

A Tree Growing



It's our second school visit this year... part two of an educational workshop on war and the pathways of refugees. The first one had been a success, with a mixture of Greek and refugee children from Syria and Afghanistan cooperating well.

I wonder how this session will go ... Before we enter the classroom, the teacher tells us, "In this classroom, there are a few students having constant fights with their refugee peers."

I am feeling excited and worried at the same time. My heart is beating fast, and my mind is running through possible scenarios. As we begin talking, 20 eyes are glued to the presentation, but two or three are staring at the floor or the ceiling. We take the students on a virtual walk through a gallery of photographs, with people all over the world having lost their lives, their loved ones, their homes, their sense of belonging.

The first iceberg is right in front of me. He says, "Why do they even come here and they don't stay at their homeland? They don't even speak the language."

How can a 14-year-old be so angry? Why? His parents are migrants themselves, as the teacher informed us earlier. I am breathing, thinking ... and then I prepare myself for an activity. The goal is to help students put themselves into someone's else's shoes.

We ask them, "What if you were at this position? How would you feel?"

After several examples and comments that begin with "But ..." in the discussion, the silence comes. This moment when there are no arguments left, only self-reflection. Maybe the first seed is planted, I think.

After a couple of weeks, our team receives a message from the teacher thanking us and saying that the children are still talking about our visit. A smile comes to my face ... I see a tree growing.

Vicky Antonopoulou is currently working with Médecins Sans Frontières in Greece. She is part of the Association Team and serves as the focal point for the Urban Spaces project in Athens and Thessaloniki.