

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

School: Städtische Grundschule Unterstadt Belgium

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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 and 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.