Chapter 3
Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in Primary and Secondary Classrooms in the U.S., Australia, Canada, and the UK

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Abstract This chapter shares an overview of students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) in the United States and three other prominent English-speaking countries with a growing number of SLIFE: Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Thus, this chapter has been organized into four main sections: (1) introduction to SLIFE, (2) in-depth overview of SLIFE in primary and secondary U.S. classrooms, (3) overview of SLIFE in primary and secondary classrooms in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and (4) six significant challenges SLIFE encounter at the primary and secondary levels in these four countries. Notably, the primary purpose of this chapter is to bring clarity to the current state and reality of the K-12 SLIFE population in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as these four countries represent the largest recipients of refugees resettling in English-speaking nations.

Keywords ELs · ESOL · K-12 schools · Literacy · Refugees · SIFE · SLIFE

Introduction

The acronym *SLIFE* was first introduced in 2009 by Drs. DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang to refer to students with limited or interrupted formal education (DeCapua et al., 2009). SLIFE, sometimes preferred over deficit-based terms such as *illiterate*, *uneducated, nonliterate*, or *low-educated*, is used in academia to identify immigrant populations of K-12 learners arriving in English-speaking countries—such as the United States (Browder, 2018) and Canada (Montero et al., 2014)—with interrupted

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25

or limited schooling. In addition to SLIFE, other terms can be found in publications to describe learners with limited or interrupted formal schooling. Additional terms and phrases found in the literature today include students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017), students with interrupted or minimal education (Salva & Matis, 2017), binate language learners (Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016), newcomers with limited formal schooling (Custodio, 2011), and students with interrupted schooling (Matthews, 2008; Potochnick, 2018), to name a few.

SLIFE is a relatively small, but growing (DeCapua, 2019; Hos, 2016) population in U.S. classrooms and around the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)'s latest report, an estimated 3.7 million refugee children are out of school around the world today (UNHCR, 2019a). Furthermore, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom were identified in 2018 as the three top countries of resettlement for refugees and asylum seekers, with Australia being seventh (UNHCR, 2019b). Considering that over 90% of refugees referred by the UNHCR resettle in English-dominant countries (Montero, 2019), giving attention to the SLIFE population in English teaching and learning environments is becoming increasingly necessary.

The exact number of SLIFE in English-speaking countries is neither current nor precise. For example, publications agree that the SLIFE population represents somewhere from 10% to 20% of newly arrived English learners (ELs) in the U.S. (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Hoover et al., 2016; Potochnick, 2018), but the specific percentage is not available. In Australia, data reported in 2005 revealed that approximately "6.9 per cent of the 46 821 ESL [English as a second language] secondary students started school…with minimal, severely interrupted or no previous formal schooling in any country" (Miller et al., 2005, p. 21). More recently, a study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2016 reported that "around 15% of adult respondents reported having never attended school, and a further 34% had fewer than 10 years of schooling" (Jenkinson et al., 2016, p. 3). On the other hand, in the United Kingdom (Williams, 2018; Young-Scholten, 2013) and Canada (MacNevin, 2012; Montero et al., 2014), SLIFE populations are recognized, but the government does not track specific national percentages.

In educational settings, the term SLIFE is used to describe learners who arrive in classrooms with at least two grade levels below their peers, with low or no print literacy in their native language (L1) and numeracy skills, and with critical social-emotional needs (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). However, the reality is that SLIFE are far from uniform and should not be thought of as a one-size-fits-all population. As explained by Matthews (2008), these students come "from a wide range of national, cultural, linguistic, ethnic and racial backgrounds, [as well as] with different experiences of forced migration" (p. 32). In addition, within the SLIFE population we can find refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants[1] fleeing countries undergoing civil, military, and political unrest, and

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[1] In this chapter, I use and understand these terms the same way they are defined by Amnesty International (n.d.). *Refugees* are people fleeing their countries due to serious human rights violations and persecutions. *Asylum seekers* are people who left their country and are seeking protection from persecution or serious human rights violations in another country. *Immigrants*, sometimes referred to as *migrants*, are people staying outside their country of origin.

individuals who chose not to participate in formal education (Custodio, 2011), to name a few. Other specific cases where students can become part of the SLIFE population is during their migration journey. A recent example of immigrants experiencing forced interrupted formal education was when Central American children were detained indefinitely in U.S. detention centers without access to formal schooling.

