Diversity4Kids
Stories about diversity

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Compiled by:
Armin Brugger, Michaela Nindl, Roberta Medda-Windischer, Marc Röggla,
Birgit Oberkofler, Emilio Vettori, Sara Bruni

Diversity4Kids:

Learning intercultural dialogue and diversity at school through play, interaction and stories

info@diversity4kids.eu
www.diversity4kids.eu

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Center für Migrants in Tyrol (ZeMiT)
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6020 Innsbruck - Austria

and

European Academy of Bolzano (EURAC)
Institute for Minority Rights
Viale Druso, 1
39100 Bolzano – Italy

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Introduction

Today when we speak of a society of migration we mean a society characterised by diversity. We are surrounded by diversified styles and ways of life. Diversity has long become part of our daily lives and is not only found in the external world but also within ourselves. We all have the task of acquiring the skills for living together in this multicultural globalised society and of making sure that diversity is accepted as the norm, not as an exception.

In this context, the development and promotion of identity are very important. All of us "act" different roles in different groups (for example, a girl can simultaneously be a daughter, student, friend, flute player...). Our roles and the groups we belong to change constantly in the course of our lives and are subject to continuous transformation. This often leads us, consciously or unconsciously, to assign value to our group (or groups) and to give less value to those perceived as "other". This is more likely when we feel our identity is threatened and when we need to regain a positive identity.

When we speak of diversity, power also plays an essential role, because diversity is always part of a hierarchy. This is why, already at school level, it is important to create spaces and opportunities that promote the management of diversity through democratic participation. In this way diversity increases and is promoted by tolerance. Young people must be urged to regard diversity as a form of enrichment and to contribute to the creation of democratic and pluralistic societies.

If children are prepared for life, if they are able to be tolerant towards others, if they are accepted with their needs and characteristics, if they take an active part in group life, if they recognise their and others' limits and know how to say "no" (an important life skill), then the school, as a place of learning and living, can do much to promote living together and peaceful coexistence.

This is why in the project InterregIV Italia – Austria *"Diversity4Kids: Learning intercultural dialogue and diversity at school through play, interaction and stories"*, we included content designed especially for children of primary and lower secondary schools. Diversity4Kids is designed to give children from 8 to 14 years the opportunity to meet with intercultural differences and to understand and put into practice the benefits that diversity creates. Through play they learn to recognise and overcome prejudice and xenophobic attitudes. Through theatre, role playing, biographic workshops and stories, the concepts of tolerance, living together and diversity are transmitted and promoted in the form of games and interaction.

Stories, in particular, are an excellent way to transmit sensitive content in a simple and intuitive way to children of any age. Through stories, young people acquire experience, knowledge and unusual perspectives; new cognitive processes are stimulated through the images created. In this way stories and tales help children to understand diversity and the experience of feeling different, stimulating the creativity and attention of those who love to read and listen. This is why in spring 2013 we announced the writing competition "Diversity4Kids – Stories about diversity". We received more than sixty stories from Austria and Italy. At the end of the selection procedure, in which the well-known Austrian writer Helmut Wittman also took part, the eleven stories contained in this volume were chosen. They can also be enjoyed in audio form from the enclosed CD.

Special thanks go to all the authors and the schools that took part in the competition. We also wish to thank Helene „Leni" Leitgeb and Chiara Visca, who read the stories recorded on the CD.

Armin Brugger and Michaela Nindl (ZeMiT)
Roberta Medda-Windischer and Marc Röggla (EURAC)
Emilio Vettori and Birgit Oberkofler (EGTC "European Region "Tyrol – South Tyrol –Trentino")
Sara Bruni (CCT)

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The fable of Mr and Mrs Uniformity

Marcel Zischg, 26 years, Naturno

Once upon a time there was a man and a woman called Mr and Mrs Uniformity. In the city called Diversity where they lived, there were many newspapers that told about everything happening in the world. There were many museums, libraries and schools because people wanted to know about the past and the present.

But Mr and Mrs Uniformity did not like reading newspapers and they did not visit museums or go to the library. They had not even been to school.

In the city of Diversity there were people of different cultures and when they met they exchanged stories and experiences. But Mr and Mrs Uniformity never spoke to people they did not know because they were afraid of strangers.

At home, Mr and Mrs Uniformity always cooked the same dishes. They never travelled and indeed did not dare step outside their house. In fact, Mr and Mrs Uniformity were looking for uniformity and the city of Diversity!

This was hopeless because Mr and Mrs Uniformity could not get away from diversity: if they looked out the window, they saw people of different origins in the street and if they chanced to open a window, they heard the music or snatches of conversation in foreign languages.

So Mr and Mrs Uniformity left the city of Diversity.

They travelled far away. First they lived in a closed valley high in the mountains where nobody could reach them. Mrs Xenophobia, the mother of Mrs Uniformity, lived there. But even there, people came past from time to time, so Mr and Mrs Uniformity moved to the coast and took a ship to a remote island, the Island of Uniformity.

On the Island of Uniformity there was only desert: no houses, no people, no animals and not even a plant. One day on the Island of Uniformity, Mr and Mrs Uniformity even lost sight of each other. And nobody ever saw them again!

