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Unlocking Linguistic Equality: Advocating for Bilingualism in Arizona

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Introduction / Background

Proposition 203 was approved by voters in November of 2000. It has since been in effect and has been challenged and criticized several times throughout the past two decades. It is important to reevaluate critical reviews of Proposition 203 and to begin to think of alternative solutions to improve English language learner proficiency. Proposition 203 is often referred to as Arizona's English-only law, as it promotes exclusive English language education for ELLs (English Language Learners). The initial intent of the law was to help English learners gain proper language proficiency while in the public school system. Proposition 203 initially intended for non-native English speakers to be fully immersed in English-only instruction for the entirety of their school day. Since its implementation in 2000, new laws have been created to challenge or modify the restrictions that were originally implemented. Of these are SB 1014, passed in 2019. The bill allowed schools four different Structured English Immersion (SEI) models in order to ensure student success: the pull-out model, the two-hour model, the newcomer model, and the 50-50 dual immersion model. (Mo 2019). The Arizona Department of Education has claimed that Proposition 203 is research-based, however many critics have challenged this claim. This paper will highlight critical reviews and research studies that have been conducted by those in opposition of Proposition 203. Authors of these reviews commonly conclude that bilingual education models have more favorable outcomes for students than English-only models. (Mahoney, Kate et.al 2022). It is important to note that California and Massachusetts implemented similar laws in previous years that favored English-only education, but they have since been repealed. Arizona remains as the only state, and the only area in the world, for that matter, to promote strict monolingual education. Arizona should arguably follow their lead and repeal Proposition 203 or modify its strong restrictions over bilingual education. Several studies

have proven to us that some dual-immersion language programs can be an effective balance between English-only and complete dual-language immersion. It is interesting to analyze critical reviews of Proposition 203 and to compare and contrast the few reviews that do exist in support of the law. This paper will delve into some of these reviews and argue the strong ethical concerns behind English-only education. Some of these concerns include: test scores being used as a measure of student success, the loss of an English learner's home language, cultural disconnect between students and families, lack of research backing structured English-immersion, and the discouragement of bilingualism in Arizona. The multiple benefits of bilingualism for young students will be highlighted. Some include increased cognitive abilities, stronger cultural/social connection, and increased job opportunities. (Kim 2019). To better illustrate some of the points argued in this paper, interviews were conducted with a variety of professionals, some having experience with dual-language immersion programs and some with the structured English immersion model. Personal anecdotes and opinions were gathered surrounding Proposition 203 and bilingual education. Conclusions made by speakers from each interview are summarized, reviewed, and analyzed to create a more powerful stance on Proposition 203. This paper also mentions current events regarding anti-bilingual education in Arizona. The analysis of two recent lawsuits carried out by Republican superintendent Tom Horne helps to visualize the detrimental effects Proposition 203 can have on dedicated teachers and administrators, who only care for the success of their students. Ultimately, this paper attempts to illustrate an argument using existing research, critical reviews, and personal interviews. Future research will be necessary to present a proposal for change to lawmakers and Arizona voters.

Ethical concerns

The initial intent behind the creation of Proposition 203 was to increase English learner levels of proficiency, as to be measured through the analysis of test scores. However, research has proven to us that a sole emphasis on standardized test scores is not an ethical and accurate measure of success for many students. Test scores might appear to be the only method to record student academic progress and achievement, but they are truly not the best reflection of a student's individual abilities or potential. Prioritizing test scores over the development of holistic academic progress neglects the diverse strengths and needs of English language learners. (Goldhaber & Ozek 2018). In addition to this ethical issue, critics have argued that Proposition 203 is not research backed. The law also strongly discourages bilingualism, which can lead to a detrimental loss of a student's home language, if this is not English. "An issue of major importance to heritage language communities is language loss. Language loss can occur on two levels. It may be on a personal or familial level." (Haynes 2010). Home and native languages should be preserved in order to avoid a cultural disconnect between students and their families. For example, a child from a Spanish-speaking home might be placed in a school with strict, structured English-immersion at a very young age. This child could likely grow up and lose several Spanish proficiency skills and not be able to communicate as well with their family members, especially if most of them hypothetically do not speak English. Furthermore, teachers and administrators could be wrongfully punished for the use of languages other than English, when they are simply concerned for the needs of their students. Proposition 203 essentially decreases rates of bilingualism and bilingual proficiency in Arizona. With the strong

