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In this episode of The Crafty Polyglot, Dr. Felicia Eybl speaks with Lydia Ferguson, principal of North Academy of World Languages, about the heart of language immersion education. As both a school leader and a parent of an immersion student, Lydia offers a uniquely personal and professional perspective on what makes multilingual learning so transformative for children.

This conversation is valuable for parents, educators, and advocates alike because it explores not only the academic structure of immersion programs, but also the social, emotional, and global benefits they provide. From student confidence and empathy to cultural experiences, international travel, and the long-term impact of multilingualism, this interview highlights why language immersion is such a powerful investment in a child's future.

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Host: Felicia Eybl (Horse Education Group)

Guest: Lydia FERGISON

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Felicia Eybl

Welcome to The Crafty Polyglot podcast. I am Dr. Felicia Eybl, a board member of the Horse Education Group and the host for today's podcast.

Today on The Crafty Polyglot, it is my pleasure to welcome Lydia Ferguson, principal at North Academy of World Languages. Ms. Ferguson is in her fourth year as the principal at NAWL. She has many years of experience as an administrator and teacher in CMS. Welcome, Lydia.

Lydia Ferguson

Thank you.

Felicia Eybl

Lydia, tell us about your background and your journey to becoming a language immersion principal.

Lydia Ferguson

Thank you for having me here. It is certainly an honor to be able to talk about what we have really invested several years of hard work and sweat into.

This is my 24th year in CMS, and all of my years in education have been in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. I started out not really wanting to go into education at all. My mother is a retired principal, and I swore I would not follow in her footsteps, but here I am 24 years later.

After leaving high school, I had a teacher who felt that I was a natural at speaking Spanish. Because my aunt was also a Spanish teacher, I listened to that teacher, went to college, and studied Spanish. I lived in a Spanish-speaking dorm and decided to study abroad in Madrid, Spain.

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Felicia Eybl

Nice.

Lydia Ferguson

When the opportunity became available to become a teacher, I followed in my mother's and my aunt's footsteps to become a Spanish teacher and a leader.

Someone felt that I had leadership qualities, and so she recommended me. Pam Espinosa actually recommended me for a leadership position, and I obtained my admin degree. Here I am, the proud principal, now five years into North Academy of World Languages.

So that is a little bit about my background.

Felicia Eybl

Great. They are fortunate to have you at NAWL. I also studied Spanish in high school and was going to be a Spanish teacher, but then I decided elementary was more my thing.

Lydia Ferguson

Well, not only are we from Eastern North Carolina, but we also have a love of languages. That makes us true polyglots.

Felicia Eybl

That is right. That is right.

Tell us about the unique traits you have noticed in your students who are learning a second language.

Lydia Ferguson

What I love about this work is seeing the traits that I love about myself. As a second-language speaker, I now get to see those same traits in my own daughter, who is a student, as well as in the other 700 students I am responsible for.

One of the traits that I love to see in language immersion students is the willingness to take risks. They are not afraid to try new things. They love the way language sounds, and they love the culture that they have the opportunity to study.

They are not afraid if they make errors because they know they are learning something that many of their peers are not. I love being able to see that willingness.

They also have a heightened curiosity. They want to know what things mean, what food tastes like, and where things are located in the world. I just love being able to see those traits in our students.

Felicia Eybl

That is great.

One of the three pillars of language immersion is social-emotional competence, which I am sure your students are developing. Have you noticed that your students demonstrate increased empathy with their classmates, teachers, or people of other cultures?

Lydia Ferguson

Absolutely.

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Our school serves students kindergarten through eighth grade. When I am visiting classes or speaking to parents, a lot of parents will talk to me about an increased empathy that their students have for others who are learning.

In a class where everyone is kind of starting at square one, everyone is on a different continuum of learning the language. It is expected that your accent might not be native-like the first time. Students really help each other in the class setting.

There is an increased empathy for students who are learning, and an increased willingness to help each other, particularly from those students who are native-like speakers already. They are willing to show off their culture and help those students who are learning.

There is also an ability to navigate being uncomfortable. We always tell our students they can do hard things, but we have to show them that they can.

A lot of my teachers will record a student at the beginning of their language immersion journey, and then at the end of the year, when we have all the celebrations and the parents are coming to congratulate their children during those moving-up ceremonies that I know you are so familiar with, we will play a before-and-after video and show the students how much growth they have made.

It really is never a dry eye in the room when we show them how much growth they have made.

Felicia Eybl

How do you see that impacting the teachers? How are they in regard to their teachers?