With a laugh

Nadia Rungger, 16 years, Lajon

I was trying to make my way in the dark. It was a black night and I could only just distinguish the outlines of the trees, dimly lit by the moon. Slowly, feeling my way, I managed to advance over rocks, through the thick scrub. A branch whipped across my face again. Wearily, I brushed it aside and warned my twin sister, Maria, who was stumbling along behind me. It was raining heavily and this made it more difficult to go forward, but at least it reduced the possibility of being discovered.

My family and I were about to cross the border into Turkey: an old friend had suggested this path and had described it in detail. Protected by trees, we were approaching Turkey, where we hoped to take a boat across the Black Sea to Greece. My mother was literally possessed by the idea of beginning a new life there, a life free of violence. In our previous country, we Christians were persecuted; some had even been killed in cold blood, so my father had decided we should flee. It was a difficult decision and I hoped that we would not regret turning our backs on the world we knew. Our daily life, our friends and relatives, whom I missed already, even our house with all its memories of my infancy.

The call of an owl awoke me from my thoughts. I was shaking with fear and cold. My clothes were soaked and muddy and I continued to slip on wet roots and trip on rocks.

Suddenly my father stopped without warning. My mother bumped into him, I into my mother and my sister into me, but none of us fell. Tense as a wire, I listened for sounds and peered into the darkness, but could only hear the incessant drumming of the rain and the rustle of foliage in the wind. Had they discovered us? A wave of panic overtook me and I hardly dared to breathe. My sister was also uneasy, I could tell. We remained immobile for some time in that position.

I was shaking all over and my heart was in my throat.

After this fright I was relieved to realise that my mother had moved. This made me feel a little better.

Two hours later we were across the border: with happiness and relief we entered Turkish territory, though we knew that our destination was still far ahead. We found a village and we stretched out in a narrow lane to rest a little. While my father was rummaging in the garbage bins for something to eat, sleep overtook me. The next day I awoke in a good mood and with good presentiments. Maria was curled up beside me, still fast asleep with a smile on her lips. My father and mother, who had already eaten something, handed me a piece of stale bread and a half-rotten apple. My father shrugged in apology, as if to say that he hadn't been able to find anything better. I ate it all, disgusting though it was.

I took up my back-pack and found it wet, as was everything inside it: a wet T-shirt, a badly focused photo of my grandparents who decided not to come with us, a small prayer book, the cover of which was a faded blue and the pages all wavy and dog-eared, the letters hardly decipherable, and several other wet objects. Sighing, I took everything out and spread it carefully on the ground to dry, blotting the prayer book with the sleeve of my pullover. We stayed hidden behind the rubbish bins, chatting among ourselves, until the time came to continue walking. The few people who had noticed us looked at us with curiosity and compassion, passing on without saying a word.

With the little money we still had my father bribed a truck driver to take us to the Black Sea coast. Several days passed uneventfully. We stayed inside the truck, crushed between tins of peas and cartons of dog food. When we were hungry, the truck-driver even let us eat a tin of peas. He only cared about money, but was in any case kind to us.

When we got out, we were greeted by warm sunshine and a blue sky. We thanked the truck-driver, quickly said goodbye and started off around the port. We enjoyed the fresh sea air and the magnificent view of the sea, which seemed endless, and the many boats rocking gently on the waves. My father identified the boat that was to sail for Greece: a rusty old fishing boat. I squinted to read the name written in flowing letters in peeling paint: “Once upon a time”. Good, I thought, very appropriate for a boat.

My father explained to my sister and I that we would be sailing as stow-aways on that boat. “Easier said than done”, Maria commented. I agreed.

We went aboard by a small gangway and passed through the second entrance on the left, which led into the hold. Very little light filtered in through a porthole almost at water level. The glass was soiled with grease and scratched; the boat had probably scraped another at some time. The days went by and I got used to the motion of the boat and the pervasive smell of fish. It had penetrated everything, like dust, every crack, the walls and the deck.

Every so often a fisherman would come into the hold with a crate of fish, renewing the smell, but we were quite well hidden and kept quiet, so nobody noticed us. I found it unpleasant sleeping beside these crates containing thousands of dead fish. At night I often awoke, because the flapping of fish in their death throes had invaded my dreams. We ate the supplies we had with us and did not touch the fish.

Several days later we heard a shudder as the boat docked. We heard footsteps and shouting above. The crew went ashore, fortunately without unloading the fish from the hold. When all was quiet, we moved the crates and cautiously opened the door. Nobody in sight.

We crossed a narrow corridor and went out on deck. We couldn't believe our eyes. We had arrived. Once on firm land I kept imagining the boat's motion, and nearly lost my balance. While my father took our documents to seek asylum, we others put distance between ourselves and the malodorous boat. Seeking to be unobtrusive, we sat in a field of yellow flowers, but we were unable to smell their perfume over our own fishy exhalations. I rummaged in my back-pack and produced a cake that I took on the boat. My mother gave me a disapproving look but said nothing. I divided the cake with Maria. When my father returned, we were licking chocolate from our fingers. Only a few crumbs were left. He laughed when he realised what we had done. I looked away guiltily. Then I asked him how his quest for asylum had gone. He simply shrugged and beckoned us to come. As we climbed the cold marble stairs of the big building, I began to have forebodings. If we are not granted asylum? If we are expelled and have to return to our country? I glanced at my sister and she understood immediately and took my hand. "We will succeed," she whispered in my ear, so that only I could hear. She squeezed my hand to give me courage. We finally entered the office, still hand in hand. At the invitation of a thin man in a suit, my father explained our situation in our country of origin and our flight. I gradually began to relax.