discouragement of bilingualism, students are being deprived of the powerful opportunity to gain proficiency in more than just one language.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism should be arguably embraced, not prohibited. Proposition 203 deprives Arizona public school students of the multiple benefits and opportunities created by being bilingual or multilingual. Benefits present themselves in the form of increased cognitive abilities. This can increase overall executive brain function, as well as improve memory, heighten attention levels and reduce risk of dementia later in life. Improved problem solving and multitasking are among other cognitive benefits. (Marian & Shook 2012). Bilingualism also enhances stronger cultural and social connections. Current society is becoming increasingly multilingual. Being proficient in at least one other language is extremely beneficial to foster growth and value of connections. Bilinguals also generally have increased job opportunities and higher salaries due to their dual or multi-language skills. In fact, those who speak more than one language earn on average 5 - 20% more than monolinguals. ("Career Benefits" 2023). Language acquisition research also proves that learning a second language at a young age is far less difficult and more impactful than trying to learn as an adult. The critical period for second language acquisition occurs between the years of 2 and 14, which is the entirety of elementary and middle school for Arizona students. (Vanhove 2013). Anti-bilingual education law Proposition 203 essentially deprives these students of their greatest opportunity to enrich their linguistic repertoire during this critical time. Countries such as Canada and Switzerland are the perfect example of using multilingualism to students' advantage to foster academic and socio-cultural success. (Barrera

2016). Arizona should adopt similar ideals and repeal their outdated perspectives on bilingual education.

Critical review: Arizona's English language learners after proposition 203

The overall goal of this review was to evaluate the progress of English Language Learners since the establishment of Arizona's English Only law, or Proposition 203. The article mentions the establishment of the SEI (structured English Immersion) model in the classroom shortly after the passing of Proposition 203. Something important to note is the establishment of the Flores Consent Order just 5 months before the passing of the English-only law. This order required proper funding guidelines for bilingual education and ESL instruction. It also established a requirement that English language learners receive proficiency assessments and 2 years of monitoring for the students that exit language programs. (Mahoney, Kate et.al 2022) Proposition 203 was established as the Arizona Revised Statutes and it required that English learners should receive instruction that is mostly in English, which is more commonly referred to as "sheltered English immersion". The authors of this paper reviewed 16 different previous studies of bilingual education effectiveness in the U.S. Results concluded that most studies had more favorable results for bilingual education programs rather than English-only ones. It was also found that the most successful programs were those that taught reading in the home language and English simultaneously. There are numerous other narrative reviews that support bilingual education over English-only, but authors argue the existence of only 2 reviews in favor of English-only. However, the conclusions of these reviews actually state that the best approach would be neither entirely bilingual nor English education, but instead a structured immersion model. So, there really aren't that many sources out there truly favoring English-only. Other meta-analyses of EL

program effectiveness were also evaluated by Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass. It was found that long-term bilingual programs had significantly better outcomes than transitional programs. The paper emphasized the implementation of the SEI model (also known as the four-hour block) in 2008. This model consists of 4 specific hours of English language development. The goal of this model is for students to achieve proficiency within one year. Despite the model being claimed to be research-based by the Arizona Department of Education, this has been challenged by several critics. Other data analyzed in this specific study conducted by the authors was student AIMS scores. The goal was to measure the effectiveness of Proposition 203 and SEI on student proficiency. Results showed no student progress under Proposition 203. In fact, there was a slight decrease in student academic proficiency. The authors agree that the law should be repealed and replaced with more flexible language immersion options. (Mahoney, Kate et.al 2022) One effective model mentioned, and arguably the best model for English language learners, is the two-way immersion model. An example of an effective way to implement two-way immersion is with the 90-10, 50-50 concept. In this model, ELLs begin their academic career with their first two primary years of education being taught 90% in their home language, and 10% in English. In the consecutive years of primary education, instruction transitions from a 90-10 ratio to a balanced 50-50 ratio. The end goal of this model is for students to achieve equal, high proficiency in both languages.

