

The Transformative Language Education Center:
Equity for Multilingual Learners at CUNY

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I. Policy Analysis and Recommendation Outline

As a result of traditional admissions requirements such as SAT and ACT being waived, as well as the NYCDOE's decision to suspend Regents testing for the 2020-2021 school year, a more diverse population of students were admitted into four-year CUNY colleges. While this is a first step toward equity and access for the most marginalized students, CUNY must make institutional changes that support the development and success for these students. First, CUNY must recognize the deficit view it holds on students labeled English Language Learners (ELLs) or Multilingual Learners (MLs). Second, CUNY departments that serve ELLs and MLs should be aligned and governed under a single administration that understands the intersectional needs of young immigrants and language learners. Acknowledging the challenges that ELLs and MLs face in the transition to college is an urgent matter for the incoming mayor. I encourage the new administration to look closely at the "unintended consequences" of expansive admissions policies in the face of pedagogical and curricular stagnation.

II. Statement of the Problem

CUNY still holds deficit views of ELLS and MLs

A Case Study: Ana

Meet Ana. Ana is a 19-year old student who just graduated high school as part of the class of 2021 of The International High School at Prospect Heights. She is originally

from the Dominican Republic and has been in the U.S. since the beginning of high school (ninth grade). She loves history, her language and culture, and considers herself an activist. One of the highlights of her high school career was co-facilitating a workshop about democracy and citizenship at a conference for teachers. She attempted the ELA Regents two times without passing and her PSAT score was a 750 before the COVID-related closing of schools. Because her school is part of the New York State Consortium of schools, Ana also must complete five content area PBATs (performance-based assessment task) in order to graduate. Here, she thrives with her ability to translanguage (use all of her linguistic repertoires) and engage deeply with concepts (García, 2011). She earns an Outstanding/Expert rating in four of her five PBATs and her teachers remark that her presentations were passionate and engaging, and that she was able to see connections and applications in the world around her. Her senior year, she also proves that she is proficient at university-level Standard Spanish by passing the Spanish Language AP exam.

Last school year, our guidance counselors were working around the clock to help students realize their dream of going to college. We also knew our teachers were providing guidance and mentoring through the personal statement and recommendation writing processes, which were now more important than ever, considering the CUNY Board of Trustees passed a resolution that stated it would utilize “more sophisticated admissions practices for Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 admissions, including using more information from high school transcripts, with a focus on performance in key subjects and expanding the use of student essays and letters of recommendation at our most selective colleges” (Board of Trustee Meeting Minutes, 2021). Because of Ana’s

persistence and through our school's collaborative efforts, Ana was accepted into her first choice school of CUNY John Jay! She's thrilled, especially because she was also accepted to the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Program that supports "disadvantaged" students. Many other students found similar success by gaining admission to their first choice schools, which were often competitive 4-year CUNY schools. This is a cause for celebration! Our students are determined, multilingual, and highly talented. Students also graduate with a CDOS certification, showing they are college and career ready. They are equipped to succeed in college as they have in high school. They deserve to be in college, despite archaic, gate-keeping measures like the SAT, ACT, and Regents, which were rightfully waived during the pandemic. This momentous occasion also shows CUNY's efforts to create a more equitable admissions process. Yet, Gallagher implores us to remember the "unexamined assumptions" and "unintended consequences" that may follow this change in admissions policy, regardless of the intention behind it (Gallagher, 1999).

According to the CUNY website, all incoming students must "demonstrate proficiency in English" by standardized assessments such as the SAT, ACT, or ELA Regents exam score, despite having already been admitted by the university and regardless of high school certification. Students "who are designated as ESL... and do not meet the proficiency requirements" are then tasked with taking another writing assessment in order to determine their English skills. Depending on the results, students may be placed in the immersive and rigorous CUNY Language Immersion, which meets 25 hours a week for up to one year (CLIP). CLIP is described as a program for "Students who have been admitted to a City University of New York (CUNY)

college but need more time to learn English before taking college courses” (CUNY CLIP, n.d.). Other options include traditional English as a Second Language Courses (ESL), which are less intensive but may also be credit-bearing. Depending on the campus, ESL classes may be housed in the English department, the foreign languages department, or within a special program or institute. Effectiveness aside, both ESL and CLIP programs are an extra time and cost factor for students who are already financially limited. Some of these students are in danger of exhausting financial aid funds before accumulating enough credits for a degree.

