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Jennifer Adelia Raponi

The College at Brockport, jraponi@monroe2boces.org

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Students with Interrupted Formal Education: Teacher Perspectives

by

Jennifer Adelia Raponi

A Thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the College at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Science in Education

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Abstract

This research is a mixed methods case study of teachers' perceptions about their ability to provide Students with Interrupted Formal Education a high quality education. Data were collected over a period of six weeks using on-line surveys and six in-depth interviews. Data collected and analysis focused on teachers' experiences working with Students with Interrupted Formal Education and the dilemmas they face when trying to provide these students with a high quality education. Results suggested that irrespective of experience, teachers and school personnel generally feel ill prepared to meet the challenges of teaching Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Teachers reported facing numerous common dilemmas when teaching SIFE. They reported receiving limited professional development about the broad range of needs of SIFE, they struggle to find a balance between students' needs and the demands of the curriculum, educational programming for SIFE is limited, there few materials and resources available and the social emotional wellbeing of students is often overlooked.

Keywords: Students with Interrupted Formal Education, SIFE, ELL, teacher preparedness, teacher dilemmas

Introduction:

Morris sits quietly at the table in my classroom. He does not move. He does not talk. He does not make eye contact. He will not cut or color or read or even pick up a pencil. He passively resists any attempt I make to teach him, waiting stone faced and unmoving until the 82 minutes until our class is over and I dismiss him. Morris has been my student for about 4 months. When I started this job they told me Morris was “low”. So low in fact, that before I started teaching ESOL at the school he was sent to a 12:1:1 classroom for part of the day. This was a desperate attempt to get him some help. When I started this job they told me that Morris and his family had spent much of the last few years fleeing from a civil war. I knew reaching him would take time. I was prepared to work hard to find ways to help him learn. What I was not prepared for, what they never told me, was that Morris had never been to school.

Problem Statement:

Morris is not unique. Enrollment of English Language Learners has risen dramatically over the last decade. It is widely known that English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing segment of the K-12 school population. Between the years 1998-2009 the ELL population in the United States grew by more than 51% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). In the 2008-2009 school year over 5.3 million students, or 11%, of the total school age population were identified as English Language Learners (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). According to Angelica Infante, the New York State Associate Commissioner of Bilingual Education and World Languages,

Over the past 10 years, New York State English Language Learner (ELL) student enrollment has increased by 20 percent. This trend is not unique to New York; according to the U.S. Department of Education, ELL student enrollment has increased by 18 percent nationally. Currently in New York State, nearly a quarter of a million ELLs make up almost 10 percent of the total public school student population, with even more ELLs enrolled in our private schools. Students in New York State speak over 200 languages, and nearly 45% of ELLs were born outside

of the United States.” (New York State Education Department, 2014, p. 1)

The achievement of English Language Learners has a serious impact on our schools and our communities. In a press release entitled *Graduation Rates: Students Who Started 9th Grade in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 (2010)*, the New York State Department of Education acknowledged that English Language Learners graduation rates “have been dropping over the last 5 years” (p.19). The overall graduation rate of English Language Learners is 31.2%. This shows that ‘one time’ or former ELLs have similar graduation rates as compared to the overall graduation rates. The New York State Department of Education defines ‘one time’ ELLs as any student who was “identified as ELL in any school year preceding the school year of their last enrollment” (p. 22). In other words, a ‘one-time’ or former ELL is a student who has met all of the criteria to exit English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and no longer requires that services. The rise in ELLs in the United States in the last 10 years requires educators to pay closer attention to their educational needs.

Significance of the Problem:

In the field of education and educational research, the term English Language Learner or ELL is a generalized word used to describe a diverse and highly variable group of students. Within the broader category of English Language Learners, there are several subcategories of students whose educational achievement is important to track, including ELLs with Disabilities, Long-term ELLs, and Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) are defined in New York by the Commissioners Regulations Part 154. These regulations state that SIFE or

Students with Inconsistent/Interrupted Formal Education shall mean English

Language Learners who have attended schools in the United States (the 50 States

and the District of Columbia) for less than twelve months and who, upon initial enrollment in such schools are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language and/or two or more years below grade level in Math due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the United States.

(New York State Department of Education, 2014a, p. 19)

The term ELL denotes only the fact that a particular student is enrolled in ESOL classes and is in the process of learning the English language. It tells us nothing of the student's social, cultural, economic, or historical background. How many other languages is the student fluent in? Are they literate in another language or do they have oral proficiency? What is their educational background? Answering these questions is critical to addressing the needs of Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Researchers Fleischman and Hopstock (1993) estimated that "20% of those identified as LEP in high schools and 12% of those in middle schools had missed two or more years of schooling" (p. 204). As the numbers of students who are identified as LEP, or limited English proficient, increased, so do the numbers of students who are identified as having limited or interrupted formal education.

Cummins (1979), a seminal researcher in second language acquisition, identified two different types of language functions ELLs need to master to succeed in school. BICS, or Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, is the language one needs to have an everyday conversation and get basic needs met and CALP, or cognitive academic language proficiency, is considered the mastery of the language forms, functions, and registers of academia (Cummins, 1979). It is widely believed that BICS can be acquired in 2-3 years, but mastery of CALP can take up to 7 years (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Studies focused around the language acquisition of students with interrupted formal education suggest that it takes a significantly longer amount of time for

these students to acquire cognitive academic language proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). In fact Collier (1995) found that the rate in which the English language is acquired is directly linked to the amount of schooling a child receives in his/her first language. In order to graduate from high school, this at risk population needs to perform the double duty of becoming proficient in English and overcoming large gaps in their education. Adolescent SIFE students are a highly vulnerable subgroup of English language learners, “They are held to the same accountability standards as native English speakers while they are just beginning to develop proficiency in academic English and are simultaneously studying core content areas” (Short & Boyson, 2012, vii). Taking these factors into consideration, it is difficult to see ways to close the achievement gap. In order to graduate from high school, this at-risk population needs to become proficient in English and overcome large gaps in their education. Over a period of ten years, from 1991-2001, the number of teachers who had at least one English language learner enrolled in their classes increased from 15% to 43% (Zehler et al., 2003). Research suggests those teachers who do not hold certifications specific to the teaching of English language learners are not well prepared to meet the needs of these students (Zehler et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Education NCES, 2001). If the majority of teachers are underprepared to teach ELLs, it can be argued that they are equally, if not more, unprepared to effectively teach students with interrupted formal education.

Rationale:

I pursued a capstone project about students with interrupted formal education because it is a new emerging area of need in the field of ELL education. With the changes to the Commissioners Regulations CR Part 154 in the 2015-2016 school year, the educational needs of SIFE students have been placed front and center. The agency I work for, the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network,

is part of the NYS Education Department's network of support for schools.

The goal of RBERN is to assist districts and schools in creating an educational environment for English Language Learners (ELLs) which engages everyone in meaningful teaching and learning. RBERN works in partnership with the district office, school building administration, building staff, and other support networks to help schools close the gap in ELLs academic performance. RBERN expertise lies in research-based instruction and assessment of ELLs and the alignment of those practices with the Common Core Learning Standards.

(Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resources Network, 2015)

The mission of RBE-RN is to provide

- technical assistance and workshops on state and federal laws, regulations, policies, and funding
- technical assistance on the design and enhancement of educational programs for ELLs
- development and delivery of professional development on instruction and assessment practices that support academic achievement for ELLs
- resources and supports for the education of ELLs.

(Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resources Network, 2015)

It is our job to meet the professional needs of our region. With the completion of this capstone project, it is my goal to more adequately meet the educational needs of SIFE by providing targeted technical assistance and workshops to address their unique educational needs.

Purpose:

The purpose of this capstone project is to look closely at the intersection of teacher preparedness and the educational needs of students with interrupted formal education. There has

been little research surrounding teacher experiences teaching SIFE and the dilemmas they face while trying to provide these students an effective education. Analysis of this study will allow me to examine teacher perspectives surrounding the education of students with interrupted formal education. Data analysis has allowed me to gain a broad perspective about the needs of teachers in the education of SIFE. This understanding of teacher needs will drive service allocation and professional development opportunities that are provided through my place of employment, the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network.

Research Questions:

This study will be focused around the following research question:

- *What are teacher experiences working with Students with Interrupted Formal Education?*
- *What are the dilemmas teachers face when trying to provide high quality education to Students with Interrupted Formal Education?*

Literature Review**Students with Interrupted Formal Education and Achievement**

Students with Interrupted Formal Education, or SIFE, are defined in New York by the Commissioners Regulations Part 154 (New York State Education Department, 2014). These regulations state that SIFE or

Students with Inconsistent/Interrupted Formal Education shall mean English Language Learners who have attended schools in the United States (the 50 States and the District of Columbia) for less than twelve months and who, upon initial enrollment in such schools are two or more years below grade level in literacy in their home language and/or two or

more years below grade level in Math due to inconsistent or interrupted schooling prior to arrival in the United States. (p. 19)

Who are SIFE students? Research has found that students with interrupted formal education have several common characteristics (Bigelow & King, 2012; Short, 1997; Yankay, 1997). SIFE are commonly

- over-age for their grade-level placement due to their weak academic skills and limited or inadequate formal schooling
- have needs that traditional ESL and bilingual programs, and regular programs for native English speakers, cannot or do not meet
- have no or low literacy skills in their first language or in English, and have little academic content knowledge
- are socially and psychologically isolated from mainstream students
- need approached and materials that will help them catch up to and compete with mainstream students
- are at risk of failing or dropping out of traditional academic programs.

