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## Embracing our Differences sends message of inclusivity through literacy

The not-for-profit organization gifts each student a book during its Reading Day event.

by: [Brynn Mechem](#) Staff Writer

As a volunteer read a book to a class first grade students at Fruitville Elementary, words like kulich and dacha caused temporary confusion for many.

However, for one student, the words were second nature.

"I know what language this is," the boy said with delight. "It's Russian. I know because I'm half-Russian."

From that moment on, many students and the volunteer who was reading the book "Rechenka's Eggs" to the class on March 10 deferred to the student with questions.

"Nicht," Tamara Owens Logan said. "Am I pronouncing that correctly?"

"Yes, you are," the boy told her.

Those connections are what the not-for-profit organization Embracing Our Differences is hoping to build during its Reading Day, which is hosted twice a year.

During the day more than 7,500 elementary students from 60 schools in Sarasota and Manatee counties celebrate reading and diversity through different childrens' books.

For this round, students read books like "Chicken Sunday," "Rechenka's Eggs" and "It's OK to be Different" that spread messages of acceptance and teach the children about different cultures.

"We specifically select books that have to do with our mission of diversity, inclusivity, respect and kindness," Sarah Wertheimer, EOD executive director said.

After volunteers read the books to students, they have discussions about the themes in the book. One volunteer even related the rituals in "Chicken Sunday" to the rituals shared in Chance, the Rapper's song "Sunday Candy."

"The volunteers are truly amazing," Wertheimer said. "They practice ahead of time and they have discussion questions to help the kids relate to the book and bring home these concepts of treating others with kindness and respect."

EOD employees work with librarians and curriculum specialists to find the most appropriate book for each grade level. The books also often fit in with lessons or key themes at the schools.

At the end of the lesson, the students get to take home a copy of the books they read in class. A copy also is given to each teacher to use in future classes.

“It’s amazing, especially for a lot of the low income students who really just don’t have the opportunity to have their own books at home to continue learning while they’re in their home,” Wertheimer said. “It’s amazing to see how their faces light up when they are gifted a book and realize it’s theirs.”

Fruitville counselor Christina Rogers-Hehr said that even though she tries to teach similar messages to students, they sometimes grasp the messages better when a visitor is delivering them.

“It’s honestly magical to see the way they interact with the text and the visitors,” Rogers-Hehr said. “They just light up and they’re enchanted. They are so engaged and they learn so much.”

With the gifted book, Rogers-Hehr said students can then continue the learning with their siblings or parents at home.

“To be able to continue to promote literacy at home is huge,” she said. “For them to be able to bring that message home and read it with their parents and talk more about what it means just reinforces all these ideas in their home lives too.”