

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“ Belgium – Year 2 (2022–23) – Storyteller’s Report

School: Städtische Grundschule Unterstadt Belgium

Facilitator (Storyteller): Susanne Lachnit (Lotte von der Inde)

An hour’s drive, several changes, the bus ride from Aachen to neighboring Eupen in Belgium takes a long time. The pandemic is over, and fortunately the borders are open again.

When I reach the schoolyard of the SGU (municipal primary school Eupen Unterstadt), it’s break time. The noise of children surrounds me and after a few steps: „Lotte!“ – individual children who know me as the narrator run up to me and hug me.

L. is there immediately, takes my trolley with the props from my hand – „Only as far as the entrance, I’ll do the rest myself, thank you!“

The children are now increasingly taking over the task of setting up my storytelling room. They do this without anyone having asked them to do so beforehand.

A good dozen chairs are arranged in a semicircle around a single chair.

In between them, a carpet of colorful, flat cushions covers the floor.

Half of the children will immediately lie on their stomachs and on their sides while listening, some will close their eyes while listening. The places on the floor are particularly popular, which is why there are often fights.

I mark out my play area with long, colorful strips of fabric and place a small table next to me. This is covered with a colored cloth, on which are a lantern with a candle and my sound bodies, which I have chosen for this day and this story.

The children in the primary school class, which I have known for the second year now, are on average nine years old. In Belgium, the children in primary school change their class teacher every year and move to a new classroom.

While in the next room they are still biting into their sandwiches and fighting over the coveted places to lie down, the children from the neighbouring special school arrive with their teacher. The moment M., a delicate, happy boy with Down syndrome also wants to lie on the floor, the jostling noticeably calms down. A place is found for him, and what’s more: the protective arm of another, non-disabled boy puts itself around him.



The other two children prefer to sit on chairs, close to their teacher. Occasionally E. is there, a severely physically disabled child who suffers great pain. Her whole body is held and stabilized by a special wheelchair. If E. laughs or smiles as soon as she listens, if she follows the story and enjoys it, then I know that I am doing a good job.

Y. is a strong, physically restless boy with mental disabilities. In the first year of the project he had problems sitting still and concentrating. That has changed. He seems calmer and more focused, which the teacher also confirms.

I., another boy with special needs, seems highly sensitive and anxious to me. He likes to sit close to his teacher. Everyone listens. They go on the journey, are integrated into the class group and they enjoy having stories told to them.

Recently, at the beginning of a storytelling session, Y. decided to be the storyteller himself. He sat down on the storytelling chair and began to tell the story in words and sounds, using lots of facial expressions and gestures. The other children gathered around him. „Shh, be quiet, Y. is telling the story!“ For a few moments, Y. had the audience's full attention.

When the blinds in front of the window are lowered and the everyday remains outside, one of the children lights the candle in the lantern.

The children open the storytelling session with a magic rhyme:

*„Es fliegt, es fliegt ein Tisch,
es fliegt, es fliegt ein Fisch,
es fliegt eine Hex´ auf der Gans herum,
sie hat einen roten Mantel um.
Wer sie will seh´n
Muss nachts auf der Wiese steh´n.“*

“It's flying, a table is flying,
it's flying, a fish is flying,
a witch is flying around on the goose,
she's wearing a red cloak.
If you want to see her,
you have to stand in the meadow at night.”

They ask what story I'm telling today.

And it begins ...

Wait a minute. Under the table, two shoe tips are sticking out of the tablecloth.

Is someone hiding under the table?

No. Those are L's shoes. He says: „There's an invisible person sitting under the table.

You can only see his shoes. He's listening too.“

In the second year, the children were allowed to choose the story topics themselves. In the autumn, they wanted ghost stories. Some of them were funny, some were scary. I. was afraid of the ghost stories at first. But his teacher stayed by his side and discussed everything with him afterwards. So his curiosity grew and his fear shrank. In the winter, it was stories about angels and devils. They couldn't have done me a bigger favor. The spiritual resonance between the children and me is becoming more and more noticeable.

The angel stories meant a lot to the children. It was absolutely quiet and the children absorbed these stories. Obviously they needed the idea of something that was whole, holy and healing, the idea of a guardian angel.

There were funny and surprising moments in the devil stories. One thing the devil was definitely not: a terrifying figure. This was also well received by the Muslim children, who sometimes have drastic images of the devil in their minds. The fact that the devil can even be just was revealed in the fairy tale „The Devil’s Sooty Brother“.

