

# Schooling,

*Schools can help English language learners who have experienced sizeable gaps in their formal education.*

**Andrea DeCapua, Will Smathers, and Lixing Frank Tang**

**A**t age 15, Tom emigrated from Sierra Leone, Africa, to the United States. He had had no formal schooling in his home country and was illiterate. Nevertheless, because of his age he was placed in 9th grade. Now, after two years, Tom can speak English fairly well, but his academic skills, as well as his reading and writing abilities, are at a 4th grade level.

Sonia has been moving back and forth between the Dominican Republic and the United States since she was very young. In the Dominican Republic, she sporadically attends school. When she's in the United States, she attends school more regularly, although at times she stays home to help her family. As a result of this bicultural transience, Sonia has missed several years of formal education. Her spoken English, characterized as Spanglish, is heavily accented and filled with colloquialisms. Although she's in 11th grade, Sonia reads and writes at a 7th grade level.

At 16, John immigrated to the United States from China, where he had attended school until 6th grade. He did not attend school in China for the two years he was waiting for permission to immigrate and worked instead as a salesperson for Pepsi-Cola. Once in the United States, John was placed in 9th

grade because of his age. One year later, he has acquired basic interpersonal communication skills in English, but he does not have enough higher-level cognitive proficiency to handle grade-level academic work.

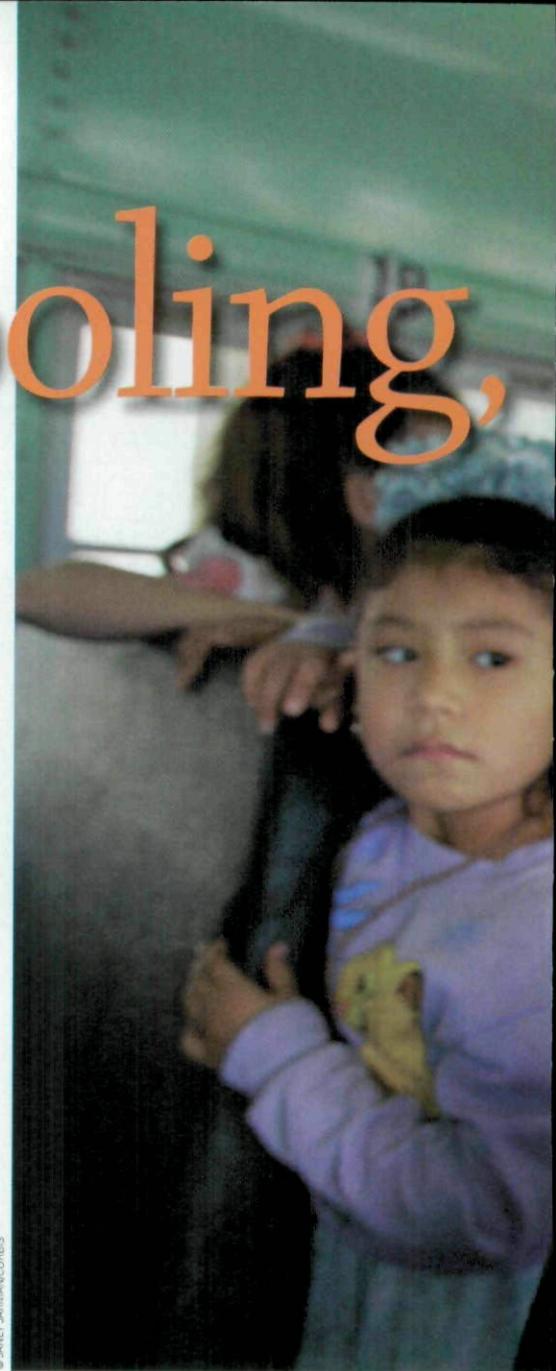
## **What They're Up Against**

Across the United States—in urban, rural, and suburban communities alike—enrollments of students with limited English proficiency are on the rise. Between 1993–1994 and 2003–2004, the number of English language learners in the United States increased by 65 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Growing numbers of immigrant students are students with interrupted formal education, or SIFE (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003).