(Freeman & Freeman, 2002, p. 33)

This population is likely to have “experienced interrupted schooling due to war, migration, lack of educational facilities, cultural dictates” (DeCapua et al., 2009, p. 2). In New York State, 2.7 million or 8.9% of the total school age population are identified as English language learners. Of those identified students, 8.7% are considered students with interrupted formal education (Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages, 2014). It is common in the world of ELL education to hear the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘SIFE’ used synonymously. While it is true that many refugee students are also considered students with interrupted formal education, not all SIFE are

refugees. In New York City, the “majority of SIFE, 64%, are Spanish speakers (mostly from the Dominican Republic), nearly 40% are non-Spanish speakers” (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010, p. 11). The same can be said about New York State as a whole (Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages, 2014).

Second Language Acquisition and Academic Achievement

In 1979, Jim Cummins, a seminal researcher on second language acquisition, introduced the idea of BICS and CALP. This theory made the distinction between two very different types of language proficiency. Cummins (1979) describes BICS, or basic interpersonal communication skills, as the acquisition of social language, the ability to use language to have comprehensible social interactions. Social language is “content-embedded” (p. 173), meaning that comprehension and participation is aided by context clues, like body language (Baker, 2011). Because BICS is highly contextualized it is thought to be less cognitively demanding (Baker, 2011). It is widely believed that BICS takes on average 2-3 years to acquire proficiency in basic interpersonal skills (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

CALP, or cognitive academic language proficiency, is acquisition of academic language (Cummins, 1979). Although definitions of academic language differ, there is an overall agreement among researchers that academic language “represents the entire range of language used in academic settings, including elementary and secondary schools” (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004., p. 3). For the purposes of this paper we will use Goldenberg’s (2008) broad definition. Academic language or academic English

refers to more abstract, complex, and challenging language that will eventually permit you to participate successfully in mainstream classroom instruction. Academic English involves such things as relating an event or a series of events to someone who was not

present, being able to make comparisons between alternatives and justify a choice, knowing different forms, and inflections of words and their appropriate use, and possessing and using content specific vocabulary and modes of expression in different academic disciplines such as mathematics and social studies. (p. 9)

CALP is “context-reduced” (p. 173) meaning that there are far fewer cues or supports to aide students in the comprehension of content information (Baker, 2011). Because of the lack of contextualization, academic language is believed to be more cognitively demanding than social language (Baker, 2011). Therefore, reaching cognitive academic language proficiency can take 5-7 years for someone with native language literacy (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Previous studies focusing on the language acquisition of students with interrupted formal education suggest that it takes a significantly longer amount of time to for these students to acquire cognitive academic language proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). In fact Collier (1995) found that the rate at which the English language is acquired is directly linked to the amount of schooling that child had received in his/her first language. For students who are below grade level in their native language literacy skills, reaching the cognitive academic language proficiency level required to succeed in school can take 7-10 years, 3-5 years more than students with a solid foundation in native language literacy (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

In order to graduate from high school this at-risk population needs to perform the double duty of becoming proficient in English language and literacy and closing large gaps in their content knowledge due to their limited educational experiences. Students with disrupted educational backgrounds and low native language literacy have the greatest risk of educational failure because they have to perform the dual tasks of learning English and closing the gaps in their knowledge base (Short & Boyson, 2012). ELL achievement data reflects this difficulty.

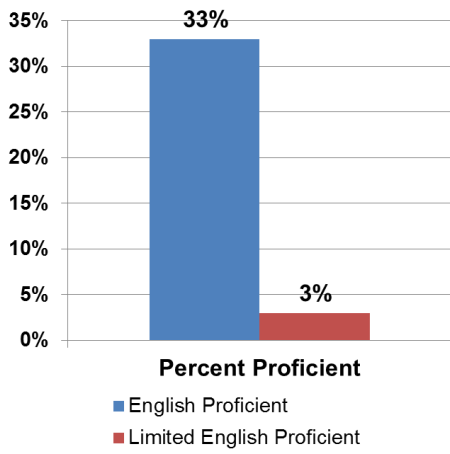


Figure 1. New York State 2014 3-8 ELA examinations: (Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages, 2014, p. 8)

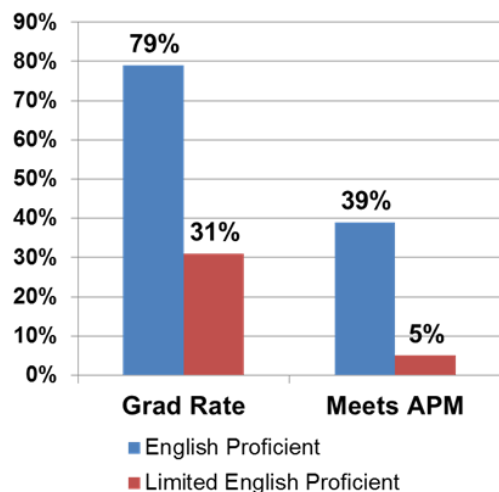


Figure 2. New York State 2014 Graduation Rates and Aspirational Performance Data (Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages, 2014, p. 8)

While the tracking of achievement data for the subgroupings of SIFE is new, there is both anecdotal and preliminary evidence that SIFE achievement rates are a fraction of the already low ELL achievement. In New York City, the number of ELLs without high needs who met 4th grade level ELA standards was 34.3% as compared to SIFE where only 17.5% met grade level standards (New York City Department of Education as cited in Advocates for Children of New York, 2010, p. 14). One New York City school reported a 1-2% graduation rate for SIFE students (New York City Department of Education as cited in Advocates for Children of New York, 2010).

SIFE face particular difficulties in U.S. school due to the “dual challenge of having to master English and learn grade level content in a language other than their own” (DeCapua & Marshall, 2009, p. 160). Meeting the needs of SIFE poses a considerable challenge to our

education system, but is none the less an important factor in improving achievement and overall graduation rates of English Language Learners.

Cracks in the Foundation

The study *Interrupted schooling and the acquisition of literacy: Experiences of Sudanese refugees in Victorian secondary schools* (Brown et al., 2006) is a small qualitative research case study featuring Sudanese refugees and their teachers in Victoria, Australia. This study focused on the links between literacy development and the backgrounds and social practices of these students. Data were collected using focus groups and interviews of students and teachers. The data were then analyzed and coded for common themes. This paper focuses particularly on eight African students and their difficulties adapting to high school, perceptions of the support provided, and practical suggestions.

Australian schools provide 6-12 months of intensive English support before a student is mainstreamed into a typical high school setting. The language and literacy demands of mainstream classrooms far exceed the abilities of students with interrupted formal education. The following problems loomed large in the minds of the focus students: content specific language, background knowledge, ways of learning valued in the classroom, how to use textbooks, socializing, anxiety and isolation, and the future oriented relevancy of school. Brown et al. (2006) present each one of these concerns in depth providing anecdotal evidence from student interviews to drive the discussion. Brown et al. (2006) conclude their article by stating

Our analysis of students' comments reveals that they are keen to engage with regular academic and social practices within the classrooms and schools, yet acknowledge that dilemmas they face in meeting language and literacy

expectations within particular curriculum content and in relation to particular pedagogical strategies. (p. 161)

They also call for more research into strategies, resources, and policies that would best meet the needs of these students.

DeCapua and Marshall (2010) argue that ELLs face the “dual challenge of having to master English and learn grade level content in a language other than their own” (p. 160). Compounding this challenge is the fact that not all ELLs have the same learning profile. There has been an increase in the number of students who have entered US schools who have limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), some of whom are new to print. DeCapua and Marshall (2010) argue that these students require “specially tailored programs” to meet their unique “language, literacy, and academic needs” (p. 160). This article identifies key concerns in teaching SLIFE that can be broadly categorized as a cultural disconnect between the students’ home life and schooling. The researchers argue for a curricular structure called MALP, mutually adaptive learning paradigm, as a best practice in the support of SLIFE instruction. MALP is a planning structure that features three main components (1) accept the conditions of SLIFE learning, (2) create learning experiences that combine the new with the known, and (3) focus on academic skills (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). Using MALP to plan instruction means meeting students where they are, introducing new information in conjunction with something students already know to help create schema, and an emphasis on the explicit teaching of academic skills.

Teacher Preparedness

During the ten year period from 1991-2001, the number of teachers who taught at least one English language learner has more than doubled, increasing from 15% of teachers to 43%

(Zehler et al., 2003). Research suggests that teachers who do not hold certifications specific to the teaching of English language learners are unprepared to meet the needs of these students (Zehler et al., 2003). In a survey designed by The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2001), 27% of respondents reported feeling “very well prepared” (p. v) to meet the educational needs of English language learners (US Department of Education NCES, 2001). In surveying over 1,200 teachers, Alexander, Heaviside, & Farris (1999) reported 81.7% of participants believed they were not adequately prepared to work with ELLs. If the majority of teachers are underprepared to teach ELLs as a broad category, it can be argued that they are equally, if not more, unprepared to effectively teach students with interrupted formal education. *Educating the English Language Learner: Building Teacher Capacity* (2008) published by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition argues

The recent increase in ELLs in the U.S. classrooms has been rapid, and teacher education and professional development has not yet caught up with the demographic shift. There is a pressing need for education for teachers at all stages of their career which aims to prepare or upgrade teachers’ knowledge and skills in order to close the achievement gap between linguistic minority students and their native English speaking peers. (p.10)

In the article *Learning to be Literate*, Woods (2015) examines the refugee immigration trends in Australia and how schools play a role in the integration of these students. Woods argues that schools play three major roles in the lives of refugee students to ensure an equitable education (1) providing access to high quality literacy learning (2) promoting citizenship and participation in civil society and (3) providing a space for social-emotional support or “welfare” (p. 99). Woods compiled research around her stated beliefs about the role of schooling in the

refugee community and juxtaposed that research with ethnographic interviews of ESOL teachers. Persuading schools to provide high quality literacy instruction to refugee students is at the forefront of Woods argument. The reality is that many refugees come to school with limited exposure to print. While teaching literacy is not traditionally seen as the responsibility of high school teachers, it is the responsibility of schools and a requirement for educational success. Woods argues that schools are often the first and most significant cultural touchstone refugee families come in contact with. Schools must also take a central role in building a sense of community among the refugee population. This means that schools play a highly influential role in how newly arrived refugees are assimilated into their communities. This sense of community translates to participation in civil society. Finally, Woods posits that schools are an ideal place to “provide spaces of welfare” (p. 99). Woods argues, “All refugee young people arrive with some level of experience of stress, trauma, violence, or disengagement” (p. 99). As learning and well-being are linked, schools have a vested interest in promoting the social-emotional health of their refugee students. Woods presents a clear argument for deeper thinking around schools’ roles in the education of SIFE.