I only know that the thin man nodded, saying "well" and after we had signed several papers we left the building with the documents in our hands. I felt relieved. Maria began to laugh, shout and dance a rhythm that only she knew. She didn't care what passers-by thought. We joined her. Seeing our happy faces, I realised that our life had finally begun: with a laugh.

The little sunbeam

Sabine Strobl Nardon, 56 years, Sesto

The little sunbeam lived in the sky with his brothers. Early in the morning, when people were still asleep in their warm beds, he sprang from behind the mountains with his brothers, dancing happily on the meadows and fields. Drops of dew on the leaves of the lady's mantle sparkled in the sun. "Good morning," she said to the daisies. "Wake up! Can't you see that everyone is already up?" The daisies opened their white corollas to show their yellow faces. "Good morning," she said to the bluebells. "I haven't heard you yet this morning!" The bluebells raised their heads and nodded gently in the breeze.

"Good morning," grumbled the devil's claw. Awakened by the ringing of the bluebells, he tossed his ruffled head crossly.

"A wonderful day," whispered the aristocratic martagon lily, curving its pink petals a little more to show off their elegant spots.

"Good morning, good morning!" shouted a group of buttercups, letting their yellow corollas shine.

The little sunbeam was no longer listening, he and his brothers had now lighted on the tops of the firs. Boldly, he teased the birds in their nests to awaken them. "Wake up, wake up!" The birds fluffed their soft feathers and preened themselves with their beaks. It was time to have a worm for breakfast and to make the first flights.

The shadows of the leaves danced on the forest floor and their rustling awoke the squirrel, the fox and the deer. "Good morning, good morning!" murmured the brook, winking at the animals drinking on its banks.

The little sunbeam advanced with his brothers as far as the houses. Jauntily they alighted on the dew-drenched roofs, from which wisps of vapour began to rise. They peeped between closed curtains: people must wake up too! “Good morning,” they said, tickling faces to awaken them.

Soon everyone was up and busy. The women at the market had already put up their stalls with striped awnings and were hawking their goods at the tops of their voices. The street sweepers in fluorescent overalls were cleaning the pavements and the mayor hurried haughtily across the square into the town hall.

The children, too, were already out of bed and had packed their beach bags. Today will be hot: perfect for a swim in the lake.

The little sunbeam sat next to the rooster of the wind vane on the church steeple. He was content. His brothers, too, had found a quiet place to rest until late evening. The sun shone everywhere!

But suddenly peace was at an end! At the top of the steeple, a quarrel had broken out. The little sunbeam began to argue with a brother about who was brightest and enhanced colours best.

“Look at me”, shouted the little sunbeam. “Look how I shine! You cannot make white circles on the market square like I can.” “Bah,” replied the other, “only because you have not yet seen my reflection in the church windows! It is so bright and clear that you cannot even look at it! And inside the colours glow!”

Attracted by the noise, the other brothers gathered and soon they were all drawn into the argument. In no time there was an uproar. “None of you is as bright as me!” “Sure, but you haven’t noticed how my light makes the colours of the flowers shine.” “Ay, you think you are smart, but you know the sky is so blue only because of me.” “I’m the only one who can make the coloured patterns on an oily puddle!”

There was a din and soon each was convinced he was the best. Suddenly there was a dull rumble “Boooom, boooom!” The god of storms had been woken by all the arguing and was approaching in a menacing way, hurling thunderbolts. “Idiots, why are you arguing? I’ll show you who is right!” he growled.

He filled his cheeks with air and blew wind that gathered all the clouds together. They towered in the sky like dark mountains. Shortly it began to rain. Large drops of water fell to earth, drumming on the meadows and fields.

The little sunbeam and his brothers were immediately silent and huddled together in the sky.

Then suddenly they were filled with alarm. What was happening? They were no longer clear and bright. No! The little sunbeam had turned as red as a cherry and the sunbeam next to him was as orange as a mandarin. Another was blue like plums on a tree, while another was as green as grass. Together they formed a wonderful coloured arch like a bridge across the sky.

“See,” said the god of storms, loudly clearing his throat. “None of you is so clear and bright! You are all different colours, but each is just as important as the other, and just as necessary for creating white light. If you stay together, if you put up with each other and nobody is sent away, then and only then does the miracle happen! You are clear and bright and you make all the beautiful things around you shine.”

The little sunbeam and his brothers were ashamed of themselves and promised never again to engage in stupid fighting.

A nice place to live

Maddalena Bezzi, Elisa Bragagna, Martina Dalrì, Xhirlantina Gjevori, Fabiana Mottes, Ilaria Potrich, 16 years, Mezzolombardo

Once upon a time there was a man with short hair who was not happy because he lived with people who had long hair. So he decided to go and live in a place where he could be happy and after a long journey he found a city in which all the people had very short hair. However, he realised that he could not be happy there because everyone had dark skin, whereas he was white.

So he left that city and discovered a village where the people had white skin and short hair. But even there he could not be happy because everyone wore long clothes, and he did not.

Finally he found a corner of a town in which everyone had short hair, white skin and short clothes. But soon he felt bored because everyone believed in God, whereas he was an atheist. He therefore went into a building inhabited only by people with white skin and short hair, who wore short clothes and were also atheists. But he couldn't be happy because they all ate rice once a day, while he was accustomed to eating meat twice a day.

