

ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDREN WORKING GROUP

Lecture and workshop by Cilel Smith (University of London), December 12, 2009

The Global Classroom: Introducing new arrivals, refugees, and travellers children to school settings in the United Kingdom

Imagine you are a child from Afghanistan and suddenly find yourself in an English school. What challenges would you face? And what can educators do to design a trajectory that will successfully help you to integrate in the regular school system?

When arriving in the UK, refugee and migrant children have to get used to a totally different school system. Some of them have never attended school at all. Cilel Smith, PhD candidate at the Institute of Education (University of London) gave an inspiring workshop during the December 2009 session of the Anthropology of Children Working Group, focussing on the ways in which board games support educators in the process of integrating refugee and migrant children into the UK school system. By now, Smith has trained 800 teachers in using the Global Classroom method and 2000 of the board games she designed are used across the UK and Wales. The games has also been introduced to Mongolian and South African teachers and there have been requests from Greece.

On one of the schools in the UK where Smith conducts her research, she found a group of Czech and Slovakian Roma children sitting in the back of the classroom all day long. "The teachers were happy to leave them there." During the breaks, these children were often involved in fights at the playground. There was no special program for the so called "new arrivals", who made up 16% of the school population of 2000 pupils. "To support these children, we needed to assess what they already knew so we could build on that to offer them a useful schooling experience. They might have learnt to lay down stones as a way to count the cattle in the field, making sure they kept an eye on the sheep in their flock. This means they are able to count, but not in the way that it is taught in the English school system."

Smith's research focuses on 40 refugee children in British schools. They are 13 to 15 years old and originate from countries like Somalia, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar and Sierra Leone. Before starting the Global Classroom program, she gained permission from both children and parents or caretakers. First, each child was 'profiled' based on information about its home country. Subsequently, parents were asked informally what kind of schooling their children had attended, and what gaps in learning and language there might be. The children were also interviewed three times in order to get information about their familial, religious and cultural background and to find out what learning experiences they had enjoyed.

Based on this information, the child was coached individually in the 'My new school' programme, and accordingly integrated into the school within the short time span of three months. The Global Classroom, having maps with football flags (familiar to almost all children) on the wall and computers with internet available to play games, is a central feature in the programme. British children are welcomed in the Global Classroom as well. 'Old' new arrivals are encouraged to assist new arrivals to

do specific activities. Every month a report is made on the progress of each child. "If there is no progress, we try to find out why, and may eventually ask for additional support for a child."

In order to overcome difficulties in children's capacities or willingness for verbal expression – because of a language barrier or reluctance to speak – Smith has developed a set of board games to give children the opportunity to express themselves in multiple ways. One of the exercises in a working book accompanying the board game is to colour the countries on a map where the child has been on his or her journey to the UK. This assignment not only highlights the child's experiences, but also makes clear if he or she is able to use a map, knows different colours etc. An elaborate range of similar activities helps teachers to carefully assess children's capacities and progress throughout the school year. Another important feature is that "children like it, it is fun!" Upon finishing the trajectory, children receive a certificate of completion.

By way of concluding the session, all participants participated in playing the board games in order to experience how the games draw on multiple techniques, exercises, and skills aimed at assessing children's educational background and learning opportunities.

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