

Oscar and Naqiya Play-based Learning with Seenaryo

OSCAR WOOD: There was a dinosaur. And there was a drought in the village that the dinosaur lived and all the humans blamed this drought on the dinosaur and the dinosaur was kicked out unfairly and the dinosaur knew it wasn't his fault so the dinosaur made it his mission to find the real source of the drought. And he found a wise man in the hills and eventually, he discovered the real source: it was, I think, the river had been diverted away from the village. So he then returned to the village, told them the real story and they accepted him back.

Now that's a funny story and cute, but also it's the story of a dinosaur and his family who'd been wrongly exiled from their town. And this was Syrian refugees who'd been kicked out of, whether it was, you know, Damascus or Hama a year earlier or a few years earlier, and we're telling a story about a dinosaur. So in one or two steps, you quite quickly see where the stories has come from.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Today we're speaking to two of the people behind Seenaryo, an organisation that specialises in theatre and play-based learning and works with marginalised communities in Lebanon and Jordan.

OSCAR WOOD: My name's Oscar Wood. I'm co-founder of Seenaryo.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And I'm Rama Chakaki, and you're listening to Innovate with Purpose, the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai.

[INTRO STING]

RAMA CHAKAKI: Our story starts in 2015. Oscar, who was a teacher in London at the time, was persuaded by one of his friends to go to Lebanon and work with Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

OSCAR WOOD: Obviously this was in the wake of the Syrian crisis, and so we went out and built a show, a theater show from scratch with about 30 children in Shatila in Beirut, a Palestinian refugee camp, and did the same thing out in the Beqaa Valley with Syrian refugees. And amazingly, against my expectations it worked! It worked brilliantly.

RAMA CHAKAKI: From there, Seenaryo was born. Using theatre and the principle of play-based learning, they began to facilitate the creation of powerful and high-quality performances.

OSCAR WOOD: Seenaryo is... Well, scenario is obviously an English word. Seenaryo means 'script' in Arabic, and we work in drama and play, so we felt that this was a nice kind of amalgam of the two languages kind of representing what we do.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And it was at that time that Naqiyah joined the team.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: Hello. I am Naqiya Ebrahim and I am the Chief Operating Officer at Seenaryo.

So I was involved in Seenaryo from quite near the beginning. In 2015, they did their first summer project. And then the following year, I went out with Oscar and we led a theater project together, and then I moved to Beirut that year.

RAMA CHAKAKI: So the programme took off. Seenaryo would bring together kids and teachers to create these theatre projects from scratch. At the beginning of the week, they would start exploring story ideas, and by the end of the week they'd have a full production.

OSCAR WOOD: The children were super engaged, excited, amazed at what was going on. And most of all the community as well. Parents and teachers particularly were very intrigued to know how we'd got from having nothing on Monday to, on Friday, having an all singing or dancing show with a beautiful set and a script that the children had written themselves.

We begin on the first day of a show with nothing. We have no idea what's going to happen in the room, but we start with games, as you might expect, getting to know each other and then move into kind of improvisation and storytelling exercises. We might give them the seedling of an idea, or like just two random words and they have to kind of connect these words through a story.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And Seenaryo started collecting these games and prompts into resource packets.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: To begin with, it really was just us sitting down with a flip chart and a giant Sharpie and brainstorming lots of ideas. The plan at the time was to come up with a few ideas, write them into a Word document and share them with

teachers. And as we continued writing, it sort of got bigger and bigger and unwieldy and we kind of were like, "Oh my goodness, we have a whole book."

RAMA CHAKAKI: From these humble beginnings, Seenaryo grew to become a bank of games, songs, interactive stories and classroom management ideas, for teachers in Arabic, English and French. But soon enough, this book became too big.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: I remember then going to the first training and seeing the teachers leafing through this book, and realizing, well, this is quite unwieldy. Wouldn't it be great if they could kind of search by topic or by what they actually need, and that's how the App came about.

OSCAR WOOD: And it contains games and songs and stories all connected to the curriculum. And our work expanded beyond just theater to working in schools, particularly with teachers doing play-based learning.

Starting to do play-based learning in Lebanon, honestly, was a delight. Teachers were so open to what we were doing and happy to be given the tools.

We began working explicitly with refugees, but very quickly, what became apparent was that the most vulnerable local communities are often living with refugees and sometimes not in dissimilar circumstances in terms of vulnerability or poverty.

Now we work with any marginalized communities. In Jordan as well, there's a big Sudanese refugee population, Iraqi population as well. We've had disabled people working with us. So yeah.

RAMA CHAKAKI: So what was the need that you were responding to? What inspired you to go from doing one theatre project with kids to a whole programme and an App?

OSCAR WOOD: What we were seeing in schools was a much wider need for these approaches, these creative approaches. Even in kindergarten, we were seeing a lot of desk-based learning, children working from textbooks.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: And I remember going into this classroom in the Bekaa Valley in a tent, and seeing all these children sitting at desks looking up at their teachers with books in front of them and thinking, well, "This is crazy!" They should be moving. They should be playing.