In the article *African refugees with interrupted schooling in the high school mainstream: Dilemmas for teachers* (2005), Miller et al., focus on the difficulties that a large influx of students with interrupted schooling create within a schooling system. The study first discusses the migration patterns of refugees coming to Australia, focusing specifically on refugee populations from Africa. Miller et al. then define the educational gaps that these students bring with them, “Students with interrupted formal education lack the topic-specific vocabularies of academic subjects, understanding of register and genre, cultural backgrounds to scaffold their understanding, social understandings of how to ‘be’ in the classroom, and learning strategies to

process content” (p. 23). This small ethnographic study focuses on African refugee students’ experiences in high school and how their teachers respond to their needs. Data for this study was collected through a series of focused interviews with both students and teachers. This paper focuses specifically on “teacher’s experiences, practices, and dilemmas in working with these students” (p. 24). Interviews with teachers revealed three main struggles in teaching African refugee students. (1) Teachers did not feel their prior teaching experience prepared them for working with this special population. (2) Teachers were frustrated by lack of appropriate texts and teaching resources and (3) teachers reported tension between the ESOL and content teachers with respects to the roles and expectations for teaching SIFE. The teachers in this study believed that the African refugees were more difficult to teach due to the cultural distance between themselves and their students. Teachers had difficulty with how little schooling this new wave of refugees had received. Teachers also reported struggling with balancing content learning expectations with the idea of meeting students where they are. Miller et al., report that the purpose of this study was to bring to light the reality of teaching and learning for refugees in a mainstream secondary school.

It is clear that the combination of high risk student populations, like SIFE, and the lack of teacher capacity in the area of ELL education is cause for great concern. This leads us to think about: how can we provide high quality education to our neediest populations when there are so few professionals who feel qualified to do so? Meeting both student and staff needs is essential to improving educational outcomes.

Applications and Evaluation

Methodology:

This case study focuses on teacher experiences educating Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Data were collected from two separate sources for a period of 6-8 weeks and

contain two distinct collection methods. First, data were collected using an anonymous survey about the teachers' experiences with SIFE (Appendix A). This survey was created using Google Forms and sent electronically to the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network's (Mid-West) list serve. This is a voluntary list serve comprised of teachers who work with ELLs in the Monroe 1, Monroe 2, Genesee Valley, and Wayne-Fingerlakes BOCES regions. The purpose of this survey was to gain a broad understanding of teacher experiences and needs surrounding the education of SIFE students in the Western New York. Lastly, the survey was followed up with 6 in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers who have had experience teaching SIFE (Appendix B). Teacher recruitment for the in-depth interviews was based on previous enrollment in Mid-West RBERN works shops (Appendix C).

Participants:

Participants in this study were identified through the services provided by the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network (RBERN) at Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES. Participants in the anonymous electronic survey were recruited via the Mid-West RBERN list serve. The list serve is voluntary. Teachers and school personnel who are interested in workshops and resources for ESOL and Bilingual teaching register their preferred email address. Participation in all activities via this list serve, including this survey, was voluntary and garnered no penalty for choosing not to participate. The online survey was open for a period of six weeks gathering fifty seven responses.

The survey participant demographics are as follows:

<i>Certification Area</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
ESOL only	21
ESOL + Classroom and/or Content Area Certification	24
Classroom or Content Area Certification	5
Bilingual Certification	4
Other	3

Figure 3. Survey Participants Areas of Certification.

Of the fifty-seven respondents, twenty one held only ESOL certification, twenty four held ESOL and additional teaching certifications, five were classroom and/or content area teachers, four held Bilingual certifications, and three were classified as “other”. These respondents included one school counselor and two building administrators.

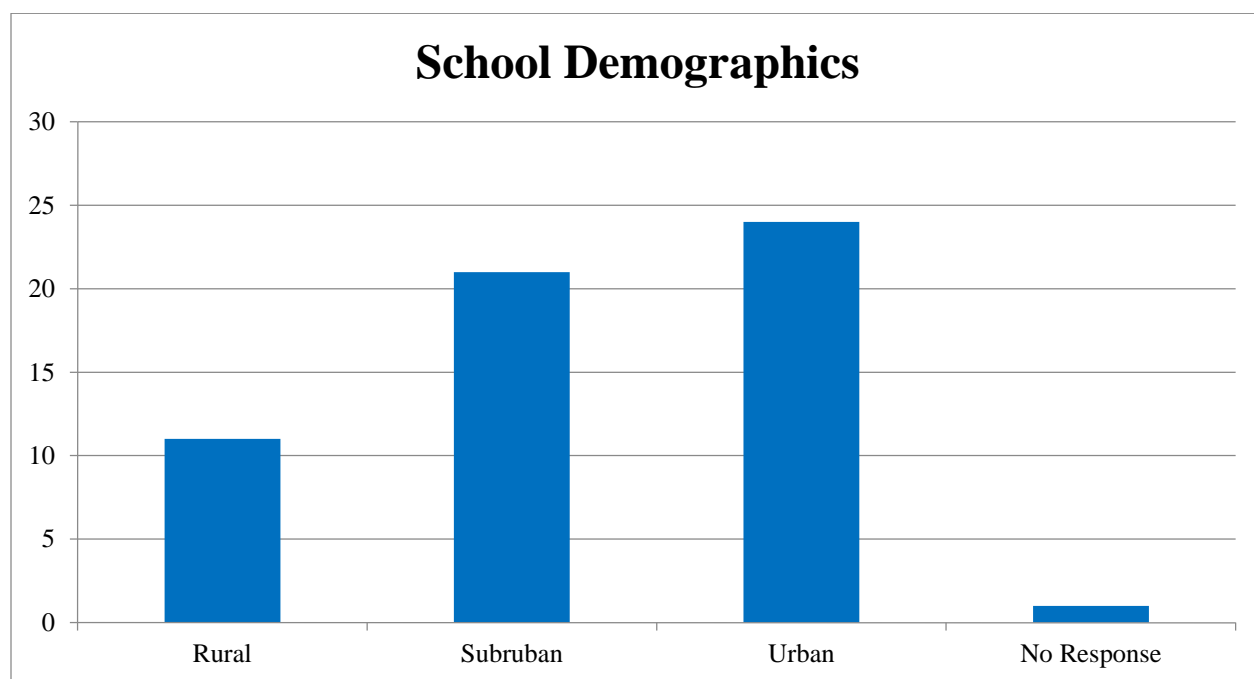


Figure 4. Survey Participants School Demographics.

Survey participants school demographic data were as follows: eleven people stated they worked in a rural school district, twenty-one worked for a suburban district, twenty four in an urban area, and a single participant provided no response.

Additionally, six in-depth interviews were conducted. Recruitment flyers were sent to twenty teachers who had both previously attended Mid-West RBERN workshops and had self-identified as having experience teaching Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Study enrollment was conducted on a first come, first serve basis. Of the twenty teachers that were initially contacted, six agreed to participate in the in-depth interview portion of this study. Participants and their respective school districts have remained anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. Interview participant demographics are as follows:

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>School Demographics</i>	<i>Current Teaching Position</i>	<i>Certifications Held</i>	<i>Years of Teaching Experience</i>
Ashley	rural	4 th Grade	Elementary and Special Education 1-6 Literacy 1-6	11 years
Keri	urban	7/8 ESOL	TESOL	13 years
Holly	urban	1-6 ESOL	TESOL	6 years
Matt	urban	9-10 ESOL	TESOL Spanish 7-12	2 years
Shannon	suburban	6-8 ESOL	TESOL ELA 7-12	6 years
Cody	urban	9-12 Science	Biology 7-12 Special Education 7-12	7.5 years

Figure 5. In-depth Interview Participant Demographics.

A total of six teachers participated in the in-depth interview process. Of those teachers, two taught elementary aged students while four focused on the middle and high school grades. Two of the teacher participants were classroom/content teachers while the remaining four taught ESOL. Participants had varying years of teaching experience and varied in the educational settings they worked in. Four of the six teachers worked in an urban school setting, one worked in suburban school and one worked in a rural area.

Setting:

The setting for the initial phase of this study was BOCES in Western, NY. BOCES is an educational cooperative service which provides services to school districts that they could not

afford on their own. The Mid-West RBERN serves four BOCES regions and 67 component districts in western New York. Participants in the in-depth interview process met at a neutral location in a non-school setting outside of their work day.

Procedures of Study:

During the time of this study, I was employed as a Professional Development Specialist for the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network. The Mid-West RBERN is one of eight across the state of New York. RBERN's are responsible for regional oversight of ESOL and Bilingual educational programs, professional development, and providing technical assistance to school districts to help them better serve their ELL students. For the purposes of this study, I took on the role of teacher-researcher. I gathered data relevant to teacher needs surrounding Student with Interrupted Formal Education in order to better meet the needs of teachers and students in my region. The data was collected for a period of eight weeks between January 2016 and March 2016. Survey data were collected via the internet using Google Forms (Appendix C). The survey consisted of ten questions designed to gather both demographic data and information regarding teachers comfort level, familiarity, and needs in regards to teaching SIFE. Data from in-depth interviews was collected using a semi-structured interview. Participants were asked a series of open ended questions with regards to their SIFE teaching experience. Interviews were audio recorded and simultaneously transcribed by briefly noting the topic being discussed and the time stamp.