Presently, schools in English-speaking countries face many challenges to provide adequate support to ELs with limited or interrupted formal education. Some of the challenges include lack of administrative understanding of the population, adequate instructional materials to support their cognitive and linguistic mismatch, and sound approaches to assess their cultural and linguistic needs and development. In a previous publication, I shared my experiences of how administrative personnel, including school counselors, are often unaware of the linguistic and academic needs of SLIFE, which results in assigning classes that are not adequate for the SLIFE' academic and linguistic levels (see Pentón Herrera, 2018a). Similarly, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and mainstream educators often lack adequate training to support, teach, and evaluate literacy development effectively for this unique group of learners (Custodio, 2011; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Montero, 2019). Furthermore, it is even more difficult to adequately support middle and high school SLIFE because there is a lack of textbooks and materials specifically designed for adolescents. Finally, "there is a lack of in-depth proven research on what works with SLIFE" (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 11) and how to assess them properly (Gonzalez, 2018).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview about the current state of SLIFE in primary and secondary classrooms (K-12) in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as these four nations represent the largest recipients of refugees resettling in English-speaking nations (Montero, 2019; UNHCR, 2019b). Thus, the remainder of the chapter has been divided into three sections: (1) in-depth overview of SLIFE in primary and secondary U.S. classrooms, (2) overview of SLIFE in primary and secondary classrooms in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and (3) six significant challenges SLIFE encounter at primary and secondary levels in these four English-speaking countries. My vision with this chapter is to bring clarity to the current state and reality of the K-12 SLIFE population in these four English-speaking nations. Furthermore, it is my hope that ESOL and mainstream educators will use the information shared in this text to educate themselves and help our SLIFE not only survive, but thrive in our schools.

SLIFE in Primary and Secondary U.S. Classrooms

The topic of ELs with limited or interrupted formal education in U.S. schools was cursorily introduced in academia in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the high dropout rates (Chang, 1990; Tellez & Walker de Felix, 1993). During that period, civil wars, political instability, and economic hardships caused a big wave of

migration from Central American countries to the United States (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). Thus, many immigrant children arriving in U.S. classrooms had gaps in formal education or had never attended a formal school environment. In the hopes of supporting ELs and preventing dropout rates from increasing, innovative programs, such as the newcomer program (see Chang, 1990; Gonzalez, 1992), were introduced. However, these pioneer publications reflect the infancy stage of the literature surrounding ELs with limited or interrupted formal education at the time. The first in-depth manuscript about SLIFE was published in 1998 (see Mace-Matluck et al., 1998), and one of its major contributions to the field was making the distinction between the SLIFE population—identified as immigrants with limited schooling—and their non-SLIFE counterparts.

In the present day, newcomers with limited or interrupted formal education remain one of the most vulnerable populations within ESOL, facing enormous disadvantages (Short et al., 2018) and representing "the neediest of our English learners" (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 1). The SLIFE population is highly heterogeneous and has widely varied educational, socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological backgrounds and experiences (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). Presently, the highest percentage of ELs with limited or interrupted formal education in the United States are from Latin American countries, primarily Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. "Refugee children make up the second highest number, with students from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East" (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 2).

In the literature, SLIFE have been described as resilient (Montero, 2018; Pentón Herrera, 2021a), strongly motivated (Potochnick, 2018), and determined individuals with a drive to succeed (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). Nonetheless, through no fault of their own, they tend to academically attain less (Potochnick, 2018) and are at a greater risk of dropping out of school than their non-SLIFE counterparts (DeCapua, 2016; DeCapua et al., 2007). For this reason, it is important for ESOL programs in K-12 to disaggregate available language proficiency and achievement data for SLIFE to better identify unmet needs and "develop solutions that will improve educational services and schooling conditions" (Short et al., 2018, p. 88) for this group of learners.

Presently, in the U.S. the term SLIFE continues to be used as an umbrella term denoting a population of students who may have never attended a formal school environment or have over 2 years of interrupted formal education (DeCapua, 2016). However, although this term is commonly used in the field of education, it is not accepted or considered ideal by all (DeCapua, 2019; DeCapua et al., 2020). For example, Browder (2019) explains his concern with using SLIFE as a construct to homogenize this group of ELs who are highly heterogeneous. In his argument, Browder (2019) advances the SLIFE conversation by questioning if the construct justifies the creation of new interventions for vulnerable students within the SLIFE continuum—such as SLIFE with special needs (see Pentón Herrera, 2021b)—or if it further stigmatizes this student population. Browder et al. venture to further explore the problematization and use of the SLIFE acronym in Chap. 2 of this book.