Lydia Ferguson

A lot of research shows that there is always some turnover and attrition for teachers, but many teachers remain in these positions.

From our inaugural year five years ago, I still have many of those teachers at NAWL. Because they love to see the students from kindergarten through eighth grade, it really creates a family feel.

If anything, I am running students off those halls and saying, "Listen, you are now a seventh grader. Why are you on the kindergarten hall?"

And they say, "I have to come back and see my teacher. I have to let them know that I traveled to Germany," or, "I have to let them know I traveled to Switzerland and I was the family translator."

For the teachers, it really is a full-circle moment. In a traditional school, you send your kids off to middle school, but in our school, you get to see those babies grow up from being five-year-olds and being unsure about themselves to really becoming competent global citizens, which we write about in our mission statements.

Even my kindergarten teachers come to the eighth-grade, sixth-grade, or seventh-grade moving-on ceremonies to see their kids. The families still say, "Our kids are here because of what you did."

It really is a beautiful moment that I know you know all too well.

Felicia Eybl

Your daughter, Layla, is an immersion student at NAWL, your school. What impacted your decision to enroll her in a language immersion program?

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Lydia Ferguson

Before I became a mom, and when I stepped into the role of leadership, one of my mantras was that whatever school I am a leader of, it has to be good enough for my child or for the children that I love.

When I became a mother and knew that I would have the opportunity to lead a school, and that my daughter would be a good fit for the program, it really showed parents that it is good enough for my child.

I get to put on two hats, a parent hat and a principal hat, and say, "Here are the challenges that my family faced as a language immersion family, and here are some opportunities that we took advantage of."

Parents believe you because you are not necessarily experimenting on their child. You have experienced it with your own child first.

Being able to have my daughter with me really reminds me of my why every day. Obviously, language immersion opens doors. Being able to have my own child spend her summer abroad and see her navigate and create new friendships is just a personal win for our family.

For me, I now sit in the role of parent and remember my mom saying what the required opportunities were. This is a required opportunity for her. She really did not have a choice to learn language.

Seeing her confidence and seeing her able to navigate, not just Charlotte, but really being able to say, "Okay, the train comes at such-and-such time," when we were in France, really is what parents are raising their children to be.

Felicia Eybl

What advice would you give parents considering immersion for their own children? You already did cover some of that, but what else would you say to parents?

Lydia Ferguson

I would say it kind of ebbs and flows.

My kindergarten parents are the most excited, but sometimes also the most fearful that they are not able to help as much as they want. So we really tell parents to trust the process.

Oftentimes, parents will send panic emails saying, "My child is not developing English as fast as I want them to," or, "Their reading might be a little choppy in the beginning."

I tell them to trust the process and encourage their students. Do not necessarily try to learn the language alongside them because parents have these hopes that they are going to be just as fluent as their children, and I tell them that is a false narrative because they are not immersed.

It could just be that their children are learning something and mastering something that they are not, which the children love, because they like to have something they can hold over their parents' heads that they can do and their parents cannot.

When there are siblings in the home and the siblings are learning the two languages, I often hear from parents that the kids are laughing and having a whole conversation, and the parents assume it is about them.

I say enjoy those moments because we really are giving students skills that will shape who they are for a lifetime.

Felicia Eybl

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Right. Absolutely, absolutely.

As the principal of a school where students are learning multiple languages, what do you see as advantages for students surrounded by language learners in different languages?

Lydia Ferguson

I could go on and on about that.

More than ever, the ability to be diplomatic, the ability not just to tolerate others but really appreciate them, and cross-cultural friendships are paramount.

I have seen students and their families hosting. We have a program where we host academic volunteers, and the friendships that families create through that, and the ability to travel and build those friendships, are super important.

The ability to understand that multilingualism is really normalized is also powerful. Sometimes in the United States, because English is so prevalent no matter where you go, students kind of have a theory that wherever they go, they are going to be the center of attention.

Understanding that not everyone has to speak English, and that they should develop skills outside of their particular culture, is important.

Students who are able to understand that there is a world out there that does not always center around them, and who also understand that real, true, deep friendships can be cultivated, are developing something very meaningful. That is very moving as the principal.

Felicia Eybl

What cultural programs or assemblies are offered at NAWL to expose your students to native speakers and other language models?

Lydia Ferguson

That is another question I could go on and on about.

Right now, when I leave here, I am going to our winter market. We have done something a little different at NAWL because all of our families are so involved. Each group kind of has its own night.

