Q: Who are Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education?

A: Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) are students entering our schools who have previously not been able to participate fully in education as we understand it. Let’s start with “interrupted.”

SLIFE may have experienced interrupted formal education because of war, natural disasters, socio-economic or cultural constraints, or other reasons. To give you a few sample scenarios: Berthe was attending school when an earthquake destroyed almost her entire town, making it impossible for her to continue her education until she was able to come to the U.S. several years later. José was only able to attend elementary school in his village. The nearest secondary school was located in an urban center, too far to travel to daily. It was not financially feasible for him to board near the school. He did not attend school again until he arrived in the U.S. as a teenager. Mu was only able to attend school for a few years before she had to leave school in order to help out at home and care for younger siblings. She re-entered school in the U.S. after an eight-year lapse.

“Limited” refers to a type of education SLIFE may have had previously that was not on par with that which is normally the case for their U.S. peers. For example, their schools may have had very limited resources, perhaps only a few textbooks and those primarily for the teachers. The focus may have been on memorization and rote learning. Writing may have consisted of copying verbatim what the teacher said or wrote on the board. In terms of content, I like to tell the story of my talking with some students who had been designated as SLIFE even though in their home countries they had completed the appropriate grade levels (9 & 10) for their ages. When I asked them to tell me about their science lessons, one student told me that they learned all the bones of the body. Another mentioned the stuffed animals one of his teachers had that they learned about. None of them knew about the scientific method, had done or observed a lab experiment, or engaged in the practices and type of thinking we associate with science lessons.

Q: What kinds of diversity do you see within SLIFE?

A: Not all SLIFE are the same but range along a continuum. What they share is the fact that they have not had the opportunity to fully participate in formal education, yet they come to our schools with vastly different backgrounds and life experiences. Picture a line representing a continuum of ways of learning. At one end, let’s say the left end, are those who have never participated in formal education, i.e., those who have never been in school and who have no literacy or numeracy skills, and have not developed school knowledge. At the other end of this line, the right end, are those who have fully participated in formal education. This right end of the continuum is where we are, and, in fact, we have not only fully participated in formal education but we are also purveyors of formal education. Along this continuum of ways of learning, but always closer to the left end, range SLIFE. The students will differ in how much exposure they had previously to formal education, but it will be significantly less than their U.S. age-level peers.

Nevertheless, it must be very clear that when SLIFE come to our schools, they have had many life experiences and a great deal of what Moll & Amanti call “funds of knowledge.” It is imperative that we avoid the deficit view of what SLIFE are “lacking.” What these students don’t have is that which is valued in our educational system: strong literacy and numeracy skills, grade level subject-area knowledge, and an identity as a learner in the context of formal education. But what they do have is rich funds of knowledge. To be able to reach these
students successfully, it is essential that we avoid evaluating them through the lens of formal education and that we recognize and honor what they do bring while we work with them to transition them to our expectations and demands.

Q: To meet the demands of a globalizing workforce, there is a movement today to build 21st century skills for students such as critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, social responsibility, and more. How can and should we envision SLIFE in this movement to build 21st century skills?

A: The first thing we want to do is what I mentioned in response to the first question, namely to shift our focus from thinking about what SLIFE can’t do, the deficit view, to asking what life experiences and knowledge SLIFE bring that we can leverage in helping them to transition to formal education. They have much that they can contribute, if we are willing and prepared to acknowledge and incorporate their knowledge and experiences, which traditionally have not been - and continue not to be for the most part - valued in formal education.

Since SLIFE range closer to the left end of the ways of learning continuum I also talked about in the previous question, they have developed different ways of understanding and interpreting the world as well as different cognitive pathways. When they come to our schools, they face a new, bewildering, confusing, and alien culture - the culture of formal education with all that that entails. In other words, they are facing cultural dissonance. By understanding this, we can better work with SLIFE to help them navigate and thrive in our schools, which brings me to my work with Dr. Helaine Marshall, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP). This is an instructional approach that provides educators with a framework for understanding what classroom practices work and why they work - or why they won’t. When educators implement MALP, they are transitioning SLIFE to formal education and building 21st century skills. I encourage readers interested in how MALP works to check out our website: malpeducation.com.

Q: As accountability and reporting procedures for ELLs are undergoing dramatic changes under ESSA, ELL tailored outcomes such as growth based measures will become increasingly more important. In what ways can we expect technology to play in assessing SLIFE and capturing data intentionally to support the instruction?

A: One issue is disaggregating the data. For the most part, SLIFE are not identified as a separate category of ELLs; thus, an important step is being sure that they are being identified and then supported appropriately. In addition, because SLIFE do not have good literacy skills, and in many cases, no literacy skills, any assessment not delivered orally will not be of much benefit. And this begs the question of language proficiency in addition to the issues surrounding standardized assessments. Beyond this, I refer you to the expert on assessment and ELLs, including SLIFE, Dr. Kate Menken. Her website is katemenken.org

Q: There is currently a massive ELL teacher shortage in this country. What systems level changes need to happen to attract more aspiring teachers to the ELL field and sustain them in the profession?

A: Factors influencing the growing teacher shortage across the board include: federal and state policies that have reduced teacher autonomy and creativity; increased the level of burdensome paperwork and tied teacher evaluation to test results; the media tendency to blame teachers for failing schools rather than the system and governmental policies; and the lack of respect for teachers and teaching as a profession.

To respond to this with respect to SLIFE, many ELL teachers are feeling ill-equipped to address the needs of this subpopulation of ELLs. This is even more true for general education teachers who often feel overwhelmed by the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classes. Together with the factors I mentioned above, teachers and prospective teachers increasingly are asking themselves why they should teach or go into teaching if they don’t believe there is adequate support for and recognition of their work.

There are no easy answers for how to address the shortage given the contributing factors. At a minimum, districts need to build in ways to support, recognize, and reward teachers as they struggle to meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations of students.

Q: At LessonPick, we like to say that we are not simply building a tool but also leading a movement to help all teachers better understand their students. How do you see the potential of LessonPick in today’s ecosystem for ELL and SLIFE teaching?

A: I see LessonPick as a resource sharing platform that helps all teachers better understand who their students are - especially nontraditional ones - and easily find quality tools and resources for addressing their students’ needs in both subject-area classes and for developing language proficiency. It is efforts such as yours that are vital to supporting and recognizing the challenging role teachers face today in reaching the growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students.