Being Our Sister and Brother’s Keeper: Creating Equitable Learning for Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education¹

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When I was growing up in Idaho, my school was not a compass of diversity. As a matter of fact, it was the reflection of years of homogenous conformity. This is not to say that there were not culturally and linguistically diverse students among us, but a public school education meant a White, English-speaking, American education. If non-White or ELL students couldn’t conform to the cookie-cutter mold or pick up the English language quickly enough, then they were left out and left behind.

I did my student teaching and first-year teaching with the Shoshone-Bannock Confederated Tribes on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in southeastern Idaho. I was the first student teacher at the tribal school, in the fall of 1992. It was the hardest, and yet best, experience I could have ever had as a new teacher. It was in this place that I learned that American public education system did not work for everyone. Students at the tribal school showed me something more valuable than anything I ever learned in a teacher training program: that education has to be perceptive of and compassionate to the needs of the learner. I learned that teaching that is cognizant of learners’ needs, cultures, and experiences will be transformative. I would be remiss if I said it was an easy chapter in my life. It was not.

As a White person growing up in America, I never had to think about things in term of my culture or my language—and how could I fit in. Everything was already set up for me to be successful, because the dominant culture and language of my country was geared for me. I never had to face that fact until I taught on the reservation. It was rough in the beginning, because there was a lot of anger directed toward me simply because I was White.

Most students had no problem in verbally attacking me for being White. But once we got past the anger, things changed. Once I understood that I had been blind to how every student had to fit into an education system that did not reflect who they were—even on their sovereign reservation—I came to see how their education was not reflective of their cultural identity. When I started to understand the backgrounds, traditions, experiences, and cultures of my students, the process of teaching and learning became propitious. Real learning took place when teaching became observant of the learner and what they needed from an education.

Now, twenty-five years later, I’m still teaching school. But to a different population and in a different place. Now, here, it is still

¹All participant names are pseudonyms.
important to tap into the backgrounds, traditions, experiences, and cultures of my students.

For the past ten years, I have taught students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) in a suburb of Long Island, New York. My SLIFE students want the same things my students wanted on the reservation all those years ago: an education that acknowledges their experiences and cultures.

**SLIFE Students and Their Challenges**

Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) is an overarching term for a particular cohort of English language learners. SLIFE have been in the U.S. school system less than 12 months and have had interrupted or limited schooling in their country of origin. They have limited backgrounds in reading and writing in their native language(s) and are below grade level in most academic skills.

For the past ten years, I have been working with SLIFE students in a suburban school system on Long Island, New York. The majority of these students come from Central America, specifically, from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The SLIFE program that I run consists of teaching the student five periods a day: Math, Science, Social Studies, and two English classes. The age range is from fourteen to twenty-one years. The ability of the students depends on their own personal histories. Some students have missed a couple of years of schooling in their country and some have never been to school at all.

The hard truth: the SLIFE program has not once, in ten years, produced a student who has graduated with a high school diploma. The reality is that most drop out because they have to work or they do not see the purpose in going to school when they aren’t going to earn a diploma, anyway. Over the years, the idea has been to give them a foundation in English so that they can transition into a community program to earn a GED or get a job.

In the past few years, SLIFE students have increasingly been allowed to exit the program if they score well on the NYSESLAT (The New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test). They are then placed in foundation-level classes where they begin to earn credit toward a diploma or other program.

The SLIFE program that I run is an educational triage center of sorts. It stabilizes the students and starts them on their road to recovery. Many times SLIFE students are fleeing political instability or violence, leaving behind their families and friends. They have made the hard decision to start anew. They know that it can only happen if they learn English and go forward.

**Helping SLIFE Students Learn**

There is a four-step process to creating culturally responsive lesson plans for SLIFE students.

**Step 1**

Before the process begins, the SLIFE teacher must understand who the students are. In order that the teacher have a firm conceptualization of the SLIFE students’ country of origin,
educational history, family background, immigration journey, and socio-emotional struggles, the following inventory can be administered to SLIFE students.

The following inventory is in English, but can be translated into whatever language necessary through the Google Translate App.

