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Personal Experiences of Latin American Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education

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**Personal Experiences of Latin American Students with Limited or
Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Secondary Schools**

by

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A Thesis

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Abstract

The United States and countries around the world are experiencing a growth of students who have recently arrived with limited or no formal education and minimal or no literacy skills, yet are enrolling in secondary level classrooms due to age. Many of the students arrive from Central American countries with difficult social and economic situations, and therefore have minimal literacy in Spanish and little to no exposure to English (Tellez & Walker de Felix, 1993). The term SLIFE, or students with limited or interrupted formal education, defines these students by the quantity of education, but factors such as educational and cultural values, home life, social situations, past experiences, trauma, and educational expectations also affect the experiences of these students in schools. Past research has focused on cultural differences (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011a; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010b), pedagogical strategies (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010a; Walsh, 1999) and struggles teachers have encountered with these students (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005; Windle & Miller, 2012), yet few have investigated personal experiences of these students (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Gunderson, 2000), especially students from Latin America countries. This study investigates the academic and non-academic experiences of students who enter schools in the United States with limited literacy skills or educational experience due to limited or interrupted schooling in their home country. These personal stories, shared in interviews, add a new perspective on past research aimed at improving pedagogical strategies and academic achievement of these students by providing educators with large- and small-scale modifications that will positively influence SLIFE from Latin America and around the world who are educated in US classrooms. Interviews with participants indicated some comparisons

and contrasts between their past and present educational experiences. Conversations revealed what things are most challenging for SLIFE including instructional practices, literacy challenges, receiving help, technology, lockers, lunch numbers, and attendance policies. These conversations can help guide administrators and classroom teachers make decisions regarding future educational models for SLIFE through an understanding of past education and current experiences.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the 2007 U.S. Census Bureau, the United States is seeing “record levels of immigration” and subsequently an increase in students who do not speak English as a first language (as cited in DeCapua & Marshall, 2010b, p. 159). Many of these immigrant students who enter secondary schools with low English proficiency often have limited education. A number of studies have been conducted on the challenges that teachers face when teaching immigrant students who lack English proficiency (Benseman, 2014; Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). However, few studies have focused on challenges SLIFE, or students with limited or interrupted formal education, have personally faced in academic, language, social, and cultural situations within the first few years of their arrival (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2005; Gunderson, 2000), especially students from Latin American countries. A deeper understanding of SLIFE can be attained by learning more about background experiences, cultural differences, and personal experiences. These experiences can shed additional light on this demographic group that teachers and pedagogical strategies cannot. The goal of this paper is to share both personal experiences of SLIFE in non-academic and educational contexts in an effort to contribute additional research to the field to help educators understand, plan, teach, and advocate for this growing population in United States schools.

Interest in this topic has arisen after several years spent in the classroom and seeing increased numbers of students who arrive with less schooling than their peers. An increased numbers of students who lack basic elementary academic skills have arrived in secondary schools. Yet, students are placed in grade levels based on age and, consequently, are not

equipped with the necessary language or academic skills needed to be successful at that level due to little or no academic background. These students are enrolled in ESL classes to improve their language proficiency. However, they are often enrolled in mainstream classes to keep them “on track” for graduation at the end of high school. SLIFE are not prepared for these classes like their native English-speaking peers. They lack content knowledge, vocabulary, and analytical skills which are taught in previous grades. Dooley (2009) suggests that despite the movement toward cross-curricular approaches, literacy and language pedagogy have historically not been a part of the skill sets of secondary teachers. A change in student needs constitutes a shift in pedagogical approaches, yet teachers are not well prepared to effectively work this diverse sub group of students due to their diverse language, academic, and emotional needs. There is a growing need for more teacher support to help these students.

Newcomer programs are increasing around the United States in an effort to provide SLIFE with necessary academic skills and cultural knowledge. These programs take on a variety of different models depending on SLIFE population and available district resources. Short (2002) compared different models of newcomer programs around the United States, especially in states that have high numbers of newcomers. She states that there are “distinguishing characteristics” that separate newcomer programs from regular ESL or language support programs (p. 175). Notably, newcomer programs are for older students or those with the lowest academic skills because the programs help bridge gaps in education and also build up cultural knowledge with the student and family. Again, newcomer programs are all very diverse in the specific programming based on need and resources. Consequently, it is nearly impossible to agree on a “single prototype for a “model” newcomer program” (Francis,

Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006, p. 25) that will best serve the needs of all SLIFE in all districts.

The difficulty with newcomer programs is that they are organized at a district level, and teachers have little control over them. Unfortunately, many districts are not prepared to implement adequate newcomer programs. Zimmerman-Orozco (2015) suggests that U.S. school districts do not have background or sufficient resources to meet the academic, cultural, and emotional needs of SLIFE. Currently, the needs outweigh the resources in many districts, and districts nor teachers can provide sufficient help with the available resources.

Not only do SLIFE struggle with academics, they also struggle with social and cultural norms. Lockers, cafeteria procedures, attendance policies, and classroom conduct are all taught in early grades and turn into general expectations in secondary grades. This knowledge of school and academic environments is assumed and expected by teachers and administrators, especially at the secondary level, but rarely talked about or explained. While all students who come from other cultures need explicit instruction in these non-academic areas, SLIFE require even more help since there is little or no foundation to build upon. Explicit explanation and instructions about school procedures and rules are necessary in order for SLIFE to understand and be successful in a new culture and academic setting.

With the growing numbers of immigrants in schools, teachers need to be better prepared to work with these populations. Teachers need more training and support. Montero, Newmaster and Ledger (2014) state that secondary ESL teachers generally have a background in ESL pedagogy “that largely assume dominant language literacy abilities” (p. 60); however these pedagogical strategies that historically have focused on content and general language

“are not meeting the academic needs of adolescent refugees with limited print literacy abilities” (p. 60). Miller et al. (2005) interviewed teachers who expressed frustration that not only were appropriate resources unavailable but they did not feel that previous teaching experiences had prepared them to work with such a vulnerable population.

Administrators and teachers need to have a more holistic knowledge of who SLIFE are and their diverse backgrounds and educational needs. Academic, language, literacy, cultural, and emotional support is necessary for SLIFE to succeed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Educational settings are composed of a wide variety of students with different experiences and needs. The number of SLIFE in the United States and around the world is increasing with the growing numbers of people immigrating to new countries. This literature review begins by defining SLIFE and how they are different from other subgroups, including English learners. Next, it considers academic and language characteristics and needs of SLIFE and how these students are enrolled in U.S. schools with fewer years of education than their peers. They also lack of content and school knowledge creates added difficulties for these students who also are required to learn a new language at the same time. In addition, low literacy in the first language makes learning a second language even more difficult. Emotional needs are also reviewed since family situations place increased anxiety on students who already find school challenging. Pedagogical models and strategies have been proposed to help meet the needs of SLIFE. Lastly, results from previous empirical research are summarized to reiterate the real educational experiences of SLIFE that have been documented. The unique and growing needs of the SLIFE population create “a new and extremely challenging set of pedagogical challenges” for teachers (Miller et al., 2005, p. 31).

Definition of SLIFE. As the number of immigrants in the United States increases, a growing number of students are entering United States schools with varying levels of education. According to Padolsky (2005), over the past decade 10.8 million immigrants have been of school-age, causing the number of English learners to more than double between 1990 and 2005 (as cited in DeCapua & Marshall, 2010a). The growing challenge facing schools is to close the gap between where these students are placed in school based on age and their

education level. These students also present challenges for educators who struggle to meet academic and language needs in a short amount of time when they enter the school system in secondary grades.

Different acronyms or terms have been used to refer to this growing population including SIFE (students with interrupted formal education) (Zimmerman -Orozco, 2015), low-literacy refugee background, or LLRB (Windle & Miller, 2012), new arrivals (Olliff & Couch, 2005), and recently arrived refugee youth (Woods, 2009). For the purposes of this paper the term *students with limited or interrupted formal education*, or SLIFE, will be used because it accounts for a wider variety of educational backgrounds. Additionally, since the term SLIFE focuses on the plural form of students, this paper will use the term as a plural noun and therefore use it with plural verbs.

Many labels used to categorize groups of people can be difficult to clearly define, and the term SLIFE is no exception. The term SLIFE does not have a single accepted definition. The Indiana Department of Education Office of English Language Learning and Migrant Education defines SLIFE as “newly arriving immigrant high school age English Language Learner students with little or no formal education or whose education began but has been interrupted, [students who are] several years below their age/grade appropriate level in school related knowledge and skills, [students with] low literacy skills in native language, and [who] need to simultaneous learn English, develop academic language skills in English, and master grade level content in English” (Tuchman, 2010). The Minnesota Department of Education defines SLIFE as students who (a) come from a home where the language usually spoken is other than English, or usually speaks a language other than English, (b) enter school in the

United States after grade 6, (c) have at least two years less schooling than the English learner's peers, (d) function at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics; and (e) may be preliterate in the English learner's native language” (Minnesota Statutes, 2015). For this paper, the definition of SLIFE by DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2009) will be used. They define SLIFE as students who come from educational systems that may have not “provided the same opportunities for learning, and/or the requirements and expectations may have been vastly different from those of the U.S. system; or students may have never been enrolled in formal schooling prior to their arrivals in the United States” (p. 2). This definition is preferred because it takes into account that cultural expectations of education can impact student learning in a new culture. It also does not limit SLIFE to secondary students. Even though a student has background education, the cultural academic expectations might have been significantly different. Regardless of the specific definition, these factors directly impact a student’s knowledge of school and literacy level which in turn impact the academic success of these students in an educational setting so they can be successful.

Although the terms English Learner (EL)/English Language Learner (ELL) and SLIFE overlap in many ways, the two populations are not the same and the terms are not to be used interchangeably. The U.S. Department of Education defines ELLs as “national-origin-minority students who are limited-English-proficient” (Francis et al., 2006, p. 3). English learners are students who lack proficiency in the English language and need additional language support to succeed in mainstream classrooms and outside of educational settings. This population includes students who have extensive formal education in their native

countries as well as those who have had limited opportunities for formal education. Only those in the latter group would be classified as SLIFE. Regardless of whether a student is classified as EL/ELL, SLIFE, or both, educators need to remember that “low or no literacy, limited English proficiency, and a lack of content knowledge should not be equated with limited cognitive development” (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011a, p. 9). Even though the students do not have the content knowledge that would be expected of students who grew up in the United States, they do have knowledge of the world they grew up in and experiences from work, cultural, and some past education.

