

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I am joined today by D Garcia, Director of Multilingual and Global Education in the Waukesha School District and WIABE member. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**D Garcia**

Thanks, Claire. Nice to be here.

**Claire Darmstadter**

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

**D Garcia**

Okay, great. So, well, I went through public schools, for my education, mostly, but I went to a lot of different schools. So for elementary school, I think I went through three schools. Middle School, I had two schools, and in high school, I had two different schools. So there was a lot of interruption in my schooling. And I was very, I would say, like, disengaged with school, I didn't have like that one person that really invested in me in school. And so I was kind of I would say, like a troubled youth would be a good way of describing me. I was able to figure out the system. I was very, very, very independent in doing that. My parents, while very lovely, did not really get too involved with that. But I was able to manage to figure out how to graduate early from school, which I did, so I was about 17 years old and two months approximately when I was able to leave high school. And so like my educational background, my personal experience was really formative. Never in my life, did I ever think that I would desire to be a classroom teacher, but I've always felt like I was an educator. And I've always really loved learning. And I've loved working with people to help them feel invigorated about their own sense of self as learners. As a child, I am a child of immigrants. But my family is from Ireland, not from a Spanish speaking country. And I grew up principally with my mother and my grandfather, and then also my dad, but living apart. My grandfather was very formative for me, he, unfortunately, was not able to attend high school. But he was in the Royal Air Force for about 16 years. And he was stationed in the Gulf of Aden, in the Middle East. And so he spoke fluent English, obviously, fluent French, and fluent Arabic. And it was really formative for me to live with a pluriglot in my house, and have that be such a strong part of his identity and his interaction with me. And so I grew up loving language and having a very international perspective, I mean, a perspective that for sure, was outside of the community where I was being raised. But also big connections to other parts of the world through my family's first experiences, primary experiences. When I was able to manage to redeem myself after my abysmal high school performance, I eventually did get the opportunity to go to college. And when I was in college, dabbled around with a lot of different ideas of how I was planning to serve in my life, and it became pretty clear to me that I was really interested in international relations, political science, sociology, and through that experience, knew that being bilingual in French might not be as rewarding for me as developing bilingualism and biliiteracy in Spanish. And so a really formative experience was I met a woman who was a seamstress. She was a dressmaker. And she was principally a wedding dress maker and a quinceañera

dressmaker. And I really, really loved how I felt I was around her. And I knew that I had a responsibility to learn to speak her language so that we could have a deeper relationship. And so that's how I started on my path to learning Spanish. I would say I was about 20 years old when I started, I was able to get a few semesters in college before I graduated, but it had definitely lit a fire in me. And it wasn't just the language, it was the interaction with the people that speak the language. So in my area, there are a lot of different communities of Latino diaspora. So of course, I had many friends who were from Mexico from Puerto Rico. And then later on, I became very close with the Peruvian community and later the Colombian community here in Milwaukee. So upon graduating from college, I was a lost lamb. I knew that I wanted to do some sort of either work or have some sort of like international experience. And so one opportunity that I was able to find, and I would suggest this for any young person who would really like to have an immersive non-university type experience, I was able to work with a group called Enseñanza Mundial. It's a division of the Harvard Institute for International Development. And in English, it's called World Teach. World Teach is absolutely amazing. I was able to get a work visa to teach in a Costa Rican public school, very, very deep in the dry tropical forests. So my community was a community that had really wonderful things to learn from; it was a bartering economy, which was amazing. I was la teacher, because in Costa Rica, compulsory English language education is universal, but they don't always have the teachers who go into really rural and remote places. And so that's where people like me come into it. So I would say that I became lovingly bilingual, through my best friendships with 12 year old girls, and through our mutual love of Shakira. So after spending two years in Costa Rica doing that work, I came back to the City of Milwaukee and worked in child protection and social work for the Bureau of Child Welfare. And in that experience, it became very linked with educators and educational leaders in the Milwaukee area and got the opportunity to work for Milwaukee Public Schools, which was an amazing experience and extremely hard for me to move on from. I still live in the city today. But I now serve as the Director of Multilingual and Global Education for the school district of Waukesha, where we have a 4K through 11th grade, dual language bilingual immersion program that I oversee, and just lots of other opportunities for students who are developing multilingualism, multiculturalism and local and global perspectives.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Most definitely, well, thank you for that complete overview of your life. Can you talk a little bit about how the experience of a) learning language is a little bit later in life, at least for Spanish and additionally having those international experiences kind of helped to hone in or form your kind of ideologies or perspectives or how you approach language learning and b) how you kind of direct the programs that you oversee in the district?

