

# **Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“**

## **Denmark – 1 (2021–22) – Storyteller’s Report**

**School: Øster Åby Friskole, Denmark**

**Facilitator (Storyteller): Maria Junghans**

As with many a first time, there are many lessons to be learnt.

### **1. Routine is great!**

The year was in general marked by lots of changes in staff and setting. The class teacher fell ill for longer periods, and there were three or four different stand-ins for her. COVID-19 also had an impact in February, both with most of the class at home with the virus, and I also had to stay at home for a week. Adding to this theme weeks, school holidays, school trips, all the many public holidays in spring time etc. made it sometimes difficult to find a routine.

In the beginning I tried different ways as to how the children could/should be seated, if they could have or not have their teddy bear while I told the stories, but found out that the best solution was to have the children placed either sitting or laying on the floor in a semi-circle around me, no teddies allowed.

And it was very clear that the children benefited when there were two or even three weeks in a row where all the surrounding circumstances were the same.

Small things make a great difference. For instance: That I bring the paper, their folders, and the good pencils, so the paper they draw on is the same every time, enhances focus.

### **2. iPads are time thieves**

Using iPads to find a motif to draw from was not a good idea. The children would spend the most of the drawing time on the internet looking for “the right” cat, house, horse etc. and some of the children with most experience on the internet also looked up things completely unrelated to the story. Hence no iPads allowed in my storytelling sessions.

Instead I brought wonderful books with me “The Artist Anatomy of Animals”, “Architecture around the Globe” or they could ask me, and I would draw it on the white board, and more children could look at the same drawing for inspiration.

## The development of the children

We started out with a class of 22 children, with relatively similar backgrounds and divided more or less 50 % in girls and boys. All children completed the year. Both the support and enthusiasm from parents, teachers and administration were high.

### During the storytelling

In the beginning a small group of the children had difficulties paying attention to the story, moving around, interrupting, asking question, trying to act “cool” and make others go along with their game.

I too was uncertain of how to tackle this, if I should just let them play around, because it might be their way of listening, or if I should make them sit down and quiet down and pay attention, and how to do this in a good, supportive and respectful way, and not entering the “teachers field”.

After a few times the children began to relax and feel comfortable, knowing what was going to happen.

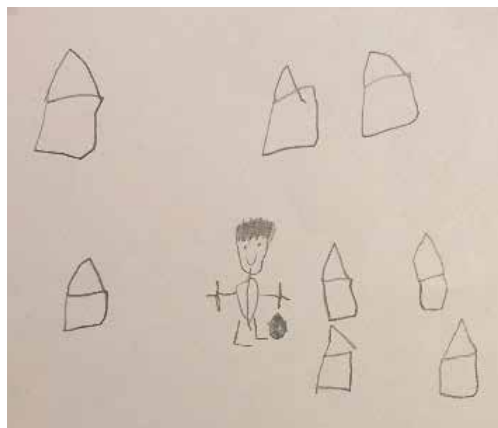
As we established how to sit, and a structure in telling - first Good morning! Then which country or part of Denmark we were “travelling” to, and if anyone had relatives there, then the story and at the end everyone “and they lived happily ever after”. This last thing was something that the children spontaneously started doing and established as a part of the routine. As this structure came into place, these few students also became more focused and their ability to concentrate grew considerably. In general all the students love these hours of storytelling, and look forward to them during the week.

Every morning as I take my daughter to school, the children ask: “When is it Wednesday?” “When are you telling again?”

So from the beginning to the end a very positive experience for all of us.

### During the movements

As I worked out a structure with the same two or three movements at the beginning and at the end, and then a few related to the story in the middle – the movement part became very good. We start out forming a circle, close our eyes holding hands sending a hand shake from one to the other until it reaches me once more. Then we “weave”, “pick apples”, then the story of the day related movements, and then we run two times around the building and into the class room. In the same direction, to avoid accidents.



## **During the drawing sessions**

I misunderstood the instructions at the beginning so the first three times they drew whatever they wanted. From then on they drew whatever they wanted – from the story of the day. This change made an important difference related to the concentration of the children.

Some are very quickly done, some use the full 40 minutes. This however cannot be related to the level of detail in the drawings.

One boy uses only black and white and a bit of colour, but makes the most remarkable stick figure graphic tales out of the stories.

