

Supporting ELs with Interrupted Formal Education: Research and Practices from the Field – Part 2

Host:

Welcome to part II of the podcast on supporting English learners who are students with interrupted formal education, or SIFE hosted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Francisco Lopez, an Education Program Specialist from OELA. Joining Francisco for the second part of this discussion is Teresa Vignaroli, English Learners Supervisor from Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia.

One of the topics of importance in English learner education is how English learners who are students with interrupted formal education often face many serious challenges when attending school in the United States. Their educators also often encounter difficulties in meeting SIFE’s needs.

In the first part of this podcast Francisco spoke with Dr. Margarita Calderon, Professor Emerita at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Calderon described her research on English learners who are SIFE and provided information on research-based best practices for supporting ELs who are SIFE and their educators. We encourage you to listen to the first part of this podcast. It can be found at www.ncela.ed.gov under Resources tab.

During our conversation today we will discuss practical considerations and day-to-day programming involved with serving English learners who are SIFE in Loudoun County Public Schools. Let’s get the conversation started!

Francisco:

Teresa, welcome and thank you for being here with us today! Can you tell us about the population of SIFE that you serve in your district?

Teresa:

It is great to be here! Sure, SIFE in Loudoun County are primarily from Central American countries of origin, though some come from war-torn middle eastern countries. The most prominent language of our SIFE is Spanish. As with many English learners who are SIFE, English language proficiency varies, however, the majority of our students’ proficiency levels are at the lower levels, and many of our kids have limited literacy in their first language.

Francisco:

Thank you, Tereasa. Next, I would like to ask you to describe the program model that is being implemented in your district and talk about day-to-day instruction for English learners who are SIFE at elementary and secondary levels.

Teresa:

Absolutely. So, to address the needs of our SIFE students at the elementary level, the EL Program has created and implemented newcomer curriculum to supplement classroom curriculum. This curriculum targets the content areas of Language Arts and Mathematics and focuses on both academic proficiency and language development. Additionally, these students

are provided with targeted literacy support via inclusion in Leveled Literacy Intervention, or LLI groups. I will describe LLI in greater detail later. Finally, our SIFE students are integrated into our division Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, or MTSS. In the Loudon County model of MTSS, school-based teams collaborate to identify supports needed for student success. This holistic approach to supporting students addresses academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs through the approaches of Response to Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and school mental health. In this approach EL students, like all students, are Tiered based on multiple sources of data into three Tiers with Tier 3 support being the most intensive.

At the secondary level, students who have lower proficiency levels in English, like levels 1 & 2, are scheduled into our newcomer sheltered courses. These courses offer support through the workshop model, implementing both whole group and targeted small-group instruction while focusing on language, literacy, and assessment driven system of phonics.

ELs who are SIFE also receive extended support through our newcomer summer programs. As with our secondary newcomer sheltered courses, this program serves our SIFE students incorporating evidence-based strategies such as community builders, whole group and targeted small-group instruction, and station rotation with an embedded focus on language, literacy, and systematic word study.

Loudoun County Public Schools EL Program also supports SIFE students through the whole school approach of language, literacy, and vocabulary development. In this approach, the EL Program is providing school-wide language and literacy training to seven Title I schools and one high school. Two key supports provided to these schools are the assignment of an EL Instructional Coach and ongoing support from the division EL administrators who participate with onsite coaching.

Francisco:

Thinking back to the challenges of English learners who are SIFE and their educators that Dr. Calderon described earlier, can you speak about how these challenges manifest themselves in your district?

Teresa:

As with other divisions nationally, Loudoun County SIFE entering as older students at the high school level may experience increased dropout rates. These students become discouraged when faced with the graduation requirements that must be met within four years or less and sadly, often opt to drop out.

Administrators at our high schools indicate that a SIFE student may enroll and initially be excited to be included in the high school experience, however, once the reality of the graduation requirements sets in, students may lose motivation and drop out. Likewise, SIFE who do choose to remain in school tend to experience higher levels of absenteeism.

Additionally, educators of ELs who are SIFE indicate that these students may have experienced trauma in their lives. As a result, everyday school procedures that we take for granted, such as moving between classrooms or maneuvering the cafeteria can be overwhelming to a student who

has experienced trauma in his or her life. Moreover, levels of engagement in the classroom and learning are often impacted for SIFE students who have experienced trauma. In many cases ELs who are SIFE need support in learning “how to do school.”

Francisco:

It sounds like these students are faced with a lot upon enrolling in school, especially at the secondary level. Based on the challenges that you described, what are some of the most urgent needs of educators and students in your district?

