

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm joined today by Kari Johnson Fort Atkinson ESL teacher and president of Wisconsin TESOL. Thanks so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Kari Johnson

Thank you, I am super excited to share more about what I know with teaching English learners as well as our organization.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, me as well. So before we dive into your current work, could you just give us a brief overview of your background when it comes to language, teaching, and how you got into your current position at Fort?

Kari Johnson

Yes, so I have been teaching for 15 years, all 15 years has been as an English learner teacher. I went to UW-Whitewater for four years for my undergrad. And my major was elementary, middle education, first through eighth grade. And my minor was English as a Second Language. And so I'm certified to teach anything first grade through eighth grade, but English learners were really my passion. And I saw that Fort Atkinson had an opening. And I applied, and I got that job. And I've been here ever since at the elementary level. And then as soon as I started teaching in 2006, I went back to UW-Whitewater for my master's, just to continue learning more about English learners as well as literacy development.

Claire Darmstadter

And so when you're working with these students, I would assume you don't speak the languages of all the students that you work with. So especially with students at first, where they don't really have much of an English proficiency, how do you work and support them when you don't have that common denominator language?

Kari Johnson

Yes, so I do speak Spanish. So that does help for the students who have Spanish as their native language. But as you said, a lot of times, there are students who don't always know or, excuse me, I should say, I don't always know their native language. For example, I have a student from Thailand, I do not know any Thai. So when she came, it's really relying a lot on gestures, pictures, other physical movements, and verbal cues. And it's amazing how just using gestures and body language and images have helped students and staff make those connections.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, and Fort Atkinson is a relatively small town compared to other places in Wisconsin and many residents might not be used to as much linguistic diversity, even though it is growing, it's not as common or something that they have interaction with growing up for a lot of them. So how do you celebrate multilingualism and remind students and families that their language abilities are a superpower, they're a good thing, rather than something that needs to be stripped or replaced by English?

Kari Johnson

Yes, so I'm really lucky at my elementary school. 25% of our population is actually made up of multilingual learners. And when I tell people I'm from Fort Atkinson, they're really surprised. So in Fort Atkinson, I'm very lucky as our school actually has a 25% population of multilingual learners. And so our school does a really good job of having everything in Spanish and English, just to show families that their native language is valuable. And we want them to feel connected to the school. I would say about 98% of our population who are multilingual learners speak Spanish, as well as English. So that's why right now, we're just focusing on having Spanish promoted. But every time I have parents come in, we do different celebrations, where we're reading books about students from other countries, who are from other cultures, we have a special food event night where families bring a special cultural dish that is a tradition for them. With COVID, We haven't been able to do anything like that this year. But we really just emphasize getting our multilingual families together, so that we provide them extra educational opportunities and outreach for them.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, so you work in that school community, but you also have a pretty big oversight role with Wisconsin TESOL, so can you talk just a little bit with the work you do there and then how other teachers can be involved with the organization?

Kari Johnson

Yes, so Wisconsin TESOL stands for Wisconsin Teachers of English to speakers of other languages. And this is an affiliate of a nationwide and actually an international wide organization for teachers of multilingual learners. And what's really powerful about this organization is we have pre-service teachers who are college students as members. We have elementary teachers, we have secondary teachers. We have college professors. And we also have adult educators who might work in a literacy council type program. And what we do is mainly support all of these educators by sharing the latest information about multilingual learners, how to advocate for multilingual learners, the latest legal rights and changes, as well as just offering fun opportunities to get students of our members involved. So right now, we are doing a writing and art contest for all of our multilingual students in Wisconsin. And so this is another way we try to celebrate their ability to communicate in more than one language. And they write and they do artwork, and they have a chance to win a prize. And it's amazing how the students feel so empowered by winning something through this contest. So many of our multilingual students may feel like they're not as good as their peers, because they're taking longer to learn English. But then knowing that their piece of writing or artwork was chosen, it lets them know they have a voice. And they can communicate their message just like everyone else. And so we also try to provide lots of professional development for our members. And just keep everyone connected. Because the world of English learners can feel very isolating, especially if you're the only teacher in your district, or in your school, or in your city. It's really important to have those connections.

Claire Darmstadter

And like you talked about, there are some times people don't really know what the career is about. They're not sure all the different ways that you can be involved with multilingual learners. So are there any like myths, you could dispel our misconceptions that people have of English language education that you could kind of just like walk us through?

Kari Johnson

I think the biggest myth I always hear is people say, Oh, well, I don't know Spanish, or I don't know the language that the students speak. And when I went to UW-Whitewater, there was like a small requirement of having to take a couple classes of any other language. This was back between 2002 and 2006. So perhaps this requirement has changed. But they did not expect me to be proficient in any language. They just wanted me to have the experience of what it was like learning another language, so that we could see what it might be like for a multilingual learner. But definitely to get a job, you do not need to know Spanish, you do not need to be proficient in Thai, I have Albanian speakers. It's definitely not a requirement. A lot of times school districts will post that it's preferred or desired. But it definitely does not stop someone from being able to help multilingual learners because it's really about making connections with kids. Knowing the content and knowing how to teach English.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, that is so important. Even for people that do have some multilingual abilities. You don't have to be perfect, right? If you grew up and your family was speaking the language, but you don't know perfect literacy, that's okay. Because you still have that basis. And so it doesn't need to be the absolute like multilingual bilingual proficiency where you can work with these students. So I really enjoy what you've said, and sharing those perspectives. I think it'll help a lot of people maybe interested in the field get involved in Wisconsin TESOL. So I know things are super busy with COVID, and I just really appreciate you giving me a couple of minutes today.

Kari Johnson

Thank you so much. I appreciate all the work you're doing with this project. And I just think working with multilingual learners, it's the best group of students to work with, because they just want to learn and they're so eager to learn. So thank you for bringing this into the forefront and trying to dispel some myths and provide education to others.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, thank you!