Interviews

Background

Interviews can be a powerful research tool in strengthening an argument. Interviews provide qualitative data and can serve as a way to better illustrate a main point. When interviewing participants directly, researchers are able to gather in depth, rich data. Participants are also given the opportunity to go into detail on their thoughts, personal experiences, and perspectives of more complex topics. To get the most benefit out of these interviews, researchers will attempt to be relatable and develop a mutual trust with the interviewee. This will in turn create a comfortable environment valuing honest communication. Participants will be more likely to share more personal anecdotes and emotions that will help emphasize the topic of research. The gathering of this information can provide valuable insights to further support an already existing argument. Although the process seems fairly simple, there are a few things to keep in mind when interviewing participants, regardless of how familiar the researcher and the interviewee are: It is important to always maintain a professional appearance and use professional language. Moreover, maintaining an unbiased stance on the topic will diminish any skewed responses and data. Lastly, interview questions should be created to be flexible and adaptable to maintain a more realistic, and “flowing” form of conversation.

Methods

For the purposes of this paper, interviewees were recruited from a variety of different professions. Sample size was 4 participants. Participants were previously known contacts. The first was an Arizona parent, selected based on their experience with children in Arizona’s public education system and the strict English-only model. This parent was selected based on their

previous experience and knowledge of the topic, as well as their past experience being an educator in a variety of schools around Arizona. The second participant recruited was a teacher of a class for international students studying in Seville, Spain called “Teaching Methodology and Practice: Teaching English as a Second Language”. This teacher contained valuable perspectives regarding the best practices for teaching English as a second language to young students having a completely different native language. The third participant was a co-teacher of this same class taught in Seville, Spain, the only difference being their close partnership with a Spanish primary school following a strong dual-language immersion model. It was determined that this participant could provide valuable responses based on their first-hand experience seeing the effect on students in dual-language programs. The fourth interviewee recruited was a director of an Arizona charter school following another bilingual education model. Specific participants were selected based on their diverse backgrounds and professions, as well as the accessibility and ease of contact. All participants were contacted through email and were informed that their full names or place of work would not be revealed in the case that privacy concerns would arise. The initial emails included a formal request for an informative interview regarding the topic, bilingual education and Proposition 203 in Arizona. Participants were informed that interviews would take place over zoom and that general information from their responses would be recorded. All participants responded to the initial email within 1-3 days and indicated that they would be eager to provide information regarding the topic of the paper. Participation was voluntary and no monetary compensation was provided. Participants were provided with a zoom link 1 day prior to the scheduled meeting time. It is important to note some of the unique challenges and characteristics for each of these interviews: For participants two and three, a time difference of 9 hours between Arizona and Spain had to be accounted for when scheduling these interviews.

Conflicting schedules for all participants were also a factor. For each participant, it took anywhere from a few days to two weeks to become available for an interview on short notice. Lastly, slight language barriers were present. The two teachers in Spain and the Arizona parent are native speakers of Spanish. English levels are proficient but some expressions and other social-context cannot be directly translated or perfectly understood by a non-native speaker of Spanish. Spanish was spoken around 10% of the time in these interviews, mostly to create a comfortable environment for the interviewees and to converse in more casual manners. The interviews were not conducted entirely in Spanish for uniformity purposes of all four interviews. Before all scheduled interviews, six base questions were created, with the expectation that the verbiage and delivery of each question could change to adapt to the flow of each interview. These questions were as followed:

1. What are your personal experiences regarding bilingual education?
2. In your experience, what effects have you observed on students in dual-language / structured English-immersion classrooms?
3. What is your knowledge regarding Arizona's English-only law, Proposition 203?
4. What is your stance on the continuation of use of strict, structured English immersion models for Arizona schools?
5. How do language education laws affect your position as a teacher / administrator / parent?
6. What benefits or detrimental effects do bilingualism and multilingualism place on young students in public schools?

