

Seidman: Lessons from Dr. Seuss day



Herald Tribune columnist Carrie Seidman and some new friends from Christine Thompson's first-grade class at Fruitville Elementary get ready to read "Green Eggs and Ham" during Dr. Seuss Embracing Our Differences day. [Photo provided by Bill Wagy]

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Posted Mar 3, 2019 at 6:00 AM

Why we need to consider what we're feeding our kids — both literally and metaphorically.

I come from a big family and one in which childhood bedtimes always involved a story read aloud. So reading and kids are two of my favorite things; reading to kids is even better. But having no grandchildren of my own and only rarely able to pry some away from the arms of those who do, I don't have the opportunity to do it much these days.

Which is why I always look forward to Embracing Dr. Seuss' Differences day. Put on by the nonprofit that brings us billboards of student art with pithy captions about diversity at Bayfront Park, this annual event brings hundreds of local volunteers into elementary school classrooms on a single day to read the time-honored stories of children's book author Theodore Geisel.

Over the years I've participated, I've had meaningful conversations with first-graders about honesty and authority after "The Cat in the Hat"; discussed solutions to environmental degradation with third-graders after "The Lorax"; and talked about inclusion with kindergartners after "Hooper Humperdink — Not Him!" It's always good to get the children's fresh and unfiltered view of the world.

When I learned I'd be reading "Green Eggs and Ham" to Christine Thompson's first-graders at Fruitville Elementary this year, I started thinking about how to reinforce the book's lesson. The usual experiential partner is to cook and eat eggs dyed with green food coloring. But Ms. Thompson's students had already done that in the hours before I arrived. I had to get creative.

So, I stopped at Whole Foods and filled a to-go container with the weirdest items I could find from the salad bar — pickled beets and artichoke hearts and marinated fava beans. I also threw in a few more familiar items to entice the timid — raw broccoli, black olives, red pepper slices. (Total \$14.53 ... honestly, how does anyone afford shopping here regularly?)

My reading was scheduled in the afternoon, just before dismissal time, and when I got to the classroom it looked a little like the house in "The Cat in the Hat" before the mad scramble to clean up prior to Mom's arrival home. The students were distracted from their chores as I set the food out on a tray, but soon enough, they'd donned paper versions of the familiar Seussian red and white striped stovepipe hats and assembled on the floor facing a chair reserved for me.

I'd barely turned the first page when it became obvious they already knew this story by heart. As the narrator grew increasingly insistent that he was not interested in eating green eggs and ham under any circumstances, they chanted along with me, chiming in with extra enthusiasm (and volume) at "I will not eat them ANYWHERE!"

When the green eggs had at last been tried (and enjoyed) and after the final shouted "Sam-I-am!" I asked the kids what they thought the book was about. "It's

about trying ... trying ... trying ...” a little girl began, her raised hand having preceded the formulation of her answer.

“It’s about trying new things!” someone else shouted. “Like we tried green eggs and ham this morning.”

We talked about how it could be scary to try something new and how you sometimes had to be a little brave. We talked about what “new things” had made them nervous — the first day of school, dance class, trying Brussels sprouts. When one student boasted he was never afraid of anything, we talked about how sometimes it was the right thing to be afraid, like if you lost track of Mom at the mall or a grizzly bear showed up at your classroom door.

But they were interested in cutting to the quick. (After all, it was snack time.) “Who is brave enough to try something new?” I asked and every hand shot up. I handed out toothpicks and asked them to select something from the tray they’d never tried before.

The first boy eyed everything suspiciously, settled on the one thing he recognized — a chunk of raw broccoli — and took a bite so small as to be less than the crumb left by the Grinch when robbing Cindy Lou Who’s Christmas meal. The next picked the only other thing that looked vaguely familiar, a spear of baby corn.

One by one they chose, their bravado rapidly diminishing. The kiwi slices went first, then the corn. When I suggested blood oranges tasted like any other orange, they eyed me as distrustfully as the food. A few brave souls who must have more adventurous diets at home polished off the olives and red peppers.

“Come on! Be brave!” I encouraged them. But after a sample of sweet potato caused one child to gag, I cheerfully added, “And if you don’t like something you can spit it out in the wastebasket. What’s important is, you tried!”

Ultimately, it became obvious no one was going to touch those pickled cipollini onions or marinated garlic cloves. And when Ms. Thompson offered their regular snack — a granola bar or some fruit gummies — there was a stampede away from the tray.

The lessons on this day were obvious. Children embrace what they are regularly fed. Exposure to variety is essential to broadening appetites. Fear of the unknown breeds contempt and rejection.

That goes for food, of course, but it also goes for what we're putting in our children's heads these days as well as in their stomachs. Exposure to a diversity — of people, ideas, ways of life — will not only help shape their preferences and future pursuits, it can instill an empathy for and acceptance of others with different looks, tastes and practices.

I worry about the steady diet of bias our children are absorbing these days, on television, on social media, maybe even at the dinner table. Not to stretch the metaphor too far, but it's worthwhile to remember that these early years of discovery, when unfamiliarity hasn't yet hardened into repudiation, may be the best time to introduce those fava beans.

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