So tonight is the German market. The next night we might have more Francophone families. We have families coming from German communities. We have German debate teams coming to show how there is debate between students learning the premise of debate, but doing it in a different language.

There are also different foods created for our families. We have French artisans coming with fresh baguettes that families can purchase. So I kind of always first start with the food.

Felicia Eybl

Right.

Lydia Ferguson

Because that is important.

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Partnering with other vendors that offer authentic opportunities for students to learn from someone other than their teachers is important. We really try to seek out different vendors from the community to partner with us so that students know they are not just learning language from their teachers.

Having opportunities like the markets we have going on right now, and working with vendors like Horse French to create those opportunities, is really important for us as well.

Different holidays and traditions like St. Martin's, Lunar New Year, and those opportunities that are truly traditional to the language, of course, are also important.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, absolutely.

Lydia Ferguson

We bring in lion dancers. All of those things are what make NAWL very, very unique.

Felicia Eybl

Yes.

Elaborate on how teachers plan for instruction in the language immersion program. Are they planning across grade levels? Are they planning just with their language teachers?

Lydia Ferguson

It really is a science.

You know very well that while our students are learning what every other student is learning in North Carolina with the standards, our teachers have to do a little bit more.

I always like to give a shout-out to our amazing staff who work so hard not only to make sure that students are learning the standards, but that they are learning them authentically through language.

That requires them to really curate their own materials by finding texts that match what everyone else is doing.

An example would be my third-grade students just finishing Peter Pan. Our students are not only reading Peter Pan in English, because third grade is where students are formally introduced to English, but my students in French, for example, are reading Peter Pan in French alongside the English.

Talk about the cognitive lift that students have, and the cognitive lift that teachers have to plan for, in order to work with the English team and the French team and say, "What are some of the things we want to lift from the texts that can be explained in both languages?"

That really requires a lot of hard work from teachers, a lot of extra planning to secure those materials, and making sure the outcome is the same for the students.

We do start cross-planning early. Our kindergarten teachers believe, as we do at NAWL, that graduation begins in kindergarten. In order to be a fluent reader by the time a student is in third grade, what are some of the things teachers need to work on in kindergarten? Yes, coloring is important, but what are also some of the skills we want students to be able to transfer by the time they get to third, fourth, and fifth grade, where testing is of the essence?

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So yes, to answer your question, planning does take place across grade levels, and it is really scientific. I cannot thank my team enough for what they do to make sure that students are prepared.

Felicia Eybl

That is great.

How difficult is it to acquire materials in these second languages? Tell us a little bit about that.

Lydia Ferguson

So, three trips in, three trips into traveling abroad, not just to secure materials that can be purchased online, but really going to the universities.

You and I were fortunate to travel together and really talk to teachers and professors at universities to say, “Okay, what are your teachers, what are your pre-service teachers, using? What texts are culturally relevant for students who, at our schools, represent many languages, races, and nationalities?”

How do we find books that not only align to our standards, but also align to the realities of our diverse families?

Working with our district-level learning and teaching teams to align the curriculum that all schools are using, while also asking how we find texts and resources that are parallel, is difficult. But it is also very rewarding when you find those resources and are able to say, “Look, I found it.”

With the French language, for example, we are typically trying to work with the French government and the Canadian government to have those materials shipped to us.

Of course, there is always the question of whether your procurement department works with different vendors, especially international vendors, where no one can read the contract.

So how do we get our legal department on board to enter into contracts with vendors across the globe? That is really a challenge sometimes. But once you find those materials, it certainly is rewarding to be able to have them in your hands for children to use.

Felicia Eybl

You mentioned that formal English language instruction starts in third grade, except of course in Chinese, where it starts in kindergarten. What skills are students able to transfer from their immersion language to formally learning English literacy?

Lydia Ferguson

That is the science, and that is what we work so hard to explain to our families when we are convincing them that this truly is a gift.

My first love is in linguistics, and all of the research I am doing now as a doctoral student is about how we transfer languages across. Phonemic awareness, decodable skills, how students really learn language.

How do they organize their writing? How do they understand grammar? Each language has its own code. No matter what the language is, we have to remember that language is meant for communication.

So whether it is writing or speaking, how do we get students to understand that there are grammatical rules in Mandarin, there are grammatical rules in French, and how do I compare what I have learned in English to my new language?

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That is what we work so hard on at NAWL. We want our English team not only to work with parents, but also to work across languages.