Another boy always had guns and blood in the drawings, but by the very end of the year these disappeared and the drawings had a different focus.

One girl had a serious creative block at the beginning - crying saying "I cannot draw!" To help her get out of this I asked her what she would draw from the story. And drew it very simply. She would then colour it. Next time we would do the same, but she might want to draw some detail too. The first 6-9 times she would end up in tears or say she could not draw. At the end she said "I think I can manage this," and "I really like the way the girl looks" and smiled. I asked her parents to buy new and good colour pencils for her, and they did.

Instead of using the iPads we have used the white board and then I have drawn what they wanted to know what looked like or the could look in my books. We also used the teachers as models if we wanted to know what it looks like when someone does this or the other.

In general the children's ability and confidence to dive into their own imagination grew. And also to value their own and others drawings, and the differences.

## **The favourite tales of the children**

Guinaruen og den forældreløse pige – The Guinaru and the Orphan Girl

Snehvid og Rosenrød – Snow White and Rose Red

# Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

## Denmark – Year 2 (2022–23) – Storyteller’s Report

**School:** Øster Åby Friskole, Denmark

**Facilitator (Storyteller):** Maria Junghans

### General Observations

Looking back on the year 22/23 it has once more been a joy to be with the children, tell the stories and listen to the children’s comments and ideas.

There has been some changes in the group of children, as one boy moved to Greenland with his family, one girl moved to another town, and one boy had to redo the year.

A new girl and a new boy came. This of course changed the group dynamics.

Also two of the boys from the class were very often not present. Both have ADHD, but where A is very outward reacting at school, the other B withdraws and is silent, and only reacts when he gets home. Both needed time away from school. I asked if it was possible for them to join us for the storytelling, as I noticed that both boys enjoyed it very much, and while I was there conflicts between the children in the class and the outward reacting boy were very rare. The teacher, the other children and A had a very difficult relationship and at the end of the year his parents decided to move him to another school. He is a good kid, very clever, very eloquent and creative in his insults once angry. One kid explained to me one day: “We can’t deal with him anymore. We have been patient with him for two years now, and we just can’t take anymore. We have tried. But why can’t he understand that no one wants to play when he hits us and says ugly words all the time?”

I went to visit A at home to give him his book at the end of the year. He was very happy to see me and to look at his drawings, and show them to his stepfather. After he left, B started to come to school regularly again and started to smile once more.

The end of the year the class consisted of 20 children.

More or less 50% girls and 50 % boys.

Our teacher Lone was present almost at every session this year, and when we had replacements the administration tried their best to make sure it was the same person who came each time. Or someone the children knew well. All the replacement teachers enjoyed the project and expressed gratitude to get the chance to experience it, asking if it could be something permanent or extended to more classes and schools.

There is a general positive feedback and support from the administration, the headmaster and the school board. The parents are engaged and show interest in the project, telling me anecdotes of how the project affect their life at home. In one home they never read stories before the project and now the child has become so fond of stories that her parents use it as a positive source of reward when she helps with chores in the house. Another child calls his aunt in the US every week and retells the story to her. Other children ask for drawing materials at home and start drawing after school.

It was also on request from a mother whose child was ill and at home, crying because she was going to miss the storytelling, that we worked out that I could record the stories live, and send them as mp3-files to the children who were absent for one reason or another. Apart from the children not missing a story, this also has another positive side effect; the parents got to “look into the classroom” and in this way get a feeling of how the children interact and experience in school. This they told me was really great and fun too.

## **Challenges**

In general this year has worked far better than last year regarding structure and collaboration with the school. The teacher now knows that her role is to observe and not intervene, but it is still difficult for her just to observe. “Next year when the children create their own stories, I can take a more active role, right?!” she asked at the end of the year.

## **Interaction between the children and inequality in power**

The class has now known each other very well and more or less set constellations of friends and groups have formed. There is some children who are very strong and determined, others very quiet and some try to smooth all conflicts, sometimes forgetting what they want in the process. This creates an inequality in power between the children. Some Alpha-boys and -girls in the group are restless and when they sit with their more quiet friends, who really just wants to listen to the story, they have this urge to poke them or whisper something to them, to get their attention and focus. Having the freedom to choose freely where to sit, seemed to make it even more difficult for the quieter children to get the space they needed and wanted. So I told the children, that they had to sit on their own seat, and not freely decide where they wanted to sit. This gave the children more option to get absorbed in the story, rather than interact with their friends. Being seated at their regular seats, both the Alpha-children and the more quiet children find peace in listening to the story and draw too. And the “quieter” or “follow-along” children also had more freedom in what they drew from the story, instead of copying the Alpha-children’s ideas.