Characteristics of SLIFE. Since SLIFE emphasizes the quantity of *formal* education a student has, defining the terms *formal* and *informal* education is necessary. According to DeCapua and Marshall (2011a), formal education “occurs within a specific structure” such as a school system and informal education is “incidental learning” or “learning that takes place in response to needs as they come up” (p. 17). Informal education is not useless, but it does not adequately prepare students to enter a structured educational setting as well as formal education. In many Latin American countries, students “are denied their right to an education” because of poverty (Kim, Miranda, & Olaciregui, 2008, p. 435). However, through life experiences at home, in their communities, or work experience, many SLIFE have a wealth of knowledge that is valuable yet different than the knowledge their formally-educated peers would have. Thus, the fact that a student has not attended school previously may not be because they did not desire to, but rather an economic situation within the family. Therefore, when discussing SLIFE, it is important that they not be thought of as without any education, but rather lacking experiences in formal school settings.

Not only do these students lack English language proficiency, many have emotional and mental health needs as a result of traumatic experiences. Students have seen violence, loss of family members (Brown et al., 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2005), or have had sporadic educational experiences due to poverty or moving. Due to the sensitive nature of emotional issues, this study did not intend investigate the emotional issues of SLIFE. Regardless, it is a significant factor in their lives and is touched on in this paper because educators should be aware of this additional stressor in their lives.

In addition to previous stressors within the family, existing family needs combined with academic expectations can cause additional pressure on SLIFE. Like most immigrants, SLIFE and their families have a hard time adjusting to a new culture and often struggle financially as they transition to the new culture. For this reason, SLIFE often have work schedules, a responsibility to care for younger siblings or older relatives, or financial obligations that force them to drop out of school prematurely (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010b; Woods, 2009). Slavin (2009) discusses Maslow's hierarchy of needs, reiterating that a person's low level needs (physiological, safety, belonging) need to be met before the person can focus on higher level needs, which includes learning. Like all students, when SLIFE have financial struggles or responsibilities outside of school, they will have a hard time focusing on academics.

Lastly, it should also be noted that when SLIFE arrive in the United States as a 15, 16, or 17 year old, they are viewed as minors by U.S. standards. However, in many other countries, an individual of 16 years is considered an adult and "a child of this age would be considered an adult with adult responsibilities" (WIDA Consortium, 2015, p. 1). Due to this

difference in perception, many students who arrive might struggle with the fact that school in the United States is mandatory until age 17 or 18. At home they are considered an adult, but the new culture considers them minors with restrictions such as curfew and work regulations.

Basic academic needs. SLIFE have three major academic needs when they enter classrooms: knowledge of school procedures, basic literacy, and academic content knowledge. Typically, low-language proficiency is more evident than unfamiliarity with school and lack of L1 literacy. However, their lack of native language literacy and familiarity within a school environment can directly influence a student's academic experience just as much as a lack of language proficiency can.

One of the first things SLIFE need when they enroll is a cultural knowledge of academic settings, or how to “do school.” Woods (2009) suggests that there is an “underlying assumption within the construct of schooling” and by the secondary grades, students have built their knowledge of academic settings based on years in school (p. 89). DeCapua and Marshall (2010b) discuss how US classrooms have strong connections with European traditions that value science, abstract reasoning, and logic all of which encourage independent learning and accountability, and future relevance. In contrast, SLIFE generally arrive from collectivist cultures that value “immediate applications, interpersonal relations, collaborative opportunities, oral learning components, and repeated contextual practice” (p. 167). This focus on relationships and immediate needs is also why SLIFE often miss or drop out of school to babysit younger siblings or work to support the family. SLIFE from collectivist cultures are not used to individual accountability or independent work. DeCapua and Marshall (2011b) emphasize that unfamiliarity with academic learning disadvantages students when

they arrive in U.S. schools because they understand and interpret the world differently due to cultural values and experiences.

In addition to overarching Westernized academic ideologies, SLIFE also struggle with simple daily tasks. Miller et al. (2005) interviewed teachers of African refugees with interrupted education who expressed concerns about how cultural expectations and ways of behaving at school are “huge challenges for students arriving aged 15, with minimal or no schooling” (p. 23). SLIFE encounter great difficulty with simple tasks that are generally expected of secondary students including organizational skills, time management (Miller et al., 2005), sitting for prolonged periods of time, and working silently (Walsh, 1999). Unfamiliarity and confusion about these seemingly simple routines can be challenging for teachers. However, DeCapua and Marshall (2011a) stress that “it is not the case that these students have ‘missed’ learning something the first, second, or third time it was taught to them, but rather that they have never had the opportunity to learn the content or skills in the first place nor had the opportunity to develop the necessary and expected literacy and academic knowledge” (p. 9). Teachers cannot assume these students have been taught specific behaviors or tasks and cannot blame them for things they have not had the opportunity to learn.

In addition to a lack of understanding of the school routines and practices, SLIFE also lack literacy in their first language (L1). Native language literacy is one of the major factors that set SLIFE apart from other ELLs. DeCapua et al. (2009) identify four different types of SLIFE literacy: pre-literate, non-literate, semi-literate Roman alphabet, and non-alphabet literate. Pre-literate SLIFE are students who have had no prior literacy exposure primarily

because the L1 is not written or newly written with few materials. Non-literate students are those who have a written L1, but the student has not had many opportunities to become literate. Semi-literate Roman alphabet means that the student has basic literacy but it is not enough to participate in grade-level academics. Lastly, non-alphabet literate SLIFE have basic literacy in a non-Roman alphabet language. Regardless of the type of literacy, SLIFE do not possess skills that allow them to read or write at the same grade level as their native English-speaking peers, even in their L1. For SLIFE who enter secondary grades upon arrival, these students often challenge educators who often lack strategies to help these students, as “basic print literacy teaching is beyond the experience of most high school teachers” (Woods, 2009, p. 93), because ESL training and pedagogy generally assumes L1 literacy and content knowledge.

Since SLIFE have not been exposed to a high level of academic literacy, academic work is exceedingly challenging. Brown et al. (2006) state that “students must acquire communication skills, and also academic writing and speaking skills, while attempting to catch up to native speaking peers who themselves are continuing to develop academic and language competence” (p. 153). Lack of topic-specific academic vocabulary, genre, and register (Miller et al., 2005) are skills that these students most likely have not been exposed to in their native language, making it difficult to transfer to their second language. Also, many of these students come from impoverished schools with few or no textbooks, making it difficult for them to understand how to use a textbook (Marshall & DeCapua, 2010). Likewise, students who do have some educational experience often equate learning with memorization, and those who are successful at memorization are the best students (Gunderson, 2000).

Depending on language in the native country, students need to learn a new alphabet, text direction, letter sounds, and sounding out words (Benseman, 2014). When SLIFE enter academic environments and are asked to learn new content in a second language using strategies they are unfamiliar with, it is not surprising that these situations can be stressful for them.

In addition to intense language support, semi-literate and preliterate SLIFE need time. Montero et al. (2014) suggest that SLIFE do not have the “luxury of time to reach a level of English language, literacy, and academic content proficiency equal to those of their English speaking peers” (p. 67). This is especially true of secondary SLIFE who need more time than ELLs who have an uninterrupted educational background with comparable time in an academic setting as their peers. Collier (1989) and Cummings (1984) suggest that ELLs generally require 5 to 7 years to attain academic English proficiency, while Collier (1995) suggests that semiliterate SLIFE may need seven to ten years (as cited in Montero et al., 2014). SLIFE who enroll in high school with limited literacy unfortunately do not have sufficient time to learn both the English and academic knowledge before they are required to leave public education. SLIFE have been given the task to catch up on literacy, L2 proficiency, and academic knowledge in just a few short years.

Emotional needs. In addition to academic needs, their background experiences, current family, socioeconomic, and financial situation also put a strain on basic needs of SLIFE. Woods (2009) suggests that if schools are going to adequately serve these students, they need to take on the roles of providing education, developing citizenship, and providing welfare for emotional support in order to meet all of these needs. SLIFE who arrive with

traumatic backgrounds add another layer of complexity to academic performance. Teachers who work with refugees, whose backgrounds can be similar to SLIFE, note how learners are often still dealing with displaced family members and homesickness (Benseman, 2014). As one African refugee stated, “it is difficult to concentrate on studies when your mind is not at peace and filled with bad memories...you need peace in your head before you can really study” (Cassity & Gow, 2005, p. 53). While educators cannot change the past, focusing on building positive relationships with SLIFE and providing a safe environment for them can help them adapt to the academic environment.

Pedagogical strategies. Pedagogical strategies and program models have been proposed to confront these challenges that SLIFE are faced with in the classroom, but as Windle and Miller (2012) suggest, these strategies are “thin on the ground” (p. 321). DeCapua and Marshall (2010, 2011b) advocate for the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm, or MALP, instructional model which is designed for SLIFE to gain language proficiency through projects with embedded language lessons. This model incorporates both individual and group components to help bridge the gap between educational models in the United States and the students’ native countries. Walsh (1999) outlines a specialized literacy program for students with less than a fourth grade formal education and no literacy skills in their native language. This program combines an interdisciplinary thematic approach and language instruction that connects the first and second languages. Underlying both of these pedagogical strategies is the importance of making content relevant by connecting instruction to student experiences and previous knowledge. Windle and Miller (2012) advocate for instruction that incorporates

students' cultural knowledge in class since to help foster student motivation for learning language concepts.

Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol (SIOP) is another instructional model currently being presented to educators to help them help their ESL students to access language and content knowledge. One of the major components is to activate prior knowledge, however, with SLIFE often times there is no background knowledge to activate, or the background knowledge is culturally based and has not been introduced to the student yet. Thus, a foundation of knowledge has to be constructed before they can truly access the content. Similarly, Montero et al. (2014) suggest that although SIOP instructional strategies are effective for many students, "they do not adequately serve the needs of nonliterate and semiliterate adolescent SLIFE" (p. 61). They suggest that literacy skills need to be strengthened before academic literature can be reachable.