Positionality:

My positionality as a teacher-researcher includes many facets of my identity. Taking into consideration my race, class, gender, education, and personal beliefs will enable me to look critically at my research. I am a single, white woman in my 30's. I grew up in a working class

household. My parents were the first in their families to go to College. My mother and father both graduated with Bachelor's Degrees from The College at Brockport. My father worked in building maintenance before retiring and my mother is a social worker.

I graduated from SUNY Geneseo with a Bachelor's Degree in Communicative Disorders and Sciences. While working as a Speech Therapist, I began to be interested in second language acquisition. I decided to pursue a Master's Degree in Teaching English as a Second Language from the University of Rochester. I worked as an ESOL teacher in a K-12 rural school district with a high number of refugee students for 7 years. I am currently a professional development specialist. I work for the Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network and provide professional development, program development, and instructional coaching for schools with English Language Learners. While I work with students who are from various linguistic backgrounds, English is my only language.

I believe that all teachers are teacher of ELLs. I believe that the responsibility for language and literacy instruction should be rest with all teachers and not just be the responsibility of the ESOL teacher. I believe this is essential to closing the achievement gap between native and non-native English speakers.

Methods of Data Collection:

Data were collected over a period of 6-8 weeks. The on-line survey was open for a period of 4 weeks, so teachers could take the survey at their convenience. Interview participants participated in 1 audio-recorded semi-structured interview. These interviews took place outside the school day in a non-educational setting. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for in depth analysis.

Lincoln and Gruba (1985) argue that the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is comprised of the following characteristics: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. In other words, in order for a study to be considered trustworthy the findings need to be true, consistent, apply across contexts and non-bias (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985).

Trustworthiness of this study was established through the practice of data triangulation and member checking. Data triangulation is the process of checking for consistency by comparing multiple sources of data (Altrichter et. all, 2008). I ensured transferability by discussing context along with participant details. I also used member checking with all my participants to ensure my findings are reliable and accurate.

Analysis

This research was designed as a mixed methods case study of teachers' perceptions about their work teaching Students with Interrupted Formal Education. Through the use of surveys, in-depth interviews and data triangulation (Altrichter, et al., 2008), I analyzed teachers' experiences working with Students with Interrupted Formal Education and the dilemmas they face when trying to provide these students with a high quality education. As a result of the data analysis process, I categorized the data I collected into recurring themes surrounding the education of SIFE.

Analysis:

After all of the data were collected, I began the process of data coding. I started with the individual responses to the online survey. I read through each response looking for themes and trends. I kept a list of repetitive words and phrases. I used the same process with the transcriptions from the in-depth interviews. I used the process of constant comparative analysis to compare and contrast the data provided in the survey answers to the transcription notes from

the in-depth interviews (Shagoury & Power, 2012). I then organized those recurring words and phrases into five categories (1) professional development; (2) programs; (3) pedagogy; (4) materials/resources; and (5) social-emotional health. I assigned each of these categories a color and color coded the survey responses and the interview transcriptions. This process of data triangulation provides trustworthiness and credibility to my data analysis.

The purpose of my study was to look closely at the connection between teacher preparedness and the educational needs of students with interrupted formal education. Because little research has been conducted in this area, this analysis will allow me to deeply examine teacher perspectives surrounding the education of students with interrupted formal education. This understanding of teacher needs will determine service allocation and professional development opportunities that are provided through my place of employment, the Mid-West Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network.

Through the process of data analysis I found common themes in both the survey and in-depth interview data. I found that regardless of the amount experience, teachers and school personnel largely feel unprepared for the challenges of teaching students with interrupted formal education. Through data analysis I also discovered that teachers face several common dilemmas when teaching SIFE. They have received little to no professional development about the wide range of needs of students with interrupted formal education, they struggle to balance student interests and curricular demands, SIFE programming is limited, there is a lack of access to materials and resources, and the social emotional wellbeing of students is not a priority.

Finding One: Teachers are Unprepared to Meet the Needs of SIFE

An overwhelming majority of study participants reported that they felt unprepared to meet the needs of Students with Interrupted Formal Education. SIFE are often over-age for their

grade level, have low or pre-literacy skills in their first language, have poor academic skills due to inadequate formal schooling, may be culturally disconnected from mainstream students, have a history of trauma, and cannot get their needs met in traditional ELL programs because they require materials, resources, and teaching practices that will address their wide social, cultural, and educational gaps (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Miller et al., 2005; Short & Boyson, 2012). SIFE students are considered an extremely “at-risk” population because of these challenges. Meeting all of these needs is difficult and poses considerable challenges to our current educational system.

Survey respondents reported feelings of being unprepared to meet the needs of Students with Interrupted Formal Education. In survey question 4, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statement: *I was/am able to meet the educational needs of SIFE students* on a scale from 1 to 5 (Appendix C) with a score of 1- indicating strongly disagree and a score of 5- indicating strongly agree. Question results are noted below:

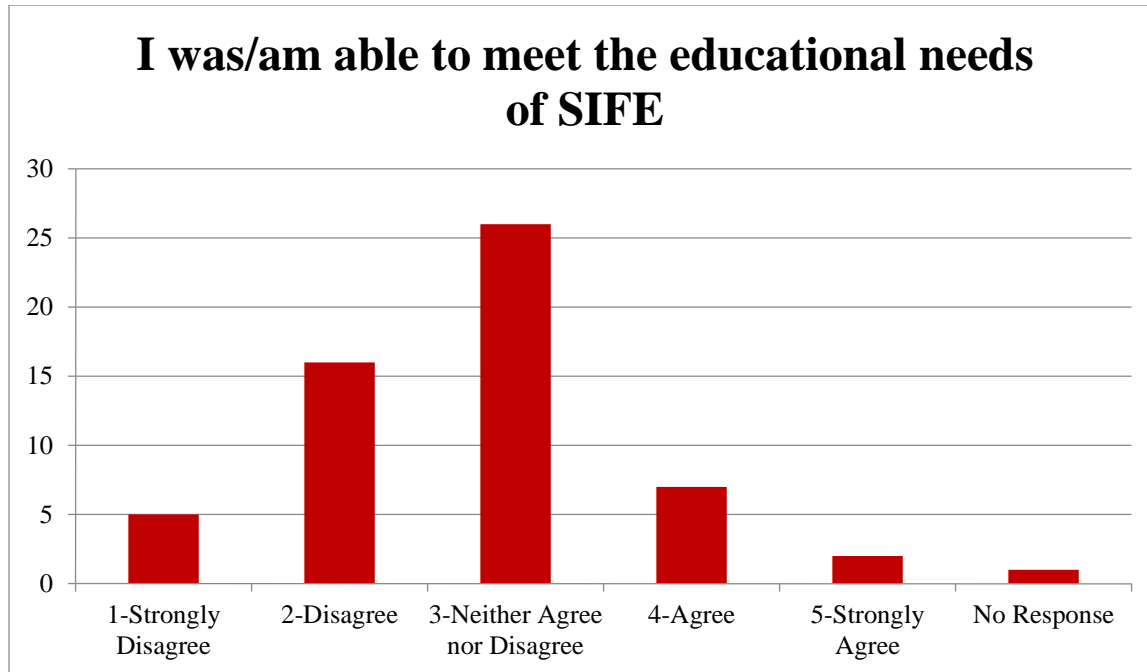


Figure 6. Your Professional Needs with Regard to Students with Interrupted Formal Education
Survey Question 4- I was/am able to meet the educational needs of SIFE.

Of the fifty-seven respondents, only nine of them reported feeling prepared to meet the educational needs of SIFE. Forty seven people responded with a less than favorable rating; meaning that they self-reported feeling inadequately prepared to provide a high quality education to Students with Interrupted Formal Education.

Survey question 6 asks respondents to rate their agreement with the following statement, using the scale described above. Question 6 states: *My education has prepared me for meeting the needs of SIFE students.* The term education was defined for participants as “college programming and/or professional development.” Respondents reported similar feelings of unpreparedness as they did for question 4.

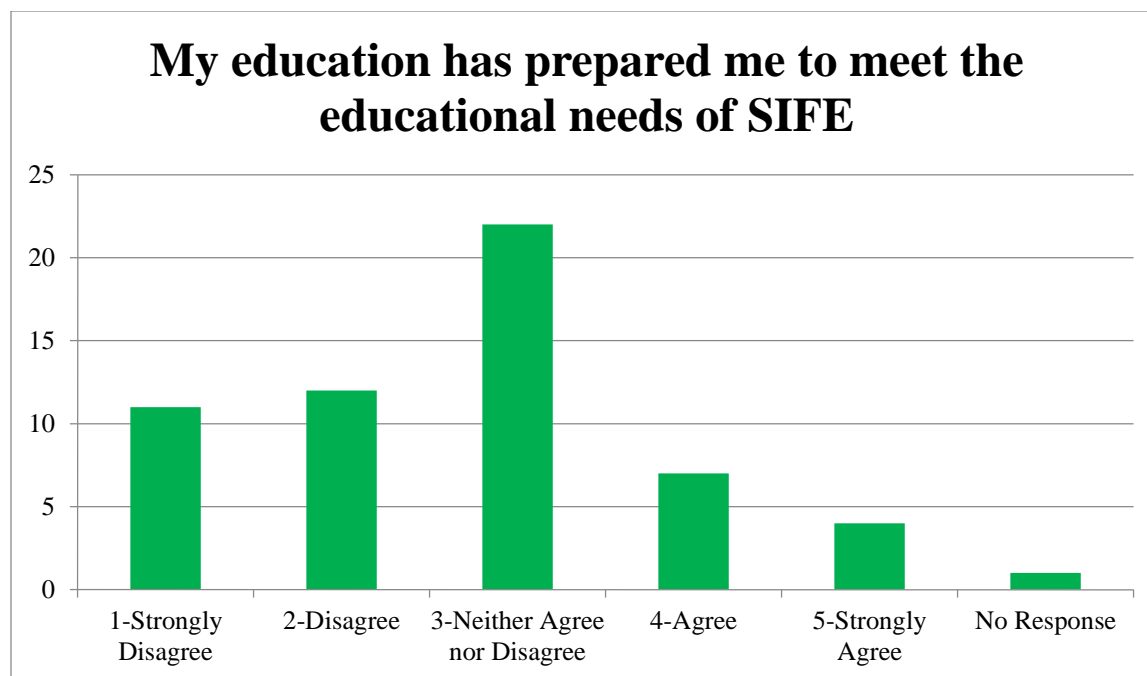


Figure 7. Your Professional Needs with Regard to Students with Interrupted Formal Education

Survey Question 6- My education has prepared me to meet the educational needs of SIFE.

