Breaking New Ground: Teaching Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education in U.S. Secondary Schools
Andrea DeCapua and Helaine W. Marshall
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Introduction

We never had a lot of students who couldn't speak English in our school district until the last couple of years. And a lot of these ESL students have hardly been in school at all, even though they're teenagers.

—ESL teacher, Iowa

U.S. SCHOOLS ARE ENROLLING EVER LARGER NUMBERS of children who speak a first language other than English and who are English language learners (ELLs). The number of ELLs in Grades K–12 more than doubled in the 16 years between the 1989–1990 school year and the 2005–2006 school year. ELL enrollment increased nearly seven times the rate of total K–12 student enrollment (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2008).

Many of these ELLs have had little or no experience with formal education or their education has been interrupted for extended periods of time. Exact data in terms of how many ELLs have limited, interrupted, or no formal education are difficult to obtain given ambiguities in determining exactly who falls into this category. Many schools, for example, do not separate this subpopulation of ELLs from their other ELLs in their data collection (Short, 2002). In addition, there have been differences in how this subgroup of ELLs is identified and described. It is not always easy to distinguish SLIFE from other ELLs initially. While it is straightforward to identify those who enter high school with no or very limited schooling and native language literacy, a wide range exists in the abilities of other ELLs who may or may not be part of this subpopulation of ELLs. ELLs who previously attended a U.S. school and then returned home before returning again to continue their education in the U.S., for example, may or may not fall into this category, depending on whether their schooling was interrupted or continued when they returned home.

Many factors contribute to the limited or interrupted educational experiences of this subpopulation of ELLs. Their education may have been interrupted because of war, civil conflict, migration, or economic necessities requiring them to work or care for younger family members. Others may come from countries with low literacy rates, where only a minority has learned to read and write in their native language. Even those who come from countries with substantial literacy levels, such as China, may not have been able to participate fully in the educational system (Rong & Shi, 2001). Access to education in many countries is limited, especially in rural areas, and often such schooling is available only for early elementary grades. When adequate school-

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ing is available, there may be few public schools and education may be costly, requiring the purchase of school uniforms, textbooks, and other materials. Education may be further limited due to the inadequate preparation of teachers, students' lack of familiarity with the language of instruction, and/or the prevalence of traditional pedagogical methods focusing primarily or exclusively on rote learning and memorization. For some or all of these reasons, schools may have been able to provide students with only the most rudimentary instruction (Gallegos, 2005; Guzmán, 2000). These and many other issues may hinder a quick and easy identification of these ELLs. A more in-depth discussion of determining which ELLs fit this profile is, however, beyond the scope of this book. We refer readers interested in this question to *Meeting the Needs of Students with Limited or Interrupted Schooling* (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009).

Because formal education is so closely tied to literacy, ELLs who comprise this subpopulation high school commonly have literacy skills far below grade level, and may even be completely new to literacy. Although it is possible to become literate outside of the formal educational setting (Scribner & Cole, 1981), the students we have encountered generally enter the school system with little or no native language literacy. In addition to this major defining characteristic, it is important to note that they are a subgroup of ELLs and, therefore, do not speak English as a native language. Although it is true that students with limited or interrupted education can come from countries where English is spoken or from ethnic groups that speak English, the focus here will be on those for whom English is a new language, the great majority of SLIFE.

In the search for an appropriate term to use in referring to this subpopulation of ELLs, educators and researchers have used such labels as "Students with Interrupted Formal Education or SIFE" (New York State Department of Education), students with limited formal schooling, (e.g. Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Walsh, 1999), "newcomers" (e.g. Constantino & Lavadenz, 1993; Short, 2002), or "unschooled migrant youth" (e.g. Morse, 1997). In this book, we have adopted the acronym SLIFE—Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education, first used by DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang (2009) to refer to this subpopulation of ELLs. As reflected in these labels, regardless of ethnicity, country of origin, or native language, all these students enter the school system, often at the secondary level, with little or no exposure to formal education, which may or may not have been interrupted. At the secondary level, SLIFE are among those at the highest risk of dropping out (Fry, 2005). Note: Throughout this book, SLIFE (because *students* is plural) will appear as a plural and take a plural verb.

In addition to lacking proficiency in English and literacy skills, these students lack grade-level content knowledge, and, due to their limited exposure to schooling, frequently lack foundational content knowledge. Equally important, SLIFE frequently hold cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions that are often at odds with those of mainstream U.S. education.

