

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I am joined today by Maryellen Merck, bilingual reading specialist in Green Bay Area Public Schools. Thanks so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Maryellen Merck**

You're very welcome.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So first it would be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position.

**Maryellen Merck**

Actually a very complex story, which I assume many people in the bilingual field have. It all began many, many moons ago when I was in high school. And there was a foreign exchange student who visited our high school from what actually one of our professors, one of our teachers asked if any of us were interested in hosting a foreign exchange student, and I went home and said, hey, I'm interested in that. And she said, okay, so we had somebody come and live with us, who was from Viña Del Mar in Chile. And she lived with us for a couple months. And I said, Oh, that's kind of interesting. I'd kind of like to do that. So in high school, very long, long, long time ago, many more years that I want to admit. Actually, in 1983, I spent a summer in Santiago, Chile, as an exchange student under the Pinochet government. So I was there under a dictatorship, lived through all of that and came back to the states and said, Hmm, international relations sounds interesting to me. So I went to American University in DC, got a bachelor's degree in International Relations and Cross Cultural Communication, and then did another semester abroad in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, and learned all about the Dirty War. I lived with a military guy, which I did not realize as he was retired at the time, who did part of the Dirty War, learned all about the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, was there for a concert with Sting, who played the song Cueca Sola, which is all about the mothers, and learned a lot about the politics and all of that of Argentina and Chile. Came back to the states and said I'd like to go into foreign service, but couldn't get a job. I ended up in New York City working for the student exchange organization that I had gone on in high school and said they're looking for bilingual teachers. So I went back to school and ended up getting a master's in elementary education with a bilingual extension; that's what it's called in New York City. And I completed that in 1992, somewhere around there, but in the meantime, had moved to Pittsburgh, and was living in Pittsburgh with my husband, which had no programs and so I was in school at Pittsburg actually linguistics program, transferring my credits back to complete my master's. Completed my master's, my husband ended up losing his job in Pittsburgh. And he's like, I dragged you to Pittsburgh, from New York City, because I was living in New York City at the time. And we had married and all of that. And then this was 1994. 1997 I completed everything. And so then we said, okay, well, he said, you can drag me anywhere. So I looked around the country. And there was a job for a bilingual teacher in Green Bay, Wisconsin. And so I told my mom I'm moving to Green Bay, and she's like, they have how many bilingual people? So my husband's from New York City. I'm from Boston. And so we ended up by a long way around in Green Bay, Wisconsin. So my, my Spanish, I learned in Chile and Argentina. And so I speak with a Chilean and an

Argentine accent. And so when families meet me, and I start talking, they're like, where did you learn your Spanish. So it's kind of odd. So when I first arrived, what was interesting to me is I didn't understand the students as easily as I thought I would, because they were Mexican descent. And I wasn't used to the Mexican accent. I was more used to the Chilean and Argentine accent. So at first I thought I had got rusty in my Spanish, but then started to watch an Argentine Telenovela. And when No, I'm not rusty. It's just I'm not used to that accent yet. So it's taken me a while and I've finally learned to kind of — we've been here 20 years now. So 20 plus years. So, but that's how we ended up here. And actually, my job started on April 1st. So my husband was convinced it was an April Fool's joke. We were going to arrive and have to go all the way back. A long, long drawn out process, but that's how I ended up here. So I actually, once I got here, I arrived with a master's which very few people had in a public school. So I arrived with a master's in bilingual education from outside of the area, which is not very usual. And then once I was bilingual, within two years realized the bulk of what we do is literacy. So I went back and I didn't get a second Master's but pretty much ended up getting 316-317. I did that about 20 years ago now. And I worked in New York City, I subbed in New York City public schools for two years while I was working on my degree. But I did not teach in the bilingual programs, although I did sub in them. And I did serve in some of the schools. And I was trained in New York City. So I had a whole different perspective of bilingual education. And in addition, when I was taking my courses in Pittsburgh, at the University of Pittsburgh to make up the difference, I was working with a woman who had actually worked with the government on research in bilingual education. And her husband was a conflict theorist. And so I took classes with her on bilingual education, but learned all about conflict theory, and how, when you bring people together, you have conflict it's a lot of times when you have movement forward, and so I had a whole different perspective of bilingual education when I arrived to Green Bay, so they didn't quite know what to do with me, with this Boston Irish Catholic with the mouth.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so the field of bilingual education is already pretty niche. But you work in an even more niche pocket of that. So it's very important, but people probably don't know exactly what your work entails. So can you kind of walk us through a typical day, whether it's pre-COVID, during COVID, whatever you want, and then why somebody with multilingual abilities might want to consider this as a potential career.

