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Chapter 2
Advancing the Conversation: Humanizing and Problematizing the Conversation About the Students We Call SLIFE

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Abstract In this chapter, the authors seek to advance the conversation of the term students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). More specifically, the authors problematize the label of SLIFE, its use, and advance the conversation to propose future directions. To accomplish this, the authors divide the chapter into four main sections: (1) introduction, (2) problematizing SLIFE, (3) expanding definitions of interrupted and limited formal education, and (4) final thoughts. Our goal is that this chapter will become part of a growing conversation about the implications of using the label SLIFE in formal schooling. Motivated by the ongoing dialogue criticizing the use of SLIFE and labels in the field of education, we hope this chapter will contribute to pushing exchanges towards using more asset-based vocabulary and avoiding labels to conglomerate a large, heterogeneous group of learners without benefits connected to its use.

Keywords SLIFE · SIFE · ELs · Literacy

Introduction

Historically, the topic of literacy has been an area of interest for industrialized nations, and it has been tied to impacting individuals' abilities to be employed and to contribute to the nation's economic development (Barton & Hamilton, 1990). For

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this reason, literacy has often been viewed as a monolithic technology or tradition (Collins & Blot, 2003) of the required skill sets needed to participate and meet the demands of the complex modern world. Thus, literacy, as a socially-made construction (Cook-Gumperz, 2006a), has sometimes been criticized for being narrow in its singular focus (Collins, 1995) as well as for contributing to a stratified system of social inequalities (Collins & Blot, 2003). Certainly, changes in the definitions of literacy respond to what is perceived as the changing needs of those in positions of power (Cook-Gumperz, 2006b).

Why does this theoretical explanation matter to students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE)? It matters because, from the moment SLIFE arrive into our learning spaces, they are evaluated and viewed as illiterate or individuals who do not possess something useful; individuals who lack the abilities to be useful to their new society. Some may disagree with this declaration, and we understand it can be considered a harsh statement for others. Nonetheless, in schools, educators teaching SLIFE are encouraged by the educational system to focus on identifying the skills SLIFE lack and rarely, if ever, focus on learning about the literacies and skills SLIFE do have and bring with them into their host countries. It is in this deficit mentality (i.e., SLIFE *do not have* or *need*) often enforced in our educational systems that the label *SLIFE* and, in particular, the word *limited* may become problematic and lead to stigmatization and simplification of the learners' abilities and possibilities to succeed in school (Browder, 2019).

The purpose of this chapter is to advance the conversation of the acronym SLIFE. To accomplish this, the authors divide the remaining of the chapter into three main sections: (1) problematizing SLIFE, (2) expanding definitions of interrupted and limited formal education, and (3) final thoughts. In the first section—problematizing SLIFE—we problematize the term SLIFE by explaining raising tensions with the use of labels and the words *limited* and *interrupted*. In the second section—expanding definitions of interrupted and limited formal education—we expand the current use of the terms *interrupted* and *limited* by using a case study from Venezuela. Lastly, the chapter ends with three takeaways that practitioners and researchers need to consider as we continue to advance our understanding of the students we call SLIFE. Our goal with this chapter is that it will become part of a growing conversation about the implication of using the term *SLIFE* in formal schooling. Furthermore, we hope this chapter will contribute to pushing the education field forward towards using more asset-based vocabulary and avoiding labels to conglomerate a large, heterogeneous group of learners.

Problematizing SLIFE

In this section, we problematize the label SLIFE and its use in education. To do this, we explore the following problems: (1) Problems with its deficit focus and potential for enabling stigmatization, (2) Problems with its operational definition for identification and placement purposes, and (3) Problems with its ambiguity for precise

discourse and placement. We end this section of the chapter exploring the question *Do we need this construct?* As an important clarifying note, the purpose of this chapter is not to discredit or criticize the use of SLIFE or the vanguard work led by Drs. Andrea DeCapua, Helaine Marshall, and others who have consistently used this acronym in their works (including two of the authors of this chapter: Browder and Pentón Herrera). Instead, the purpose of this chapter is to acknowledge the rising tensions and the lingering concerns with using SLIFE (Browder, 2018, 2019) and labels to conceptualize language learners (Kibler & Valdés, 2016).