SLIFE research in the classroom. Some researchers have investigated teacher struggles when working with SLIFE. Windle and Miller (2012) surveyed teachers who work with low-level refugee students to find out their most prevalent challenges and concerns while working with these students. Two-thirds of teachers responded that they lacked time and professional development that would help them support these students. When students enter secondary schools with little or no education, appropriate materials are difficult to locate and materials that are available are "cognitively and linguistically too demanding for these students" (Miller et al., 2005, p. 29). Teachers expressed a huge need for sufficient time to modify, scaffold, and accommodate class materials. Yet others expressed the necessity of more time for SLIFE to be at newcomer centers or in intensive programs before entering the

mainstream (Olliff & Couch, 2005). One experienced teacher estimated that her refugee students “took four to five times longer to consolidate their new skills” when compared to other English learners (Benseman, 2014, p. 99). Both students and teachers need additional time throughout the language acquisition and process to productively make language gains.

Newcomer programs are available in some districts to help immigrants with the transition into both academic and non-academic settings. A wide variety of models are seen in different districts based on demographics and support needed. Short (2002) outlined several different types of programs around the United States that support the academic needs of students. She notes that these programs are distinct from ESL or bilingual education programs because these programs are in place to build up basic academic skills and activities to “familiarize students with school routines and expectations, American culture, the community and the United States” (p. 195). Regardless of the program model, newcomer programs strive to address the academic, language, and emotional challenges of SLIFE as they transition. Unfortunately, newcomer programs and centers need the support of a district, and districts that have a large population of SLIFE, but no newcomer program in place rely on classroom practices and pedagogical strategies.

Research on personal experiences of SLIFE has increased over the years, but remains small in comparison to the growing number of these students in schools. Gunderson (2000) conducted two large-scale studies involving 35,000 immigrants from over 100 countries. He discussed how student expectations of school stem from their cultural backgrounds and how these expectations can cause “considerable difficulties for students, parents, and teachers” (p. 704). Through interviews with students, parents, and teachers, researchers encountered

common themes including the difficulty of the educational model, socioeconomic issues, identity, and access to English.

Although SLIFE are different than refugees, their past experiences with trauma, poverty, and moving can overlap with SLIFE and help educators understand their needs, so mention of the findings here are worthwhile. Cassity and Gow (2005) used art based projects to help Sudanese refugees open up about experiences. Through drawings and paintings students shared the challenges of school and the need to make up for lost time. The students expressed the need for peer mentors with the same L1 to make the transition smoother and help them feel a sense of belonging in the new community. Benseman (2014) conducted a study of 36 adult refugees, many of whom had traumatic backgrounds. They expressed a desire for personal independence in daily activities such a grocery shopping and going to the doctor. Although these students come with low-language proficiency and education, they can express their needs and goals through the help of meaningful instruction.

Rubinstein-Avila (2003/2004) conducted a case study with Miguel, a student from Mexico with low-literacy upon arrival in the United States. She conducted interviews with Miguel and his family to understand his experiences in the United States and also back in Mexico. Through interviews, she discovered that Miguel struggled both in English and Spanish literacy yet “had not realized that reading in Spanish could have helped him read in English” (p. 294). Literacy skills in the L1 can support L2 literacy; likewise, a struggling reader or student with a low-level literacy in the L1 can make literacy in the L2 more difficult.

Brown et al. (2006) conducted a study that examined the educational needs, perspectives on school, language support, and suggestions that would make the transition

easier for Sudanese refugees entering Australian schools. Interview topics ranged from classes, English proficiency, comparisons between schools in Sudan and Australia, social experiences, and future goals. One student articulated challenging school practices by stating, “if you watch a video and you have to write it down, it’s hard...like if you miss the part, they can’t rewind” (p. 158). Another comment focused on the importance of social connectedness in class by saying, “We build good relationship like sharing ideas, debating on something. [This] will make us divulge some ideas so I think it is very good at putting us in a better position” (p. 159). Struggles and successes in both school and non-academic situations arose that provide a personal look at what refugee students encounter when they arrive in public schools. Refugees and SLIFE may overlap but do share some characteristics such as cultural differences and limited education.

This study does not aim to replicate Brown et al.’s (2006) study in a detailed manner, but does use the general framework of interviews and topics to elicit the personal stories of SLIFE in the United States. Olliff and Couch (2005) state that refugees “are not a homogenous group and not all will be affected by the same constraints or learning difficulties” (p. 46). This same idea can be said for all students, especially those who enter school systems from outside the country. Understanding the personal struggles, triumphs, motivators, and stressors will help teachers and those working with SLIFE to transition them into mainstream education where, with the right tools, they can be successful.

Research Questions

1. For a student with limited or interrupted formal education, how does prior education and academic work in the native country compare to education and academic work in the United States?
2. How do academic and non-academic tasks affect the attitude about school and performance for SLIFE? (i.e., What tasks make them feel most successful, defeated, confused, etc.?)
3. How have experiences with teachers in the United States impacted the performance or motivation in school (positively or negatively) for SLIFE?

Chapter 3: Method

Methodology for this study focused on a smaller group of participants using interviews about their experiences in their home countries and in the United States. The interviews uncovered personal experiences of SLIFE from Latin America who are now in the United States. Participants wrote about their experiences and later interviewed in Spanish. Interviews were transcribed into English and results were categorized into academic and non-academic categories. Interviews were used because they allow for a large amount of quantitative data and immediate clarification from the participant. The personal communication encouraged participants to share their story and experiences in a way that quantitative data cannot. Participants included secondary students from Central American countries who entered high school with fewer years of schooling than their peers. Although selection was challenging due to family and financial responsibilities, ten students were selected and participated in the study. One researcher conducted the interviews in Spanish, transcribed the interviews, and coded the responses based on academic or non-academic categories. The information was gathered in an effort to help teachers and administrators understand the difficulties these students have and how to reach them in productive ways. The results also outline simple, practical ways that school administrators can improve the intake process for SLIFE and concrete ways that teachers can help these students transition into the new school environment.

Participants

The participants for this study are currently attending a secondary school in Minnesota and arrived with fewer years of schooling than their native English-speaking peers. During the

2014-2015 academic year, 41% of the entire student population was identified as Hispanic and 17% of the total population received ESL services (Minnesota Department of Education, 2015). According to K. Moon, a district employee who works with SLIFE and a local representative for MinneSLIFE, although the district has been seeing a growth in immigrant students with little education for several years, they are only starting the process of identifying these students based on data (personal communication, August 10, 2015). Currently, the teachers are most concerned with native language literacy, missed grade levels, and periods of time (years) in which the students did not attend school. In addition to learning English, SLIFE need to overcome gaps in their education when they arrive in high school. During the 2014-2015 academic year, 130 ESL students at the high school from all over the world completed a student survey. Results showed that 56 students (43%) fit one or more of these criteria. Of the total population surveyed, 29% of the respondents expressed little or no literacy in their native language, 25% had jumped two or more grade levels when they arrived in the United States, and 14% entered high school with six or fewer years of formal education (K. Moon, personal communication, August 10, 2015). She indicated that this is a growing concern in the district.

A total of 10 participants, seven males and three females, from two different secondary schools were selected and interviewed. All students were born and spent their childhood in Latin America where they had their first experiences in an educational setting. Students from Guatemala and El Salvador participated in the study. Nine participants had 6 or fewer years of prior formal education in their native country. One student had completed

seven years of formal education. All students were enrolled in 9th grade upon arrival due to their age.

The students were selected by the researcher based on years of education and the individual student's interest in sharing experiences. All of the students spoke Spanish which was the primary language used for data collection during the study. Several of the students also spoke indigenous dialects, either Mam or K'iche' (also written Quiche). Both dialects are of Mayan decent and spoken in Guatemala. Approximately 9.1% of Guatemalans are K'iche' and 7.9% are Mam (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Many of the Mayan were dialects have been orally transmitted throughout the generations because their written languages were abolished by Spaniards during colonization (England, 2009). During interviews, some participants indicated their difficulty with reading or writing in their dialect.

Written permission from each participant and guardian was obtained prior to participation the study. Student participation was completely voluntary, and students understood that participation status would neither positively nor negatively affect teacher attitude or classroom performance. Pseudonyms have been given to all participants to protect their privacy.

Participant selection for this study was difficult at times, as the SLIFE population can be very transient. During the course of the study, several of the potential participants moved away before the researcher could approach them to participate in the study, and a few of the potential participants declined because they had too many responsibilities at home. Some dropped out to work due to financial needs. Many of the students who did participate had a hard time scheduling a time to meet because they also had extra responsibilities outside of

school, or needed to stay after school with a teacher to get extra help or finish work. One participant was interviewed and later disqualified from the study due to a misunderstanding about his prior education. Initially, he indicated that he had only completed “grado 3” (*grade 3*) but further clarification during the interview revealed that he had completed “tres secundaria” (*third year of secondary*), which is the equivalent of 9th grade in the United States. His responses are not included in this study.

Materials

Interviews and written questions were used to collect information. Participants were given an initial set of written questions which asked about demographic information and educational experiences in their home country. Questions about their previous schooling experience gathered information about the organization of school and school experiences in their home country. Students were asked to describe what they did during a typical class period and what the teacher would do if they did not understand. They were also asked what types of classes were easy and difficult for them. Later, they responded to questions about their personal, social, and educational experiences in the United States. The second set of questions gathered information on what their classes have been like in the United States, what has been easy and difficult for them, and what things teachers have done (or could do) to help them. Lastly, they were asked about their future plans after graduation. The questionnaires were modeled after a sample provided by DeCapua et al. (2009) (see Appendix A & B). The students had the option of answering all of the questions at one time, or breaking them up over two sessions. Many participants had after school responsibilities at home or a job and preferred to answer them all at the same time.

Procedures

Student interviews were conducted on an individual basis based the nature of the questions. Interviews took place over the course of approximately three months from December 2015 to February 2016. Initial interviews were conducted after the participant had completed the written questions. This procedure attempted to familiarize the student with the research environment and questions, raise their comfort level with the interviewer, and encourage them to share more of their experiences. The individual interviews were based on the written responses. The interviewer asked the student to elaborate or explain their written answers.

Initially, small group interviews were proposed as an additional way for participants to share experiences with others and the researcher. The goal of the group interview was to help the students think even more about their experiences, compare or contrast their experiences with other students, and hopefully spark more conversation than was possible during individual interviews. Small group interviews were proposed to each participant, but none of the participants indicated that they would be available due to responsibilities at home, work, or too much homework to finish.