### **Maryellen Merck**

Basically, what I do is, okay, so when you're in bilingual education, with any students who have issues in learning languages, you're primarily working on literacy of some form or another, that's what you're doing, you're working in language speaking, reading and writing. And so as you do that, you realize that with a general degree, you don't have a true understanding of what literacy is all about. So I went back to school to get that degree and realized that I could support these kids in literacy in their first language. And that was, many years ago, I actually, when I graduated in 2001, we created at the school I was at, we were looking at — we were in a transitional, basically late exit type transitional, and it wasn't really working. So we were looking at creating a longer term, or another way of doing it and pushing kids into classrooms and things. And so at the time, there was a woman who was very much into Title One, and into

supporting the kids in literacy and understood the connection between language and literacy, and understood that if you give the kids literacy in their first language, that literacy transfers into their second, and it makes learning that second so much easier. And because of that, when I completed my master's, she said to me, I'm going to create a bilingual title one position, would you be willing to do that, and nobody had ever done it in our district. Nobody had any idea what that entailed. But because I was trained in both, and had been doing a lot of literacy stuff, coming from New York City, I had a lot of training in whole language balanced literacy. So I knew a lot about literacy before I arrived. And so they said, I said, Okay, let's do that. So fundamentally, what I do is, if you look at an English Title one, or English intervention, or English literacy only position in a district, that's what I do, but I do it in Spanish. So we look at the students who are in our bilingual programs, and we look for the kids who are struggling in literacy, who may or may not be on grade level, obviously, not on grade level. And then we pull those kids and then I work with them 30 minutes in 30 minute blocks, in one on one or small groups to increase their level of language learning and their level of literacy in reading in Spanish. So that is my focus. And that is primarily what I do. Of course, I have kids who are bilingual. And so I might go back and forth between the languages, but my focus is increasing their reading ability in Spanish, and helping them to see how that connects to their reading in English. So on a typical day, my role has changed through the years because we've added Reading Recovery. So I'm actually a Spanish DLL or Reading Recovery trained teacher. So in a typical day, I will pull four individual first graders who are the lowest of the low to try and get them as close to grade level as I can in Spanish, using Reading Recovery DLL practices. Then I have another four groups of students that I work with anywhere from two to four, who are reading below grade level. There are particular Spanish materials that we have purchased and Spanish programs that we have purchased that we utilize with them in hopes of accelerating their progress to get them to grade level. And so our goal is to accelerate them a year and a half in a year, so that they can eventually close that gap with their peers. So that's primarily what I do. And then I support the teachers and their teaching of literacy within their own classrooms. And I work at a school presently, that has almost 700 students, 350 of which speak Spanish or in a bilingual program. So it's quite a lot, one of the largest, I think we're the fourth, fourth or fifth largest elementary school in the state. And we are the fourth largest district in the state. So people don't realize how much there is of bilingual education in Green Bay.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

So you started to kind of hint at this, I think a little bit before. But there's a lot of myths and misconceptions surrounding bilingual language and literacy development. So can you perhaps clear up some of the ones that you see most often? And maybe are there some areas where we maybe aren't super sure about what's the best practice or what might be preferable one, and we still need more research? And so you can't definitively say this is the best or this is not?

### **Maryellen Merck**

Right. And that's, that's one of the big problems with bilingual research. Okay, I have been in the field, I started down the road in like '91. So oh, my God, it's been 30 years now that I've been looking at this field. And when I started working on my 317 20 plus years ago, one of the big things I was finding is, first of all, nobody knew what the heck that was all about reading