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SLIFE face cultural dissonance every day in the classroom, the hallways, the school grounds, and in all aspects of their school experience. We believe that before any program for SLIFE can be completely successful, it needs to address this underlying issue. In its most concrete terms, this can be seen in the comments from this teacher who details her early experiences with this population in her high school:

> *If you take this paper, even with the holes on the left side and the lines, they don't know what's the front, what's the back. They don't even know where to put their name and where to put the date. Sometimes they write their name right next to the date and maybe another time somewhere else. And their name could be anywhere. All their papers are all over. Even when I give them a binder and the tabs and dividers and sit down with them, it takes a long time and some of them don't get it for the longest time. They don't know what to do with the paper, even when I stay after school and help them organize.*
>
> —Janice, high school teacher of SLIFE, New York

Janice's comments highlight how unfamiliar even the basics of school are for SLIFE. While it is tempting to focus solely on such immediate and obvious needs of SLIFE, we must keep in mind that these represent the most readily apparent issues, and lie on the surface of what constitutes a much deeper problem. Many SLIFE are at risk for failure due to the vast differences between their expectations and the realities of how and what they are being taught (Gunderson, 2000). While we do not deny that high school SLIFE drop out for many reasons, often economic and/or family related, we also firmly believe that there is another significant factor that is not being sufficiently addressed in classes and programs for this population—cultural dissonance. Often teachers and administrators themselves are unaware of the complex, and often hidden, formal schemata that constitute the expected learning paradigm of Western-style education as it plays out in U.S. high schools today (Ladson-Billings, 1995; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010b). It is this hidden agenda of assumptions about learning, more than surface issues apparent in tasks such as creating and keeping a notebook, that is responsible for contributing to the feelings of alienation that SLIFE face each day in U.S. schools.

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Cultural Assumptions

To illustrate the extent of this cultural dissonance, the major assumptions of mainstream U.S. teachers and students are summarized:

Assumptions of Teachers and Learners

1. The goals of K–12 instruction are
   a. to prepare the learner for life after schooling
   b. to produce an independent learner
2. The learner brings along
   a. an urge to compete and excel as an individual
   b. age-appropriate preparation for
      - literacy development
      - academic tasks

Adapted from Marshall, 1998; DeCapua & Marshall, 2010a, 2010b; Marshall, DeCapua, & Antolini, 2010.

Throughout this book, we explore how, from the perspective of SLIFE, these assumptions about teaching and learning are, for the most part, not valid. One by one, we address the issues and consequent cultural incongruity SLIFE face when confronted by an educational system based on these assumptions. We argue that because SLIFE come from a very different cultural orientation to learning, it is important not to view them as failing based on the assumptions of the U.S. system.

A New Instructional Model—
The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm

Reaching SLIFE entails not only addressing language and content, but also addressing culture. To minimize the sense of alienation SLIFE experience when entering U.S. schools and the concomitant negative effects on academic achievement, teaching must go beyond a compendium of best practices. Instruction for SLIFE also needs to go beyond culturally responsive pedagogy because focusing on providing culturally relevant materials is not enough (Gordon & Yowell, 1999).

In this book, we present a new instructional model, the Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm (MALP). This model provides teachers with a framework for understanding what will work and why (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010a, 2010b; Marshall & DeCapua, 2010; Marshall, DeCapua, & Antolini, 2010). SLIFE and U.S. educators hold, for the most part, very different assumptions about teaching and learning. The instructional model, MALP, makes these different assumptions explicit. Because MALP is mutually adaptive, the instructional model asks that both parties, SLIFE and

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U.S. educators, recognize the critical priorities of the other so that SLIFE can transition to the practices and expectations of the U.S. educational system.

A note of caution about the SLIFE population is needed here. SLIFE are by no means a homogeneous group; they come from all over the world, from diverse languages, backgrounds, and life experiences, and we must be careful not to overgeneralize or stereotype these students when they enter our classrooms. Some SLIFE may have good colloquial or conversational English proficiency; some may have relatively strong literacy skills but have large gaps in content-area knowledge; still others may be entering school for the first time. We encourage teachers to see them as individuals in their classrooms and treat them as separate and different from each other, as for any other students they may have. We view them as a group so as to provide classroom teachers with guidelines. Regardless of their differences, these students, by virtue of having had limited, interrupted, or in some cases, no formal education, have a very different learning paradigm from that of mainstream U.S. schools and face cultural dissonance.

Steps Toward Implementation

What follows is a step-by-step overview of what teachers need to do before implementing this new instructional model, MALP, at the secondary level. Although MALP can be implemented at any grade level, we focus here on SLIFE at the secondary level since these are the students at highest risk of dropping out (Fry, 2005).