### **D Garcia**

Yeah, sure, so I can tell you and the audience, I think this is an exceptional thing to know that I have actually said, this has come out of my mouth, that I do not have the brain to learn language. I have said this. And I said this before I had the kind of experience that I needed to be able to develop my bilingualism. So as we know, adult learners of second languages approach language learning differently than very young learners. Because the more you know about your own language, the more you apply to acquiring the second. And so traditional world language

programs, in my opinion, teach children and adults about language, but they don't actually teach children and adults to acquire a partner language. And so I think something that was unique for me is that I got the opportunity to go to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and I had absolutely essential people in my life. And one of them, she knows who she is. Her name is Stellia Jordán. She was a Columbian Spanish professor, and she was brutal with me, and I really think being shut out of education and really like not even being able to get into it college, I was never gonna feel that like that voracious consumer of Spanish, like learning the language interacting with as many people as I could. I had the benefit of having work colleagues in a restaurant that I worked in were willing to invest in me as a Spanish learner, and give up their time, their heart, their energy, and playfully work with me as I started to develop what I would call like the rudimentary skills. I would say for anyone that is learning a language you have to approach your language as an adult, as a continuum, almost like a spring. And so with lots and lots of contact and interaction, you move up on that continuum, with little interaction, little contact, you down on the continuum, but you could always move back up, it's very flexible. And so for adults that are considering honing in and developing their partner language with English, it's a continuum. And it's a lifelong task, I would say specifically, my message to those who are heritage speakers of Spanish and maybe didn't have the opportunity to develop literacy or even like a lot of academic or technical language in their home language of Spanish, a lot of times identity is really wrapped up in that. And there's a lot of shame. And I would say, for that community, to re-engage, it is never ever, ever, ever late to continue to work on it and to continue to grow. One thing I didn't say about my story was that I am actually married to a Colombian, and my relationship with him obviously and his family has had a huge impact on me. So I wanted to give a shout out to my family for also having the patient investment in me, while I negotiate culture, expression, language, etc. So how does this impact me as a leader in my school district? I would say that my colleagues would say I'm a Susan, not a Karen. And a Susan is a person who is a first language speaker of English, who has a significant cultural and linguistic experience that has developed their bilingualism and has given them the perspective that there are so many funds of knowledge that are under-represented, undervalued. And these are the types of people that become voracious defenders, very much me, my colleagues would characterize me as I think a defender, but also an advocate and also like a visionary in terms of bilingual education. I'm sure the audience might know and just googling Waukesha County, it is tending to be a more conservative-learning area. I suppose I could say that generally. I'm absolutely shocked every day that there's been over a 40-year legacy of bilingual education in this community. And that I get to be a part of making sure that the bilingual education program that we offer in the district extends through a student's experience in the district, and that it is not seen as a bridge to learning English, but it is seen as a goal in and of itself, and that our students can demonstrate tremendous scholarship that is valued, I think, in other areas of society. So for example, we were with the school district of Madison, the first districts in the state to offer the Seal of Biliteracy for our students. We've had almost 200 students now graduate with the Seal of Biliteracy since 2017, which I consider to be like an industry certificate. The students can take that to many different states in the country to demonstrate not only their bilingualism, but also their biliteracy and their exceptionality as someone who can navigate multicultural environments. We also offer the Global Scholars award, we have a three, a three phase approach in 9th, 10th, and 11th grade for our students in Advanced Placement courses.

And we're hoping to add our fourth step in advanced placement in the Spanish language. So I have looked through every single door that I can find to give our students the opportunity to identify the gifts that their parents have given them, and the gifts that their parents have chosen to give them by selecting bilingual education in our school district, to get them the opportunity to really like put something concrete behind that that really demonstrates to universities, to employers that they are the real deal, and they got they got the chance to do just about anything. So that's been really important for me is to be the person who is accepted at the table to represent people that might be struggling to get a seat at the table.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah and I think a really important distinction that we've made in recent years is moving from calling these classes foreign language to calling them global or world education. So can you talk a little bit about why perhaps this shift is important and why your district chooses to refer to education in this manner.

### **D Garcia**

So our district offers a lot of different pathways towards bilingualism. So there's a pathway for native English speakers who want to initiate global language study in middle school. And it's a very traditional track taking French or Spanish 1 or Mandarin 1-5 and going through that pathway. In that pathway, it is very unlikely that students will have contact with first language speakers of either French or Mandarin or Spanish, etc. so it remains very traditional. Something that's very out of the box is our dual language bilingual program where students come in, in kindergarten, 4K, kindergarten, or first grade. And I'm really proud of that, because in the program, we do have native English speakers, we do have native Spanish speakers, we have lots and lots of kids who are simultaneously bilingual and I would say pretty high risk of losing their Spanish. And then we also have students who are Turkish speaking, Danish speaking, and a Russian speaking. And I think this year, we have a student who speaks Telugu and Hindi as well, in our program, we're all developing this multicultural, bilingual and by literacy, identity, I would say for me, our program for bilingual education specifically, because I have so much autonomy and trust from my district and colleagues, I'm able to make really, I think, critical decisions in terms of the content and the resources that we put in front of kids. And so kids from a very young age are dealing with issues of global concern, issues that are related to sustainability to I think, cultural interaction, identity, power. And so what we do in making decisions about the resources that we placed before kids is we try to bring things to kids that allow them to use the sources to help them inform their own opinions, and really extrapolate evidence for why they believe what they believe, and later on why they claim what they claim. That's been really important for me. I've always, also really, I hadn't really experienced as a teacher, I worked at Hayes Bilingual School in Milwaukee Public Schools, yay Hayes. And the Hayes bilingual school is a dual language school that has a science and technology focus. And that I felt was a pivotal experience for me. And so I brought that into the school district of Waukesha. And we have a very strong science focus and STEM focus in the dual language program. And we have been able to really personalize the types of curriculum that we put in front of kids to not only ask them to be scientists, but also to apply science to resolving global global problems. So a good example of that would be in the third grade students ask the