On survey question 6, forty-five participants reported that their education had not prepared them to meet the educational needs of SIFE, while eleven participants reported feeling prepared by their education. When comparing survey questions 4 and 6, it is interesting to note that while the favorability rating between the two questions remains consistent, the number of respondents giving a 1- strongly disagree rating increased by nearly 10%. This discrepancy points to a perception that the knowledge teachers acquired through their college preparation programs and professional development did not prepare participants to address the needs of diverse student populations.

This issue of teacher preparedness was also addressed in the in-depth interviews. When asked interview question 5: *Do you believe your previous teaching experience prepared you for teaching SIFE students? Why or Why not?* Five of six interview participants responded “no”. The remaining participant responded “somewhat” to this question (Ashley, personal

communication, February 6, 2106). Of the six interview participants, Matt was the most recent college graduate. He was hired as an ESOL teacher for the 2015-2016 schoolyear. He had one year of previous teaching experience, teaching Spanish 7-12 prior to entering a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Master's program. When asked "Do you believe your previous teaching experience prepared you for teaching SIFE students," he emphatically answered "NO" (personal communication, February 19, 2016). Matt went on to explain his program "did talk about SIFE students so I knew about the idea of what SIFE meant and what students with limited formal or interrupted education meant. I was exposed to the term so I knew they existed. I knew they were out there but as far as strategies to work with them specifically, I didn't really have a lot of that. I have had to make connections between ESOL strategies and what that means for SIFE students" (personal communication, February 19, 2016).

This sentiment is echoed in Holly's response to interview question 5. Despite having had exposure to dozens of SIFE in her six years teaching and having had experience teaching in a program specifically designed for SIFE, she did not believe her previous education prepared her to adequately meet the needs of SIFE in her classroom. Holly stated in her interview, "I think that you can't really prepare someone for that level of need. You know what I mean? They just need so much. And they need it so...like...so extensively...like they need help at home, they need help navigating everything..." (personal communication, February 15, 2016).

All six in-depth interview participants reported believing that no teacher really felt prepared to meet the needs of SIFE. When asked: *What challenges do SIFE bring to the classroom?* Shannon stated, when "thinking of secondary SIFE students, so if they're in a middle or a high school their teachers have no idea how to teach them the skills that they need. So the students who are really low level readers, not to say that the reading or the literacy specialist in

the school don't know how to teacher people to read, but they [SIFE] are working in groups with students at their grade level and the skills that they are working on are not the skills that they need. So, one of the biggest challenges is that their teachers aren't really equipped to teach them the skills that they need" (personal communication, March 3, 2016).

Analysis of both the survey data and the in-depth interview transcripts revealed a feeling of being unprepared to meet the education of SIFE. Factors like previous teaching experience and years teaching did not appear to make a significant difference in the perception of teacher preparedness. For example, all of the in-depth interview participants currently have SIFE enrolled in their classrooms, yet none of the participants reported feeling their prior experiences prepared them to teach SIFE. Four of the six in-depth interview participants currently work or have worked in programs specially designed to meet the broad educational needs of SIFE. All four of those teachers answered "no" when asked if they felt like their previous teaching experience prepared them to meet the needs of SIFE. Although, ELL and SIFE populations continue to rise, teacher education and professional development have yet to specifically address this changing population, thus, creating a sense of unpreparedness in the teaching community.

Finding Two: Balancing Curricular Expectations with Student Need is a Challenge

Students with Interrupted Formal Education are an at-risk population due to their educational gaps. Language acquisition for students with interrupted formal education takes a significantly longer amount of time for these students than ELLs without SIFE designation (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). This is due to the fact that the rate of English language acquisition is directly linked to the amount of schooling a child receives in his/her first language (Collier, 1995; Short & Boyson, 2012). Lack of formal schooling results in lack of literacy, therefore educational achievement is dependent on a student's ability to overcome large gaps in

their education which requires her/him to develop cognitive academic language proficiency and grade level literacy skills in English (Baker, 2011). Despite the fact that they are just beginning to develop English language and literacy, SIFE are held to the “same accountability standards as native English speakers” (Short & Boyson, 2012, vii). Teachers, therefore, face the dilemma of balancing curricular expectations with students’ language and literacy needs. Teachers face tough choices when attempting to provide high quality education for SIFE. How do I meet my content standards with a student who with low literacy skills? What is more important, teaching my content or teaching a student how to read and write? Do they have to be mutually exclusive?

This dilemma is a recurring theme present in both the survey responses and the in-depth interviews. The majority of respondents report tension between what they are expected to teach and what would be best for their students. Cody, a long time SIFE Science teacher, and an interview participant reported the challenges he faces when trying to educate SIFE “mostly have to do with the nature of the curriculum and pacing...” (personal communication, March 8, 2016). Even as an experienced teacher of ELLs and SIFE, Cody struggles with balancing his curriculum and the needs of his students. He struggles with whose role and responsibility is it to ensure that all students’ needs are being met. For example during his interview he stated, “The ELL teachers are swamped trying to teach the current material that students are accountable for. If a student has 3rd grade Math skills in 6th grade, who is going to bring the student up to speed? What happens is that the student goes into the class at their grade level and the gaps never get filled out. Going back to fill in missed information is almost impossible. I'm not sure what the solution is” (Cody, personal communication, March 8, 2016).

Cody reports having to cover less curriculum more in-depth with his students because he has to start at the very beginning of Science with how to make observations (personal

communication, March 8, 2016). He believes that taking the time to lay the foundation is the best way, possibly the only way to close their educational gaps by ensuring that students are learning both content, academic language, and literacy (personal communication, March 8, 2016). This sentiment is echoed in the following survey responses. When asked: *How can RBERN best support you in providing high quality education for Students with Interrupted Formal Education?* Curriculum was mentioned eleven times. Participants stated:

- "...It would also be helpful to have a "scope and sequence" for where to start with SIFE students--when so much is needed, where do you start?"
- "I really don't know if that's possible. With CCS and the aligned standardized tests, I feel lost on how I can get SIFE students to that level with little to no foundation. I'm teaching students how to read for the first time in middle school, yet they HAVE to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their ELA class. We're going from A to Z without hitting any of the letters in between."
- "when there's only 1 or 2 SIFE students in a content/Regents class, how to modify/slow pace of instruction"

Shannon, an in-depth interview participant, also discussed the issue of curriculum and accountability. "There is not enough time, there is a constant race to learn the breadth of material that they are supposed to cover and when there's gaps in the basic knowledge that they need it's always like racing against the clock", she said (personal communication, March 3, 2016). She believed that the pressure for on-time graduation was enormous, relating a story of an administrator trying to place one of her SIFE in all remedial classes so she could graduate with her cohort. Shannon reported that she believed this pressure came from the top down and is exacerbated by states holding schools accountable for graduation rates. That pressure is then

passed on to administrators and eventually to teachers in the form of set curriculum, coverage, and pacing to prevent academic failure. Shannon wondered, “If we could somehow put a SIFE stamp on a student, and not just for the sake of labeling but to try to you know designate a group of students that maybe it wouldn’t ding the school for the graduation rates if they took five or six year to graduate. I think that would really be beneficial” (personal communication, March 3, 2016).

The link between curriculum issues and accountability was also mentioned by Cody: “...if we were a school we would be beholden to the graduation on time rate. That graduation on time rate is one of the reasons why [my former] closed. We got a large amount of ELLs from West which had closed, and when those kids came in they already came in past that [graduation] deadline, that four year deadline. And so what ended up happening is our percentage went up and that was enough to force us into closing” (personal communication, March 8, 2016).

Determining and implementing curriculum is a complex issue. It has close ties to the wider context of school accountability. There is very real social, political, and monetary pressure to get students to perform on grade level. The data appear to suggest that this pressure at times causes schools to follow a set of rigid compliance oriented teaching guidelines rather than taking students’ individual needs into consideration when mandating curricular initiatives.

Finding Three: There is a Lack of Programming for SIFE

Previous review of the literature tells us that SIFE share several common characteristics. They are as follows:

- over-age for their grade-level placement due to their weak academic skills and limited or inadequate formal schooling;

- have needs that traditional ESL and bilingual programs, and regular programs for native English speakers, cannot or do not meet;
- have no or low literacy skills in their first language or in English, and have little academic content knowledge;
- are socially and psychologically isolated from mainstream students;
- need approaches and materials that will help them catch up to and compete with mainstream students;
- are at risk of failing or dropping out of traditional academic programs.

