

When Is Self-Respect Not Enough?

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I want to thank John Petrovic for opening the topic of bilingual education at PES, and I hope that this can be an exchange that follows upon that opening in a fruitful way. I will, in my brief time and space, make an initial pass at explaining why I think Petrovic's argument, with its Rawlsian-Aristotelian roots, does not move us far enough in a public debate over bilingual education and why I believe that this mode of philosophical argumentation is insufficient as an instrument of progressive politics.

The success of the Unz-funded English-only campaigns in California (Proposition 227) and in Arizona (Proposition 203) was based, in part, on organizers' ability to use the language of reform and the ethical responsibility of schools effectively.¹ Generalized feelings of the ineffectiveness of public schools were also relied upon to justify this change, presented not as a *cutting off* of educational resources to immigrant and other populations, but as an opening of doors to increased opportunities. Let us take a look at the language of Proposition 227, the "English for the Children" initiative that passed in 1998:

(a) WHEREAS the English language is the national public language of the United States of America and of the state of California, is spoken by the vast majority of California residents, and is also the leading world language for science, technology, and business, thereby being the language of economic opportunity; and

(b) WHEREAS immigrant parents are eager to have their children acquire a good knowledge of English, thereby allowing them to fully participate in the American Dream of economic and social advancement; and

(c) WHEREAS the government and the public schools of California have a moral obligation and a constitutional duty to provide all of California's children, regardless of their ethnicity or national origins, with the skills necessary to become productive members of our society, and of these skills, literacy in the English language is among the most important; and

(d) WHEREAS the public schools of California currently do a poor job of educating immigrant children, wasting financial resources on costly experimental language programs failure over the past two decades is demonstrated by the current high drop-out and low English literacy levels of many immigrant children; and

(e) WHEREAS young immigrant children can easily acquire full fluency in a new language, such as English, if they are heavily exposed to that language in the classroom at an early age;

(f) THEREFORE it is resolved that: all children in California public schools shall be taught English as rapidly and effectively as possible.²

These "whereas" clauses are canny. As slickly and quickly as the message was sold, it was unclear to many voters exactly what a "yes" vote would mean—certainly not anything harmful to children. In fact, I would pause to suggest that the literacy problem that has fueled "prop fever" in the western United States in the past decade is largely one of *media* literacy. The campaign was very successful at conflating the pro and anti messages—in this case for any citizens who are not able to parse the factual claims through access to educational research.

The first three "whereas" clauses support Petrovic's contention that the opposition mobilized the language of equal opportunity. In its invocation of state and

national “majority” language and full participation *yearned* for by immigrant parents, Prop 227 suggests this measure is opening doors to full citizenship. As well the measure promises access to life as a productive worker. Petrovic is also right that almost no research supports the claims in clauses d-e, at least as far as high quality bilingual programs are concerned. Full immersion programs are not linked to school success insofar as students are left to “sink or swim” in the classroom. Transitional programs that adjust instructional language ratios over time accomplish both language acquisition and subject knowledge acquisition tasks simultaneously.

Unfortunately the concern expressed about the high dropout rates for Latino/a students continues to be necessary. However, only a small minority of Hispanic students receives bilingual education, so the linkage of the complex node of problems with student retention cannot be made so simply with the programs that do exist.³

Petrovic does not supply us with any particular idea of the modes of bilingual education he would approve, but not all bilingual education strategies would, I think, provide the kind of linguistic pleasure that he alludes to in his essay. The “high-end” goals of Aristotle’s notions of the Good Life map much more easily onto programs like dual language acquisition that put native English speakers into classes with speakers of a different language with the express goal that all children will be functionally bilingual in the classroom. Here it seems to me is the answer to the Rawlsian “veil of ignorance.” In successful programs of this sort, at the end of the day, we should not be able to distinguish the Chicano from the Irish-American by virtue of language proficiencies. These programs preserve and promote the *value* of both languages and view members of both linguistic communities as literate and communicatively competent from the start.

Another type of program that would seem to support Petrovic’s wish to ground approval of bilingual programs as primary goods would be heritage language preservation programs. These programs, which have been used to some good effect among Native American groups who have been losing (to old age and death) the last generations of originary language speakers, specifically reclaim cultural and community aurality. This becomes a political, relational, ethical, aesthetic, as well as educational repair of a historical injury. The success of this might mean a different strategy of bilinguality—in which children with English-only are given the pleasures of participation by recuperating languages to which neither they nor their parents have access. The task of preservation becomes a multigenerational responsibility—one that *creates* a cultural backdrop for the formation of a linguistic community.

Linking bilingual education to self-respect requires a thicker description of the aims of bilinguality and the goals and efficacy of the programs involved. When English language instruction is used simply as a tool to remediate a so-called deficiency in an individual child, it is difficult to conceptualize it as fulfilling Rawls’s notion of the “conception of his [*sic*] good, his [*sic*] plan of life” as well as developing the confidence to fulfill one’s intentions. Many bilingual programs are based on deficit models of student efficacy, and the instrumental nature of the goals

is precisely what enables Unz and others to appropriate the language of increased opportunity. The *goal*, to get students up to snuff in English and to leave behind that language that is “holding them back,” is then *precisely the same* for friends and foes of bilingual education programs. All that differs is the method of getting to the goal and the speed at which one expects to accomplish the goal.

Supporters of bilingual education could and should take from Petrovic a suggestion that goals beyond the instrumental could make clear that success in bilingual education is broader than individual achievement (although competency in English is a good and reasonable goal). Canada’s position, viewing rights of linguistic freedom as collective rights, may help in this direction.

Petrovic’s argument fails, however, to persuade me that the Rawlsian idea of self-respect can be fulfilled by any individual education program or that the idea should form the basis of public support for bilingual programs. Disrespect for the context and origins of language and language communities can and do have deleterious effects on individuals. If being a successful speaker of English also necessitates abjuring another language as inferior, defective, or an obstacle, then we can expect English-only programs to have deleterious effects on non-English speakers. This connects to the way that the false choice is posed to immigrant or other LEP parents: Do you want to hold your child back from all the public goods of American life or do you want him/her to speak English? The two are not mutually exclusive unless the non-English language is already suspect.

Instead, I want to suggest that self-respect would be one of the by-products of programs that are specifically focused on preserving and enhancing a variety of languages, cultures, and communities. These programs would open opportunities for individuals to situate themselves productively and dynamically among those who value both the specificity of, and connections to, those communities. While I think we need to go further than Petrovic suggests, I want to thank him for bringing these ideas to us to ponder.

1. Ron Unz is a Silicon Valley millionaire, who supplied the majority of the funding in Arizona and much of it in California to get Propositions on the ballot and to campaign for passage.

2. English for the Children, *English Language Education for Children in Public Schools* (California initiative statute, 1997). Certified as Proposition 227 for the June 2, 1998, primary election.

3. James Crawford, “Ten Common Fallacies about Bilingual Education,” in *ERIC Digest* (DC: ERIC, 1998) <<http://www.cal.org/ericcll/diget/crawford01.html>> (27 July 2001).