research in Spanish. And secondly, all of the research that is done in the world is done by English people. And so therefore, their subjects only speak one language, or are learning a second language, but their research is on them learning English, it's not on in their first language. Okay. So that's a very small percentage of research that's out there anywhere. And what I tell people a lot of times is all you have to do is open a catalog. If you look at a catalog of literacy resources, what percentage is English? What percentage is any other language? That's all you have to do? And that gives you an idea of the research done in the world. Okay. So as I was learning, and as I was doing things, I was presenting at conferences, and I would go to these conferences, and I would ask people, and they're like, Oh, my God, you guys are so much further ahead than any other place in the country that we've seen. And so that's the way Green Bay was for many, many years. I ended up teaching at UW-Oshkosh for a number of years in their bilingual program. And through a variety of things that happened, I ended up being able to go on a five day conference with Kathy Escamilla in Puebla, México to learn about bilingual literacy. And this was probably about five or six years ago. Kathy Escamilla is one of the leading researchers. Her, Jill Kerper Mora, and there's also Beeman and Urow, but principally Escamilla, and Jill Kerper Mora, and a couple of other names that are not coming to me, are some of the biggest researchers in understanding the connection between literacy and Spanish, and getting them to literacy in English. And how does that work and how do you do that in the best way. And so when I went with Escamilla, one of the big things that we learned about was that literacy transfers. So it's all that Krashen theory of the iceberg theory that the two tops of the iceberg, so the two languages and all this stuff is connected underneath. Well, that's the principles of literacy. So there was research that was done in the 70s or 80s. And it was Eleanor Thonis. And if you look, she has a graph that I use in all of my classes, as I've taught courses on by literacy for years. And Eleanor Thonis, looked at a variety of languages and a variety of reading and all of that and looked at things that are language-based versus universal. What are the concepts of literacy that are solely determined by the language? And then what are the concepts that transfer. So for instance, something that's solely determined by language is direction, because in I think it's Hebrew and other Arabic languages you read right to left, not left to right. So directionality is language based, however, a main idea is not. If you can find a main idea in Arabic text, you can find a main idea in a Spanish text, you can find the main idea and English text, you just have to know the language. So that's the whole principle of learning to read in your first language. The problem is because people who are big researchers are English speaking and in the English world, there's not a lot of research done on what are the best practices for a bilingual learner learning to read in Spanish, and then transferring those skills to English. There's a lot out there on it. But there's no definitive answer. And because of that, and because the bulk of the research is done in English, there's this whole concept, José Medina has referred to it. And there are other people that refer to it Spanish a la English. And that is the biggest issue — trying to take English principles of literacy instruction, superimposing them on bilingual students, because they go back to the concept of good literacy is good literacy. It is, but the literacies are different. So Spanish speakers do not need as much work on the differences in vowel sounds. There are only five. They don't need to know that. But because there's so much push in English on phonics, that people think that well, they need to learn the phonics, not really. You teach them the five vowels, and then you start with m, and they get the concept, and then you're off in reading, and then it becomes an issue of fluency, and reading for

meaning. So there's all these pieces, and the biggest piece of it is the lack of research and what I find in our district is the people who run the literacy department and the best practices in literacy, are English speaking. They've never left, many of them haven't really been out of Wisconsin, or taught anywhere else. And/or have never learned a second language. So they don't know what it's like to learn a second language, and to try and figure out how to read in that language. So they're looking at these best practices, and they're going well that's the best thing to do for all kids, because language is interconnected with literacy. It is, but it's also different. So you have to kind of be careful that you're teaching Spanish for Spanish sake. And if you bring out research from Mexico or for Colombia, they poopoo it, because it's not leading researchers. Does that make sense? And so that's the biggest issue that I find is, is that whole concept of Spanish a la English. It's not English. It's not English literacy. It's Spanish. Although I can use some of it based on Thonis's research, I can use some of it, but I can't use it all.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

That is so important. José has a great column of articles that I will include in the show notes, because they're very interesting. They kind of walk through all those theories. And I think it's also important, I want to kind of put in that qualifier that if we find what we consider to be a best practice, that doesn't mean it works for every student. So you can't say like, best practices for everyone. It's not across the board decision. So there's always gonna be things that we are figuring out and adapting. So the last question, we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in English, in Spanish, a mix of two, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one like.

### **Maryellen Merck**

Because I think it gives you more opportunities. I just was talking to a student the other day about it. Elizabeth is one of my tier three students, which means she really struggled in literacy. But she's always pulling in English. She's just one of these kids who would rather use English than Spanish even though mom only speaks Spanish, they only speak Spanish at home. And she struggled so much in literacy that I kept saying to her, you need to remember that you are two languages, you're smarter than most of the other kids in this school only speak English, because you know two languages. That gives you double the amount of people you can speak to. Many of us have a job only because we speak a second language because there are so many people who speak English and could do my job. But my job is only for somebody who's bilingual. So I tell kids all the time, it gives you that opportunity to understand more than one type of person. The other thing that Escamilla talked to us about which I have taken to heart is in Charlemagne and the 1400 said, to learn another language is to have another soul or something like that. And it's true. I speak Spanish with a different mannerism and a different way of being than I do in English. Some of it comes through, but it's like two different people. It's two different cultures. It's two different ways of being. And so when you have the ability to do that, you'll have the ability to speak to and offer yourself to more of the world than just your little corner of it. It gives you so much better understanding of differences and in the ability to be more open. So I always walk up to people all the time. I'm the one of the people. I'm in the Civil Air Patrol. And there was a guy at a conference one day, and he didn't look like he quite fit. So I

went to talk to him. He was from Estonia. He had just arrived like five years prior. And so we were talking, nobody else in this place knew that this guy had this whole other background, because nobody asked, but when you're a bilingual person, when you speak two languages, that just opens their whole mind up to this whole concept of this whole rest of the world that's out there. So yes, it is a superpower. And we should all speak two languages.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So well said thank you so much for chatting. You had so much interesting research and theories and different things to share with us. So I think people will really enjoy these perspectives, but I hope you have a great rest of your school year and thanks for making a couple minutes for me.

**Maryellen Merck**

You're very welcome.