War, migration, lack of education facilities, cultural dictates, and economic circumstances can all interrupt a student's formal education. Because some students enter a U.S. school with limited or even nonexistent schooling, they may lack understanding of basic concepts, content knowledge, and critical-thinking skills. They may not even read or write in their home language. Nevertheless, they will be expected to develop higher-order thinking skills and prepare for high-stakes tests while mastering basic literacy and math skills in a lan-

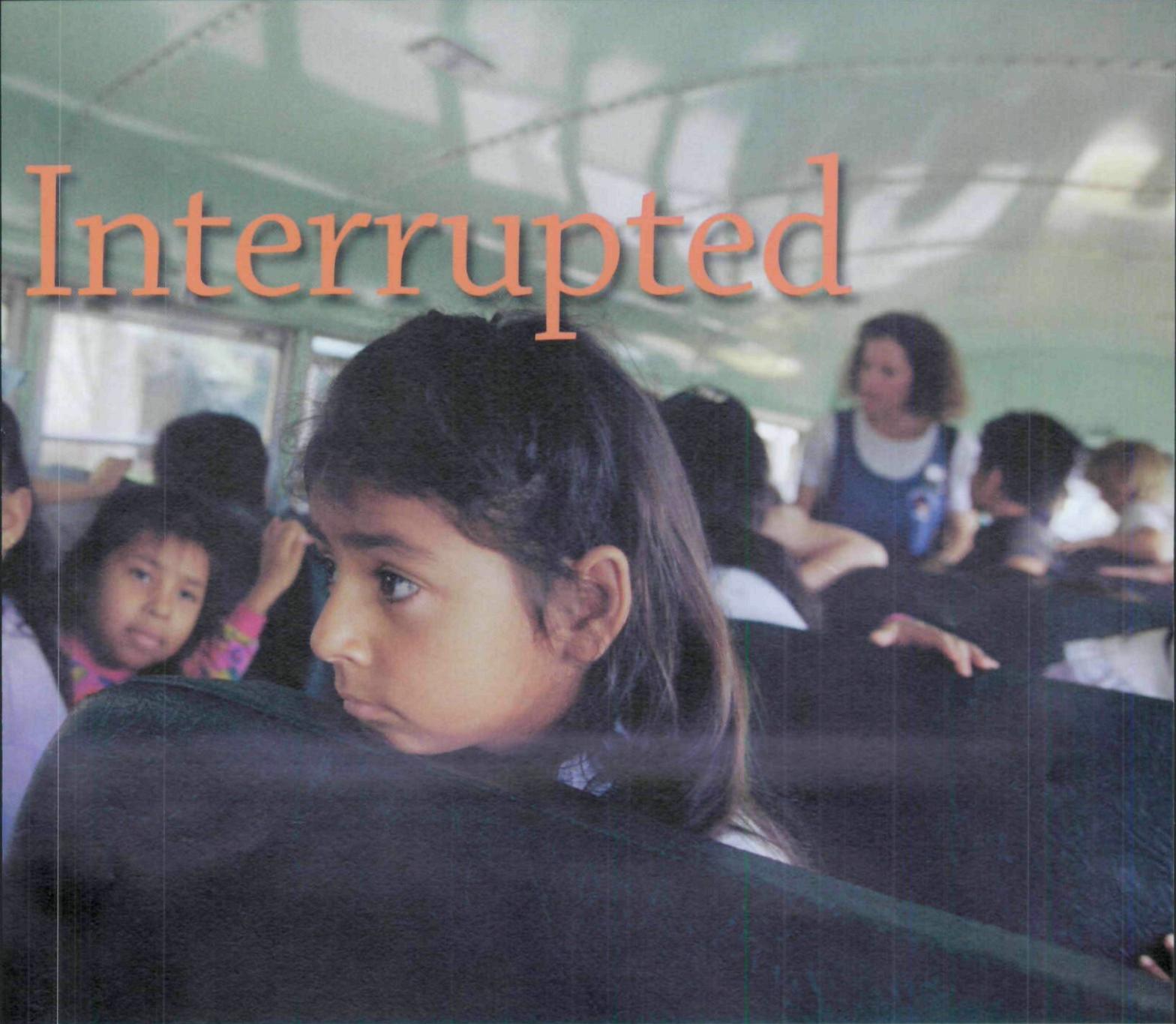
guage other than their own. According to one researcher, the SIFEs are "the highest of high-risk students" (Walsh, 1999). This is especially true at the high school level (Morse, 2005). One of five immigrant Latinos does not complete high school, and Latinos account for 90 percent of English language learners (Osterling, 2001).