Step One: Administrative Approval

As for any new model of instructional delivery, teachers should obtain approval from a district-wide or building administrator before proceeding. Users of this book will have sufficient information and understanding of the model to make the case to their administrators and to respond to concerns that may arise. To have the school administration support efforts to implement MALP avoids feelings of isolation that teachers of SLIFE and these students often experience. Even if the class for SLIFE is the only place in the school where this model is implemented, such support allows teachers to adjust the grade-level curriculum, the pedagogical tools, the cultural climate, and other aspects of instructional delivery.

Step Two: Curriculum and Standards

In order to focus on appropriate content, teachers need to review the national, state and/or district standards. Because SLIFE will have significant gaps in their content-area knowledge and literacy abilities, teachers will want to look at the standards for previous grade levels, going back to the elementary grades, and use a combination of elementary and secondary level standards to create objectives for their lessons. This is not remediation, however, because SLIFE have not yet been exposed to the content-area knowledge and literacy practices expected of secondary students. The curriculum

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in classes for SLIFE needs to align with their actual current level of knowledge and skills. The intent of this book is to guide teachers' pedagogy; teachers are referred to resources already available to develop SLIFE curriculum (e.g., DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

Step Three: Lesson Planning and Preparation

In planning to implement the model, teachers will view their lesson plans through the lens of MALP. Using MALP in preparing lessons requires teacher to revisit the assumptions outlined on the box on page 4 in a manner consistent with this model. First, teachers select the relevant standards and set daily objectives; then they guide the students toward completing class projects. Chapter 4 discusses writing lesson objectives targeted specifically for SLIFE in the context of MALP, and Chapter 5 outlines the principles of project-based learning using MALP.

Step Four: Applying the Instructional Model

This last step asks teachers to check that they are truly implementing MALP. Taking the lesson plans they have developed, teachers use the tools provided in this text to incorporate all the elements of the MALP instructional model. Teachers will find that they already address some elements in their lesson plans; at the same time they will find that other elements require altering their lessons. The MALP Checklist presented in Chapter 4 guides teachers in assessing how comprehensively they are applying the model into their lessons.

Considerations in Implementing MALP

Mixed Ability Classes

Before we embark on our exploration of the MALP instructional model and its foundations, we turn to issues that may arise as teachers of SLIFE begin to implement MALP.

Ideally, once such students have been identified, schools set up a self-contained program for SLIFE, addressing the needs of SLIFE in a separate program and separate classes. Schools with large numbers of SLIFE can and should take this approach. However, many schools lack sufficient numbers of such students. In such cases, SLIFE are typically mixed in with beginner ELLs, and implementing the MALP instructional model introduced in this text is a viable and advantageous solution. This model encourages success for all ELLs because it accepts cultural differences while promoting transitions to U.S. classrooms. Moreover, project-based learning, as outlined in this text, encourages and supports consistent and real differentiation of learning, and true cooperative learning is the norm. For the work in groups and in pairs, beginner ELLs with more formal education experience can act as "buddies," or peer mentors, for SLIFE (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2009). In so doing, these students practice and rehearse their own knowledge and further refine their academic English as they help

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their classmates. Care, of course, must be taken that these other ELLs are utilized in such a way that they, too, are developing and improving their knowledge and skills and not merely substituting as informal aides or teachers' helpers.

Covering the Curriculum

Public high school teachers have a mandated curriculum with both scope and sequence specified, and they are expected to keep to a schedule of unit completion that is based on the school calendar. While this may make it appear that incorporating the MALP instructional model could be problematic, or even contraindicated, we believe the opposite is the case. Strict adherence to a curriculum designed for students who are not SLIFE will not help them. If they are having difficulty with material, then pushing ahead to cover even more new material in the mandated curriculum is counterproductive. In lessons infused with MALP, on the other hand, learning is constantly scaffolded, and information is recycled and applied in a variety of ways to maximize opportunities for SLIFE to understand and internalize it.

An insistence on covering curriculum without attending to the needs of SLIFE means that these students will at best get a cursory or superficial understanding of the material. They can easily become bored, anxious, and frustrated and drop out (Freeman & Freeman, 2002). SLIFE need to be able to process information so that it becomes meaningful, which calls for a different approach to instruction. In our work, we have found that successful implementation of MALP shows promising results in motivating SLIFE and encouraging them to engage in school learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010b; Marshall, 1998; Marshall, DeCapua, & Antolini, 2010).

