Storywood

Tierlantuin is a childcare centre in Ghent, Belgium, where reading to and with children is a standard activity in the daily schedule. The pleasure of reading is discovered and experienced in many different ways: in a cozy reading corner, in the ‘storywood’ in the garden as well as in a tailor-made Kamishibai theatre.

By Ankje Vandekerckhove

Katrien Reynaert, the centre coordinator, explains that there is a set ritual for storytelling that the children know by heart. Before lunch a signal is given and the children immediately know what that means: they stop playing and gather in the reading corner, eager to hear the next story. The same goes for the daily walk in the garden to the ‘storywood’, in which exciting stories are to be heard about nature, or about the elves and trolls who live there. Also, children can always ask to read together, which they quite often do, inspired by books laying around everywhere.

Involving everyone

Not only the child carers read for the children: parents, grandparents, friends and even neighbours are always welcome to come in and tell stories. The centre is open for them to walk in and get involved with all the reading material at hand. This makes them feel more involved and they enjoy it as much as the children do. Parents have stated that they like the attention that is given to books and stories as it stimulates the children’s sense of fantasy as well as their language development. As the centre has children of many different backgrounds, respect for diversity is very important. Among the reading material this becomes clear: besides books in Flemish, there are many books in several other languages. Children who are not yet all that familiar with Flemish, feel good when they can listen to stories being told in their native language as well. The experience has been that this sense of well being is beneficial for their development and they will pick up the Flemish language more easily. For Tierlantuin it is an explicit choice to also invite parents who speak another language for these reading activities.

Marieke, the aunt of one of the toddlers, and Zeliha and Souhir, both mothers, come by the centre to read. While Zeliha and Souhir get cozy in one reading corner, Marieke chooses the story corner in another room. The children, who are in the mood for books, join in. Three childcarers look after the toddlers so they all get to join in the right group according to their home language. They also keep an eye on the size of the group; when the groups get too big, the attention span is lower and the children get more easily distracted. As everyone is comfortable settled, it is time for the first story. It is a story about ‘Nijntje’ (in Flemish, Miffy in English). As Zeliha is reading out in Arabic, she talks about ‘Naynti’ but all children immediately recognise the well-known rabbit. Zeliha starts reading out in Arabic and after a while she turns the book towards the children and she explains in Flemish what she has been telling before. Not only the Arab speaking toddlers listen very attentively; the others as well point their fingers at the booklet and spontaneously jump in into the translation. Souhir is next, with a story about Naynti and some adventurous little chickens, that have to be counted throughout the story. She reads out in both Turkish and Flemish and it sounds like fun. While it is the first time that Souhir comes to read out in Tierlantuin, it is obvious that she is an experienced storyteller with lots of expressions, different voices and questions to keep the children enthusiastic and fascinated. The children really get involved and enjoy making chicken’s noises and counting them! The reading in the adjacent room is as exciting, so it seems. Marieke is reading out a book about a bear with a very soft belly. The attentively listening toddlers can all feel this belly one by one.

Bringing stories to life

De tijdsmachine...

- heeft een dashboard, een stuur, vleugels, maar vliegt niet als een auto...
- heeft ook deuren, een om binnen te gaan, en de andere om naar buiten te gaan...
- is als een grote doos, je kan er in met zijn drieën...
- is als een lift...
- is om mee naar vroeger te reizen.

Eleonora, 5 jaar
In the meantime, some older children seem to be getting ready to go outside with Fairouz, one of the child carers in Tierlantuin. She is carrying the Big Book of Elves and walks the children to a nice place in the garden where the little bird’s nest hangs in a tree. The nest is not the home of a bird however; it is where Mouse lives. Mouse knows her way around the garden and can lead the children along the pathways, passing by all the insects living in the garden as well as the other nests, homes of Bear, Piglet and Rabbit. All these (stuffed) animals experience quite a lot of adventures.

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Books and stories outside

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The Kamishibai

Next to all this, together with some students from the Ghent community college, colleagues also made up some stories themselves, fit to the interest and curiosity of the toddlers in the centre. These stories are not only nice to listen to, but also have elements to appeal to their sight and tactile sense. The stories all feature Bear, Mouse, Pig and Rabbit, all children respond to reading etc. Based on all this information, the students also developed a very special material: a small kamishibai theatre with nine different stories, adapted to life at Tierlantuin and the families. All with specific materials, drawings, musical instruments and songs. The children simply love it and the child carers as well find this a very nice way to work with them.

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Pictures: Caroline Boudry & Tierlantuin, childcare centre
W: http://dienstkinderopvang.be/kdv.tierlantuin

“This is what happened during a random afternoon at Tierlantuin...”