The immigrant parents of students with interrupted formal education frequently lack English proficiency themselves and are often poorly educated. Given that many immigrants are at or below the poverty level, many high school English language learners are



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# Interrupted



pressured to drop out, join the workforce, and help their families. Moreover, studies have shown that English language learners and students with interrupted schooling are often concentrated in high-poverty areas and in low-performing schools, which provide limited access to necessary resources, services, and qualified teachers (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000).

In 2005–2006, the New York City Department of Education reported that approximately 13.4 percent—or some 18,900 of the more than 141,000 English language learners enrolled in New York City public schools—were desig-

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nated as students with interrupted formal schooling (New York City Department of Education, 2006). Concerned with the high dropout rate of these students, the department has been funding programs aimed at developing and supporting schools' efforts to meet this population's needs.

## **Identifying SIFE**

According to the New York State Department of Education, students with interrupted formal education come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken and have entered a U.S. school after 2nd grade. In addition, they have had at least two fewer years of

schooling than their peers and function at least two years below grade level in reading and math, criteria that differentiate them from other English language learners. They also may be preliterate in their native language. Additional indicators include

- Poor education records, no education records, or education records with significant gaps.
- Self-reports or parental reports of absence from school for extended periods of time.
- Poor attendance records from previous schools.
- Poor grades.
- Very weak grasp of academic content.
- Poor performance on standardized tests.

## Students with interrupted formal education may not have had a lot of academic experience, but their life experiences are often well beyond their grade and age levels.

Several instruments can help identify students with interrupted formal education. These include writing samples of students who have some literacy in either their home language or in English, student and parent interviews, and parental questionnaires if the parents or guardians are literate. Students' poor performance on an evaluation of their proficiency in their home language can also indicate interrupted schooling.

### School Models that Work

Although the needs of the SIFE population may overlap with those of English language learners in general, students with interrupted formal education most often require additional assistance in acquiring fundamental skills that many

English language learners already possess. These commonly include phonetic/phonemic basics, decoding skills, and logical sequence in both the native language and English.

Several school models can improve the chances for students with interrupted formal education to succeed academically. Programs that focus on learning the basics and adapting the mainstream curriculum have had success at the secondary level.

### The Pull-Out Model

In this model, students are pulled out of mainstream classes for a small portion of the day to attend classes that integrate English as a second language (ESL) instruction, academic skills development, literacy, and content-area support.

Schools can arrange student schedules to maximize student participation in mainstream classes. For example, schools might offer the special classes during lunch period and provide a bag lunch as an incentive. They might also offer an English class to support the regular language arts class or give students the option of substituting a special credit-bearing class for an elective.

For schools enrolling students who speak a variety of home languages, a pull-out program is more viable than a bilingual or dual-language program because it doesn't require teachers to have knowledge of students' home languages, but merely to have an understanding of the processes of second-language acquisition. However, pulling students out of

mainstream classes often makes it difficult for the students to take electives. And giving up lunch or another free period may deprive students of opportunities to socialize with their peers or may be stressful if they need that time to complete class assignments.

When implemented traditionally, the pull-out model has been criticized as the least successful model for language learning. However, pull-out programs that focus on teaching English through academic content and developing higher-level thinking skills can make a difference when implemented by high-quality teachers (Collier & Thomas, 1995).

### The Push-In Model

Push-in programs place students in regular mainstream classes. This exposes students to the mainstream curriculum, which they must master to graduate, and helps integrate them into the student body rather than separating them from it. This model is most successful when an ESL teacher or a trained bilingual paraprofessional assists the students in mainstream classes.

The push-in model, prevalent in such content-area classes as math, science, and social studies, provides an excellent opportunity for team teaching and joint problem solving. ESL teachers can work with content-area teachers on different ESL techniques for approaching content-area instruction. In addition, ESL teachers can use texts drawn from the mainstream curriculum to hone students' language skills.

The success of this model depends on providing content-area teachers with extensive professional development opportunities in ESL methodologies and supporting team-teaching efforts through scheduling flexibility. Schools can effectively use both the push-in model and the pull-out model as long as the programs have shared goals and are mutually supportive.

### **After-School and Saturday Programs**

Students with interrupted formal education can also take credit-bearing or non-credit-bearing classes in content-area subjects and English as a second language after regular dismissal time. In credit-bearing classes, students follow the general curriculum, use the regular textbooks, and receive grades. The purpose of these extended-day programs is to help students compensate for lost learning time so they can complete their studies and graduate within an acceptable time frame.