question about whether governments should control where people live. And it's really in the context about whether the government should protect people from building housing in places that are unsafe or unsustainable. A really good example of that would be allowing people to build their homes in wildfire areas, or another one would be allowing developments to build up on cliffides, which is, as we know, an issue that really impacts a lot of countries that have very quickly developing populations and they don't necessarily have the infrastructures to support families to choose to live in other places. So those are some things that I brought into the school district that I think are really important. I would say another thing that at high school that is really critical, in addition to offering biology and chemistry in our dual language program, as well as integrated math 1 and geometry in our dual language program, we have decided to participate in the Advanced Placement Seminar and Research classes. The Seminar and Research classes are classes that support 11th and 12th grade students in their rhetorical analysis in students. Some students go into that class thinking, I want to cut hair and do nails for a living and they come out saying no, I'm going to be a lawyer. It's a super empowering experience. A lot of the students build a lot of their body of knowledge and their research around issues that are impacting us here locally, but also impact the students and their families, globally. And so those courses are offered in two languages and it's an amazing experience. I'm really proud of those who took that on and teach those courses.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well, that just sounds incredible. And there's so many amazing opportunities for the students in your district. I know you also work with WIABE. Could you just talk briefly a little bit about your work there and how you bring any of your ideas to that professional organization or what you take away from them that you might try to employ your own district?

**D Garcia**

Yeah, thanks for asking. So with WIABE, I'm available to WIABE for consultancy whenever that would be needed and saw in that I serve in a small committee of educators in working on the Seal of Biliteracy and other kind of policy that we would like to bring to fruition by either suggesting at the state or legislative level or at the district, or organizational level. I'm really proud to say that I have great relationships with people across school districts, and so I really enjoyed working with the former director of Equity and Bilingual Education in Verona. I do work with principals and coordinators in Milwaukee Public Schools. One of my best friends ever is the director of the Racine School District's multilingual and bilingual education programs. And so I like to keep really good relationships with my professional network and always be a really open and available resource to build our collective efficacy around how we're trying to solidify, I would say a regional ethic and ethos for supporting bilingual education k-12 and beyond. So I really value those relationships there. Since COVID, of course, it's been a little bit more difficult for us to make strategic plans for what we are trying to do. It's kind of stop start stop start, but of course we are always connecting and trying to ideate on what the next step is going to be.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well, thank you for all your insight thus far just to wrap this out. Can you give us one reason if you can boil it down to one why we should view speaking more than one language and

multilingualism as a superpower and you can answer in English or in any of the other languages that you would like to employ?

**D Garcia**

That's a really great question. Para mí, los que hablan dos idiomas tienen dos almas. Definitivamente, puede ser participante en dos culturas, dos comunidades, o cincuenta comunidades distintas que son comunidades de habla hispano, de habla lengua pareja. Para mí, me ha profundizado demasiado mi identidad como persona, mi flexibilidad, mi pensamiento, mi empatía, y me hace aún más una persona que puede abogar y puede ayudar a las otras personas a abogar por sí mismo. Para mí, yo creo que una educación bilingüe es fundamental para apoyar a las familias que están luchando, que sus hijos reconocen la cultura, los valores, que trayen de los países de origen. Yo lo veo en mi casa y quiero que la mayoría de los niños en las comunidades que nosotros servimos tengan acceso a una educación global. So I'll say it in English too like, for me, I feel like being bilingual is really giving me the opportunity to have two souls. I really do live in two worlds, all of the time. It has given me empathy. It has made me a voracious advocate, I would say for anti-racist work or multicultural work. But above all, I think that I have learned so much more than I have given specifically from the Latino communities who have been close to me. And I see my role as being able to support those families by ensuring a legacy of bilingual education that keeps the opportunity for children to interact with their family's funds of knowledge and to find value in their family's experiences and their culture. That is super important to me is that kids here especially in this region, at such high risk of language attrition. Language is the conduit to culture and values definitivamente, and so that is something that I feel is really important and if I can just use myself to help support any family to keep that circle of identity tight and tight and close that that is what I would like to be able to do. And of course, I want our kids to have all the access and opportunities to the experiences that this country can offer and I want them to be the leaders ideating what could be offered in the future because they are so unique and so special.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Well, thank you again. I'll link all the different resources and organizations and groups you talked about in the show notes because there's so many incredible things that I think people want to look into a little bit more, but I appreciate you fitting me into your schedule, and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

**D Garcia**

Thanks so much Claire. Have a great day, everybody.