# On a Mission to Learn

## *My Trip to a Syrian IDP Camp*

***By Abdulrahman Y. idlbi***

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# Before You Start

This is my report for a trip I made to the Syrian-Turkish border in January 2013. I wanted to explore the refugee communities and know more about the kids there to help with designing learning environments for them. I was learning then, and still I am... I had to make many decisions on the spot, some were smart (I guess), some were not, and you'll find me inferring and making conclusions throughout the text... So please feel free to select any piece of text, right-click and choose "comment" to add any comment, reflection or question you have — any *improper* comment will be removed :)

I'm so thankful for the kind people who provided me with advice, suggestions, support or introduced me to more kind people who provided more help. In particular:

- Qah refugee camp admins (specifically Mouaz) and volunteering teachers (Waseem and Abu-Abdul) for the great time I had (and lessons I learned)
- Watan for the logistic support (specifically, Lama, Mulham, Jahed, Alaa and Mahmoud)
- Amos Blanton, Hadia Zarzour and Lennis Echterling for advice on psychological and crisis intervention issues.
- All the Gobos in Lifelong Kindergarten group for the infinite stream of ideas.
- My partners in Nama team for..., well, starting this together :)

More pictures from the trip are in this gallery. Videos in this playlist (mostly of kids singing or telling their stories in Arabic).

**إن كنت تفضل مطالعة تقريري بالعربية فعليك بمدونتي.**

# Background

Since March 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled to neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey[1] to escape turmoil back home, and millions became internally displaced. There are huge needs to be met, and most of the aid providers and NGOs working with refugees are concentrating on meeting their prompt needs related to accommodation, food, clothing, and health. Little attention is paid to the educational and psychological needs of the kids although they make a considerable portion of the Syrian population.[2]

Many children have been out of school for more than a year for various reasons. It's either unsafe to go to school, the school has been destroyed, the school is occupied by displaced people[3], or there's no school in the first place which is the case in many camps.

[1] UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response

[2] More than one third of the Syrian population is under 15 (source).

[3] In various cases, school were turned into barracks or detention centers (source: The Syrian Network for Human Rights: A report on the destruction of schools and its consequences)

In addition to that, most of the kids have suffered as a result of the violent and brutal reaction of the Syrian regime. Many of them witnessed cases where parents, relatives or friends were injured, killed or detained, or at least heard many stories of that. Many lived for weeks under shelling. Even kids in relatively safe areas hear bombing and observe military aircrafts frequently.

A friend and I were approached in late October 2012 by an NGO working with Syrian kids, and were asked if we could suggest resources for teachers in schools. They were planning to start a school (the usual kind of school) and wanted to do some retouching to take into account what the kids have been through. The discussion evolved over time, and I suggested designing a totally different type of learning environment and activities. I had two concerns regarding school:

- Best learning happens when kids are actively involved in the learning process creating things following their own interests, which is not usually the case at School.
- School by design is a competitive environment. Kids, on the other hand, needed a safe, respectful and collaborative environment where they could develop the necessary resilience to overcome their experiences.

I used to put it like this: the kids have gone through unconventional circumstances, so it makes no sense to educate them in conventional ways.

I drafted a short proposal concentrating on the basic principles that should govern the learning environment and activities. I didn't focus on the particular content of the activities for two reasons: First, while the content itself is important, I thought what was more essential at that stage was how the children would react to it and transform it to reflect their (and their community's) experiences, needs and interests. Second, having a sustainable model was one of my design criteria, so I wanted to build the learning activities on the resources and needs of the environment where the kids were living; and I lacked this information :-|

The second point was actually what made me decide to take the trip to the refugee camps. I didn't plan particular activities to facilitate. Instead, I wanted to explore the environment, resources, needs, and how parents, teachers and kids were perceiving their situation and circumstances. The plan was visiting camps on both sides of the Syrian-Turkish border, spending an extended amount of time in one of each.

# Part 1 - Finding My Way Around

I arrived in Reyhanlı, Turkey in the late evening of December 31. Reyhanlı is a town near the border with a few thousand Syrian refugees living there. The NGO I contacted had an office there. As they were already planning to open a school, they had a database of candidate teachers.

During the next few days I met several kids and teachers who moved to the town from Syria a few months ago.[4] I held long meetings with several groups of teachers to learn more about their experiences and perceptions of the events and how kids could be helped. I started generally by asking the teachers about what they thought the major concerns/challenges that have to be addressed regarding kids in the current situation. Interestingly, the teachers reported psychological issues (e.g. fear, trust, dealing with loss and confidence) as top priorities. After that came physical needs (e.g nutrition and health care), then lacking access to school.

However, as soon as the discussion moved to how these priorities can be met, teachers tended to focus back on formal education taking place at school and the importance of meeting the curriculum requirements :-| I realize their toolkit didn't contain much to deal with the current situation. Anyway, it was good to know they were realizing the nature of the top challenges the kids were facing.

Reyhanlı had only three schools for Syrian kids, which can only host a small fraction of the total number of kids already in town. The schools were operated by foreign NGOs (Syrian expats), and the teachers were refugees themselves. Connecting with various Syrian activists I knew about several educational activities and networks that were held by volunteers in less safe environments inside Syria. I didn't see or hear much of that in town.

[4] Those were mostly people who had little but enough money to pay rent. Their life was still difficult. Many teachers walked long distances to the meetings because they couldn't afford the transportation.

I visited a school that hosted a few hundred refugee kids who were living in the town, and was founded by a Canadian NGO. Meeting with some of the administrative staff I found out that kids were instructed using the same old methods and using the current formal Syrian curriculum. They had 2 hours per week when a teacher would *talk* to the whole class about resilience. Talking more about this issue to a lady from the founding organisation who happened to be visiting at the same time, she said they wanted to provide the kids with a more supportive and creative learning environment but they didn't know how, and they lacked the means to provide the teachers with proper training to do more than they learned to do as traditional instructors.