(Freeman & Freeman, 2002, p. 33)

These characteristics make SIFE non-traditional students. The nature of their educational needs makes servicing these students in a traditional school setting difficult. The results from both the survey and the in-depth interviews brought this dilemma to light. The majority of participants reported that SIFE need specialized programming to succeed. When asked to rate the statement in survey question 8: *The programming and scheduling of SIFE in my building meets their educational needs*, the majority of respondents reported a less than favorable rating. Only six of the fifty seven respondents reported a rating of agree or strongly agree. Nine respondents did not give a response to this survey item. Three of those nine do not currently have SIFE, and six of those nine reported having no specific programming for SIFE. Therefore, these participants did not respond to this item because they felt presently there was no SIFE programming in their schools for them to evaluate. The data strongly suggests that the programming needs of SIFE are not yet being met in our region.

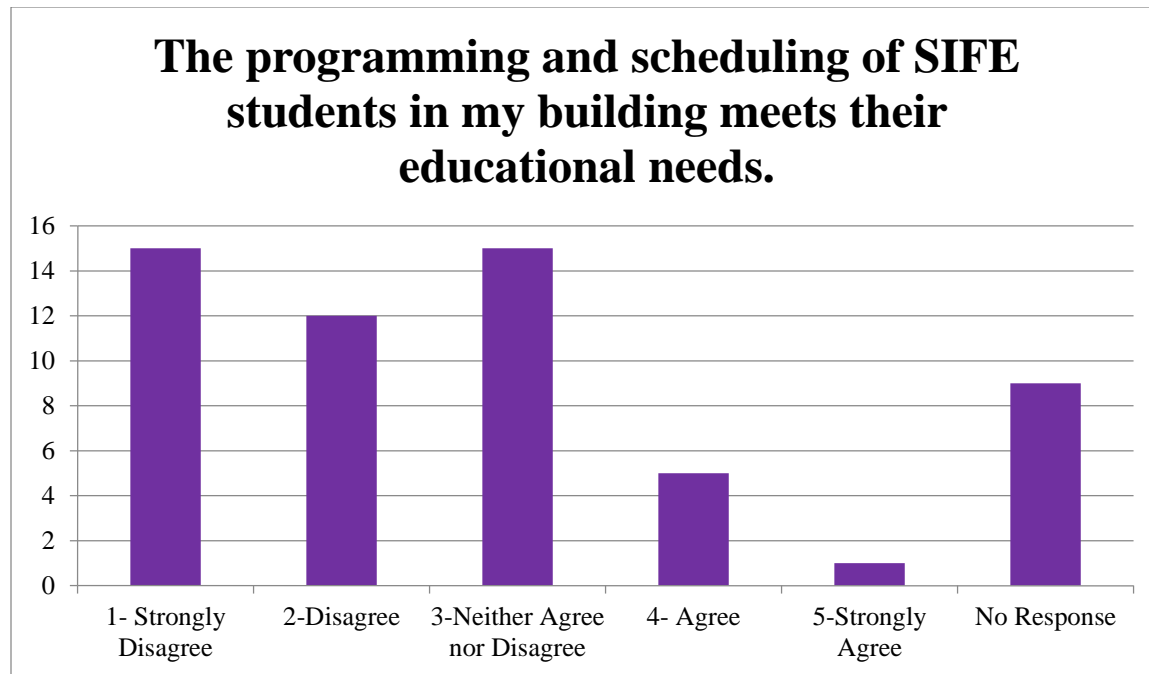


Figure 8. Your Professional Needs with Regard to Students with Interrupted Formal Education
 Survey Question 8- The programming and scheduling of SIFE students in my building meets their educational needs.

When survey respondents were asked: *How can RBERN best support you in providing high quality education for Students with Interrupted Formal Education?* They replied:

- “I would like to see a county wide program...created made available to the students in this situation. Maybe BOCES could set this up.”
- “There needs to be a school ... that serves this population.” “Why do they only accept students from certain areas of the world and not Hispanic or others? If they will not take in other students, then there must be an equal opportunity for those of Hispanic and other backgrounds (other than Nepali and Burmese).”
- “I would like to see a school where the Hispanic and others not served by Rochester International Academy have all the resources available to them needed to make them successful educationally.”

There is only one dedicated SIFE program in the entire Mid-West RBERN region. This is a short term, 1-2 year, program designed to meet the needs of refugees. Enrollment is only available to students within the Rochester City School District who have refugee status. As previously discussed, the terms refugee and SIFE are often used synonymously. Within the parameters of this program, large populations of students who are not refugees and still have limited or interrupted formal education are being underserved. Survey responses indicate that there is a huge gap in programming for students outside of the city of Rochester and an equally problematic gap for non-refugee SIFE.

Survey respondents also indicated that they believed a supportive administration was directly linked to and therefore played a major role in the programming and ultimate educational success of SIFE.

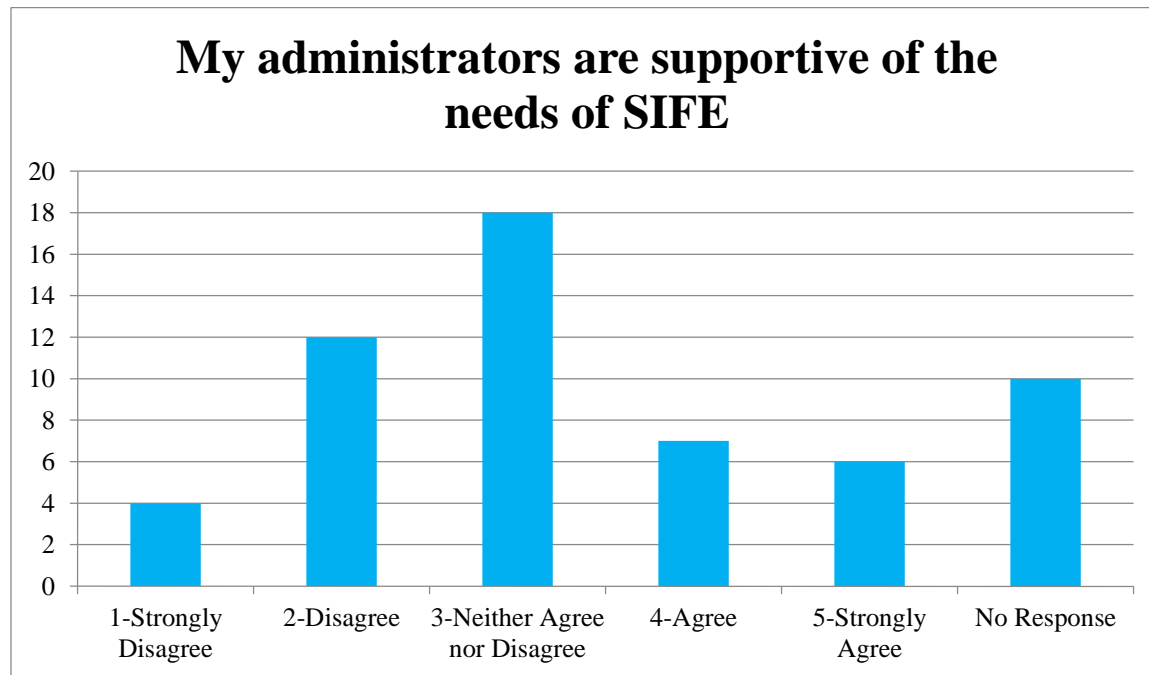


Figure 9. Your Professional Needs with Regard to Students with Interrupted Formal Education
Survey Question 9- My administrators are supportive of the needs of SIFE.

When asked to rate survey question 9: *My administrators are supportive of the needs of SIFE* thirty-four people responded with a less than favorable rating. When survey respondents were asked *How can RBERN best support you in providing high quality education for Students with Interrupted Formal Education?* Several respondents answered by suggesting that helping the administration to understand and value SIFE would improve programming and in turn student achievement. For example, one person stated “I think the support needs to start at the top, with administration. Educators are often halted by schedule needs/money/administrative decisions. Helping administration to understand the needs of SIFE students would be helpful because then they would understand and perhaps offer more flexibility and/or support when it comes to student needs.”

The need for administrative support to create specialized flexible programming is also reflected in the in-depth interviews. When asked the interview question: *What do you need to better service SIFE students?* Keri discussed the need for flexible programming that was based on individual student’s needs. Keri’s previous teaching experience was at a program specifically designed for SIFE. This was a short term sheltered program, where all of the students enrolled were SIFE. Keri left this program because she did not feel like it prepared her students for the rigors of school that they would face once they left the sheltered program. In her interview she discusses the issues that programming constraints have on her students’ abilities to access all a school has to offer. She states, “programming might limit them in a way from accessing other opportunities” (personal communication, February 9, 2016). She goes on to give an example of how participation in the Bilingual program in her current building means that due to scheduling constraints none of her students have access to literacy classes or the trades school housed in their buildings. She struggles with the idea that inflexibility in scheduling and programming limit

her students' potential: "we need flexible programming..." (Keri, personal communication, February 9, 2016).

Holly responds to the same interview question with her experiences teaching SIFE. She discusses her belief that administrative support is critical to student success. Holly argues, "I think there needs to be more administrative support around the understanding that even if you say this kid is going to pass the Regents exam (which is absurd) you have to think about how? The administrator at [my last school] was super supportive and super realistic...you have to teach people how to read before you teach them content and she understood that" (personal communication, February 15, 2016). Holly argues that the issues of SIFE programming have to be looked at from both the top down and the bottom up. Effective SIFE education means thinking about how to meet students' needs within the context of your school and developing programs to meet those needs. That task is nearly impossible without administrative knowledge and support.

