

Teaching SLIFE in Public Schools

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Amiir [pseudonym] came to America from Syria via truck. I know this because when he first broke his silent phase he pointed to a photo of a truck in the room and said, “Me in truck.” Through a fraught interview process, he explained he had journeyed in the side container.

Amiir was placed in the fourth grade and expected to pass the exams that would determine his options for future middle schools, though he could not yet hold a pencil.

No content teacher was trained in differentiating for SIFE. There was one ENL teacher servicing the building and she was responsible for over 90 ELLs. I was the only ENL student teacher, and so Amiir became my shadow.

Teachers College armed me with an arsenal of theory and strategies to help SIFE students, and they did help Amiir acquire English. We worked on fine motor skills, choral reading of his favorite stories from the library, and memory game. I found that if Amiir felt the task was a game, he would readily play and learn. After my 14 or so weeks at this school, Amiir was forming one-word answers to questions and could have basic exchanges with peers about his name, age, and favorite games. My lack of a set schedule allowed me to devote whole days to the education of one student—but this is not a norm in the DOE.

Teachers are tasked with far more than most can achieve in a day and students, like Amiir, are often left behind as the engine of education rolls on. You will learn that there is a lot of work to be done in the system so that students like Amiir do not get left behind, but student teaching is something I believe we got right. This is the time in your career where you have unparalleled freedom to focus on students who need you the most—do not waste it and carry their stories forward to guide you when you forget why you started teaching.

I now work in a transfer high school where many of my students have been caught up in that turning engine long before I meet them. Considering students like Amiir when designing curriculum is crucial. We cannot guarantee that students will get the one-to-one attention they need and deserve, but we can better design materials and cater content so that it considers, and responds, to their needs.

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