On my third day, I accompanied a group of Syrian American activists on a trip to two relatively small camps inside Syria near the border. Each had a few thousand people living in tents. While my colleagues distributed aid and did some filming, I was initiating conversations with the people to learn more about the circumstances the kids went through. My strategy was simple: I'd greet a parent who was accompanied by their kids doing some work beside their tent, and ask them about their living. People were generous and eager to speak. They'd invite me immediately to have coffee or tea of the very little they brought with them, and then start telling their stories. During that, I gave the kids my camera, showed them briefly how to use it, and asked them to take pictures of whatever they liked while I was talking to their parents. I did that for two reasons: First, I always believed that kids (and learners in general) are empowered when they create things. Kids enjoyed posing for strangers, but they never touched a camera. Second, I personally didn't like to be taking pictures of them as if I was a tourist.

In the first camp I met a mother preparing lunch for her children just outside their tent. I greeted her, and soon she was telling me her story while her six-year-old daughter was taking pictures around. The camp was built ten days before, and those people were coming from a region that was liberated by the Free Syrian Army, so their town came under the mercy of the Syrian regime's rockets and military aircrafts. I spent about 30 minutes talking to the mother, and she mentioned that they were more comfortable back home and had more resources to live, but she could not bear spending more nights awake beside her kids waiting for the next rocket to hit.

Then, I headed back to where our car was parked to find many kids gathering. They asked me to take pictures of them. Instead, I offered them my camera to take the pictures themselves.

We started talking about different issues regarding the camp. One kid showed me his collection

of ammunition cases of different sizes. The kids said that everyone had similar collections[5] and could name the different weapons that were used to fire that kind of ammunition.

While talking, older teenagers joined us (16-17 years old). Among other many things, I asked them why there were no volunteers from the refugees themselves helping with running the new camp[6] and meeting its needs. One of them answered that they volunteered in the beginning, but then an aid agency would come offering incentives for some refugees to do camp-related work. That discouraged the people who had been already volunteering. They'd say they wouldn't volunteer while others are being paid to work.[7]


The second camp I visited was Qah camp. Again, I went through the tents, met a 12-year-old boy with his sister who was always smiling, greeted them and asked for their names. I introduced myself as their dad approached. He immediately invited me into their tent. While the dad was preparing tea, I showed the kids how to take pictures, and they invited the rest of their siblings and cousins. Soon they were posing for each other and taking pictures around the

[5] In another camp, a five-year-old kid showed me a similar collection.

[6] Tal-al-Karamah camp, established to host the people displaced after the beginning of Hama offensive. The camp was almost 10 days old and had about 1,000 refugees then.

[7] Another related issue was viewing the people in crisis as victims (versus survivors). I heard the same narrative from many people working with refugees/displaced people in different regions: the volunteers who came helping lacked the basics of dealing with such situations, and approached the situation as heros who were supposed to rescue the poor victims. Right from the beginning, the refugees were not encouraged to be proactive members in their communities, and the volunteers would offer willingly doing all what was needed, even the simplest tasks. Overtime, that evolved on the side of refugees into passiveness, less self-esteem, and as I believe, less trust and more nagging. The situation worsened as time passed with the refugees sitting idle, in addition to the dramatic increase in their numbers in the past few months.
Should I also mention aid providers who ask the kids to pose with what they provided and how that's affecting their dignity? &*$^%(*@

place. While they were exploring, they started taking video. After some help, they decided to arrange themselves to sing some revolutionary songs (here is one, in Arabic of course).

After an hour of talking and drinking tea, it was time to leave back to Turkey because the border gate closed at 5 pm. I made up my mind that I'd come back to this camp, maybe because I had a longer, more intimate interaction with the kids there :) I asked the father if he knew a way to spend a few days in the camp, so he introduced me to the person who was managing the finance of the camp. I introduced myself as an educator willing to work with the kids. Without any questions, he said I was welcome and that he'd manage some space for me when I come back (and some source of power to recharge my equipment[8]).

[8] Well, maybe I should have mentioned this *little* detail earlier, but there was no heating or electricity. The only source of electricity was a generator that was only turned on at night to power the lamps in the bathrooms and the storage tent.

In both camps, there were teachers but there were two problems according to the parents: First, the teachers had no motivation to teach without being paid :-\ The dad I met in the second camp was a lawyer himself, and said he'd prefer doing something that would get him some money to meet his family's needs. That was understood somehow, but except for occasional day labor (such as olive harvesting with local farmers) most of the people would just spend the day smoking and drinking tea. Second, there was no space to gather the kids. Each family lived in a tent that was about 16$m^2$, and had 5-6 kids on average. There was a larger tent dedicated as a mosque in the second camp which was also used as a school, but it could barely host 80 kids at a time in a community of more than 4000 people. The parents acknowledged, however, the need of their kids to be involved in some kind of activity.

Another thing I noticed was the lack of trust among people. Refugees would usually accuse the

people managing the aid distribution of embezzlement -- I mean all the people along the aid distribution chain. There was nothing documented (although I knew some of that was happening), but this was a general theme of many of the discussions I had in the camps.

# Part 2 - Let the Hard Fun Begin

## Day 1 - Welcome to Qah Refugee Camp![9]

January 5, 2013 afternoon was the time to cross the border back to Qah camp. I had my laptop, camera, two Scratch Sensor Boards, and a MakeyMakey. I wasn't sure yet what activities I'd do with the kids or what materials to use, so I decided on my way to buy some paper, pencils and coloring pens.[10] Holding a Syrian passport, it was easy to cross the border.[11] I took a cab to Qah camp, and as I arrived I headed directly to the same tent I visited earlier. The kids were a bit surprised to see me again. It was usual to see strangers everyday visiting the camp, taking pictures, promising aid, then leaving, but they'd rarely come back. Refugees considered them somehow as tourists.[12] They ran to their dad, Ahmad, telling him I was back. He told me they were preparing lunch[13] and invited me to join them.

