

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“

Greece – Year 2 (2022–23) – Storyteller’s report

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

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I write this report some days after the shocking and tragic shipwreck that occurred on 14th of June 2023 in international waters close to Pylos (southern Greece) that led to the drowning of almost 700 refugees who were trying to find their way to Europe (Italy) on a fishing vessel heavily overcrowded; not a single woman or child was among the just 104 survivors, although hundreds of them travelled hidden in the lower deck ...

This tragic event reminds us once again in a painful way the inhumane conditions refugees face so often, as well as the increased challenges the first reception countries, like Greece, have to deal with when dealing with such kind of refugees (because of their extra practical, psychological, social etc. needs).

Many of the children whom I meet in my class and in ELIX in general, have recently experienced (and, in some cases, they are still experiencing) similar difficult conditions. Although I don't (and I am not allowed to) know the details of their personal stories, these details have been easily obvious by their sayings, behaviour, fears, hopes and issues. Taking into account these facts, as well as the specificities of ELIX students, and using the experience I got by the project last year, this year (2022–23), with my new group of children I decided by the beginning of our meetings to use some more methods and strategies: to tell the stories to all the children in the class, no matter how many/few or who they were (I mean if they could be evaluated or not in the end), no matter if their language level was sufficient, if they were newcomers or not; to be much more flexible with the educational tools I used, with the types and selection of the stories told (that meant that many times I changed the story I had prepared to tell in order to adjust it to an unexpected group composition or that not all of the tales I told were wonder tales), to lower, in many cases, my expectations and to have always in mind the children's benefit (i.e. I decided to change the day of the meetings, from Wednesdays to Thursdays, although this was very inconvenient for me, in order to include a student who was present just on Thursdays). Two times I knew that a child of the group would listen for the last time (or for the first and last time simultaneously) a story by me, as he/she would leave the next day unintentionally. In their case I had in mind that this is the only life jacket that I can drop them: my story. I hope that they can use it in their long difficult refugees' travel ...

Challenges of the project

I would like to mention at first, some of the new challenges I (and, subsequently, the project) had faced this year (2022–23), in comparison with the previous one (2021–22) because of new or unexpected state or other circumstances that make Greece a very different case than the other countries-partners of the project:

A) Instability of the participant students' number – fluidity of the group

Even before my first meeting with my new group I had noticed that the number of the students had been surprisingly small –the teachers and the staff of ELIX were very worried too. I was informed that this happened due to a new state regulation according which the accommodation subsidy to refugees is cut. This, of course, had consequences to ELIX pupils, as the families of many of them had no money to pay the rent and they are moving to a refugee camp, far from Athens, so their children wouldn't attend anymore ELIX courses ...[In fact, the number of students increased a bit the second month after the beginning, but during the whole year, the instability and fluidity of the participant students were very big -bigger even than last year]. Let me give you a personal testimony of this: Setare was an Afghan girl who participated just in two of our meetings. She was energetic, clever and participant. At our second meeting she came very late, but she managed to catch up with the others; during the drawing (that she liked very much) she commented on many details; one of them was that she wasn't very happy that she had to draw two boys (the heroes of the story). I told her that next time the hero of the story will be female, so there is no need to worry. Then she explained that, unhappily, there is a possibility not to come next time. "Because, you know", she added, "tomorrow we are moving. We'll go to another house! It will be big like a castle! Many people live there, some of my friends too, some others too ... I think Amza [= a boy classmate that I met on a previous meeting, but from that time he had always been absent] will move tomorrow too ... My mum said that I have to take care of my 3 year old sister there, because the castle is so big that we may lose her... But it is far far away ..." (Oh, poor Setare! Her 'castle', I realize, is in fact the refugee camp in Malakasa, far from the center of Athens, where thousands of refugees are living under difficult conditions). "But", she added, "I'll remember your story for sure!"

Another reason for the usual sudden long 'disappearing' of the students is the fact that because of a new state rule, some of the children families have to move to the same refugee camp, far from Athens, to 'register' again -this is obligatory, if they want to have some rights and not to be considered illegal, and it has to be done (I don't understand why ...) at the camp, not at their houses ... However, this 'registration' takes long: in one case, a student of mine was absent for more than a month; When she came back all the progress she had made at first, was gone and she had to start again: she was shy, silent, shocked by the conditions of the camp, and she felt insecure, with no self-confidence and with lower language level ...