Since the researcher was proficient in English and Spanish, participants were given the option of responding to questions in either English or Spanish depending on their comfort level with the language. Participants responded to questions in Spanish during the interviews, and also wrote their answers to the questions. A few of the participants did not respond to the written questions because they were not comfortable writing in Spanish or English. They preferred to just answer the questions during the recorded interview.

Interviews were later transcribed in Spanish and the important segments were translated into English by the researcher that were included in the paper. The Spanish translation is also included in this paper so readers who are literate in Spanish can see the original words used by the participant. All of the translations were done by the researcher and also reviewed by other native speakers. It is important to note that the participants are from different countries and the vocabulary may differ from country to country. Also, for some, Mam or K'iche' is their first language and Spanish is their second language, so their spoken Spanish is not perfect.

Analysis

Results from the written questions, individual interviews, and group interviews were transcribed and coded. Responses were categorized into two main categories: academic and non-academic. Within these categories, responses were broken down even further into sub categories including academic work, interaction with teachers, easy and difficult factors, and future goals. Although there are many other dynamics that influence SLIFE, the goal of this study is to focus on factors that will help educators understand their confusions, disconnects, and productive ways to assist them in the first few days, months, and years.

Chapter 4: Results

The initial part of the results discusses the participant's native country experiences in school. It highlights stories about classes, teachers, and school structure that set their educational foundation. Next, experiences in the United States are addressed and are organized into two broad categories: academic and non-academic contexts. Lastly, participants talk about advice they would give to a new student and their future goals. Direct quotes are first in Spanish followed by the English translation, so readers who are literate in Spanish can read the participants' original language.

Academic skills are addressed first followed by non-academic situations. Academic and non-academic contexts in a school setting can be a challenge to clearly define because many situations involve a combination of academic and non-academic skills. For the purposes of this study, academic factors are those which happen in the classroom during the class period. Asking questions in class, academic content, assignments, and classroom expectations are all classified as academic skills for the purposes of this study. Non-academic factors are things that happen outside of class time and are not necessarily taught in class as part of a curriculum. These factors require students to seek help from another person, either a teacher or student, in order to be successful with school procedures. For example, lockers, lunch numbers, bus information, and class schedules are all considered non-academic factors in this study.

Academic background is the principal difference between ESL students and SLIFE. All students who attend school in a new country are required to transition to the new academic and cultural environment. Cultural differences will inevitably affect both

populations. However, the level of prior academic knowledge can significantly influence the pace of the transition. For those who have a background education in content and caliber to the one they are entering, language is the biggest challenge. For SLIFE who enter school with less academic experience than their peers, the combination of academics and language is overwhelming.

Previous School Experiences

Before analyzing participant experiences in the United States, familiarity with their background education is helpful. Knowing a little bit about where students have come from will help educators understand the viewpoints they have when they arrive and try to maneuver the new culture. However, these stories are the actual experiences of just ten SLIFE from Central America, and every student who comes from a different culture will have their own unique stories and perspectives. Regardless, these stories uncover a side of many SLIFE that may not otherwise be known by a classroom teacher.

As previously noted, several of the students had dropped out of school because of a financial necessity. Since it can be a sensitive topic for any person to talk about, the question was not directly asked in the interviews. However, a few of the participants volunteered to share the reasons why they left school. One student from Guatemala opened up about his decision to drop out of school after sixth grade:

Es una decisión muy dura. No seguí estudiando porque mi mama y mi papa se murieron. Entonces, yo crecí con una señora muy pobre entonces yo tenía que salir de la escuela para ganar dinero para mantener a ellos porque ella era pobre también. Mi mama cuando se murió yo tenía un día, un día de haber nacido. No conocí a mi papá ni a mi mamá. Entonces yo allí crecí con esa señora por eso yo saqué seis grados nada más y cuando yo tenía 13 años fui a trabajar con la gente y así. *(It's a very hard decision. I did not continue studying because my mom and my dad died. So I was raised by a very poor*

woman so I had to leave school to earn money to support them because she was also poor. My mom when she died I was one day, one day since I had been born. I didn't know my dad and my mom. So I grew up there with the woman and because of this I finished sixth grade and no more and when I was 13 years old I went to work with the people.)

This participant said he had not studied for 3 to 4 years prior to enrolling in high school. Many students, like this one, did not have a choice whether or not they could continue studying. Financial and family obligations were more important at the time.

Not all SLIFE drop out of school due to necessity. Another student left school after completing second grade to work for 10 years, “solamente porque no me gusta.” (*just because I don't like it.*) He decided early on that he would rather work. “Pensé en jugar y pensé en trabajar de diez años. Trabajé en el campo con bananas y una vaca.” (*I thought of playing and I thought of working for 10 years. I worked in a field with bananas and a cow.*) In many Latin American countries, school is not free or required. Students whose parents have significant financial need may not encourage their children to stay in school if the child would rather get a job, even at a young age.

Coursework. Coursework in their native countries varied from student to student, mostly because of the different grade levels reached. All students talked about taking math and language classes in their schools prior to coming to the United States. A few participants remembered taking science and social studies classes but could not remember any specific information they learned. One participant remembered learning some English, although he did not remember any words or phrases he learned. Subjects were the same basic subjects that students in elementary school have in the United States.

Prior math experience was confined to the basic math skills. Participants remember learning addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division to some degree, although not all participants indicated that they felt comfortable with the skills. None of the participants had ever used a calculator before enrolling in a US school. They remember using manipulatives or their hands to do math. One participant named Alejandro commented that:

con nosotros no existe la calculadora y entonces la única idea que el maestro nos dio es de darnos piedritas pequeñas y luego juntarlo. Cuando el maestro nos daba de trabajo en la casa, para poder sumar, nosotros sumabamos estos piedritas y juntaban y cuando era solo allí aprendí. (*The calculator does not exist with us, and therefore the only idea that the teacher gave us was to give us small pebbles and later put them together. When the teacher gave us homework, in order to add, we added those small rocks and put them together and when I was alone that's how I learned.*)

These SLIFE had only learned the basic skills with simple concrete answers that had immediate connection to tangible objects in their lives. Several participants had never seen fractions before, and those who had indicated that they had just barely been introduced to them. Most of their math skills were limited to basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

Textbooks were also not common at many of the participants' schools. Students learned by copying everything off the board into a notebook. Julia said that a big difference between the United States and her home country of Guatemala is that “no tenemos libros de matemáticas. No es como aquí. Allí tenemos que copiar del pizarrón. Tenemos que copiar y hacer. No hay libros.” (*We didn't have math books. It's not like here. There we had to copy off the board. We had to copy and do [the problem]. There aren't books.*) Only one student, Mateo, indicated that he had used a math book and had learned to copy the math problems into his notebook to complete his homework before coming to the United States.

Language was another class that students had taken, although their experiences varied greatly. The participants remembered learning to read and write a little. Students who also spoke a dialect had a more complex language experience. Tomás said that when he was learning Spanish in school, that “hablo mi idioma y cuando aprendí en español me cuesta.” (*I speak my language, and when I learned in Spanish it was difficult.*) Julia indicated that the teacher “hablaba mam pero los libros estaba puro español.” (*spoke Mam but the books were only in Spanish.*) She explained that the teacher would read the books in Spanish, and then explain the concepts in Mam so the students could understand. She admitted that “cuando voy a entrar la escuela no sabíamos de leer en español hasta que el tercero.” (*When I go to enter the school we didn't know how to read in Spanish until third [grade].*) When Sofía, a participant who speaks Mam and Spanish, was asked about which language was easier for her, she said that it depended on the language skill. For her, speaking Mam was easier than Spanish, but reading Spanish was easier than Mam. With a mix of languages in school and limited resources, these students did not receive a solid language education in either language. So, although SLIFE may be bilingual, students who lack literacy skills in the L1 “face a greater challenge in making the transition to English literacy than other ELLs” who have a strong native language literacy (DeCapua et al., 2009, p. 20). L1 literacy skills can be transferred to a second language “even if they vary significantly from the original one in which reading was taught” (Benseman, 2014, p. 94).

Two of the participants noted that they repeated grades in their home countries because they did not pass the year end exam. Felipe stated that he was actually in school for seven years, but only completed sixth grade. “No pasé los exámenes. Será del primer grado,

en el fin del año y no pasé y por eso tuve que repetir el grado del primero.” (*I didn't pass the exams. They were for first grade, at the end of the year, and I didn't pass and because of this I had to repeat grade one.*) Similarly, Julia had to repeat third grade. “Solo estudié dos años en tercero. Repetí porque no completé mis calificaciones. No pasé mi examen. Siempre había un examen. Es diferente como aquí.” (*I studied two years in third [grade]. I repeated [it] because I did not complete my grades. I did not pass my exam. There was always an exam. It's different from here.*) Although these participants had been in school for seven years, they only gained skills through grade six, making the transition into ninth grade a three year gap in academic knowledge.

Teachers. Interaction with teachers varied greatly among participants in their former schools. Many students talked about how their teachers had little time to answer questions or provide extra help during class. Sofía stated that “solo una vez ellos explicaron” (*teachers only explained one time*) or “no me ayudó mucho” (*they didn't help me much*). Teachers also “se enojó con uno” (*got angry at one [student]*) for asking questions. One student even recalled what one teacher did when students did not respond to questions correctly in class:

cuando no podemos contestar unas preguntas, nos ponía enfrente y ponían dos piedrecitas abajo de rodillas y tienes que estar de rodilla hasta que termina la clase...cuando no podemos hacer las cosas... las preguntas. Y al siguiente día necesitas estudiar para que no te hace eso. Tienes miedo” (*when we couldn't answer some questions, she put us front [of the class] and put two pebbles under the knees and you have to kneel until the end of class...when we can't do things, the questions. And the next day you need to study so that this doesn't happen. You are scared.*) (Tomás)

Other students indicated that teachers never stayed after school, so “no se puede quedar después de la escuela” (*You can't stay after school*) (Felipe) for help. Hesitantly, a few students even admitted that their teachers would come to school intoxicated and angry. Julia

stated that the teacher “estaba borracho cuando llegó a la escuela” (*was drunk when he arrived at school*). In contrast, Luis remembers that his teacher would “vuelve a explicar otra vez” (*return and explain again*) when students did not understand. Students who did not feel they received adequate help from their teachers had to ask friends in class or friends in higher grades to help explain material to them. Felipe stated he had to “pedir a un compañero que sabe o a veces los que tienen grado más alto lo preguntamos a uno y te explican y allí entiendes algo como hacer las tareas” (*ask a classmate who knows or sometimes those who are in a higher grade, we asked them and they explained to us and then I understood something about how to do the homework*). Aside from a few students, most participants did not have good experiences asking teachers for help in school.

