

Claire Darmstadter

Hi, everybody, I'm here today with Sarah Chaja-Clardy who is the Director of Secondary - Teaching, Learning and Equity at the Sun Prairie School District. Thank you so much for chatting with me today.

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Absolutely.

Claire Darmstadter

So before we dive into what your position entails, I love if you could just give us a brief overview of your personal and linguistic and perhaps educational background, if they overlap. Can you just share what languages you speak and what your acquisition process has been like?

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Sure. First of all, muy buenos días, soy la directora de enseñanza, aprendizaje, y equidad para el distrito escolar en Sun Prairie. My languages that I speak are Spanish and English fluently, including speaking, listening, reading and writing. I did take Italian in college as well and was able to make it through Italy with a little bit but definitely not fluent in those areas. My language acquisition background started, you know, in high school with just a little bit of dabbling in Spanish, but certainly by no means anywhere near a level of proficiency. And when I went to college, I went into the field of education to be a teacher. And in setting a major, you also are required to have a minor and had always had a passion for language. So Spanish was my minor in college. And then, as love goes, I married a man who was of Mexican descent, and lived with his family for a while who is only Spanish speaking. And so I had the academic language from college. And then really, that's when the learning around social language developed, and being able to use Spanish more intimately. Ultimately, then I was a bilingual teacher. And so I taught elementary school all subject areas in Spanish. And then as the students got older, I also taught in English for some subjects and Spanish for some subjects. And so that is largely my background, personally, with language acquisition.

Claire Darmstadter

And I appreciate so much you giving us that little Spanish snippet, because it's really important for us to celebrate multilingualism and to validate these language skills. However, I sometimes feel a little bit nervous to speak Spanish in front of people because I'm not a native speaker. So as someone who is also not a native speaker, and we're in that bilingual position, did you ever feel nervous or not sure of your skills? Or how did you overcome that when Spanish wasn't your primary language? But it was the language of instruction?

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Yes, for sure. So I think there's like personally and professionally, right, so personally, again, I had the academic language, I could read ancient, like Spanish literature and write essays on it, but then I would be watching telenovelas, or soap operas in Spanish and like, not really understanding what was happening. So it was a really interesting dynamic for me and fortunately, I had a lot of grace because of my in-laws, who like helped me acquire that

language. But certainly what you're speaking to is absolutely right, there is a trepidation and wanting to get things right. And I think that also comes from like, white Eurocentric backgrounds of perfectionism and wanting things to be right. And just understanding that, you know, especially when I was teaching a field, like math in Spanish, even though it was only elementary school math, there were just certain terms that, you know, when you get into like, angles and polygons, and just like really particular specific terms, I would always lean on my colleagues who were native speakers, because I wanted to make sure that I knew the word and I said the word and sometimes also, depending on which country or which Spanish you're leveraging particularly different countries use different Spanish terms for different things. And so why don't you be able to bring in just a multiple of ways to say if you're in Spain, you might use this language, if you're in Mexico, you might use this language. And so leaning on people, and then ultimately, I think, I never want to assume that anyone is a Spanish speaker. Right? And so like, that's always really super important to me, too, is to say, *Hi, I'm Sarah. Soy bilingüe, would you prefer to speak in English or in Spanish?* To just not make any assumptions that people are not fluent in one language or the other, but there is a fear. I think the more you get to know people of other cultures, people who are bilingual love other languages, and love to experiment and talk and then like, especially like Spanglish speakers are some of my favorites and like choosing the exact right words in conversation. Usually when you're speaking with other people, they're just what I have found is incredibly grateful for the effort. So setting perfection aside, and just like, I don't know, not being embarrassed, it's like, just something to like, push through and get over.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. And I know you've also kind of recently moved into an admin position. So can you talk a little bit about that transition and the journey and why you kind of made that switch?

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Yeah, so I was a principal. I've been a school administrator for the past nine years, my first assistant principal school was an elementary school that had dual immersion, Spanish and English in it, as well as an English instruction program. And having come from being a bilingual educator, feeling like I could have a sense of like, efficacy in helping lead a dual immersion program, especially at that time, where I was always writing my own curriculum, we didn't, we had English materials that our teachers were then like, we had to translate ourselves about 10 years ago, and so like feeling a sense of efficacy, and being able to support teachers in that, I went into being a school administrator, from then moved into the principalship, went to a school that didn't have dual immersion, but still had an high number of ELs, and then moved into another middle school where there was dual immersion programming, a pretty extensive dual immersion program, which again, we were growing and developing, and it just that sense of efficacy. I went into doctoral research then based on my experience of having to always write curriculum and knowing that the challenges that come with that, and particularly looking at equity in schools, and so thinking my dissertation research was on students who are in kindergarten through second grade who are like learning in a dual immersion program and learning in Spanish. And, and the challenge is that, like, we know that all not not all students read at the same level at the same time, that's the human experience. However, there does come a point in education, where for some students reading becomes a significant challenge.