Primary School

For elementary-age ELs, arriving as a SLIFE means having extremely limited or no experience with formal schooling. As a result, these learners may have had limited to no instruction in reading and writing in their L1 and would have little or no under-standing of sound-symbol correspondence. Basic activities and concepts learned in primary years such as learning to wait in line, taking turns, sitting down at a desk for long periods, using school instruments (i.e., holding a pencil and using scissors), raising their hands to ask a question, using the American-style lavatory, eating at a school cafeteria, and working cooperatively with classmates, might need to be taught upon their arrival (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; also see Cruzado-Guerrero & Martínez-Alba, this book, Chap. 13). Albeit academic challenges increase with grade levels, Potochnick (2018) found that "for primary-grade-age arrivals with interrupted schooling, the results suggest that by 10th grade, they may be able to catch up academically in some areas" (p. 855).

Secondary School

The consequences of interrupted or limited formal education are greater for adolescent newcomers. Secondary schools place great demands on students in the content areas, which adolescent ELs with limited or interrupted formal education have minimal time to meet. "By the time they acquire enough English to handle instruction in content areas, they are significantly behind their mainstream peers in content knowledge" (Hos, 2016, p. 481). In addition, even the implementation of evidence-based literacy programs may prove ineffective or harmful for this particular student population (Gonzalez, 2018). As a result, high school SLIFE become heavily influenced by a tangle of pre-migration and post-migration challenges (i.e., personal, print literacy, economic, social, emotional, psychological, etc.) they are often unable to overcome within the shortened time available and, after 10th grade, are highly likely to drop out of school or not enroll at all (Potochnick, 2018). Adolescent SLIFE remain, without a doubt, one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations within the context of English language teaching (ELT) in the United States and around the world.

SLIFE in Primary and Secondary Classrooms in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom

Different from the United States, the majority of the SLIFE population arriving in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom consists of resettled asylum seekers and refugees from all over the world. In these three countries, the SLIFE population

is acknowledged, but there are currently no available numbers found at the national level for students with limited schooling served in K-12 schools. In this section, I provide an overview of the latest data and publications available about SLIFE in primary and secondary classrooms in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Australia

The latest available scholarship from Australia shows the growing interest in literacy education for refugee SLIFE—sometimes referred to as low-literate refugees (see Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Maadad, 2020; Windle & Miller, 2012). According to these works, "Australian schools have received growing numbers of students with disrupted schooling arriving from places of conflict and persecution" (Windle & Miller, 2012, p. 317), including Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Iraq, and Syria (Watkins et al., 2019). The increase in migrant and refugee populations has expanded through inner regional areas, but a significant number has also relocated in rural and remote areas of the country (Davie, 2015). Due to the growth of this student population, some school districts are incorporating programs to support their refugee SLIFE. For example, the Victoria State Government began the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) with the aim of having "a positive impact on the educational and wellbeing outcomes of young people from refugee backgrounds in Victoria schools" (Victoria State Government, 2018, para. 8). In this initiative, the Victoria State Government provides whole school support programs that focus on improving refugee students' print literacy as well as mental, emotional, and social wellbeing (Victoria State Government, 2018). Similarly, the University of South Australia recently began a study titled *Refugee Student Resilience Study* where the aim is to "develop an understanding of the complex and intersecting ways in which school and policy environments shape refugee student resilience" (Refugee Student Resilience Study, 2019, para. 3).

Available publications have primarily focused on the literacy education of SLIFE in secondary schools (Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011; Maadad, 2020; Windle & Miller, 2012) as well as refugees transitioning into higher education (Naidoo et al., 2018). Furthermore, most attention has been given to social-emotional needs (Refugee Student Resilience Study, 2019) and to foundational language support. As a result, there is currently a need for research and works delving into the topic of providing refugees with adequate support in other in-school requirements (Maadad, 2020), such as mainstream, content classes. A recent study sheds some light on school leaders' thoughts about their responsibility for educating refugees which includes engaging in caring, nurturing practices to support the whole child (Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020). There is still much work to be done in Australia on how to best support refugee SLIFE. Nonetheless, the latest works disseminate hope for this student population in K-12 Australian classrooms.

