

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

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

School: Øster Åby Friskole, Denmark

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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 and 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 came 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.

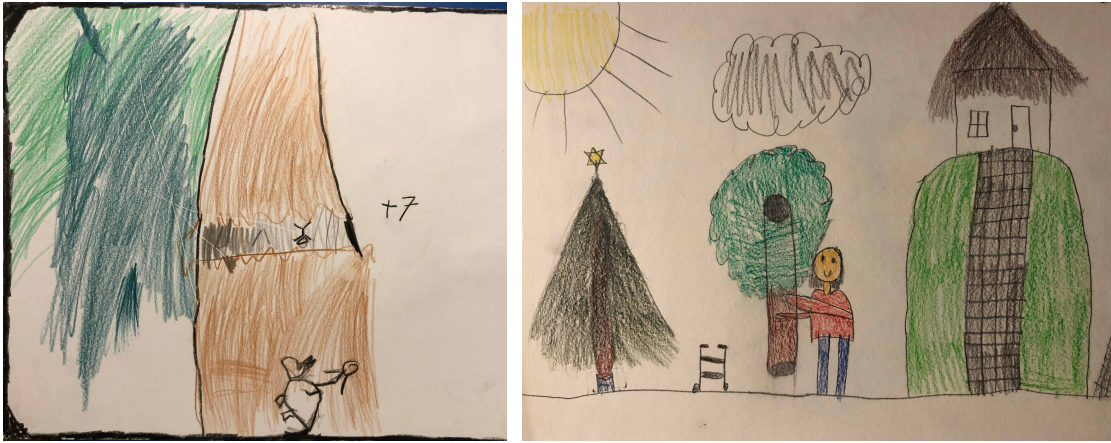
Lone, our teacher, was from time to time on sick leave for shorter and longer periods of time. The replacement teachers were often young people without any formal training as teachers. This resulted in more chaotic sessions, where I had to both be the storyteller and take the teacher’s role as the one 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 Easter 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 drive 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 whose 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 noise 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.

Would I do it again?

Yes, I would. Are there things I would change? Some. I would keep the first two years as they are, but make it a part of year three that the sessions ends with a 15–20 minute story told by the storyteller. Perhaps some of the stories from the first two years, perhaps stories from real life that are useful that day, perhaps just retelling of the children's stories. The reason for this is that all of the children responded that they felt at ease and really enjoyed the storytelling, because it felt like not being at school, they could relax while listening to the story and they found it useful, even though they could not explain why.

They should be allowed to continue their drawings while the story is being told, if they want to. To some children drawing while listening enhances the memory and creates a wonderful presence.

And I would highly recommend adding a short 10 minute break in the 90 minutes to go outside and get some fresh air. 90 minutes are a long time to stay focused.

I would also advise to have a kind of written manual on how to do it and with storytelling exercises written down to use when it feels right for that specific class. This would make it easier for those being part the project it for the first time, and still allow room for each storyteller's and class' individual preferences and needs.

I would highly recommend this project to schools as being part of the curriculum, as the children enjoy it, and it seems to empower them, and make them work better together as a group where differences are respected and cherished.