The Storytelling Club

Fadi Taher, Suzanne Kanso, Maya Götz

The article explains how the project "The Storytelling Club" fosters resilience, creativity and mental health in children through difficult life situations.

Several teachers had tried to encourage Mohammad, a 9-year-old refugee boy from Afghanistan who has been living in a refugee home in Germany for a year, to learn to write. But the boy strictly refused to do so. The reasons for his refusal may have been the impending deportation and knowing that the people in his home country write differently – I don't know. But what I do know are the things I have experienced with the Storytelling Club. Mohammad had attended nearly every unit of the Storytelling Club. As he is an enthusiastic and talented artist, he always told his stories through pictures. After the final event, the children's mentor told me something astonishing had happened: Mohammad began learning the Latin characters. When she asked him how this came about, he replied: "Because I want to be able to write down my own stories!"

Experience of a Storytelling Club facilitator in Munich, Germany

The Storytelling Club is a workshop developed by the IZI and the Prix Jeunesse Foundation to foster resilience, creativity and mental health in children through difficult life situations. A group of children meets for a certain period of time to play, listen, tell, draw and write stories of strength they have experienced.

The official aim of the Storytelling Club project is to create a storybook intended to help other children in a similar situation. The book's heroes and heroines are the children themselves. The completed book will contain short stories and pictures, or photographs narrating experiences of everyday resilience ("strong stories") (Ill. 1 and 2). The stories are created during weekly meetings in which the children come together for approximately 2 hours, usually to watch short films that then form a starting point for their own strong stories. The children learn how to tell stories – as a monologue in front of the group, in pictures and in written form. Narratives are typically sparked by impulses such as "The day I overcame my fear" or "The day I could help someone". The stories the children are most proud of are gathered in a book which can be produced by an app. If possible, a final presentation of the work in front of family and friends is held for the children to tell their best stories and get a printed version of the book – a celebration of resilience where children can see their own strength and share it with others.

The Storytelling Club is a pedagogic building block system that supervisors on the ground can utilize to undertake project-oriented work with the children. All materials and an app to produce the book are offered for free online (www.storytellingclub.org) and are currently available in 4 languages (English, German, Spanish, Arabic).

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Ill. 1: Within the framework of the Storytelling Club, children listen, tell, draw and write stories of strength they have experienced

STORYTELLING CLUB EGYPT (CAIRO, LUXOR, SINAI)

Resilience – key for Egyptian kids living in an authoritarian system in which nearly everything is forbidden and/or prohibited, depriving children of the right to engage in imaginative play, dream and simply just be kids. Egyptian children live in a system of punishment rather than of acceptance, they live in a system of oppression rather than of freedom. Being subject to this oppressive system as a child growing up, I felt the urge to give Egyptian kids the opportunity to experience resilience and acceptance by means of creating a space where they could tell and share their stories in a creative way and learn from each other.

The project in Egypt was funded by the Dutch Embassy in Cairo and focused on working in marginalized areas and with discriminated communities. To ensure project sustainability we started by training 12 local coaches, facilitators and pedagogues as educators. The following Storytelling Clubs were held in Luxor, Sinai and Cairo. In Cairo, we were working with El Waha (Oasis) Center in the debris part of the village. Children lived with their parents and siblings amidst waste which they collected for the purpose of recycling. These kids suffered and endured inferiority, fear and insecurity as a result of harsh environmental circumstances, violence,

and parental neglect. When given the possibility, children would run away to hide and talk about simple dreams like having a private room, eating fruits and having meat or just having a new school uniform. The Storytelling Club served as a window of hope and safe space where children could share their stories and feel accepted. The Storytelling Club allowed them the opportunity, albeit briefly, to escape the horrors of their reality and desert the feelings of fear and limitation behind – a space where they could feel proud of themselves even with the very little they had.

My personal experience facilitating the Storytelling Club and witnessing its impact first hand on children was quite remarkable, and for this very reason I wanted to share my experience with other educators and create that window of opportunity. Local educators who came from the same authoritarian system wanted to deal with these kids the same way they were subjected to in schools, and expected immediate results, immediate change. My instant reaction was pulling the educators together and organizing a brief, one that is different from the expected authoritarian school-led structure. The need to educate and inform my colleagues that the Storytelling Club was not a race to finish the curriculum as the expected and accustomed to model here in schools took them aback. On the first day of the workshops, the local educators approached me despondently, noting how the children were out of control and expecting that any result was nearly impossible. I challenged them by allowing the children the space needed and working collectively on enhancing the children's self-esteem, and sure enough the kids' behavior and attitude took a sharp turn. On Day 2, kids who were silent and did not share or get involved with others became more talkative and started communicating and sharing their stories more and more every day. And on the very last day of the workshop, even the most difficult children became engaged and showed interest. Below are a few examples.

