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In this episode of The Crafty Polyglot, Dr. Felicia Eybl speaks with Dr. Nicolette Grant, a nationally respected leader in dual language immersion, educational leadership, and school transformation. With experience spanning district leadership, principal coaching, higher education, and the development of successful bilingual programs, Dr. Grant brings both practical expertise and a deep personal passion for multilingual education.

This conversation is especially valuable for parents, educators, and school leaders because it explores what makes dual language programs truly effective, the systemic challenges they face, and the long-term academic, cultural, and global benefits they offer students. From staffing and advocacy to student identity and international teacher support, this interview offers meaningful insight into why dual language immersion matters so deeply.

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Host: Felicia Eybl (Horse Education Group)

Guest: Nicolette GRANT

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Felicia Eybl

Hello, I am Dr. Felicia Eybl, member of the Horse Education Group and the moderator for The Crafty Polyglot podcast.

Today I am pleased to have as our guest Dr. Nicolette Grant. Dr. Grant is the President and CEO of Inspire Excellence, which specializes in coaching principals and district leaders as they develop, improve, and/or expand DLI programs. She currently serves on the Fostering Language Acquisition of North Carolina, FLANC, Board and is a Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies, JNCL-NCLIS, North Carolina advocate.

Dr. Grant is also an Educational Leadership Program Advisory Board member for the Wake Forest School of Professional Studies. Previously, Dr. Grant served as the Learning Community Superintendent for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, the Chief Academic Officer for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, and the Executive Director of Choice and Magnet Schools for Guilford County Schools.

As the former principal of Collinswood Language Academy, a K–8 DLI school in Charlotte, North Carolina, she received numerous awards and recognition for outstanding academic outcomes for bilingual students. Her successful journey creating Collinswood’s middle school DLI program was included in Creating Dual Language Schools for a Transformed World: Administrators Speak by Drs. Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas.

Dr. Grant’s doctoral research at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte focused on understanding and improving the onboarding experiences of international Latinx teachers in DLI programs. She currently serves as an adjunct professor teaching DLI administration graduate course at East Carolina University and is an associate professor in the educational leadership department at UNC Charlotte.

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Welcome, Dr. Grant. Thank you for joining us today.

Nicolette Grant

Thank you for inviting me.

Felicia Eybl

It is such a pleasure to have you with us today. How did you personally become a strong proponent of dual language immersion programs?

Nicolette Grant

I think my love of language started in middle school. I took Spanish in middle school, in high school, and in college.

I grew up in New York, and a lot of my friends were Puerto Rican, Colombian, and Peruvian. I just loved the language, and I loved the culture, so I was always interested in that.

Then when I moved to Charlotte, I worked at Crown Point Elementary School, and I was the only staff member in the entire building who spoke Spanish, which was a shock to me. We had a lot of Spanish-speaking students in the building and families, so I took the initiative to translate for families and for students. I ended up creating a Spanish-English guide for the school to help teachers communicate with students.

I just loved that language opened doors and broke down barriers between the families and the school. The students and the families felt so excited that their language was being used and that they had someone to communicate with.

Anyway, from that experience, I ended up meeting Cheryl Little, who was the literacy facilitator at Collinswood Language Academy at the time. I was a literacy facilitator at Crown Point, so she and I were at a meeting and I was sharing my love of the language. She asked, "Have you ever heard of Collinswood?" I said, "No, I have never heard of Collinswood Language Academy." I had been in the district 10 years and had never heard of the school.

She introduced me to the school at the same time that I was finishing my admin degree at UNC Charlotte. Once I visited, I was in love. My soul felt like it was being fed, like I was finally in the place that I was supposed to be all of my life.

I was introduced to dual language through Cheryl Little and the principal at the time, Maria Petrie, who started the program at Collinswood Language Academy.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, that is amazing. That is wonderful. What part of that spark still motivates you today?

Nicolette Grant

I love language.

If I could, I would love to learn every single language in the world. I love language. I love the sound of it. I love the way that it expresses culture, the way that it expresses history, the way that it brings people together, and the way that it dispels bias and assumptions about people.

If you cannot speak someone's language and you do not take the time to learn their culture, so many misunderstandings and so many geopolitical crises can occur.

I just love the fact that, if we could just talk to one another, how many things could we solve in this world? Politically, geopolitically, militarily, diplomatically, solving a business crisis or a health crisis.

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So anyway, language in general, I love it. I love being around the language, and I love hearing it. That is just something that feeds me.

Felicia Eybl

Yes. It is interesting, too, that you decided that language was important to you and that that is what feeds you and makes you grow, or makes you just feel whole. That is great.

I just have to ask this because I know this about you. Does your twin sister also speak Spanish?

Nicolette Grant

She does. She does.