When asked the same question Matt takes a long pause to think and reflect about his current students. He tells me, "What they really need is a special program that does not isolate them but gives them school survival skills. I think that should be a whole class or at least a part of a program...a class that targets study strategies, how to write in an agenda, who to ask for this thing, what are the names of people in school, what rooms are called...I believe they need their own program with school survival, literacy, stand-alone ESOL, and their own content classes with heavily adapted curriculum" (Matt, personal communication, February 19, 2016). Matt goes on to discuss the need for administrative support; administrators need to "also understand SIFE, just like they also need to understand ESOL. In my experience the only administrators that understand any ELLs are either former ESOL teachers or former ESOL students

themselves...those are the only people who have been empathetic. They grew up ESOL” (Matt, personal communication, February 19, 2016). Like the survey and other interview participants, Matt is wrestling with the need for specialized flexible programs for SIFE.

Finding Four: There is a Lack of Access to Materials and Resources

When surveyed, *How can RBERN best support you in providing high quality education for Students with Interrupted Formal Education?* twenty of the fifty seven responses mentioned access to materials and resources. For example survey respondents stated:

- “I would also like to learn the most effective resources, scaffolds, and differentiation strategies for increasing U.S.-related background schema and building cultural/literacy/language skills in SIFE ELLs. I would like our school to be able to access specialized resources to better serve SIFE ELLs.”
- “The greatest need (even with students who aren't SIFE) is access to materials that teach basic skills in a 'grown-up' way.”
- “Age-appropriate true beginner materials...”
- “I need clear, concise, appropriate resources and time to go over those resources.”

When asked to rate survey question 6: *I have access to appropriate teaching materials for SIFE students*, only five respondents showed agreement. These two survey questions represented the most pressing dilemmas for teachers. The vast majority of respondents reported not having access to the materials they needed to teach SIFE.

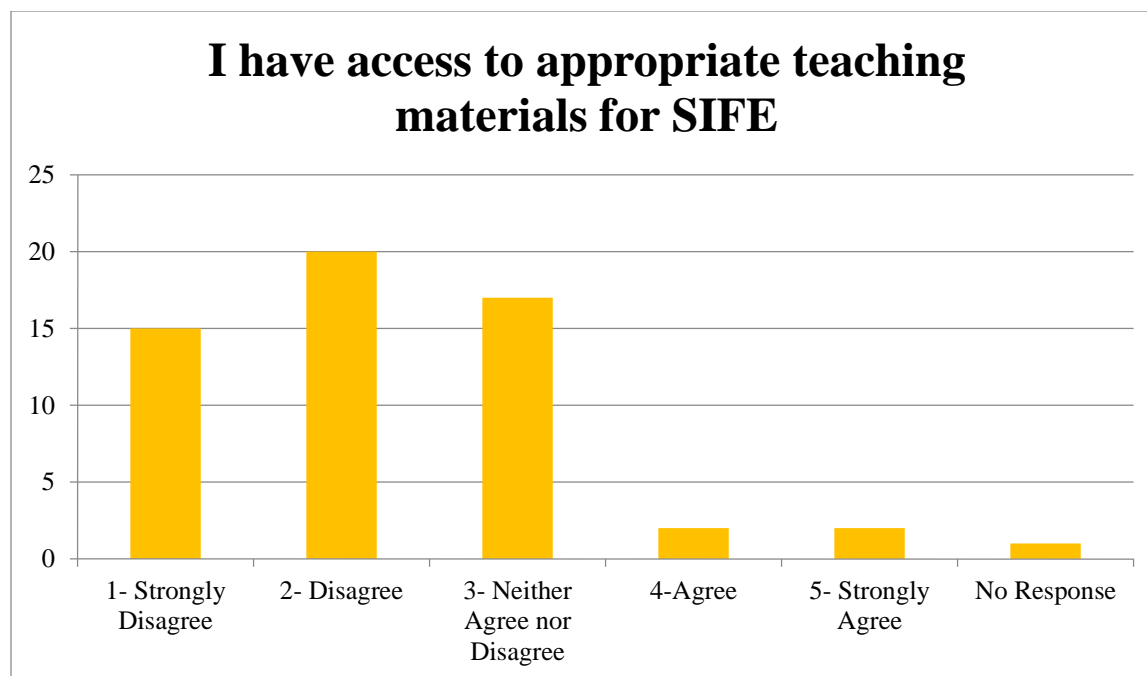


Figure 10. Your Professional Needs with Regard to Students with Interrupted Formal Education Survey Question 6- I have access to appropriate teaching materials for SIFE.

In-depth interview data corroborates these findings as all six interview participants reported access to materials and resources to be a challenge. Data suggest that teachers don't differentiate between the ideas of materials and resources. In reviewing the interview transcripts, references to materials and resources can mean books or things they could physically use in the classroom, strategies and ways to modify instruction, and more abstract ideas of time and collaboration. This is illustrated in Ashley's response to the final interview question *What do you need to better service SIFE students?* Ashley replied, "Time" (personal communication, February 6, 2016). When asked the follow up question "What do you mean?" Ashley elaborated, "visiting classrooms that are like the first teaching placement I had, where there are two teachers...just to be able to see what's possible, look at strategies they use..." In her interview, Ashley also mentioned collegial expertise as a resource; "this one amazing ESOL teacher showed us how to modify instruction to teach parts of a plant, that was solid gold. I want to be able to use ideas like

that in my own classroom” (personal communication, February 6, 2016). She also discussed the need for language based resources; “When I get a student, I want someone to say here are cultural differences, here’s how me might respond to authority, here are the things he values. I also didn’t have enough printed resources” (Ashley, personal communication, February 6, 2016).

When asked interview question 6: *What do you think teachers can do to help SIFE become literate in English?* Cody lists a myriad of resources and materials he as a content teacher would need to close the achievement gap. These resources include home language materials, access to literacy assessments, lower reading level text books to teach content, and hands-on teaching materials. Cody believes that these resources would not only improve his teaching but would also be invaluable to his students’ learning. He states, “I am a personal believer that you give kids access to as many resources as you can...we use a lot of tools that are available on any cellphone. About 80% of my SIFE class has cellphones at home so kids will actually access the materials they need at home on their phones. If you can give them access to strategies, tools, and scaffolds they can access learning” (Cody, personal communication, March 8, 2016). As in the literature previously reviewed, teachers that participated in this study faced the difficult challenge of accessing appropriate teaching materials for their students (Miller et, al, 2005).

Finding Five: Lack of Mental Health Support and Services is a Serious Concern

Mental health issues among SIFE are a well-documented phenomenon. Woods (2015) contends, “[a]ll refugee young people arrive with some level of experience of stress, trauma, violence, or disengagement” (p. 99). As we know learning and well-being are interconnected. Schools, therefore have a responsibility in caring for the social-emotional health of their students. Five of six interview participants directly reference students’ mental health as a barrier

or challenge to meeting their educational needs. They argue that the stress of acculturation and histories of trauma and violence contribute to the academic difficulties of SIFE. The emotional stability of his students weighs heavily on Cody's mind. He laments, "Some of our kids come from very dangerous areas of the world. They come with...some of our kids exhibit symptoms of PTSD...and we don't really have...I would say the resources are not often allocated to give them what they need. You know? I mean, how many Native speakers get counseling? Let alone being able to have a translated counseling session. We just expect them to...I don't know. We try to be aware of it, we run professional development in that area but these kids run into a lot of barriers both here and at home and I don't know that we always take care of that like we should" (Cody, personal communication, March 8, 2016).

Holly echoed these concerns during her interview. She states, "Trauma is a huge barrier and it can cause really long lasting processing issues. I would love to find out does it last forever? If you get psychological help does it dissipate sooner? Can you develop coping mechanisms to deal with it? Because I notice that all the students in my school who are considered SIFE exhibit processing issues and it is not an intelligence things. I think that is just because they are totally traumatized" (personal communication, February 15, 2016).

The other interview participants relay similar tales of students not feeling safe and not feeling a sense of belonging. They identify assimilation into American schooling as a source of frustration, anxiety, stress and depression. They also worry that a lack of success in school can "contribute to a lack of belief in oneself" which may be a contributing factor in high SIFE dropout rates (Keri, personal communication, February 9, 2016).

Assimilation, stress, and trauma are reoccurring themes with survey participants as well. While less prominent than the other dilemmas, acculturation and its importance is mentioned five

times in the survey data. Respondents discuss the need for students to receive “PTSD counseling”, “counseling services to assist with the trauma that they most likely encountered”, and “...more information on how to work with the acculturation needs of SIFE - how to help them with the social/emotional rigor of adjusting to the "game" of school.”

Conclusions and Implications

Summary of Findings:

The purpose of this study was to examine the connection between teacher preparedness and the educational needs of students with interrupted formal education. This study was focused around the following research questions:

- *What are teacher experiences working with Students with Interrupted Formal Education?*
- *What are the dilemmas teachers' faces when trying to provide high quality education to Students with Interrupted Formal Education?*

During this six week study, I found that regardless of previous educational experiences or professional development opportunities, teachers feel unprepared to meet the educational needs of SIFE. Data analysis revealed that teachers face numerous dilemmas when teaching SIFE. Teachers struggle to balance student needs and with the demands of the curriculum, specialized programs for SIFE are inadequate, there are few appropriate teaching materials and resources for SIFE, and the mental health of SIFE is not adequately addressed.

