

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am so incredibly honored to be joined today by Mariana Castro. And I don't think she needs much of an introduction, but for those who are not familiar with her work, she is the WCER Deputy Director, as well as a wearer of many different hats. So thank you so much for chatting with me today.

Mariana Castro

Oh, yeah.

Claire Darmstadter

So there is so much we can cover. But can you just give me a really brief overview of your educational background, linguistic background and how you kind of ended up in your current position?

Mariana Castro

Yes. So I've been in education for over 30 years. I actually was an immigrant to Madison. I came from Mexico, back in early, early 90s around June 1990. I spent I think about 15 years in the school district and I used to — I wore every hat possible. I worked with students with disabilities for about four years, specifically with students with autism. I also worked for about six years as a paraprofessional, as a Bilingual Resource Specialist within the ESL Department of Madison. I also taught chemistry, bilingual courses in biology and in Latin American literature. And after that, I found an opportunity to work at WIDA, which is an organization that advances both policy and practice around English learners. And they did that for the last 14 years. And during all that time, I got a master's at UW-Whitewater and then for the last, and then my PhD, I got it from UW Madison, and I've been really interested in issues around language use and language practices of multilingual learners.

Claire Darmstadter

So let's first start with way back in the early years in your teaching, in Madison, multilingual bilingual programs were kind of in their beginning stages back then. So what was that like kind of being a part of the beginning of that movement when people might not see it as credible or there might be questions or concerns? How did you guys kind of sell the program as a great thing? It is, despite all the questions and everything that was involved with that?

Mariana Castro

Yeah, I think a lot of it was grassroots movements. It was working with families. Because I was the bilingual resource specialist, a lot of what I did is I had direct contact with families. And we talked about, you know, what the research said. There has been years and years of research on bilingualism and bilingual education. Many times when I talked to families, it was all about what they really wanted their children to be able to do. And it was to continue to advance, you know, as professionals, but he was also to keep that connection to their families. Many of them at that time they had transnational families, so part of their family was in other countries, so being bilingual provided them with that connection. It also was very much tied to their identity and what they could do for their families, including translating. So the purpose for bilingual education

was a little different when we were talking to families for whom Spanish was one of the languages and I say one of the languages because for many of these families that were truly bilingual, they were being raised in an environment in Wisconsin, where a lot of the language was English, was the dominant language. In the school district, there was a growing sense of social justice and what we should be doing for students. So we started with, with providing paraprofessionals, and then we realized that that was not enough. So the bilingual education program really took off while I was still in the district, and it was very exciting. Teachers were big, big advocates for it and I mentioned families. And then, you know, Nuestro Mundo was coming on board, and I was very lucky to meet a lot of the founders and participate in a lot of the meetings and visit the schools. It was over one or two years of research and really finding different approaches, different models and implementation of what that looked like. In Chicago, in Milwaukee, it was really exciting times because people were doing it for the right reasons, right. They were trying to help multilingual learners be successful and both in their community and in school.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. So when we're looking at bilingual Ed and specifically dual language programs, there is a great opportunity to advance equity but also the opposite, especially as these programs have become more popular among monolingual, financially advantaged families. So how do we kind of celebrate this growing popularity of these programs, while at the same time making sure we are meeting the needs of all learners and keeping all parties involved in the decision making process?

Mariana Castro

Yeah, I think it's like having social justice. Every time you make a decision, every time you make a decision about curriculum, every time you make a decision about what language you're going to use during parent teacher conferences, who's going to be translating for whom? Parent teacher groups like PPOs, when they come together, what language are you going to use? Do you always use the same language? Who has to wear the funky earphones and who gets translated to who has to wait to get the message? So making sure that all those decisions are made with social justice at the core, actually changes the dynamics and challenges the decisions that you make? So they are the everyday little decisions and then there are the big decisions, when you have to decide I thought, you know, as a full district, what model are we going to take? And having the courage to talk to families, explain what you know, how do you use resources, like the University of Wisconsin or other universities, bring in experts to talk about these things, it's so easy. I shouldn't say it's so easy, people really think about this. And sometimes, you know, if you have limited knowledge, you might look at an awesome program in English and say, hey, let's use this program, and it has a component in Spanish, but your review of the Spanish component waits until after it's been adopted. So it's the decision about who will come to the table to make decisions on those and to try different things and to review different things and to give their feedback. Collaborating and bringing other peoples' voices often causes dissonance because people have just different priorities. And sometimes, if I'm working with people who all look like me, a lot of our decisions are going to be similar. So bringing other voices, you know, kind of upsets the harmony. But I think the work that we do with multilingual