In two cases, two of my students were absent for a long time because they got sick and they had to remain for some weeks at hospitals; I am afraid (although not sure) that illnesses are more common in refugee populations, even the ones who live in houses and not in camps and health care more difficult for them to get properly.

Of course, some of the reasons of students' number instability that were mentioned last year, are still here; that is, some children left the project unexpectedly, as their families

moved in other countries; some others moved in distant houses (because of state regulations) and it was impossible for them, afterwards, to come to the school; some others came on an unstable basis, because their parents were busy and couldn't lead them to the school: the group of students never became stable, because, even after many meetings, not only some students left unexpectedly but also some others joined unexpectedly too; so, almost in every meeting I was prepared to see some new faces. Also, I have to underline once again that the courses at this support afternoon school are optional, not obligatory as the morning state school; subsequently, usually the children were very tired that hour of the day and they had less concentration and patience. This was more obvious during the Ramazan: most of the children (the majority of them are muslims) were absent, because they were too weak and tired – something that led me many times to alter the scheduled programme.

B) Language-social issues

Like last year, the big language and social difficulties of the children were of course an obstacle too. Although this is never an insurmountable obstacle, this year it was bigger than the last one, because of the big differences among the children's level in the same class: some of them spoke almost fluently, some others almost zero; moreover, some struggled with mental, psychological and social issues too (i.e. 2 students with ADHD, others with usual aggressive behaviour etc.).

C) Distracting factors

In some meetings, in the same classroom two different groups of students were working on different projects: one group with me, was working on our project, the second group, consisted by students who were not part of the project but were studying with the teacher, in the other corner of the class – this had distracting consequences. Fortunately, this issue was in most cases soon solved.

Good practices and positive notices about the project

The positive impact of the project and of storytelling on such groups of participant students was, during this, second, year, even more obvious than the first one. The told stories, as well as the following exercises and games, helped a lot most of them to improve their language, social and mental skills, to develop self-esteem, empathy, collaboration and solidarity and to imagine positive futures. Even the children who faced bigger difficulties and vulnerabilities benefited by the project, sometimes in ways that we couldn't expect (see the given examples below). I believe that also the children who left unexpectedly or who were present at very few meetings benefited too: at least they had the chance for one (if not and only ...) time in their lives to have this experience and to 'take the stories with them'.

In general, all of the children found encouraging and stressless the happy ending of the tales when always the hero 'lives happily ever after'; the stable structure of the folk tales helped them also to express themselves easier and to structure their thoughts too. Some children gradually reacted and participated energetically in the stories, by commenting and sharing likes and dislikes. Another field of important remarks results by their drawings: Although not all of the children were fond of drawing, in many cases they revealed themselves more and more openly through them. Finally, the "warming" and "closing" games that I introduced and used last year proved, once again, very helpful and successful for the students' expression, collaboration and development. This year, I introduced some new games and I was always adjusting their difficulty and selection according to the team I worked with in every meeting. Sometimes that meant that the games would be much easier (like the "golden stones game", an amusing game of hide and find), some other times the opposite. When, once, for example, I had to work with just a single student, who, though, was very receptive and positive to all of my 'experiments', I dared to play with her the game "person-animal-object", a game that requires high language skills – it needs to know and write the names of different language families, i.e. personal names/names of animals/names of objects/names of professions/of colours/of countries etc).

Apart from the new games, this year, I felt more free and open to proceed to experiments and innovations. Two of them, which were very successful are a) the "table of tales" (see below) and b) the one to one storytelling, when this was possible. (Actually, I tried this at first hesitating, rather by chance, when once in one meeting just one student was present. At first I doubted if I had to go or stay; I stayed and tried to adjust everything on this student; the results were so good, that I believe that we have to take into account the benefit of personal – one to one – storytelling, even (or rather especially) with 'difficult cases' of students.)

Examples:

Let me give some examples of my remarks on positive points and noticeable profit of the project (I copy them by my detailed diary of the meetings):

A. Collaboration and solidarity of the children

1. In one meeting, Z., a boy with ADHD, as well as other difficulties, and who has a very low language level, had understood very few of the plot of the tale; (he also had come late), but after the end of the story, one of his classmates volunteered to explain him briefly in arabic what the story was about.

