

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I'm joined today by Marcy Olson, Assessment Content Specialist at WIDA. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Marcy Olson

Happy to do so.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So first, it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you ended up at WIDA.

Marcy Olson

Yeah, of course. So my educational background is, I had a couple of really inspirational Spanish teachers when I was in middle school and in high school, and I decided to pursue Spanish. So I majored in both Spanish and at the time, it was called Hispanic studies, at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and then spent a semester overseas in Spain, as well, working on language skills. And then I pursued my master's degree at the College of St. Scholastica. So it's a Master of Ed in Curriculum and Instruction. And that was a really interesting program, because at the time, there were not very many distance learning programs. And so the cohort was part distance learning and part not. So that was kind of a good experience of what was to come in our world. And I really enjoyed that, because I got to do some action research. And at the time, I was teaching in a small rural district in Wisconsin, with a migrant population that had primarily settled out. So that allowed me to apply my research right to the experience that I had in the school setting there. And I taught for 22 years in that school district. So first, Pre-K through 12th grade, and as the population grew with predominantly Spanish speakers, but also adding in a handful of other languages, I then spent probably 14 or 15 years just at the 4k through second grade level, where I just absolutely loved the combination of early learners and beginning language and literacy development. And then being located right in Dane County, by UW Madison WIDA was, you know, a place that I look to all the time, always pulling resources to share with content teachers. And so it seemed like a natural fit to head to WIDA, and what I really love about WIDA is there's the combination of research and all sorts of, you know, precious professional learning. And I really have an opportunity to get to hear from some of the people doing some of the leading work in the field. So I've been working with the assessment team at WIDA, for a little over four years.

Claire Darmstadter

And so you talked a little bit about how much you loved working with the kids. So when you're in a classroom or school on a daily basis, you get to see the smiling faces and interact and chat with the kids. But was it hard to make that transition out of the classroom to be more in a position where it's harder to see the direct impact of your work?

Marcy Olson

Definitely. It's something you know, that I still miss. And, you know, I have a lot of teacher friends that I'm very close to and family members. And it definitely was a big transition. And I

think in some ways, it's a transition I'll always be making. In a pre-pandemic world, I did some volunteering with Gigi's Playhouse that serves people with Down Syndrome. So I'm sure as I have opportunities to do so I'll look for ways to continue to work with kids in particular. But yeah, it's definitely something that I miss. And yet some of my favorite times are when I get to work directly with teachers. And it's really exciting to hear from people across the consortium of, you know, 41 members or so close to 40 states. So that's, that's been a really fun part of working at WIDA as well.

Claire Darmstadter

Can you talk a little bit about some major initiatives or specific projects that you worked on are currently involved with at WIDA?

Marcy Olson

Absolutely. Because one of the biggest projects that I've been involved with is actually going to launch two weeks from today. So that project is WIDA Screener for Kindergarten. So it's an assessment that is screening incoming kindergarteners. It's been a really fun — project doesn't seem to grasp what it really is. I'll use the word project, but it's also really meaningful one that when you think of incoming kindergarteners, that's an opportunity to really kind of set the stage for stakeholders, I guess I'll use that word, by families, parents, pulls, you know, everyone coming together to look at, through a home language survey and a screener and other information, you know, is this a student who we are going to identify as an English learner, I mean, that has really big implications for the support and services and programming they get. So that one has felt really, this project has felt really purposeful and meaningful. And I was able to, you know, start from the very beginning of having, you know, days and retreat set aside to really focus on, you know, here's what we know, that are kind of non negotiables are as we start creating this assessment, and, you know, drafting content, working with the Center for Applied Linguistics, as well as other WIDA staff. So the project has been three years in the making, I, you know, have never seen a project through in terms of like, creating an assessment and working with pilot testing, and field testing and cog. labs and all that goes into creating a screener that will be used with, you know, a great number of students and making a really important decision. So that has been one that I've really enjoyed working with. I also am working with ALTELLA project and that project is looking at identifying. Well, that just identified, we're working on both a screener and an annual assessment for English learners with significant cognitive disabilities. So, you know, I enjoy the other work I do on early content for ACCESS. But I've also had the opportunity to do some projects that are really interesting and meaningful to me.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and I think people often don't realize how much work goes into these and making sure that they are covering all your bases, and you're doing everything possible to mitigate perhaps some of the risks or the bias that are built into them. I think I and many others are kind of skeptical sometimes when they hear a testing agency or something like that, it has kind of a negative connotation. So can you talk a little bit about what WIDA does specifically to try to

counteract some of this bias or any other issues that may come up with tests sometimes? And what kind of the philosophy or guiding principles at WIDA are?

