

Promoting a Primary Good in Schools: An Aristotelian Defense of Bilingual Education

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INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education is an educational model designed to provide students content area instruction in two languages. These programs as they serve language minority students now face their most strident attacks since the nativist movements of the early Twentieth century. Ironically, when the Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1968, there was very little scientific research to support it. Since then, a number of studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of bilingual education and yet Propositions 227 and 203 in California and Arizona, respectively, severely curtailed and, in many districts, resulted in the elimination of these programs.¹

As an increasing number of native English speaking students get on waiting lists to enter bilingual programs, the language minority children that such programs were meant to serve in the first place are shoved back into the monolingual English classrooms that previous generations fought to escape. Thus, the gentrification of bilingual education seems imminent.

Opponents of bilingual education for language minority students argue it is necessary to learn English in order to enjoy equality of opportunity societally and educationally. Despite the empirical evidence favoring bilingual over English-only methods in promoting these laudable goals, the arguments of bilingual opponents have proven too tempting for an electorate predisposed to accept them.

What is interesting is how bilingual opponents have been able to make their equality of opportunity arguments stick while betraying what should be a fundamental notion of liberal democratic societies. The fundamental notion referred to is a "primary good," the primary good of self-respect. In this article, my argument is that equality of educational opportunity requires the promotion of self-respect. Drawing on John Rawls's work, I briefly review his defense of self-respect as a primary good and further describe the Aristotelian principle of motivation that he relies on to develop this defense. Self-respect in these Aristotelian terms provides specific guidance in educational policy for language minority students. More specifically, the consistent and systematic use of children's primary languages in school as media of instruction promotes self-respect, leading to increased academic engagement.² In making these arguments, I point out how important critics of bilingual education either misuse or ignore this Aristotelian position to the educational detriment of language minority students.

REVIEWING THE PRIMARY GOOD OF SELF-RESPECT

Rawls's project is to develop a view of social justice defending justice as fairness. Briefly summarized, Rawls asks us to engage in the following thought experiment: imagine that you do not know your place in society, your position or social status, or your fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities (for

example, intelligence, strength, looks, and even psychological propensities). From behind this “veil of ignorance,” Rawls concludes that we would agree to distribute certain primary goods fairly.³ Among the primary goods necessary for individuals to pursue, shape, and alter if necessary their view of the “good life” Rawls includes basic liberties, equal opportunities, income/wealth, and self-respect. These primary goods and their fair distribution are ideals upon which an “overlapping consensus” can be achieved among individuals and groups such that social stability can be maintained even in pluralistic societies.⁴

One point of plurality that Rawls does not explicitly raise is language. He also spends very little time on schooling even though the primary good of equal opportunities would seem to require, at a minimum, a vigorous and free system of public education. It is in this gap that I build my defense of bilingual education by connecting three pillars: language, schooling, and self-respect. Here again Rawls provides a point of departure with an Aristotelian notion of self-respect.

Between and within disciplines the notion of self-respect is conceived differently and distinctions are made between closely related constructs. For example, a distinction has been made between self-concept and self-esteem in psychology and between self-esteem and self-respect in political philosophy.⁵ The construct of self-respect, as Rawls develops it, seems to be subsumed within these related constructs. Rawls, in fact, uses self-respect and self-esteem interchangeably, which more than adequately meets his purposes and mine. For, those who misconceive the language/self-respect interface do so using the same lay understanding of self-respect.

For Rawls self-respect has two specific aspects that demonstrate why it is among his primary goods. He describes these aspects as follows:

[self-respect] includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions. When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution. Nor plagued by failure and self-doubt can we continue in our endeavors.⁶

Given that it is a fundamental precondition for planning and pursuing a rational life-plan, self-respect is, Rawls contends, “perhaps the most important primary good.”⁷ Ignoring social conditions that undermine self-respect risks cynicism and apathy.

Two circumstances support Rawls's first aspect of self-respect. The first circumstance is having a life plan in which an Aristotelian Principle can be satisfied. This Aristotelian Principle, a principle of motivation, runs as follows: other things being equal, “human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity.”⁸ The second circumstance necessary for someone to enjoy self-respect is having their person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed.