Many scholars have written about perceived language deficits, especially when it pertains to immigrants and other minoritized language learners and speakers. These perceived language deficits in non-English-dominant students have been influenced by Western Mechanistic ideology (Heshusius, 1989). Rosa and Flores emphasize that there are certain “empirical linguistic practices deemed appropriate for a school context” (Rosa & Flores, 2017). They may be labeled as Academic English, Standard English, “Proper” English, etc. Martinez et al. (2017) discuss Heath’s (1983) research from the Piedmont Carolinas which revealed that, despite the linguistic sophistication of the non-”mainstream” communities, those students’ home languages were not affirmed nor leveraged in schooling (Heath 1983, cited in Martinez et al., 2017). Their success was determined by their linguistic practices and, in this case, class and race since the non-”mainstream” communities were often working class and/or Black. Additionally, Banks provides the historical perspective that assimilationist notions of citizenship and belonging required that cultures and languages of diverse groups had to be eliminated to strengthen the national identity (2004). By not recognizing language differences and

pushing assimilationist practices, many non-English-dominant students became ineffective at functioning in either language or culture, leaving them socially and politically alienated (Banks, 2004). True to Newtonian Mechanistic thought, the onus is continually placed on the student to correct any errors so that they “embody appropriateness” (Paris, cited in Rosa and Flores, 2017). For example, solutions often took the form of additional language classes whose expressed purpose was teaching English language skills, again positioning home languages as unnecessary and obtrusive (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

What happens to a student like Ana, who proudly speaks a Dominican variety of Spanish that many of her Generation Z peers are familiar with? A student who proudly breaks language barriers and uses all of her languages as tools may be perceived by the “White listening subject” to be deficient of Standard American English. This may seem contradictory, especially since Ana graduated from a progressive, international high school where multilingualism is the norm. Her teachers did not see her language as a problem or barrier. Ana merely presented another opportunity to the teachers of International High School. However, at CUNY, ELLs and MLs are expected to abandon their multilingual practices in lieu of English-only policies. Why does CUNY not view her in the same regard? Is college really that different from the type of work students do in high school? Many of our students have come back to us, dejected that a professor told them to “fix their English” or that based on their language, they were “not ready for college.” Language is often a proxy for discussing culture, and the construction of language deficit has been a euphemism for constructing cultural inferiority in the face of

American and English superiority. Rosa and Flores' work on Raciolinguistics is important to consider as we look at our students' intersectional identities.

Support for ELLs and MLs are Decentralized

Multilingual learners, who are often immigrants or part of mixed-status families, may be at the intersection of many marginalized identities. For example, racialized immigrants may face challenges in personal economics, communication, residency status, or understanding racial hegemony in the U.S. Programs such as SEEK have greatly increased access and opportunity for “disadvantaged” students pursuing higher education. Still, SEEK often fails to consider the linguistic and cultural needs of the many MLs in the program and the availability of the multilingual staff in its program.

During a recent phone call with a colleague who is a first-year professor and counselor with the SEEK program, I was surprised to discover that this colleague was actually Ana's counselor! We had a student who embodied the unique challenges and opportunities that a ML student would. He mentioned the staggering number of MLs he had in his class that he learned about through observation. Some used languages other than English in class, including Ana. This professor also described the linguistic diversity of the SEEK staff, and more than half of them were also multilingual. Yet, my disappointment came when I learned that there were no specific language supports available for the many MLs present in the program, despite the multilingual staff. In further conversation about his class and the academic support offered for students, he described his Critical Literacy approach, which aligned with many of the best practices used for MLs. This conversation illuminated many things which I already knew being a veteran educator of MLs—that ELLs and MLs, particularly immigrant and transnational

students, need a lot of academic and socio-emotional health. More specifically, educators need to approach ELLs, MLs, and general pedagogy with a renewed interest in critical language awareness for all students.