So if I am teaching strokes in Mandarin, how do I say, "This is very similar to punctuation in English"? Yes, student, you are learning a logographic language, but you are also transferring those skills to what you do in the English language.

Students are not necessarily learning to read English only. They are learning to transfer what they learned in their target language to English, which is why language immersion is such a gift.

In French, for example, our students are learning the same skills as what we use for DIBELS. Do they recognize beginning sounds? Can they blend sounds? Do they look at nonsense words? Those are the same skills we are working on in French and German. Those are Latin-based languages.

Of course, we are doing the same in Mandarin for our students as well. Morphology, beginning sounds, prefixes, suffixes, spelling patterns, phonics, explicit grammar, all of that transfers from the target language to English.

Felicia Eybl
Right. Right.

What advice or support do you offer for parents for their children at home? You touched on that earlier, too. We know that the parents are not learning the language with their children, so what do you suggest that they do at home with their children?

Lydia Ferguson
I would say create a positive mindset. It is hard in the beginning. Sometimes there might be tears for those students who are embracing the opportunity that parents have given them.

Learn alongside the children. Let the children be your teachers. Ask them to teach you a word a day.

The teachers at NAWL do a tremendous job of sending materials home, videos, and recordings of themselves. Watch those videos alongside the children, and let the children judge your language.

My daughter loves to say, "No, Mom, you cannot say it that way. It is not bonjour. You sound Southern. It is bonjour." She says, "You have to really say it with a certain je ne sais quoi. You have to really feel it."

She loves being able to have me channel my inner French self, and I enjoy allowing her to have that power to be able to teach me.

A lot of my families want to immediately take a trip and have their children be the family interpreter. The kids will say, "Can you please tell my mom I am not ready to go to Paris and be the family interpreter? I am only in third grade."

So I say allow the students to show off a little bit, but do not put too much pressure on them. I am guilty of it. Every time I meet a French speaker, I will say, "My daughter speaks French. Layla, come over here and tell them what you know."

And she will say, "My name is Layla. I am in fifth grade."

So really, brag a little, but do not put too much pressure on your student.

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Lastly, stay connected with teachers. Find out how your child is doing. Trust the teacher. We ask families to place a lot of trust in our program, but trust the teachers. See how you can support at home.

Just like with any other language, when your child needs extra help, ask how you can do that outside of what the teacher is doing in school.

So, a strong home relationship and really enjoying the magic of language immersion.

Felicia Eybl

Absolutely, enjoying the magic of language immersion.

You mentioned trips there for a minute. Are there plans for international travel for immersion students at NAWL? Tell us all about it.

Lydia Ferguson

The million-dollar question.

I like to remind my families, and you were such a gracious sister school when we opened NAWL, that SAIL has been in existence for more than 20 years. A lot of the partnerships that you all have established, I have been the benefactor of by learning how to do those things.

In just a short five years, we already have plans in place and are working on having those memorandums of understanding in place between the school and other countries. It does not happen overnight, but certainly we have learned from the blueprint of our sister school how to do those partnerships and how to establish the homestays.

We are very excited that we are working at the state level with some of our friends who have already been guests on this podcast on how to establish those opportunities. We hope to take our first group next year, and I will not spoil the surprise yet, but we do hope to take our first group next year to participate.

One of the things that we are going to ask our families to do is, in addition to sending your child abroad, also host a student.

Dr. Lynn and I at SAIL have already talked about how we are going to launch those family meetings to explain what those trips are, what they are not, and how families can get involved.

Some of my very ambitious middle school teachers want not only to offer this opportunity for immersion students, but also for those students who come in through language learning in sixth grade. If not necessarily a home stay, then at least the opportunity to travel abroad with their friends.

We have done that already at NAWL. We have gone to Paris, London, Switzerland, and Germany. This year we are going to Japan.

This is a different track that we take for those students who have not been in the immersion program, but who still want the opportunity to travel with their middle school friends.

Felicia Eybl

Minus the parents.

Lydia Ferguson

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Yes, minus the parents.

Felicia Eybl

That is a very good point. Yes, yes, yes. We want those kids to be able to do these things on their own and to have the confidence that they can truly be global citizens, which we talk about in our mission and vision all the time.

Lydia Ferguson

Great. So stay tuned, because you will see that the Narwhals are taking this show on the road.

Felicia Eybl

Okay, great. Thank you, Ms. Ferguson, for joining us this evening. We certainly appreciate it, and you have certainly added to our Crafty Polyglot series. Thank you so much.

Lydia Ferguson

Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun. Thank you.