Finally he found a little door carrying a sign that read: "Admission only to people with white skin, short hair, short clothes, and who eat meat twice a day".

"At last!" he exclaimed. "This is the place where I can be happy." However, when he opened the door he found that the room was small and empty and there was room only for himself.

The new student

Anja Leitner, 10 years, Angerberg

"Let me introduce your new classmate," said the teacher in the first hour of school. She introduced a tall slender girl.

"This is Asy. She and her family moved here a few days ago. She comes from Syria. She cannot speak English yet. Asy, say hello!"

"Hello," Asy said shyly. Some of the students began to snicker. Asy flushed as red as a pepper.

When the bell rang for recreation, a boy went up to her: "Hey, I hear that in your country there is a violent war... cool!" and began to pretend to be shooting. Asy did not find this funny. The war in Syria was truly devastating and many people had been killed. It was not a laughing matter. In the meantime some other children came up and shouted, "War, war!" Asy regarded them with dismay. Other children came up and pretended to shoot. Asy's eyes filled with tears and she ran away, but in so doing bumped into a girl.

"Hello, who are you?" the girl asked. Asy did not answer. "You must be the new girl?" to which Asy nodded and began to smile. It was the first time she had done so in the new school. Her smile soon became laughter.

"Can we be friends?" asked the girl. "My name is Madeleine". Asy said nothing. Nobody had ever asked her to be their friend.

"Yes!" she finally managed to say. The two embraced and from that moment on they were always together. Neither was ever alone after that and if someone joked about Syria, they stood together.

A fantastic group

Paul Faye, 42 years, Innsbruck

It was 22nd January, just before the winter vacation. Outside the trees were decked in snow, evoking ideas of holidays in the mountains. After several months of hard work, the students were happy to finally relax. The six friends set off for home. They were a diverse group. Nafi was a very thin ten-year-old girl from Senegal; Selcuk was born to Turkish parents in Austria; Yin wore glasses and was from China; Florian was Viennese but had moved to South Tyrol with his family 3 years ago; Anja was 11 and Tyrolean; Jasmin was Tyrolean too, but only 10. They were talking about what they would do on their holidays, when Nafi, with her coloured plaits, suddenly announced that she wouldn't be returning to school after the holidays. The others were surprised and at first did not know what to say, until Jasmin asked, "How come? What happened? Where are you going?"

With tears in her eyes, Nafi explained that her parents had decided to move to Vienna. This situation so struck the children that they decided to talk to the headmistress next day and ask her to do something. Nafi was adamant about staying with her friends. Together they had often spoken about the end-of-school dance and celebrations.

Next day the headmistress explained that the school could not help because it was a private matter. She said she knew cases in which the whole school or the whole community had fought unfair expulsion of students or families. However, Nafi's parents had only decided to leave the region, but remain in Austria. The school could therefore do nothing.

Then Selcuk had an idea: "Since the adults can do nothing and we don't want to lose Nafi, we have to do something."

"Yes, but what?" asked Yin. "We are children and this is a matter for adults."

Anja thought Selcuk's idea was interesting: "I think we have to do something. Nafi, we absolutely have to know why your parents are leaving. Have you any idea? Did they explain why they no longer want to live here?"

"I don't know exactly. There are more Senegalese in Vienna because it is an international city and there they will have better chances. I don't know really," replied Nafi.

"We have to discover their reasons as soon as possible. But how can we do it?" asked Jasmin.

"I have an idea!" said Yin suddenly in a loud voice. "Let us organise a good-bye party for Nafi at Nafi's home. Nafi, could you convince your parents to let us come to your house next Friday for a party?" The group had decided. They all persuaded their parents. The idea that took form over two days involved inviting the children's parents; Nafi's parents would be present too. However, it turned out that not all of the parents could come. The families of Jasmin and Selcuk had already made holiday bookings, and Anja's parents were expecting family friends from Graz that Friday.

Nevertheless, there is a solution to everything. For Nafi's family it was normal in their culture to welcome uninvited guests or even strangers to their house. So they suggested that Anja's parents bring their friends with them. There would be enough food for everyone. Jasmin and Selcuk's families had no difficulty delaying their holiday, so the group was more than complete.

At 4 o'clock on Friday the children and their parents arrived. The house was not luxurious but very comfortable. There were shelves of books and well-worn German dictionaries in green, yellow and red. A wonderful but unknown aroma wafted from the kitchen. Nafi's mother had made mafè, a typical Senegalese dish with chilli sauce, beef, peanut butter, tomatoes and okra, served with rice. None of the guests had ever eaten such a dish. "I don't have the cutlet, OK? Try this," joked Nafi's mother in perfect German. Florian's mother copied the recipe to try it herself at home. Then she said, "Today we are all richer because we have tasted a new cuisine and have made new friends."

“Yes, but soon you will lose these friends,” said Florian with consternation. Yin, Anja, Jasmin and Selcuk nodded. Nafi burst into tears and fled from the room. Her mother called her at that very moment. Yin rose unexpectedly and announced in a gentle but determined and persuasive voice: “Mr and Mrs Diop, we would really like to know why you are leaving our region. We don’t want to lose Nafi. Isn’t there any chance that you will stay?”

