

Chapter 1

Who Are SLIFE?

I've been in this school district for 32 years. I grew up in this area, and I'm telling you, I've never seen anything like this. It's always been an Irish, blue-collar, working-class type of town, with a few African-American families. Then about three years ago, we got a family from Mexico, and well, we now have a lot of Spanish-speaking kids who've never really gone to school. We really don't know what to do with them. The ESL teacher tries really hard, but these students don't have the schooling to be in high school, but they have to come here because of their ages.

—Principal, suburban high school

USERS OF THIS TEXT WILL, NO DOUBT, BE WELL AWARE OF THE EXTRAORDINARY INCREASE IN THE immigrant population in the United States over the past decade and the resultant changing face of the school population. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey of March 2007 revealed a record 37.9 million immigrants, both legal and illegal, meaning that one out of every eight U.S. residents is now an immigrant. Of these nearly 38 million immigrants, 10.8 million are school-age children, who account for almost all the increases in public school enrollment across the country. Among these 10.8 million children, those who are ELLs more than doubled between 1989–1990 and 2004–2005 (NCELA, 2005).

Unlike previous immigration trends, which saw large numbers of immigrants settling primarily in major urban areas, the current trend indicates widespread immigration across the nation, with large new immigrant populations moving to smaller urban centers as well as to large urban areas and to rural and suburban areas. Rural areas of the Southeastern and Midwestern states have seen especially significant increases in recently arrived immigrants and are struggling to cope with the needs of school-age children who have not yet developed proficiency in English and who increasingly come from backgrounds with less formal schooling (Capps et al., 2005; Johnson, 2005; Kandel & Cromartie, 2004). From 1993–1994 to 2004–2005, Alabama, Kentucky, Nebraska, and Tennessee experienced increases of more than 300 percent in their K–12

ELL populations; South Carolina's was more than 700 percent, and Nevada's more than 200 percent (NCELA, 2005). In Utah, while total growth in the student population is below the national average, the growth in ELLs has been more than double that of the national rate (Hosp & Mulder, 2003).¹

As the number of ELLs increases, so too does the subpopulation of ELLs who have limited or interrupted formal schooling and whose schooling is not on par with the grade-level expectations of the U.S. public school system. This subpopulation may have experienced interrupted schooling due to war, migration, lack of educational facilities, cultural dictates, or other circumstances; they may have had limited access to schools in their home country, or their schools may have lacked highly trained teachers and/or educational resources. For some of these ELLs, high school may be their first exposure to literacy in any form. In addition to facing academic challenges, many in this subpopulation have to deal with emotional traumas, such as fleeing civil wars or natural disasters or who may now be separated from immediate family.

Exactly how one should refer to this particular group of students is still open to debate and there is no single accepted label to identify this subpopulation. In the literature, they are referred to by various labels, such as "LFS ELLs" (Limited Formal Schooling ELLs) (Freeman & Freeman, 2003); "unschooled migrant youth" (e.g., Morse, 1997); "newcomers" (e.g., Constantino & Lavadenz, 1993; Short, 2002); "migrant youth" (e.g., Nava, Hernandez, Rubalcava, & Palacios, 1995); and "SIFE" (Students with Interrupted/Inadequate Formal Education, e.g., DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007; New York State Department of Education). The acronym SIFE has been increasingly used throughout the United States by organizations such as NABE (National Association of Bilingual Educators) and is the official term for this subpopulation in New York State.

In this book, we have chosen to modify the acronym SIFE because we believe this label does not accurately reflect the reality of many of these students, for instance, those whose education may never have been "interrupted" (DeCapua et al., 2007). The educational systems of some students' home countries may not have provided the same opportunities for learning, and/or the requirements and expectations may have been vastly different from those of the U.S. system; or students may never have even been enrolled in formal schooling prior to their arrivals in the United States. We therefore propose the term SLIFE, students with limited or interrupted formal education, which we believe is a more accurate label.