Conclusions and Implications:

Conclusion 1: Teachers are unprepared to meet the educational needs of SIFE

The results of this study indicate that teachers feel largely unprepared to meet the vast challenges of educating SIFE. SIFE have broad ranging educational needs and gaps that seem impossible to overcome in time for high school graduation. They are frequently over-age for their grade level,

have few literacy skills in their first language, have limited academic skills due to a lack of formal schooling, may be culturally isolated, have a trauma history, and cannot get their needs met in traditional ELL programs because closing these gaps require materials, resources, and teaching practices that address their wide social, cultural, and educational needs (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Miller et al., 2005; Short & Boyson, 2012). The results of this study also indicate that previous education and professional development experiences did not prepare teachers to meet the needs of SIFE. Research participants overwhelmingly reported a lack of preparedness with regards to providing a high quality education for SIFE (Alexander, Heaviside, & Farris, 1999; US Department of Education NCES, 2001). Even when data were controlled for time and experience, teacher self-perception with regard to their own abilities to provide a high quality education for SIFE was negative. In short, the length of time participants spent teaching SIFE did not alter their negative self-perceptions.

Implication 1: Teachers need targeted education and professional development around the needs of SIFE

With the increasing rates of English Language Learners enrolled in U.S. schools and extensive educational needs of the subpopulation of SIFE, education and professional development opportunities have yet to address these shifting demographics (Zehler et al., 2003). Through the process of this study, I learned that regardless of their years of experience teaching SIFE, teachers feel largely unprepared to meet the vast challenges of educating SIFE. Teachers want targeted education and professional development around the needs of SIFE. There is a serious gap in knowledge when it comes to best practices and SIFE. We need to provide all teachers, regardless of where they are in their career, with the skills and knowledge required to close the achievement gap between SIFE and their Native English speaking peers (NCELA,

2008). Higher education and professional development organizations, like Mid-West RBERN, need to work collaboratively to create educational and professional development programming to help teachers gain the skills that need to provide high quality education for SIFE. All teachers, not just those majoring in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, should be exposed to this population of students. In preservice teaching programs, colleges need to work diligently to ensure that all students gain experience working with English Language Learners in their field experience and student teaching placements.

Conclusion 2: Lack of programming negatively impacts teachers' ability to provide high quality education for SIFE.

Data analysis shows that high quality education for SIFE cannot be achieved without attention to their educational programming. Educational programming is a broad term that encompasses many of the findings of this study, including perceptions of administrator support, balancing curricular expectations with student needs, access to materials and resources, and access to mental health support and services. In all of these areas participants reported facing significant challenges. When schools are unable to address the global needs of a group of students by developing effective programming, teaching and learning suffer.

Implication 2: Holistic and inclusive programming is necessary to provide high quality education to SIFE

The idea of education programming has far reaching implications. How well do we as a school understand the needs of our SIFE? How are we addressing those needs? How do SIFE fit into the context of our schooling system? Do we practice shared responsibility and shared decision making for our SIFE? Programming for SIFE should be created within the context of a particular schooling system and with the input of all education stakeholders, administration,

classroom and content teachers, ESOL teachers, community members, parents, and the students themselves. This is the only way to ensure that educational programming for SIFE is both holistic and inclusive.

Without specific SIFE programming, the language and literacy demands of mainstream classrooms are beyond the students' abilities (Brown et al., 2006). Programming needs to address gaps in students' content specific language, background knowledge, literacy skills, ways of learning valued in school, socializing, assimilation, and the relevancy of school (Brown et al., 2006; Bigelow & King, 2012). Based on my research, I recommend that SIFE programming take a three pronged approach and be developed around these guiding principles: (1) focus on closing the literacy gap; (2) focus on grade level content; and (3) focus on social emotional wellbeing.

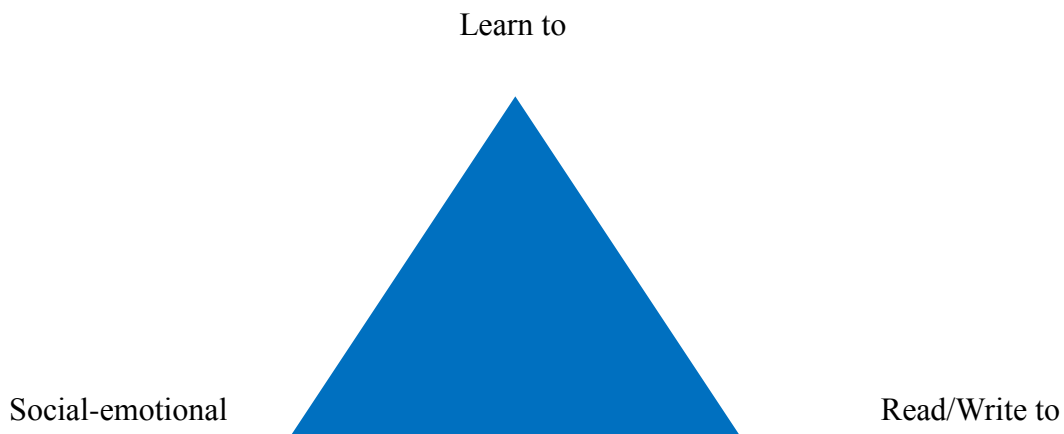


Figure 12. A Three Pronged Approach to Educating SIFE.

In an effective SIFE program, curricular demands and the needs to the students must be balanced. In order to close the SIFE achievement gap, students' early literacy needs must be

addressed. SIFE need time and space in their programming to learn how to read and write. Simultaneously, the gaps in content area knowledge need to be identified and addressed. Schools need to help teacher's access materials and resources to address students content and literacy needs (Miller et al., 2005).

Finally, schools play a significant role in the cultural assimilation of SIFE students (Woods, 2015). In order for assimilation to occur, SIFE must be included into the culture of a school, not isolated for long periods of their education. Because students spend the majority of their time in school and because learning and social-emotional health are linked, school is an ideal place to address the anxiety, depression, isolation, and trauma SIFE bring. Schools should not shy away from the emotional needs of SIFE. In order for SIFE to succeed, mental health needs must be addressed right alongside educational needs.

Limitations:

The limitations of this study include member checking and transferability. As I was the only researcher conducting the study, I was unable to utilize other people's perspectives during data collection and analysis. With regard to transferability, the sample size from both the survey and the in-depth interviews were small. For the survey there were fifty-seven respondents, but the survey was sent to a field of over six hundred professionals. Conducting in-depth interviews with six teachers is also a small sample size. This could affect the transferability of my findings to a wider population.

Research Suggestions:

Based on the results of my research, I believe there is a serious gap in education research about effective programs and instructional practices for English Language Learners overall. I find the lack of data about "what works" for educating SIFE particularly disturbing. As a highly

“at-risk” population, it is imperative that educational researchers take up their cause. I believe there is a need for research in the following areas: (1) effective programming options for SIFE; (2) ways to teach and promote emotional resilience; (3) effective ways to teacher early literacy skills to adolescents; and (4) ways to help preliterate or low literacy students’ access grade level content.

Overall Significance:

This study is timely because it looks deeply at the fastest growing segment of K-12 school population, ELLs. The results of this research have provided insight into the dilemmas teachers’ face when trying to provide high quality education for students with interrupted formal education. It is only through deepening our understanding of problems that we can create viable solutions. The results of this study will lead to the design of long-term professional learning plans to address the needs of SIFE within the context of the work of the Mid-West RBERN. This study will also inform the creation educational programming targeted at meeting the unique needs of students with interrupted formal education.

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Appendix A

Your Professional Needs with Regards to Students with Interrupted Formal Education

What educational setting do you currently work in?

rural

suburban

urban

What teaching certifications do you currently hold?
Check all the apply

ESOL

Bilingual

Classroom preK-6

Content Area 6-12

Special Education

Other:

Do you currently or have you ever worked with Students with Interrupted Formal Education?

Yes

No

What makes a student SIFE? How would you define SIFE?

I was/am able to meet the educational needs of SIFE students.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

I have access to appropriate teaching materials for SIFE students.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

My education has prepared me for meeting the needs of SIFE students.

college programming and/or professional development

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

I understand and can carry out the New York State SIFE identification process.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

The programming and scheduling of SIFE students in my building meets their educational needs.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

My administrators are supportive of the needs of SIFE students.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

How can RBERN best support you in providing high quality education for Students with Interrupted Formal Education?

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your teaching experience.
2. Tell me about how you started working with SIFE students.
3. What are the strengths SIFE students bring to the classroom?
4. What are the challenges SIFE students bring to the classroom?
5. Do you believe your previous experiences prepared you for teaching SIFE students? Why or why not?
6. What do you think teachers can do to help SIFE students become literate in English?
7. What do you need to better serve SIFE students?

Appendix C



Research Study

Students with Interrupted Formal Education: Teacher Perspectives

Volunteers Needed: The purpose of this study is to explore the dilemmas teachers face while trying to provide a high quality education to Students with Interrupted Formal Education. If you have taught in the past or are currently teaching SIFE students we would like to hear from you.

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following: complete 1 semi-structured interview lasting 30-45 minutes. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. All information gathered from this interview will be kept private, anonymous, and confidential. Interviews will be conducted in a non-educational setting outside your work day. Participation is voluntary and will not be compensated.

If you are interested in participating, please contact:

Jennifer Raponi

Professional Development Specialist-RBERN

Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES

3599 Big Ridge Road

Spencerport, NY 14559

jraponi@monroe2boces.org

(585) 352-2757

Semi-structured Interview Recruitment Email Script:

Good Morning,

You have been identified through your previous participation in Mid-West RBERN workshops as teachers who are currently working with or who have worked with SIFE students in the past. Please find attached a recruitment flyer to participate in research study I am conducting about teaching Students with Formal Education. If you are interested in participating in this study please follow the directions as laid out in the flyer. Participants will be chosen on a first come first serve basis. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Thank You,

Jennifer Raponi

Professional Development Specialist-RBERN

Monroe 2-Orleans BOCES

3599 Big Ridge Road

Spencerport, NY 14559

jraponi@monroe2boces.org

(585) 352-2757