## **Finding stories for the themes**

It was difficult to find 10 myths, legends, wonder tales or folk tales with the theme SPORT. It took a lot of time, and when I ran out of options, I decided to create new legends for the children. New legends with real stories as starting point. The result was two modern stories, one about Yusra, a female swimmer from Syria, and one about the football legend Pelé from Brazil.

The reaction from the children was great. Some of the children who struggled most to concentrate, were completely focussed for 45 minutes straight during these modern stories, and one of the boys which find it really hard to draw, drew a wonderfully detailed drawing after the story with Pelé, perhaps because this was his field of expertise.

## **Getting time to help every child**

It was difficult for me to help all the children who asked for help during the drawing sessions. Since they can freely draw whatever they want, it is not enough to draw it on the white board for everyone to see and then move on. I tried to solve the challenge by taking a quick round listening to children's ideas and finding out what they felt they could do on their own, and then returning once everyone was engaged in drawing, and helping with specific elements.

I think it might not only be the need for actual help drawing, but also the need to be seen, heard and understood, which this safe emotional room of drawing is, makes possible, when there is enough time.

I also had books with me with pictures and drawings relevant to the story of the day, which was enough help for some children.

## **The development of the children**

### **During the storytelling**

From the beginning of the year the level of concentration was high and stayed high during the year. It was only a very few children which found it difficult to concentrate, and not always the same children. Only one girl sticks out in this respect, as she mostly found it difficult not to interact with the other children during the telling, or engage them in a game of her inventing. A small, silent game, but still distracting for the others. I found out, that by giving her some extra focus while telling, eye contact, direct questions or references to something related to her, her focus would increase. Or simply walking to her and standing there for a little while telling, or letting my hand rest gently on her shoulder for a moment or two.

I am impressed by the level of concentration these children have. One time the story lasted 50 minutes, and they were in the story the whole time, some children eagerly asking questions or suggesting what was going to happen next, but focused and respectful of the story.

So not much development as such, just generally very good.

### **During the movement**

This part creates high arousal for most of the children every time, making it difficult to calm down to draw afterwards. We go outside, form a circle and do the movements. Starting by holding hands, and passing on a gentle squeeze of the hand from one to the next person until it returns to the one who started. We do this with closed eyes, to connect with the group and listen to one another in a silent way. After 15 times it started to work really well. Then we do some stretching and then two rounds running around the building, then back in the class room to draw. It starts out with chaos, then it closes in and becomes focussed and there is an outlet of energy.

Once it rained heavily and we stayed indoors, only stretching and this had a very positive impact of the drawings, the amount of detail and the time they used. So maybe opening the windows, standing and stretching is enough, and perhaps even better, if the aim is to stay in the story.

### During the drawing

One of the boys who found it difficult to draw anything independently grew considerably during the year in this respect. He started out drawing only castles. If there was the slightest hint of a castle in the story, he would draw a castle. They would differ in details, number of windows, moat or no moat, but slowly when he was no longer seated next to his best friend, he started to draw other things which made it easier to tell which plot or focus the story actually had.

I found out by the end of the year that his parents had divorced in the beginning of the year, but were still living under the roof, until the end of the school year. This too might have been a reason to constantly draw castles as they are also a fortress, and where the king, the queen and the children live together.

One girl drew only food the first 15 times. If there was food any food at all in the story that would be what she drew. When I told the quiet, and descriptive story of the Woman in the Moon, she drew something else for the first time. I later learned that her mother's work is helping people change their eating habits to achieve a permanent weight loss. If there is a link, I do not know.

The girl who struggled with a creative block last year improved significantly this year, being more and more independent, but still from time to time struggling with the creative process and focusing on perfecting. Moving house might have had an impact on her confidence and need for control.

The boy how only drew black and white last year, continued to draw the most wonderful cartoons, but this year he added colour.

One girl who is very skilled in drawing and loves the stories, did not draw with colours this year. Black and white all year. I have no idea why, other than it is a choice she made.

Another very creative girl and very silent and shy, until you get to know her, started asking for help for her drawings. Always full frame drawings and lots of colours.