Soon, the lunch was ready. It was rice and okra. Ahmad had four girls (4, 7, 10 and 16 years old) and a son (12). All the children joined us for lunch, except for the older girl. It was a conservative society and girls over 13 were generally not encouraged to interact with stranger

[9] Location: http://goo.gl/maps/4l3Cl

[10] These proved to be priceless resources. The kids in the camp hadn't seen any for months. I had even some kids offering the very little money they had to buy pencils. I couldn't provide any because I needed every one of them to run my activities. Other than that, there were barely any materials to play with: resources were scarce and expensive (the currency had already lost 50% of its value) and most of the refugees didn't have any source of income. Anything that could be burnt would probably be used for heating.

[11] Non-Syrians can still enjoy a public people smuggling service in both directions :)

[12] I remained one for my first couple of days.

[13] Lunch is the main meal in Syria (and the Middle East in general).

men or participate in coed activities. I noticed some of the girls were not eating. One of them said they were on a diet as they were recovering from jaundice. It started with their cousin, and soon most of the kids in the family were infected due to the lack of proper health care and the crowded tents. The whole camp had a poorly-equipped clinic operating from 9 am to 4 pm with a doctor and a nurse. For emergencies, people had to go to a relatively close hospital.[14]

I didn't see many teenagers around the camp. I understood teenage girls were not expected to be wandering around, but I asked Ahmad about the boys. He said they'd be helping their families collecting wood or in the nearby villages trying to find something to do for money.

After lunch, a few relatives joined us for tea. Meanwhile, the kids were taking pictures. I asked them if they thought of any activities they'd be interested in doing in the following days. They didn't have much to say except that they liked photography. I showed them how that can be used to create stop-motion animations. The grandfather who joined us after lunch asked me how things were in other camps. I told him the little I knew about different camps in Syria, Jordan and Turkey. I had a short documentary about Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, called

[14] Here's a short story to explain what "emergency" meant: One night, I was staying with the camp's manager, and a man came running to us saying that his baby had diarrhea and was vomiting. The answer was it wasn't an emergency and could wait till the morning. An emergency usually meant suffocation or severe burns due to accidents related to the means of heating used in the tents.

Tiny Souls, and suggested seeing it. Zaatari is a big camp in the desert with more than 65,000 refugees at the time. The stories that were coming from that camp were not pleasant[15], and I thought it was a good idea to talk about it because people were complaining in general and knowing about less fortunate refugees would help them appreciate what they had.

Things didn't go as planned. The kids (and adults) noticed every single aspect where the situation was better than theirs: bigger tents, some access to schooling, etc. On the other hand, they didn't recall what was mentioned about the wind destroying tents in Zaatari. Maybe I chose the wrong movie :) I liked, however, how the kids were giving their full attention to what the kids in the movie were saying.

[15] Zaatari camp was flooded then, and a few kids died of cold a few weeks earlier.

I left with Ahmad to the mosque for prayer. As we were away from the kids, I asked him why they moved to the camp. He said their house was bombarded. Luckily the family was staying in a neighbouring house that got only minor damage. Two kids were slightly injured when the glass of the windows exploded. I asked him whether the kids showed any signs of trauma after that. He said they were normal,[16] [17] but in one incident they got so scared when a fighter flew over the camp a month before. Before destroying their house, the kids were full of excitement whenever aircrafts were flying around.

Crisis intervention wasn't my field of expertise (and still isn't), so I asked some friends for advice and read a little about the topic. I understood that the main strategy was to listen and empower the survivors and trust them to seek their resilience by themselves, which was somehow similar to the way I was trained to approach learning. Anyway, I was comfortable about trying things out because I believed it was the only way to learn. When I came back to the tent, I told the kids that with the camera I had we could make a documentary similar to the one they watched earlier about Zaatari camp. They liked the idea, so I suggested starting with telling some stories. The 10-year-old girl gathered the younger girls and started with a story. Frankly, I didn't understand much of her story. I was from the capital in the south of Syria, while the kids were from a small town in the north: they had a different accent and used some different words, and my ears weren't trained to that yet. We continued anyway. I suggested recording with the youngest girl (4 years old) after that. We started with a story, which was followed by a couple of songs. The brother was shooting most of the time, and after every shot, I discussed with the kids the little I knew about camera angle and lighting to make the next one better.

Next, it was Mustafa, the 12-year-old brother's turn to be interviewed. I asked him to talk about the family's journey to the camp, the good things and people he encountered in that journey,

[16] This was the typical answer I got from parents and volunteers. Many parents told me that their kids needed someone to tell them what they were through, but they'd always say the kids were "fine."
[17] Later on, I found out one of his girls continuously drew the same picture with her cousin: a house with happy people and helicopters dropping bombs.

and how he managed to rise up to the challenge. I got mostly what I considered pre-packaged answers, the ones you get from a student who wants to impress his teacher. For example, when asked about where he got his strength from, he answered: “[from] family, school and education... because when you have an exam, you stop playing outside and study more to pass to the next grade.” That didn’t work, maybe because the nature of the questions were foreign to him, I was a stranger myself, the presence of the camera, his dad listening and trying to dictate answers indirectly, or a combination of these. I didn’t want to stress Mustafa out so I thanked him and told him I got what I wanted (and decided to find another way to talk to kids).