Then when I was at Collinswood, my daughter and my son were transferred to Collinswood when I was there. So I got to see my kids using the language. My son did not finish at Collinswood. He ended up transferring to another school, but then he took up Latin, French, and Spanish.

Felicia Eybl

Wow.

Nicolette Grant

My daughter stayed in Collinswood all through eighth grade and was the first group of our eighth graders that went through the program. Then she went off to high school and college. In college, she studied abroad in Spain for a semester. She also studied abroad in Santiago, Chile, for a semester.

Anyway, my sister, my twin, had children who went to Collinswood. So I had my niece and nephew with me as well, and they went through the program. They are now a high school senior and the other is in college, both using the language. It has just opened doors and opened the world to all of them.

Felicia Eybl

Right, right. It is just so amazing how these language immersion experiences open the world up to our children. People just do not understand what an amazing journey that is and how that helps you understand other people.

You have observed countless dual language classrooms. What distinguishes a truly effective immersion environment from one that is just teaching in another language?

Nicolette Grant

I would say, obviously, whether it is English or all traditional schools, we are teaching reading, writing, listening, and speaking. So, in a dual language school, you are doing that in two languages.

But in addition to that, there is a fifth domain of metalinguistics. So not only are you teaching, in my case, Spanish and English, but you are also teaching students how to compare and contrast and study the language.

Students learn their own language of English more deeply, or their own language of Spanish more deeply, as well as the other language because of the constant comparisons and fine-tuning and looking at and studying language, whether it is syntax, pronunciation, idioms, jokes, or whatever it is. They are learning that in addition.

So, the teachers, as they are teaching language and teaching students to compare and contrast languages, are also teaching culture. That stands out more so than in other traditional programs. Traditional programs just teach the

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content, the writing standards, and the content. In our language immersion schools, they are teaching that, plus the language, plus studying the language, plus culture.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, and that is something that stands out. That is unique.

That is very unique, and that is what people outside of language immersion do not understand.

So, what is something you think a great language immersion teacher does that might go unnoticed by an outsider?

Nicolette Grant

I think one of the things that I look for the most when I go into classrooms is who is doing the talking. We say that as principals, but it really is so important in a language school.

When I first arrived at Collinswood, what I noticed the most was that the teachers were the ones doing the talking. So I am walking around the classrooms and I am looking, and I am thinking, okay, the teachers are learning the language. The teachers are practicing the language, which is great. It is a model for students to be able to hear the language. But the students were not producing it.

So, they were building and picking up their receptive understanding of the language, but they were not using it. That was one of the first things I thought: we need to do more with cooperative learning.

What I look for the most is cooperative learning being used effectively in the classroom. I am looking for what opportunities the students have to read, write, listen, speak, and study the language. But they have to talk with their peers. They have to use the language in order for them to learn it. So that is the thing I am looking for the most.

I am also looking for teachers to be able to share their culture and help students compare and contrast cultures. I am looking for language scaffolding as well as content scaffolding. I am looking for the use of sentence frames or graphic organizers, thinking maps. I am looking for effective language strategies within the classroom.

I am also looking for very high expectations for students and high engagement.

Felicia Eybl

Absolutely. Those high expectations, I think, are very important for each student.

You have mentioned that immersion is not just about language, but it also includes culture, identity, and connection. How do you see immersion shaping the way students understand themselves and the world?

Nicolette Grant

I think traditionally students are not as attuned to their culture in America. Sometimes they do not even realize that they have a culture in America. They think everyone else has a culture, but they do not have one.

But I think in the classroom, where they get to interact with students from Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Chile, and other places, both the students and the teachers get a chance to learn other cultures.

As they learn other cultures, they start to think more introspectively about their own culture as they compare the two. So, I think that provides a great opportunity for students.

I am not sure if I answered the full question, but that is what I think I see.

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Felicia Eybl

As we look at the realities, what are the biggest systemic challenges facing dual language and immersion programs today?

Nicolette Grant

One of the great things about dual language is that people are starting to learn about it. It is becoming a lot more popular. So, in the last 15 years, the number of dual language programs in the country has tripled. We have over 3,600 programs now in the country.

In North Carolina, over the last 20-plus years, we have gone from 58 programs to over 300 programs. So the good thing is that people are learning about it and they see the benefits of it.

The downside is that we are now fighting for teachers. It is happening at the same time that we are dealing with a nationwide teaching shortage of just any teacher, let alone bilingual teachers. So teacher shortage is the biggest challenge, I would say, to dual language programs.

Many principals hire international teachers instead to fill the spaces, but there are a limited number of visas that are offered. Then those teachers can only stay for up to five years. So every five years, you are having a churning of your staff and rebuilding and reteaching and getting them acclimated to American culture and American pedagogy, and then they leave and you start all over again.

So, I would say the biggest challenge is the teacher shortage. Secondly, I would say political policies, sometimes political biases that do not support dual language funding, whether it is federal funding or local funding.

