

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

## **Greece – Storyteller’s Summary**

### **School:**

**ELIX (organization of non formal education support for refugee and migrant children)**

### **Storytelling organization:**

**Centre for the study and Dissemination of Myths and Folktales-Mythos**

**Facilitator (Storyteller): Maria Vrachionidou**

When I was first informed about the project “The children of Sheherazade”, its goals, its structure and concept and the possibility of a Greek participation in it which would be represented by MYTHOS and by me personally, I got excited: such a project was exactly what I had in mind for many years and I was trying to find a way to implement in Greece. Besides, I had still in my ears my conversation with Regina Sommer many years ago, sitted in a sofa somewhere near the Arctic Circle at an annual FEST Conference, about the project “Einstein’s children” and I couldn’t forget the impression it made on me. Moreover, “The Children of Sheherazade” gave me the opportunity to combine all my previous experience, as a storyteller (mainly as a storyteller working with groups of vulnerable people) but as well as a teacher, a linguist and a social anthropologist who many times in the past I had conducted researches or worked with refugees (never though with refugee children); the project was the best opportunity to apply all the theoretical and research principles in real life and to explore how they work and if /how beneficial they could be for refugee children.

Three years later, after the completion of the project, I feel satisfied, happy and, I dare say, wiser and full of all the learned experience, despite the fact that, as it usually happens in reality, things didn’t go exactly as planned.

### **The Challenges**

My biggest challenges had to do with the special situation I faced in Greece:

a) with the increased difficulties with unstable, small, fluid and incoherent groups of students, in which a great number of children (the majority of them, I would rather say) faced a lot of language, social, behavioral, psychological or mental issues;

b) with the usually altered state laws which affected the accomodation of refugees and, consequently, the presence or the lack of students and in general with the condition of refugee status in Greece, which, like in other entry countries too, is always unstable and fluid;

c) also with the organization of implementation (ELIX), which, as I very soon realized, couldn’t provide me with a stable group of children for 3 years (this wasn’t clear to me from the beginning), so, I had to repeat Year 1, and, to my disappointment, I didn’t have the opportunity to proceed on to step 2 and step 3 of the project, as my colleagues in the other countries did;

d) finally, at the beginning of the project, I faced an (unexpected) resistance and doubt by some educators of the school about the importance and benefits of the 'violent' folk tales ... Fortunately this problem was soon overcome after my explanations and listing to the great benefits one can have by the very folktales especially.

## **Positive Aspects**

However, the positive moments of the project have been numerous and its positive impact undeniable. First of all on the children:

a) almost every child, even the ones with severe issues or the ones who participated just in some sessions benefited by the project. As I reported in detail in my annual reports, I remarked clearly (even if this is not clear or measurable by quantitative data) that they had improvement on their language level, on their social skills, on their collaboration with each other, on their psychological attitudes. They adored the structure of the folk tales, their happy end and the heroes' final success and happiness, the structure of our sessions (part 1: educational games, part 2: storytelling, part 3: drawing, part 4: conversation on a subject always in a self-assertive and positive oriented way).

b) The dissemination of the benefit of storytelling has not been only to children but also to adults (educators, translators, social workers, parents). Sometimes, even children that had not participated in the project benefited by it through an unexpected way. For example, to my astonishment, I met children who weren't my students who, though, knew my told tales: they were siblings, friends or classmates of some of my students who had retold them the stories because they liked them; or because one of the staff members who was present at my class when I was telling, retold or drew them the tale; some of the children that had been present at only one or two of my sessions remembered after a year or even more this very tale that I had told then ... So, I believe the impact of the project and of the tales goes much further than we can imagine.

c) As I usually faced the situation of being alone with one student, I had the opportunity to realise the extremely beneficial impact of the one to one storytelling: at least in the case of entry countries, where the fluidity of the groups is very usual and where the differentiation of the needs of every child is bigger, this method of telling could be very profitable, as it helps the child to feel safe, important and to face anxiety better.

d) The fluidity, the unstable situation and incoherence of the composition of my groups, as I mentioned above, were my major obstacles. I had to admit – to do my self-evaluation as well here – that during the project I made some mistakes, i.e. I used some times longer and more difficult stories than was proper for the group, or I didn't manage to use the most beneficial educational or storytelling tool for a case or I felt some times tired and disappointed because the progress was lower than my expectations etc. But, on the other hand, these same obstacles functioned, as the project went on, as motives for me to become more flexible, to be more innovative and creative, to explore different methods and introduce new tools and educational games and keep calm while expecting the unexpected. And it worked! In the end I learned how to adjust myself to a situation of permanent fluidity and uncertainty and in this sense to put myself in the refugee children's shoes: because in their lives, fluidity, uncertainty, always changing cases and unexpected problems are the rule, not the exception. This attitude, hence, increased the empathy and I am proud that I made it.

## The European Dimensions

As far as the European dimensions of the project are concerned, I would like to mention some very positive points:

1) The numerous zoom meetings among the coordinator and the other storytellers were very beneficial and enhancing. All of us could share our remarks, struggles and doubts, could have a feedback from our colleagues and this was very helpful and encouraging.

2) The physical meetings at the end of every year in different countries with the visit of the different group of students, the acquaintance with different state educational programs, the sharing of good practices and the exchange of experiences were tremendously important and helpful. It provided us with a lot of applied knowledge, which, afterwards, we could apply on our groups.

3) The collaboration with the other storytellers, the coordinator and the other educational partners was excellent, beyond my expectations. I would like to express my gratitude for that – it's not at all self-evident!

There are possibly many other points that one could mention about the project but I believe that I have mentioned them in my detailed reports. In general, if I could express my point of view, according to a possible future implementation of the project, as far as Greece is concerned, I believe it would be necessary to implement such a project at a state school, during the morning classes (of course such a school is difficult to find, because of bureaucracy and resistance of many educators).

I also believe that it could be beneficial for every student, not only the ones of refugee origin.

I hope that such projects will be applied in the future in as many schools as possible. Storytelling has a great power for the good – a power that we just have to take advantage of.