Challenges and Issues for SLIFE

Students with limited or interrupted formal education bring with them a broad, highly variant range of challenges; nowhere is this more evident than at the high school level where the overall drop-out rate of all ELLs is alarmingly high (Morse, 1997; Osterling, 2001; Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Although accurate drop-out numbers are nearly

¹ For detailed statistics, visit the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA) at www.ncele.gwu.edu/policy/states/index.htm.

impossible to obtain and assess for a host of reasons (Barton, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; National Governors' Association, 2005; Valenzuela, Fuller, & Vasquez-Heilig, 2006), it has been claimed that ELLs account for one-quarter of the high school drop-out rate of which an alarming, although not altogether surprising, 70 percent are SLIFE (Fry, 2005).

The challenges facing high school ELLs are much greater than those facing native speakers, given that ELLs must both learn English and develop the requisite academic knowledge in a language not their own in order to graduate. SLIFE, however, face especially formidable challenges. These students not only need to develop cognitively demanding grade-level academic language proficiency while learning grade-level content knowledge, but they must also confront the additional challenges of developing basic literacy and numeracy skills and acquiring basic academic knowledge, all within the relatively short time frame of secondary school (DeCapua et al., 2007). Furthermore, the implementation of the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the federal law holding schools accountable for the academic performance of all children, requires high-stakes testing for which SLIFE tend to be ill-prepared.

The mandates set forth in NCLB have created additional challenges for SLIFE. In order to comply with the NCLB mandates, many states in the United States now require high school exit exams in English language arts (commonly reading and writing skills), math, history, and/or the sciences. These exit exams are categorized as "high-stakes tests" because high school students must pass these tests in addition to earning a specified number of credits in a variety of disciplines in order to graduate from high school with a recognized diploma.

Four of the largest states with high percentages of ELLs have instituted the passing of exit exams as a requisite for a high school diploma. As of 2006, California began requiring all students to pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in order to earn a high school diploma. The CAHSEE, created by Educational Testing Services (ETS), assesses reading, writing, and math skills. Texas mandates a satisfactory performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) at Grade 11 as a prerequisite to obtaining a high school diploma. The TAKS tests students in English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science. The state of Florida has established the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), measuring reading and mathematics skills. Florida students must obtain satisfactory results on the FCAT by Grade 12 in order to obtain a high school diploma. In New York State, students are required to take the New York State Regents Exams in English language arts, mathematics, global history and geography, U.S. history and government, and sciences. As all these various exit exams assume that those taking them have native or near-native fluency in English, strong literacy skills, numeracy and/or content-knowledge, these tests are frequently seen as posing insurmountable obstacles for SLIFE.

Faced with learning English literacy skills and the academic knowledge required by cross-discipline testing, SLIFE often become frustrated with the academic requirements for graduation and drop out at alarming rates. SLIFE need additional help if they are to remain in school and achieve academic success.

This book attempts to address some of the many issues facing SLIFE, beginning with the correct identification of SLIFE, many of whom are not being properly identified or tracked such that this population often gets lost in the system. SLIFE

frequently find that they have been placed with other ELLs and/or in an age-appropriate mainstream class without the requisite support for their additional needs. Too often they do not receive the extra expertise, time, and help that they require. Teachers—even ESL teachers—frequently lack adequate training because this population has specific literacy development and content-area knowledge needs that are markedly different from other ELLs. There is also a lack of textbooks and materials specifically designed for these students at the secondary level. Furthermore, most schools do not offer a clear support structure with teachers, guidance counselors, parent coordinators, social workers, and the families all involved. Finally, there is a lack of in-depth proven research on what works with SLIFE. These are just some of the more salient variables associated with this student population, and schools serving them must take into account this wide range of issues affecting the performance of these students.