Canada

Historically, Canada has welcomed refugees and asylum seekers escaping persecution, war, eviction, and statelessness (Government of Canada, 2017). Since 2000, Canada has primarily welcomed Karen, Bhutanese, and Iraqi refugees. In addition, since 2015, Canada has welcomed 40,081 Syrian refugees "through government-assisted, privately sponsored, or blended visa office-referred programs" (Montero, 2019, p. 317). Although no specific data is available at the national level for refugees and asylum seekers arriving in K-12 schools, many children can be considered potential SLIFE as they had limited access to formal education prior to resettling. Due to SLIFE' growing presence, the Ontario Ministry of Education created a document for teachers to support ELs with limited prior schooling (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). This document shares practical tips that teachers from 3rd to 12th grade supporting SLIFE can use in their learning environments. It is important to note that this document approaches the topic of SLIFE from an asset-based mindset stating that "every English language learner with limited prior schooling can learn and be successful when given appropriate supports and opportunities" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 5).

Publications from the Ontario Ministry of Education share some insights about the steps the nation is taking to support the SLIFE population in primary and secondary schools. For example, Ontario's ESOL curriculum is divided into two programs: (1) English as a second language (ESL) and (2) English literacy development (ELD). The ESL program was designed for students learning English as a second language who "have had educational opportunities to develop age-appropriate first-language literacy skills" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 7). Conversely, the ELD program was designed for students whose "access to education has been limited, and they had limited opportunity to develop language and literacy skills in any language" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 7). The ELD program focuses primarily on differentiated literacy instruction (see Ledger & Montero, this book, Chap. 9). As such, ELD teachers are expected to implement teaching strategies that acknowledge student identity into their learning while providing modification and accommodations as needed (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014).

In addition to individualized and modified instruction, publications about SLIFE in Canada have recently focused on humanizing literacy instruction (Montero, 2019), considering this population's psychological and social-emotional needs (MacNevin, 2012). These works explain the effects of psychosocial needs on SLIFE' academic development and success (Montero et al., 2014). For this reason, researchers encourage teachers to facilitate learning environments that provide intensive psychosocial supports (Montero et al., 2014). Montero (2018) proposes the integration of "educational practice through a trauma-informed lens [to] help educators understand their role in supporting refugee newcomers' recovery from trauma within their academic mission" (p. 93). In this study, Montero (2018) found that refugees, when supported, have the ability and resilience to self-heal from

trauma. This study's findings paint a positive picture for the future of K-12 refugee SLIFE in Canada and around the world.

The United Kingdom

At the time this chapter was being written, the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) was undergoing a difficult social and political situation where the nation recently separated from the European Union (EU). According to recent news, immigration is the single strongest issue driving Brits to support leaving the EU (Garrett, 2019). In fact, over half of the United Kingdom (Garrett, 2019) voted to leave the EU inspired by their feelings of anti-immigration, making this event a refugee crisis that is reframing immigration within the United Kingdom context. This event is crucial because it affects refugee visibility, education, and support in the United Kingdom's K-12 schools. For example, recent statistics show "in primary schools, 33.5% of pupils of school age are of minority ethnic origins" (Department for Education, 2019, p. 8). On the other hand, "in secondary schools, 31.3% of pupils are minority ethnic origins" (Department for Education, 2019, p. 8). These statistics, however, do not reflect the number of refugees or SLIFE being served in K-12 schools presently.

Visibility is currently one of the most significant challenges facing refugee SLIFE in the United Kingdom's primary and secondary schools. Available publications from the United Kingdom about the SLIFE population have mainly focused on adults, referred to as low-educated immigrant adults, low-educated adults, or literacy education and second language learning for adults (LESLLA) learners (see Haznedar et al., 2018; Young-Scholten, 2013, 2015; Young-Scholten & Limon, 2015). The focus on SLIFE who are adult immigrants might be connected to the statistics showing that most reported asylum seekers and refugees arriving in the United Kingdom are over 18 years of age (Cerna, 2019; also see Harris, this book, Chap. 4). Much work remains to be done in the United Kingdom today for primary and secondary SLIFE; specifically, as it pertains to supporting their print literacy, language learning, and social-emotional needs.