It was already dusk. I had to leave to go to the guy who told me he’d manage my accommodation in the camp. His name was Mouaz. He was managing the finance of the camp, which made him a central figure there. He offered me a place in the storage tent where he also spent the night. It was getting colder so we went to sleep early. In addition to my sleeping bag, I used three blankets to stay warm.[18]

[18] Each refugee received only three blankets.

## Day 2 - Visiting the School

Ahmad's kids and I agreed to meet in the morning to go to the school together. I told them we'd be drawing and that it'd be fine to invite some friends. Saturday to Thursday, boys met at 10 am in the mosque tent to receive religious schooling. At noon, prayer was held, then it was the girls' turn. The teacher, Waseem, was a volunteering refugee and didn't receive any training to do that. He offered help because he thought kids shouldn't be left without education. He had around 50 boys and 50 girls, ages 6-13[19]. Ahmad's children didn't go to this school.

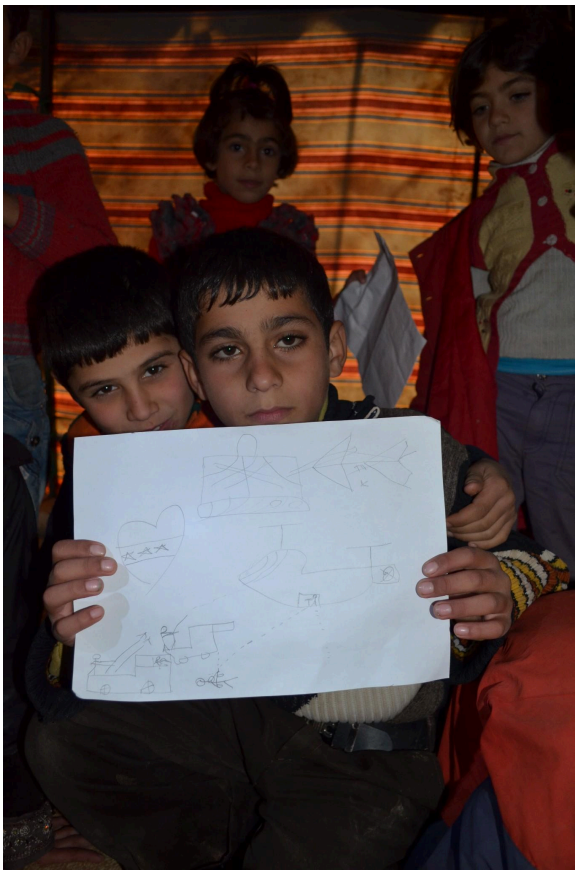
When we entered the tent, there was already a session going on, with the boys sitting in the front half of the tent. I hadn't met Waseem before and didn't know what to expect without prior coordination with him. I had seven girls and a boy with me. I gave two sheets of paper and a pencil to each of them, told them to draw whatever they wanted, and asked them not to make much noise.

Most of the drawings were houses with rivers and mountains. Whenever someone finished and showed me their drawing, I asked her to tell me about it. They mostly named the things they drew: a house, trees, birds, etc.

When the boys finished their lesson, some of them came to me asking if they could do the same. I distributed the sheets and pencils. The process went the same except for I started getting tanks and helicopters instead of birds and trees. That would become the general theme of the drawings for the next few days.

This very short video shows how the school usually looked like with religious instruction in the front and my session in the back.

[19] Older boys would be helping their parents or trying to get some money in the nearby villages. Older girls wouldn't join unless there were female teachers.

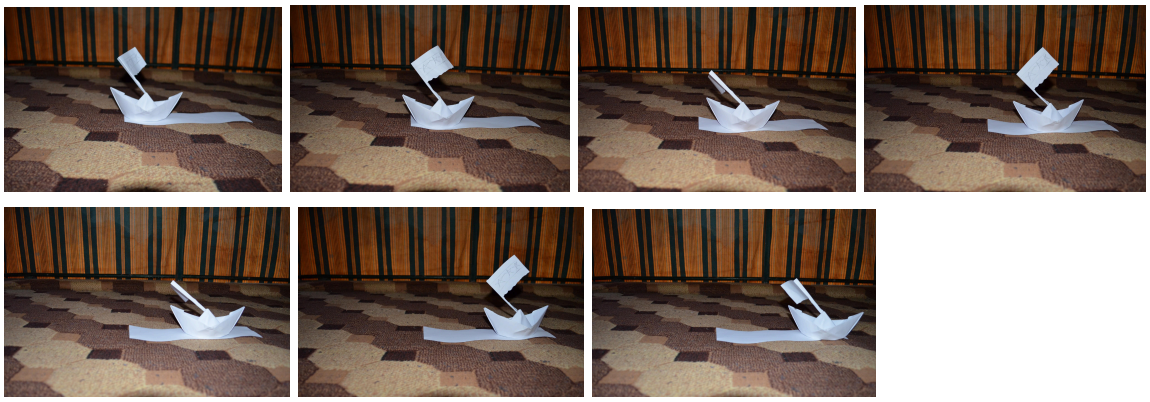
With the end of the girls' session, I had more boys and girls around me. I decided to screen Tiny Souls again. I had different goals in mind this time. I wanted my kids to emotionally connect to other kids from a different region in Syria and realize that they were not alone in this, and wanted them also to see other kids expressing themselves and talking about what they'd been through. They paid good attention to it (some adults did too). The group was too big for me to ask for reflections, so I concluded the screening with a general question on how much they enjoyed it.[20]