WHO ARE SLIFE? SUMMARY CHART

- Lack basic academic skills and concepts, content knowledge, and critical-thinking skills and may not be literate in their native languages
- Confront the triple challenges of learning English and becoming proficient in a prescribed body of knowledge and skills, while simultaneously preparing for high-stakes testing
- Have limited time to accomplish all of this successfully in order to graduate from secondary school

Identifying SLIFE

Of central concern to all schools should be the accurate identification of SLIFE. In addition to wanting to provide the best services possible, accurate identification of this population should be treated as a priority because it has an impact on accountability and has repercussions for school funding issues, as well as the rights of parents and students. Accurate identification of potential candidates for SLIFE programs often poses major challenges, including being able to determine

- levels and/or quality of prior education
- native language literacy abilities
- levels of English proficiency
- the cultural values associated with education in the home countries

In the most extreme examples, such as students entering high school with little or no literacy in their native languages, identification is relatively easy. In reality, however, most cases are not always so immediately clear. For example, SLIFE may

appear to have completed the requisite number of school years in their home countries yet lack sufficient academic content knowledge and literacy skills to graduate from high school in the United States. The educational resources and/or the education standards previously available to them may not have permitted SLIFE to attain the academic knowledge and higher-level thinking skills necessary for success in U.S. schools. Schools may have lacked sufficient resources, whether well-trained teachers, textbooks, libraries, lab equipment, or even desks and writing implements. Classroom procedures may have focused primarily on rote learning or memorization, or may have concentrated on passing national tests and exams. Some SLIFE come from schools where they were not surrounded by print and where advanced reading and writing skills are not high priorities.

In my country I go school everyday but no books, no pens.
Only teacher have. Teachers says, we say. Teacher write, we
write. Not like here.

—Kareem

SLIFE may have found it necessary to absent themselves from school regularly in order to help with seasonal labor, take care of family members, or for other reasons.

If my mother need help, I stay home because she have to go
work. I'm the eldest so I have to help my brothers and some-
times my mother or cousin she need me.

—Ines

In educational systems where students must provide their own materials, they may have lacked the funds necessary for books, writing materials, and other basics, and thus may not have been able to complete required work. All of these factors contribute to inadequate schooling to meet the requirements and standards for successful completion of and graduation from U.S. high schools.

Everywhere I go, I see words, not like in my country. My
brother go school but you have to buy everything and too
expensive.

—Alpha

My home, it is in the country. School very different, we have
no building, it's open. We have book, but old and you have to
buy so sometimes we share so we don't have to buy. Can't do
homework if don't have book, but these expensive.

—Armando

Possible Indicators

Because SLIFE come from such disparate backgrounds, there are various indicators to be considered in attempts to “flag” a student as a potential SLIFE. Any one or a combination of the indicators listed could indicate the need to evaluate an ELL more carefully.

POSSIBLE INDICATORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inadequate school records, no school records, or school records with gaps• Reports by student and/or parent/guardian of not having attended school• Poor attendance records from prior schools, frequent absences, and/or tardiness at current school• Low literacy level in the native language• Weak grasp of grade-level content material

Although weak school performance is most often determined by reading and mathematics proficiency, performance in other academic subjects such as science and social studies should also be taken into account. The vocabulary and concepts for such disciplines are difficult for all ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Gomez & Madda, 2005) but especially so for SLIFE who lack foundational academic knowledge. The checklist on page 7 can be used to help educators and administrators in initially identifying potential SLIFE.

Checklist for Identifying Potential SLIFE

Student's Name _____

Evaluator _____

Interpreter's Name _____

Date of Evaluation _____

1. _____ English is not the primary language of the home.
2. _____ came to the U.S. after Grade 2
3. _____ upon enrollment, has had at least two years less schooling than peers
4. _____ functions at least two years below expected grade level in reading
5. _____ functions at least two years below expected grade level in math
6. _____ is pre-literate in native language
7. _____ low literacy level in the native language
8. _____ lack of complete educational records
9. _____ Parent/guardian reports student has missed schooling.
10. _____ poor attendance records from prior schools
11. _____ consistent absences in the current school
12. _____ consistent lateness in the current school
13. _____ poor grades
14. _____ weak grasp of academic content
15. _____ limited experiences in content area classes in English
16. _____ poor performance on standardized tests

