

Claire Darmstadter

Hi, everybody. I'm joined today by Dr. Emily Zoeller, Assistant Professor and Coordinator of ESL, Bilingual, and Reading Education at Edgewood College. Thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to talk to me.

Emily Zoeller

You're welcome. Thank you for having me!

Claire Darmstadter

So before we dive into your current work, could you just walk us through your linguistic and educational background and how you got into your position here at Edgewood?

Emily Zoeller

Sure, I got into education through an alternative path. I actually was a business major at Notre Dame. And then I joined an AmeriCorps volunteer program in San Diego for a couple years intending to change the world. And maybe I changed the world. But more importantly, I changed career paths and just realized that probably helping students, not just any students, but the bilingual community, was probably the best use of my talents that could be, so I switched gears and pursued education. And after some time abroad, came back stateside, found myself in Madison teaching in a bilingual classroom. And so my background is as a bilingual teacher, as a classroom teacher. I've done work at central office in a leadership role, and also as a reading specialist. And then most recently, as an instructional coach for a number of years. I've been in a number of schools and bilingual programs, probably most of my time has been at a school called Nuestro Mundo Community School, which is a bilingual school here in the Madison area. So I've enjoyed being in the trenches and working alongside kids and teachers for a very long time. And it wasn't until this opportunity came up that I made the leap or made the decision to leave that to support in teacher preparation and bilingual teacher preparation is probably my, well, I guess I'm interested in all and all are important, but that's probably my passion. And so I applied for this position, and I've been here about a year and a half.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, well, I'm just so blown away by all the programming and courses and degree opportunities that Edgewood has. So could you just kind of explain perhaps why there is such this emphasis and focus on bilingual education at Edgewood, and what are some of these programs and opportunities that you have for potential students?

Emily Zoeller

Why the focus, the focus is for a few reasons. For one, it's really the need in our community and beyond our community, but specifically in the area, we have a growing number of multilingual learners and multilingual learners are showing up in our classrooms, and they need teachers who are all prepared to give them access to learning. Why at Edgewood? Because Edgewood's values center around compassion, truth, justice partnership, it's almost as if, like, the needs of the area, and the values of Edgewood College are just, it's a very natural fit.

I'll show you, if you can read this. But basically, okay. This is what our program seeks to, or I was, I would say, this is our vision statement. And this was created through a number of listening sessions that I held among instructors in our program, and kind of when I asked them, what brings you to Edgewood or what makes you, you know, choose to teach with Edgewood among everything else that you're you are doing in your in your other roles, etc. And I kind of pulled together their ideas and put it into a vision statement. And that actually, that needs refinement, but it kind of gets at again, what I spoke to earlier, we need teachers who are well-prepared. And, yeah. Yeah, learners deserve a good teacher, they deserve really, really good teachers so that they can have access. And that access then gives them a chance to communicate and show all that they know and then have opportunity.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And we know bilingual education comes in many forms. And one of the more popular or trendy ones, as of recent is two way or dual language immersion. And we know it's especially becoming more popular among financial advantage monolingual families. So assuming positive intent, and that everybody comes into this with the idea that we're going to have this awesome opportunity for kids to learn additional languages and get to know other cultures and other individuals and other ways of life, how do we still make sure that we are supporting the students who the programs were originally created for, those students who might come from a background that speaks a language other than English or comes from a bilingual household? How do we support them while still welcoming, embracing this increase in popularity among a more general population that might not have known about these programming opportunities in the past?

Emily Zoeller

I'm so happy that you're including this question in your study. That question has to be front and center for all of us that are in the field of dual language. And you know on paper, and in theory, dual language will if you look back at how bilingual education began, rooted in the Civil Rights movement, as you mentioned, it is for the population of learners who speak another language in the home and deserve access. Dual language is an opportunity for that population. And the equity ideals of dual language say that and the program has, I mean, if you look at the research in terms of outcomes and probability of those outcomes, there's not much dispute in terms of which bilingual programming has the potential to set up language learners, so called language learners, for success. However, in practice, implementation has been found to depend largely on I'm sorry, those equity outcomes depend largely largely on the implementation. I've been fortunate to kind of watch the evolution of dual language in Madison. I came here in 2004, the time that I came, I was one of maybe seven bilingual teachers in the district. Our programming then was developmental bilingual. And there was one grade at one school that was dual language. And then as you know, that has just expanded exponentially. And so it should be a positive thing, the expansion, because we're giving access to the programming to that many more students. And the inclusion of a population that speaks mostly English in the home can help propel equity initiatives because of the attention and the voice and the resources that then go along with a population that has cultural capital. But the equity issues are real, and what we need to do more of is own those equity issues, and then make those constantly the center of our