With many of the drawings comes stories, and I wish we had time to listen to all the stories they tell.

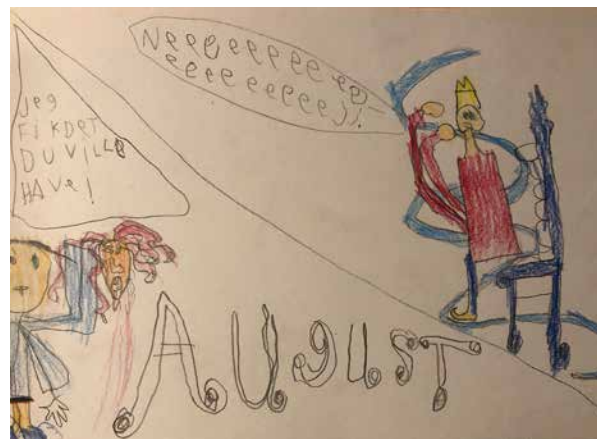
## The favourite tales of the children

**From the 29 stories these are the children's favourite ones:**

Magic: Master and Apprentice – a folk tale

Sports: Yusra – the Butterfly Swimmer – a modern legend based on a true story (by Maria Junghans)

Animals: The Boy and the Cow Nyange – from “Tales from the African Plains”



# Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

## Denmark – Year 3 (2023–24) – Storyteller’s Report

**School:** Øster Åby Friskole, Denmark

**Facilitator (Storyteller):** Maria Junghans

### General observations

Looking back on the year 23/24 it has been a year of change both regarding the content of the project and the structures at the school.

There is a general positive feedback and support from the administration, the headmaster and the school board. The parents are very interested to know the results of the project, even though there has been fewer stories from the parents to me on how the project affects the daily life in the families.

### What we did

We began the story using first letter rhymes (Freja flies Friday from Finland...) and using the same letter as the rhyme creating the characters in the story. The main characters had names beginning with F and characteristics with M (i.e. Marvelous Magician). After a couple of times we realised that we desperately needed some villains in the story, and some helpers to move things along. The helpers names and characteristics were with H, and the villains with S. This the children found very funny and they also discovered new words they had not known before. We took turns adding characteristics to the characters, and then when someone said “Nooo, it should not be like that!” We had a vote on it, where all the children had to close their eyes and then raise their hand if they were in favour or not. The majority vote won.

The first letter rhyme became the beginning of the story, which was continued using “The Street in Rome”. We did this in the forest by the river, because it was such a beautiful day, but with 20 kids and having to do more than one round, remembering and repeating everything that had been said before it became a very long time for them to stand still, we ended when one child said: “Once there was a street in Rome with a bank and a bakery and ... and a group of children in the forest with legs so tired that they were about to break”.

The next few times we took a closer look on some of the locations creating stories around those places and drawing them in detail.

In one session we worked with sensory elements. Each child got to describe a kind of food to the class, without mentioning the name of the food. How does it smell, taste and feel. The one who guessed which food it was, then had a go describing another kind of food. As we went along the children refined the rules of the game making it more and more fair, and fun. They took into account that if you had already guessed a food before, you could not guess again unless no one else had a suggestion. That game really sparked their imagination and everyone was taking part on the edge of their chairs.



The children who needs time to think before speaking liked this game too, because there was no time pressure. One could take as much time as one needed to really investigate the sensory memory of the food, and it sparked plenty of memories in the listeners, and lots of comments.

We used the “Fortunately - Unfortunately” method in one session. It worked well, but if I should do it again I would hand out cards with colors, yellow for Fortunately and blue for Unfortunately, and then only have Unfortunately every third or fourth time, as it seemed to hinder the flow of the story and the children found it frustrating that their ideas were sidetracked every time the word was given to the next child in the circle.

In another session we went outside to the sandpit as it was a nice sunny day. We sat in a circle on the edge of the sandpit submerging feet and/or hands in the sand while each child first decided which superpower they had, and then they created a story where they had to use those superpowers to save the day. The trick was that they could not apply their own superpower, but had to involve someone else in the story and their superpower, and thus making each other heroes.

One child had chosen to have the superpower that when he snapped his fingers there would be immediate world peace. This was not used until the very end of the story, and a child exclaimed: “Ah, but we could have used his superpower from the beginning and solved the whole thing!” To which another child very calmly responded: “Yes, but that would not have been half as much fun.”

