

Erasmus+ project „The Children of Sheherazade“ Greece – Year 3 (2023–24) – 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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The last year of the project, as I had to repeat what I did the previous two years, I used all the gained experience to adjust my sessions to all the specific circumstances that we face in Greece and in ELIX. This experience and the comprehension of what to expect (and what not) made me much more relaxed with regard to my anticipations but also much more decided to use all the tools this project provides us for the benefit of the children, no matter their big or small number in the group.

So, I continued with some methods and strategies that I followed last year (see also report Year 2), like telling my stories to any present child in the classroom, regardless their participation or not in evaluation, their language level, their systematic or occasional attendance of the sessions. I also, due to the circumstances, I explored better the profit of an one to one storytelling. I also explored the dynamic and results of storytelling in special events, as i.e. the one that took place in ELIX when a Swedish school visited my group and took part in the session.

Challenges of the project

The challenges of the project remained the same like the previous years:

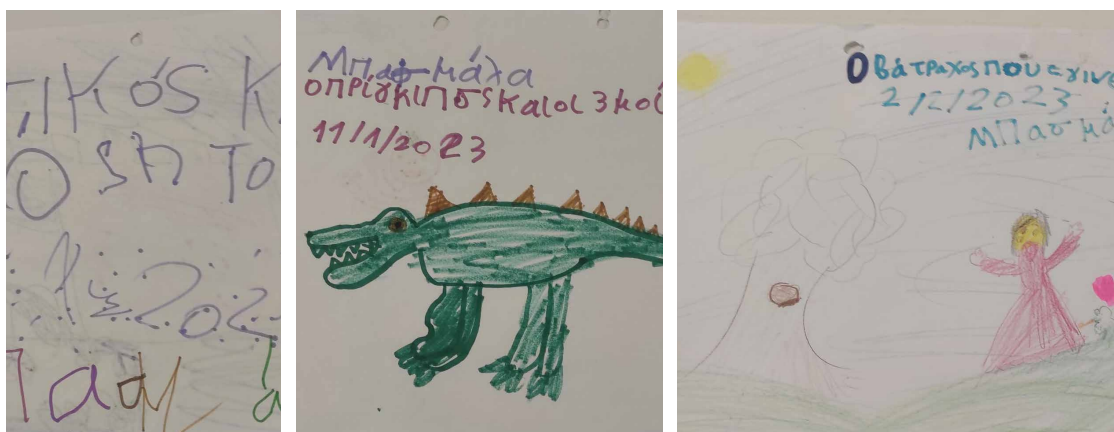
a) low number of participant students – fluidity of the group:

I have to admit, this was even worse this year, as almost in every session the composition of the group was different and some times even the session was cancelled because no child appeared. This fluidity and usual ‘disappearance’ of the children has been due to many reasons: because of state policies, which, despite their opposite reassurances are not very friendly for refugees, because of the form of ELIX function but also because of many of other imponderables, like Ramadan time, family’s other priorities, long distance of the children’s accommodation from ELIX, fatigue of the children due to heavy school program etc. (see also last year’s report) b) Language-social issues: Like the previous years, big language and social difficulties of the children were usually an obstacle. However, this, third year, the social issues were easier handled; despite the fact that a language low or zero level was very often, this, after (my) first shock, functioned as a motive to use new tools, methods and including strategies. c) Distracting factors: Although neither this year we managed to get rid of distracting factors, I have to tell that these were less than the previous two years and many times a quick solution was given, i.e. when we realized the distraction of the children by toys and objects that were put in our classroom, next time we changed the classroom and the problem was solved.

Good practices and positive notices about the project

There was a positive impact of the project and of storytelling during the third year, as the two last ones too. As I mentioned last year: “The told stories, as well as the following exercises and games, helped a lot most of the children 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 or the ones who were present at very few meetings benefited too”.

Actually I remarked the great progress that a boy with Asperger syndrome made during our sessions, as well another one with ADHD, so I dare to tell that such people are the ones who benefit the most by projects like “The children of Sheherazade”. Of course, all the children found the happy ending of the tales encouraging, satisfying and stressless their stable and given structure and entertaining their content. Also they found stressless and helpful that our sessions had the very same structure all the times, and they liked and learned a lot from the introductory and other games. They usually found ‘difficult’ the task to make a drawing, but, nevertheless, in the end they liked it a lot and learned many things apart from drawing: how to motivate their fantasy, how to cooperate, how to find themselves in their drawings and the stories ...



Examples:

Let me give some examples of my remarks on positive points and noticeable profit of the project.

A. Innovative ideas of children

I realized many times the cleverness and the motivated fantasy of the children, as well as their will for sharing or for communication during not only the storytelling but during the games or the drawing as well:

1. Once, for example, a boy who has just joined the session for the first time not only understood the rules of the played game “hide the stone” but very soon he made a ‘joke’ trying to win by inventing new rules.

2. Another time, while playing the game ‘cold -warm’ a girl, hid so well the object that nobody could find it: her ‘method’ was interesting: she first made sounds with objects in a box, so everybody thought that the wanted object was hidden there, but she had hidden it in a more secret place, close to that.

3. Another time, during the game ‚salt-pepper‘ the boy with Asperger syndrome suggested a new difficult rule, that no one had ever before thought of (in the 3 years that we play it): he suggested not only to move forward (when one says ‚salt‘) and backward (when one says ‚pepper‘) [these are the rules of this game] but also to move right when one says ‚sugar‘ and left when one says ‚honey‘ (the words were his suggestion – it is clear that they are not chosen at random, but they belong to the same word group!)