learners doesn't need and should not be harmonious. Because if we just continue to do what we've always done, and we don't disrupt the practices we have, then we're going to end up in the same place that we have. There's a district that a couple of years ago, I visited in the area. And that was just just so exciting, and you walk into the building, you know, all the signs in both English and Spanish as you walk into the office. The greetings are both in English and Spanish, as you walk through the hallways, you see the work of students, and it's both English and Spanish. And then you go into the library. And by the way, that's always my kind of my gauge, how I gauge when I go into a new building, is you look into the library, you see what's offered, to what students in what languages do you have equitable, you know, types of resources. And I'm not just talking picture books, but books around science, books around math, books in multiple different languages, also that reflect the cultures, the life, the communities of the students who are part of that school. So I just always remember visiting that school and walking through the hallways and looking into the classrooms, because it was like, you could feel it. So I think when we think about how we make changes you have to also feel it, you have to be thinking about all the stakeholders, you can only do as much as your own experience. Experience allows you. So that's why the way you make changes is by bringing other voices because then you also get other experiences.

Claire Darmstadter

So you also work a little bit outside of the classroom with WCER, but there's WCER and then there's WIDA. So can you talk a little bit about how these two programs relate to one another? And what opportunities may exist for multilingual individuals who want to be involved in education, but not necessarily in the front of the class leading a group of first graders.

Mariana Castro

Yes. So I've been just very, very lucky and blessed with them with the work that I do. After work in the school district. I came to work at the university. So within the university you can think about one of the schools is the School of Education. It's a little bit of a special place because it has all these departments, but it also has an affiliation with a center. There's a center that is part of the School of Education. It is the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. And this is a place where faculty and staff come in, and the community comes just to the research. So I think I think about it as a center for intellectual sharing for intellectual and not just sharing, but also translation of theory to practice. So one of the projects within the center is WIDA, so WIDA is part of the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research, they have a very close connection. But when you look at the center there, you know, hundreds of different types of research projects. And there are other projects that are also working around multilingualism, or a teacher training, social justice. So what you get is a space where different people who are working on different things, or sometimes related things can come and share ideas. So I just feel very excited, because I've been able to do both. Also having the different projects, for example, WIDA, it's more about taking research and applying it, you know, that translation and really sharing it with the people who are in schools who are in the case of WIDA, nationally and internationally. With WCER, it does more of the research, you know, and the evaluation. So there's a much more varied type of functions that they have, which is great, because then as WIDA, as they're trying to do this translation, they have different ways, different sources to pull for research. So the

work is related, but it's also different. WIDA has a consortium of states, so they provide supports to that consortium of states, it also has had an international consortium, it works with early years. So I've been able to stay grounded into what's happening at policy level and at practice level. In the WCER, I've also been able to engage in research and learn from what other people are doing. But to me, they're very connected, it's much easier for me to think about how they relate than how they're different. because ideally, we want everybody who's coming into to really learn from each other, working at a university, that's your role, right? It's continuous learning is continuing excellence around that. But if we just are assuming that we're the ones providing the knowledge to others and we forget that we are ourselves learning, then they think we don't do as good of a job, even sharing the knowledge that we have.

Claire Darmstadter

And so about once a week, I open my inbox, and I have an email, and there's a picture of your face. And it's from Dual Language Schools. And there might be an article you penned or some upcoming webinar you're doing. And so can you talk a little bit about what your partnership is with this group, and how you work to advance dual language education on both a state and a national level?

Mariana Castro

Yes. Again, I think that, because I've been involved with all these people who are doing amazing research, you start connecting on a national and international level. And many times, you go in and work with just people in different groups. And so there's an organization called National Dual Language Forum. And this particular organization has attempted to bring together all these different places. It's more of a consortium of organizations who work with multilingual learners. So there's, for example, NABE, which is the National Association of Bilingual Educators, there's a Bueno Center, which is in Colorado, has done a lot of work around, again, research to practice in that area. There's dual language education in Mexico. So as you get older, and work with more people, you just get to know more people. And this is a particular organization, dual language education, that really shows up at every conference that I've been to. And I've been doing a lot of work with them in thinking about what does equity look like in dual language programs. A colleague of mine, Sylvia Romero-Johnson, was part of Madison Metropolitan School District, and now she's in Boston. And Sylvia and I would get together, our kids where we're friends. So we get together for coffee on Saturday mornings. And one of the things that we were realizing was this issue that you were talking about. We are bringing in dual language programs to communities that one of the communities has been part of the struggle to have an identity to negotiate language to negotiate and occasion and then you have another community who has never had to think about those particular issues. So it's like rather than pitting communities against each other, thinking about how can we use these two communities and bring them together so that they can work together and so that they can be each other's social capital. So, we decided to write a book and the book was around, how do you embed equity in dual language programs. And it was specifically for leaders. So we go around issues around operational issues in dual language programs, we also talk about teaching and learning about professional development for educators. And it was like a fun, extracurricular activity for me. But

I love to do those types of projects where I get to talk to teachers, and I get to roll up my sleeves and talk about the real issues that are happening in schools.