Sometimes it is local districts and central office staff that do not understand dual language. So they do not know how to best support it, and therefore they are not supporting it in the way they should.

Then what I have seen lately, as we are growing so many programs, is that there are a lot of schools being led by principals who do not have experience in dual language and were just placed at a dual language school.

So, it is going to be so important that our school districts train the principals, make sure they know the research, the benefits, and the strategies, and that we are training central office staff so they know how best to support. Then we need to advocate at our state and federal levels for the funding we need for the program, the curriculum resources, and also for the teachers.

Felicia Eybl

Absolutely, absolutely. What suggestions would you have for leaders in districts as they look toward hiring or seeking international teachers?

Nicolette Grant

Ideally, we would create our own grow-your-own programs here.

We have had Waddell and then SAIL and NAWL and Collinswood and Oaklawn and now SAIL, South Meck High School, North Meck. We now have years of students, graduates, who have come through a dual language program.

So it would be ideal if we could create a partnership with a local school, like UNC Charlotte, because that is my school and I have worked with them before as we tried to create a pipeline for our K-12 immersion students to go into the field of teaching so that they can become our next group of teachers.

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That way, we have permanent residents who are here, who understand the program, and who have a near-native accent.

Additionally, we have programs that take teacher assistants into teaching positions and teacher residencies. So we should be looking at the local community. Who can we get in our local community who speaks the language and can become a teacher assistant for a few years? How can we help them then get their teaching license so that they can be the next group of teachers for us?

For Spanish programs, we can go to Puerto Rico and hire teachers from Puerto Rico because they are U.S. citizens and we do not have to deal with the visa issues.

Finally, we are using international companies. So we use Participate Learning, we use TPG and EPI, and there is another one, Global. We are looking at different organizations that can hire teachers for us. But again, there is a limit on the number of visas, and there is more competition across the country from other districts that are trying to hire.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, absolutely. Part of your research, and this might go back to the question you just answered, was on teacher retention in dual language programs. There is currently a shortage, and most teachers in dual language immersion programs are guest teachers.

How do students benefit from having teachers who are native speakers of the non-English language?

Nicolette Grant

I would say they benefit from the cultural exchange the most.

Obviously, Spanish speakers from the United States can teach the class, but the teachers from Peru, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere are bringing their culture. They are bringing sayings, expressions, idioms, and stories that they read when they grew up.

They are explaining what is happening in their countries now. I especially loved, when I was at Collinswood, that social studies was taught in Spanish. I thought it was a great opportunity for the teachers to talk about their societies, their cultures, and their governments as they were teaching our United States social studies standards.

So, they are bringing that authentic language and accent, but they are also bringing the culture with them into the classroom.

I think that is a great benefit. But also, the teachers are learning from one another, from other countries, and then taking that back to their countries. So it is an opportunity for some ambassadorship, with the teacher and the cultural exchange having a transnational focus on them coming to our country and learning and teaching, then taking things back to their country so they can teach their students about American systems and American pedagogies. They bring theirs, and we learn from one another. So it is an opportunity for learning.

Felicia Eybl

How would you say that parents can support the teachers who are recently arrived in the United States?

Nicolette Grant

In so many ways. Your school did this, and mine did as well. We had a strong PTA, and it is important that the PTA is representative of the entire school, so both languages on the PTA and all racial groups.

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The PTA purchased furniture for the teachers, and we would lend that out to the teachers to use while they were here. Then when they finished their three- to five-year contracts with us, we would collect the furniture and use it again for another teacher who was coming in. That helped with furnishing their homes.

The PTA also had a storage unit that they would pay for. The help with furniture was important because many of these teachers are coming here with just two suitcases.

The PTA also would buy gift cards so that teachers could buy towels, sheets, kitchen items, and toiletries. I think another great idea is creating housewarming parties for the teachers so that people can purchase sheets, towels, and other essentials for them.

Another district I worked with, from my dissertation, offered more of a welcome party for the families of the international teachers. What they said was that when international teachers come, they have a school family that will mentor them, coach them, help them, and train them.

But when they come with their spouses, often their spouses are isolated. They cannot work yet because they have not gotten their visas. Their children may not know anyone yet.

So one of the people from my dissertation research said that in her district they hold something almost like a family picnic where they invite all of the international teachers and their spouses and children, along with the staff, spouses, and children. That way they get a chance to get to know one another and their spouses do not feel so isolated. The children get to meet one another quickly. She said it was a great way to welcome them into the school community.

Another thing that came out was that there is such a difference between Latin American culture and American culture. The teachers mentioned what they called Latin warmth. It is a family, communal feeling.

In America, they said it was more individualistic and more work, work, work, industrialized, always rushing to do more work. They want relationships, and they want time to get to know one another. Getting adjusted to that industrial, work-focused and data-focused environment was another thing they talked about. We test so much in America, and they do not do that in the same way in Latin American countries. It is more holistic and child-development focused.

