

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm lucky enough to be joined by two guests today, Danette Daniels, as well as her daughter, Elena. Danette has a background in Spanish and Italian and Elena participated in the Lincoln and Midvale Elementary, dual language immersion for Spanish or a DLI program, as we call it. And she's also been taking French in middle school through a more traditional route. So thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me today, guys.

Danette Daniels

Thank you.

Elena

Yeah, sure.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so first Danette it'd be great to get a really super general overview background of your language and education experience. So how did you learn these languages? Do you continue to learn them? And what motivated you to enroll her in this immersion program?

Danette Daniels

Yeah, well, I've had a longtime interest in learning other languages. I took initially in college, some Spanish. And then later on, in my 30s, decided to do evening courses or side courses in Italian and most recently have returned to Spanish for evening courses at the UW continuing education program. So it's always been important for me, we travel a lot, we like to explore a lot. And just I think for the kids, it's important that they understand there are other languages and know other languages. So it was, when I heard Madison had a public school that was offering the immersion program, I definitely wanted Elena to be a part of it.

Claire Darmstadter

And then for you, Elena, of course, your parents are kind of the ones that decide if you're participating in these programs or not. And so you didn't really have a choice. And you know, you're thrown in as a five or six year olds with not really a background in Spanish. It's like go, you have to understand everything. Do you remember, and of course, you were super young, do you remember it being super overwhelming at first? Or what was that kind of like, being immersed in a different language when you didn't really speak it at first?

Elena Daniels

Yes, so I do that. And I'm going to save for the first like, year, year and a half, I had no idea what was going on. Like, at all, I couldn't understand anything. So I just mostly learned by watching other kids, like the teacher would give a direction. And of course, I wouldn't know what she said. And they were very patient, like explaining things. They had good visuals, but I mostly just watched the other kids to see what they'd have to do. And it wasn't until later that I started actually, like somewhat understanding it.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And then for you to not add that parent perspective. Like I said, you can't really know how the kids are going to embrace it, how hard or easy it's going to be. And it can probably be a little sad to see how, you know, difficult and draining these classes are and they come home, they might cry, they might be just overwhelmed. And that's expected at first with language immersion programs, but how do you kind of negotiate those two perspectives or emotions and how do you decide like when you push them? And when you say like, okay, this is way too much? And I just need to let them be and if they want to speak English, that's totally cool.

Danette Daniels

Yeah, I don't really let Elena decide what she wants to do. No, Elena's very tough. So she was exhausted, especially that first year. And I could tell, you know, the transition from her - she was in daycare, and then she went directly into immersion with not being prepared for it at all. And you can tell she was very exhausted, mentally exhausted from those days. But I knew it would get better. And I knew she would benefit from it. So we're not one to kind of back out if it's difficult at first. So and she never complained about it. I think if we had reached that state where she was very unhappy, or you know, was really having difficulties, then then we would have changed.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And we also know that often parents play a really big role in their child's education. And that can be a little bit difficult when you're in an immersion program, because there might be a different language that a parent doesn't know. And thankfully, you did have that Spanish background, so I would imagine you could help with homework a little bit more. But how could a parent best support their student who's in a program if they don't speak the language? Or they do speak both languages, but they're not necessarily fully proficient in both? Is there a way to kind of help when you don't necessarily know exactly everything that's going on in class?

Danette Daniels

Yeah, that the school had a lot of support for parents that maybe didn't speak the language. There were classes that you could take, there were information sheets and a lot of the homework you know came home with instructions, both in English and Spanish, even though they were to complete the assignments in Spanish, so the the school system was very nicely set up for parents who were uncomfortable, I'd say with the other language, but it was a benefit, especially, you know those young ages where they're reading or learning how to read, trying to pronounce the words that they don't know, to be able to know that other language.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And then for Elena, once you moved into middle school, I understand that you moved into French instead of continuing with Spanish. So could you just talk a little bit about what informed that decision? If there are any differences you notice? I'd assume there's lots of differences because you're not in an immersion program anymore? And then do you think it was a little bit easier to pick up French because you've had that background and learning another language? Or is it not really that noticeable?

