

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.