So the PTA can help by providing resources, furniture, taking them around town, showing them places, and helping with things like their driver's license or getting a car.

The teachers mentioned that it is difficult because they do not have credit. They do not have credit scores. So when they come here and try to apply for a car or apartment and are asked for their credit scores, they do not have that information, and they do not have a Social Security number yet. It makes it difficult, not only financially, especially when they have to come up with a deposit and the first month's rent before we have even paid them here in the United States.

There are so many bureaucratic challenges they deal with. So anything we can do to support their onboarding to the community is really important for the families. Then, of course, the school has to think about how it will onboard them in terms of pedagogy and expectations.

Felicia Eybl

Yes, those are some very important points. And just having that connection with other people is important to international teachers when they arrive because they really are just thrown into it, and it can be difficult.

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Dr. Wayne Thomas and Dr. Virginia Collier are widely recognized for their longitudinal research on dual language immersion. Your research was also included in their book. Tell us a little bit about that and its impact on DLI programs.

Nicolette Grant

I met Drs. Collier and Thomas back in 2013, at a dual language conference, and they visited Collinswood. I was very excited to have them actually in my school.

When I started at Collinswood, it was a K–5 school when I was an assistant principal. Then when I became principal, my charge was to turn it into a middle school, to grow the program, which was a little different from what Inez had done at Waddell and Smith at the time because she already had middle school and kind of grew the elementary down into the K–8 by combining schools.

We did not have any K–8 Spanish models here in Charlotte at the time, so my charge was to research, develop, and grow that program.

When I met Drs. Collier and Thomas, they wanted to learn more about what I did to grow the middle school program. They came and visited the school and toured it. 2013 was my third year of having the middle school, and we had just made it up to eighth grade the year they came.

They were blown away, and they were so impressed. They asked me to write about that. So that is what I submitted to their third book, the green book, which is a book about administrators. They reached out to different administrators around the country to ask them to share different experiences they had in dual language. So that is what I shared in that particular book.

Felicia Eybl

Great, great. What else would you like to add, or what would you share with parents who are interested in enrolling their children in a dual language program?

Nicolette Grant

Lots of things for parents. First of all, it is an amazing, life-changing program.

My children went there, your children went there, Inez spoke earlier, Lydia did in one of your earlier episodes, and their kids went there.

The potential for expanding students' world, expanding their perspectives, expanding their job opportunities, and feeding into fields like the military, the United Nations, healthcare, and every other industry — you cannot go wrong having two languages.

Especially as an African American woman, it was important to me, and it was important to the families in my school. When I got there, our African American representation was not as large. For families to see me as a leader who could use the language, and to see my daughter doing the same, the number of African American families grew so substantially while I was there.

The research from Collier and Thomas shows that African American students in dual language programs outperform their comparable peers by almost a full year by middle school. The academic benefits, the cognitive benefits, the social benefits — all of those things are wonderful for families.

Even within the community, having multiple languages helps you be a better neighbor and a better citizen.

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So I would say that for families, and I would also say to stick with it. Dual language or language immersion is not an overnight thing. Research says that it takes at least five to seven years for students to become proficient in the language.

So if you start in kindergarten, first grade, or second grade, do not pull them out in second grade because you are worried about English. The kids are going to learn English as well as a second language, but commit to the program through all of elementary school, and through middle school if your district has it, and through high school if you have that option.

Allow your child to travel internationally. We all did that as principals. We set that up for our students to be able to travel abroad. Our students went to Spain and multiple cities around Spain and used the language and were immersed in the culture. In your school, the same thing happened in multiple countries.

So give them that opportunity to use the language.

Finally, I would say for families: we need you as advocates. Learn as much as you can about dual language, the research, the benefits, and the strategies, and then become an advocate in your local district with your central office staff, your superintendent, and your school board. Be an advocate at your state level for funding, support, and policies, and then be an advocate at the federal level.

You mentioned JNCL, which is the Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies. It is an advocacy branch. They work directly with congressional leaders and advocate for bills like the World Language Advancement and Readiness Act, which provides dual language and world language expansion for military-connected schools, or World LEAP, which is something we are advocating for now for districts that are not necessarily military-connected to help grow and expand dual language.

They also advocate for making sure our federal government provides Title III funding for ESL students at the level needed and that it is efficiently distributed to the districts.

Study abroad is another thing we are focusing on. Fulbright-Hays and other study-abroad opportunities are so important for our college students and our teachers.

So as a parent, think about ways you can advocate locally, at the state level, and nationally to support this expansion of dual language.

Felicia Eybl

Well, thank you so much for joining us today. You have provided us with some excellent information and insight into dual language and immersion, and we appreciate having you here.

Nicolette Grant

Thank you so much.