While Rawls's liberal-egalitarian project is designed to address challenges in the larger community and to promote the ability to pursue a life-plan, his notion of self-respect is readily applicable to schools. For example, we can easily qualify as “educational” the types of endeavors that *children* cannot continue if “plagued by

failure and self-doubt.” Similarly, we can conclude that children in schools “enjoy their realized capacities” and that “this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized.” To wit, it is not a stretch to assume that students who struggle with reading will read less. Furthermore, students bolstered by the confirmation of their deeds and capacities by esteemed “others”—teachers and classmates—are more likely to further their capacities. In short, even though children may or may not be involved in pursuing a life-plan per se, self-respect is equally important to them in their school community and to their academic needs.

CONNECTING SELF-RESPECT AND LANGUAGE

If within liberal democracies self-respect should be a primary good, we must engage in educational practices that promote that good. Following the Aristotelian principle, bilingual education provides a significant and effective means to this end.

Aristotle tells us that “the pleasures arising from thinking and learning will make us think and learn all the more” since “activity is intensified by its proper pleasure.”⁹ As concerns language and activity, there are two lines of argument to draw. First, language is the *sine qua non* of many, if not most, other activities, especially academic ones. Second, language can itself be an activity whose capacity can increase and from which pleasure can be derived.¹⁰

To see language *sine qua non*, four rather obvious assumptions must be made explicit. First, thinking and learning require thinking and learning about something. Second, the source of that something in schools is typically a teacher or textbook. Third, these sources use language to make this something known to students for their consideration. Fourth, further analysis or thinking and learning about this something requires engagement by the student, either with the teacher or with the text, and this also requires language.

These simple facts preclude the student who happens to not speak the language of the teacher or text from engaging in a great number of school, especially academic, activities. Furthermore, if, as Aristotle tells us, “activities are destroyed by their proper pains” language minority students’ struggles to engage in academic activities in a language they do not comprehend may lead to harm and disengagement.¹¹ For “if a man finds writing or doing sums unpleasant and painful, he does not write or does not do sums.”¹² There should certainly be some doubt that children would find reading in a language they do not understand pleasant. While we can all be taught to decode and “read” phonetically in another language, enjoyment comes from comprehension of and engagement with the text. It is this that draws us to read all the more.

Aristotle’s logic here extends into nearly every academic subject. For example, the enjoyment of history comes from understanding its flow and how society has developed, in short, how history is relevant today. Its enjoyment comes from being able to visualize historic events as they are presented through text. It is being able to analyze historical events, delving more deeply into their root causes and the decisions of major role-players. Some might argue that with present technology history can be brought to life with video reenactments or computer simulations. One need but watch the History Channel for ten minutes without the sound to realize that

it is the narrator and his use of language that allows us to make sense of the images before us and to understand their finer meanings.¹³ There is no joy in language-less history or most other academic content areas for language is the *sine qua non* of their understanding, their increased enjoyment, and, hence, their further engagement.

Language is also an activity in and of itself whose capacity can be furthered and from which pleasure can be derived. For example, we tend to engage in increasingly complex text in our leisure reading. As young children, we choose Dr. Seuss. As adolescents, we might choose Marguerite Henry or Henry Potter. We play increasingly complex word games, graduating, say, from the USA Today's crossword to the New York Times's. Some people also choose professions in which language is their livelihood (in an even stricter sense than the fact that it is the *sine qua non* for everyone's livelihood). For example, novelists strive to create sympathetic characters, weave through plots and subplots, and create vivid images of places and actions. Journalists engage in a different sort of language work, striving to achieve efficiency of word usage, conciseness, and balance. Songwriters tell a story within a specific number of stanzas, matching their words and story to the music that will bring it alive. Other professions require oral language skills. Baptist ministers, for example, "hack" to pull their congregation into the sermon, adding syllables to words and varying their intonation.

Young children increase their language capacity in schools through direct instruction in spelling, in reading, in sentence formation. Later they engage in paragraph formation and practicing language for different purposes, for example, informing, persuading, and describing. More than this however, children in schools increase their language capacity by engaging in academic subject matter that introduces them to various language repertoires. In math, they make use of increasingly specific language. The "up and down line" becomes the "vertical line" and then the "X axis." Children may even become frustrated with peers who continue to call the X axis the "up and down line." In some part, this is because precise language makes communication more efficient. It may also be that an increased capacity, in this case specificity of language, reduces one's desire to engage in less complex or sophisticated capacities.