2. Another time, I tried to encourage a boy (S.) to finish his drawing, but he insisted to ask for the scissors. The teacher intervened and answered him that there is no possibility to get the scissors [there is such a rule in the school] and rather stop it. He then lied on the floor and stubbornly asked for the scissors. The teacher then, angry, reminded him that this is a school and there are some rules. „Or do you prefer to call your mother to come and get you home?“ The boy answered to call his mother. He lied down and started repeating all the time „I want my mom, my mom, my mom...“ for 5 minutes. The other kids all that time tried to draw, but he was distracting and disturbing them. In the end A., a girl with a traumatic personal story (I 'll mention her again below), told him: „Look, I want my mom too, but I don't ask for her! Anyway, she is in Germany!“.

Then S. stopped; he stood up and sat on the chair. „What?“ he said. „What?“ repeated H. another boy. „Is your mother abroad? And you are left without her here?“ and then her classmates tried to console A... (I believe that this is a touching moment of solidarity and empathy; it shows, moreover, the ways the children can succeed where the adults cannot...)

3. In another case, I was working with some children on a game having to do with finding names, while in the other corner a boy with extra issues was working alone with the teacher. While one of the students of my group was struggling to find the name of an object starting by the letter „k“, suddenly the boy in the corner, who ostensibly was occupied by another activity, shouted by the other side of the class „karekla!“ (that is the Greek name of the chair). So, I realize that even children who are not part of the project have to benefit by it ...

B. Remarks on the children’s comments on tales

1. My first example has not to do with a comment on a tale but on a comment on the process of storytelling: At one of the first meetings, we sat on the “tale pillows”. Then a boy, who was a newcomer, took a tale book from the shelf and gave it to me to read it to them. But a girl student then told him: “No! You can’t imagine! She can tell stories without reading them! Long stories, learned by heart!”. The boy didn’t believe and was curious then to see how this can happen. Gradually, this boy became one of the most enthusiasts of the storytelling sessions. Many times he (but also other students) when I came in, shouted: “Story! Story! Story! Story!”.... (Such reactions, of course, are encouraging for us, the storytellers, and confirmative of the good impact of the project to the students, I believe.)

2. Once I told a story titled “Fatima” which is an arabic variant of Cinderella. I gave in advance a task: “to find if this tale reminds them any known to them tale”. A girl in the end told that she knows a tale with shoes (she meant Cinderella, but she didn’t know the name ‘Cinderella’). But she also told me that an episode of the my told tale (when the girl helps other creatures) reminded her another tale and she retold me a tale about a tiger, a mouse and a man that I had told to my last year’s group! Me, astonished, I asked her how does she know that tale (it is a rare one). She answered that Ali (the male translator who was present when I told the tale last year and who is a good painter) drew that time to their class (she was attending another class, the one of the beginners, last year) on the board the tale! So, I realised that our stories and storytelling go further than we usually believe and really have impact; and yes, believing it or not, they can make a difference! Doesn’t this sounds like the ‘wave effect’ actually?

3. In one story, when the prince took the princess with him, a girl commented, that she knew such a case from her family, when a boy stole a girl to get married because their parents were against this marriage... (This comment led afterwards to compare different marriage practices among the peoples and countries – a really advanced, I believe, social subject!)

C. Remarks on the children’s behaviour during the games and concluding meeting

1. Once I noticed that B., a girl student who spoke almost zero Greek but nevertheless she liked very much holding a pen and writing, I introduced a new game, especially for her learning level: I ‘sang’, ‘danced’ and then drew some of the Greek sounds.

Then I told her a sound and she tried to do the same, to dance and draw it. Then we played a game with questions about colours (I realized that she knew the names of three colours). She wanted more. She showed me the chestnut (this is an object I use often in another game) asking by gestures to tell her the name of its colour. When I told her the word for 'brown' she grasped the pen and tried to write the name on the board guessing the spelling by its sound. Not only she succeeded (this is something very difficult) but then she made something even more admirable: she drew on the board a cup with coffee! Do you know why? Because the words 'coffee' and 'brown' sound the same in Greek. So she wanted to tell me that she knows a second meaning of this sound! How amazing the ways through which children can learn and how clever some of them are!

2. The last part of my meetings, where, like last year, I use a heart shaped red plastic ball and asked the students every time something different (always positive focused) had good results this year too. Once I asked them to tell me a moment that they had laughed a lot. A girl, (A.), told about a funny incident in her family. But a boy (H.), remembered a moment that he was sad. Then A. explained to him: "No, when you keep this heart you have to tell just good things and memories and leave the bad aside!"

