An Argument for Stand-Alone ENL Curriculum

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This alternative perspectives paper presents an argument for prioritizing the curriculum and instruction of English language development courses for multilingual learners (MLLs), a program model known as "stand-alone English as a new language (ENL)" in New York state schools. We propose a more systematic approach to curriculum development for stand-alone ENL that focuses on language development while also connecting to core academic content areas. More specifically, we argue that a stand-alone ENL curriculum should include content-rich units of study that are connected to big ideas, essential questions, disciplinary practices, and the Next Generation ELA Learning Standards. Furthermore, we argue that a broader and more intentional dissemination of the guidance documents commissioned and published by the New York State Education Department could support this initiative by giving teachers and school leaders easier access to current research and best practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment for MLLs.

At this moment in history, New York State (NYS) schools are experiencing a steady influx of multilingual students and a troubling decrease in the number of professional teachers who are prepared to meet their unique needs. Teachers are retiring or leaving the profession faster than new teachers are entering the profession, and as a result there is a teacher shortage in most content areas, but especially in English as a New Language (ENL). According to the NYS Teachers Union (NYSUT), enrollment in teacher education programs is down 53% from 2009, and the NYS retirement system reports that one third of NYS teachers will be eligible for retirement in the next five years (NYSUT, 2017). At the same time, the population of English language learner/multilingual learner (ELL/MLL) students has grown from 214,154 in the 2012-2013 academic year to 259,829 in the 2023-2024 academic year (NYSED, 2024).

As a result of the increase in the ELL/MLL population and the dearth of certified ENL teachers, many districts are hiring graduate students who are still completing their degrees to fill the openings in their schools (NYSSBA Research, 2019). These new and inexperienced ENL teachers are faced with the daunting task of developing curricula and materials for stand-alone classes, navigating the NYS Next Generations Learning Standards in order to provide integrated instruction, and establishing relationships with content-area colleagues, all while playing the many roles that ENL teachers play—advocate, mentor and counselor, in-take coordinator, home-school liaison, and so forth. Just like their colleagues new to the profession, experienced ENL teachers are also challenged in developing curricula for

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ELLs/MLLs that are "rigorous, relevant, and designed and delivered with second language learning in mind" (Short et al., 2018, p. 5). Of particular concern is the curriculum for stand-alone ENL, one of two instructional delivery models in NYS. The two program models are defined in the NYS Education Department Bilingual Education Toolkit Glossary of Terms, Appendix A (NYSED; 2019b),

● Integrated ENL: A unit of study or its equivalent in which students receive core content area and English language development instruction as a component of their BE (Bilingual Education) or ENL program with home language supports and appropriate ELL scaffolds; and

● Stand-alone ENL: A unit of study or its equivalent in which students receive instruction in order to acquire the English language skills needed for success in core content courses. (p. 3)

In this article, we present an argument for prioritizing and supporting the development of stand-alone ENL curriculum: NYS school districts need to ensure that the curricula for stand-alone instruction meets the expectations as outlined above. Stand-alone English language development courses need to be as carefully designed as math, science, ELA, and social studies courses, with curriculum maps aligned to standards and assessments and the resources to support academic English teaching and learning. Integrated ENL, typically co-taught by an ESOL certified teacher and a content area teacher (elementary classroom teacher or secondary ELA, mathematics, science, or social studies teacher), has a well-defined curriculum created by curriculum committees in academic departments or grade level teams. But in stand-alone ENL, there are vast discrepancies from school to school in how well developed and established the curriculum is for various proficiency and grade levels.

As professors in a teacher-education program, we see this lack of curriculum in NYS schools when our graduate students begin their teaching internships. One graduate student who was hired to teach ENL in a high-needs, urban school district recently asked us about his stand-alone class for Entering and Emerging students: "What should I be doing with them for 80 minutes a day?" In this conversation, he expressed his confusion and frustration about a lack of curriculum and materials for stand-alone ENL. He felt it was all on him to design the curriculum and find materials and resources and felt pressure from students who expected to use the time for homework and studying for their other classes, like a resource room.

This is not the first time we have fielded this question about what stand-alone ENL should look like. We often hear—from in-service teachers and pre-service ENL teachers alike— that there is no curriculum at their school for stand-alone ENL. Oftentimes, there are no suggested texts, no guidelines, no units with associated standards, and no stated expectations for ENL at a given proficiency and grade level. In schools with a curriculum, it tends to be grammar-based and more related to social English than academic English, with themes such as the family, seasons and holidays, and shopping. Instruction is not always aligned to NYS learning standards and, as a result, is often disjointed and fragmented. In our work with ENL teachers and graduate students we have frequently heard that stand-alone ENL is a class where students "get help" for their other classes, make up homework, and complete missed classwork and tests after absences. Some pre-service teachers have reported that their mentor teachers in the stand-alone setting do not formally or systematically plan, teach, or assess because their "lessons" will depend on the work that students bring to the class with them on a given day. In some schools, the class is graded and credit-bearing, and in others it is nothing more than a study hall. This practice not only communicates low expectations of ELLs/ MLLs, but also communicates low expectations of

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ENL teachers, who have specialized knowledge of how to support and develop students' academic English. Returning to the definition from NYSED (2019), stand-alone ENL class is intended to help students "acquire the English language skills needed for success in core content courses" (p. 3). Therefore teachers need well-developed units of instruction within a scope and sequence that supports students in developing the requisite background knowledge, language, content, and analytical practices that can be transferred to content area classes so they can progress toward graduation as they meet grade-level learning standards.