Additional Instruments for the Identification of SLIFE

ADDITIONAL VERIFICATION INSTRUMENTS

- Standardized tests such as
 - the *Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment* (CELLA) from Educational Testing Services (ETS)
 - the *Stanford English Language Proficiency Test* (SELP) from Harcourt Assessment
- State tests such as
 - the *New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test* (NYSESLAT)
 - the *California English Language Development Test* (CELDT)
 - the *Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System* (TELPAS).
- Student writing samples in L1 (native language) and/or in English
- In-depth student interviews
- Interviews with parents or completion of questionnaires if parents are literate and comfortable with questionnaires and are willing to fill them out

Tests

Once SLIFE have been at least tentatively identified, multiple instruments should be used to gain a more complete picture of students' literacy and academic knowledge (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik, & Queen, 1998; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000). English language proficiency tests are generally used to identify which students are ELLs in order to place them in appropriate classes and to offer appropriate support services. Some states have their own standardized English language proficiency tests; other states use a variety of commercially available tests.² These language proficiency tests are not designed to assess ELLs' literacy, numeracy, or academic knowledge; but they may help teachers pinpoint specific areas of English that need additional work and/or support, such as the correct use of verb tenses, sentence structure, and comprehension difficulties, as well as others.

Because standardized tests in subject areas are generally not available in languages other than Spanish—and even in Spanish few are available—it may be difficult to use these in identifying SLIFE with low levels of English proficiency. Another pitfall of overdependence on standardized tests is that poor performance on standardized tests may be a language issue rather than a knowledge issue, or it may possibly be due to lack of familiarity with how to negotiate the test, such as filling in the bubbles on a Scantron answer sheet.

² A list of states and the English language proficiency tests used is available at www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/faq/25_tests.

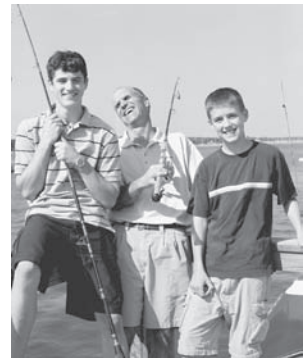
Regardless of the assessment instrument(s) chosen, care must be taken that only one instrument is used across school populations. If, for instance, SELP is used for seventh graders and NYSESLAT is used for eighth graders, there is no standard basis for comparison. Likewise, if different schools in a school district use a different assessment instrument for the same grade, there is no standard basis for comparison.

Writing Samples

For SLIFE with some basic literacy, production of a writing sample, either in their native languages and/or in English, can provide some indication as to their level of literacy and English proficiency. Students at low levels of proficiency may be assessed by asking them to describe a series of pictures; somewhat more proficient students may be asked to choose one topic on which to write from a list of topics. In order to assure an accurate assessment of the native language production of more proficient students, the school community should have access to the services of a person who is proficient in that language and qualified to evaluate writing and other language production.

Writing prompts may consist of a series of pictures for students to describe, like those shown in Figure 1, or some clip art images can be put together for students to write about.

FIGURE 1: Sample Writing Prompts



Parent/Guardian Interviews

Even when records of prior schooling in the home country are available, additional issues may frequently arise. Parents/guardians are not likely to be aware of their rights and the rights of their children with regard to education and may be extremely sensitive to possible accusations that they neglected the education of their children. They may also fear that their children will not be accepted at the U.S. school if there are gaps in the records or if they indicate poor performance. Parents, guardians, and/or children, wanting to appear to have age-appropriate schooling, may report more years of school than were actually completed. Consequently, at times, school documents may have been fabricated or tampered with to give the illusion of a full, age-appropriate educational background.

