The Benefits of Bilingual Education
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Summary

This article explores the controversial issue of Bilingual Education disputing the notion that bilingual education has failed in California schools. Borrowing from personal experience as well as on a thorough review of the literature Mendoza Wagner concludes that Bilingual Education is means to provide immigrants with a gateway to becoming full participants in this society. Dismantling bilingual education will not only weaken the social fabric of the state, but could also have a negative impact on its economic future at a time when multiculturalism and diversity are of utmost importance in an increasingly global community.

The issue of bilingual education is controversial on many levels. In political terms it is called a “hot button issue”. Most often one finds that the controversies are fueled by misconceptions or inflammatory political rhetoric rather than on concrete evidence. This paper will explore current research that dispels the notion that bilingual education has failed in California schools, as well as argue that dismantling bilingual education will not only weaken the social fabric of the state, but could also have a negative impact on its economic future at a time when multiculturalism and diversity are of utmost importance in an increasingly global community.

Personal experience has afforded me the ability to examine the arguments placed in favor and against bilingual education from an insider’s perspective. As I review information that looks at the outcomes from bilingual education at a macro level, it has become apparent that my understanding of the issue has often been narrow in scope and biased, as it takes into account only personal experiences and anecdotal evidence, as I imagine is true for most people, and that a better understanding of the topic can only be achieved through unbiased research and thoughtful consideration of the cultural differences that may cause some people to feel threatened by bilingual education, which to many, is synonymous with illegal immigration.

As a layperson my opinion about immigration has been based on a belief that if there were no jobs available for immigrants, there would be no immigrant influx. In other words, the issue of immigration, both legal and illegal, revolves around a basic assumption of supply and demand. Now, I understand that in actuality there is nothing truly basic about immigration and the issues surrounding it. I merely feel that at its core, immigration happens because in the United States, and specifically in California, there is a need for the type of labor that
immigrants provide, thus there are immigrants here to provide it.

On the economic impact that immigrants have had to California’s economy, Peri (2007) offers an analysis based on government data collected from the last 44 years. This eye opening analysis dispels strong held beliefs that immigration has negatively impacted California’s economy. Peri’s (2007) study found that “there is no evidence that the inflow of immigrants over the period of 1960-2004 worsened the employment opportunities of natives with similar education and experience” (p. 1); the study also found that “immigration induced a 4 percent real wage increase for the average native worker” (p. 2); and lastly, the study found that “recent immigrants did lower the wages of previous immigrants” (p. 2). Peri’s findings suggest that immigrant laborers work to complement native workers, and that immigrants’ presence in the labor force present native workers with opportunities for higher paying, supervisory jobs. This study found that the only group, who was negatively impacted by the presence of immigrants, was immigrants of previous generations who experienced a decrease in wages due to an increase in availability of immigrant labor.

An insightful, ethnographic study conducted by Valdés (1996) serves as a window into the lives of ten Mexican origin families and their struggles as they arduously work to succeed in the United States, amid a milieu of unknowns, being strangers in a strange world, often facing bitter disapproval from natives who view them as a threat and a burden. Valdés (1996) presents the broader issue of immigration from the perspective of those who experience it as a way of life; here to willingly take on the lower paying jobs, while at the same time being rejected for the culture they cannot possibly leave behind, as it is part of who they are, and ultimately, the only thing they know for sure in a place that frequently feels unwelcoming.

Huntington (2004) asserts that “Americanization” should continue to be the goal for all newcomers to this country, because he argues that assimilation into the prevailing Anglo-protestant culture and political values has allowed previous generations of immigrants to achieve “wealth, power, and status in American society” (p. 2). Valdés’s study contests that this is in fact the goal for most immigrants; her research suggests that immigrants are looking primarily to make an honest living, and settle, as best they can, into a different culture. Huntington’s piece presents a view that is held by many United States citizens, which is that immigration without assimilation is ultimately a threat to the welfare of this country. One has to ponder whether this view truly captures all the possible options and outcomes, or whether it is narrow and does not take into account the current technological advances that fueled a global economy and that allow cultures to transcend geography. Callan (2005) states that “Cultural mixing has always been a powerful influence on human lives” (p. 471) in spite of a vision for cultural purity often guised as nationalism, which can no longer be sustained thanks to globalization. He further suggests that one may “even wonder whether the concept of assimilation has outlived its usefulness” (p. 471-472).

Having suggested that immigrants enter into the United States seeking better job opportunities, that these job opportunities are available to them without creating an undue burden to the native workers and that their participation in
California’s workforce have a positive impact in the state’s economy, one has to decide how to manage the various social issues that arise from housing a large immigrant minority; one such issue is how the children of immigrants will be educated in the public schools.