We argue that such a curriculum should promote deeper learning through a process-oriented approach; it should be content-based with big ideas and engaging topics, supported by grade-level texts. A well-developed ENL stand-alone curriculum should consider the assets that ELLs/MLLs bring to schools and support these students as they develop their English proficiency, disciplinary literacy, and understandings of grade-level content. An example of this is the well-done Bridges to Academic Success program that was developed at The Center for Advanced Studies in Education, City University of New York, to meet the needs of Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) in grades 7-12 in NYS schools (Bridges to Academic Success, n.d.). This curriculum is content-rich, organized around compelling issues and big ideas, heavily scaffolded to support language development, and project-based. Districts are able to purchase the curriculum and receive training before and during instruction. Teachers using the Bridges to Academic Success curriculum appreciate having concrete units, essential questions, suggested texts, videos, and articles, linguistic scaffolds, and resources. These components of curricula are needed for all ENL teachers, including those teaching in stand-alone settings. NYS schools need to prioritize the development of similar curricula that will help new and current ENL teachers to effectively plan English language instruction for Entering and Emerging ELLs/MLLs in their stand-alone classes.

Where do we begin with such a large curricular project? We can gain some insight by examining the NYSED Guide for Aligning Local Curricula to the Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards (NYSED, 2019a), which guides curriculum design at the local level. Indeed, this NYSED document clearly encourages the local development of curriculum:

> Curriculum alignment to the Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards can be undertaken as a collegial or individual effort. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) encourages teachers, school districts, and BOCES to work together to create a culturally responsive, standards-based curriculum that meets the needs of all students and supports culturally-responsive teaching practices. (p. 11)

Therefore, a first step would be the commitment of time and financial resources to support ENL teachers and department leaders to develop curriculum at the school or district level or through a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) professional development program. Teachers should be paid for their work in curriculum development or be given release time and should not be expected to create a curriculum in the after-work hours and on weekends for a course they are currently teaching. Summer hours and in-service hours should be devoted to this work with the assistance of curriculum developers if needed. This is the standard in the field for all content areas and should apply in an equitable way to teachers of stand-alone ENL.

As a next step, we propose ENL curriculum committees begin with a close review of the NYS standards to identify the convergences among the content area classes in terms of what students need to be able to do with language to meet grade-level content standards.

We know from the work of Cheuk (2013) that the CCLS Math, Science, and ELA practices converged around the use of several language functions: developing an argument, providing evidence for an argument, critiquing an argument, and evaluating an argument. Similarly, by looking at the Next Generation Anchor Standards of ELA, the K-12 social studies practices, and the science and mathematical practices, we can find areas of convergence upon which teachers can build a local curricular framework. The NYS social studies practices (NYSED & The University of the State of New York, 2014), mathematical practices (NYSED, 2019c), the science and engineering practices (NYSED, n.d.a), and the ELA anchor standards (NYSED, 2017), all offer broad, thematic skills and concepts that can be connected to specific language functions. These disciplinary practices can provide students the opportunity to use interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication skills as they develop their academic English use and conceptual understandings. They provide a platform to develop ELLs/MLLs' advanced literacies (Lesaux & Galloway, 2017) as they engage with grade-level content.

Looking across and between the disciplinary practices, we believe that social studies may offer the strongest organizing theme for content-rich English language lessons in stand-alone ENL. For example, the practice of "gathering, interpreting and using evidence" can easily be connected to STEM topics and ELA anchor standards. ENL teachers in stand-alone classrooms could explore the language of "gathering, interpreting, and using evidence" as they also reinforce disciplinary learning to support students in their content area classes. Likewise, content area teachers can invite ELLs/MLLs to explore the features of academic language, including but not limited to semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and morphology that are characteristic of these content areas.

Considering the work of Lesaux and Harris (2015), de Oliveira (2023), Heineke and McTighe (2018), and Auslander and Beiting-Parrish (2018), we recommend the development of stand-alone ENL curricula that includes extended units of study (a unit of 10 weeks, for example) organized around rich essential questions and compelling ideas. This backward design approach to curricular development meets several instructional goals: it promotes deep study of ideas over superficial coverage of topics; it allows for teacher flexibility and creativity; it allows for cultural relevance as teachers create text sets and materials based on their students' interests and background in relation to the essential questions; and it promotes the simultaneous development of language, content, and analytical practices. These concepts come directly from research in the field which is summarized, synthesized, and made actionable through the NYSED Advanced Literacies Topic Briefs (e.g., Lesaux & Galloway, 2017), available to teachers and district leaders for guidance in developing appropriate and rigorous instruction for linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Throughout this work in curriculum development, one other issue needs to be addressed: the challenge of disseminating the guidance and resources made available by NYSED, created by experts in the field, to local schools and classrooms. Throughout this article we have cited several guidance documents that were commissioned by NYSED and developed by scholars and experts to support ENL teachers and facilitate curriculum development. However, in our experience, few teachers have been introduced to these documents. In our work with teachers through professional development and with our graduate students and their mentor teachers, we have seen time and time again that these documents are not making their way into schools. Teachers are extraordinarily busy, so without explicit notification of the existence of the guidance and resource documents, the work will not be done. We need to find mechanisms for the dissemination of these resources so that educators have the tools they need to design rigorous and relevant instruction and assessment.

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By taking the time to develop a curricular framework for stand-alone instruction, schools and districts will provide new and current ENL teachers in NYS with a clear vision and mission. With concrete goals and objectives for each grade band and proficiency level, ENL co-teachers in integrated settings will have an increased sense of purpose and direction as well. The persistent problem of ENL teachers in NYS being treated as paraprofessionals, working more as teaching assistants than co-teachers in integrated settings and more as tutors than teachers in stand-alone settings, could be alleviated with a well-designed and purposefully implemented ENL curriculum. And in doing so, we believe we can further elevate our profession and, perhaps more importantly, better serve the linguistically and culturally diverse students in our schools.

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