It was hypothesized that all participants would have negative perspectives regarding Proposition 203 and positive opinions surrounding bilingual education. Also, participants would have variable, unique responses due to their diverse backgrounds.

Results

Responses revealed generally diverse perspectives. The overall consensus was negative emotions regarding Proposition 203, but mixed perspectives surrounding complete dual-language education. Summaries of the responses of each participant are as follows:

Participant 1: Arizona parent

The first participant shared their background as a parent of two native English speaking children. The participant is a native speaker of Spanish, and immigrated from Colombia to the United States in the year 2000. They first share their personal experiences learning English as a second language. The participant stated that they understand the need for superintendents to want to raise test scores for English learners to help them achieve proficiency, but that home languages should still be maintained as proficient as possible. “It was very hard for me to learn English, being an adult and brand new to this country. I would have appreciated some support in Spanish also when learning English as a second language. Now, I sometimes forget words I don’t use often that are in Spanish because everything around me is in English”. In regards to Proposition 203, participant 1 reflects on her children’s experiences in English-only classrooms throughout their academics: “I was happy to see my daughters begin taking Spanish classes in middle school and high school. My daughters are bilingual. Looking back, it would have been amazing to have my daughters grow up being taught in Spanish and English at the same time”.

The second participant is a teacher for an ESL methods class in Spain. They share their background in education and the European Cambridge-English test standards. Students in their ESL methods classes are taught to create instruction material that is appropriate for certain levels of English learners in Spain. The participant states their stance on bilingual education: “Teaching a second language can be a challenge. Learning a second language can be even more

challenging. This would not be possible without proper language testing. It is necessary to have well-trained teachers and guidelines for each level of instruction. Bilingualism is powerful, but it is a hard process.” When given some information about Arizona’s unique position in English-only education, the participant expressed: “I thought most people wanted to learn Spanish. I would never limit students and tell them to only speak Spanish”.

Participant 3 is a co-teacher for the ESL methods class in Spain. They oversee the education of primary school students learning English. These students receive an ample amount of class time dedicated to English instruction. The participant shared some observed strengths and difficulties of the young children at the school: “It really depends on if the child comes in knowing a little or a lot of English. We have one child who is fluent in English, but almost never speaks in Spanish. We are trying to get her to speak more Spanish. Hopefully she eventually reaches equal proficiency in each language. Some children struggle in English and we have English teachers who come in and do pull-out lessons during recreational class time.” As far as perspectives regarding Arizona and Proposition 203, the participant shares: “I think that is something that could work. It would help students stay on track”.

Participant 4 is the director of a successful charter school in Arizona. The school uses a dual-language immersion program. Instruction is mainly in English, with parts of the school day learning Spanish or Mandarin. The participant reflects on bilingual and multilingual education: “I wish my own kids had this opportunity. I do enjoy seeing the happiness it brings other parents seeing their kids become proficient in home languages and other languages. I am grateful for the chance to watch these kids grow and reach their full potential with multiple language abilities. This is the best age to start”. This participants' responses differed in the sense that they were mostly all positive regarding bilingual education. To conclude the interview, they shared that they

believe Proposition 203 doesn't make sense and that it should allow all public school students the opportunity to learn in other languages.

Ultimately, 3 out of the 4 participants had opposing perspectives towards Proposition 203. All participants shared valuable experiences that speak to the nature of the topic. All four participants argued that bilingualism has more benefits than detrimental effects for students. Unique challenges were presented and a common conclusion was that bilingual education and instruction can be very difficult, but rewarding. This qualitative data helps to emphasize the overarching argument of the paper but to also bring light to new points and counterarguments.