Silence descended and nobody said a word. To hide their discomfort, everyone set upon the apple strudel and coffee that Anja’s parents had brought.

Then Anja’s father said: “Anja has been talking about it for four days. I think... if it’s true, we don’t know each other well, but we would like to know more. Have you sought asylum here?”

Nafi’s father replied in perfect German: “No, we didn’t seek asylum. Often people ask me this. We too are sorry to take Nafi from her friends, but we have to make this decision. Time goes quickly. My wife and I find it hard to integrate here. It took 2 years to have my wife’s diplomas recognised and she has not been able to find work. We have no social network. I am an engineer but I work as a casual labourer on building sites, with long hours and no car. It is frustrating and depressing. I thought that we would have better work prospects elsewhere.”

He paused to breathe, then continued, but he was very upset: “My family is at risk of poverty. I am fed up with the arrogance of certain authorities; I am tired of the hidden xenophobic attitudes at work. I don’t see any prospects for my career. That is the story.”

Nobody knew that the Diop family was in such a situation. They often saw them in the street but never greeted them. It was also difficult to understand why the media were always referring to the shortage of skilled workers while the Diop family was in such straits.

Jasmin's mother decided to call her cousin who had a firm to ask whether they needed an engineer. The others took down the number of the Diops in case they could help. At 6 o'clock, Selcuk's parents, who were Muslims, wanted to pray, so Nafi's mother prepared a carpet for them in Nafi's room, where they prayed for 10 minutes. Since they came by bus, Florian's father waited until they had finished and took them home in his car.

The group broke up with mixed feelings. The children had learned the reason the family was leaving but could do nothing. The parents wanted to do something at any cost but did not know what or how.

A week later the Diop family received at least nine phone calls from the children's parents. Nafi's father was even interviewed by a firm but was unsuccessful. Florian's father invited him to join the soccer team. Nafi's mother went for a walk with Yin's mother. Something had changed and the mood had improved. So Mr Diop decided to write this email:

Dear everyone,

Since our farewell party many things have happened. Can I really call it a farewell party? No. Actually, this party prevented my daughter from being separated from her friends. Although I have not yet found a decent job, we all decided to stay here because we now have a group of friends and our daughter is happy here. Your solidarity and warmth convinced me. And so I thank you all. I also want to thank your children, but not only with words. Since I discovered that you are all learning French, I can give you free lessons so that you can get better marks without your parents paying for private lessons. Every two weeks my wife also proposes a creative afternoon for the intellectual development of the children. We have received so much from you and we wish to give whatever we can in return. If everyone was like you, society would be a better place. And all this is the merit of our children. They were the ones who got the ball rolling and viewed the future with optimism. Things can only get better now, even if life on the whole is not easy. Please show your children this email.

Best wishes,
Mr Diop

PS. When can you come again for mafè?

A painted life

Alina Gruber, 12 years, Bressanone

Steffi was walking in streets wet with rain. Everything around her seemed grey and tedious. The rain fell from grey clouds and kept people at home. Steffi pulled her hood down over her face and walked faster. She thought about those without a home to return to, and shivered.

At home a comfortable bed and a hot meal awaited her. She sighed with relief and walked faster. Suddenly she found herself before a grey brick wall and a muddy puddle. Since the wall was empty, she put her hands in the puddle and began to paint with hand prints. She painted a warm sun that shone for everyone. Then she hurried on her way...

The rain surprised Naoki, who set off at a run for the terrace house where he lived with his African family. Suddenly he found himself in front of a wall on which someone had done a hand-painting of the sun. Naoki looked at the painting and felt the warmth of the sun. Fantastic! It seemed a symbol of everything good and beautiful in life. But this sun only showed the positive aspects of life. Life was more than just love and warmth. Naoki put his hands in the puddle and began to paint. First he traced an oblique line under the sun and then a grey world. Everyone would now see that there is not only sun in life, but also the greyness in which, for example, many foreigners live. But the painting still did not show all aspects of life...

When Steffi woke up next morning, she thought about her sun and jumped out of bed. She just had to see it before breakfast. She dressed and left the house. That morning the sun was shining again, as if to imitate the painted sun. But to her surprise, she found that someone had painted a grey world under the sun. She took a step back and contemplated the work. She recognised that the painting depicted life. Dark days in which everything goes wrong and happy days in which you can dive into life and let it envelop you in light.

But a little hate and conflict were missing from the picture. She put her hands in the puddle where she found less mud than the day before, and began to paint. She pressed her muddy hands against the wall and traced a line. Now conflict would be part of the painting. Then she ran home, where her parents were waiting for her at the breakfast table.

Naoki rolled over in bed, arose and went to his mother and father, who were still asleep. He tried not to listen to his stomach grumbling as he took a stroll outside in the alleys. He was surprised to find himself in front of the wall. He looked at the picture and saw that someone had continued the work. At first he did not understand what the barred hand represented, but then he recognised that it was hate. Naoki agreed that hate, too, was part of life, but friendship was missing. He put his hands in the puddle and made two hand prints and then he enclosed them in a series of circles. While he was observing his work with satisfaction, someone touched him on the shoulder. Surprised, he turned and saw a girl with pale skin smiling at him. “Now life is complete,” she said, and Naoki realised that it was the girl who had painted life with him. “I am Naoki,” he said. The girl smiled and introduced herself: “I am Steffi.” The speed with which they became friends made life truly complete...