3. Another time I took out of my 'tale box' the heart shaped red plastic ball and asked them to tell me about their favourite feast. A boy with ADHD and very low Greek language comprehension told (half of his telling was in arabic and he asked the help of the translator, but nevertheless at least he wasn't negative to talk...) about a feast where he played, danced and ate a lot with his friends; Then, a girl (A.) remembered and told us about a feast where she was with her mother in the camp and her mother had made for her a cake... (Her mother has left and has been since a year in Germany, while the rest of the family is in Athens and they try to join her...). I was about to leave but the girl held me and continued her story: she told me about the night when her mother left: „She put me in bed; I was sleeping when she left; and that was wise of her because if I had been awake, I would never have allowed her to leave me..." I tried to console and comfort her by telling her that I can guess how she feels and I am sure that her mother thinks no other but her and that I am sure that they ,ll be together very soon... (What life stories, my God! The point is that none of the teachers, translators or other educational staff knew her story. I believe that our storytelling project helped her to express her personal story and to reveal her trauma. If this is so, isn't this project very important?)

4. A third time I asked them with the heart-shaped ball what kind of present would be their favorite. It was the same girl (A.) the first who answered and you can't imagine what she said! "I want you, Maria, to be always happy and smiling!" Then a boy, H., took the ball and said that he wants as a present me to be always happy and healthy and all the world too. The rest of the children asked for other presents like a Barbie, a puppy etc. (let's mention that some of them weren't able in previous meetings to answer either to easy questions) but in any case such answers reveal empathy, kindness and sensitivity, I believe.

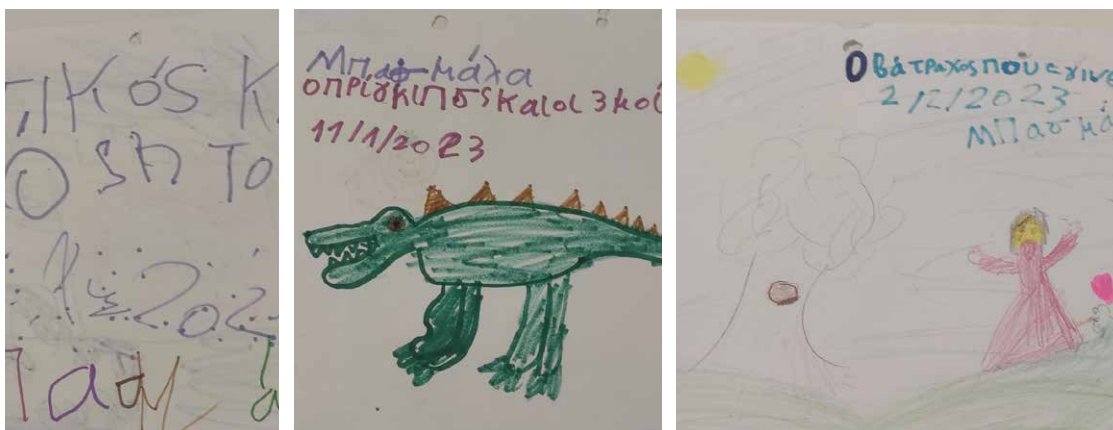
5. At our last meeting, except for the construction of the books, I had for my students a present: a T-Shirt for each of them on which the two verses of the typical conclusion of every Greek tale were printed („They lived well, but we live better!", that is the variant of 'they lived happily ever after') (I had visited a special shop and I asked to print the verses on the T-shirts). I gave a same T-shirt to Niki, their teacher who was leaving the next day, too. During the last meetings, I also completed the pupil's questionnaire with two of my students (with each of them separately). Their answers are really very interesting!

D. Remarks on the children's drawings



1. Once, a girl, Sg. (who left very soon the class) drew very beautifully, using more colours and details of the story. But she also added a christmas tree (which wasn't part of the story). When I asked her about that she explained: "Didn't you say in the story that time passed and winter came? That means that it was already Christmas time – that's why I drew a christmas tree also!" [I think that this explanation shows amazingly how children's fantasy can work differently and go beyond our adult rational thinking...!]