Once an ELL has been identified as a possible SLIFE, the school should arrange for an interview with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s) to provide them with as much information as possible about what it means to be identified as a SLIFE and the services/programs this entitles the student to receive. Interviews, usually more so than written documents, can provide insights into where and with whom students lived prior to immigration. This information can indicate potentially significant factors in determining the nature of students' prior educational experiences. Students may have moved frequently and may not have had opportunities to attend school consistently; others may have lived in refugee camps with few or no schooling opportunities (Crandall, Bernacvhe, & Prager, 1998; Fishman & Monroe, 1990). The residual effects of separation from family members, homesickness, and of living in transitional areas for extended periods of time may affect their school behaviors and their abilities to concentrate and learn (Apfel & Simon, 1996; Suárez-Orozco, 1989; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990; Zhou & Bankston, 2000). These and other affective factors (see Chapter 3) are potentially significant in determining the nature of their prior educational experiences (Fishman & Monroe, 1990; Hones & Cha, 1999).

Because many parents/guardians feel uncomfortable and intimidated by schools and school personnel, an atmosphere of trust must be established either before or during interviews. Gaps in school attendance are often due to sensitive matters; parents/guardians may be embarrassed, distressed, or feel threatened if they sense in any way that they are being censured or blamed for the lack of complete school records or their children's incomplete prior educational experiences. Thus, creating an informal dialogue generally elicits more information than conducting formal, structured interviews.

When interviewing parents or guardians, every effort should be made to locate the interview at the school because conducting it at school presents several advantages.

- It provides the parent/guardian with the opportunity to meet more people involved in the student's learning activities.
- It provides an opportunity to take the parent/guardian and student on an informal tour of the school's facilities, which is more relaxed than sitting in an office.
- Parents/guardians are more likely to ask specific questions during these tours.
- It may offer parents/guardians and students a chance to meet and talk with other students in the school from similar backgrounds.

In all interviews, the school's parent coordinator(s) should be involved to serve as a critical link between the school and the parents (see Chapter 7). If the student and parent(s)/guardian(s) are not proficient in English, then the interview should be conducted in the native language with an appropriate interpreter whenever possible. In instances where the parent coordinator is bilingual, he or she may assist with interpretation and translation. Although securing the services of a qualified interpreter may pose a problem in areas with traditionally low numbers of immigrant populations and/or for students who possess varying degrees of literacy skills in languages less commonly spoken in the United States, such as Urdu or Somali, every attempt should be made to do so through both formal and informal (e.g., religious or community associations) channels. Parents/guardians with little proficiency in English and without the benefit of interpreters will not understand, or may misunderstand, the information that school personnel are trying to convey (Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990).

In interviews with parents/guardians and students present, the school should avoid having the student act as interpreter, particularly for sensitive matters or issues that may be beyond the student's cognitive state of development. Furthermore, having the student translate may place the child and parents/guardians in inappropriate and uncomfortable roles that may be at odds with cultural expectations (Kratovich, 2001).

The school community should be aware that not just any speaker of the same language will necessarily suffice. If the interpreter speaks a different variety of the native language, as is often the case with Spanish or Arabic for example, the interpreter needs to be aware of different terminology and nuances of meaning. For example, if the interpreter speaks Mexican Spanish and the student speaks Venezuelan or Dominican Spanish, is the interpreter aware of possible areas of misunderstanding? In addition, children and their families need to trust the interpreter. If the interpreter is a person of different social status or family connections, will the SLIFE family be open in their communication or will they hesitate to share personal information? Will the family feel the interpreter can be trusted to keep the meeting confidential?

While the quality of prior education is not always easy to determine, well-planned interviews with appropriate interpreters as needed can help teachers and administrators explore the nature of educational experiences that SLIFE may have had prior to entering a U.S. school. The questions provided on page 12 are intended for use as a guide when conducting interviews to elicit as much information as possible. These questions should be used to open the door to past educational experiences and will, in all probability, need to be modified depending on the language proficiency of those involved in the discussion. Ideally, the teachers and/or administrators involved in the discussion of past educational experience will see these questions as a springboard to opening a dialogue or discussion that allows participants to tell the story of their past school experiences.

Student Interviews

Students are often the most valuable source of information regarding their educational experiences because interviews with them can potentially produce valuable information about their academic backgrounds. Factors to keep in mind when interviewing ELLs who have been tentatively identified as SLIFE are listed on page 13.