Interestingly, Tomás commented on how little affirmation given to students by teachers in his native country.

Nunca nos hablan de cosas como nosotros podemos las hacer cosas, nunca nos han dicho una cosa de afirmación, como por ejemplo nosotros tenemos el extraordinario de poder elegir qué queremos hacer en la vida o cosas así. Nunca he escuchado esas palabras de una maestra. (*They [teachers] never talk about things like that we can do things, they have never told us a thing of affirmation, like for example that we have the extraordinary power to choose what we want to do in life or things like that. I have never heard these words from a teacher.*)

He later said that receiving affirmation from teachers in the United States does not make him feel uncomfortable, but suggested that it might not be true for others.

Every student, SLIFE, EL, or refugee comes to the United States with unique experiences. These stories from home countries were shared to provide context for their experiences in the United States. Being informed about a student backgrounds and prior academic skills is important so they can have “a clear picture of where the student is

starting” and can inform decisions about “programming, course selection, and instructional needs of the student” (WIDA Consortium, 2015, p. 5).

Academic Experiences in the United States

There are many academic skills that high school students are expected to have. Educational settings in all countries train students gradually as they move through the system. Students learn skills such as note-taking skills, study skills, time management, and responsibility. All immigrants who come have to assimilate to the new country norms and expectations. ELLs who come with schooling have an easier time because they learned similar skills already in their former schools. SLIFE struggle with the language and “school shock,” which DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang (2009) describe as basic classroom behaviors like using a pencil, sitting in a desk, asking permission to go to the bathroom, and other routine activities (p. 36).

Class structure. Class structure and teaching styles were identified by some participants as difficult to adjust to. A few noted that it is difficult to listen and copy at the same time, something that high school students are expected to do for hours every day. Julia was able to articulate some things that teachers do that are difficult for her.

Solo matemáticas me confunde porque el maestro escribe y habla y cuando vea el pizarrón él habla. Yo pongo mi atención cuando el habla pero después rápido se le borre el pizarrón” (*Only math confuses me because the teacher writes and talks and when he’s looking at the board he talks. I pay attention when he talks, but later the board is quickly erased*).

Similarly, another participant commented how classes are difficult because the teacher “solo habla” (*just talks*) (Sofía) and because the teacher “just talks,” she does not always understand important details such as when an assignment is due. To ease this burden, teachers can give

outlines or printed notes to students so they can focus on listening without worrying about copying everything before things are erased. All language learners require more processing time when information is presented in the L2; SLIFE are no different.

The students also expressed difficulty in keeping up with teachers in class. They recognized that the pace of class was challenging because of a language barrier, but also that it extended into note-taking and general lecturing practices. “A veces practican rápido y no entiendo lo que hacen y escriben rápido y pasan en otra página y otra página. Se complican a uno. Eso es lo que me hace más complicado.” (*Sometimes they practice quickly and I don't understand what to do and they write quickly and they go to the next page and the next page. This is complicated for one. This is what is the most complicated for me.*) (Felipe). For all ELs, copying information down in an L2 is difficult. For SLIFE, who may have had little experience copying large quantities of notes or have few note-taking skills, keeping up with teachers is difficult.

Academic content. Participants have also noted the difference in rigor and class content. Most participants remembered having math, language, and science classes. They all noted that the classes were very different than in the United States. Pedro commented on how classes in his country were “más básico” (*more basic*). Mateo stated that “una de las cosas que me fue difícil...nos dieron un libro aquí como es el desierto ...si los caballos aguantan el desierto o no...umm...es lo que un poco difícil [porque] ya no sabía de eso” (*One of the things that was the most difficult for me...they gave us a book here about how the desert is...if horses can survive the desert or not...this was a little difficult [because] I didn't know about this*). When a lack of formal education and often times a childhood in a rural setting, SLIFE

lack the background knowledge that teachers would consider common knowledge. Even though classes can be overwhelming for SLIFE, many participants said that they are learning. Julia said that in her home country she didn't learn anything because "cuando llegue aquí no sabía nada" (*when I arrived here I didn't know anything*), but now she says that she knows she is learning more.

Longer days and more rigorous classes overwhelm all language learners, but especially SLIFE who may be returning to school for the first time in several years. Inevitably, they are inundated with information. Educators are trained to present information in multiple ways to cater to different learning styles, however, this results in an increased amount of information for SLIFE to take in. Depending on their language proficiency, they might have a harder time sorting out what information is most important. Pedro described the way his math teacher lectures. "Como por ejemplo nos explican ellos en varias formas. Sí me confunde porque cuando nos explica uno y terminando explicar esa, nos explica en otra forma y ya me han salido lo ella explicaba primera. Hay muchas formas de hacer y me confundo en esta. Hay muchas formas para hacer" (*Like for example, they explain in various forms. Yes, it confuses me because she explains one thing and [when she] finishes explaining this, she explains to us in a different way and already I have forgotten what she explained first. There are many ways to do things, and it is confusing to me...there are many ways to do [things]*). With only an elementary level education, the quantity of information can be overwhelming.

Another participant commented on general lecturing practices of teachers and how they often go off on tangents making it difficult for him to follow along.

Cuando hablan de algo y a veces cambian de tema muy rápido allí donde no entendemos y a veces no sabemos en qué están hablando o quizás a veces

cuando nos explican algo y aparece alguien, o llega alguien en el salón no terminan de explicar completo y empiezan de hablar con otra persona y al final empezamos a poner atención en otras cosas con lo que hablan a veces escuchábamos lo que hablan y ponemos importancia en otro lado y cuando regresamos a la materia se nos olvida todo” (*When they [teachers] talk about something and sometimes they change topics very quickly, there is where we don't understand and sometimes we don't know what they are talking about or maybe sometimes when they explain something to us and someone appears or someone arrives in the room they don't finish explaining completely and start to talk with the other person and at the end, we start to place our attention on other things*).

For teachers, changing topics and going off on tangents can happen several times during a class period without even knowing it. Although this participant was the only one to voice this difficulty, he is probably not the only one who finds this daily habit of teachers confusing.

A few participants noted the lack of hands-on and more abstract knowledge taught in the United States. “Aquí estoy aprendiendo más como capacidades de la mente. Estoy aprendiendo más las palabras más como altas, así como palabras que traen mucho significado” (*Here I am learning more capacities of the mind. I am learning higher words, like words that carry a lot of significance*) (Tomás). He continued by saying that “aquí explican más con palabras y allá en Guatemala nos se explican más con detalles” (*here they explain more with words and there in Guatemala they explained to us more with details*), which he explained as things he could touch and see. Participants remembered their former teachers' use of hands-on materials helped a lot. “Pues conocía a un maestro que nos enseñaba bien allí donde aprendí mucho. Nos daba ejemplos con cosas por ejemplo maíz, con frijoles, con tapitas, con piedras.” (*Well I knew a teacher who taught us well [and] there I learned a lot. He gave us examples with things for example corn, with beans, with bottle tops,*

with small rocks) (Tomás). He continued to explain that at his prior school “a veces el maestro trae hojas, y a veces nos enseñan cómo hacer las medicinas con plantas, jabones con plantas” (*sometimes the teacher brings leaves, and sometimes he taught us how to make medicines with plants, soaps with plants*). The difference between the hands-on work they did in their home country and the more abstract thinking in the United States makes learning harder for many SLIFE.

Math. Math class was the content area where many participants perceived the biggest differences early after they arrived in the United States. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and possibly some fractions and square root skills had been previously introduced to them in a math class. Only one participant indicated that she used a calculator in math classes, while others had never touched one before enrolling in math class in the United States. Alejandro stated that “con nosotros no existe la calculadora” (*with us the calculator does not exist*), he continued to explain how they used manipulatives to help with simple math operations. Since SLIFE often experienced schools in very rural communities, teachers and students used whatever they could find to understand concepts. Contrast that with schools in the United States that are much better funded and introduce technology at an early age which allows students to become more familiar with calculators. SLIFE often lack this knowledge when they arrive in secondary school.

The complexity of math assignments was also a difficulty for most SLIFE. Participants noted how their prior math experience had been primarily simple math facts such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Students in the United States learn these skills and work up to more complex math with more steps. SLIFE have had no transition into

the more complex problems with multiple steps. “Como en álgebra hay unas oraciones que son difíciles porque son largas. Primero tenemos que dividirlo y después multiplicarlo son largas y nos confundimos y a veces no entendemos porque son largas las respuestas” (*Like in algebra there are equations that are difficult because they are long. First, we have to divide and later multiply them. They are long and confuse us and sometimes we don't understand because the answers are long*) (Pedro). The frustration expressed by these students stems directly from disconnects in their prior math experiences and expectations of secondary math students in the United States.

Assignments. Although academic experience varied greatly among all of the participants who came from several countries, most participants were able to quickly adapt to some of the academic expectations, especially those that revolved around consistency and simplicity. When SLIFE can see explicit connections between a simple task and the learning outcome, they had an easier time adjusting to the new school.

Consistency of tests and assignments made the academic transition easier for participants. For example, in art class, one participant talked about how the study guide and the quizzes were the same format. Pedro said that art tests were especially easy to study for because “no más te dan para que leas y lo tienes que grabar y ahora si lo grabas lo sacas todo bien” (*they just give you [something] to read and you have to record (memorize) it and now if you record it you get them all right.*) It was very clear what information would be on the test and what they were expected to know. Likewise, resources and reference guides also helped students transition. Mateo discussed how in his ESL class he has packets with pictures and English words that he can go back to and reference when he needs to. Another student talked

about how he goes back to the examples in his math book when he gets confused working on homework. He says that the examples help him remember what to do. When students have a clear purpose and know what they are expected to know, learning is easier.

By the time students reach high school, the workload has greatly increased. Teachers are required to get through certain curriculum and students are required to demonstrate certain standards by the end of the quarter, semester, and year. Teachers often do not have the flexibility to slow down to accommodate L2 learners. Consequently, workload in class and homework was frustrating for participants. Like ELs, assignments and projects take longer because they are focusing on language and content. Participants commented on how they can never seem to catch up. “No más te dan tareas y no lo termines, no lo termines a veces hay un montón de papeles allí” (*They just give you homework and if you don't finish, sometimes you don't finish, there is a mountain of papers there*) (Alberto). The overwhelming workload and inability to catch up only causes SLIFE to feel a sense of defeat and frustration.

