

Embracing Diversity Symposium

Children book's project

Presentation of Dragon Lake- *Estelle Cohenny*

First I'd like to thank MMN for the opportunity to work on this project. I would also like to thank Dara Academy and Bong Noi Primary School for helping us in organizing and facilitating the activities in Chiang Mai.

School Activities

In each school, we facilitated one whole day of games, visual arts and role plays to approach the topic of migration with children and get a sense of what 7 years old children think, what they are aware of already, without putting them into a confronting situation. After each of these two days, the facilitating team met to debrief and although we were tired, we could have gone on talking.

The insight that we got from talking with children and teachers was manifold and led to more questioning. Here are some of the main points we discussed:

The activity required students to create 2 imaginary countries. In each country, students worked in groups to create a city and a village together with their inhabitants. Then some people moved from each place to another country or from an urban to rural area (and vice-versa). Unfortunately while traveling by plane, the travelers lost their purse. When they arrived, they realized they did not speak the same language as the locals. In groups, students explored these situations and found ways for newcomers to get some food and a place to sleep.

The first group of students totally surprised us because they did not question who the new comers were. They assumed they were undocumented migrants. Students all knew the procedures migrants have to follow: they talked of reporting to immigration, being arrested, making a statement to the Head of village to request for a person to stay. Not once did they mention Embassy services or protection, or going to the police for help. The only refuge mentioned was the temple.

In the second school, newcomers were treated as equals. They were invited into homes, taken to restaurants, offered free languages classes and applied to work in hospitals- not as cleaners but as doctors. They got the jobs too. After a while, they went home. Newcomers reported to their embassy the loss of their money.

Concluding on travellers experience living away from Home, some students in the first group talked about taking revenge for being treated badly, others about understanding migrants' feelings and treating them with understanding in the future.

Another issue that came through clearly was Gender. Gender differentiation was strong element, not only in the way it affects migrants, but also in how power in the community was represented. People of authorities were automatically men. Children amongst them behaved very differently in both schools regarding to gender.

As I mentioned above, the aim of these activities was to find out how children perceived “living together” and migration. The activity brought out the real situation students are facing. The first group of students had a large number of migrants’ children and children from ethnic minorities. At the end, when these students were asked how it had felt to be in a new place, the feelings were awkward, discussion hesitant but the expression was clear: “We were not welcome, we didn’t want to stay”. At this point, the class teacher intervened and reminded students that when people come to a new place, they have to adapt and change themselves. To which students bent their heads and replied “yes teacher”. It ended the discussion.

Students were seeing/ perceiving things but were not allowed to express them. This strongly affected the whole team of facilitators and made us see that a successful approach to this topic at school - if one is to envisage it as a teaching and learning goal included in the school curriculum- must consider the local current school environment. It is clear that schools are under much pressure, and have to work with little budget and large numbers of students. However, if teaching methods are based on the imposition of a response that is “acceptable” and didactic, without trying to really tackle the issue by applying critical thinking and allowing self-expression, however creative the tools is, it will have little effect.

In the second school, students had been exposed to the notion of travel. Some had been abroad. They were more ready to accept the idea of new people arriving and that this could produce new experiences and relationships. In short they had a more liberal attitude towards the ‘idea’ of migration and who ‘the new comer’ might be. It would be interesting however to find out if students have actually had direct encounters/experiences with migration/migrant workers and under what context. Did the fact that students did not seem aware of migrants mean they had never encountered migrant people, or was it due to the fact that they had integrated already that migrants do not belong to their world?

The attitudes in this second group of students were certainly different, though not automatically more open to the outside world. One could make generalizations about why: according to social position, privilege, and experience etc. but it would require a much more in depth survey to make such statements. What the activities did highlight though is that Migration and living together needs to be explored together with the issues of gender and social class, introduce concepts of place and space, in order for acceptance to be truly recognition of people’s engagement in society.

Hence, for the children book part of the project, the theme that I chose to focus my writing on was the feeling of rejection and acceptance because children in both schools had expressed a variety of feelings related to the experience of belonging or not belonging to a group, welcoming or not welcoming others.

Dragon Lake

The Picture book *Dragon Lake* asks questions. What is rejection? How does it feel to be rejected? When we teach or tell our children to reject someone, how do they feel? What does it say about the kind of people we are when we tell a child: "don't play with that child, they are dirty!"

As parents, should we pass on our prejudices to our children? Our children want us to love them. They are likely to obey even if it hurts them to lose a friend, because the force of our anger or fear in our voices when we forbid, scares them more.

Rejection is sprouted from fear and anger. Its roots are not in the person we reject, in reality, anyone can be rejected on any basis. Rejection sets up an opaque barrier. Once it's up, all we see is ourselves. How the person rejected carries on living, how they feel, we don't know. The Other as an unknown entity is thus created.

To reflect on the concept of foreignness means also defining the concept of home, of the familiar. Home is the place where we are greeted everyday by the same things and people- it is a place where we feel safe and this sense of safety is tied to the way our identity develops. Often times, in Chiang Mai where I work, I have heard adults jokingly ask a child "where you are from?" and the child replied "I'm from Chiang Mai!", which made adults laugh a bitter sweet laugh, knowingly. Do we really know better? Isn't this child's answer the correct one? Are we to tell children that they are not entitled to the sense of safety they feel, for reasons – nationality, legal statuses- that don't mean anything to them, but seem to mean a lot to adults? *Home is where I am loved*, says the child.

Children start perceiving and feeling the world and its pressures before they are even born. Children experience rejection early and it's painful. For adults too, it is painful. Knowingly passing down our own prejudices is like teaching children to be scared of the world and others. Shouldn't we teach our children to be brave and fair? By fair, I mean knowing how we ought to be treated and to treat others the same way. By brave I mean to be open to each other and dare to ask a newcomer, "do you want to play with me?", and be able to venture into unknown social territories without feeling our identity under threat.

Dragon Lake is a children book, a story that asks questions rather than answers them. It was made in the aim of opening dialogue for between children together with adults. This dialogue takes time. I hope you will enjoy the discussions.