Elena Daniels

Yes. So I did eventually, in seventh grade start taking French and that was the very basic French 1, which is one class a day. And I found it very amusing because I would look at the lesson plans and we're talking about conjugating verbs and adjectives that go with this. And this is stuff that in translation I learned in Spanish in like second grade. So basically, it was going to like grade levels, three, four, and five, for French work and that was quite funny. And you asked about Spanish relating to French? So yes, they are very similar, because they're both Latin-based languages. So I can understand a little bit more. And there's definitely rules that are very similar to the language that apply. But it's I mean, orally, yes, it's much easier because it didn't know Spanish, but written and reading, it's awful, it's all so hard to write.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And then the added difficulty of this past year, was COVID hit and everything has been moved online. And it's really hard, especially with languages because you don't have that kind of in-class fun game speaking activity kind of experience. So could Elena, could you just start and give us maybe a challenge that you've experienced related to language, maybe with everything COVID in mind and then Danette maybe can chime in, from a parent perspective how managing that has been?

Elena Daniels

Yeah, actually. So when we were actually in class, it would be much easier because we get new words and new sets of vocabulary to study. And we could actually hear them from our teacher, like, listen to how they sound, how the accents are supposed to sound. And we just don't have that anymore, which makes it much more difficult to actually do some of the speaking activities.

Danette Daniels

Yeah, I would say it's the same in the transition to virtual, I mean, so much for me, and in trying to understand a language and seeing the other people speak the language is being able to see them, their body language, like hear them talk, right? So it's very difficult on camera, or in person to have that same type of interaction.

Claire Darmstadter

And finally, reflecting back on the experience, just in general language, or in the DLI program, specifically, can you talk about maybe something you both liked? And something maybe that you would change about that elementary DLI I experience? Maybe Elena, do you want to go first?

Elena Daniels

Yeah, so my biggest takeaway from this is I still have my Spanish and I've found it to be a very valuable life skill. I can use it in casual conversation, or I can relate it to French, I just think I learned something extremely valuable that I'm hopefully going to have for the rest of my life. And that was a huge benefit of the program I went through.

Danette Daniels

Yeah, I would say, too, just I remember when Elena was very young, and we actually started a little bit of Italian class once a week, not not a lot with her when she was three years old. And I just remember the day she was in the car, and she realized that two different words could describe the same thing. Just that concept, that understanding of what language is right. So I think that her being part of the program, her understanding that, and also all the different people that she got to meet in the immersion program and the cultures that she's learned about and such. I think speaking the language and kind of understanding from the language point of view, helped really to broaden her education.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure and not to end on like a sad negative note, but is there anything maybe that you would change about your experience maybe? Or the program structure?

Danette Daniels

I wish it were all possible, right that she could continue Spanish, also in the French. So it's hard, you know, middle school, we had to make a choice kind of to continue in the program or not. My only hope is that, like she said, she doesn't forget. And the six year she had an immersion, you know, that that, that stays with her.

Claire Darmstadter

And Elena did you think of anything, or since you were so young it was all just --

Elena Daniels

Yeah it may just be because I was younger. And then by the time I actually got old enough to actually be aware of, kind of situation I was in, I was really used to it, but I can't really think of anything that I want to change looking back on it.

Claire Darmstadter

That's a good thing. That's what we want.

Danette Daniels

It's that your parents were so wonderful in their decision-making.

Elena Daniels

Oh, right. Of course. Yes.

Claire Darmstadter

Well thank you so much to both of you for speaking with me today. I think, I don't know it's really interesting to have both the parent and the student perspectives and so I think a lot of people will benefit and really enjoy the two perspectives you had to share. So thank you, have a good day.

Danette Daniels

Thank you, Claire!