Problems with Its Deficit Focus and Potential for Enabling Stigmatization

One of the main problems with the term SLIFE is that it is used to label a group of people based on their supposed deficits and thereby enables their stigmatization. Social psychologists tell us that social stigmatization begins with labeling and ends with the damaging of identity (Link & Phelan, 2001). Thus, social psychologists warn that using nouns to refer to people is dehumanizing and devaluing as it enables us to forget we are talking about human beings, especially if the noun label refers to the lack of something that is highly valued. Approaching the labeling of SLIFE from a deficit-based perspective raises issues because this label is associated with low, limited, or no literacy and/or with low or limited formal schooling. Furthermore, this classification might be seen as problematic for some teachers and scholars, especially for those guided by emancipatory (Freire, 1970), Indigenous (Iseke & BMJK, 2011), and decolonizing (Hernandez-Zamora, 2010) epistemologies.

As we shared in the introduction of this chapter, the field of education is shifting towards an asset-based definition of literacy where the word *literacies* is preferred by some (see Collins, 1995; Collins & Blot, 2003) to capitalize on the knowledge and experience learners have and bring with them to their learning environments. As such, recognizing and acknowledging that SLIFE *do* have and bring different forms of literacies to the formal learning spaces is the first step towards fully embracing asset-based practices in our schools and institutions. Furthermore, this acceptance of viewing literacy as *literacies* creates spaces for educators to seek further learning experiences that equip them to understand their SLIFE' strengths, skills, and abilities beyond those standardized set of literacy skills enforced in our schools.

People in industrialized nations value literacy and formal schooling because they are viewed as assets affecting individuals' abilities to be employed and to contribute to the nation's economic development (Barton & Hamilton, 1990). Thus, literacy—and being literate—has been and continues to be attached to virtue, ability, and even usefulness (Cook-Gumperz, 2006a). On the other hand, illiteracy—or being illiterate—is associated with denigration, economic stagnation, cultural disorder, and political decay (Collins, 1995; Cook-Gumperz, 2006a). Thus, the use of the term SLIFE and its association with *illiteracy* and being *uneducated* may enable the

stigmatization of these students and simplification of their abilities and possibilities to succeed in school (Browder, 2019). Stigmatization could harm the identity of students identified as SLIFE.

It may be considered an issue that the use of the acronym SLIFE does not allow writers to follow the American Psychological Association (2020) rules for bias-free language. The American Psychological Association (APA) asks writers to avoid using nouns to label groups of people and instead consider using adjectives and/or person-first language phrases. Most importantly, APA recommends the involvement of communities and people in choosing their labels. An example of this is how APA prefers the phrase "persons with down syndrome" and considers the noun label *retards* to be offensive and unacceptable. The term SLIFE, however, does not allow people the choice of using person-first language because the personhood, or student, is subsumed into the acronym. In other words, writers lose the option of referring to these students as "students who *have* SLIFE" because (1) SLIFE is a plural acronym in which the letter *S* stands for students, and (2) SLIFE is a category people are placed into, not a characteristic they can have. It is also worrisome that SLIFE have not chosen this label for themselves or been asked how they feel about it.

Problems with Its Operational Definition for Identification and Placement Purposes

Critical examinations of the term, SLIFE (or students with interrupted formal education [SIFE] in New York State), argue that it is currently not well defined for the purpose of public school data collection and placement in interventions (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010; Browder, 2019). In school systems, to qualify as a SLIFE, a student must have low math skills and/or low first language (L1) print literacy *caused by* gaps in schooling attendance (Minnesota Statutes, 2015; NYSED, 2019). Attempting to measure limited or interrupted formal education this way is problematic because newly-arrived immigrant students can have developing math or L1 print literacy without having documented interruptions in their schooling and vice versa (Browder, 2019). Research shows that math and print literacy levels are often not correlated with years of schooling (Browder, 2019; Tarone, 2010; Tarone et al., 2009) because print literacy development can happen without schooling (Scribner & Cole, 1978), and schooling can happen without print literacy (Robson, 1982). Moreover, the adequacy of public schooling can vary greatly from country to country or locale to locale (Flaitz, 2006; UNICEF, 2014), and students do not benefit equally even when given equal schooling (Bigelow & Watson, 2011). As a result, when using documented interruptions in schooling history as an inflexible placement criterion for SLIFE services, students with low math or L1 print literacy skills may be systematically excluded from services they need simply because they do not show interruptions in their schooling histories (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010). Similarly, students who do not have developing L1 print literacy

or math skills may be inappropriately placed in SLIFE programs that are not in their best interest simply because they have interruptions in their schooling histories (Feinberg, 2000).