In the spring, the children wanted fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. The familiar ones: Frau Holle, The Bremen Town Musicians, Sleeping Beauty, The Frog Prince and others. They knew songs from school that were related to the fairy tales. They were spontaneously given the opportunity to incorporate these songs into the flow of the story.

This year’s favorite fairy tale was „The Fisherman and His Wife.“ „Why didn’t he leave him?“ asks a girl. „The woman was totally stupid!“ Some fairy tale characters need to be spoken to in plain language.

After the story is told, there is an exercise session: either they let off steam outside for a bit, or inside, with my guidance, they physically recreate characters from the fairy tale that has just been told („Being a small fish,“ „Being the rain“ ...)

After the exercise session, there is drawing.

Some children draw several stages of the story with attention to detail, others draw a comic with speech bubbles, and others have specialized in depicting castles. Some aren’t interested at all. They draw a large circle and name it with an object from the story. I let that go.

When I ask at the end of a storytelling sequence that lasts nine weeks, then a miracle happens: there are children who remember all the stories and can recount them in detail.

The children’s imagination has grown, their inner world of images is rich and I am very amazed at the memory skills the children are capable of. I find it deeply enriching to evoke and encourage all of this.

When the storytelling hour is over and the pictures have been painted, then school is over for that day. I find this to be very positive because the children now take their impressions home with them.

At a music event that I attend privately in Eupen, I happen to meet M., a boy from the class, with his parents. I once asked him what he would like to be when he grows up. „Author,“ was his answer.

M.’s parents are happy about the meeting.

M. returns from school every Wednesday with a story, say his parents.

Thank you, M.

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“ Belgium – Year 1 (2021–22) – Storyteller’s Report

School: Städtische Grundschule Unterstadt Belgium

Facilitator (Storyteller): Susanne Lachnit (Lotte von der Inde)

In the third year of ‘The Children of Sheherazade’ project, I was initially faced with a huge task that instilled me with respect and immersed me in an intensive period of preparation.

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

Belgium – Year 3 (2023–24) – Storyteller’s Report

School: Städtische Grundschule Unterstadt Belgium

Facilitator (Storyteller): Susanne Lachnit (Lotte von der Inde)

In the third year of ‘The Children of Sheherazade’ project, I was initially faced with a huge task that instilled me with respect and immersed me in an intensive period of preparation.

The task was to get the children themselves to tell stories, to recognise and encourage their willingness to do so and to accompany them in their processes.

After a stormy and joyful welcome by the class in the new fourth school year with a new teacher, it turned out that two children with special educational needs had left the class. The children from the neighbouring school, who had always come to listen in the previous two years, no longer came. The task would probably have been too much for them.

I quickly realised that the storytelling had been a structuring element up to that point element that had also created a sense of calm in the classroom. The task was now much more difficult for me, as there was a lot of unrest in the class.

I asked the teacher to support me pedagogically. I was lucky to have Caroline Claesen at my side that year, because she recognised processes and actively encouraged them. With her calm and experienced manner, she often brought the calm and attention to the class group that our task required.

Firstly, I asked the children what they thought was involved in free storytelling. They came up with some amazing and thoughtful terms such as **telling - writing - book - title - author - memory - imagination - finding words - learning - courage - concentration - rhythm - music - sounds.**

We also tried to find out what could be part of the craft of oral storytelling. We looked at the concepts of **facial expressions, gestures, speaking and voice.** We explored the role of the listener in conversation.

It was clear to me right from the start that I wanted to do theatre education exercises with the children this year. Our dedicated teacher made sure that we were allowed into the so-called movement room at a certain time every week. For the children, the theatre education exercises, which I will talk about later in my report, were something they really looked forward to every week.

From October 2023, the time had come. Some children were keen to tell their stories. The interest grew quickly and it seemed as if it was a privilege to stand in front of the class and class and tell a story of their own devising, a film or the content of a favourite radio play. of a favourite radio play. The challenge for every child who showed this great courage was clearly noticeable. However, over the course of weeks and months, it seemed to become established that speaking in front of the class group was somehow normal and was now part of school life.

The children sometimes told long stories, often daring to tell them in pairs and taking turns. There were even series with sequels.

Some children made up stories off the cuff.

Others prepared well at home and developed long and complicated storylines.

Sometimes a child would break off and say, 'I can't make it to the end.' There was always clapping, because it was the courage they now almost all knew that was applauded.

My small orchestra was at their disposal and they were able to incorporate islands of sound into their narrative flow.

The children narrated every week from October to December. Audio files now exist of many of the children's stories, as I recorded them – with their consent and that of the teacher.