Teresa:

This is not specific to Loudoun County as there are common needs for educators and for students with interrupted formal education nationally. However, as noted above, needs for both students and educators include age appropriate and developmentally appropriate resources such as texts to support these students’ learning. Likewise, educators need professional development in supporting SIFE especially in teaching reading. Many of our students come to us with limited literacy skills, but all English learners’ teachers receive formal instruction in teaching reading during their coursework. Additionally, SIFE benefit from support that addresses their social-emotional needs given that many students have experienced trauma in their lives. When teachers and administrators go through the ExC-ELL training that Margarita described earlier, they learn about adding SEL strategies to their instruction. Some of the SEL strategies that the training provides include, but are not limited to cooperative learning, active listening, self-advocating, understanding and appreciating those from other cultures, and personal goal setting.

Francisco:

How does your district overcome these challenges and meet the needs of SIFE and their educators?

Teresa:

Professional development is provided to train teachers to be able to support SIFE and EL students in the content areas. In our district teachers are trained in ExC-ELL and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or SIOP to scaffold learning and make content accessible. For example, teachers learn how to preteach key words at the beginning of a lesson using ExC-ELL’s 7-Step strategy. This gives students sufficient vocabulary to approach and comprehend the text they are about to read. Teachers are also trained in literacy intervention models to provide support for gaps that may exist in students’ literacy skills. Some of the skills that teachers address to support SIFE in literacy intervention models include “explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral language skills, and writing”. Educators in many schools also meet in Collaborative Learning Teams, or CLTs to review data, determine how students are progressing, and to identify gaps in which students need more support. In many schools flexible or creative scheduling is in place to provide daily math and English instruction, as opposed to block scheduling.

Francisco:

It sounds like Loudon county educators are making strong efforts to serve ELs who are SIFE. What support do they receive from the district to make their efforts successful?

Teresa:

Our EL teachers received professional development in several ExC-ELL strategies that Dr. Calderon described in the first part of this podcast. Likewise, educators from schools with high numbers of English learners have or are going through school-wide training in the ExC-ELL instructional model. In this model, teachers learn how to preteach key vocabulary at the beginning of a lesson, how to teach reading comprehension and academic writing skills relevant to their subject areas using a variety of cooperative learning strategies and SEL competencies development.

Additionally, we have five ExC-ELL certified trainers who have begun offering ExC-ELL training at the division level. The ExC-ELL trainers have conducted this training for more than 110 educators. The trainers have also provided ExC-ELL training at the school level to cohorts of educators. This school-level training is tailored to meet the needs of the teachers in the school. During the COVID-19 related closures, the EL Department has moved to creating online ExC-ELL professional learning that cohorts of educators may attend virtually.

Additionally, our county has three EL Instructional Coaches who support the ongoing coaching component of ExC-ELL at our schools that are implementing this program school-wide. These coaches are paired with teachers at ExC-ELL schools whom they support in the ongoing coaching approach which includes a pre-observation, observation, and a post observation of lessons. The coaching is differentiated by the educator's level of experience with ExC-ELL program and learning goals are identified by the educator. In addition to supporting the ExC-ELL implementation, coaches offer SIOP training at the division level on an ongoing basis.

Finally, in order to better understand the needs of educators to support ELs who are SIFE, the EL Department Administrative Team routinely conducts ExC-ELL classroom visits using the "look for" protocol developed by Margarita Calderon and Associates. In this approach, educators identify the ExC-ELL skill that they would like observed in the classroom visit and share this with the team conducting the visit. The "look for protocol" is used to collect information during the visit and provide specific feedback to the teachers within 24 hours. This includes setting a goal to implement a new ExC-ELL component.

We are also implementing school-wide professional learning that focuses on teaching language and literacy at some of our schools with higher populations of ELs who are SIFE.

Francisco:

Which of the research-based practices in educating SIFE does your district implement?

Teresa:

Loudoun County has implemented several research-based practices to support our ELs who are SIFE. These include participation in sheltered newcomer courses, use of newcomer curriculum that includes English Language Development Standards that are grade level aligned, and Tier 2 vocabulary. Likewise, we have purchased Newcomer resources and texts that support Social-Emotional Learning at the secondary level. Our EL teachers hold Leveled Literacy Intervention or LLI groups for our students with limited literacy skills. LLI is a supplemental literacy intervention program designed to help struggling readers achieve grade-level competency. The lessons focus on phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, oral language skills, and writing. LLI groups are small, usually involving no more than four to

five students. EL teachers implementing LLI groups are able to match their students with books that the students can read with little difficulty.

Other research-based practices our district implements include Word Study. English & EL teachers use Word Study to teach letter consonant and vowel sounds and patterns. Likewise, some schools use the Reading Instructional Goals for Older Readers, or RIGOR. This is an intervention program to reinforce comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and phonics skills. As well as online programs such as: A to Z, Imagine Learning and Literacy, and System 44.

Francisco:

Can you tell us about some the successes and achievements that students with interrupted formal education have experienced in your district?