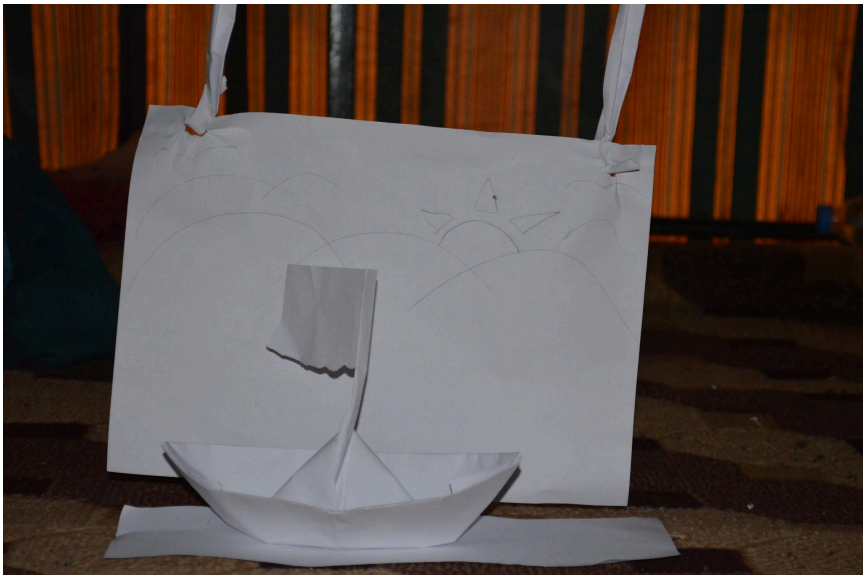
Afterwards, many kids started asking me to take pictures of them. I didn't like that (it was again that tourist feeling), but there were too many kids to whom to give the camera to take pictures by themselves. Instead, I offered them a stop motion activity. I showed them one working example, struggled myself with other two unsuccessful trials,[21] then asked them to divide into teams to create simple projects. I asked them to create the characters and the sequences while I took the pictures. Soon, with some suggestions, they started creating their own techniques to

[20] I didn't take pictures during the screening (and not many while I was working with the boys). I thought that would be distracting and would prevent them from behaving normally. On the other hand, when I worked with the girls earlier that day, I already knew most of them, and they worked with/around the camera a few times, thus taking pictures wasn't a problem.

[21] But always telling them that there were things they had to be aware of when they did their own projects.

overcome the problems they were facing. Different teams created projects of varying qualities, but some merely enjoyed the idea of cutting paper to create different artifacts.






This was my first experience of the problems the kids had as a community. Each team had pencils and papers, but there was only one multi-tool scissors to be used by all the teams to cut shapes. They were fighting all the time for it and coming to me complaining about some team who had been using it for a long time. They lacked the language to communicate respectfully,[22] and they were using the same language the adults used to express distrusting others.

To make the challenge nicer, the multi-tool disappeared at one point. I was always asking for it because some team needed it, and suddenly no one knew where it was. A couple of kids named a boy who had it, and thought he left with it (they said “stole it”), and that was it. They just continued their work. I didn’t like the wording nor the passive reaction they had. I told them that he might have *borrowed* it for some reason, then said the activities would be discontinued if the multi-tool wasn’t back. We were experiencing each other for the first time, and I wanted them to realize that they were not only responsible for their personal actions, but also held a communal responsibility so they wouldn’t expect it was fine to be passive. Thankfully, three boys left the place and came back after a few minutes with my multi-tool :)

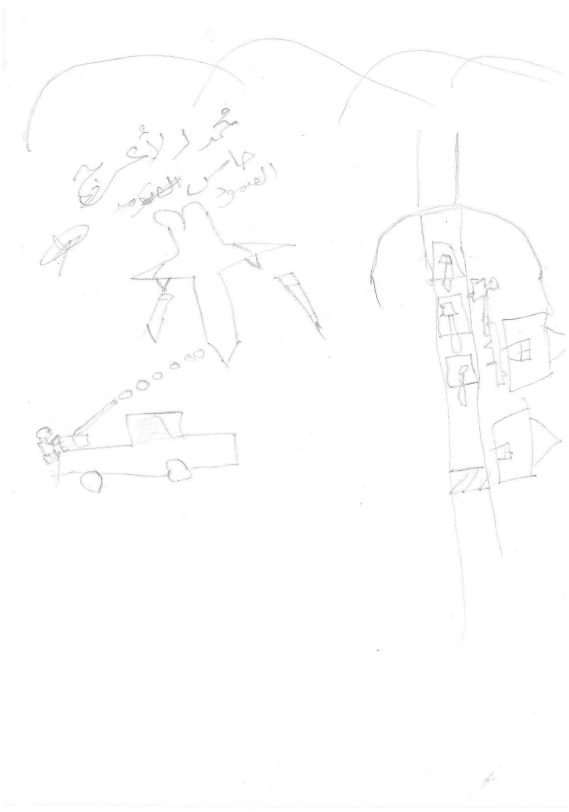
[22] Saying something equivalent to “What's the magic word?” never sufficed.

## Day 3 - Rolling! Action! Cut!

By the end of the second day, I met more girls than I started with. I asked them to come early the next morning to find some activity to do. When we met in the morning there were ten girls, all new! I asked them how they liked the screening yesterday, and if they wanted to do something similar. They were excited about the idea, but we needed a place to do it. One girl said it was ok to go to her tent. That was lots of girls in a tiny tent :)

My suggestion was to have a combination of singing and talking. I asked them to choose to talk about their experience back home before the revolution, during the revolution, their life in the camp, or their hopes for the future. Interestingly, most of them insisted on telling stories from the revolution: either how they had to leave their homes, or tales about the heros who lost their lives.

When it was time to be with the boys, I paid more attention to the description and stories told for the drawings. I took the detailed stories I heard to adults from the same town, and they verified that many were reflecting actual events and battles.

