

## Preface

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*Meeting the Needs of Students with Limited or Interrupted Schooling: A Guide for Educators* represents our combined experience observing classrooms and schools; interacting extensively with teachers, students, administrators, and program developers; and participating in numerous national and regional conferences with focus groups and seminars on the diverse types of English language learners (ELLs). For more than five years, we have concentrated on students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) enrolled in secondary schools; during this time, we became keenly aware of the unique challenges that this particular student population poses. Our experiences and observations have led to this book, which offers suggestions that we believe will help educators struggling to meet the needs of these students as they help them adjust to the new culture and a new educational experience.

This book is not theoretically grounded, although we do refer to some methods that have come from various theories of second language acquisition. It is not supported by data accumulated over an extended period of time. Requisites of this nature would require the undertaking of a long-term, broad-based academic study or studies with a national focus on the shifting demographics of immigrant student populations in U.S. high schools. The field has yet to produce such a scholarly work. What we offer, instead, is a guide featuring practical suggestions for teachers, administrators, program developers, and others who are concerned for the academic success of SLIFE. The suggestions are based on actual observed practices that address specific SLIFE issues and offer solutions.

Those of us who have worked in the field of English as a second language (ESL) or teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) know that there are many theories that deal with the fascinating topic of post-adolescent second language acquisition. It is not our intention here to deal with theoretical issues. Theories of post-adolescent second language acquisition have generated a variety of recognizable classroom practices used in ESL classrooms today. While these have proven to be pedagogically sound practices, the principle that underlies these practices is founded on the assumption that ESL students already possess a level of literacy and an accumulated base of academic knowledge in their first language that facilitates the transfer of these skills to the U.S. high school classroom. In fact, studies have shown that students who do possess these requisite skills in their native or first language not only make the transfer to English-based instruction but tend to do better academically than monolingual English language students. For SLIFE, assumptions of this sort simply cannot be made.

We found that nearly all schools place SLIFE in an age-appropriate grade level regardless of their language or academic skills. Most SLIFE are placed in regular ESL or bilingual classes where such exist; if there are no ESL or bilingual classes, they are placed in mainstream classes with their American peers. Whichever the case, it is a disservice to these particular students, as the standards and practices in these classes

are, at least initially, beyond their abilities. They lack the basics assumed in these classes. Countless teachers, administrators, and others approached us after presentations at conferences and seminars to ask us what they can do to help these students because regular classroom activities do not work and the academic clock is ticking. The problem is widespread. The high drop-out rate among SLIFE and long-term ELLs is indicative of the failure of schools to offer realistic alternative academic programs that address the needs of these particular students. We must work together to find viable programs that will help these individuals make the transition to a new culture and become productive, contributing citizens of it.

We owe a sincere debt of gratitude to the many teachers who invited us into their SLIFE classrooms, introduced us to their genuinely amazing students, and took time out from their busy schedules to talk with us and answer our many questions. We would also like to thank the many school administrators, district supervisors, curriculum specialists, and others who opened the doors that enabled us to observe classes, examine materials, and conduct inquiries.