Teresa:

Since conducting more diagnostics, targeted interventions, and providing supports with SIOP and ExC-ELL, over the past three years we have seen an increase in graduation rates for ELs who are SIFE. They have been able to access the Virginia Department of Education, or VDOE standards, pass VDOE exams, and meet all certification requirements to earn a high school diploma.

Looking at one high school in our county, we had several students with interrupted education who enrolled approximately four years ago. These students came with extremely low English language proficiency and interrupted schooling. They were on a pre-primer or the kindergarten/beginning first grade reading level in English. Over the course of three to four years, they increased their reading levels every year and were able to take higher level classes like Biology, U.S. History and U.S. Government. Some were able to attend the Technical school part-time and earn a certification in HVAC, Auto collision, and cosmetology in addition to their high school diplomas. They were provided with interventions alongside their regular academic classes. We are so excited to celebrate their success this year!

Francisco:

These are wonderful accomplishments and we congratulate your students and staff on being able to achieve them! I would now like to switch gears and ask you to you talk about the families of students with interrupted formal education in your district. How does your district support and engage family members?

Teresa:

The EL Family and Community Engagement Coordinator oversees the Parents as Educational Program, or PEP, which was implemented in 19 school sites during the 2019–20 school year. The PEP program is a voluntary program, designed to support the family engagement of English learner families, including SIFE families. The PEP program curriculum is designed to empower families to engage meaningfully in their children’s education. The Program is broken down into eight units that aim to increase the knowledge of English learner parents and family members about the U.S. and Loudoun County school system in particular, while also deepening their understanding of strategies that can be used to help positively impact and partner in their children’s education. As a result of participation in the PEP Program, some of the things parents

and guardians can do is identify their child's or children's teacher, request information about homework, and request a conference.

The Loudoun County Public Schools EL Welcome Center documents the number of SIFE students by school year in the Welcome Center Contact Log. While students are being assessed, the Welcome Center Parent Liaisons meet with families and conduct a Family Needs Assessment. Based on the results of these conversations Welcome Center staff provide families with appropriate school and community information such as English classes for adults, health clinics and other resources. The Parent Liaisons also assist families with activating their parent/guardian accounts that allow access to their children's educational information.

Francisco:

How is information about newcomer students and the support that they require communicated to the school level?

Teresa:

The Loudoun County Public Schools EL Welcome Center Counselors gather the student's academic and social history information for ALL secondary students who are screened there. During the Counseling interview, a number of questions are asked of parents and students which are then shared with the Home School counselors and EL teachers.

Francisco:

What information do the counselors at the EL Welcome Center gather about newcomer students?

Teresa:

They ask what was the last grade completed by the student and when? What was the date of last school enrollment? How many years of interrupted schooling did the student experience? Has the student repeated a grade? Has the student received special education services?

Francisco:

How does your district foster and sustain family engagement?

Teresa:

Welcome Center Counselors always suggest that parents and students keep in close communication with the Home School counselors, teachers, and parent liaisons to find out if there is any additional support offered by the school for students with interrupted formal education. Examples of some supports could be PEP classes, English classes for adults, and/or the Adult Education Program, our Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program information, and community college information.

The EL Family and Community Engagement Coordinator works cross-departmentally to ensure LCPS staff members division-wide are aware of strategies and programming available for families. One such example, would be a consistent partnership with the LCPS Outreach office and the LCPS School Improvement Office. These offices work directly with parent liaisons, translators, interpreters, and Title I school sites. Collaboration with these offices is crucial to cultivate sweeping programming for our families within our entire community. An example of how departments work together to support SIFE students is the collaborative nature between the EL Welcome Center Counselors and the EL Administrators. Within this relationship, the EL

Administrators are able to share with the counselors the most appropriate courses in which to schedule the students.

Francisco:

Can you talk about how your district supported English learners who are SIFE and their families during COVID-19 related school closures last spring?

Teresa:

During the time of school closures, our division has implemented several initiatives to support our learners. These include but are not limited to providing devices to students in grades 3 through 12, arranging for Hotspots for students who may not have internet access, creating interactive virtual lessons and learning guides, increasing online course offerings many of which are self-paced, creating printable packets that are mailed to students' homes, sending books, school supply kits, and educational magazine subscriptions to our at-risk students, and extending learning opportunities over the summer.

Francisco:

Thank you for joining us today, Teresa. We appreciate all the information that you shared with us.

Teresa:

You are welcome! It was my pleasure!

Host:

Thank you, Teresa for discussing the education of English learners who are students with interrupted formal education. The information and experiences from Loudoun County Public Schools that you shared with us today will certainly help educators support this population of students. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve English learners who are SIFE in classrooms across the country. As this podcast comes to a close, I encourage all of you to visit the NCELA website at www.ncela.ed.gov and check out the many educator resources available there.