

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

Hey, everybody, I'm joined today by Nikki Logan, UW-Stevens Point Associate Professor and former special ed bilingual educator. And thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Nikki Logan

You're welcome, Claire.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

So before we dive into your work and what that all entails, it'd be really helpful if we could break down some of the terminology used in the field of special ed. So can you just give us a couple pieces of context if I asked you a couple questions?

Nikki Logan

Sure. So in terms of bilingual, special education, the definition I have sort of come to create and go off of what's been around in the field is just that they are students with special needs, and have an IEP Individualized Education Program, who also would receive bilingual services in school, and most commonly, they have a home language or first language, native language of something other than English, and then also English. And then they would benefit from a program that supports their linguistic needs, and also their special needs.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

So in the field, we talked about sometimes like identity, first language versus people first language and people are sometimes confused on what to use, is there kind of a general rule? Or is there reasons why certain terms might be better than another to use?

Nikki Logan

So in terms, I guess it's — so I've learned that it all boils down to the preference of the individual, first of all, but then beyond that, in special education, we use person first language to sort of, to pay attention to who the individual is first, and then he out any outside factors beyond that next, so person, first language being a person with and then we could say, what disability or maybe what condition or diagnosis that the individual has, and in terms of bilingual education, really understanding that there is a difference between maybe a person's strong language or their first language and that it might be English, even if they are bilingual.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, the next term or kind of group of terms is having a disability versus different abilities versus special needs. Is there kind of an opinion there that is strong among the others or...?

Nikki Logan

There, it depends on who you ask. So it all just has a little bit different of a connotation. I know that the field says don't use euphemisms, like use exactly what the specific condition or diagnosis is. So then that would be a person with a hearing impairment or even with it within

that one deaf and hard of hearing versus hearing impairment as a different type of connotations as well. And different preferences within specific individuals are the specific diagnosis, ADHD. So there are different connotations. And it depends on sort of what your intent is, I suppose, if you want to say a person who specifically has a certain diagnosis versus in general grouping, a special need, and making it the general term, and then of course, there's the differently abled, and that can be an accepted term in the community. And it might sort of be in a rejected term in the community or neurotypical or neurodiverse that as well.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure. And then the last one is special ed versus exceptional education. Is exceptional kind of gaining more traction, or is that not as popular?

Nikki Logan

I haven't seen it gain as much traction as I thought it would. So the program I graduated from, we received degrees in exceptional education and that was sort of the title and our program that I teach and right now is still a special education. And we really in the eight years I've been there haven't had a conversation about changing that. The way that we teach about it at maybe a basic level in our program for future educators, is that exceptional education being the overall general like umbrella term, which could include gifted and talented and students with disabilities, and then special education more so the common definition being individuals with disabilities. So a more narrow term in terms of exceptional education, or exceptionalities.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, well, thank you for providing that context. I know sometimes people are a little bit scared to use the wrong term, and so they don't engage in these conversations. And so I think it's important to kind of lay out what these terms might connote or what their origins may be. So now going into what you do personally, could you just give us a super brief overview of your linguistic background and your educational background and how you ended up at Point?

Nikki Logan

I can do that. So I started in middle school in a Spanish class. And then I continued on in high school, and it was something that was going well, and I realized I could get some college credit in it. So I took the placement test, tested into a more advanced semester level in Spanish, and then just went from there. And in my undergraduate program, we needed to have a minor, and I did not want to study abroad, and it took more credits to get a Spanish minor, so I didn't do it. But I graduated with an elementary education bachelor's degree and a license. And then after teaching in Milwaukee Public Schools for a couple of years, and getting my master's in special education, I went and applied for positions in the Green Bay Area and I didn't see many. I saw a lot of bilingual positions, or even at that time, they listed them as Spanish speaking positions. And I applied for that. I failed the Spanish test, and they said that will come to you, you know, we want to hire you anyway. So they hired me, they said the Spanish would come to me. So I had a couple of semesters of college Spanish. And then I started this Spanish-speaking special education job. And I mean, more or less, it came to me, but I was around kids with speech and language disabilities. And it was me and them, I was their teacher. So in terms of the language

model, they weren't the best language model for me. And then I would work with some paraprofessionals, and some general education teachers that were able to speak Spanish as well. So when I was able to work with them, my language skills grew. I know in terms of talking with parents, I always sort of felt at a disadvantage, or like they might interpret that I didn't know what I was doing because I was not able to speak Spanish as proficient as the other individuals I was working with. So I taught in Green Bay Public Schools as a bilingual special ed teacher, and moved from a Spanish speaking special ed teacher to a bilingual teacher or a bilingual special education teacher, because I was working on getting my bilingual bicultural license. And I think after the first year, they reposted the position. And I was able to apply for it. And I had my bilingual bicultural license. So at that point, it became bilingual special education. And I taught there for five years. And eventually I went on and I am now still teaching at UW-Stevens Point. And I haven't had much interaction with bilingual education, we don't have a bilingual program, we have sort of an ESL or TESOL program in a different department that we don't sort of interact with as much. So I haven't had a lot of interaction there. Sometimes I have students at UW-Stevens Point, and I teach in teacher education, so they're future elementary majors or secondary math or science or social studies or whatnot, majors, and they have a Spanish minor, and I say, what are you going to do with that? You know, there's a lot of positions out there that even their elementary school gen ed teachers or special ed teachers, and they would hire you because they have a great need with their students to be able to speak Spanish and teach them in Spanish. So I always try to promote and push that, but I don't have any classes or, you know, traditional hands on approach with bilingual education at this moment.