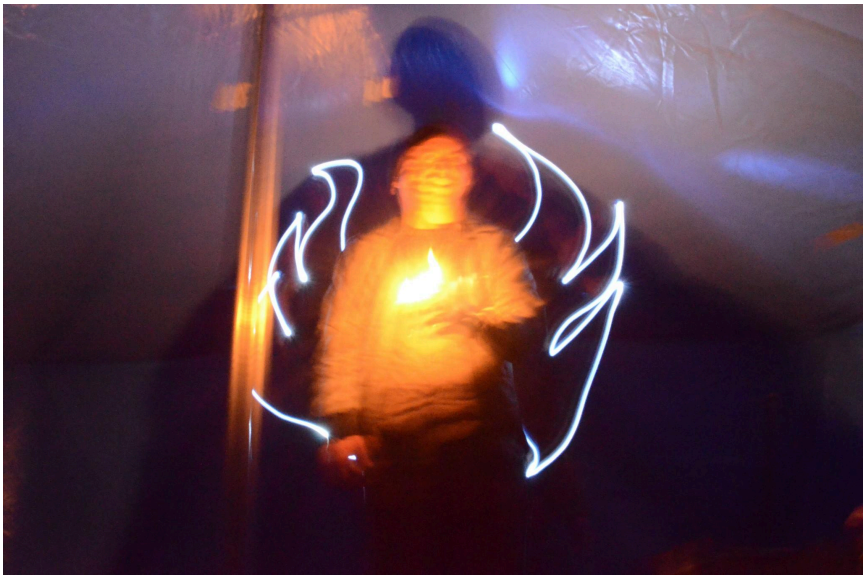


That day, I also met Abu-Abdul, the other volunteering religious teacher working with kids. But unlike Waseem, he wasn't a refugee himself. He came volunteering from another city to help refugees around this part of the border. He was tough, but the kids, especially the girls, liked him. He was devoting all his time to the kids, and whenever they needed him to recite, read or talk he'd be there for them. He was taking turns with Waseem teaching the kids, and coordinated together what they were teaching.

He was straightforward and strong about it when I introduced myself and why I was there. He said that if I really wanted to help the kids I had to stay with them, to be there with them, and that if I wanted to introduce change I had to be there to do it. I felt it was a bit aggressive in the beginning, but I highly respected that of him. Some parents expressed concerns about people like me coming and and leaving frequently, many dealing with the kids but without building deep connections.

I spent the evening with Waseem, Abu-ABdul and some of their friends. They were all in their early twenties. One asked me about the camera, so I spent some time taking pictures with different settings. Then I thought of doing some light painting. It was their first time doing it, and they liked that!

We were talking about interests, and one of the guys, Free Bird, mentioned he was a hobbyist rapper who wrote his own lyrics. That was surprising. I never met one before in Syria because I had certain views of their community, and never expected to meet one in the camp. I asked him to start singing and I liked it. I asked him later to record some songs and he performed in front of some boys, which helped in establishing a positive interaction between them.



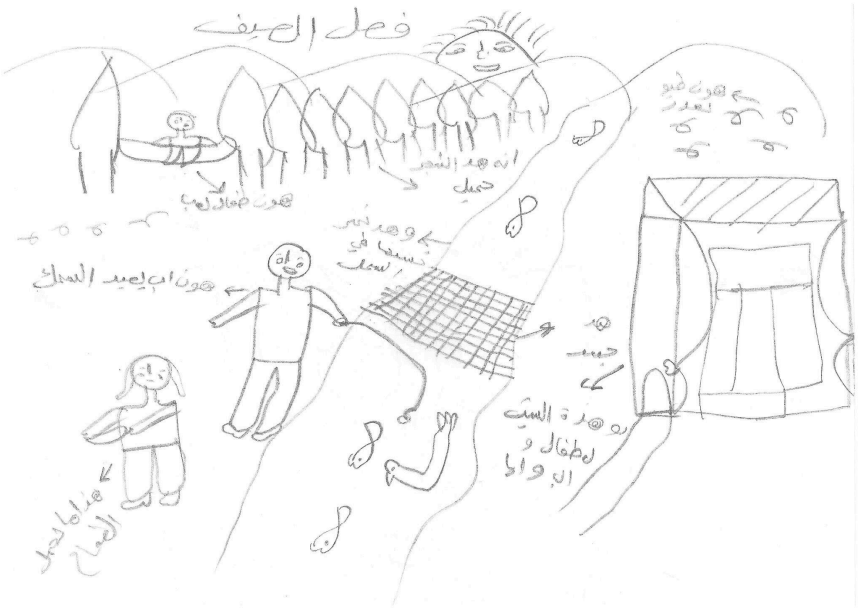
I spent that night with these guys. Welcome to a real tent. I didn't have my sleeping bag, so I

needed 5 blankets to stay warm (remember that each refugee received only three?) That was the only preferential treatment I got. Other than that, I shared their food, lived in the same tents, had to wear muddy clothes, and waited with them in bathroom lines :) Sharing these experiences helped in establishing deeper relationships with the kids and parents. All that put me in a better position to gain their trust as one of them who really cared about them.

## Day 4 - Not only Tell Stories, But Also Write Them

Aside from writing their names and where they came from, the kids didn't write anything. On that day, after showing me their drawings and telling me what was there, I told them to write down what they had just told me. They were reluctant at first, but I told them just to write down directly on the drawing itself.

Some wrote only nouns (e.g. tree, house, fish), while others wrote simple sentences (e.g. This's a tree, Here's a child playing). They had spelling mistakes, but I didn't correct them. When they came back to show what they did, I asked them to read what they wrote.



When I asked one girl to write, she told me she couldn't. She was around 8. I asked her in which grade she was. She said she was supposed to be in the third grade.[23] I asked her if she could spell the word, write the letters separately, connect each two letters together, and then write the whole word.[24] She tried each of these separately for one word then another, then she delightfully said "I can write!" Again, there were some errors but I didn't point them out.