I suddenly realised I am no longer a child!

Alexander Staffler, 15 years, Merano

It all happened so fast. I was 10 years old, dark-skinned and chubby. In my class they sometimes called me fatty, but I always pretended not to hear. Because of my weight, my mother enrolled me in sports at Weber high school, where sport was offered as a subject. My mother thought it was for losing weight, but unfortunately unlike me, the other children were all tall and sporty.

Then I grew, probably somehow also in my head, and I switched from cartoons to telefilms. I made friends with girls. I began to train and after the time I gave a boy one because he called me fat-ass, I trained even more because my trainer made me work. I began to go to fitness centre for the purpose of improving my physique. I couldn't do anything about my skin colour! I don't know what happened, but in any case it all happened terribly fast.

When school began, I wondered what to wear. Everyone looked at me strangely and I didn't know why until someone asked me why I wore sunglasses on a cloudy day. I replied that it was cool. It was not long before Albian and his friends from another class were waiting for me in a side street and gave me a black eye. They said I had to stop being cool because in any case I was a wimp. That's how I became victim number one of these bullies.

I changed school. Now I avoid side streets in the evening and I only wear sunglasses at the pool. I also made friends with Raju. He has dark skin too and comes from Nepal. His parents died in an absolutely senseless war. When Raju comes to my place, my father always asks him, "What would you like to eat and drink, Radjo?" and Raju just smiles (and I correct my father every time).

My life has not been easy. I had to learn by experience. But I'm not the first.

The little blue rabbit

Barbara Calvo, 40 years, Rome

The little blue rabbit is sleeping peacefully. He is dreaming of school that will begin in a few days. He is dreaming of seeing his friends again and of the Moon Festival that they will celebrate together. He is also dreaming about his red car, his favourite toy, a birthday present from his grandparents. The little blue rabbit is still dreaming when his mother comes to wake him: "Wake up! We have to leave!"

The little blue rabbit, still half asleep, gets out of bed and heads for the mouth of the warren. His father and brothers are waiting outside. "Good," says father. "Now that we are all here we can go."

"Just a minute," pleads the little blue rabbit. "I have to fetch my red car."

"There isn't time," replies his father and begins to walk. "The bears and wolves are at war and our forest will be destroyed. Quickly! Staying here is dangerous."

The little blue rabbit and his family leave their warren without knowing whether they will ever be able to return. They say very little as they walk. Days go past.

The little blue rabbit is sad. He thinks of school which has already begun. He thinks of the friends he no longer sees, he thinks of the Moon Festival they will not celebrate together and he thinks of his red car.

One day, the rabbits meet a family of cats. Their farm was burned down and they lost everything. They too are looking for another place to live. The kittens are happy because now they have new friends to play with.

Further on they meet a group of birds who are also on the move. Winter is coming and so they are going to a warmer place for the season. "Come with us," say the birds. "In the warm forest you too can find a new house."

Finally they reach the forest and the new friends say goodbye to each other. The birds are going to see some relatives who remained in that place. The cats continue into the countryside where there is a farm, and the rabbits go looking for a warren.

However, in the new forest, things are not as simple as the little blue rabbit imagined. The other rabbits look at him and his family with diffidence because they are blue. Here all the rabbits are yellow, white, brown or pink: none of them are blue.

Everything is different in the new forest. School started a long time ago and people speak a different language that the little blue rabbit learns very slowly. There is no Moon Festival. There are many other festivities, like the Spring Festival and the Sun Festival, but no Moon Festival.

The little blue rabbit is afraid. He thinks of his distant home and the friends he will not see. He thinks of his red car.

Mother and father have trouble finding work. In the warm forest there is a food shortage and the population fears that the new arrivals will leave them without food or work. Mother is good at growing vegetables: her carrots are large and tasty and so she begins to make friends with the other mother rabbits. Father knows how to fix things and soon makes himself useful.

The little blue rabbit gets ready for his first day at the new school. The teacher welcomes him and shows him where to sit. The little blue rabbit is fearful: his desk mate is an enormous yellow rabbit with gigantic teeth. The little blue rabbit sits down cautiously. The yellow rabbit looks at him and... smiles.

“Do you like cars?” he asks. The little blue rabbit just nods his head; he is still terrified. “Look, I have lots. If you like, I can give you this red one, so we can play together during the pause.”

The little blue rabbit is happy. He has a new warren, a new school, a new friend and a new red car.

Just Hasan

Stefania Viola, 30 years, San Michele all'Adige

He settled for the second row. Not even a sprint worthy of Usain Bolt would have gained him the last row. Too bad, he was so close. A matter of milliseconds.

His cousin had warned him that it would be hard and he was always right. Or almost. But after all, second row was also a strategic zone and besides, he was next to a pretty girl. So much the better.

At least he wasn't in Cesarini's zone: there nobody could have spared him the label of loser. He could therefore draw a sigh of relief.

He had received detailed survival lessons a few days earlier, huddled on the cold dirty steps of uncle Ermir's newsstand.

"Trust me," his cousin Thair had whispered, looking him in the eye. Those two extra years were sufficient to give him the charisma of a man of the world. "Camouflage yourself like a puma in the savannah! If you want to survive, stay in the midst! If you dress properly, get the row and perhaps even the right chick, then you've won: you are one of them."

