

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I am so excited to be joined today by Erica Suo, fourth grade teacher at South Shore Elementary in Port Wing, Wisconsin. The very, very northern tip. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Erika Suo

Absolutely.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So first, it'd 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.

Erika Suo

Okay, let's see, I graduated from UW-Superior with a degree in elementary education in 1993. And I went on from there to get a graduate degree in special education, with the focus on emotional behavioral disabilities. And since then, I've been teaching full time. I taught in the Superior School District for 18 years and I've been in the South Shore School District for the last six years.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and I know you've had some contact with Finnish, even if you're not a fluent speaker, what's that kind of like for you going up?

Erika Suo

Yeah, I've grown up hearing Finnish spoken, you know, my entire life. My dad spoke fluent Finnish. And of course, I heard my grandparents and great grandparents speak it and other relatives. I did take a trip to Finland in 2014 with a group of educators and we went there to explore Finland's educational system. So we did some studying of it before then, and, and went over and visited many different schools over there. So as far as speaking Finnish myself, I have taken a class through Northland College in Ashland many years ago, an undergraduate class, and then just speaking, hearing you know, people even today in Oulu speak Finnish, I can understand a little bit. You know, holiday words and some general phrases and foods and things like that is pretty much what I'm comfortable with.

Claire Darmstadter

So let's dive into that trip to Finland a little bit more. Because for me personally, it's very interesting, I think, for other people as well. So I know your classroom is pretty heavily influenced by Finnish language and culture and education practices, even if it's not like a Finnish immersion school. So can you talk a little bit about how you incorporate all these things in your classroom and what you learn from that really exciting trip?

Erika Suo

Sure, I guess I was very inspired, before being invited to join that team of teachers going to Finland to explore, just by everything that I heard about Finnish education. And I, I'm not sure if

it's, if I connected to it because of my Finnish heritage and growing up, or just because of my philosophy of education. But I was interested in how they make learning so authentic and real, and hands on. They use a lot of project based learning, which I'm thankful and I actually did move to the South Shore School District, where I'm at now, because I knew of opportunities for project based learning. A lot of the children that attend our school were from an area of Scandinavian heritage. Here in Port wing, there's a strong Swedish heritage yet today. And in Oulu, where I live, it's a Finnish heritage. And passing down our traditions, there's really strong traditions yet today being celebrated in Port Wing, and in Oulu, and we have, you know, community events, yearly events that are passed on. And so there's a desire to pass on these cultural influences to the younger generations. And so that's where I've been able to incorporate summer school classes, where I have grandparents come in, and they help teach the traditions, arts and crafts and foods and stories of growing up. And their grandchildren will come and attend. And so because of that strong community support, I've been able to incorporate passing down those traditions, but also using Finnish methods of project based learning.

Claire Darmstadter

And so I know there's a partnership that you guys had, or perhaps maybe you still have that, but I'm not sure if COVID change that with the Oulu Historical Society, and then also you talked about that Swedish presence, but also I understand that there's a pretty large Anishinabe presence in the area. Is that something that you kind of incorporate or how do you, I guess, talk about that confluence of languages and cultures when they all can be very different, although I would imagine a little bit related because of the history of the area.

Erika Suo

Right? Yeah, there's a strong Ojibwe Anishinaabe culture in the area. You know, we're close to some tribal lands. And so that is something that is a local interest and like for my summer school classes to at the Heritage Center, in Oulu, we've done a week of studying the Ojibwe culture and had connected with people from the reservations to come and speak and share their flute music and their stories and their traditions too. But it's also something that we do in the school district, because of the local heritage and because we need to do that, you know, as part of our state requirements as well, but there really is a natural interest in incorporating, you know, the real life learning about the history and culture of our area.

Claire Darmstadter

And so despite all this great, fantastic programming, I've also kind of heard you express the sentiment that perhaps students can still feel pretty isolated. So maybe when they go to college in a bigger city, or they go to work somewhere else, it's kind of a big change. They're not necessarily used to the language diversity or ethnic diversity and can be a big change for them. So I know specifically within the Spanish program, kind of at the older ages, due to a teacher stepping away, I believe it kind of shifted online, and it was like, oh, I'm not so sure that this is very effective. And it was kind of like, well, maybe we could focus instead on the culture more than the language if we're not having great outcomes. So what are your thoughts about this topic? Should smaller districts kind of put a heavier emphasis on culture if it doesn't seem like language acquisition is too practical?

Erika Suo

Yes, I think the teachers would definitely agree that we're pretty isolated up here in our part of Wisconsin and our students seeing and interacting with people of different heritages. You know, we're very white up here. And so thinking about other ways that we can teach our children about cultures. I know we do have the Spanish classes, and we do have online German and French. But as far as the students actually, using those skills later on in life, you know, that's pretty limited, where I do believe, if we spent more time and emphasis on teaching on different cultures and their religions and that would be much more beneficial to our students, because we are so isolated, and so lacking in diversity here in our region in particular, and it is overwhelming when they go away to schools. And, you know, they're just, I think they're more probably more hesitant to get involved in activities and to put themselves out there because of those limited experiences that they've had growing up in our region.

Claire Darmstadter

And for teachers who might be interested in teaching their students about local cultures, are there any resources that you know of that you would recommend or any groups or organizations you belong to?

Erika Suo

Well I would say reach out to your local historical societies. I know that's been great for us here. And universities, I'm sure any local universities may be a good resource. That could be really helpful. I know I'm excited that our school district is now putting together a trip to Europe for our students, particularly because we know they're so lacking in worldly experiences and cultures. And so that's something that I might even go on. It'll be the summer, not this summer, but the next summer, but we really want to get our kids thinking more broadly, more globally about the world to give them a better chance at success and a happier, more rounded life.

Claire Darmstadter

And so the final question I usually ask most of my interviewees is why they consider being multilingual a superpower, and I know that you don't necessarily have full proficient fluency in Finnish. So can you maybe just share a word or phrase that's significant to you in the language or a cultural practice that you'd like to share with all of us?

Erika Suo

Well, I think my Finnish baking and cooking skills might be where we've spent the most time passing down our traditions, making pulla which is a cardamom bread, making mojakka, which is a Finnish stew, leipä, which is bread ohrarieska, I guess. So those are the main Finnish words that I know. And things like Hauskaa joulua!, which means Merry Christmas, things like that.

Claire Darmstadter

Thank you so much for chatting. And I know your perspective is super interesting and before a couple months ago, I had no idea that there was such a large Finnish community up in northern Wisconsin. And so it's very niche, but I think it's also very interesting. So I appreciate you

sharing a little bit about your local culture and your school and all of that, and I hope you have a great rest of your school year.

Erika Suo

Thank you very much, Claire.