language. She has no English language skills. The student enjoys drawing and singing and dancing to songs. She is a happy girl, but at times can become visibly upset, by crying, when you have to leave the classroom to go to specials like art or gym. The student gets along well with others, but is struggling to follow along during class activities and lessons.

**Appendix E****Professional Development Presentation Slides**

<https://brockport.voicethread.com/share/20398450/>