High-Stakes Testing and SLIFE

One of the most pressing problems teachers of SLIFE face is the requirement that all students must be tested using standardized assessments that are mandated at state and federal levels. This testing does not exclude SLIFE, even though they have little or no prior experience with school. Applying MALP in the classroom can both minimize the difficulties SLIFE face with respect to these assessments and assist teachers in creating a supportive testing environment for them.

The focus on standardized test scores as evidence of learning has required all teachers to place greater emphasis on preparing students to do well on the tests. Assessment is one of the greatest school challenges for SLIFE. In the U.S. educational system, regardless of the ongoing classroom activities that may take place, academic success hinges on testing. The testing situation almost always consists of a single student providing answers on a printed teacher-made or standardized assessment. There is, at the present time, no widely accepted or institutionalized alternative to this "bottom line." Although alternative assessments, such as portfolios, have been promoted, the challenge of testing has become even greater under current federal education policy. Schools that receive federal funding are required by law to demonstrate that their ELLs are making progress in developing English language proficiency via standardized assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

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Furthermore, ELLs, like all other students in U.S. schools, are required to take grade-level content area knowledge tests in English, including English Language Arts, regardless of whether or not they have the language proficiency to do so. As Menken (2008) points out

> English language learners are now showered with tests from the moment they enter school . . . an immediate effect of [this] testing policy is that ELLS are overwhelmingly failing the tests, labeled as deficient and low-performing, and barred from advancement. (p. 35)

Menken and others (e.g., Abdei, Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004; Solano-Flores & Trumball, 2003) argue that, along with issues of English language proficiency, there are also cultural issues in these standardized tests that are designed for native speakers. Tests often include questions with subtle nuances of meaning that rely on a sophisticated knowledge of the language used in the question prompts. In addition, the test format is frequently an unfamiliar one that causes students to become disoriented. Menken found that many ELLs drop out after numerous failed attempts to pass required state and local assessments that consist largely of multiple choice and similar formats. She noted in particular that it was not primarily the content of the tests, but the language and the way the questions were posed that contributed to their lack of success. Others have reported that even advanced non-native speakers at the university level have difficulty with typical U.S. formal assessments (Bifuh-Ambe, 2009; Ibarra, 2001). The multiple choice format, for example, which is a common type of standardized assessment in the U.S., is not universally used in educational systems around the world, even those with Western-style schooling (Pinkus, 2009).

MALP transitions SLIFE to the type of thinking needed on standardized assessments rather than approaching high stakes testing from the test preparation perspective. SLIFE are generally not accustomed to tasks that ask them to make judgments but are looking instead for practice. SLIFE who have had some schooling prior to immigrating to the U.S. primarily experienced rote learning (Gallegos, 2005; Townsend & Fu, 2001). *What* they need to learn is emphasized rather than *how* to learn.

Based on our work with SLIFE and our instructional model, we support the argument that the tests themselves are assessing specific formal schemata that are not meaningful, relevant, or familiar to many SLIFE, even when they have been exposed to test-taking strategies designed to help them succeed on them. If we carefully examine the formats of these tests and realize that doing well on them is not simply a matter of a skill set, but a paradigm shift as well, we can perhaps begin to bring SLIFE to a place where they can shift their thinking.

Why This Book?

We endeavor in this book to elucidate an instructional model that provides a framework for classroom teaching, placing equal weight on language, content, and culture. Understanding the larger cultural issues is not a question of changing all our instructional approaches to meet the expectations and needs of SLIFE because this will not

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serve them well as they compete with their peers academically. What is needed is a mutually adaptive approach that includes language and content, while incorporating the cultural needs of SLIFE.

Breaking New Ground builds on the earlier book by DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang (2009), *Meeting the Needs of Students with Limited or Interrupted Schooling,* an introduction to this population. *Breaking New Ground* introduces readers to and engages them in the implementation of an instructional model that we have developed over many years of working with SLIFE. Although we do not intend to negate the value and importance of the researched-based best practices for these students, we believe that what is most sorely needed is a larger framework within which to place these practices. Central to the instructional model and the practices presented in this book is our belief that teaching students with limited or interrupted education should in no way be considered remedial, which in our experience is a common tendency among both educators and administrators. It is not the case that these students have "missed" learning something the first, second, or third time it was taught to them, but rather that they have never had the opportunity to learn the content or skills in the first place nor had the opportunity to develop the necessary and expected literacy and academic language. Therefore, while we strongly advocate adapting material and content, this does not mean it should be watered or dumbed down. When teachers have high expectations of their students and make these expectations clear to them, students benefit (Cavazos, 2009; Lukas, Henze, & Donato, 1990). An essential part of our approach is realizing that low or no literacy, limited English proficiency, and a lack of content knowledge should not be equated with limited cognitive development. SLIFE have the potential to develop these areas given the opportunity and can benefit substantially from instruction that meets their needs while helping them transition to the exigencies of schooling in the United States.