The problem in the story was that the parents of the children had been abducted by a group of purple aliens, while the children had all been locked up inside a house to protect them from the aliens, but now they needed to get out in order to save their parents. From time to time I would throw “the unfortunate ball” to someone and then the child had to create a new obstacle to be overcome. If a child had an idea for an obstacle they could also ask to have the ball.

This too worked very well, and the option to focus on digging in the sand while listening to the story, instead of looking at the others calmed a lot of the very energetic, talkative children giving them head space to listen to the others and pay attention to the story.

We worked with the ability to describe places and people, by letting the children close their eyes and in their minds visit their favorite place and their home, trying to recall as many details as possible. And then take turns telling to the class about the place, and their home describing in detail the way from the front door to their room and then the room itself.

This game worked well and also gave the children insight into the life of the others outside of school.

From time to time, we would either start or end the day with a short story. The children would then draw if they wanted to work on their drawings, or just listen to the story. Sometimes I would ask the children to choose a place, a person and a problem. And from that I and Jasmin should create a story. One would start the story and one would end it.

The children also worked with improvisation stories using a pair of spectacles as a starting point. The children would choose a pair of spectacles and put them on and then answer the following questions: Where did they find these spectacles? Who had worn them? And how did this person lose them?

The answers creating a story, sometimes a very short story, sometimes longer. The joy of wearing a pair of glasses takes away great part of the fear and nerves, or in case the child is confident gives them an extra bounce to their storytelling.

In every session the children drew. Some used a number of sessions working on one drawing, others worked together creating mixed media drawings, some turned the story into a comic, others worked together taking responsibility for different parts of the process, one come up with good ideas, one draws, one writes, one colors, one draws the cars or the eyes, all depending on their interest or what they feel comfortable with.

## Challenges

One of the major challenges was in the beginning of the year was the lack of a clear “manual” or set of rules for the third year. Not having done the project before, I tried to do my very best to comply with the guidelines set up, and found it both very difficult and frustrating to facilitate the children’s creative process, when they had complete freedom to choose the way they wanted to do it, be it rap, stop-motion, theater, singing, dancing, storytelling, or comic book, and include every child’s idea in the story. Only having the option to say Yes, and not put any restraint on the children resulted in a lot of noise, a lot of different groups doing different stories and me trying to help everyone and change mind-set every two minutes to best facilitate that group or that child’s needs.

It luckily turned out to be a misunderstanding. And once I had the right to focus on the storytelling, on the creation of one common story all of the children participating, of setting up a structure where we created together, then continued in smaller groups to elaborate on parts of the story in “quiet time”, and then meeting up at the end of the session for the children to show and tell what they had worked on, then everyone seemed to thrive and enjoy the sessions.

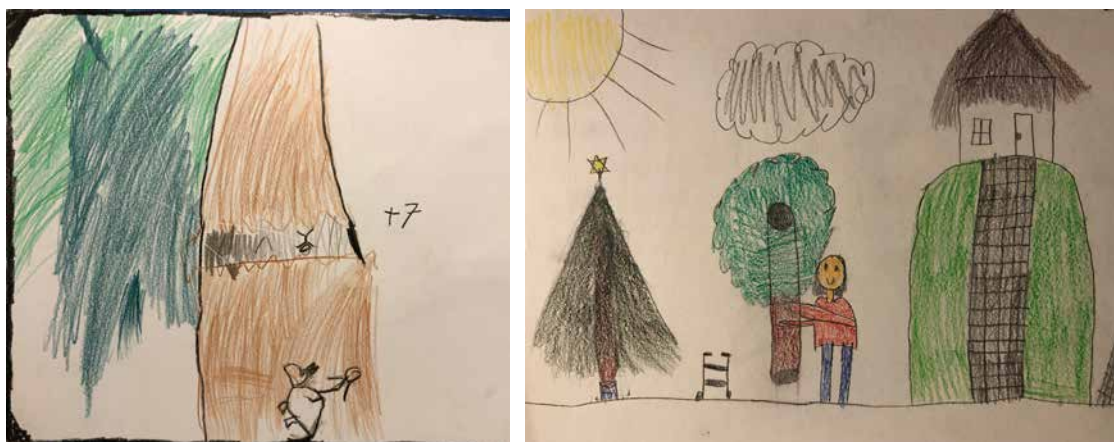
Lone, our teacher, was from time to time on sick leave for shorter and longer periods of time. The replacement teachers were often young people without any formal training as teachers. This resulted in more chaotic sessions, where I had to both be the storyteller and take the teacher’s role as the one to secure a beneficial working environment for the children, solving conflicts between the children, taking care of their emotional needs if they were sad, etc.