Our willingness to engage in "lesser" capacities decreases because the reward or pleasure from doing so has decreased. Someone who can play chess, for example, is more likely to choose to play chess over checkers. For "while there is pleasure in respect of any sense, and in respect of thought and contemplation no less, the most complete is pleasantness, and that of a well-conditioned organ in relation to the worthiest of its objects is the most complete and the pleasure completes the activity."¹⁴

REDIRECTING THE DEBATE ON SELF-RESPECT AND LANGUAGE

As contrast to the Aristotelian framework presented, it is informative to present the ways that two influential scholars, Diane Ravitch and E.D. Hirsch, think about the connections among language, self-respect, and schooling.

Addressing the relationship between self-respect and academic performance, Ravitch argues, "genuine self-esteem means self-respect and confidence in one's

ability; self-confidence is the product of experience, the reward that comes as a result of working hard to achieve one's goals [presumably goals relating to academic performance]."¹⁵ Here, Ravitch accepts what is for all intents and purposes the Aristotelian principle invoked by Rawls. However, she applies this principle inconsistently and tendentiously when it comes to bilingual education. This is because Ravitch is misguided by her view of bilingual education solely as a technique for language instruction. She measures the effectiveness of bilingual education merely by whether or not it is the best way to learn English.¹⁶ While Ravitch admits that they may not be appropriate for all children, she clearly leans toward English-only programs for language minority children and dismisses the goal of bilingualism.¹⁷ Invoking an intuitively appealing time-on-task argument, she asserts,

[u]nless [bilingual education] enables non-English-speaking children to learn English and to enter into the mainstream of American society, it may hinder equality of educational opportunity. The child who spends most of his instructional time learning in Croatian or Greek or Spanish is likely to learn Croatian, Greek, or Spanish.¹⁸

In short, the more time that students spend on a specific task, the more they will learn. In this case, the assumption is that immersion in English provides children with the greatest amount of time on the task of English acquisition.

Continuing this line of thought, Ravitch, with Chester Finn, points out, "the more youngsters read, the more regularly they attend school, and the more serious content they study while they are there, the more they tend to know about history and literature."¹⁹ Again, the time-on-task argument tells us that the more one studies history the more history one learns. This is not farfetched. The problem is, following this logic, the non-English-speaking child who spends most of her instructional time learning history in English is likely to learn English, not history. Furthermore, and contrary to Ravitch's assertion, the Spanish speaking child who spends her instructional time learning history in Spanish is likely to learn history; she already speaks Spanish.²⁰

On the one hand Ravitch wants educators to afford language minority students "sufficient opportunity to examine important events and issues in depth."²¹ This is consistent with her Aristotelian position that such opportunity is crucial to students' increased capacity in the subject area. This capacity increases enjoyment and results in "genuine self-esteem." But, recalling the earlier language-less history example, such in-depth analysis requires, for non-English speakers, the primary language instruction that is a component of bilingual education, something Ravitch seems to reject. In other words, she abandons her own Aristotelian point of reference when it comes to the education of language minority students.

Hirsch is similarly confused. Looking specifically at his views on language, Hirsch claims that he is "opposed neither to biliteracy nor to the learning of foreign languages."²² However, he goes on to claim "well-meaning bilingualism could unwittingly erect serious barriers to cultural literacy among our young people and therefore create serious barriers to universal literacy at a mature level."²³ While he is for, "in the best of worlds," multiliteracy for everyone, Hirsch is adamant that "the

first step in that direction must be for all of us to become literate in our own [read: Hirsch's own] national language and culture."²⁴

Immediately we might ask why the national culture is so inaccessible via a language other than English. Why cannot language minority students begin to understand the socio-political expectations of U.S. culture through their own language? I do not speak Japanese but have learned something about Japanese society nonetheless. It is also unclear why biliteracy impedes universal literacy while monoliteracy promotes it. Indeed, if we continue to follow Hirsch's application of theory, we exacerbate the (il)literacy problem.

This is evident in what Hirsch calls Sticht's Law. As Hirsch summarizes it, Sticht's Law holds that "reading ability in nondeaf children cannot exceed their listening ability."²⁵ Questionable as it is, my purpose is not to question the law but Hirsch's application of it: If Hirsch's "first step" is for all children to become literate in English, will not all language minority children in his schools be immediately behind their monolingual English speaking peers in literacy? Furthermore, they will remain behind until they acquire the necessary English oral/aural skills for literacy. It is unclear how and when Hirsch expects they would catch up.