conversation so that we're engaging in what's called critical consciousness so that teachers, leaders, students and families are pointing out, yeah but, yeah but, yeah but, we're reflecting on why that is. And then we're engaging in action to overcome it. I actually wrote my dissertation on teacher leadership in dual language, and presented in May. And what I found was that teachers, bilingual teachers, and in dual language, can and do play an active role in that sort of critical consciousness. In other words, noticing when there's an equity issue that unintentionally affects our language minority students and doing something about it. So I feel really lucky to be to -- have had experiences and settings and alongside teachers that have engaged in that kind of advocacy work, and equity work. And I'm in agreement that that needs more attention, and it continues, it needs to be front and center and all that we do.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And what I really enjoy about your background is that you have so many different views that you've had of this type of education. So you had the administrative roles and the professor roles, and being in the classroom as a teacher. And if I understand correctly, you've also been a parent of children who have been raised bilingual. And I guess, could you just kind of talk about how, I don't know some challenges that people might not realize about raising bilingual children? And then for those parents who have children in these programs, who might not speak both languages, how can they support their students best if they're not able to necessarily read the directions or know all the content that the students are learning in school?

Emily Zoeller

Yeah, the parent perspective is an important one and these are my kids and I've got them next to this other flip chart. Of all my old students that I have, not all of them, but many of them that just had some impact on me and my views and I always go back to them... anyway. So here's my spiel about parenting as a dual language — parenting multilingual students, or kids. I think for me what I've been able to kind of watch firsthand is the experience that my own kids are having in comparison with the experience of their classmates. And if I didn't have the parent lens that I wouldn't understand quite as clearly what goes on after the hours of school and how that plays out. I'll give two examples. So a simple one is with language. My kids attend school, a dual language school, elementary, all day and have rich exposure to the Spanish language for the vast majority of their day. And then it changes to more and more English, but they have rich linguistic models, they're engaging in texts, they have a whole lot of access to Spanish language. They leave school and they come home, and what do they get? Rich access to English language, like from a literate family who's engaging them in conversation and a lot of academic language and English. What happens to their classmates? I'm thinking of the Denises and the Dianas and the Margóts. They attend in Spanish alongside my kids in the classroom, they go home. And these are students who speak mostly Spanish at home. So they'll continue to have access to language and that language for the most part is Spanish. So where does the access to English come in, if you actually look at their whole day, my kids are in a 50/50. And they're in like a 95/5. I'm saying this because it gets at the need for like, really, really careful, deliberate planning in terms of what we will afford our kids. The other example I'll give is, in a way, getting to know students on a personal level through friendships ensures you do whatever possible to ensure equity and ensure what we're pulling off for, for their classmates. So you

know, one of the trainings that I attended once on leadership, talks about having tough equity conversations with teachers and with colleagues. And it was a phenomenal experience. It was like a workshop to engage in, you know, what does that process entail? And you had to choose a topic that was important to you, a hard conversation you wanted to have. And you had to begin with thinking about? Like, how are you going to derive courage? Or why does this matter to you and really reflect on it, and what I thought of that, when that happened to be the time it was a year and a half ago, I think, when our community was being visited by ICE agents, and there were raids going on to the immigrant community. And it had a serious, serious impact on our students and families and their social-emotional well being. And I recall, one Friday afternoon, we were in a meeting at school. I was alongside the school psychologist, social worker, principal, and another teacher. And we learned that unfortunately, students at a school on the other side of town were being stopped at the bus and being asked to show their documentation or their papers. And so we ended the meeting. And we decided what we needed to do was just divide up and go and each follow a school bus and in our own car, with the school bus and just provide information to families, so they knew their rights in the case that this would happen. And so we did that, and there was driving there, this is — I'm watching the bus and I'm watching the students get off the bus and watching their parents meet. And I think it's just it still gives me goosebumps, because I really can't possibly understand what that must be like, but I can fathom because I'm also a parent. And then I'm watching the parents who I'm acquaintances with, because our kids are friends. Anyway, I have that memory here. And I see those same students in the class a week later. And I noticed these particular students in the back of the room eating chips instead of engaging in the math lesson. So that was my equity issue. Right. And what I do is I think, if I were Diana's or Margaret's mom, you know, what would I say to this, I would not accept that, I would want more for them, I would insist that they participate, that they step up, that the teacher hold expectations that there be accountability. So I was able to engage in that conversation and I honestly think if it weren't for that reflection or if it weren't for really going there and allowing us to see students as people and families as individuals that we could relate with, I don't know if I would have the courage that I do in terms of stepping up and engaging with other colleagues in matters of equity.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And I think that humanizing point is really important, because I think often when we're looking at bilingual, dual immersion programs, it gets boiled down to these test scores. And at first, a lot of times, what happens is that test scores aren't necessarily as high as peers who are in just English monolingual classrooms. And we know there is like, you know, over time, there's generally a trend up. But there's so much of a focus sometimes on these numerical values and quantifications of students' abilities of who they are. And that is very problematic, obviously. But also, with all this data and all these, like studies that people put out, there's a lot of myths and misconceptions that form around dual language, bilingual education. So either in your research, or just in general, your observations through the years, are there any, like common myths that you can dispel or just kind of talk us through and say, yeah, people might think this, but this isn't really true.