Sample Questions for Parents/Guardians for Initial Assessment of Prior Educational Experiences

1. What is your relationship to [Name of Student]?
2. What language do you speak at home? Is it a written language?
3. Can [Name of Student] read or write in that language or in any other?
4. How old was [Name of Student] when he or she started going to school?
5. How many years did [Name of Student] attend school?
6. Was the school in a city or in a rural area?
7. How did [Name of Student] get to school? How long did it take?
8. What language did the teachers use in the school?
9. Did [Name of Student] ever miss school for more than 1 week? If yes, why?
10. How many days a week did [Name of Student] have school? Which days of the week were they?
11. At what time did the school day begin? End?
12. How many students were in a class?
13. How long did each class last?
14. What subjects did [Name of Student] study? How many times a week did he or she study each subject?
15. Did [Name of Student] use textbooks at school? If yes, did he or she have to pay for the textbooks?
16. Did you visit [Name of Student] school and meet with teachers? If not, why not? If yes, what was your experience like?
17. What kinds of things does [Name of Student] like to read? Newspapers? Magazines? Books? Can interviewee provide titles?
18. Does [Name of Student] have a favorite book or author?
19. What sort of printed material do you have at home? Newspapers? Magazines? Books? Can interviewee provide titles?
20. What are your expectations for the education of [Name of Student]?

A COMFORTABLE INTERVIEW ATMOSPHERE

- Students should be interviewed about their past educational experiences in a relaxed, non-threatening environment. This can take place at the school, preferably in a classroom, library, or conference room, rather than in an office. It can also take place in the student's home, if feasible.
- For the interview to be productive, it is vital to establish a climate of trust, as well as a comfort zone. Students need to realize that everyone is there to help them.
- For those students and family members/guardians with no or low levels of English proficiency, the interview should be conducted in the native language with an interpreter so that the interviewees may effectively communicate with school personnel.
- Educators will glean more information if they conduct the session so that it is a conversation or storytelling of the student/parent/guardian's past experiences rather than an intimidating machine-gun style of question and answer.

We suggest these topics on general family circumstances that we have observed as being effective in eliciting useful information about the ELL and in helping in the student's possible identification as SLIFE.

- What was the student's daily life like before coming to the United States?
- What were the student's living conditions like before immigrating?
- Was the student (or is the student) separated from family members? If so, from which members and for how long?
- Where/with whom did the student live before coming to the United States? For how long?
- Did the student live in refugee or resettlement centers prior to arrival in the United States? If so, where and for how long?
- Did the student live anywhere else in the United States? Where? For how long?

We have to leave our home because of the war. We live in camp, my mother, my sisters, but we don't know nothing about my father and brothers and we have nothing and we wait to come here with my uncles.

—Malik

I come with my brother but my mother and other brothers stay home. I living with my father and sister and brother, but I miss my mother so much.

—Estela

A sample interview sheet the school community can use when interviewing potential SLIFE appears on page 14. Discretion should be used in deciding which questions to include, and keep in mind that the interview session should avoid an intimidating question-answer style.

Sample Student Interview Questions Regarding Prior Schooling

Student's Name _____ Date of Evaluation _____

Interviewer _____

Interpreter's Name _____

Names/Relationship of Others Present _____

1. How many years did you go to school in your home country?
2. Did you go to school anywhere else? *If yes: Where? How long?*
3. How old were you when you started school?
4. Have you ever missed any school for more than 1 week? *If yes: Tell me about it.*
5. Was your school close to your home?
6. How did you get to school and how long did it take?
7. How many days a week did you go to school? Which days of the week?
8. What time did school start each day? What time did it end?
9. What language did your teachers speak in school?
10. What subjects did you study? Did you study them every day?
11. What are some of the things you did in class?
12. What kinds of school books did you have?
13. Tell me about a book that you like to read.
14. Did you learn the same kinds of things as you are learning here? Give me an example of something that is the same/different.
15. Tell me two things that are very different about school in the United States compared to school in your country.
16. With whom are you living in the United States?