Future directions

In the future, more participants could be gathered to generate a larger sample size. Responses could be collected using more questions and an online survey format in addition to personal zoom interviews. More parents, teachers, and administrators could be evaluated in Arizona and in other states in the U.S.. It could be impactful to recruit participants from leading multilingual education countries such as Canada or Switzerland. Students could also be recruited as participants to diversify the sample. Additionally, data could be gathered from participants that are more likely to be in support of Proposition 203, such as Republican voters or lawmakers. Qualitative data could also be better analyzed using coding or an already existing data analysis software. This in-depth, qualitative analysis would have been conducted if a larger sample size were collected initially and if the timeline of the project was not limited to one semester. These are all important considerations for future extensions and studies of this topic.

Counterargument

Proponents of Proposition 203 argue that the law will help English language learners gain high-levels of proficiency by reducing instruction to strictly be in English. They argue that ELL graduation rates are nearly 20% below the national average. In reality, there has been no evidence to prove that the implementation of Proposition 203 has increased graduation rates or proficiency levels of ELLs. ELLs continue to suffer in what is essentially a “terrifying and alienating” school environment created by policies that historically come from a place of true xenophobia. (Wexler 2023). States such as California and Massachusetts have since overturned their strict English-only laws, on the sole basis of significant research and evidence showing zero success under these policies. So, what’s stopping Arizona from following in their footsteps?

Current Events

It is important to review a few current events regarding the debate of anti-bilingual education in Arizona. Recently, Republican state superintendent Tom Horne filed a lawsuit against governor Katie Hobbs, Attorney General Kris Mayes and 10 different school districts in Arizona. Horne claimed that these districts were in violation of Proposition 203. He argued that these district’s use of dual-language programs and the “50-50 model” was illegal. Ultimately, the lawsuit was dismissed by an Arizona judge, stating that these districts had previous approval from the Arizona state board of education for their specific dual language models. (KJZZ 2024). After this had failed, Horne essentially recruited a Scottsdale parent to file another similar lawsuit on his behalf. Patricia Pellett, a mother of a Scottsdale high school student, has a strong stance on English-only education. Her lawsuit is carried out by Carmen Chenal Horne, wife of state superintendent Tom Horne. Creighton Elementary School district is being sued for their

violation of Proposition 203 and their use of dual-language immersion. Administrators and teachers in support of the teaching of these models will be found personally liable. Pellett's strong opinions are based on her husband's personal experience, immigrating from China at a young age and being forced to learn English in an English-only classroom. She shares that her husband would not be as proficient in English if the language environment and dynamic was anything different. (Riley 2024). It will be interesting to hear of the outcome of this lawsuit. It seems wrong that teachers and administrators who care immensely for the success of their students can be punished for something like this. Hopefully soon we will see current events about the progression of bilingual education and change to proposition 203 will be made.

Conclusion

What Proposition 203 essentially creates is large linguistic inequalities within the public education system of Arizona. The law prohibits bilingualism as well as linguistic diversity and also some students' potential academic growth. Instead, lawmakers and voters should be more focused on the true success of students in Arizona. Critical reviews and informative interviews are able to highlight some of the ethical concerns and issues behind Proposition 203. Language loss, cultural disconnect, and decreasing rates of bilingualism are some of the many issues that Proposition 203 helps to create or to worsen. It is important to highlight the multiple benefits of bilingual education in the social, academic, and cognitive realms. This is all part of a decades-long debate in which news and conflict has arised. Critical reviews, research studies, and even lawsuits have persisted due to the consequences of Proposition 203. Hopefully, change will occur soon and the Arizona law will either be repealed or modified to allow for more effective and evidence-based dual language models. In doing this, Arizona will be able to successfully

unlock linguistic equality and give students the tools they need to succeed in a growing, multilingual society.

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