And I have a background in theater as do a lot of people on the Seenaryo team. So I sat down with Oscar in fact, and we just started writing all these ideas from our heads for how they could be teaching exactly what we saw them teaching, but in a play-based way.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Ah, I see. So it was really about seeing the curriculum in the schools and translating those same learning concepts into action.

So anything 'play based' sounds fun to me. But can you explain to me what play-based learning is and why is it so important?

OSCAR WOOD: Yeah, of course. Play-based learning is quite a wide spectrum. So in kindergartens what you sometimes see as totally free play, and that's when you go into a classroom, sometimes it seems to you the teachers aren't doing anything,

because what the children are doing is essentially wandering around: kind of going from the sand pit to the Lego station.

It doesn't make that much sense, pedagogically as an adult who doesn't know about that. But obviously what children are doing is being supervised in a minimal way, and maybe being prompted and guided by teachers.

A teacher might come along and say, "Oh, who's the doctor here? And who's the nurse? And who's? Oh, great. Why don't you be the patient, Amina?"

At the other end of the spectrum, which is more what we do, is much more guided play, and that might be a classroom game like Grandmother's Footsteps or Red Light Green Light, you would say in America, where there is structure, there are some rules.

Let's take that game as an example. Why is that game useful? Isn't it just like messing around and having fun? Well, in that game, for example, you have to freeze when grandma turns around, and for a three-year-old who's mega excited, freezing is actually quite difficult because they're really having to regulate their emotions, to control themselves and not just like run.

And that skill of emotionally self-regulating is super important as an adult.

Those are the skills that we have to build in children, especially under fives. And we know from neuroscience, which is still kind of a developing science, that that's when the brain kind of cements those vital skills. If you miss them under five, it's way harder to develop them later.

RAMA CHAKAKI: The work of Seenaryo has impacted not only children, but also teachers and parents alike. It has also helped to professionalise the kindergarten career and equip teachers with more tools. Unfortunately, in many places, the role of a kindergarten teacher is undervalued and often under-resourced.

But ultimately, children are at the heart of this project.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: I think it was 1837 that Friedrich Froebel coined the word 'kindergarten' and I think it means children's garden. And he talked about his school as a play institute, not a school at all. And then in the 1900s, you had Maria Montessori as well, really advocating for play-based learning, child-centered learning.

And I think we've somehow been distracted over the course of the 20th century, and there's been a huge focus on academic achievement, a huge focus on testing. And what excites me and motivates me is knowing that we're kind of coming full circle and coming back to what we've known is right and works all along, and that that is play.

MUSIC

RAMA CHAKAKI: Seenaryo's core team of 16 people works with another 50-odd freelancers to lead shows or deliver training. When speaking to Naqiya and Oscar, they shared that they've reached more than 2000 teachers and over 30,000 children. And with their App, these numbers are only growing.

OSCAR WOOD: The Expo Live grant was transformative for us because it came initially just as the App was getting going, and it allowed us to train a load more

teachers, and therefore just get the App out into the world as well as paying for some of the App development.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And this growth in outreach has naturally led to a bigger impact, a chief driving force for Seenaryo. Here's Naqiya again.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: The one story that stands out in my head was a little boy — I unfortunately don't remember his name but — who was hiding underneath the table. Teachers had said he had in general been struggling to be engaged. And they started playing one of our games called "Touch" or "Jump", where you have a line of objects in front of you and you either touched them if they'd begin with the correct letter — I think they were doing the letter B — and you jump over them if they don't begin with that letter. And he was sort of hiding under this table, and you could just sort of see him poking his head out and looking at what was going on. And then he eventually came out because he was so intrigued by the activity, but he wanted to join in.

MUSIC

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: They've since told us that in general he has been participating so much more with all of the activities because they excite him; they're igniting his imagination.

Seeing the impact is what ignites my imagination, knowing the impact that the work is having is what really warms my heart.

OSCAR WOOD: Inevitably, what children and especially teenagers and young people do is, they reflect their own experience. When we work with young people,

with teenagers, we've had very explicit shows about racism that they might experience, or marginalization in some way.

But even when we work with young children, what's really interesting is they might be telling a story that kind of seems like something out of Disney or a children's storybook, but actually underlying it is like an analogy with their situation.

NAQIYA EBRAHIM: What's different about using theater with marginalized communities as opposed to another community. I think my short answer would be there isn't a difference, because I think when you get a group of people in a room and you offer them the space to express themselves and the space to be creative, you are always finding beauty in what is happening and you are always discovering that everyone has a story. Everyone has a story to tell, everyone has something to share, everyone has the ability and desire to play and be creative.

I think for me, the key difference in working with marginalized communities is realizing that this is where it's most needed. These are the people who most need the space to do this, they need an outlet. They need an area in which they can do these things. And actually when you're focusing only on their basic needs, food shelter, healthcare, you're forgetting to address a whole part of that being a whole part of that person.

RAMA CHAKAKI: "Innovate with Purpose" is the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai. Innovation can come from anywhere, to everyone.

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