Table 1: SLIFE Inventory

- DATE:
- SCHOOL:
- TEACHER:
- STUDENT NAME:
- COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:
- WHEN DID YOU LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN?
- WHO DID YOU LIVE WITH WHEN YOU WERE IN YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN?
- UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES DID YOU LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY?
- HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO GET TO THE U.S.?
- DID YOU GO TO SCHOOL AT ANY TIME WHILE WAITING TO COME TO THE U.S.?
- HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT LIVING IN THE U.S.?
- DO YOU FEEL HOMESICK RIGHT NOW? EXPLAIN HOW YOU FEEL.
- DO YOU LIKE YOUR CURRENT SCHOOL, CLASSES, AND TEACHERS? EXPLAIN.
- WHAT COULD BE BETTER IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?
- WHAT NEEDS DO YOU HAVE THAT ARE NOT BEING MET EITHER AT SCHOOL OR IN YOUR HOME?
- DO YOU HAVE A JOB? DESCRIBE IT.
- WHAT IS THE MAJOR REASON YOU ARE IN SCHOOL?
- WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?
- WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN SO YOU CAN ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS?

Step 2

Step 2 consists of the teacher processing the knowledge gathered in Step 1. It is imperative that any teacher know who the people sitting in their classroom are and it is no more urgent than when teaching SLIFE students. Their personal histories and experiences impact their ability to learn.

In order to meet a SLIFE student’s needs and bring them up to speed regarding their education and socio-emotional wellness, a teacher must understand the lived experiences of the SLIFE student. The following vignettes are examples of SLIFE students’ stories from my program from the past ten years. They give a glimpse into the turmoil, issues, and dreams of some SLIFE students.

Brenda. Brenda is a 20-year-old young lady from Apopa, El Salvador. She had not been in school since she was ten-years-old due to gang violence in her neighborhood. She had two brothers as well as her mother murdered by a local gang. For those ten years, she had been doing seamstress work with her grandmother. Then she left for the United States. Her dad had saved money to send for her once she got old enough. She was supposed to leave El Salvador for America when she was 15-years-old, but she did not want to leave her grandmother. Ten years of staying home had rendered Brenda with vocabulary, reading comprehension, and math at a fourth-grade
level in Spanish. This was assessed by giving her the Logramos test (which is a Spanish language assessment test).

Her low scores in her native language qualified her for the SLIFE program. Brenda struggled with basic math, science, social studies, and English in the SLIFE program. She had only been in school three months when she got pregnant by a young man who was not at the high school. She finished the school year, but did not return. She worked stocking shelves at a local bodega until she had her baby.

**Elijah.** Elijah was born in La Union, El Salvador. His mother immigrated to the United States when he was three years old and his older brother was five years old. They lived with their grandma, yet did not attend secondary school due to the threat of gang violence.

The mother worked as a seamstress in suburban New York City and saved enough money to bring one of them to the United States by paying a coyote. Both boys were being threatened by a gang in the community. The older brother said that Elijah should go first, and then when the mom had enough money, she could send for him.

Elijah took three weeks to arrive at the border between Mexico and Texas. After he was processed through a detention center in Texas, his mother brought him to New York. The first week he was in New York, the mom and Elijah got word that the older brother had been decapitated by the local gang.

Needless to say, Elijah and his mother were devastated—so much so that his mother had a nervous breakdown and he stayed by her side for six months. He again was in a position of not attending school due to violence and turmoil beyond his control. Eventually he would register for school and qualified for the SLIFE program with roughly a third-grade literacy and math level in Spanish.

Yet even after he was in the SLIFE program, he mostly wanted to stay by himself in the corner, with his head down, for the first semester of school. The school social worker did not speak Spanish, so it was impossible to express what was going on in his life. The SLIFE teacher, me, was the “counselor,” in a manner of speaking, by allowing him to write in a journal every day, in his own language, about his feelings and issues. Eventually Elijah scored out of the SLIFE program by scoring “Emerging” on the NYSESLAT. The journaling allowed him to have a place where he could feel safe and “say” whatever was on his mind.

**Griselda.** Griselda arrived from Honduras to my SLIFE program at the age of 18. She scored on the fourth-grade level in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and math. She had been brought to the Mexican-United States border by a coyote.

