

ARTS EDUCATION SARASOTA



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Embracing Our Differences and Early Learning Coalition Provide Meaningful Opportunity for Students

Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County *Embraces Our Differences*

By Shelly Dorfman

Embracing Our Differences became the “text” for teaching and learning for nearly 100 children. Working through the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County (ELC), five centers in our community participated in a comprehensive, collaborative educational experience that integrated the arts into curriculum with focus on reading readiness skills and literacy.

In November 2015, Arts Literacy Consultant Shelly Dorfman led professional development for participating teachers. The evening was an opportunity to explore *Embracing Our Differences* through previous art exhibits, create their own art work and share strategies about how to bring this experience to children in their classrooms. A follow up meeting provided an opportunity to exhibit their completed mural and share their personal process.



With the goal of creating and submitting their own art work, each classroom worked diligently to develop an understanding of what *Embracing Our Differences* meant. Through a variety of literature, use of intentional vocabulary and multiple art experiences, each classroom explored possible themes for their submission. During the months following the initial professional development, Susie Wells, an ELC Early Childhood Specialist, visited each site multiple times to support and provide guidance to the teachers and the children. The centers incorporated the Florida Standards, social competencies, math, vocabulary and analogies into this learning process. Each mural theme was unique, meaningful and exemplified *Embracing Our Differences*.

In March 2016, the culminating event was a field trip to the exhibit. This trip was orchestrated utilizing about 30 parent volunteers, center staff, ELC staff and *Embracing Our Differences*' Education Director, Brenna Wilhm. Ms. Wells wrote that everyone was "looking forward to taking in the wonder of art and the joy the children will experience." On the day of the tour, children experienced five designated murals discussing what they saw with involvement, vigor and excitement. One parent asked, "How did she know all about that?" We were grateful to *Embracing Our Differences* for making available Sarasota County School buses which had required equipment for young children. Claudia Malecki, ELC's Quality Services Manager, noted "the children felt quite special about riding on a bus and going on a field trip for the first time."

The outcomes of this experience were many. Children gained increased knowledge of vocabulary as evidenced through pre/post assessing. Social and emotional skills were demonstrated through collaboration, empathy, and perspective taking. The valuable home and school connection was an additional benefit. Sara Snow of The Renaissance Preschool said, "It made me smile to see the teamwork and friendship during the process." Liz Williams of A New Beginnings at the Courts said, "There were great conversations about how we're the same and how we're also different." Some of the comments were priceless as we witnessed the interpretation of art through the eyes of the children.