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So going a little bit back and seeing if there's anything you can recall from when you're in that space, sometimes it can be a little bit difficult to determine what may be the root cause or what factors may be playing into certain behaviors or linguistic patterns that a student's exhibiting. Obviously, you know, language learning is a messy process, and so it's not very cut and dry. So, knowing that in the past, we have both over-diagnosed but also under-diagnosed students as needing special education services. How does the linguistic background kind of factor into that decision making process about what will be the best supports for them?

Nikki Logan

We try to have a really clear assessment procedure, I suppose, and implement what we have with fidelity. We talk about language differences versus disability. And I know that there's many schools that struggle with that, just is it a language difference, or is it a disability that is making the student appear I suppose, as if they were sort of falling behind or if they're not on grade level. So being able to assess students in their strongest language would be one way that we can break down some of those barriers or eliminate that possibility that it's a language difference instead of a disability. So in school districts where they have those capabilities, where there's even professionals in terms of special education teachers or core teams, or program support teachers diagnosticians, where they're bilingual, then they can implement, like the Woodcock Johnson in Spanish or what have you. And then even if we don't have those professionals, then being able to have an interpreter in the room and working to help interpret and then determine again if it's just a language difference and even like a language delay, which

could be a speech and language delay, or within their strong language, to figure out if sort of the root cause of why they aren't reaching proficiency, and then looking if they're not reaching proficiency in Spanish, if it's Spanish, and in English, as well, and taking a look at those individually.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, and there's different types of students that engage with different models of bilingual education. But there is one group of students that I think might be particularly interesting to discuss. And that is, students who come from a monolingual background. So at home, they just speak English. And they're entering into these programs that are often Spanish immersion, or Spanish-English 50/50 split. And I've heard before from people that students who have special needs or additional accommodations, that they maybe shouldn't enter these programs if they weren't raised bilingual, that it would be more of a detriment than a benefit to their education. So I would assume you can't make that blanket statement and that there's so many different factors. But can you just kind of talk us through why this program may be actually beneficial for these students or why maybe in some situations, it wouldn't be?

Nikki Logan

Sure some kids have language related disabilities. So I think I definitely reiterate what you say that it might be right. For some students, it might not be right for other students. And it really depends on the unique individual. So if a student has a language delay, and they're already struggling with vocabulary, or any type or sort of semantics or syntax or anything like that, then introducing another language could run the risk of confusing them even more. But some students or individuals, I think innately are just very verbal and linguistic individuals, and they take on another language and a third language and a fourth language easily. So it definitely depends, you can't even like you said, apply a blanket statement to someone who struggles with, with language processing or anything, but it could strengthen students sort of education early or within their school setting, because it might be one of their assets, and they can use it to learn other skills or boost their self confidence. And students with individuals with disabilities, they get and obtain jobs at a lower rate than their counterparts without disabilities. So it could be where they are learning a skill that helps them out in the workforce outside of the school, and definitely be a benefit to them. There's kids who have struggles with math computation, and that's the only services they receive in special education too. So don't make any type of blanket statement that this type of bilingual program would be for, not for kids with disabilities would be doing a disservice to a child like that. But any child obviously.

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For sure, and getting close to the end. So personally, I'm going into bilingual Ed, but I don't have the concentration or certification in special education, although of course, I'll be working with students in my class who do have additional needs or additional services, or they have an additional teacher working alongside them. So do you have any tips for people like me who might not have that concentrated background in this area to work with these students in a productive manner and engage with perhaps their paraprofessional or support teacher in a productive way as well?

Nikki Logan

Love it. Great question. I think generally speaking, what I tell my students is anything you can do for any of the kids in or any of the kids with a disability in your class are good for anyone in your class. And oftentimes vice versa, too. So the more intense you can sort of provide the instruction, which means either additional minutes or smaller group sizes, the better for individuals with special needs. If you can review concepts or pre-teach concepts that would help those kids as well as the kids without disabilities. You already pointed to collaboration. So increased collaboration with families with service providers, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and language paraprofessionals, gen ed, and special ed teachers would also benefit those students as well. So I think those are some -- oh, and let me add too -- any type of hands on activities. So I also think that sort of tenants, like best practices in bilingual education are also best practices to some extent in special education as well, they sort of parallel each other. So you want to use realia, any type of kinesthetic or hands on learning with, with your bilingual education program, just as you would with a special education program. So I think that mirrors itself in that way as well,

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, and that's so important, right? It's not like doing these additional components of your teaching is going to have a detrimental effect on your other students, it's going to support everyone. So it's not nearly as scary to take on as it may seem, I think is kind of a good takeaway. Thank you so much for your time and chatting. And just before we kind of sign off, can you share one reason why we should celebrate multilingualism? Why it's a good thing. It's a superpower that kids have.

Nikki Logan

I love it. I love that it's a superpower. I think multilingualism gives you a different perspective at how perhaps difficult or just different it is to learn another skill. And the more that we can promote learning about others and engage in ways to learn about others, I think the way better we understand each other and that just leads to greater things in the community.

CLAIRE DARMSTADTER

For sure, well, thank you so much. Have a good day.

Nikki Logan

Thanks Claire.