She had been raped several times on her journey from Cortez, Honduras. She was lucky in that she did not get pregnant, but unlucky in that she would wear the scars of her sojourn, deep in her soul, for the rest of her life. She was listed as an unaccompanied minor and was only enrolled in school because the immigration court required her to do something productive with her life—and going to school was a component of that structure.

She was absolutely not interested in participating in class, doing homework, and working on projects. She cried a lot in the class
and attended many sessions with counselors. She was only in school from October to June and then dropped out because she had to work to support herself and pay for her immigration court fees. She was a case that is often seen with the SLIFE students: she only needed a note from the school stating she was in school in order to give it to the immigration court.

Frantz. Frantz was fourteen when he entered the SLIFE program. He had been living in the hills outside of Cap Hatien, Haiti. He had never been to school. He didn’t know how to write his name or hold a pencil. He was truly in shock, as he was expected to sit in a classroom all day. He knew how to survive in the streets of Haiti, but was at a complete loss as to how to speak, read, write, or listen to English.

Frantz dropped out of SLIFE when he was eighteen years old. He did go on to get his GED, eventually. He was a success story, of sorts. He did get his GED, but not during his time at the high school. He attained it through a Jobs Corp program in upstate New York.

The Students. There are a hundred different stories of SLIFE students from over the years, but the common thread that weaves them all together is their struggle to be educated and safe during their lives. The aforementioned stories are just a few of the many that could be told. They give insight into the difficulties that they face and how those difficulties impede their ability to gain access to success in their new home.

Step 3

The following template is meant to be used for SLIFE students in order for them to have input into what is important to them regarding an education.

Table 2: Educational Needs Assessment

1. What do you feel are your strengths?
2. What are your weaknesses?
3. What do you want to learn in school?
4. How can being in school help you with your daily life?
5. What things do you want to understand about the United States?
6. What does it mean to live in America?
7. What is American culture? Is there anything in common with your culture?

Step 3 is meant to gather information from SLIFE students in order to begin the process of creating curriculum. The point is for teachers to take stock of the SLIFE students’ ideas about learning in order to make connections of relevance and progress tangible for them.

Step 4

The following lesson plan (see Table 3) is an example of what a SLIFE student wanted to learn in school and why an education was of import to him. The student wrote this lesson himself. That is, this is a plan for future learning, developed by the student himself. It is not the only type of learning that happens in my program, but it is an important slice.

Referencing ideas from John Dewey and Maria Montessori, an emphasis on children’s development was brought to the fore...

Step 4

It is difficult to imagine moving to a new country and learning a new culture and a new language under the conditions many SLIFE students have endured. The following lesson
plan is an example of what an education might mean to some of them.

**Table 3: Noe Chamaco’s Lesson Plan**

Name: Noe Chamaco (19 years old, originally from Cortez, Honduras)
Grade: 9
Title: Symbol of America: The Flag
Summary:
1. Subject: Social Studies
2. Topic or Unit of Study: American Symbols
3. Grade: 9-12 SLIFE
4. Objective: To learn about what the flag represents.
5. Time Allotment: 1 block period (roughly 90 minutes)
6. Learning Context: The American flag is important for people because it represents my new home. I pledge allegiance to this flag because it gives me liberty and justice.

Procedure:
1) Watch the video on the American flag at: https://app.discoveryeducation.com/learn/videos/f868fc21-2772-43e2-852e-17e30e96ff1c?hasLocalHost=false.
2) Direct Instruction: Students learn about what the colors represent. Color the American flag.
3) Guided Practice: Students present their artwork of the American flag and tell in English what it means to them.
4) Check for Understanding: Ask students what are the colors of their country of origin flag and what it symbolizes. What are the connections between that flag and the American flag?
5) Independent Practice: Give students copies of the Pledge of Allegiance. Students have to recite the Pledge of Allegiance together.

The process was one of assisting Noe in identifying what was important to him when he lived in Honduras. He said that the Honduran flag always meant a lot to him. We researched together the history of the Honduran flag. It was a meaningful experience for Noe because not only did he find out information about the Honduran flag, but he also increased his computer-literacy skills, keyboarding, English skills, and creative thinking skills.