Technology. Technology has become a big part of education in recent years. The schools that these students attended are 1:1 schools, meaning all students are given an electronic device to use in class and for homework. It should be noted however, that classes and assignments are not strictly on the devices. While some classes have all assignments and resources on the electronic devices, several classes still use paper copies and allow for the submission of hard copy assignments. For many, the use of 1:1 devices expedited the transition since they could use it for quick translation. Participants commented how it was helpful to have a device that they could use to quickly translate things during class, or write down words and look them up later. Like many students, Pedro finds technology useful

because the tablets “sale más fácil porque nos dan tabletas y entendemos más allí en tabletas” (*make things easier because they give us tablets and we understand more on the tablets*)

because “algunas palabras no entendemos y traducimos en español” (*some words we don't understand and we translate in Spanish*). However, as with many SLIFE, their L1 literacy is not strong. Consequently, typing words into a translator or looking up words in a dictionary is not always easy if they are not able to spell the word correctly in their native language.

Technology is often useful to bridge the language gap with translators, but not always for SLIFE with low literacy.

Technology also provided significant help with providing visuals and examples.

Participants noted that especially in art class the teacher was able to use the tablet to show examples of projects, or clarify things. One student, Alberto, said that his art teacher “te dice cómo se hace el dibujo y todo y si no sabes dibujar bien, te va a buscar [en] tu tablet para poner como hacerlo” (*she tells you how to do the drawing and everything, and if you don't know how to draw well, she looks on the tablet to show you how to do it*). Using a projector to quickly show an image of vocabulary words or explain the significance of a word was also very helpful.

Technology is not always a helpful tool for SLIFE. Some participants commented on the difficulty of technology due to their unfamiliarity of it. Many participants did not have computers in their former schools. Felipe said that, “en la escuela donde yo estuve estudiando no habían computadoras y no había ni devices como aquí” (*in the school where I was studying there were no computers or devices like here*). Initially, he found technology difficult because “a veces me hace difícil usar la computadora o usar mi tablet porque no sé donde entrar. Pero

ahora estoy aprendiendo pero se me hace difícil usar la computadora” (*Sometimes it is difficult for me to use the computer or use my tablet because I don’t know where to enter. But now I am learning but it is difficult to use the computer*). DeCapua and Marshall (2011a) advocate for the use of technology with SLIFE, but stress the importance of explicit teaching of the programs and steps. They also encourage teaching students to bookmark websites to ease frustration with long websites.

Interaction with teachers. Interaction with teachers was different for each participant. Common threads in interviews showed that teachers who spoke Spanish, teacher proximity, and ability to reteach and simplify seemed to be the most helpful for SLIFE. On the other hand, teachers who appear to have little time or patience are less approachable in the eyes of the participants.

Teachers who spoke Spanish were undoubtedly the most approachable by all SLIFE. Pedro said that he wants to ask the teacher questions in class, but “no entiendo mucho los maestros porque hay maestros que no más hablan inglés y ya no entiendo mucho en inglés.” (*I do not understand many of the teachers because there are teachers that just speak English and I still do not understand a lot in English.*) Luis finds it most helpful when there is a Spanish-speaking paraprofessional in his classroom because “cuando no entiendo le pregunto, una profesora que habla español y ella me explica mejor” (*when I don’t understand, I ask a professor that speaks Spanish and she explains it to me better*). The option of getting information clarified in their native language was an invaluable resource for many of these students.

Teacher proximity made a difference for some of the students who asked for extra clarification. When participants were able to muster up the courage to ask for help, most indicated that it was more helpful for the teacher to help them individually during work time when possible rather than explain it on the board. Tomás said, “yo entiendo más cuando se acercan a mí y me explican frente a frente. Lo pongo más importancia. En cambio se me hace un poco difícil en el pizarrón, se me hace un poco difícil entender” (*I understand more when they get closer to me and explain face to face. I put more importance on it. On the other hand, it is a little more difficult on the board, it is a little more difficult to understand*), although he could not quite explain why an individual explanation was better for him. Sofía agreed by saying that it is easier to get help “en el papel...tienes que ver allí, tienes que guardarlo, en el pizarrón lo borra” (*on the paper, you have to look there, you have to save it, on the board he erases it*). For many SLIFE, the extra step to copy something off the board made learning a little more difficult as compared to a small group or individual explanation to clarify material.

Without a doubt, English was the biggest challenge for them when they first arrived and still today. The most prevalent hindrances the students expressed with making a connection with their teacher was a language barrier, which is why students quickly formed a strong connection with teachers who spoke their L1. Many participants acknowledged how helpful it was to have teachers who spoke Spanish and could understand or help explain things to them in their native language. Asking for help either during class or outside of class was a big stressor for many students. Each participant had their own approach to navigating this in the classroom. Most students commented how they would ask a Spanish-speaking paraprofessional for help first because they did not know how to ask the teacher in English,

nor understand the teacher's explanation if the question was communicated. Pedro said that, "Si pero no entiendo mucho los maestros porque hay maestros que no más hablan inglés y ya no entiendo mucho en inglés" (*Yes, but I don't understand a lot of the teachers because there are teachers who only speak English and I don't understand a lot of English*). Julia said that "siento que cuando voy, ya no entiendo cuando explica mejor no voy" (*I feel like when I go, I still don't understand when they explain [so] it is better that I don't go*). Most students expressed a desire to go to the teacher with questions, but they also knew that the language barrier would cause them difficulty in expressing their question and understanding the teacher's response.

Teachers who participants perceived as too busy and who did not have time to reteach were less likely to be approached by these students. Felipe said, "Bueno a veces pero yo no los pregunto porque están ocupados. Están enseñando rápido, y así se termina la clases vamos a otro. Entonces no da tiempo para preguntar a ellos" (*Well, sometimes, but I don't ask them because they are busy. They teach quickly and then class finishes and we go to another class, so this does not give time to ask them*). Julia said she wants to ask teachers and sometimes she does, but "a veces siento como, no se, no tengan tiempo" (*sometimes I feel like, I don't know, they don't have time.*) When a few participants were asked if they had ever had a negative experience when asking the teacher a question or getting extra help, no one could recall a time when this had happened. So, even though teachers may feel as though they are approachable, a sense of busyness or language barrier might be enough to hinder these students from seeking help. To help ease these perceptions, teachers can set aside time in class to check in with these students where they can ask questions in a one-on-one setting. Also, asking students to repeat

back or demonstrate that they understand can help students feel more positive about asking questions.

Seeking help outside of school is difficult for many students, but for non-native English speakers and SLIFE it can be especially intimidating. Most of the participants do not ask their teachers for help after school, but the few who do stay find the help beneficial. Alejandro said that he stays after because “es que cuando no entiendo entonces para poder entender más entonces me quedo después de escuela. Me ayuda mucho” (*It's when I don't understand then [I stay] to be able to understand more I stay after school. It helps me a lot*). Several participants commented on how culturally teachers did not stay after to provide extra support in their home countries. Julia mentioned that if students were confused about something, all they could do was “solo preguntar otra vez, y si no, no hace nada porque allá los maestros no quedan después de la escuela, tienes que hacer todo” (*just ask again, and if not, don't do anything because there the teachers don't stay after school, you have to do it*). Overall these SLIFE who do stay after school with teachers say that they understand more and do better in class. However, they also say that the cultural mentality has to be relearned based on past experiences.

Receiving help from peers. Peers also provide these students a lot of support in classes. Many participants talked about how they would ask for clarification from peers in their classes if there was someone who spoke a little more English than they did. Fortunately, these students have found that teachers are understanding and allow them to speak to friends in Spanish to get help. “No hay problema porque no entendemos cuando nos explica y cuando explica un amigo entendemos fracciones.” (*It's not a problem because we don't understand*

when he explains and when a friend explains we understand fractions) said Pedro. Other participant even said that they will seek out a friend who has had the class in the past and will get help because they know they can get help in their native language. Having support of native language speakers was vital for these students and continues to be even after months and years have passed since they arrived.

Non-Academic Experiences in the United States

Although academic and non-academic needs have significant overlap in a school setting, the latter is defined as things outside of the classroom or a teacher's normal daily responsibilities with a student. For example, lunch numbers, lockers, bus information, and general how to be a student is a "cultural expectation and understanding" that are "huge challenges" for SLIFE who arrive with limited schooling (Miller et al., 2005, p. 23). Even though all of the participants had some prior schooling, not one had used a locker or learned to use a lunch number before arriving. Julia talked about her first time using lunch numbers in the cafeteria. She stated "cuando muy llegue no sabía como poner los números" (*when I first arrived I didn't know how to put the numbers*). Although these issues may seem like common knowledge, for new students the smallest details can cause great stress. Goodwin (2002) states that lack of cultural knowledge affects everything and "even the simplest tasks can be onerous and forbidding when background knowledge and familiarity are absent" (p. 164). Asthon (2008) investigated the perceptions of middle school students entering secondary school the following year. She found that the biggest student concerns were surrounding the daily routines and logistics of high school and less on academics. When SLIFE enter, these concerns are even more inflated because they lack language and cultural.

Academic day. Many participants also commented on how the academic day was longer in the United States. In their home countries the day was shorter and there was a recess. Not only is the day longer, but there is more accountability with attendance and absences. Alberto commented how it was used to the attendance policies when he arrived. “Ésta es diferente. Si no llegas a la escuela te llaman “¿por qué no llegaste?” o fuiste con el doctor tienes que presentar el ticket el otro día” (*This is different. If you don’t come to school they call you “Why didn’t you come,” or [if] you went to the doctor you have to present the ticket [doctor’s note] the next day*). Many of the countries where SLIFE come from, attendance at school is not as obligatory as it is in the United States. They are accustomed to a shorter day and, as one participant noted, it is hard to be inside all day.