And then, you know, educators are tasked with teasing out, is there something else going on here? May there be a disability, or may there be something else. And there's extremely limited, extremely limited research and resources in Spanish, that have been approved by our educational system for helping to tease that out, including like intervention programs, or any of that sort of thing. So leaned heavily into that research work and then, while being a principal just really thoroughly enjoyed it. And when the position came available for Director of Secondary Schools, it was intriguing to me. Sun Prairie doesn't have bilingual programming, but certainly does have a high number of English language learners and rapidly growing across a wide variety of languages. And so as a director, I oversee our middle schools and high schools. But another piece of my job is overseeing Title III. So in education, Title III legislation from our federal government is all about English language learners, and providing access to not only like, bilingual or multilingual supports, but also having extensive family engagement. And so like, that was another area that I feel like, again, I've been able to, at least in my short time here, and he's only been a few months, but been able to put some systems and structures in place to better serve our ESL students and families.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, and I'm from Sun Prairie, as well, and so I'm very jealous of the Madison and surrounding systems that do have those dual immersion and bilingual programs. But it's been great chatting with you so far, would you be willing to just answer a couple closing questions before we sign off?

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Yeah, absolutely.

Claire Darmstadter

So the first one is, so you've experienced both the teacher and the admin side. And teachers can often be a bit nervous to interact or kind of, you know, engage with people who are an admin, just because they feel that intimidation, kind of like fear and power differential. Do you have any tips for people on both sides, how they can have positive interactions with one another?

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Yeah, that's a really good point. There's always this line of like evaluation, right. And I think it comes from developing trust and like, acknowledging that trust gets developed over time. Knowing you have to not only say things, but show things, right? And just having a space in the authentic conversations and showing support. For me as a teacher that looked like a principal coming into my room and observing me and giving me feedback, because I always wanted to grow and get better. And knowing that like, if I ever went to them that it would just be like a conversation and an offering of like, assistance and support. Then on the administrator side, I kind of looked at it the same way, right, like, now it's on now it's on me as the administrator to be going into your classroom to be giving you feedback to be like, showing all the good things because people are like, I don't know, I think there's reticence to acknowledge the good work by and large, there's like awesome work that's happening every single day and then also offering

improvement. All teachers are like, want to get better and want to serve kids well. And so it's like just constantly the things you say and the way you show up, listening, providing resources you know, like, the teaching profession is so challenging and so difficult. And anything that can be done, whether that's allowing for additional professional development or professional resources, or just simply the tools that teachers need to do their job well, right. So like actual classroom items, proving field trips, right, like, all of the things that like, it's really about supporting educators, who then in turn directly are working so hard to support the students. So, again, for me, it's all about relationships, right? And then that's not like lip service, it means like, being together talking together visiting, stopping at lunch, right? There's all of the like, everyday interactions that have to be like constant and consistent, so that that trust can get developed and just acknowledgement that trust does take time.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And I also know that you've kind of come into this new position during COVID, which I would imagine is super difficult, both for the teachers as well as people who are kind of looking into the career and it's like, I'm not so sure I want to go into teaching because I've seen how difficult it has been for these teachers right now. So do you have any like response to that or reason why maybe you should still pursue education, even though it looks really difficult and scary right now?

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Yeah, right. Like the COVID piece is certainly difficult. A lot of districts, some prairie included Madison, Dane County, most of Wisconsin are going into concurrent teaching. And I think it's that everything is so new and so challenging. And there's certainly this like sense of overwhelming, right, and that that doesn't go away, always wanting to serve, depending on your level, right? If you're elementary school, you might have 15-25 students, if you're Middle School, you might have 50-75 students, if you're high school, you might have 150 or more students. And so it's like, trying to meet all the students' individual needs is difficult. But at the end of the day, I think like any educator, if we asked right now, like, what are you missing the most, they would say the kids, right? Like, there's just something about being with children that is validating. It makes all of your hard day's worth it. Like to see kids grow to see them believe in themselves to see their true selves shine to see them excel to be able to afford opportunities that, you know, they wouldn't otherwise have, if they weren't set up and designed in a classroom. There's like a sense of self, at least for me, as a teacher, there's a sense of self worth that comes from that. And like, it's literally always about the kids, seeing their smiles, seeing their struggles. You know, I was most recently in middle school principal and watching the growth that happened from September of sixth grade year to May of eighth grade year. Look different, act different. Their minds have just like, like bloomed. So you know, why should people go into education? Education is the greatest determination of our future, right? It is where we make the most impact and is where he would make the most change. And particularly right now, you know, we have an opportunity to do what we have never done before in education and that is truly lift up our students and people of color in ways that highlight excellence, highlight all of the greatness, highlight all the richness and like, turn the just the history of education the past several hundred

years, and what's been oppressive, like we have, we the educator has the opportunity to flip that. So I think there's no better job out there than being an educator.

Claire Darmstadter

So well said thank you so much for that and just to close this out, can you give us a one word or phrase or just like closing in Spanish that you think is fun to say or that's you know, a fun interesting word.

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

La palabra es murciélago and the funny thing is that if you know this word it means bat, little animal. Right. And so again, when you're teaching Spanish for bilingualism, a lot of the books are translated. So like in English, he would say this is a bat when you're trying to read in Spanish este es un murciélago, it just helps me to highlight for people always that, like, translation is complex. And an easy word in Spanish is not an easy word in English and vice versa. And so it's also fun to say it's one of my faves.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, that is one of my favorites as well, so I'm so excited that brought that out. Well, thank you so much for chatting today. I think your perspectives both from the teaching side and the administrator side and being a parent and all these different things that go along with education and multilingualism I think are so valuable. So I really appreciate you chatting with me today. Thank you.

Sarah Chaja-Clardy

Absolutely. Take care.