[23] I received this "supposed to be..." answer from many kids.

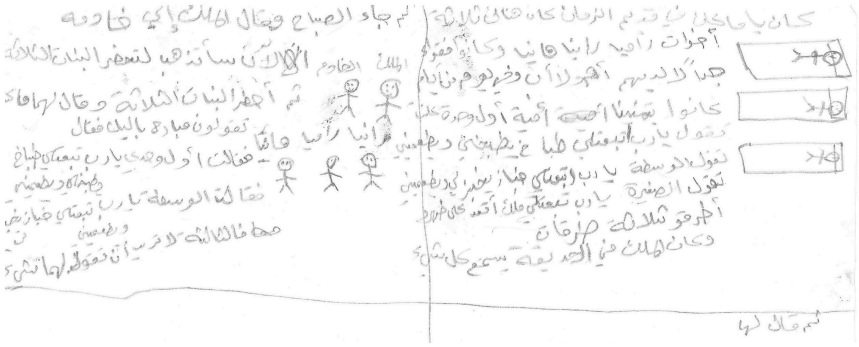
[24] Arabic is written in a cursive style.

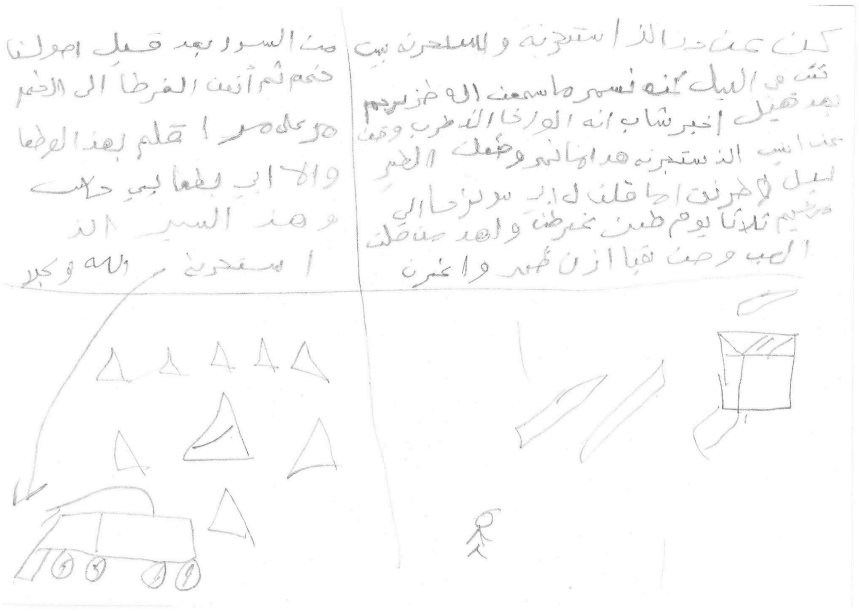
After showing their first writings, I asked them to think of a sequence of events instead of a fixed frame in time. To help them, I suggested dividing the sheet into four quarters and thinking of each quarter as a frame in the sequence. It became easier for them to write expressive sentences that tell a story.

As I was having an increasing number of kids attending my sessions, I started delegating some tasks to the kids themselves. After explaining the next activity to a few kids, I sent all other kids to those who had already started to investigate what they had to do. For example, I'd tell a kid who wrote on his drawing but didn't create a sequence of events yet to look for a kid who had his sheet divided into four quarters, introduce himself, and ask him what to do next. Sometimes,

a kid who had already started a new task would come back to me saying he couldn't explain it to another kid so we would go over the activity and discuss it again. That helped in fostering the relationships between the kids, and it helped them practice talking about their learning experiences not only with adults, but also with their peers.

I also found out that some kids became more interested in writing than drawing. They were writing about fairy tales or a series of events they went through. Another thing I started noticing was that kids were drawing less war scenes. Some still did, but I could see a wider variety of themes developing over time.





One of the volunteer teachers, Abu-Abdul, was developing a deeper interest in what I was doing. Everyday, he asked what activities I held and observations I had. That day, I had to leave the girls while they were drawing. When I came back I found him sitting with the girls having a similar interaction to the one I told him I was doing. He was asking them about their drawing and listening to their stories. After a while I found out that he was incorporating some of the strategies I was using in his own lessons (like delegating teaching tasks to his students).

## Day 5 - Elections

We had many new experiences that day. It was snowing all night, and in the morning everything was in white. I was wandering around the camp and soon was engaged in a snow fight with the kids. I noticed some level of aggressiveness by a group of kids against others, including me) and they were telling the kids to go back to where they came from. That was harsh. Trying to talk to them, I found out they were from the village just next to the camp. Investigating more, I found out that the villagers, adults and kids, didn't like the refugees and vice versa. The villagers complained that refugees were breaking branches of olive trees to set fire, and that their kids were learning bad words from refugee kids. The refugees on the other hand said that villagers were making use of their misery.[25] [26]

I was waiting for an authorization to access a refugee camp on the Turkish side, and had only a day or two left in Qah (that was what I thought at least). I decided to put more explicit effort on enhancing the learning community.

From the first day, I worked on establishing the mosque/school as a safe welcoming environment for all the kids. When I first arrived at the camp, kids were told by many adults to leave as soon as their religious schooling sessions were over. I set a rule with the adults and kids that no one can tell anyone to leave the place.[27] Soon, the kids were more comfortable in

[25] Many villagers were working with the camp to provide water and other needs, and the land itself was rented from a farmer in the same village.