Challenges SLIFE Encounter in Primary and Secondary Classrooms

Many factors affect the academic success of SLIFE in K-12 schools in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. However, in this section, I address six important elements that need to be taken into consideration to improve the academic opportunities of SLIFE and promote school success. The six factors shared in this section are (1) identification, (2) age of arrival, (3) social-emotional

needs and integration, (4), language and literacy learning, (5) assessments, and (6) parental support and involvement.

Identification

Currently available data on "immigrant children with interrupted schooling is largely out of date or limited in its relevance, particularly on a national scale" (Potochnick, 2018, p. 860). This is partly due to a lack of identification among schools, counties, and states and/or inconsistencies in how they are identified and tracked. According to DeCapua (2016), educational entities are having a difficult time identifying what exactly characterizes this diverse sub-group of ELs "who range along a continuum from those who have never had any schooling and arrive pre-literate, to those who may be two or three years behind their grade-level peers in content knowledge and literacy skills" (p. 225). Furthermore, many school districts do not keep track of how much formal education ELs have received in their native countries and their level of L1 print literacy (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017). As a result, it is not uncommon for Latinx SLIFE, for example, to be assigned to Spanish classes[2] that are above their print literacy level at the time of enrollment without taking into consideration anything beyond the students' country of origin (Pentón Herrera, 2018a).

Lack of effective processes and programs to identify SLIFE is harmful for this student population and impedes the implementation of appropriate, wrap-around support. Similarly, when school administrators, leaders, and counselors have insufficient knowledge about the academic needs of SLIFE, this student population suffers because they are (mis)placed in classes above their current academic abilities and with educators who have not been properly trained to teach them initial print literacy (Montero, 2019). In addition, SLIFE "bring a variety of learning needs to the classroom which directly impact reading and which may be misinterpreted as indicators of a learning disability" (Hoover et al., 2016, p. 12). Thus, it is necessary for educational institutions to collect as much data as possible about each English learner and share all available information with school leaders and classroom teachers. To provide the best instructional program for each child, schools must assess the students' print literacy in their L1—which may be an Indigenous or a less-commonly spoken language—and ask for a history of formal education in the students' native country. For more information about how school leaders and teachers can advocate for SLIFE, see Linville and Pentón Herrera, this book, Chap. 5.

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[2] In the United States, *Spanish* is commonly offered as a class that fulfills the world/foreign language graduation requirements at the middle and high school levels.

Age of Arrival

The age of arrival is an important factor for the future success of SLIFE. As explained by Potochnick (2018), SLIFE who arrive in primary schools have a better chance of reaching academic and language-level literacy skills by high school. Nonetheless, SLIFE in elementary schools still have difficulty understanding and getting used to classroom routines (DeCapua & Marshall, 2011) as well as adjusting to the academic rigor of a formal educational system (Birman & Tran, 2017). Common knowledge and practices, such as understanding classroom expectations, eating in a lunchroom or cafeteria, and working in groups might be new and challenging concepts for elementary SLIFE (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017).

Adolescent SLIFE, on the other hand, have an even more difficult time adjusting to a formal educational setting, reaching expected content and linguistic levels, and staying in school. The majority of the SLIFE population in the U.S. are currently enrolled in middle and high school (Salva & Matis, 2017). However, most secondary teachers are unprepared to teach the foundational print literacy skills needed by adolescent SLIFE arriving in middle and high school classrooms (Montero, 2019; Montero et al., 2014; Pentón Herrera, 2017). As a result, SLIFE in secondary schools become trapped in a cycle where they are expected to expeditiously learn content without receiving explicit instruction on how to read and write. Being trapped in this cycle where much is expected but little appropriate support is offered, paired with the urgency to learn applicable English skills they can use in their real-life settings, reaching the age limit for free access to public education, and economic responsibilities make the estimated dropout rate of high school SLIFE an estimated 70% (Fry, 2005) to 75% (Hoover et al., 2016). For more information about how to support adolescent SLIFE in high school, see Marrero Colón and Désir, this book, Chap. 10.

Social-Emotional Needs and Integration

The majority of the SLIFE population arriving in the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom has been raised in difficult environments or refugee camps. According to Hoover et al. (2016) many SLIFE "have experienced emotional trauma and therefore have social-emotional developmental needs in addition to literacy" (p. 12). In fact, many refugee children arrive in our classrooms suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—whether they and their family know it or not—and, in many cases, PTSD follows them into adulthood (Flaitz, 2018). These social-emotional challenges and the isolation often experienced during their formative years can affect adolescent SLIFE' ability to integrate into a formal educational environment and interact with their teachers and classmates (Flaitz, 2018; Pentón Herrera, 2018b).