To be one of them! Hasan wanted it more than anything. He wanted it desperately and this was the perfect situation. New school, new life. It was first year high school and he would start anew. Goodbye to the past, the nicknames and recess passed counting the tiles in the toilet.

"You'll see! It will be like a reincarnation," said Thair.

Hasan had nodded with conviction. Actually, he had not understand precisely what his cousin meant, however since the word reincarnation evoked meat, which reminded him of his grandmother's shashic (minced and seasoned meat, like a hamburger), back in Skopje, to reincarnate immediately became a friendly verb.

Lost in thought, Hasan did not realise that the Italian teacher, a man with hollow cheeks and thin lips, had already begun to call the role. His long fingers ran down the thick pages of the register. From top to bottom, slowly. The moment was fundamental, solemn. There, in the second row, next to the girl he had discovered was called Bonetti Elisa, Hasan perceived something mystic from way back in time in this ritual that accompanied the strident sound of the bell.

Silence for a moment, and then the voice resumed its chant. Coldrini Giacomo. Present. Dallago Massimo. Present. He was almost there. Hasan's heart was in his throat. Fontana Marika. Present. Leonardi Pietro. It was a crescendo. It was like Ravel's Bolero in the final bars.

"Malnani Hàsan."

The boy frowned.

"Well?" asked the teacher, searching the herd before him. "Malnani A... Hàsan?"

From the centre of the classroom a timid hand was raised with the index finger pointing upward, "I'm here." Hasan distinctly recognised the murmur. Ninety-nine out of a hundred it paved the way for derision.

"Bother this name!" he grumbled, as he felt his cheeks flush. "Sir, it should be Malhani Hàsan, not Malnani," he replied, stuttering.

"It should be or it is?" replied the teacher with a frown, rising from his seat.

"It is, sir."

Meanwhile derisory giggles, starting quietly from the left wing of the last row, had reached the front desks.

"Evidently you are not Ital..."

The old teacher had not finished the phrase when a penetrating voice erupted from the eastern quarter: "Gypseeee!"

A bomb. A brute with a piebald shirt and a double chin received an ovation from the class which was now laughing loudly without restraint. Hasan wondered how long the torment would last.

“No sir, not only,” he replied, ignoring the comment and aware of the fact that the second row, the hoodie and the chick would not be sufficient to make him one of the group as from that moment.

“Ah! Strange statement! Was would you be?” asked the teacher with curiosity.

Feeling forty-eight eyes on him, Hasan made up his mind. He realised that if the world was not ready to change, he would give it a hand. Not tomorrow. Now. To hell with Thair, the puma and the camouflage.

This was him. It was his life, his history. He could not escape it, nor did he wish to. He asked twenty-two strangers and himself permission to show himself for who he was. Finally.

“I am, sir, not would be. I am Macedonian of Albanian ethnicity, living in Italy since the age of 8 years.”

“Well,” asked a beanpole sitting near the door. “What do you feel? Italian, Albanian or Macedonian?”

Hasan was silent for a few seconds. He lowered his head, and then replied without hesitation: “I don’t think there is a thermometer for measuring what I am. Am I different? Perhaps, I don’t know. I feel like you. My hair isn’t made of jute, I don’t have six feet or scissor hands. I have two legs, two arms and a head, that my mother says I don’t always connect to my brain. And yes, it’s true, I speak three languages, but I’m not a fraction. Nor do I wish to be one. I am just Hasan, I think.”

“Welcome among us,” said Elisa on his right, winking. “You... you are like a beautiful painting by Monet.”

Everyone is different but equal

Anna Schnitzer, 13 years, Lana

It was a rainy morning in March, when still sleepy and full of misgivings, I said goodbye to my family and left the house.
“Look after yourself, Lisa. You will certainly enjoy your four weeks in Africa,” my mother called after me. I was not at all sure that they would be an enjoyable four weeks and I continued to turn my gaze back to our front garden.
Once at school, I noticed many other weary faces. Very few of us were truly motivated to take part in the exchange programme with students from Kenya, because we could not get the end-of-year exams out of our heads. Mrs Künig, a big pack on her back, greeted us: “Good morning children. In the next four weeks we will take part in the project Everyone is different but equal. I am sure it will be an interesting and instructive month!”
“Everyone is different but equal,” I continued to repeat in my head, wondering what it could mean. How can one be different and equal at the same time?
“All aboard,” called Mrs Künig. I reluctantly boarded the bus.
“Well then! Are you as excited as me?” my friend Nora asked me in a bored voice. I nodded.
After about half an hour we reached the airport (actually a bit late) and boarded the plane. It was the first time I had flown and I have to admit that I was nervous. The flight took many hours and I fell asleep. Finally we landed. Everyone was in a hurry to disembark. Mrs Künig desperately tried to impose order, but we were already on the tarmac.
The project manager and another African were waiting to take us to a village. “This is where we stay,” explained the teacher, indicating a hut among the trees.
Nora, myself and another six girls shared a room. We were all so tired that we immediately fell asleep.
Next morning we had to get up early. A village man brought us rolls and butter for breakfast.

In the course of the morning, the project manager showed us how the people lived. Although they had to work and did not have much to eat, they seemed happy and satisfied with what they had. In the evening we sat with the children around a fire and they sang and danced.

