Chapter 14
Professional Learning Recommendations for Teachers of Late–Entering Newcomers With Interrupted Formal Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the academic literature on late-entering students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), many of whom are refugees or asylum seekers, in order to gain a better understanding of how to serve these students and support their teachers. The literature suggests that school personnel who are serving late-entering SIFE (i.e., arriving in the United States at high school age) require additional support, resources, and on-going professional learning. The purpose of this chapter is to provide recommendations for district-wide professional learning based upon the challenges and promising practices that emerged in the literature review. Although this chapter focuses on the educational context in the United States, the recommendations may apply elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

According to a recent report, students who are learning English in school, or emergent bilinguals (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008), comprised 10% of the K-12 population in U.S. public schools (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2018). This is a growing segment of the student population, with some states seeing increases of over 40% within a five year period (USDOE, 2018). There has also been

an increase in the subpopulation of emergent bilinguals who have experienced interruptions in their formal, school-based learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010; Menken, 2013). Although this is a growing demographic, we have no way of knowing how many of these students are attending U.S. schools. The data are limited because most states do not identify and track students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) and there are inconsistencies amongst places that do (Browder, 2014; Morland & Custodio, 2017). The few states that define SIFE (e.g. Minnesota and Oregon) adopted definitions that are similar to the original one developed in New York:

Immigrant students who come from a home in which a language other than English is spoken and: 1. Enter a United States school after the second grade; 2. Have had at least two years less schooling than their peers; 3. Function at least two years below expected grade level in reading and mathematics; and 4. May be pre-literate in their first language (AFCNY, 2010, pp. 8-9).

With certainty, not every student who has gaps in their formal school-based learning will fit this definition, but those who do are likely to encounter multiple challenges. This is especially true for late-entering newcomers (i.e., arriving in the United States at high school age) with interruptions in their formal education. In secondary schools in the United States, English as a second language (ESL) programs are typically designed for emergent bilinguals with strong literacy skills in their first language (Menken, 2013). This is particularly problematic at the high school level since students have a short amount of time to pass state-mandated standardized tests in English. Succeeding on these assessments requires emergent bilinguals to build advanced literacy skills and content knowledge in a language they are in the process of learning (DeCapua, Smathers, & Tang, 2007; Menken, 2013). This places pressure on teachers and schools as well, as they are often held accountable for immigrant students' standardized test scores within one to two years of the student's date of entry into the United States.

From 2014 until present, the United States has received an influx of unaccompanied minors and families from the northern triangle countries of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), many of whom fled due to widespread violence, poverty, and food insecurity (Rosenblum & Ball, 2016). The violence in the Northern Triangle is often attributed to gangs and organized crime syndicates, but it can also come from members of the police force and military (Medrano, 2017). Since the violence is being perpetrated by nonstate actors outside of an official war, the people who flee do not meet the definition of a refugee according to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Therefore, many immigrants from Central America are de facto refugees and "protective status is almost always denied" (Medrano, 2017, p. 129).

Regardless of immigration or family status, all school-aged minors are mandated to attend school. In 2015, the USDOE released an information sheet that stipulates "while residing with a sponsor, unaccompanied children, like other children, are required to attend school up to a certain age established under State law. Sponsors must help unaccompanied children to enroll in school immediately following family reunification" (p. 1). As a result, public schools across the United States have received an influx of late-entering newcomers from Central America. Due to the students' circumstances, many are likely to have gaps in their formal, school-based learning.

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