Now if literacy is important to Hirsch and if he desires to remain faithful to his own psychology, he must reapply Sticht's Law. He must admit that the first step should not be literacy in English but literacy, period. He must admit that Sticht's Law applies to non-English speaking children such that the 18,000 plus hours of pre-schooling experience in their first language matter, that these first language oral/aural skills are the foundation of literacy.

In sum, Hirsch's argument is that children must spend time on the task of literacy. This they cannot do without an oral/aural speech foundation. In his insistence on literacy in the "national language" as the first step, Hirsch unwittingly disallows language minority children to spend time on the task he finds so important.²⁶

Recall the point made earlier that language minority children can be taught to read if by reading we mean decoding and pronouncing words. But this is not literacy in any deep sense. Following the Aristotelian principle, in order for students to engage in reading further and to increase their capacity for it, it can not be so tedious and meaningless that the activity is "destroyed by its proper pains." Meaningful, autonomous reading requires at least a certain amount of comprehension.

DEFENDING BILINGUAL EDUCATION AS A SOURCE OF SELF-RESPECT

For language minority children, bilingual education provides the opportunity for them to engage in the self-respect-promoting activity of their language both as the *sine qua non* of other academic activities as well as an activity in and of itself. Their first language affords them access to the curriculum. This promotes self-respect by providing students' confidence in their ability to fulfill their academic intentions—a level of confidence that cannot be achieved through a language they do not understand. Use of the first language more readily promotes the realization of increasing academic capacities and subject matter understanding. This, in turn,

promotes self-respect through the realization of increasing capacities within the language itself in the ways described previously. Finally, bilingual education promotes self-respect since the use of the child's first language as a language of instruction is the ultimate confirmation of their sense of their own value, or at least that part of the "self" that is derived from sharing certain important characteristics (language) with their community and kin.

Given the discussion so far, opponents of bilingual education might raise the following argument: The language minority student's increasing capacity in English can be a source of self-respect. I would agree that there are myriad sources of self-respect and that English acquisition is one of them. This is precisely why I am defending bilingual education (in English and the student's first language) and not monolingual (first language) education.²⁷ But the argument here certainly does not address the academic issue of how students go about increasing in any deep way their capacities in content areas. In other words, no self-respecting student enjoys her school career simply because she increases her capacity in one area while her peers have access to a full array of content and choices.

This might bring about an addendum to opponents' critiques: English can reasonably replace the student's primary language as the *sine qua non* of other sources of self-respect. When this occurs, the array of content and choices available to English-speaking students will be available to the English language learner. "When" is the operative word here for it is empirically impossible to determine when an individual child will have reached a level of proficiency in a second language to compete effectively with native speakers of that language. On the one hand, Ron Unz, sponsor of initiatives to eliminate bilingual education, has told us that this can occur in about one hundred eighty days. As the results of his English immersion program in California indicate, this is absurdly unrealistic.²⁸ On the other hand, Christine Rossell, professor of political science at Boston College, has claimed that it could take students "ten, maybe even twenty" years to become fluent in a second language; and she adds, "some may never become fluent at all."²⁹ Unless we are dealing with a student who has some sort of language disability, who underwent some sort of trauma, or who suffers from some other pathology, Rossell's claim holds the same merit as Unz's.

Research indicates most language minority children will learn the target language well enough to compete academically in that language within four to seven years.³⁰ Even this, however, cannot be interpreted strictly. For language minority students come to school with a variety of experiences. Some come to school on grade level in their own language. Others do not. Some come to school having studied some English or another language. Others do not. Some come from upper-middle class families. Others do not. All of these factors and many others affect the rate of second language acquisition.

In the end, we must ask: What happens to children when the most important capacity they bring with them to school, their language, is ignored? Since second language acquisition is not a discrete learning event but takes several years for the vast majority of second language learners, we cannot allow ourselves to be lulled

into the intuitively appealing arguments of bilingual critics. Full participation in school with teachers, in class with other students, in content with one's language, and the self-respect that each of these helps to build should not be sacrificed, not even for one hundred eighty days. To answer the question, children whose language is ignored upon entering school fall behind academically and drop out at higher rates.³¹ This makes the dual contentions that English acquisition is a source of self-respect and can become the *sine qua non* for other sources anemic at best and perhaps even harmful.

Even if bilingual education were not more effective but only as effective as other instructional programs, there is no reason to deny children the particularly important source of self-respect of their first language. As the primary capacity brought to school, a child's language must certainly provide the sense of his own value integral to the construct of self-respect. Were there any evidence that the practice of helping students to maintain their primary languages in school denied them access to other important sources of self-respect, the conclusion might be different. But there is simply no evidence that properly designed bilingual programs do any such thing.