Social-emotional needs and challenges with integration to a formal classroom environment—particularly during the adolescent years—are two difficult barriers that SLIFE need to overcome before or while learning print literacy. It is important for schools and educational personnel to recognize that, without addressing social-emotional needs and potential psychological barriers for integration, SLIFE will have a difficult time feeling safe in the new environment. In addition, without appropriate support, SLIFE will not have the opportunity to make meaningful social connections with their peers and school staff, which are vital emotional anchors during the process of integration (Pentón Herrera, 2018b). Lastly, it is important to recognize that teaching print literacy without addressing trauma, social-emotional needs, and psychological barriers might result in frustration, disconnect, and apathy with a potential end result of school truancy leading to school dropout (Pentón Herrera, 2018b). For more information about how to understand and incorporate social-emotional learning to support English learners, see Montero and Al Zouhouri (this book, Chap. 5), O'Loughlin and Custodio (2020), Pentón Herrera (2020), and Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba (2021).

Language and Literacy Learning

Teaching language and literacy to SLIFE needs to be a gradual process where educators first learn about the students' cultural, linguistic, and academic background to better devise a realistic course of action. Teaching content to SLIFE immediately, without getting to know the students' background and needs, will only delay their language and literacy learning experiences. Instead, educators should begin by teaching and developing existing foundational print (Montero et al., 2014) and numeracy skills. In this process, L1 may be used as support and/or may be strengthened while acquiring English skills (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Pentón Herrera & Duany, 2016). If possible, during the first year, SLIFE should be immersed in a sheltered, day-long newcomer program where foundational print literacy learning is the focus. For SLIFE, "literacy instruction must be systematic, explicit, and targeted at diagnosed needs… What gets taught is what is needed by the students" (Custodio, 2011, p. 39). As learners become more comfortable, educators can start integrating standards taking into consideration that "each lesson should include vocabulary, essential background knowledge, and some type of activity to encourage use of the language to manipulate content" (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017, p. 98). For more information about effective practices to teach language and literacy to SLIFE in K-12, see Marrero Colón and Désir, this book, Chap. 10; Cruzado-Guerrero and Martínez-Alba, this book, Chap. 13; and Aker et al., this book, Chap. 14.

Assessments

The topic of assessment as a challenge experienced by SLIFE in primary and secondary schools is perplexing and multifaceted. The first challenge encountered by SLIFE is not being evaluated for L1 print literacy upon their arrival at school. As pointed out by McKay and Weinstein-Shr (1993), "most national surveys and assessments fail to report on L1 literacy because they collect no data on it" (p. 403). This statement was true at the end of the twentieth century, and it continues to be true today in K-12 schools around the United States as well as in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The problem with ignoring L1 print literacy when evaluating newcomers' English skills upon their arrival is that instruction automatically shifts into a deficit-based model where the primary goal becomes filling the English proficiency gap without acknowledging the ELs' prior knowledge. In addition, ignoring L1 print literacy and prior formal schooling sets unrealistic expectations for newcomers who, then, are placed in ESOL classes and are expected to progress at a pace that is both frustrating and unsupportive.

Another assessment challenge SLIFE face in primary and secondary classrooms is understanding types and expectations of assessments. SLIFE arriving at U.S. schools, for example, often come from refugee camps or from countries where they have not experienced or been exposed to standardized testing. Thus, common assessment practices in the U.S. such as using scantron answer forms, answering multiple-choice questions, or taking computer-based tests might result in confusing and anxiety-inducing experiences for these learners. For this reason, it is particularly important for SLIFE to be explicitly taught and receive ample practice with these forms of assessments before being required to complete one. I recommend teachers see Salva and Matis (2017) and Calderón and Slakk (2019) for a few personalized ideas that may also help SLIFE become acquainted with assessments. Furthermore, an important consideration to have is that informal and formative assessments might prove more effective methods of evaluation for this student population.