The Investigating Pedagogies for Advanced Proficiency is doing promising work with MLs. The project “studies ways to better serve heritage language learners enrolled in college level language classes. The project will deliver new knowledge on: how different pedagogical approaches support proficiency development; how proficiency in English relates to proficiency in the heritage language; and on the language-using patterns of advanced writing” (CUNY ILETC, n.d.) The only caveat is this program serves heritage language learners only. Heritage language learners generally are considered English-dominant in literacy. It may be of interest to question why such a project involves heritage learners, instead of more urgent cases of immigrants like Ana.

III. Policy Recommendation

Shift the Stance on Language by Learning from K-12 Schools

Ofelia García is Professor Emerita in the Ph.D. programs of Urban Education and of Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures (LAILAC). She is world-renowned for her work on Bilingual Education and multilingualism, and particularly in conceptualizing Translanguaging theory. Translanguaging is “using the entire complex and dynamic linguistic repertoire of bilingual children flexibly and strategically in instruction (García et al., 2016, as cited in Menken et al., 2018). It may be helpful to imagine Translanguaging as a perspective or stance that seeks to build linguistic awareness “to match the community’s actual language practices,” positing minoritized language learners as

classroom experts and co-creators of knowledge (Menken et al., 2018). Theoretically, Translanguaging can be understood in conjunction with other theories that seek to reframe research “away from deficits in students to look at structural impediments,” such as the contradictions behind English-only policies and assessments (Linville, 2017).

Claire Sylvan is the founder of the Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS). This organization is the governing and guiding body of the International High Schools, such as the one described in this recommendation. Schools within the network follow a similar teaching model based on “heterogeneity, collaboration, learner-centeredness, language and content integration, language use from students up, experiential learning, and local autonomy and responsibility” and are also connected through resources and collaboration opportunities. For example, as a member of our network’s portfolio committee, I collaborated with other educators to create and refine project assessment rubrics. The intersection of Ofelia García and Claire Sylvan’s work on multilingualism is documented in the article, “Pedagogies and Practices in Multilingual Classrooms: Singularities in Pluralities,” in which they discuss language education to be the facilitation of communication to improve the lives of speakers of language, instead of promoting a specific language or languages (García, 2011). It is no coincidence that I invoke these scholars and their work as I turn to the possibilities within CUNY.

At the public International High Schools, all teachers are language and content teachers. This network, the Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS), does exemplary work with schools in the service of MLs. They have not only worked to shift

the paradigm on language education, but consistently provides the support for schools to continue this work. I invoke their philosophy and model as I recommend that CUNY braids resources from the various Bilingual Education programs: CLIP, ESL, ILETC (an integrated language learning program for heritage language learners), and SEEK/College Discovery. I also recommend a partnership between INPS, CUNY Initiative for Immigrant Education (CUNY-IIE), the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at John Jay College, and the Teaching and Learning Center at CUNY Graduate Center to collaborate and create a learning space in which the English-language “achievement gap” of MLs is reframed as linguistic “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) which must be repaid by pedagogy and curriculum changes. This is an opportune time for CUNY to learn from the progressive work done in public International High Schools.

The Transformative Language Education Center

The Transformative Language Education Center (TLEC) is a single space in which MLs can feel supported and affirmed in their linguistic repertoires. It's a space where being multilingual is the norm because, in the global reality, it is! Imagine language-based tutoring and study groups that are arranged both homogeneously and heterogeneously, depending on the goal. Keeping in mind the various hardships that MLs and immigrants may face, mental health counseling and academic mentoring will be available. And because our most marginalized students need to see the possibilities before them, internships and Work-Based Learning (WBL) programs will help students see the connection between learning and doing. However, our most critical and urgent

work will be to collaborate with CUNY educators to make their coursework more accessible for MLs.

