

A Lesson



The school principal warned me, “The last class is the most difficult one. They get into big fights with the children in the refugee reception class that operates in our school.”

I did not comment, and to be honest, I did not give it too much thought in the beginning. I was confident in our team and the material we had prepared for the children. In any case, they are children mostly in the beginning of adolescence. How bad could it be?

We entered a half full classroom. Most of the pupils were still outside in the courtyard, and others were delayed and slowly coming into the room. Some students did not even take off their jackets or school backpacks – as if they wanted to get this session over with, hear what we had to say and leave.

This was certainly not a warm welcome, and was in great contrast to our previous experiences in other classrooms.

We started our presentation the same way we started with all students. However, this time was different – as if the icebreakers actually made the atmosphere and room colder. But, we continued with the presentation of our material, talking about war, solidarity, and what makes people flee from their homes and countries.

An avalanche of questions and harsh comments came in...

“But why are they coming here?”

“Why don’t they go to another country?”

“We are a poor country, we cannot accommodate them.”

“THEY are aggressive and hit us.”

“THEY don’t talk to us.”

“It is not OUR fault, so why do we have to play and be friends with them?”

I was listening carefully to the students’ words, and my primary goal was how to confront these words and explain complex notions that even as adults, we have problems understanding. To try and understand how these grown up words became children’s words ...

Our presentation was not working. These questions and harsh comments were building on one another and making the situation worse. We had to improvise, adapt, and think rapidly of another approach. Without having previously discussed it as a team, we started sharing our own personal stories with the students, about the times when we moved houses and were closed off to ourselves, didn’t know anyone, about the times that we were aggressive because of things that were troubling us at home. We felt that we had to be honest, engaging and not patronizing. And it worked. They started listening.

The next day, I received an email from the school principal thanking us and saying that the pupils were really appreciative of the discussion we had with them, and were looking forward to us returning again. I finished reading the message with a big smile on my face. I immediately forwarded the email to my fellow team members to share the good news, and show that it is always worth trying! Always. Because you never know the mindsets you can change by sharing your own story.

Emilia Skourla has been working with MSF since 2018 and is the Association Coordinator of MSF Greece. She particularly loves listening to stories, true or imaginary, and her first attempt to tell her own story was a truly exciting experience. Emilia looks forward to sharing stories more often.