Alternatives to Face-to-Face Interviews

Alternatives to face-to-face personal interviews exist, but these are likely to prove less effective. One alternative is to try to conduct the interview via telephone with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s). Key persons may have to be omitted from the dialogue, unless a telephone with conferencing capability is available at the school that would allow the parent coordinator(s), ESL instructor, translator, and other relevant school personnel to speak directly with the parent(s)/guardian(s).

Another alternative to personal interviews is to have the questionnaire translated into the language used at home and sent to the residence. The primary drawback to this method is that questionnaires are often not returned, whether because of literacy issues, lack of familiarity with such an instrument, or other reasons. There is also no way of guaranteeing that it is the student's parent/guardian who fills out the questionnaire rather than another person. A follow-up call to complete the questionnaire by phone may prove helpful. Again, interpretation services may be needed, so school personnel should see that adequate preparations have been made to have interpreters available or that the questionnaire has been accurately translated into the appropriate native language.

The chart that follows summarizes information-gathering options about the past schooling of SLIFE.

Although setting up interviews, arranging for interpreters, finding appropriate venues, and coordinating the schedules of several individuals is time-consuming and often frustrating, these efforts will pay off as they help to establish effective avenues of communication. Communication is the key to the SLIFE's past, because it will provide better understanding and will likely help open doors to the SLIFE's new future in the United States.

For interviews, the school community should keep these tips in mind.

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWS

- Gaps in school attendance are often due to sensitive matters; therefore, it is essential that interviews be conducted in a sensitive and caring atmosphere.
- Informal "conversations" often elicit more information than formal, structured interviews.
- The interviews should be conducted in a quiet, relaxed environment without interruptions or where they can be kept to a minimum.
- Make sure the parents/guardians can communicate adequately in English. If not, a qualified interpreter must be present at the interview.
- Interpreters may be obtained through local educational agencies, community organizations, and religious organizations.

Because the needs of SLIFE are unique from those of most ELLs, responsible school personnel should take all the steps necessary to see that these students are

properly identified. SLIFE are frequently placed in regular ESL and/or mainstream classes where they become lost, their frustrations mount, and all too often, they drop out. There have even been instances in which SLIFE, because of their limited literacy and academic skills, have been placed in special education classes, a too-common occurrence even with regular ELLs (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Brown, 2004).

Enrolling SLIFE in schools means that we must accept the requisite obligations to offer them the services and opportunities that enable them to feel that they belong in their new country and are motivated to become contributing citizens. The extra effort and time spent in the beginning to carefully screen these students will, in the long run, save time for all concerned. Above all, keep in mind that time is something high school SLIFE do not have enough of.

Profiles of Representative SLIFE

Five profiles representing some of the typical SLIFE who may be found in U.S. high schools follow.

Mamadou from Mali

At the age of 15, Mamadou immigrated to the United States from Mali. He had had no schooling in his home country and was not able to read or write when he enrolled in high school shortly after coming to the United States. Mamadou grew up in a rural area where there were few opportunities to interact with print, and his family could not afford to send him to the small village school. After arriving in the United States, Mamadou was placed in ninth grade because of his age. Two years later, Mamadou is able to speak fairly well, but his academic skills and reading and writing abilities are only at approximately a fourth-grade level.

I never care about reading until I come here. In my country, nothing to read but here, everywhere print, words and signs and books and you have to read.

—Mamadou

Sonia from the Dominican Republic

Sonia is from a rural area in the southern part of the Dominican Republic. She moves back and forth between the Dominican Republic and the United States. When Sonia is in the Dominican Republic, her school attendance is erratic. When she is in the United States, Sonia attends school more regularly, although at times she stays home from school to help out other family members. All in all, Sonia has missed several years of formal education, but exactly how many has been difficult to ascertain. She is in the eleventh grade, but her reading and writing proficiencies are at about a seventh

grade level, and her spoken English is heavily accented, filled with colloquialisms, and very *Spanglish*.

I no care about school home but here I like very much. The teachers they want help me, they teach me food, they very nice. I have many friend and I learn lots. Is hard for me sometimes because I must to stay home with my brothers when they sick or something. But I like school very much. Is good for me.