Marcy Olson

Yeah, absolutely. And I would just say, you know, as a, as a teacher for over 20 years, you know, I shared those concerns about assessments, but also about, you know, the balance of the amount of assessment that happens for students. So it has been, you know, an incredibly interesting and good learning curve for me to learn that all that goes into assessment. So there's just so many pieces along the way, where WIDA and the Center for Applied Linguistics are working with educators and students. We are in the process of, you know, from the very beginning, where, you know, we just call it theme generation. So that part is done with teachers. And we're now building an accessibility review into the very beginning piece of theme generation. So, of course, there's the obvious parts, when you think of accessibility and bias and sensitivity, or you're looking at the graphics, you're thinking about students with low vision, or color blindness. But then there's, of course, you know, the actual content and themes around bias and sensitivity there. So, from the very beginning of theme generation, there's teachers working in that part, there are standards experts who are teachers that are coming in and doing reviews early on in the process of writing the test content, there's bias and sensitivity reviews, and content reviews once the content is a little more refined. So I mean, I've just been incredibly impressed with all that's built in to the entire process to look for sensitive topics, bias, and then bias like through, you know, what are the graphics we're presenting, what is the content we're presenting? How are we presenting that information? When we're looking at technology, what are the pieces there as we're considering, you know, especially speaking, you know, a lot goes into the thought around recording versus, you know, I work a lot with kindergarten, so that's individually administered, but I really couldn't say enough about the process that has been created and continued to be refined to look at bias. And one of the other pieces that I didn't mention yet is when teachers are part of that we're looking at course for representation in many ways, so representation across the consortium looking at the different regions of WIDA, we're looking for, you know, linguistically, culturally racially diverse. So I mean, I feel like we bring together a group of people that have different perspectives. And we're also looking at suburban, urban, you know, rural, and the conversations that happen are just really rich conversations.

Claire Darmstadter

It all sounds so intentional. And I think obviously, the size of the consortium says something that there are a lot of states and a lot of territories that buy into this work, and they really recognize what you're doing. You also are a mother. So can you share a little bit about your experience raising your children as relates to language, I understand that neither of them aren't necessarily super proficient in an additional language. And I think a lot of people go through the struggle of trying to raise kids speaking in another or a non English language in a very English dominated society. So was it potentially a factor that you ever felt less confident in your Spanish because you're not a native speaker, and you didn't want to kind of deprive your kids of that really close connection because you couldn't necessarily 100% of the time always accurately express yourself? Or what was kind of the process there?

Marcy Olson

Yeah, definitely, I would say, you know, from the get go, I really wanted them to be exposed to a language other than English. So particularly with our older son, you know, I was very intentional about that. And when our second son was born, I think just, you know, the amount of busy-ness that occurs with chasing around a toddler and a baby. You know, I think I, without realizing it kind of pulled back a little bit in terms of the amount of Spanish I was speaking to both of them. But certainly like their early language, my older son did actually, you know, respond in Spanish, it wasn't just receptively that he, I should say, responded orally, so it wasn't just receptively. So that part was a whole lot of fun. And I continued to do it to some extent, although replies are often in English. But yeah, that definitely was very important. And you know, I'm really looking forward for both of my children to have more opportunities post pandemic to pursue, you know, experiences that will allow them to develop language in other than English. So, you know, whether that's a study abroad or what that may be, I'm looking forward to that for them.

Claire Darmstadter

And so we tell little kids all the time, sometimes older ones that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason, if you can boil it down to one, you can answer in English, you can answer in Spanish, a mix of two, whatever you want, why is it a superpower to speak more than one language?

Marcy Olson

I just think it opens the world. I mean, it's just sort of magical, you know, to hear children in particular, just switch from one language to another. And I know this isn't one word, but I guess if I had to pick one word is its beauty. I mean, it's just a beautiful thing to have your world open.

Claire Darmstadter

I appreciate all you had to share with us. I'm so excited for your project with WIDA to be wrapping up and by the time this is published, it will be available so everybody can go check it out. And I'll leave a link to that below in the transcript. But thank you so much and have a great day!

Marcy Olson

And thank you! Have a wonderful day.