1. Merle Fulton-Scott and Allen Calvin, "Bilingual Multicultural Education vs. Integrated and Nonintegrated ESL Instruction," *NABE Journal* 7, no. 3 (1983): 1-12; Anne C. Willig, "A Meta-analysis of Selected Studies on the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education," *Review of Educational Research* 55, no. 3 (1985): 269-317; J. David Ramirez, Sandra Yuen, and Dena Ramey, *Final Report: Longitudinal Study of Structured English Immersion Strategy, Early-exit and Late-exit Programs for Language-minority Children*. (San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International, 1991); and Jay P. Greene, "A Meta-analysis of the Rossell and Baker Review of Bilingual Education Research," *Bilingual Research Journal* 21 (1997): 103-22.

2. I may only be able to defend the safer argument that the promotion of self-respect does not lead to decreased engagement. But, I believe even this safer argument is stronger than the case that can be made for English-only education.

3. This fair distribution would follow the "difference principle," according to which the primary goods must be distributed equally unless their unequal distribution is to the advantage of the least favored. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

4. Rawls introduces "overlapping consensus" and "reasonable pluralism," which follow from his original notion of a "social union of social unions," in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

5. See, respectively, James Beane and Richard Lipka, *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986) and Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

6. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 440.

7. *Ibid.*, 395.

8. *Ibid.*, 426.

9. Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. D. Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 186, 258.

10. Rawls' "deed" is synonymous, I believe, to Aristotle's "activity."

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 259.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Even when we have complete understanding of images before us, language provides a deeper connection (and increased pleasure) with what we are seeing. Take, for example, the failure of commentator-less football, rejected by even the most knowledgeable fans.

14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 256.
15. Diane Ravitch, "Diversity and Democracy: Multicultural Education in America," *American Educator* (Spring 1990): 16-20, 46-48.
16. Diane Ravitch, "Politicization and the Schools: The Case of Bilingual Education," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 129, no. 2 (1985): 121-28. This is not to say learning English is not important. Children in bilingual education learn English as quickly or more quickly than those in English only programs. The point is that Ravitch loses sight of the other responsibilities of schools: content area instruction and achievement.
17. Diane Ravitch, "Student Performance: The National Agenda in Education," *Brookings Review* 17, no. 1 (1999): 12-16.
18. Ravitch, "Politicization and the Schools," 125.
19. Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch, "No Trivial Pursuit," *Phi Delta Kappan* 69, no. 8 (1988): 561.
20. This is not to say children will not simultaneously "learn" Spanish in the sense of broadening their content-specific vocabulary.
21. Finn and Ravitch, "No Trivial Pursuit," 561.
22. E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Random House, 1988), 93.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. E.D. Hirsch Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 147.
26. Further to this argument is the research that demonstrates that there is a much stronger correlation between children's first language reading ability and second language reading ability than between second language oral skills and second language reading ability (cited in Jim Cummins, *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire* (Buffalo: Multilingual Matters, 2000)).
27. English immersion supporters often claim test scores soared in California's Oceanside School District upon abandoning bilingual education. Since then, the Assistant Superintendent there observed that the district never had a full bilingual program, but a program that looked much more like a Spanish-immersion program (Ken Noonan, "English-immersion programs helped Spanish-speaking California students achieve significant improvements in the classroom," *Mobile Register*, 17 September 2000, D1, D4.). It is not surprising that students scored poorly on standardized tests given in English!
28. Jim Crawford, "How Proposition 227 has Failed at Least 1,330,478 Children," Available at: <<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/castats.htm#RR>>.
29. Personal communication, November, 1999.
30. Kenji Hakuta, Yuko Goto Butler, and Daria Witt, "How Long Does it Take English Learners to Attain Proficiency?" University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute. Available at: <<http://www.stanford.edu/~hakuta/Docs/HowLong.pdf>>
31. Ramirez, *Longitudinal Study of Structured English Immersion*; Herman Curiel, James Rosenthal, and Herbert Richek, "Impacts of Bilingual Education on Secondary School Grades, Attendance, Retentions, and Drop-outs," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 8, no. 4 (1986): 357-67; and Patricia MacGregor Mendoza, *Spanish and Academic Achievement among Midwest Mexican Youth* (New York: Garland Publishing Company).