—Sonia

Chang-Ching from China

Chang-Ching came to the United States a year ago at age 18. After leaving school in China at the end of eighth grade, he worked for a large international corporation in a big city until he was given permission to join his family in the United States. Again, because of Chang-Ching's age and despite his missed schooling, he was placed in the ninth grade. Chang-Ching's spoken English has become moderately fluent but retains a strong Cantonese accent. His writing is high-beginning level, but he has begun to show improvement. Chang-Ching strives to catch up with his classmates by working overtime. He spends most after-school hours at special programs for SLIFE such as reading and writing English and learning new skills in web design. Chang-Ching has found the school's bilingual program helpful. He believes that the bilingual teachers have a better understanding of the needs of SLIFE and that they teach so that students can understand both the language and the content.

Hello! Everybody, my name is Chang-Ching. I'm 19 years old. I'm in HS study English. I like play computer game and play basketball. Eight month ago, I first time came a new country. I felt so afraid, because everything is stranger. But now, every thing I can do myself.

—Chang-Ching

Brenda from Bosnia

At age 13, Brenda came with her family to the United States. Because she arrived during the spring semester, she only attended eighth grade for about two months. Brenda is now in her first year of high school. Her parents are college educated, but due to turmoil in the Balkans, Brenda's formal schooling was sporadic at best. Her mother tried to work with her at home but said that it was often impossible because there were too many "bad things happening," and the family was forced to make frequent moves. Brenda is happy to be here and happy to be in school but has many difficulties with even the basics. She reads at about a fifth-grade level; her oral proficiency is quite good, but her writing remains problematic.

I love school. It's hard for me, but I work very hard all the time. I learn so much and I study all the time. Computers for me is the most wonderful. I want to go to college but I don't know what I want to study. Maybe doctor. Maybe computer person.

—Brenda

Luis from Mexico

Luis is 15 years old and from a rural area of Mexico. His family—his father, mother, younger brother, and younger sister—are migrants who follow harvesting seasons. As a result, Luis frequently has gaps in attendance. His native language is Spanish, which he can read and write but only at a basic elementary level. He has just completed his first term of ninth grade at a U.S. school. His oral/aural abilities with English are good, as he often has to translate for his parents. Luis's written English and reading abilities indicate a third-grade level and his math is below grade level as well. He did not pass social studies or earth science.

The school does not have enough qualified ESL teachers to meet the needs of the sudden influx of Spanish-speaking students to the area, so SLIFE tend to be assigned to overpopulated classes with a broad range of ESL abilities. SLIFE attend mainstream classes in content areas, and some afternoon programs attempt to provide additional help via tutoring—but students often join their parents for landscaping work or in the fields and orchards for harvest after school and on weekends. As there will be no additional agricultural work until spring, the family will likely migrate elsewhere in search of work. Luis's teachers find him friendly and cooperative and think he would do well if he could remain in a given school for an extended period of time. However, given the economic circumstances of the family, this does not seem possible.

I like school. Everyone care about me and I learn a lot and I have many friend and fun, but I have to help my family and when I go to the school no help and my parent, they need me and we go when there is work another place.

—Luis

Although the five high school students profiled come from different countries and different backgrounds, they have several things in common:

- They have had less formal education than their ELL peers.
- They lack English-proficiency skills.
- They are not prepared for the grade-level work in the required subject areas.

Nevertheless, they are enthusiastic and motivated about their studies here, due in large part, as we will see later, to the dedication of their teachers.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that while SLIFE may lack academic knowledge and skills, they are quite likely to have witnessed or even been a part of life-changing events that have contributed to their acquiring a *knowledge of life*. These students enter schools with rich and varied experiences or “funds of knowledge”—that is, knowledge of mundane but necessary activities, whether animal husbandry, essential agricultural practices, artisan skills, or other “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). SLIFE should not be considered deficient but rather as students who come with funds of knowledge that can and should be used as building blocks for the acquisition of new, academic knowledge.