In contrast to the aforementioned school system criteria for identifying SLIFE, DeCapua and Marshall (2015) argue that SLIFE can be distinguished from other English learners (ELs) by their experience of cultural dissonance. They argue that these students come from collectivistic cultures, oral traditions, and backgrounds of informal or out-of-school learning, and that causes them to experience cultural dissonance when placed in formal, western-style schooling, which emphasizes individual achievement on abstract, decontextualized, and commodified learning tasks. Furthermore, DeCapua and Marshall (2015) argue that the challenge these students face is not simply a lack of print literacy or educational schema, but is instead the difficulty of adapting to a new way of learning. This definition of SLIFE has great potential because it offers a single criterion instead of relying on a set of uncorrelated and restrictive criteria, such as math test scores, L1 print literacy scores, and school transcripts. Unfortunately, there is currently no objective-quantitative operationalization of this criterion for school system use. In other words, schools do not yet have the means to identify cultural dissonance in newly-arrived EL students for the purpose of data collection and placement in SLIFE interventions. Hence, without some sort of objective criteria, there is a danger that placement decisions may be made based on assumptions or bias, and this can become a form of educational segregation (Feinberg, 2000).

Problems with Its Ambiguity for Precise Discourse and Placement

The public school operationalization of the term SLIFE is also problematic because it is a dichotomous variable used to refer to an incredibly diverse group of people with very different needs (Browder, 2019). As a result, it may lump people with very different needs together and encourage inappropriate one-size-fits-all interventions. To address this issue, DeCapua et al. (2020) argue that these students' challenges can be understood better with a continuum they refer to as *Ways of Knowing*. In their more nuanced view, SLIFE is not an all-or-nothing category to which a student either belongs or does not belong. Students can experience more or less cultural dissonance based on their backgrounds, and therefore, each student will need a different degree of support. Browder (2019) views the SLIFE construct similarly but complicates further. He argues that SLIFE is a multidimensional construct composed of many different continuous variables. His research shows that students can have one of the SLIFE traits without the other. For example, students can have interrupted schooling but can also have highly-developed L1 print literacy skills, or students can have low L1 print literacy skills without interrupted schooling. Browder (2015, 2018, 2019), DeCapua et al. (2020) and other advocates would like to bring attention to this group's diversity and needs.

The existing literature from our field already shows the diversity of the students we call SLIFE. In one of their articles, DeCapua et al. (2007), for example, describe a wide variety of students who might be identified as SLIFE: (1) Tom speaks English because he is from Sierra Leone but has no formal schooling; (2) Sonia has been moving back and forth from the Dominican Republic all her life, and as a result, has inconsistent and interrupted formal schooling; (3) John recently came from China, where he completed up to grade six before leaving school to work in a factory and has not been attending school for several years. In one of his articles, Browder (2018) studies a group of Chin refugees from Burma/Myanmar, an ethnic group with a long history of print literacy and formal schooling. Browder (2018) finds that most of them have varying degrees of Chin print literacy despite having lengthy interruptions in their schooling. In their article, Bigelow et al. (2008) describe working with recent-arrival Hmong immigrant children with various levels of print literacy and prior formal schooling experiences. Lastly, Franco and Abreu (2018) and Mac Donald et al. (2020) discuss how the term SIFE is being applied to university students in Venezuela who had to discontinue their studies, in many cases, due to forced migration.

From those examples, we see that the literature suggests the terms SLIFE and SIFE can include (1) both EL and non-EL students such as speakers of World Englishes (e.g., people from Sierra Leone); (2) both students who are recently arrived immigrants and those who are very transient, coming and going from the U.S. or other English-speaking nations; (3) both students who have and do not have L1 print literacy skills, as well as students whose L1 print literacy is not Roman-Alphabetic (e.g., Chinese); (4) both students who have never attended formal or western-style schools and those who have completed many years of formal schooling; (5) both students who have very low math skills and students who have very high math skills but are struggling to restart their formal schooling after being out of school for a long time; and (6) both children in K-12 or adults at the university level. Indeed, SLIFE is an umbrella term that includes a diverse group of students with very different needs.

For these reasons, the current construct of SLIFE may be inclusive to the point of ambiguity. When two people are talking about SLIFE, there is no guarantee they are talking about the same student population or about the same academic needs. When talking about Latinx students' academic needs, for instance, it would be problematic if we place this highly heterogeneous group of learners into a one-size-fits-all box because not all Latinx EL students speak Spanish as a first language, have the same formal schooling levels, come from the same countries, or have experienced the same social and economic privileges (Pentón Herrera, 2018). If the term SLIFE is to be used to identify students who need specific interventions, then it should actually refer to specific academic needs instead of being a vague umbrella term.