The following days passed quickly. Nora and I made friends with an African girl called Sarah, who full of life. She taught us how to knit and showed us her house. There was no television, computer or smartphone but she was as happy as anyone.

The days went by and the time to say goodbye approached. On the last day, Sarah gave Nora and me friendship bracelets that she had woven herself. We spent another pleasant day together in the village and the next day we bid goodbye to Sarah and the other village people. Saying goodbye was more difficult for me than for anyone else, since in that short time Sarah and I had become true friends. With great sadness, quite in contrast to our feelings on arrival, we left the village in the forest and boarded an old bus for the airport.

“Everyone is different but equal,” I reflected. Slowly I began to understand. We are all different, for example we have different languages, religions or cultures, but nobody is better than anyone else, so we are equal.

In the plane I kept looking at the bracelet that Sarah had tied around my wrist. The return flight seemed much faster. In the bus, Mrs Künig made a short speech: “I hope you liked the village and that you have learned many things. We will stay in contact by mail with our African friends, and who knows whether they can come to visit us. We will see if we can find the money.” I really liked that idea.

When we reached the school, our parents were there to meet us.

“Well? How did it go?” my mother asked with curiosity.

“Fantastic,” I replied. I was tired and only wanted to go home after the long flight.

Next morning I began to look at the world with new eyes. I was happier than usual and wasn’t cross even when I discovered that during my absence my brother had ransacked by wardrobe.

“Lisa, what’s up? You haven’t argued with your brother even once today and you haven’t touched your smartphone,” my father asked with amazement.
“Oh! One can live without a smartphone. As for my brother, well... this one time, I forgive him,” I replied with a wink.

The Diversity4Kids Team

Editors

Armin Brugger studied Political Science at Innsbruck and works on European projects for the Centre for Migrants in Tyrol (ZeMiT).

Michaela Nindl studied at the Teaching Institute of Salzburg (Pädagogische Akademie Salzburg) and graduated in Sociology from the University of Vienna. She currently collaborates on various projects at the Centre for Migrants in Tyrol (ZeMiT).

Roberta Medda-Windischer (LL.M, Ph.D) is Senior Researcher at the Institute for Minority Rights at the European Academy of Bolzano (EURAC). She is an international jurist specialised in human and minority rights. After concluding her studies in Law and her Masters degree (LL.M) in International human rights at the University of Essex (GB), she obtained her research doctorate (PhD) at the Law Faculty of the University of Graz (AT).

Marc Röggla (Mag.iur.) graduated in Law from the University of Innsbruck and is Junior Researcher at the Institute for Minority Rights at the European Academy of Bolzano (EURAC).

Birgit Oberkofler (Dr. MAS) graduated in Law from the Universities of Innsbruck and Padua, and obtained a Masters degree in Management of cultural heritage from the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst in Vienna. Since 1996 she works for the provincial administration of South Tyrol (jurist in the Personnel Office, Referent for the Councillor for Culture and Education and Vice President of the Department of Culture). She has been Vice President of the Bolzano Theatre and Auditorium Foundation. Since February 2010 she has been the representative of South Tyrol at the EGTC “European Region Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino”, and was General Secretary from September 2011 to October 2013, according to the principle of rotation.

Emilio Vettori graduated in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Rome III. He taught Italian as a foreign language in various primary and lower secondary schools in South Tyrol. He currently works at the EGTC "European Region Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino" and collaborates with the local edition of Corriere della Sera.

Sara Bruni studied anthropology at the University of Rome "La Sapienza". She collaborates in various projects for schools on topics such as political training, environmental education and intercultural dialogue. She has been active for many years in the Movimento di Volontariato Italiano (Mo.V.I.) and collaborates with the Centro Culturale Tavazza (CCT) in Friuli – Venezia Giulia.

Project managers

Center for migrants in Tyrol (ZeMiT):
Gerhard Hetfleisch, Armin Brugger, Michaela Nindl

European Academy of Bolzano – Institute for Minority Rights (EURAC):
Roberta Medda-Windischer, Marc Röggla, Katya Waldboth

EGTC "European Region Tyrol – South Tyrol – Trentino":
Birgit Oberkofler, Emilio Vettori, Elena Alberti

Centro Culturale Luciano Tavazza (CCT) for voluntary work and participation in Friuli Venezia Giulia:
Giorgio Volpe, Sara Bruni, Irma Londero

Immigration Information Centre of the Autonomous Province of Trento (CINFORMI): Pierluigi La Spada, Rose Marie Calla, Claudia Filippi

Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung, Abt. JUFF – Fachbereich Integration:
Johann Gstir

"The stories in this collection approach the topic of diversity in a pleasant, captivating and stimulating way. The authors differ in age and provenance which is why they succeed in treating the theme of diversity in such a touching and incisive way. From beginning to end, it is a refined and special little collection of stories."
Helmut Wittmann, storyteller *www.maerchenerzaehler.at*

This third volume of the kit "Diversity4Kids" is for teachers and everyone who works with children between 8 and 14 years of age. The volume contains the eleven short stories that won the competition "Stories on diversity"

www.diversity4kids.eu

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Centro Culturale Luciano Tavazza (CCT) for voluntary work and participation in Friuli – Venezia Giulia

Associate partners

Provincia autonoma di Trento – Centro informativo per l'immigrazione (CINFORMI)
Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung, Abt. JUFF – Fachbereich Integration

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