George

At the first workshop we had a kid named George who was beaten up by his parents on a daily basis. George liked to boss around the rest of the group, always annoyed and bullied other children who were not listening to him and tried to grab their attention. On the third day, George became different, more easy-going and relaxed; a team member got up to share the story of how George helped a friend solve a problem. George's friend was in need of a small amount of money and George helped him by collecting the money from other friends to make his friend happy.

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Ill. 2: Children explain: "This is who I am, and I am proud of …"

Nour

Being very silent and timid on the first day of the same workshop, Nour summoned the courage and strength to share many of her beautiful drawings and narrated her story of how she overcame her fear of darkness. Nour believes there are demons out there that come out when it gets dark. One day, Nour (meaning "light") decided to stop being afraid of the darkness that taunts her. So, one day Nour decided to summon up the courage when it was both dark outside and the village had no electricity. She kept walking and with every step she took she realized that there were no demons out there, that it was a manifestation of fears she had created. From that day on she stopped fearing darkness.

Amr

Amr from Luxor was always sad, sat aside and neither played with other children nor talked with them despite his involvement with all the activities. Amr shared his story of "The Day I Became Strong" by sharing the reason for his sadness. Amr was very close to his grandmother. One day, she gave him money to buy candy, and on his return home, he found his grandmother dead. Amr was dealing with the unexpected and sudden death of his grandma by isolating himself for many years and not opening up to his family, teachers or friends, until the day he shared this experience at the Storytelling Club. It was then and there that Amr felt free and strong and overcame his isolating sadness.

At the end of all workshops, local educators evidently placed more trust in the Storytelling Club, acknowledging that the curriculum in place was crafted as a process to help and enable children to experience, uncover and reach resilience at their own pace.

Fadi Taher

STORYTELLING CLUB LEBANON (BEIRUT)

In Beirut, the project was conducted with 17 Syrian refugee children in co-

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Ill. 3: Storytelling Club Beirut: telling each other stories on the topic "When I overcame fear"

operation with the local broadcaster SAT7. Educators Suzanne Kanso, Fadi Taher and Hania Asgari worked with the children for 5 days and 4 hours each day, while other educators helped with the writing of the stories. Children experienced units like "What am I good at?", wrote and drew stories on "When I could help someone" or "When I overcame fear", and discovered their own strengths. They talked about what was important to them and what they thought good values were, spoke about what made them sad, and wrote stories of when they overcame fear and difficult situations.

Moreover, they learned how to see their everyday life differently through a different lens – photography. Every child was given a camera to take home with the challenge of capturing 5 photos that showcased and reflected the following: "What gives you strength, where could you help others and when could you overcome fear?" Children got daily feedback on their pictures, and towards the end of the workshop their best photos were selected and presented in an art exhibition. In the course of these central learning experiences children had a lot of fun; through group activities they realized what they liked about each other, what connected them, and that collectively as a group they could overcome any obstacle and acquire greatness. Their work, thoughts, stories, and pictures were collated and published in a book of which every child received a final copy at the final ceremony alongside their families. The children gave their book the title:

The Day I Became Strong: The Stories of Syrian Children Who Overcame Everything!

On our last day together, we gathered around a tree, a lone green tall leafy tree that embraced us under its shady branches, protecting us from the striking heat (Ill. 3). And the situation unfolded as follows: "Today, I want you to close your eyes. Take a deep breath in. Now exhale. In your exhale, let your deepest thoughts surface. You're somewhere – be it at home, on your balcony, or on the mountain. Now pick a tree, one that you really like, that you connect with or that represents you. Now remember that tree. This is your safe space. This is your strength (moments of dead silence and heavy breathing). Now slowly open your eyes, can someone tell me why we chose a tree?"

Molham, a 9-year-old war child: "Because it is still, strong and resilient. I think what the world and other children around the world need to know is to continue to have fun and laugh. I mean we are children and we ran away from missiles, gunshots and tanks to seek refuge and survive, but look at us now we're still smiling and laughing."

Silence filled the space under our tree. Expressions of both agony and exhilaration were observed.

Mohammed, an 8-year-old physically and emotionally abused child: "It doesn't matter that we went through war, what matters is that we're here, and still going outside and having fun – my favorite game is tag."

"Resilient – this is what you are. No matter how strong the winds are, the tree remains resilient. This is how I want you to be – resilient, strong and unchanging, no matter how strong the winds are, no matter how difficult the obstacles are," I said.

And on that final note, we embraced our lone green tall leafy tree that hugged all our pain, and then we parted the children with the following message: "Promise me this, but most importantly promise yourself to become those trees, to become your own strength, to keep fighting no matter the odds."

This is the story of strength from Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, who overcame everything. ■

Suzanne Kanso

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