Non-credit-bearing after-school or Saturday programs are similar to tutoring programs. They generally allow for more flexibility than extended-day programs do because they don't have to closely follow the regular curriculum and can be geared toward individual student needs. After-school and Saturday programs can easily incorporate small study groups and individualized instruction.

Field trips can also provide rich experiential learning. For instance, some New York City school programs take students with interrupted formal education to historical sites, such as the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, in conjunction with the regular social studies unit on immigration. English language learners who have made progress in English can serve as tour guides and answer other students' questions. Some schools equip students with digital cameras and camcorders so they can take still shots and movies for use in post-trip journal writing and projects.

### **Best Practices for SIFE**

Teachers must consider the student makeup of the school, curriculum requirements, the degree of administrative support, and realities of the school system in choosing appropriate practices. The following approaches have proven successful with students with interrupted formal education.



### **Sheltered Instruction**

Sheltered instruction consists of an integrated approach to developing English language proficiency, basic literacy skills, school behavior knowledge, and academic content knowledge, with a strong emphasis on basic learning strategies. Teachers present content in ways that enable students to learn the academic material as they "learn how to learn" and work on English proficiency. Students are "sheltered" in that the teacher modifies the academic material from a language and skills perspective to make it accessible and comprehensible to the learners.

Teachers can effectively introduce academic content to the SIFE population by using visuals, such as charts, graphs, time lines, and Venn diagrams. Collaborative learning activities, such as task-oriented projects and small-group activities, replace traditional note taking and individual worksheet assignments. Demonstrations often replace lectures. When teachers must lecture, they repeat main points, speak slowly, and pause for

frequent comprehension checks.

Mainstream and ESL teachers work closely together to coordinate lessons and materials. It's important to note that these programs rarely focus on supporting the student's home language. Sheltered classes are more common in programs in which students speak multiple native languages or in which support staff members are not bilingual.

### **Content ESL**

Fluency in English is the primary goal of content ESL. Students in this program generally speak different home languages, exhibit elementary levels of English proficiency, and have poor literacy skills. Because of these literacy constraints, relatively little instruction focuses on academic content; however, teachers introduce the students as much as possible to important basic academic concepts and principles and make them aware of the mainstream curriculum.

In some schools, ESL teachers pull students with interrupted formal education out of regular classes for a double

period of language instruction each day. Teachers divide the students into small groups, each with its own ESL instructor who works with students on clearly identifiable goals. One group might focus on writing topic sentences, another on adding descriptive details to a paragraph, and a third on subject-verb agreement and correct tense usage. If students master the objectives of their group, they move to a more advanced group; if they need additional reinforcement, they can remain in their current group or return to a previous one.

### **Bilingual Instruction**

When possible, schools should foster students' language development in both the home language and English. By encouraging bilingual content instruction, schools reinforce, expand, and accelerate students' academic learning. Sheltered instruction is often used in conjunction with bilingual content.

The bilingual content approach is most successful when the SIFE population shares the same native language and when qualified bilingual support staff members are available. For example, the Washington Heights area of New York City has a predominantly Spanish-speaking population who come mostly from the Dominican Republic. Public schools serving this population often choose a bilingual content approach. On the other hand, schools in the Rego Park area of Queens, also in New York City, attract immigrants who speak a variety of native languages, such as Arabic, Farsi, Uzbek, Hebrew, Russian, and Bukhori. These schools often adopt sheltered instruction and content ESL methods.

### **Collaborative Learning**

Group work is central to developing students' language proficiency and academic skills. Teachers assign students clearly defined roles or tasks on a rotating basis, such as group note taker, fact



checker, materials collector, and presenter. Such activities as role-playing, simulations, panel discussions, and group writing projects figure prominently.

Teachers can pair recent immigrant students who have low-level English language skills with students who are at a more advanced level. Buddies can explain teachers' instructions, daily routines, school requirements, and so on. Most important, buddies provide the newcomer with a sense of security because they understand what the newcomer is going through.

### **What They Need**

Through classroom observations and teacher, student, and administrator interviews, we have identified several key elements for meeting the learning needs of students with interrupted formal education.