Noe found the following information about the Honduran flag:

The overall background is sky blue and white:

The Honduras Flag is . . . three equal horizontal bands of blue (top), white, and blue. [There are] five blue, five-pointed stars arranged in an X pattern centered in the white band;

The stars represent the members of the former Federal Republic of Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Honduras, and Nicaragua; and
According to ancient and heraldic traditions, much symbolism is associated with colors. The colors on the Honduras flag represent the following: white represents peace and honesty. Blue represents the sea and the sky [and is associated with values like] vigilance, truth and loyalty, perseverance and justice.

Noe was thrilled to learn about the American flag through creating activities for a lesson plan. It never occurred to him that a teacher would be interested in what he thought was important to his learning.

**Implications**

John Dewey, in his work *Experience and Education*, emphasized the importance of continuity of experience: the role that previous experience and prior knowledge play in student learning. SLIFE students’ prior knowledge may appear to be limited. In fact, SLIFE students are not barren of experiences or an understanding of the world around them.

Dewey wanted education to be transformational for students through it being continuous, relevant, and interactive. SLIFE students need unique levels of socio-emotional support and academic reinvigoration in order to stimulate interest and subsequent learning. SLIFE students distinctly benefit from the transmission and exchange of ideas.

The act of simply going to school was problematic for SLIFE students in their country of origin due to socio-political issues, gang violence, or family obligations. Dewey understood the linkage between a learning environment rich in personal experience and the ability to process practical and academic learning. Education for SLIFE students must include broad experiences that encompass learning a new culture and yet doesn’t entail forgetting the old.

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It is not realistic to have students create lesson plans every week, but it is feasible to connect lessons to tangible, useful elements that will help SLIFE students be engrossed and take ownership in their education. A democratic society such as the United States must encourage its members to not only gain academic knowledge, but membership in society.

SLIFE students, like many immigrant students coming from Central America in recent years, are undocumented. This exodus of students has required the public school system in the United States to be even more prepared to deal with issues related to socio-emotional trauma and gang violence—issues that often follow these students to their new communities.

SLIFE students are some of the most vulnerable in school, because many are unaccompanied minors, having fled for their lives from gangs. Yet many of these same dangers are lurking in their new communities.

I have also witnessed specific issues with females who are vulnerable. Many times the support of a caring family member is absent, which leads them to seek comfort, support, and security in relationships that prove to be unhealthy on a variety of levels. Interestingly, the young males are equally predisposed to such lifestyles that often end with involvement in violence, drugs, and, sometimes, death. Over
the past ten years, I have witnessed how the U.S. school system has failed this subgroup of English language learners repeatedly.

In my SLIFE program, the age range is from fourteen to twenty-one. Students who are seventeen or under have a chance at graduating from high school with a diploma. Unfortunately, SLIFE students who enter at the age of eighteen or older rarely have a chance of earning a diploma. There just isn’t enough time.

The most that my SLIFE program has been able to do for these older students is to begin their development in English so that they can initiate their learning sometime later, on their own. Sometimes the older SLIFE students simply want to learn enough English to get a job. Or they are required by the immigration court to be in school in order to get their paperwork processed to get residency.

SLIFE students are, for the most part, losers in the current neoliberal education system. This is because they are treated as just another low-value “human commodity”: their test scores simply are not viable. The cultivation of socially responsible individuals who care for community and self starts with a new mindset that rejects the neoliberal mantras of consumerism and competition.

Why not create culturally responsive curriculum that is dedicated to teaching these new members of society what it means to live in the United States? Let’s create curriculum that tends to the needs of these learner, situated in their local community, for success.

As noted above, not once in my ten years of running the SLIFE program has a student graduated with a diploma. What was I able to do, then, for all of those SLIFE students in the past ten years? Do my “numbers” tell the whole story?

Of course, I taught them the basics of a standard education and most were able to read, write, listen, and speak English, on varying levels, after spending time in my program.

Yet what did the education system tell them? It told them that they were not good enough to pass the test. It told them that they didn’t know enough English to pass the class. It told them that the system was not meant to help students who immigrated to the U.S. as older teens.

The American school system tells SLIFE students that you can enroll in school because it is your right, but it will not truly address your needs nor will it advance your presence here. The American school system will take “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” but only because it has to.

But then what?

When will we see that the value of a person does not reside in a test score or their credentials? Rather, it is our collective social commitment to creating genuine learning that meets the needs of special populations like SLIFE students that should be the true “measure” of the day.

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