Claire Darmstadter

So one issue or I guess, challenge that we're dealing with currently is it's really hard to find bilingual educators to work in these programs. So how do we kind of increase the amount of teachers going into language education and lower barriers to entry, but at the same time, still make sure that we're having a really high quality teaching force?

Mariana Castro

Yes, I think this is super important. And many times we put the big issues on the shoulders of schools, we say, schools, please solve this. I really, truly believe that this one is where collaboration will prevail. We need to bring together districts, universities, and other community members who can work together. As an example, Milwaukee has an education pathway. We have in Madison pathways about health and around the issue of technology, and communication. What would it look like if we had a pathway for education, and what they mean by pathway is really students who are interested in that area pick courses together in a smaller cohort. And they take particular electives that help them understand more what that particular area involves and what opportunities they have. We need people in education across the board, actually bilingual education, right. So we need social workers, we need school psychologists, we need principals, we need a lot of leaders, we need educators. So there might be kids who don't even know that what they love to do exists. So sometimes by starting early, providing those experiences to students earlier, you can actually get more, but it has to be a lot of people say like oh it takes a lot of time, we've had this issue for, you know, a long time, I've been teaching for 30 years, and we've had this issue for 30 years. So if we start now, we won't be having the same conversations 30 years from now, the opposite is true. If we don't start now, we will have those discussions. So that's number one. The other piece is that a lot of our programs for certification, you have to pretty much put your life on the side like a loss in order to go to school, and then you need to find the money. So you're losing money, you're spending money, and not making money. And for many students who come from minoritized backgrounds, sometimes they are at the intersection that they also have economic issues. So if you're going to tell me, I need to put my life in hold so that I can go to school, it's just a tough path for them. So how can we identify resources to help these types of students? And I'm not saying we have to always bring all this money and you know, fundraise. But there might be opportunities where we can while they're going to school, they can still have a job, and they can maybe have a job in those school districts where they need those, those certifications. So to me, that would be flexible thinking. And if you have that flexible thinking, it has to come both from the schools who are going to say yes, we will hire these teachers who will be supported, and from the universities that will say yes, maybe we'll receive payments through you know, different sources. So start early, have flexible programming for them that meets not just their time, either their scheduling needs, but also their their, their financial needs.

Claire Darmstadter

So well said. So finally, we tell little kids and older kids all the time that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give me one reason if you can boil it down to one in English, in Spanish, in both whatever you feel most comfortable in, why it's a superpower.

Mariana Castro

Es un gran superpoder. I could talk about this for hours. We just talked about - typically people say that a bilingual person vale por dos, and I would say bilingual people vale por tres, there's a lot of what you can do. There's a lot of like I think about your brain being super flexible in being able to share who you are in multiple different languages. And I think that as we look at the world, a lot of our issues are about being inflexible. I think that people who are multilingual are used to crossing borders, are used to making those borders kind of disappear. And that would be a superpower if we could make borders disappear, and be able to have these people who can continuously cross borders that are linguistic, that are cultural, because your language is typically connected to your culture, and can really look at things from the other side. So I think that the superpower really is about being able to change the world, through language, through differing experiences, but the moment that we start realizing that the bilingualism is more of the norm, rather than the odd, I think we'll be in a different place because that will have implications. We're used to seeing language from a monolingual lens. We used to think like the normal is one language, and then you have to always change it for everybody. But we have communities like African American children, Asian American children, Latinx, who are whose language is always developing in multilingual lenses. So when in the world it's dos multilingual lenses, so changing the power dynamics around that I really truly think that we're going to change the world. I always like to remind people education is a socio-political act. We cannot sit on the sides and just either cheer or point fingers. We need to get into the race. We need to work along children, because their experiences are what's going to be the future of our country and of the world. So yeah, our superpower is about transforming the world and transforming their reality.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you so much for chatting with me. I so appreciated everything you had to share. I think there's about 100 resources and websites and everything you mentioned, but I'll include all of them in the transcript. So thank you so much, and have a great rest of your day.

Mariana Castro

Thank you, Claire.