In February I asked to have Jasmin as the teacher, if Lone continued to be on sick leave, or was absent due to other things. This was granted and it greatly improved the environment both for the children and for me. Jasmin is a trained teacher and she did her masters in storytelling, so she knows the benefits and the methods, and I could focus on supporting the children in the creation of their story and their drawings.

Before Christmas we also had a change of the school principal, which of course affected the everyday life at the school. After Ester Lone was let go and Jasmin took over for the rest of the time remaining. At the same time a new girl arrived to be part of the class, and it was wonderful to see how caring and welcoming the children were towards her.

The two new children from last year now seem as truly integrated in the class, though the boy still struggles to understand that he has no need to be rough and tough to be accepted by his classmates.

This becomes very apparent when they create the story. All the other kids ideas and contributions drives the story further in a constructive way, whereas he introduces nuclear bombs, people dying, being killed, etc, and the rest of the kids then use their turn to undo or amend what he invented to keep the story on a constructive path.



The boy with ADHA who withdraws and is silent in school, was more present this year, but it was clear that the less structured way of the sessions tired him. After approx. 40 minutes he would ask: "When is it over?" He told me that he found a lot of the others' ideas silly, but said it became better when they voted on what was to enter the story.

The boy whos parents got divorced last year, this year had to go through moving to a new home and having his life change once more. This naturally affected him, and he needed more comforting and his participation varied greatly in the duration of the year.

Another boy found it very difficult to work in the groups with the others and chose to sit alone at the desk in the corner by the white board and draw with the pencil only, no colors. In the beginning of the year he drew things for the story and tried to be part of the groups, but at the end he decided to work alone. He seemed closed and sometimes troubled, but I could not find out what lay behind it. When there was time to sit together and focus on the drawing and the different techniques of drawing he lit up, and also spend time after class on his drawings. The love for drawing also gave him a good relation to one of the girls in the class.

Three girls created their own little unit and drew horses most of the year. They kind of zoomed out and into their own little part of the story here the riding school was. One of the girls who struggle with concentration did not understand the task of creating a story together, and just wanted to do theater or draw horses and hearts. She is excellent in her ability to talk in front of others and act, and to focus on drawing horses, but when it comes to listening and not being active herself, it becomes difficult for her.

### **Interaction between the children and inequality in power**

The class has developed a good way of working and being together. This year the balance in power is more even, and even the more quiet children speak up, and are listen too by the others. The only ongoing conflict was the need of some of the children for silence when working, and the urge of others to move and hence make some kind of noice or talk.

## **The development of the children**

It was very interesting to see how the third year differs from the two first years.

This year interaction became important, and also the skill of listening to one another and reaching common ground on which to continue the story.

This made room for new friendships to be made as the children choose to work on a part of the story together, not out of whom was in the group, but out of the content of that specific part of the story.

Another great thing was to see the enthusiasm and dedication that the children had towards their story. It was a very clear ownership and responsibility they took over the project. That they are proud of the project can be seen in the fact that they insisted that a copy of the story be sent to the King and Queen of Denmark, the Royal National Library and their own school library. Which we did.

The children wrote the letter together, four of them taking turns writing by hand the sentences that the class decided the letter should consist of, and then one got the task of putting it in the letterbox after school.

On the last day of the project all of them stood side by side as a group beaming with pride and joy in front of the whole school. Some telling about the project, others showing an example of how to do an improvised story and others taking care of the power point with drawings others had created, and some actively nodding and smilingly supporting the ones presenting. They were there as a group and none could be spared in that moment.

The main class teacher of the class, who has not been part of the project, wrote to the parents at the end of this year, which is also her last as their main teacher:

“It has been a joy to teach your children. The children have a wonderful way of being together, they care for one another, listen to each other and have a great empathy. It is clear that the storytelling project has worked”.

I believe that such a statement from one outside of the project counts for the projects relevance and positive impact.