Emily Zoeller

Testing. You know, data is a good thing, data, we, we should make friends with data, because I even talked to one educator who said that they, you know, don't want the most for our students. So they don't want to set them up for, you know, proficiency or to be a competent reader or speaker or writer communicator. We should befriend data, and we should befriend high expectations, we have a lot of options in terms of how we go about that. And in the pursuit of adequate equity, and setting students up with high expectations, it's very easy for people to become numbers-oriented and goal-oriented, and it comes from a good place. However, what's probably necessary is to match the fields of like premises of bilingual education and premises of teaching language learners with how we go about assessing. So off the top of my head, I would bring it back to just like, three hallmark premises. And I would say, number one, students' oral language matters. So whatever it is, we're assessing, whether it's a content area or literacy, we have got to look at oral language alongside assessment. There are certain assessments that lend themselves more to that than others. Formative assessments can do that, because they honor all that the child might know, as opposed to setting them up only to show their deficits. So I'd say number one, oral language. Number two context, things need to make sense. They need comprehensible input. And so whenever we're doing a test, in isolation, or without meaning, it's not setting up the student for what, again, what they're capable of. It cuts slices off their ability to make sense of things. And then number three, I would just go back to the home language as a resource and a source of support, not a hindrance. So to whatever extent we can assess in both languages and look side by side, or honor that a student might know things and some one language and some of the other more more likely to get the data that can actually give us the information that we're looking for in terms of how do we teach, but then also, is the child on track or where we want the child to be or what could we do differently?

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, and to close us out, in celebration of multilingualism, we always tell kids that being multilingual is a superpower. So can you tell us why you believe that is true? And if you want to say it in Spanish or in English, whatever language you can best, express yourself — anything's great.

Emily Zoeller

Cuando trabaja en Nuestro Mundo, llevamos camisetas que decían "Ser bilingüe es mi superpoder, cuál es el tuyo?" [*When I worked at Nuestro Mundo, we wore shirts that said "Being bilingual is my superpower, what's yours?"*] Yeah, I love the superpower metaphor. And I think wearing those t-shirts with the students and then wearing them to our district wide meetings was really powerful because oftentimes, we don't use the term like monolingual. It's like how many languages do you speak? It's like we use the term English language learner or you know, we used to use limited English proficiency and bilingualism is a strength and is an asset if we let it be. But I will say I am working closely with an instructor. One of the things structures in our program is First Nations Ojibwe from the Lac Courte Oreilles sect of, of the Ojibwe tribe. And she teaches remotely. She's phenomenal. We've done a lot of work together. She works at the language immersion school Waadookodaading in Hayward, where they are also in a bilingual setting and they are teaching their students to be bilingual Ojibwe/English. Anyway, when this topic came up in a recent conversation, she said, we tell students that English is your weapon is

your -- how did she say it? She said you put it in your knapsack and you take it out and you use it whatever you need it. So she's flipped it. She's talking about this as learning English, but I just thought that was like profound, I thought it was a really powerful way of articulating, like how language is can be used as a tool to advocate and to get what you want to communicate and to express yourself and to serve, you know, whatever purpose you're trying to serve. So anyway, that story is with me. But yes, bilingualism is a superpower. And we knew we need to do what we can to set it up to be that superpower.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. Well, thank you so much. So well said I really appreciate all your perspectives. I know everybody else will as well. So thank you so much and have a great day.