Likewise, the term SLIFE as a dichotomous variable is problematic because a large number of EL students fall into a large gray area and can, therefore, be included or excluded based on minimal differences in just one criterion. For example, currently, 77.8% of all EL students in U.S. schools are from families of Latin American

origin (U.S. Department of Education, 2017) and, therefore, usually speak Spanish as a first language. This is noteworthy because Spanish has a long history of print literacy, formal schooling, and scientific thinking. It is also noteworthy because Latin American nations generally have free public education up to sixth grade or higher (UNICEF, 2014), with 86% of their youth completing grade six and youth literacy levels around 98% (World Bank, 2020). Yet, children's formal schooling in these nations is often inconsistent or interrupted due to social injustice, violent crime, and political turmoil (Lukes, 2015). Given these facts, it is possible that many of the Latinx EL students in the U.S. actually fall more into the right side of DeCapua et al.'s (2020) *Ways of Learning Continuum*. They may have some of the characteristics of SLIFE to a moderate degree, but not all. Consequently, two very similar Latinx students might get classified differently based on a small difference in just one criterion, such as having or not having at least 2 years of documented interrupted schooling (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010). As a result, one of those two very similar students might receive services while the other student is denied services.

Do We Need This Construct?

Given the issues with the term SLIFE and the way it is currently being used, it is important to consider the need for this label or perhaps even consider its elimination or reform (Browder, 2019). In order to have this conversation, however, we must do more than find its faults; we must also discuss the benefits of having the term SLIFE or something similar. We, then, arrive at the important question, *How does having the term SLIFE benefit students identified as SLIFE?*

Browder (2019) explains that it is sometimes helpful or necessary to create dichotomous variables for public schools to identify students who are eligible for certain services. Thus, in this particular case, having the term SLIFE allows us to (1) identify students for the purpose of giving them the services they need and (2) disaggregate the data for these students to hold schools accountable (Minnesota Statutes, 2015; NYSDE, 2019). In fact, advocates for these students fought hard to get those laws enacted (Heilman, 2018) because they believed these students benefit from special services, and researchers (Browder, 2015; Pentón Herrera, 2021), as well as teachers' personal experiences, appear to approve the benefits of those supports for those students. Thus, removing the term from public schools might cause harm to these students. Furthermore, as long as the public schools continue to have the term SLIFE, researchers might be inclined to continue to use it when discussing students currently included under it. Consequently, consistent published research under this umbrella term of SLIFE will make research findings and advances more visible in academia and more accessible for teachers.

However, the realities that this term is already in use and has benefits should not dissuade advocates from introducing the use of more specific and more potentially beneficial terms. For starters, advocates and researchers could start referring to

SLIFE as persons, children, adolescents, adults, or students *identified as* SLIFE as the writers of this chapter do in the title. Similarly, individuals could use terms such as *students with developing L1 print literacy* to refer to students with one specific academic area of need instead of generalizing the literacy and academic needs of learners. For example, students with the cultural dissonance issue DeCapua et al. (2020) describe could eventually be referred to as students experiencing cultural dissonance (CD) in U.S. schools. To avoid having to repeat long and awkward phrases, the condition can be referred to with an acronym such as CD and students with shorter phrases such as students *experiencing* CD. Over time, the term SLIFE might eventually be supplanted by several other terms that are more specific. Similarly, advocates could start promoting terms that are growth-focused instead of deficit-focused, such as EL students learning print literacy, students new to print literacy, or print literacy EL students.

As part of a larger struggle, it would be ideal if public schools became less dependent on systems that classify students but could also make greater progress on helping students with their individual needs. One way to achieve this progress is to create legally-enforceable plans that are created to help individual students overcome their temporary needs. An example of this is the 504 plans currently used in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). The 504 plans do not need to label students in order to require they be accommodated, and 504 s serve as a legal document. A 504, for example, can be used to help a student who recently had hand surgery and needs temporary special accommodation. In fact, the Americans with Disabilities Act has been broadening the range of people protected under law to include psychiatric and substance abuse conditions (Fleischer, 2001). A 504 plan can currently be used to accommodate and provide counseling services for students who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Likewise, a 504, or something similar, could someday be used to require schools to be flexible and supportive with students who have been out of school for a while (i.e., interruptions) and are reintegrating back into formal schooling. In the current system, state and federal authorities can already disaggregate the educational data for students with 504s to evaluate how well those students' needs are being met, and advocates can also use these documents in educational lawsuits if necessary. The implementation of a plan similar to the 504 plan for students identified as SLIFE could require accommodations and services for the specific needs of each student instead of a one-size-fits-all intervention.