It was important for the children to include their classmates in their story by name.

There were also situations in which they were disrespectful in the stories. Blood flowed at times. We talked about how to attract attention and I told them openly that I found some parts too bloodthirsty. I only said that once. From then on, blood only flowed when a protagonist accidentally pricked their finger. Death and destruction became injuries that were healed.

What really impressed me was that some of the children had internalised my narrative flow to such an extent that they spoke at a very calm pace. They took pauses, they modulated the tone. Some of the children became less nervous, but not all of them, of course.

The listeners were well aware of their responsibility. They sometimes managed to follow a very confusing and illogical story for a long time. Afterwards, however, there was a hail of questions.

After the children's story time, there were 30–40 minutes of theatre education exercises in the movement room.

To mention just a few examples:

1. walking in the room with changing guidelines:
like a tap - on ice - through water - through honey - like a happy child - like a very old person - like a boss etc.
2. passing around an imaginary object
3. combined with the fantasy language *Grommelo*
4. the pantomime representation of everyday actions
5. grimaces in masses and much more

Body awareness, concentration, imagination, breath, voice, body expression, facial expressions and group behaviour were trained here.

At the end of the movement unit, the children formed a lying circle, their feet met in the centre. By raising their upper bodies, they all formed a flower that opens and closes.

From January 2024, we approached our new task: the creation of a class story.

Here, too, I took small steps. Using the saga cards and the myth cards, I established work in groups: a group of about four children developed a storyline based on three pictures. It was up to the children whether and how much they wrote to record the storyline. There were always presentations of a short story afterwards.

This could be read aloud as well as told. Most of the children preferred to read out the previously written text.

The stories created here were of great psychological density and often dealt with fears, sometimes a higher power (e.g. a star) intervened to save them.

In February 2024, I started an exercise called 'The Street in Rome'.

It's about imagining places, things, people, animals and magical creatures.

Initially, the children created places: a museum, a pizzeria, a Vespa hire shop, a delicatessen, the Colosseum.

Groups were formed for the locations. The places were populated with people, the people were given a short biography. Then the groups intertwined – the protagonists of the places visited other places and actions were generated.

This process did not run smoothly. There were arguments and disagreements among the children, socio-emotional processes were fuelled, some left one group and moved to another. Some had to use a lot of force to motivate the other group members, while other children were too dominant and easily got angry when their ideas could not be implemented. The process was turbulent and exhausting. It felt like being in the blast furnace of creativity.

The result made us all proud.

'Life in Rome' is the title of the class story. It is illustrated with many expressive and humorous children's drawings. As far as possible, I left it in its original state. I put the children's texts into an easy-to-read form, assigned the appropriate pictures to them and had them bound. Each child in the class and the teacher received a copy.

The story exists as a pdf file.

Saying goodbye to the children was difficult and very emotional.

The children of Sheherazade showed me what wealth really is.

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Belgium – Storyteller’s Summary

School: Städtische Grundschule Unterstadt Belgium

Facilitator (Storyteller): Susanne Lachnit (Lotte von der Inde)

The Children of Sheherazade project is about more than fairy tales and storytelling. When I started working on this project as a storyteller in a Belgian primary school in 2021, I felt like the hero who sets off on a journey. I couldn't foresee what I would encounter on this journey. I suspected that the road would not be easy, that I would be tested and that I would need helpers at my side.

My adventure of building a relationship with children of primary school age for three years through an artistic activity took me to unexpectedly beautiful landscapes, even if the paths were often steep and I was sweaty after almost every one of my assignments.

As the Belgian school showed little interest in the project in the first two years, there was often no help from the teachers. In the first year, there were also sabotaging elements of 'black' pedagogy.

This made the encounters with the other storytellers involved in the project all the more important for me. I felt supported and accompanied by both the coordinator and my fellow storytellers and hope to have given them the same.

Our regular Zoom conferences were supplemented by meetings in Aachen and Denmark, where we learnt a lot from each other and the scientific side of the project was revealed to us. As artists and women, we met and were increasingly able to recognise the significance of the project. Through our exchange, the social and economic gap between the north and south of Europe became increasingly clear.

I would like to say that the project idea of giving children more self-esteem and social skills has continued and manifested itself at the level of our encounters.

Were we able to get closer to the guiding principles of empowerment and social interaction among the children? Did these children have a special opportunity to feel for themselves and for others?

Were we able to show the children the well of their imagination and teach them to draw from it?

I am firmly convinced of this.

Need we add that schools need something like this?