As one of the participants noted before how he had to quit school in his home country to support the family who had raised him, those financial burdens do not disappear when SLIFE arrive in the United States. Like many immigrants, SLIFE often come from lower socioeconomic families who struggle more to survive in a new country. Students are often required to babysit, work, or interpret for families. Alberto continued by explaining that “es difícil aquí tiene que trabajar uno ...tiene que trabajar...pagar los billes...la renta” (*it is difficult here [because] one has to work ...has to work...to pay the bills...the rent*). These students cannot stay after school to get extra help from a teacher or work on group projects. Just as they were in their home countries, these students are “important resources for their families” even though they struggle with English (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003/2004, p. 300). Several of the participants who wanted to participate in the study found it challenging to arrange a time after school to interview because of work schedules and family responsibilities.

Keeping up with homework and studying for exams is more difficult as a language learner, but for SLIFE it is even harder when they have responsibilities at home.

Class schedules. Almost every participant indicated that at their former school they had been in one classroom with one teacher for the duration of the year. Since the participants' schooling had been at an elementary level, this is consistent with the structure of elementary schools in the United States. Many schools in the U.S. have a transition program to help middle school students adapt to the new class structure at the secondary level. However, many SLIFE enter school throughout the school year and miss out on the transition program. They may receive a condensed tour and orientation compared to others. Almost all of the participants expressed confusion and insufficient guidance with the new structure. Interestingly, only one participant mentioned how the change of classrooms was not a challenge for him at all because the rooms were numbered and easy to find. Alejandro said that finding his classes was easier than he thought. "La única que me ha sido fácil es dónde está la cafetería y las aulas y todo porque todos las aulas tienen números entonces por los números que me fijo entonces son más fácil para mí" (*The only thing that was easy for me was where the cafeteria is and the classrooms and everything because all of the rooms had numbers so because of the numbers that I saw, so they were easy for me*). Once he learned the system, he was able to navigate the school and later help others do the same.

Security. A sense of security was noted by a few participants as a significant difference between their home country and the United States. Some noted how they felt safe walking to school and had never felt as though they were in danger as they had in their home countries. Mateo talked about how "uno puede ir caminando, pero allá en Guatemala hay

mucha ...umm...que consumen drogas. Y aquí uno puede ir caminando. Hay seguridad” (*One can go walking, but there in Guatemala there are a lot of...umm...they consume drugs. And here one can go walking. There is security*). One of the most basic needs of a student is to feel safe. Students who do not feel safe will have a more difficult time learning and it may take time for SLIFE to understand that their school in the United States may be safer than their school in the last.

Lockers. Lockers proved to be a stressor for many SLIFE that arrive in U.S. schools. For many of the participants, it was the first time any of them had used a locker in their life. “Nunca he tenido un loquer en mi vida entonces yo no sabía cómo abrir un loquer. Tuve que pedir ayuda a algunos muchachos que estaban allí (*I have never had a locker in my life so I didn't know how to open a locker. I had to ask for help from a few guys who were there*) (Felipe). Sofía recounted a story from one of her first days at school:

Una vez fui a mi locker no pude abrir y me dejó el autobús y tuve que ir caminando a mi casa. Los demás estaban corriendo al autobús, yo trataba y trataba de abrirlo y no pude abrir, la primera vez no pude abríó y la segunda si y fui corriendo pero me dejó el autobús. (*One time I went to my locker, couldn't open it and the bus left me, and I had to walk home. Others were running to the bus and I tried and tried to open it but I couldn't open it the first time I couldn't open it, and the second yes, and I went running but the bus left me*).

Opening lockers is a big stressor for all students, but especially for SLIFE who use a locker for the first time in high school. The worry about not being able to open a locker and getting to class late or missing the bus in addition to not speaking the language can be nerve-wracking.

Cafeteria. The cafeteria and using a lunch number was also a significant change for some students when they arrived in the United States. None of the participants who were

interviewed had ever experienced lunch at school or using lunch numbers. In addition to lunch numbers, incoming students fill out a free and reduced lunch form. Although there is a Spanish version it can still be confusing for students and can cause more stress. It is “difícil cuando nos dan un papel para llenar para lunche y a veces no llenas bien y tienes que pagar” (*It is difficult when they give us a paper to fill out for lunch and sometimes you don't fill it out well and you have to pay*) (Sofía). Eating at school and filling out a form to get free or reduced lunch are both foreign experiences for many SLIFE.

Transportation. Riding the bus to school was a new experience for the participants who ride the bus to and from school in the United States. By the time students get to high schools, teachers do not think to help students with the bus. It is assumed that students can navigate this themselves. For new students who have no experience with riding a bus, it can be intimidating to figure out the system. One participant commented that “fue algo raro a veces ir y subir un autobús que no conoces para donde...subir con personas que no conoce, nunca estaba acostumbrada eso. En Guatemala todo en bicicleta, caminando” (*it was strange at times to go and get on a bus and you don't know where to....to get on [the bus] with people that you don't know. I was never used to this. In Guatemala everything was by bicycle, walking.*) (Tomás). The sense of security is almost immediately noted by students who come from countries where they did not always feel safe.

Making connections. Making friends and getting to know people was also difficult for some of the participants. Mateo said, “cuando yo muy empecé yo no conocía a nadie cuando yo llegue, ya cuando pasaron los días uno va conociendo a las personas.” (*At the very beginning, I didn't know anyone, as the days passed one starts to get to know*

people.) Alejandro admitted that on his first day, “tuve miedo de estar aquí” (*I was scared to be here.*) For adults this may seem minor, but Ashton (2008) found that even for English speakers entering secondary school the biggest stressor for students transitioning into secondary school is making relationships with others.

Future Goals

When asked about future goals, some of the students had aspirations of continuing on to post-secondary education and others planned to go straight into the working world. Many of the participants had to think about the question, or initially responded saying that they did not know. Sadly, one participant hesitantly responded that she wanted to be a nurse, but did not think she could achieve it. Julia has dreams, but does not think she can achieve them. “Pues quiero ser enfermera pero no sé lograr. Es difícil. A veces sí pienso que voy a hacer lo pero hay veces que pienso es mejor no. No sé porque pienso esto” (*Well I want to be a nurse but I don't know how to achieve it. It's difficult. Sometimes I think that I am going to do it, but there are times that I think it is better not to. I don't know why I think this*). Isabel expressed similar sentiments about becoming an elementary teacher when she said, “no sé si lo haré” (*I don't know if I will do it*). SLIFE know that school is harder for them than for others, so they need more encouragement than others to help them achieve their goals. However, encouragement might need to be more subtle if the student is not accustomed to receiving affirmation from teachers.

The common denominator in almost all participants' future goals, was that they wanted to work in a field in which they could help other immigrants or people. Tomás in particular did not know exactly what he wanted to do in the future, all he knows is that he

wants to help immigrants change the mentality and let them know that they can accomplish what they want. He talked about how, culturally, Latinos are not raised with the mentality that they can change their lives, but rather to simply work and live. “A veces nosotros animos con la mente negativismo que no sabemos hacer las cosas, que solo sabemos trabajar” (*Sometimes we are driven by a negative mind that we do not know how to do things, that we only know to work*). Coming to the United States has allowed him to compare and contrast cultural views in his home country and in the United States. He wants to continually strive for a better life and encourage other Latinos to do the same through encouragement and taking advantage of opportunities.

Discussion

Much of the discussion about ways to support SLIFE came directly from them the advice they give to other new arrivals. When participants were asked about how they support students who have recently arrived, they did not hesitate to offer small, but important, ways they reach out to others. The advice for teachers and administrators comes from the students themselves and from their experiences, including ways to help SLIFE in and outside of the classroom. Here are some practical ways to help make a student’s transition just a little smoother.

SLIFE advice for SLIFE. One of the more challenging questions in research is not the actual research questions but how this information can be applied to different situations and what future research needs to be done. To help answer this question, students were asked “What advice would you give a new student?” and “What do you wish someone would have

done or you could have had to help you when you first arrived? These questions proved to be some the more challenging for participants to answer.

Interestingly, most students did not respond to the first question with advice, but rather with how they already do help new students who arrive almost weekly. Although most did not answer the question as anticipated, their answers illustrate how SLIFE can be given extra support when they first arrive. Most participants responded that they assist new students with logistics such as lockers, lunch numbers, and finding their classes. Alberto said that he enjoys helping new students by helping them with simple daily tasks:

[Cuando] hay un estudiante aquí que llega de nuevo lo dijimos se llama este así, este así. Si quiere ir al baño, cómo se dice [a] la maestra, y nosotros le dijimos se llama así. Él va a tomar agua no sabe decir nosotros dijimos...pedir un lápiz...sacar su punta. (*[When] there is a new student here that recently arrived we tell him how to say this and this. If he wants to go to the bathroom how to say it to the teacher and we tell him to say it like this. [If] he wants to drink water and doesn't know how to say it we tell him...to ask for a pencil...sharpen his pencil.*)

These participants all expressed how they received help from others upon arrival, and therefore helped other new students during their first few days at school. The strength in comradery among SLIFE has lasting impacts on a student's success in school.

Academic advice was also important for new students. Many participants said that they encourage new students to learn English as fast as possible in order to do well in classes. Although English is difficult, immigrants realize the need to learn English in order to survive. Providing them with old books, or directing them to the school or public library is one way to help them access English outside of school hours.

Graduation requirements and required classes are not always the first thing SLIFE are concerned about when they arrive. Learning English, opening lockers, riding the bus, and

surviving each day are big accomplishments when SLIFE first arrive. Unfortunately, these students do not only have more academic knowledge to catch up on, but also have fewer years to accomplish it in order to graduate (Short, 2002). Luis said that he wished that someone would have told him that when someone fails a class, they are required to retake the class. He said that his friend “explicaba que si no pasaba una clase tenía que tomarlo otra vez” (*explained that if you don't pass a class that you have to take it again*). The student said that he would have studied more if he had known the consequences.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

SLIFE students have lots of seemingly insurmountable needs when they arrive in US schools. Past educational experiences can clash with the new environment, and experiences with teachers can greatly impact the learning experiences of SLIFE. Often times it is the teachers who are left to provide language and educational environment supports in addition to normal teaching responsibilities. Students and teachers can get easily overwhelmed with the situation due to lack of ways (knowledge) of how to help SLIFE. With the increase in SLIFE students in United States schools, systemic changes at the state and administrative levels are needed. However, there are strategies that teachers can use to help give SLIFE a more positive learning experience. Peer mentors programs are a powerful way that schools can reach out to SLIFE and ease their transition. Teachers and administrators can benefit from SLIFE voices and opinions in their efforts to help SLIFE.