4. Once, I was in the class with just one Afghan boy who speaks zero Greek. After the story (a lot of mimic and other means were used) and the drawing we played a game with some plastic animals that were kept in a box in the classroom. He had to find the same animal and to make them pairs; I told him the Greek name of the animals and he repeated them. But afterwards, he took an initiative: he brought the plastic globe and he put the animals on the countries we can find them: so, he put the lions in the middle of Africa, the penguins on the North Pole (I explained to him, to his astonishment, that they live on the Antarctica), the sheep on Afghanistan etc. Then he picked all the animals that live in Afghanistan from the box and showed them to me. So, I think that, despite his limited vocabulary, this is his way to make a dialogue! And this couldn't be done if a story was not told first.

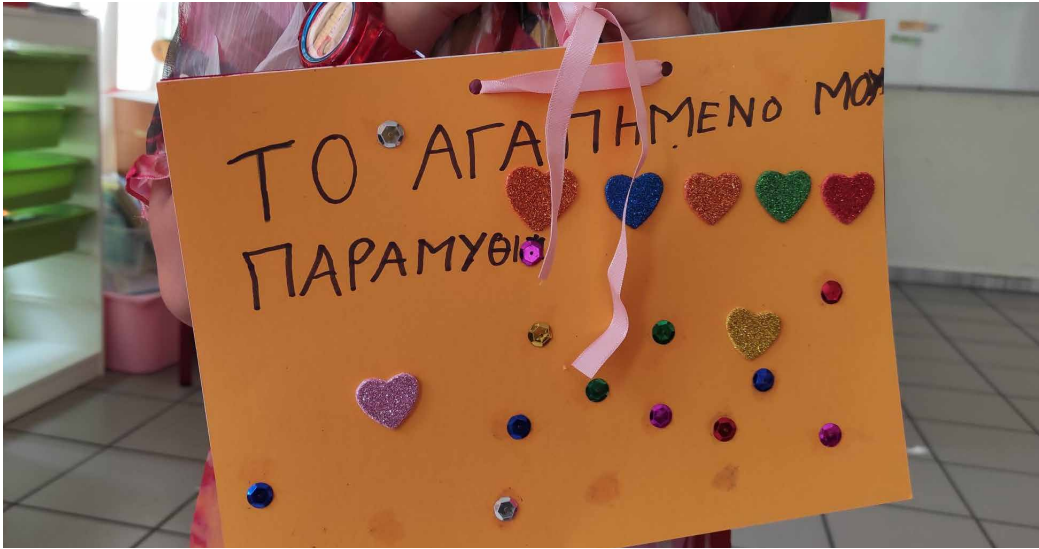
5. A boy once drew two drawings, on both sides of the paper [the tale was a variant of Hansel and Gretel, with a male villain and just one small hero instead of two]: on the one side the sleeping ogre (with a huge belly, snoring; on the back side at first he drew green high grass, then the hero and on the very low part of the paper some black spots, that looked just like smudges. But when I asked him about it, he explained that the grass is so high and that's the reason that the hero and his brothers lost their way and that the black spots are ... the stones he threw behind him to find his way...!, so I realized for one more time that everything can be meaningful, no matter if we, the adults, can understand it or not!)

B. Collaboration, sharing and dissemination of the project

1. Once, a girl, who was present just in one session in the beginning of the year, appeared with her newcomer sister many months later. I was impressed that she remembered the rules of the game „chestnut or stone“ that we had played the first time she was present; but the most impressive was that her sister knew the rules too! When I asked her how this did happen, she answered: „My sister told me with details all the games and other things that you did together, also the story you narrated to them, when she came once -that's why I know it too!

2. Another time, when I entered the classroom I found a new student, S., there. Actually, S. was not a real newcomer: He has been a student that had participated in the project last year, but he was present just in three meetings, that time. He was then younger than the others, so he entered another group for younger children. S. remembered the game we played from the previous year! He even tried to explain to his classmate the rules (although she, of course was familiar to it). When, afterwards, I told the story „the frog maiden“, S., surprisingly, said that he knew the story and what will happen next... Later, when I looked at my diary, I realized that last year he had listened to a similar tale („The frog emperor“), with some similar episodes, and that was the reason why the tale looked familiar to him! I really felt very happy that he remembered so many details of our sessions, despite the fact that he was present just in three of them!

3. A third example: once, when I was telling, M., a new student came in the classroom. She sat beside her friend, and she was very fond of drawing a scene too, although she missed a big part of the story: then her friend renarrated for her sake the first part of the story that she had missed.



C. Immediate expression of the positive impact of the project

1. A girl once complained: "why is [this session] so short? I would like it to be longer! You to stay longer! The sessions with the other teachers are longer!" I explained that this session has the same duration as the other ones. It is obvious, I believe, that possibly because it has to do with storytelling and games, that are entertaining, she had the impression that it is shorter ...

2. How ever, the project turned out to be beneficial not only for the children but for the educators as well. That is exactly the case i.e. when a social worker who was present at the classroom during a session asked me many questions about the stories I choose, the myths, my methods etc. He was a young employer and it was obvious that he thirsted for learning – he knew nothing about storytelling and he confessed that it's such a pity that this is not included in social workers' education, that he finds it so exciting and a strong tool for his work, too!

Finally I would like to say some words about the 'calendars' that I attach. The method of writing a diary of all the personal observations, remarks, impressions, thoughts and descriptions at any session has been inspired by the same method used by social anthropologists and one that I use often in anthropological and language projects that I conduct or participate. Of course, all the remarks are subjective, emotional, full of repetitions, and, sometimes, positively or negatively marked, according to many (subjective) factors and thus they can even be 'false' at all. So, they cannot be counted as objective reports, but, nevertheless, I think that they can be of use to participants in other similar projects in the future mainly because they can compare their struggles, excitements or disappointments with the described here.