Although the United States has no official national language, there have been and continue to be movements to make English its official language (Lewelling, 1997). As early as the 18th century, the United States has had to accommodate languages other than English (Baron, 1991, p. 6), which oftentimes created controversy. Baron (1991) asserts, “the insistence on English has never been benign”, and he suggests that these movements “often mask racism and certainly fail to appreciate cultural difference” (p. 9). He goes on to suggest that bilingualism is often viewed more “as a liability than a refinement, a curse of ethnicity and a bar to advancements rather than an economic or educational advantage” (p. 10). It is no wonder then that the issue of bilingual education is frequently contested and debated. In California the latest confrontation took place in the form of Proposition 227.

In 1998 the State of California opted to terminate what it had historically been an ambivalent support of bilingual education. With the passing of Proposition 227 California residents were in essence accepting the argument set forth by conservative politicians, that bilingual education had been an absolute failure, blaming it for the high dropout rates seen in Latino minority students. However, no data was provided to adequately determine that bilingual education programs were in fact responsible for the dropout rates seen in the Latino population, and factors such as the political and economic climate of the time, which could have impacted those rates, were not addressed. Proponents of this law that sought to implement one-year English immersion programs provided little evidence that their alternative method of teaching English would present better results.

The highly debated proposition pitted a vastly divided group of politicians and educators on either side of the issue, who fiercely argued their position in favor or against the termination of bilingual education. Those in favor of the proposition varied in their reasons for their support of this law, raging from citizens merely seeking to instill a sense of civic responsibility in newly arrived citizens to those who blatantly took the opportunity to ensure their social superiority by jumping on the bandwagon. Politicians, one can argue took advantage of an opportunity to exploit negative sentiments against a particular group, and used it for their own political gains. Those who fiercely debated against this law, which eventually culminated in a blow to bilingual education, presented research data to show that bilingual education when imparted correctly, best served the needs of students working to become not only proficient in English, but also academically competent in all school subjects (Baron, 1991, p. 11).

Some of the research available suggests that learning in bilingual classrooms, does not hinder English competency; in fact, the majority of students who participate in immersion programs, four-year-exit bilingual programs and six-year-exit bilingual programs, are eventually reclassified as being fluent in English (Stewart, 1993). However, it has been found “that students in late-exit instructional programs do better than students in early-exit and structured English programs” (Gonzales & Maez,
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1995, p. 8). Gonzales and Maez (1995) reviewed research conducted on bilingual education and they found that “the more methodologically rigorous the study, the more positive the benefits of bilingualism on academic achievement” (p. 4) of LEP students. Similar findings are reported by Krashen and McField (1999) who suggest “when it comes to English acquisition, native-language instruction is part of the solution, not part of the problem” (p. 10).

Proposition 227 was quickly contested in the courts of California, as parents and educators continued to fight for what they felt was the right choice for the limited English proficiency (LEP) students of California’s schools. A quick implementation of this law could have permanently damaged the academic opportunities and future financial stability of thousands of students. This resolve to continue providing bilingual education could be attributed to the negative experiences encountered by educators and families, who witnessed the fallout that cruel immersion programs had on previous generations of Latino students in California, as well as the positive results that bilingual education can deliver when carried out with proper financial backing that allows for adequately trained staff, and well designed programs.

Not all arguments leveled against bilingual education should be dismissed, some warrant consideration, such as the requirement of bilingual programs in schools that house a relatively low number of LED students, and the financial burden this could pose on such schools at a time of financial insecurity for school districts that have seen a reduction in their annual budgets. Perhaps a solution would be to move away from a “one size fits all” idea and allow individual communities, and even individual schools to independently decide which bilingual program works best for their students, as well as how to implement it. Perhaps motivating educators to become involved, and giving them ownership of these programs would be another way to bring the focus back to where it needs to be, which is the students and the quality education they deserve.

The battle for bilingual education will probably continue with no clear resolution in sight. Even those who are in favor of bilingual education are divided as to what programs deliver the best results. As a society, the battle will persist because in reality what we are fighting goes beyond bilingual education into deep seeded cultural prejudices that are not likely to change in the near future. Because once we look at Peri’s analysis of the economic benefits that immigrant labor provides to California, what else is left to argue, except for the fear of different cultures that are often seen in terms of good or bad?

Huntington (2004) asserts that liberal elites are to blame for the current trend to embrace multiculturalism and diversity and that this trend has worked to weaken a national identity, and further suggests that a war has been waged to deconstruct American culture. I suggest that we ought not be fearful of other cultures, but rather embrace them and find ways to benefit from the cultural diversity found in the country. As was mentioned before, we are part of a global economy that is made up of a variety of cultures and languages; there is a need for a common language, but there is also a need for acceptance of diverse cultures because our world today requires it.

Bilingual education is a means to provide immigrants with a gateway to becoming full participants in this society.
This country’s relationship with immigrants has not always been reciprocal, and the resistance to provide immigrants with the basic tools necessary to succeed is a prime example of the disparity of the relationship. The need to learn English is evident, as it is the language this society has chosen; however, before deciding to dismantle programs that allow immigrant minorities to acquire the language fluency needed to succeed, one must carefully examine the reasons for doing so. It is ultimately in the best interest of the United States to educate its residents because the result will be a society of well-rounded individuals that contribute positively to the social, as well as the economic future of this nation.

References