Students who arrive from other countries find numerous disconnects between their educational experiences in their home country when compared to those in the United States. Simple tasks like changing classes, navigating the school building, and opening a locker can be stressful. Since education is not mandatory or may not be as valued in their home countries, students who drop out and enroll in school years later struggle with strict attendance policies. Likewise, with fewer years of education, SLIFE have only a basic knowledge of school subjects and often have low L1 literacy. Participants expressed how teachers in home countries were generally not available for extra help outside of class, and did not spend much time repeating information re-teaching content to ensure student

comprehension. These ideals and practices conflicted with the new schema that SLIFE encountered in U.S. schools causing a more stressful transition.

Both academic and non-academic expectations of students affected SLIFE attitudes and perceptions of their school experience both positively and negatively. In academic situations, participants found technology to be helpful when using the internet for translation, images, or examples of words or concepts. This was especially helpful since SLIFE noted that teachers in the United States used more words and fewer visuals or manipulates during instruction. However, technology was frustrating when no formal instruction was given on how to navigate the device or troubleshoot problems. Even calculators caused confusion for some who had never used them. In general, the pace of class in a secondary level classroom is too fast for SLIFE. Listening to lectures and taking notes simultaneously was a new skill for SLIFE who had a hard time dividing their attention between listening to the teacher and copying notes from the board. This lack of academic vocabulary and foundation from missed years of school make academic learning at the secondary level more challenging. Moreover, learning content in an L2 when literacy skills in the L1 are not strong causes an additional layer or complexity and difficulty. Some SLIFE may find multiple explanations helpful, while others may find them confusing. The workload was also overwhelming for students who could not keep up and felt helpless as the work continued to pile up faster than they could complete it. Since some SLIFE have work responsibilities after school, homework was simply not a priority.

Non-academic school skills were also challenging for SLIFE because they are new skills that have not been previously learned. Skills such as lockers, lunch numbers, and bus

routes are uncharted territory. They worry about not being able to open lockers or get on the right bus. Although these things preoccupy these students, SLIFE often feel comfortable in the United States knowing that the school building is secure, something that was not always the norm in their formal schools. Teachers can easily overlook the importance of supporting SLIFE with these non-academic skills, but they are just as important for the success of SLIFE as the content taught in the classroom. Overall, the complex interweaving of academic and non-academic tasks create a unique new environment for SLIFE to navigate that makes them feel successful, overwhelmed, defeated and hopeful each and every day.

Experiences with teachers are vital to the success of SLIFE. Since SLIFE are not accustomed to teacher help outside of school or asking questions, it takes time to learn how and when to request help or clarification. SLIFE can feel defeated when they feel teachers are too busy to help or additional questions are getting in the way of the teacher's agenda. Not surprisingly, SLIFE will gravitate toward teachers who speak their L1 since they will be understood. SLIFE will also build a connection with teachers who go out of their way to give one-on-one mini lessons during work time so students are not as pressured to quickly copy off the board as the teacher is explaining. Teachers can check in with the student rather than waiting for the student initiate the conversation. Similarly, letting students know when a good time to come in for help or checking in with the student to see how they are doing lets SLIFE know a teacher is available and willing to help. This will help lower the affective filter of students and show the teacher's interest in helping. All students need to know that teachers care, but for SLIFE, relationships are even more important. Taking the time to listen to students and learn about their lives is essential (Rubinstein-Avila, 2003/2004). Knowing a

little bit about a student's background and prior education may help educators make small changes to ease the transition. Lastly, teachers should be aware that some SLIFE are not accustomed to affirmation, but it is not possible to say that all SLIFE react to affirmation in the same way. Often the smallest changes can make the biggest differences in a student's first experiences in a new school.

Teachers can make instructional changes to help SLIFE in smaller ways that will make a difference. Providing outlines or copies of notes will allow these students to focus on the lecture and less on copying down notes from the board. Writing down important information such as due dates or homework assignments can reassure students that they have the correct information. Also, teachers should try to be conscious of the workload a student is given and if possible, extended deadlines to alleviate the stress of homework deadlines. Using technology to show images of key information or examples can help the student focus on the topic and make connections to previous knowledge. Technology can also be used to provide L1 support through online dictionaries and translators. These small supports for SLIFE in the classroom can significantly improve their learning experience.

Much of the program support that SLIFE need to succeed is dependent on district resources and organization. Newcomer centers, specialized literacy programs, and extra staff are all important in helping SLIFE make significant gains in both academic and non-academic knowledge. Teacher education, sufficient staffing, and resources are necessary for educators to give SLIFE adequate and effective programming that will allow them to be successful in school and work. During the enrollment process, set procedures and guided tours by a speaker

of the student's same L1 are essential to easing stress on a new student who may not be comfortable in a school setting.

Advocacy for SLIFE by administration and teachers is also imperative to their success. Goodwin (2002) states that "immigrants lack a strong or vocal political base from which to advocate for their needs" (p. 161). Due to unfamiliarity with cultural expectations in school and low language proficiency, SLIFE need educators to advocate for them and their educational needs. As previously mentioned, parents rarely have the cultural knowledge of school and expectations. They trust that educators are providing the best education for their children. Teachers need to be available to help SLIFE with questions, and also voice their concerns about programming in order to give these students classes to meet their needs.

Designating student mentors is one of the most powerful ways that teachers can help all ELs, especially SLIFE. Zimmerman-Orozco (2015) discovered that the reason most SLIFE and ELs admitted that they survived the first few weeks and months of school "had less to do with the strategies the teachers were masterfully implementing than with the students' instincts to reach out and make friends" (p. 53). Participants in this study not only received help, but also opened up about helping new students. Assigning a student helper who can walk the student to their next class, help them open their locker, and help them in the lunch line at the cafeteria is critical to helping SLIFE transition. These helpers can also assist in answering questions about basic school procedures that may have been overlooked or are still confusing for the student. With a SLIFE mentor who has recently experienced a similar transition, a new student can feel more at ease with the non-academic aspects of school and be able to devote more focus and attention to learning.

SLIFE mentors for SLIFE benefit the mentor as well. In addition to taking responsibility off teachers, mentor students will also continue to learn as they teach a new student. They themselves will become more confident with the school environment. It will also boost their own confidence in their knowledge of the culture and school know-how. They will feel as though they are making a contribution to the school and gain a sense of belonging in the school culture. Fortunately, SLIFE mentors are easy and practical ways that a school can assist all new students, especially SLIFE, in the new school environment.

SLIFE are a growing population in U.S. schools and their needs are distinct from other ELLs who come with a stable, uninterrupted educational background. Goodwin (2002) emphasizes that discussions about immigrants “highlights patterns or trends rather than absolutes” and that “no assumptions or generalizations can be made about newly arrived immigrant students and their prior experiences with school” (p. 163) because each student has diverse needs and no single curriculum or instructional practice is the magic solution for educating SLIFE. These stories and experiences from a handful of SLIFE in a rural Minnesota secondary school do not represent the entire population. Rather, they share snapshots of a few experiences that might not have been shared otherwise. It is the hope that these stories and experiences of a few SLIFE can help both administrators and educators be more aware of disconnects between a SLIFE’s past educational experiences and those they encounter in the United States.

Information from this study scratches the surface of challenges SLIFE have in United States school. Future studies can and should continue to look at the specific challenges and needs of SLIFE populations that come from many countries and cultures. Each will have

diverse challenges and experiences when they are immersed in the same United States academic culture. The transition for SLIFE may never be seamless, learning about their struggles and strengths will only help their transition because the stories and experiences of these students will “have an emotional impact on all who work with them” (Zimmerman-Orozco, 2015, p. 49). Understanding the academic experiences, stresses, and struggles of these students through their own cultural lens is one small, but meaningful, step toward creating an academic environment where both their language and academic needs can be met.

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Appendix A: Participant Questions

Name/Nombre _____ Date/Fecha _____

Participant Questions / Preguntas para Participantes

Home Country School Questions/ Preguntas de escuela en tu país de origen

1. How many years did you go to school in your home country?
¿Cuántos años fuiste a la escuela en tu país de origen?
2. What was the highest grade you completed in your home country?
¿Cuál fue el grado más alto que completaste?
3. How old were you when you started school?
¿Cuántos años tenías cuando empezaste la escuela?
4. What subjects did you study? *¿Cuáles materias estudiaste?*
5. Describe what you did during a typical class.
Describe lo que hiciste durante una clase normal.
6. What did the teacher do if you didn't understand?
¿Qué hizo el maestro(a) si no entendiste algo?
7. What things were easy for you at school?
¿Cuáles cosas fueron fáciles para tí en la escuela?
8. What things were difficult for you at school?
¿Cuáles cosas fueron difíciles para tí en la escuela?

Appendix B: Questions about School in the U.S.

Name/Nombre _____ Date/Fecha _____

Questions about School in the US/ Preguntas sobre escuela en los EEUU

1. Tell me two things that are very different about school in the United States compared to your home country.
Dime dos cosas que son muy diferentes de la escuela en los Estados Unidos en comparación a la escuela en tu país de origen.
2. What things were easy when you started school in the United States? Why?
¿Cuáles cosas fueron fáciles para tí cuando empezaste escuela en los EEUU? ¿Por qué?
3. What things were difficult when you started school in the United States? Why?
¿Cuáles cosas fueron difíciles para tí cuando empezaste escuela en los EEUU? ¿Por qué?
4. What has helped make the difficult parts of school easier for you?
¿Cuál(es) cosa(s) ha(n) ayudado hacer las cosas difíciles en la escuela más fácil para ti?
5. What do teachers do that confused you? Why?
¿Qué hacen los maestros que te hacen sentir confundido/a? ¿Por qué?
6. What do you do if you don't understand? Why?
¿Qué haces si no entiendes algo? ¿Por qué?
7. What things in class are easy to understand? Why?
¿Cuáles cosas en la clase son fáciles entender? ¿Por qué?
8. What makes it difficult to be a student in the United States?
¿Qué se hacen la escuela difícil ser estudiante en los EEUU?
9. What have teachers done to make things easier?
¿Qué han hecho los maestros para hacer cosas más fáciles?
10. What do you wish you could have had or people would have done to help you?
¿Qué te gustaría que podrías haber tenido o que habrían hecho las personas para ayudarte?
11. What advice would you give to new students?
¿Cuáles consejos darías a los estudiantes nuevos?
12. What do you want to do after you graduate from high school?
¿Qué quieres hacer después de graduarte de la escuela?