We ask our students to engage with highly intellectual and abstract concepts, and it is crucial to consider the linguistic needs of students beyond reading the “word” to reading the “world” (Freire, 1921). I know this from experience as I now teach MLs and am forced to reckon with over-emphasis of English monolingualism in the American public education system. I am forced to reckon with the fact that the schools I attended never used the Funds of Knowledge (Moll, 2019) that my family brought with them from Laos and refugee camps in Thailand on their journey to the U.S., and how my schooling and home life never intersected. Now, in phone conversations with my mom, I realize what a resource my family should have been for me as a student if only the education system viewed them as an asset and provided entry points for them to engage in my schooling. How empowering it would have been to be able to see my culture and language as a bridge to possibilities, instead of problems to be eradicated. I am imploring the city and CUNY, specifically, to open its eyes to the authentic and sophisticated language skills of our students and, by extension, all of us who language (as a verb) outside of White, monolingual, Eurocentric norms, and find meaningful ways for collaboration between education, immigration, and innovation.

IV. Budget

Braid Resources from Departments and Agencies that Support MLs

Over the summer of 2021, the city announced a breakdown of the fiscal year 2022 including funds from the Academic Recovery Plan. Part of the \$10 million are

being allocated to “Immigrant Ambassador Programs across 30 high schools that match immigrant DOE students with college students to foster mentorship and early college awareness” and expanding the Postsecondary Readiness for ELLs Program (PREP). The CUNY K-16 Office of Initiatives includes GraduateNYC, a collaboration between the NYCDOE, City Hall, CUNY, and corporate members. Their work includes the College Completion Innovation Fund (CCIF) project, which has “invested more than \$5 million to support projects that aim to significantly improve student completion outcomes” (CUNY GraduateNYC, n.d.). These funds must be taken in consideration with other language education options available at CUNY, including CLIP, ESL, and IPAP, which operate with great budgets and generate as much income from the many immigrant and transnational students who are attracted to CUNY, ironically, because of its world-class status. The Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA) also offers language learning services through its We Speak NYC program, which is designed for adult learners, and also funds CUNY ESL programs. The MOIA adopted a budget of \$42.2 million for fiscal year 2022, with \$10 million funding CUNY ESL. There are millions of dollars earmarked for various services that are crucial to immigrants. It is proposed that several million be moved from remediation services for immigrants, to creating spaces and structures to equitize education for ELLs, MLs, and their families. The TLEC is one possible space.

V. Arguments Against Policy Solution

Just Learn English!

Historically, the erasure of Native American languages through physical punishment and English-only instruction at the boarding schools provides a foundation

for restrictive U.S. language policy. (Adams, 2020). These perspectives believe that English immersion or cheaper, transitional ESL programs are the best solution for these students, with the intention of mainstreaming students back into content classes. Transitional programs are often criticized because of the deficit view it takes on language, positioning English as the target language and the minoritized home language as a scaffold that would eventually be eliminated. This subtractive view of bilingualism makes transitional programs vulnerable to attack as evaluators criticized them for keeping students in bilingual classes once they had achieved English proficiency (Flores, 2016).

Decades of linguistic research has proven that it takes at least five years to acquire academic language, while informal language usually takes just one to three years to develop (Cummins, 1999). Remedial English-language programs at CUNY signify to MLs that they are not prepared for college, despite completing and graduating from a New York State high school. This ideology puts the onus on MLs students to “catch up.” Yet, Raciolinguistics Theory (Nelson and Flores, 2017) offers a contrasting perspective that shows that “White-listening subjects” are resistant to acknowledging the languaging skills of racialized MLs. For example, English-only language movements and arguments around standard vs. vernacular languages are often xenophobic and racially-motivated and not about language proficiencies. To dismantle the “White-listening subject,” Nelson and Flores encourage us to “indict” the White ears and eyes of CUNY (2017).