2. Some christmas trees were the crucial explanatory factor of another drawing too: Once, A., the girl whose mother is in Germany, drew something that seemed irrelevant to the story (a story from Anatolia), some green trees that looked to me like christmas trees or firs with red flowers and some blue lines. When I asked her what this is and if it has a connection to the story she answered that this is the rich man's garden and the blue lines are the water from his beautiful fountain (this was a detail of the story). [Once again I realised that even if something seems to our eyes irrelevant maybe, after asking, one can see the relevance to the story... Soon, after discussion with the student, I understood that to her eyes this is the way "a rich man's garden" should be: full of such kind of trees like she imagines German landscape, where her mother is.]

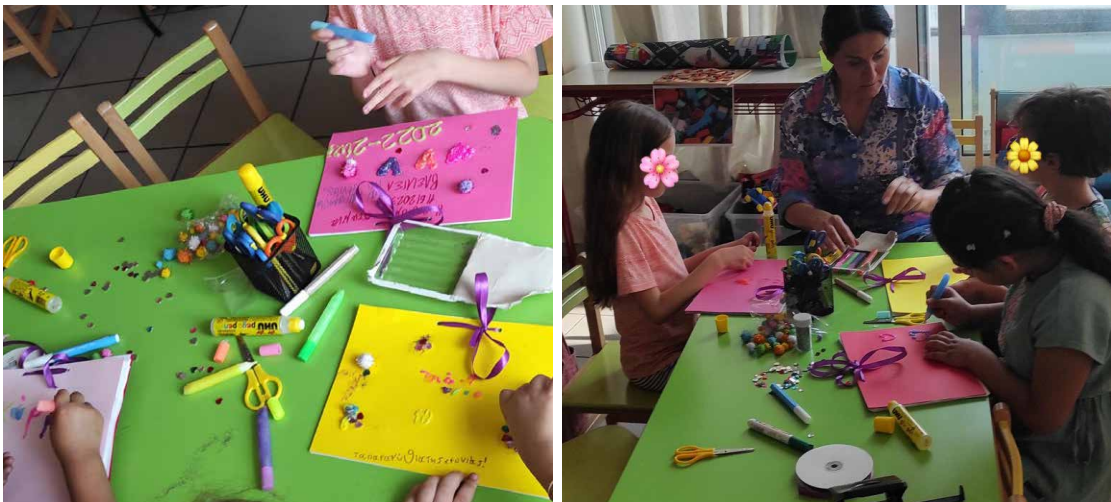


3. Another time, another girl, B., who spoke almost no Greek at all, was very prompt to draw. I thought that she would copy what she saw drawn on the board by me during my telling; but she, once again, took me by surprise: she drew the final episode, the happy ending of the marriage between the two mice – a scene that was just told and not drawn on the board... She used many colours, her drawing covered all the paper space (so there was no room to write her name, date and the title of the story, which she wrote [for her name she used many colours, one for each letter, all shades of pink and red, as expected] on the back of the page) but she painted quickly and nervously.

When she finished she asked another page to draw something else, not in connection with the tale. I gave her. She started painting in the same nervous style the blue sea. I told her that we have time, she doesn't need to be nervous, she can draw calmly. And then I drew (on the back of the page) a calm sea, to show her what I meant. She stared at me in my eyes and then she asked a third paper. I was reluctant to leave her paint something more (time has passed and I wanted to stuck on the tale more) but she explained in her way that she didn't want to draw. So, I gave her the paper. She started to make an origami, a paper boat and she encouraged me to do the same. She looked very happy with the process and this 'change' of roles (she now taught me something) and she looked very contented when in the end we had two boats. Then she placed the boats at first on the side of the paper with the 'calm' sea (drawn by me). The boats were travelling happily. Then she turned the side of the paper and put the boats now on the 'stormy' sea (drawn by her). She made clear that the boats were now shaking very heavily and the people were falling into the sea and tried not to be drawn... Just then I noticed that she had also drawn in advance some black spots in the stormy sea – they represented the hair of the people who tried to swim and save their lives. Although she didn't look sad, I believe that she tried, in this amazing, eloquent and touching way, to tell me the story of her journey to Greece...(reminding so much all the tragic shipwrecks we have witnessed last years.)

4. Another “irrelevant” drawing led to some unexpected conclusions too:

C. once made something bizzare and irrelevant to the story (a round yellow circle with spots on it), I was not sure what this was. When I asked her she told me that it is – a pizza! And she explained: “I would like to have one now... I feel very hungry!” (Even by last year, I have noticed that sometimes, some of the students may lack basic means of survival or be malnourished...)