Expanding Definitions of Interrupted and Limited Formal Education: A Case Study from Venezuela

In this section of the chapter, we provide a case study to shed light on the expanding uses and definitions of the term SLIFE and, more specifically, SIFE. Our vision with incorporating this case study is that practitioners, researchers, administrators, and

educational stakeholders at all levels will be able to understand the growing diversity within the population of students identified as SLIFE.

Background Information

During the last years, Venezuela has been experiencing economic, social, and political turmoil that has led to a generalized crisis of unimaginable dimensions, dramatically impacting the way people live. Such crisis has caused chronic shortages of food and medicine, lack of access to basic services, insecurity, insignificant salaries, unemployment, discouragement, and demoralization. The result of this crisis has been the massive displacement of Venezuelan citizens to neighboring countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, or even more distant nations such as the United States and Spain.

People's fight-or-flight response against a situation that threatens their very survival reflects the forced nature of the migration in Venezuela (Franco & Abreu, 2018). Even more alarming is the fact that most of the population leaving the country are young adults, mostly highly-trained professionals and university students who have been forced to abandon their studies due to the above-mentioned reasons (Franco & Abreu, 2018). Consequently, tertiary education has been the most affected education sector in the country due to the high student dropout rates and also because of the high resignation rates of university professors. Thus, in our context, we use the term students with interrupted formal education to refer to university students forcefully leaving Venezuela (Franco & Abreu, 2018; Mac Donald et al., 2020).

The most remarkable difference between students identified as SIFE in the context of Venezuela (young adults) and the population of SIFE appearing in most of the literature (e.g., Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2002; Lukes, 2015; Schmidt de Carranza, 2017; WIDA Consortium, 2015) is that the former are university students with highly-developed print literacy skills in their native language (Spanish). However, language may represent a constraint for those who move to countries whose official language is not Spanish. With this in mind, Venezuelan students identified as SIFE do not fit in the popular characterization of *students with interrupted formal education*. The popular definition of SLIFE and/or SIFE currently used in the literature to primarily refer to K-12 students who are ELs with emerging print literacy skills in L1 and interrupted formal education may also exclude other groups of learners with diverse realities from around the world.

Expanding Our Understanding of Interrupted and Limited Formal Education

The aim of this case study is not to establish a unique term to refer to the student population identified as SLIFE or SIFE, but to understand how these labels can be expanded—or challenged—depending on the context in which they are adopted. In this context, the fact that Venezuelan university students drop out implies a form of interruption, which, unfortunately, is an indefinite type of interruption. As such, the term *interrupted formal education* is the one that best describes the situation of these students leaving the university to migrate to other countries in search of a better life. Also, for the Venezuelan migrants and refugees described in this case study, legal regulations of permanence in the host countries and economic hardship present additional barriers to returning to higher education (Franco & Abreu, 2018), which, in a way, might also expand the term of *limited formal education* as these students have *limited* access to continue *formal education*.

Final Thoughts

As we end this chapter, we would like to leave our readers with three important takeaways: (1) we need to continue exploring what it means to be a student with limited or interrupted formal education because, as we saw in the case study above, current global events are pushing the boundaries of the label SLIFE and/or SIFE; (2) we need to continue exploring more reliable forms of individualized assessments to comprehend the knowledge students identified as SLIFE bring with them and craft individualized plans to help these students achieve the skills needed to succeed; and (3) the field of education and applied linguistics need to continue advancing the conversation about the necessity of humanizing the constructs of literacy and language in formal educational environments as well as in society as a whole. We hope the information shared in this chapter generates beneficial discussions in the field and contributes to the advancement of asset-based knowledge about the student population we call SLIFE.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks of using the label SLIFE in your context? As you draft a list, ask yourself if the positives (benefits) outweigh the negatives (drawbacks).
2. What topics or concerns that you are familiar with about the student population we call SLIFE was not addressed in this chapter?

3. What are your thoughts about the authors' call for *problematizing* and *humanizing* the conversation about the students we call SLIFE?

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