### **Committed and Well-Trained Teachers**

The most important factor in establishing a successful program is having teachers who care deeply about this segment of the student population. Teachers in

successful programs have generally received training in at least one ESL methodology. Strategies include creating a supportive learning environment, planning lessons that are relevant to students' lives, providing students with background information, developing students' vocabulary skills through content, frequently checking for understanding, and using visuals and hands-on activities. Teachers should meet regularly, usually weekly or bi-weekly, to discuss each student's progress in all subject areas, clarifying both strengths and areas needing extra work. This process might involve following up with school counselors or parents and generally requires administrative involvement and support.

### **A Well-Planned Program**

Effective programs put together a team to work with students with interrupted formal education. Team members need to be familiar with the resources available both in and out of school. These may include community-based service organizations, businesses that assist pub-

lic schools, nonprofit foundations, and colleges and universities that may be willing to assist with the program.

Schools employing best practices for the SIFE population often focus on using a specific methodology, such as WestEd's QTEL (Quality Teaching for English Learners). One member of a team receives training in the methodology and then becomes responsible for training other team members or colleagues in its use. Some newcomer high schools, which focus on educating recent immigrant students, offer a complete curriculum taught within the framework of intensive English as a second language or bilingual support.

High school exit strategies for the SIFE population are also vital to a well-planned program. Although some students may be able to move into mainstream programs within two years, the majority—because of their language needs and the gaps in their learning—are more likely to require additional time to make this transition. Exit strategies should be the product of a group effort that includes the ESL instructor, content-area teachers, the guidance counselor, and others who have spent significant time working with the student.

### ***Meaningful, Standards-Based Learning***

Mandated standards are likely to be well beyond the initial capabilities of students with interrupted formal education. Teachers can create lessons that are standards-based yet suitable for students' various ability levels; teachers should regularly assess students to determine whether they have mastered the standards.

When teachers adapt standards-based curriculum to meet the needs of students with interrupted formal education, they should ensure that content and materials are age appropriate and culturally appropriate. This is not the same as "dumbing down" lessons, which is a great disservice to students. Instead of giving a 2nd grade book to a 17-year-old

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immigrant from Ghana who reads at a 2nd grade level, a teacher might work, for example, with the social studies instructor and provide the student with ESL materials from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service that focus on U.S. history. This sort of reading would not only be age appropriate, but it would also help those intending to apply for U.S. citizenship.

### ***Educating the Whole Child***

Students with interrupted formal education bring with them not only lost education time, but also a host of social and psychological problems that are usually the result of having been abruptly uprooted from familiar surroundings and transplanted into an alien environment. In addition to having little to no understanding of English, the students usually do not know how to read the many cultural "texts" around them. Schools may need to address these needs before tackling the academic ones.

For example, some newly arrived students may never have seen indoor plumbing or toilet facilities. Students arriving from cultures in which males are educated in one facility and females in another may be uncomfortable in the coed environments of U.S. schools. Orientation programs can help with these issues. Workshop sessions might focus

on such basics of school behavior as raising one's hand, sitting at a desk, locating bathrooms, and using cafeterias. They might also include a video about the school community and an international sharing time, during which participants can share their experiences adjusting to the United States and offer insights, suggestions, and help.

Because students with interrupted schooling enter school at different times during the year, schools need to be flexible about scheduling orientation programs. Programs can pair the incoming student with a peer buddy, involve English language learners who have made substantial progress in English, and provide ongoing counseling and support.

Students with interrupted formal education may not have had a lot of academic experience, but their life experiences are often well beyond their grade and age levels. Some immigrant youths have been profoundly and adversely affected by civil war and other violence in their homelands, and they may have lost family members and friends. Post-traumatic stress disorder is not uncommon among this population. Those who work with students coming from these backgrounds should learn to identify the symptoms.

Schools need to make these students feel that they are members of the school community rather than outsiders. The welcoming process should start before the first day of school and involve parents and guardians. A tour of the school as well as empathetic volunteer peers can open the door to communication.

### ***A Supportive Administration***

Principals have an important role to play in ensuring program success. They need to communicate to parents what program options are available before and after school, why their child was selected to participate, and why it's important for their child to attend, especially when students hold after-school or weekend

jobs to supplement family income. Many cultures view principals as important authority figures whose counsel carries great weight.

### Looking Ahead

Studies focusing on students with interrupted formal education are practically nonexistent. Those of us who work with such students are, in a sense, pioneers. To substantially improve teaching and learning, educators need to begin to systematically collect, analyze, and synthesize information to provide an accurate picture of the many challenges involved in educating this growing population. **EL**

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