In addition to providing a general framework for pedagogical practices, *Breaking New Ground* centers on the intersection of culture, language, and pedagogy. An understanding of culture (e.g., DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004; Wurzel, 2005) and how it impacts on an array of values, beliefs, behaviors, norms, and attitudes is essential for educators working with SLIFE. It is this cultural dimension that we believe has been neglected in most treatments of pedagogy for this population. Culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant materials and curriculum can contribute to the lessening of disaffection and alienation that students may experience. However, without attention to deeper levels of culture that drive views of learning and knowing, we cannot ultimately decrease their cultural dissonance sufficiently for SLIFE to reach their academic potential.

The book as a whole provides a complete presentation of our instructional model from theory to practice and guides readers throughout to reflect on each element of the model, why and how it is essential and effective, and how they can use it in their own teaching of SLIFE. The book is divided into the following sections: Chapters 1 through 3 lay the theoretical foundation and present the instructional model. Chapter 4 describes the implementation of the model in actual classroom settings. Chapter 5 introduces project-based learning and examines how such an approach best lends itself to the full realization of our instructional model. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss project-based learning, the execution of projects in the instructional model, and comprehensive examples of projects. The text concludes with Chapter 8, a reflective chapter. Each chapter concludes with a section titled *For Further Exploration,* which describes a variety of activities designed to help readers reflect on and apply concepts and themes introduced in

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that chapter. In most chapters readers will also find short activities placed throughout that are relevant to a particular theme introduced in a given section.

Chapter 1 explores what culture is; how it affects the way people understand, interpret, and interact with the world around them; and how this in turn influences the learning environment and pedagogical practices. We frame the discussion by examining key cultural dimensions that impact education, such as individualism and collectivism. Understanding these dimensions of culture prepares teachers to facilitate the transition of these students to learning within a very different educational setting with its own culturally based values, assumptions, and behaviors.

Chapter 2 clarifies some of the fundamental assumptions about learning in U.S. schools and contrasts them with those of other types of learners, such as SLIFE. We conceptualize and describe the conflicting culturally based learning paradigms of SLIFE and those of U.S. mainstream education. Educators, as products of the dominant U.S. educational system, are seldom aware of what their educational values and assumptions are because they take them for granted. We make these explicit in the text so that readers achieve a better appreciation of who they themselves are as educators and who their learners are, and where they are coming from intellectually and culturally.

After the exploration of the contrasting learning paradigms of SLIFE and mainstream U.S. education, in Chapter 3 we introduce our instructional model, the **M**utually **A**daptive **L**earning **P**aradigm (MALP). This instructional model aids the shift for this population from the preferred learning paradigm to that of U.S schooling. The chapter outlines how, in order to accomplish this shift, both teachers and students must make adaptations and develop new perspectives and behaviors with regard to their respective roles. MALP explicitly incorporates cultural factors in learning and teaching, thereby reducing the cultural dissonance this population experiences in mainstream U.S. schooling.

The discussion then moves to explore a hands-on approach to implementing MALP in the classroom. Chapter 4 examines how MALP can be infused into lessons, using two teachers, Christina and Rick, to illustrate. In this chapter, readers see how MALP is implemented by these teachers of SLIFE in two different subject areas, social studies and math.

Taking the model from the lesson level to the project level, Chapter 5 explores project-based learning, and how and why it is essential to the implementation of the MALP instructional model. Building on this chapter, Chapter 6 explores four projects that specifically target academic learning activities, a key component of MALP. Chapter 7 continues with project-based learning by taking one project, *Class Surveys*, and offering a step-by-step discussion of how the project is implemented in the classroom, following the guidelines of MALP.

The text concludes with Chapter 8, a reflective chapter in which we revisit and reexamine the cultural assumptions underlying teaching and learning. This last chapter also includes sample lessons from a teacher both before and after she received training in MALP. Finally, readers will find observations from a former SLIFE who was successful in making the transition to formal education.

In sum, *Breaking New Ground* provides readers with a new understanding of the SLIFE population, introduces them to a new instructional model, and teaches them how to address the needs of their students using project-based learning infused with MALP.