Lastly, as explained by Custodio and O'Loughlin (2017) an additional issue facing "newcomers with limited formal schooling involve the increasingly rigorous state standards that are in place across the country and the assessment-driven atmosphere of most school districts" (p. 10). Many SLIFE, especially students in secondary schools, are expected to take standardized state-mandated tests only an academic year after they have arrived in their schools. As a high school ESOL teacher myself, I saw firsthand the effect standardized testing had on my SLIFE population. At my high school, many SLIFE arrived in 9th grade as newcomers, and after 4–5 years, they were promoted to 12th grade. As seniors (or 12th-graders), my SLIFE had taken standardized state-mandated tests at least two times by then but, often, were not able to pass them. Because passing standardized state-mandated tests is a high school graduation requirement in the state of Maryland, U.S., (see Salmon, 2018), SLIFE who could not pass the tests were then required to find alternative routes to meet this requirement. Often, my SLIFE were required to complete long and

complicated academic projects, known as Bridge Projects (Salmon, 2018), as alternatives. During my tenure as a high school ESOL teacher, I saw a few SLIFE complete the Bridge Projects with teacher support and were able to graduate, but I also saw many others who felt demotivated and quit school during their senior year. Without a doubt, standardized state-mandated tests continue to be one of the most difficult barriers for SLIFE in K-12 learning environments.

Parental Involvement and Support

SLIFE, as a richly diverse and heterogeneous population, arrive at our schools with different life stories and living arrangements. Some SLIFE have lost family members due to war conflicts in their native countries; some arrive with their family having lived in refugee camps for many years; some have been living their entire lives with grandparents, relatives, or friends of relatives in their countries of origin and have not seen their parents since they were children; while others might have been born in the United States and were forced to move back to their parents' country of origin because their parents were deported. Through the many life stories we learn from the SLIFE population, one pattern identified is that parents and guardians have not been involved in their children's schooling directly for many (or most) years. This means that parents and guardians might not know how to support their students at home (i.e., knowing what school supplies to buy, enforcing study habits, helping them in school projects, etc.), might not know how the formal school system works, might be afraid to approach the school for different reasons, or might also be adults with limited or interrupted formal education who are not able to support print literacy learning or enforce academic discipline in their households.

For these reasons, it is necessary for teachers and administrators to understand that the parents and guardians of SLIFE might not readily know what to expect from their children's schools or school staff. In addition, they might have different cultural and religious expectations about their children's education or their role (as parents/guardians) in their children's academic development. As an example, in some Latinx cultures, parents often demonstrate support to their children by making sure they are raised well and cared for at home, as opposed to the parents attending school functions (Khalifa et al., 2016). The disconnect between Latinx parents cherished cultural practices and U.S. schools' expectations of parental involvement is the reason why "school personnel often criticize the poor involvement of [Latinx] parents" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1292). Thus, it is important for schools to directly talk to the parents and guardians of SLIFE to learn from their lived experiences, living arrangements, cultural and religious practices, as well as to share school expectations for parental/guardian involvement. In addition, it is important for schools to recognize that SLIFE often come from low-income households that rarely allow for the acquisition of tools such as computers, laptops, printers, and other expensive equipment (Flaitz, 2018) often recommended (or required) in schools today.

Final Thoughts

The population of SLIFE is unique because they often need personal, social-emotional, and instructional services that their non-SLIFE counterparts might not need to succeed in school. At the same time, they also represent the most vulnerable group of students within the EL population and without the support of their teachers, administrators, and school staff, they are sure to fail. This statement is certainly true for vulnerable populations within the SLIFE umbrella—such as SLIFE with special education needs (see Pentón Herrera, 2021b) and queer SLIFE youth, see Trinh, this book, Chap. 12—who remain nearly invisible, seldom addressed in academic publications, and underserved in our classrooms. Thus, as educators supporting SLIFE, it is important to know and understand that the first step to help our neediest students (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017) involves changing our own attitude, awareness, and perspective by focusing on what they bring rather than on what they lack (i.e., asset-based perspective). As their educators and advocates, we have to be prepared to change our mindset, recognize the need "to take a highly individualized approach to instruction" (Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017, p. 173), and be patient. The learning process for SLIFE might be slow at first—especially for special education and adolescent populations. However, with confidence, support, and individualized instructional practices, students will stay in school, progress, and succeed.

Reflection Questions

1. How does age affect the development and success of SLIFE in their classrooms?
2. Why is it important for SLIFE to be properly identified and assessed during the registration/intake process?
3. As a stakeholder at your level (administrator, teacher, etc.), how can you and your leadership support SLIFE at your institution? In your response, take into consideration their personal, social, emotional, and academic needs as well as their living arrangements.

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