5. Finally, in a case where the session was done with just one student, she made her drawing two times: one time on the paper and one time on a small blackboard. When she drew on the board (the story 'the prince-snake') the drawing had a lot of details and she explained to me what this was all about. On the lower part of the board she drew the first meeting of the princess, layed in bed, with the snake-prince; on the left she drew two faces (the king and the queen) who were eavesdropping outside their daughter's room; on the top she drew the happy ending, when the heroine princess finds her lost snake husband and breaks the spell: there is a huge heart on the right to show their love and reunification; the lines under the table that look like the table legs are not really table legs, but they represent the forty small snakes – the snake-prince's subjects –

while the shoes of the heroine, as she explained, “are large because they are her last iron shoes and her feet were swollen because of such a long trip” (refugee children have usually experienced long walking trips where the feet have been swollen...) Also, on the top, she wrote a phrase of the tale “ten years passed” (possibly to make clear what the depicted scene was about). I found really successful such a drawing! (see also below, F3, and attached photos)

E. Table of tales



During one of our first meetings, I had brought a special wooden craft with me, especially for the project. It was a castle on which three ‘heroes’ were stuck, a princess, a dragon and a knight. Then I showed it and I told them that this will be ‘our tale castle’. I gave them the stickers that I had brought with me and asked them to write their names. Then they stuck them on the back side of the castle and then we hung it on a nail in the classroom. They got enthusiastic. The table of tales remained there all the year and we used it in many other occasions too, but also it is a mark of our sessions during the other hours that the children spend at the school with their teachers.

F. One to one storytelling

As I have mentioned above, I tried sometimes to explore if and how storytelling would be beneficial in one to one session. The results were very encouraging. Some examples:

1. Once, I was alone in the class with B, whose almost zero language knowledge was very challenging for me to tell her a story. The teacher suggested to ask the translator to come back (she had, during the third warming game, left the classroom) and translate. But I refused it. I told her instead that I want to experiment to tell my story using other means. At first we both sat on the “tale pillows” and I sang to her the initiative tale motif. Then I stood and I told the story “The mouse and his daughter”, a cumulative tale (the Greek variant of ATU 2031C) [it was the tale that I had told to the students in Eupen when visiting them on 17.9.2022] using also singing and drawing the 5 steps of the tale on the board. B. understood everything! When the translator came back ...it was her the one who explained to the translator in her mother tongue what the tale was about!

2. Another time, it was a day of general strike (everybody was on demonstrations protesting against lacking of safety measures after a train tragedy some weeks ago, so there were no public transport, most of the employees didn’t come to their work, most shops were closed etc.). Indeed, at ELIX also some of the employees didn’t manage to

come, but one sole student in the whole school appeared and she was a student of my group! When she was asked how she came, she answered 'on foot' (although her home is far away...) "I don't want to lose our meetings!" During our meeting, we talked also about the strike, the demonstration and the police on the streets. Then she found the opportunity to tell me many incidents of her personal story. For instance, she narrated a moment where policemen and opponents enter violently her house in Afghanistan and she hid herself under the table where a big knife had always been hidden, to protect themselves in the case of attack... These personal confessions and details need space and trust among two people. I believe that she wouldn't have narrated them if we weren't just the two of us and that my status of a storyteller helped this, that's why I evaluate the one to one storytelling successful.



3. A third time when I found myself alone with a student, I asked her if she would like to sing together the introductory song. She answered: "I think I can sing it by myself alone! Would you like to allow me to show you?" So, of course I did!. After the telling it was time for drawing. Drawing, though, is not this student's strong point. That moment I realised why: she always needs to learn or to do something new! So, that day, when I gave her the paper and markers for drawing she proposed something new: She grasped the chock and started drawing on a small mobile blackboard! This couldn't be done if she wasn't alone in the class, as there is just one small blackboard.

G. Collaboration

Finally, I would add to the positive points of Year 2, the better collaboration with ELIX staff and educators. Although some inherent problems for our project (like the instability of students, the structure of the school and the way it operates etc.) have been still here, the school staff has at last (especially after our first meeting in Aachen) adopted the expected behaviour towards the project, the storyteller and all of them have been much more friendly now.

CONCLUSION

I would like to underline my commitment to the aim of the project. Although many times, because of various difficulties the results seem to be not very prominent, I strongly believe that this project has a lot to offer and, especially in the case of Greek participant refugee students, it is not just worthwhile but invaluable.