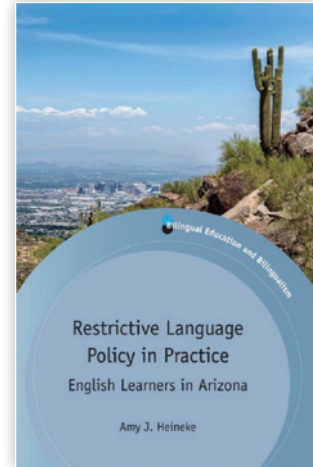


Arizona Fails English Language Learners

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Amy J. Heineke in her 2017 study *Restrictive Language Policy in Practice: English Learners in Arizona* documents how Arizona's efforts to teach English to immigrant students are failing. Arizona voters passed in 2000 the anti-bilingual education Proposition 203 that optimistically predicted that non-English speaking students could learn enough English in one year to be successfully mainstreamed into regular classrooms. Arizona first tried teaching English Language Learners (ELLs) through structured English immersion (SEI) that included teaching content subjects like math along with English but with poor results. In the face of the lack of success with SEI in 2006 Arizona legislators passed House Bill 2064 that shifted to teaching English in a four-hour immersion block every day in which teachers were to only provide skill-based language instruction. This is still the approach in 2018 despite the fact that

“[d]ata demonstrated that students test out of the EL [English Learner] label in an average of four years in the ELD model, slightly longer than the time frame in the previous SEI model” (Heineke, 2017, 159).

Through classroom observations and interviews with teachers, school administrators, university faculty, legislators, and others Heineke documents the failure of Arizona's efforts to improve the education of English language learners. She describes how “[f]ear dominated the school environment” when she was an ESL teacher in Arizona after the passage of Proposition 203 because of “harsh punitive actions for any educator engaged in bilingual practice” under Arizona Department of Education policies (pp. 11 & 169). While actual Arizona laws did not prohibit students using their Native language, at the school level English

language “coaches” can tell teachers to punish children for using their Native language (p. 170). In addition, the English language development (ELD) classes segregated ELLs from English proficient schoolmates who could help them learn English and were too often stigmatized as the “stupid class” (2017, p. 11).

Heineke describes Arizona ELD classes as focusing on time-on-task with rigid time allotments, that had no research backing, for teaching reading, grammar, writing, vocabulary and conversation separately with little or no teaching of mathematics, science, and other important school subjects. She found that ELD teachers were not well prepared, which aggravated a high turnover rate, and were isolated in their schools from the regular classroom teachers. Teaching is a low paid “semi-profession”, especially in Arizona, with reductions being made in the

amount of preparation required for teachers. Heineke concludes that “[d]isregarding both scholarly research and practical experience, policymakers have treated teaching like factory work, seeking to provide order in the system with prescriptions and procedures rather than professional knowledge, skills and discretion” (Heineke, 2017, p. 176). This approach devalues teachers’ ability to adjust teaching material and methods to meet the needs of the very diverse students they deal with in their classrooms every day. Heineke quotes Jal Mehta from his book *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*:

The people we draw into teaching are less than our most talented; we give them short or nonexistent training and equip them with little relevant knowledge; we send many of them to schools afflicted by high levels of poverty and segregation and when they don't deliver the results we seek, we increase external pressure and accountability, hoping that we can do on the back end what we failed to create on the front end. (Mehta, 2013, p. 7)

Arizona has been lowering requirements for Arizona teachers who were once required to get Masters Degrees and have 60 hours of preparation in SEI. This lowering of requirements includes a reduction in amount of preparation in knowledge of second language acquisition theories and English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teaching methodologies, making Arizona “highly qualified” label given to ELD teachers who meet state requirements a joke.

Sadly, all this is not new. As in many states, Arizona’s English only legislation goes back a century, being passed first in 1919. Learning English and leaving behind immigrants’ home language and culture was and is part of “Americanization” with the goal of culturally assimilating immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere into American society. However racist notions of genetic inferiority of people of color limited the expectations of the legislators in regard to the success of those efforts. Carlos Kevin Blanton (2004) in his book *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981* documents

how Texas policy makers held views similar to Arizona legislators, and similar books could be written about California and other states. It’s obvious in today’s political climate that we are again experiencing a heightened fear of immigrants with Hispanic and other ancestry, and that fear is increased because in Arizona today Hispanic students outnumbering non-Hispanic “white” students.

After an advertising campaign bankrolled by California computer millionaire Ron Unz, Arizona voters passed the anti-bilingual education Proposition 203 in 2000 similar to the one passed in California in 1998. These initiatives were sold to voters as providing “English for the children” and promoted the idea, one lacking research backing, that with one year of intensive English instruction would prepare most non-English speaking children enough so they could be mainstreamed into regular classrooms and be successful. Interestingly, one of the criticisms of bilingual education used to sway voters in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts was that it segregated the immigrant students into bilingual classrooms where they were not in contact with students who were fluent in English. However, Arizona’s four-hour English Language Development [ELD] block repeats that segregation, and its focus on only language development contrasts with California and Massachusetts that also focus on teaching content.

Arizona’s emphasis on English proficiency alone devalues students’ identities. University of Toronto professor Jim Cummins (Cummins, et al., 2005) and others have documented the importance of affirming students’ identity in the classroom. As the Indian educator Dhir Jhingran (2009, p. 263) writes,

Language is not merely a means of communication. Language, thinking and learning are inextricably linked. When children are forced to study though a language they cannot fully understand in the early primary grades, they face a serious learning disadvantage that can stunt their cognitive development and adversely affect their self-esteem and self-confidence for life. This is especially

severe in deprived socioeconomic situations where there is little exposure to the school language outside of school. This is further exacerbated when the children’s culture, along with their language, is completely excluded from the classroom.

One can get depressed with the ethnocentric, anti-immigrant mentality that is hurting English language learners today in Arizona and elsewhere, however, there is hope as seen in when California voters in 2016 passed Proposition 58 that essentially repealed California’s anti-bilingual 1998 proposition. One can only hope for similar actions elsewhere, including in Arizona.

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