Critical Language Awareness is for All

Global capitalism renewed the interest in language education, leading to a shift in the “common sense” ideologies on language (Johnson & Johnson, 2015) that now valued multilingualism as a global commodity. White, monolingual, middle-class families’ interests converged with those of other language learning students and their families. This renewed interest in language was due in part to native English-speaking families’ skepticism, and perhaps envy, of state bilingual-education programs. Williams asks, “How could they [parents/voters] believe in a model they knew only as a distant abstraction serving kids who seemed so different from their own?” (2017). Policymakers and leaders used this opening to make language integration the latest intervention designed to close “the opportunity gap for historically underserved students” while selling the benefits of multilingualism to affluent families (Williams, 2017). Leaders described bilingual education as an “incredible wealth, a resource that comes into our country ... [this] linguistic and cultural wealth and capital” that would attract affluent white families into traditionally non-white students of “low-economic status” (Williams, 2017). It was argued that multilingualism would integrate schools and allow the linguistic “wealth” of minoritized language learners to be traded with the monetary “wealth” of white families.

This interest-convergence led to what Flores describes as a codification of an *ideal bilingual hegemonic Whiteness* (2015). Dual Language Bilingual Education programs were coveted by privileged families who were seduced by the allure of multilingualism, resulting in programs that were dominated by white, middle-class families, and struggled to retain minoritized language learners the programs were

designed to serve (Dorner & Lee, 2020). White, English-speaking families could move into neighborhoods to secure seats for their children at schools with DLBE programs, often causing immigrant families to be priced out of the same tight housing market (Williams, 2017). As this trend of “opportunity hoarding” (Williams, 2017) continues, Flores foreshadows that the need for “minority bilingual speakers” will be eliminated in preference of “white bilingual speakers” (2015). Several two-way bilingual programs have gentrified into one-way programs because white families are able to wield their power, preventing true integration from happening. The next administration must approach language education and critical language awareness from a universal perspective, selling the benefits of multilingualism to privileged students while creating diverse and inclusive structures to address the inequities that immigrant families and ELLs/MLs historically face when DLBE programs neglect their values and concerns (Dorner & Lee, 2020).

VI. Approval and Implementation Process

Start Small with SEEK and College Discovery

Opportunity programs such as SEEK and College Discovery are a great place to start this work. Since this policy recommendation involves creating a physical learning space to support minoritized language learners at the intersection of race, immigration, and class, programs like SEEK seem poised to best serve most of these students' needs. Based on my earlier conversation with a college, matching prospective students and counselors could involve a more intentional linguistic lens, as could syllabus creation. The professors in the SEEK program would also be appropriate candidates to

begin collaboration with, as many educators and counselors believe in holistic approaches to education. Much of the early work would involve experiential education and collaboration between INPS, eager educators, language education researchers, and MLs at CUNY. The TLEC is an experiment in higher education spaces, and this focus group would be the first step in changing the stance and approach to ELLs and MLs at the university level.

VII. Conclusion

Language education ideology and policy has generally focused on remediating students, their language, and sometimes, their identities. Yet, I am proposing structural changes at the pedagogical and curricular levels, shifting the onus from the student to the institution. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies maintains that we “cannot continue to act as if the white middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were seen as the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure...have remained or will remain so as our society change” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 6). If CUNY’s desire is to create a more equitable admissions process, then it too must create a more equitable learning process. There are multiple opportunities for the new administration to enact the changes mentioned in this paper. Mr. Adams’ emphasis on bilingual special education teachers is important to note, and I challenge the administration to expand the scope of language education for New York City students. Just as Mr. Banks has embodied his vision of creating academic and social structures for young Black men through the Eagle Academy, I am similarly interested in creating and sustaining those structures for ELLs/MLs, who are often at the intersection of many marginalized

identities. It is a crucial time to look at CUNY: the resources are there. Still, it is the ideology and possibilities that must be reimagined. The TLEC is such an ideological and material possibility.

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