[26] The camp's power generator malfunctioned on several days. On one of them I asked the kids for an alternative to recharge my equipment. They suggested going to one of the houses in the village just across the road. I visited a house introducing myself as a teacher and asking for help. I was invited over lunch with my kids who refused to come inside. That's how I got the villagers' perspective.

[27] In Islamic convention, a mosque is called a *house of Allah*. I used that with other religious texts to justify what I was doing. Looking myself as a religious guy and showing knowledge in religious texts made

doing more activities in the place: at times you'd find the kids drawing, singing, running around the place and doing cartwheels. The kids even started inviting their friends who never came to the place before. That day, a kid named Rasmeh came to the mosque while we were drawing. He was older than the rest of the kids but he was deaf, which made him live in isolation from the rest of the community. When I noticed him outside he was always by himself. I had no idea how he knew about the place, but as soon as he appeared on the door on the tent, kids ran to me asking for pencil and papers for him to draw. I liked how they were celebrating him.

I mentioned earlier that the refugees in general had issues with trusting whomever was involved in running the camp, and kids were just inheriting the same attitude and language.[28] One reason for that, in my own analysis, is that refugees were not encouraged to participate in running the camp. Most of the work and administration were handled by people who were *outsiders*, with the refugees just passively observing and receiving. This state of idleness provided a rich environment for gossip and mistrust to spread.

To introduce a change, I decided to delegate more tasks to the kids. I told the boys when their session started that I had to leave for some business and wanted them to select someone to take care of the process of distributing the paper and pencils and running the session. All the kids were like "Me.. Me.." I said I wanted them to *nominate* someone but that was without avail. Everyone wanted to be in control. I tried explaining again then started an election process. Out of ten kids who were there, the winner got only 3 or 4 votes. I asked him to select an assistant, then explained the rules for the kids:

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people more comfortable in accepting (or allowing) the way I was doing things in the mosque, although most of them were unconventional.

[28] Every few days, a big argument would erupt between the refugees and the camp managers (and guards), usually after distributing aid or having an accident (like a fire in a tent). Kids were aware of all of this. They even knew many of the details running the camp (e.g. how many water tanks the camp needed and how much they cost).

- We'd deal with each other with respect. No physical or verbal violence was allowed.
- Girls and younger boys had a higher priority in getting the materials.
- If someone infringed on the girls or the boys in charge we'd defend them.

I told the new "admins" they had the freedom to choose the right way to run the process and they could ask me for help when needed. Soon, the kids started shouting at each other, and some came to me complaining. I told them to go back to the admins and ask them kindly for what they wanted. The admins themselves were abusing their power to shout at the kids and give them orders. I brought their attention to that. At one point, the boys were almost going to start a fight. I reminded them of the rules again and told them that if they couldn't solve things for themselves the session would be over.[29] That worked. The boys received their tools and started drawing.

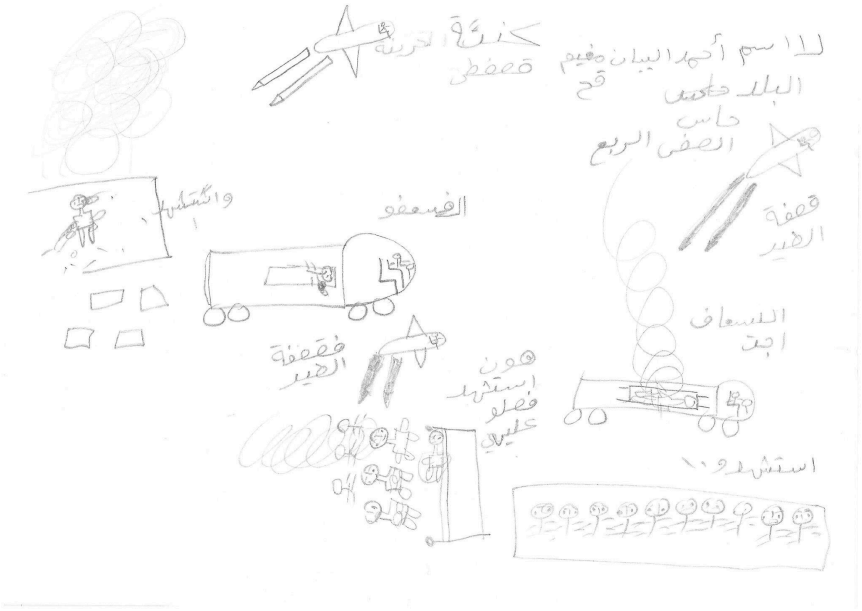
Day after day, the process was improving and the kids were dealing with each other with more respect. They created a sign-up sheet to keep track of the pencils. When new kids came to the place, they told them who was in charge and what the rules were. Everyday, the kids were asked whether they wanted to keep the current admins or elect new ones. The boys were happy with theirs. The girls were electing a new one everyday :)

[29] Any suggestions for an alternative method?

Asmaa, a close little friend of mine, was a five-year-old girl who accompanied me most of the day. She was drawing a boy, a house and an obscure rectangle. When I asked her what that was, she talked about an arms depot, then mentioned adults and girls being killed and buried. I thought Asmaa was already comfortable talking to me with the camera running. I started filming, asked her to repeat what she had already said, then asked her for more details. She mentioned that her uncle was among them and he was killed by bombardment. I met Asmaa's father later to ask him about her story. He couldn't confirm that his daughter had watched any of that. He told me also that her uncle was injured, not killed. I don't think Asmaa was lying or intentionally exaggerating, but that was her perception of the events going around her. I had similar incidents with other kids telling their stories.

I noticed a nine-year-old boy who was drawing many war aircrafts and plenty of dead bodies. After he told what was going on I asked him whether it was ok to visit him and talk further about his story. He invited me to his tent where I met the rest of his family: his parents, twin brother,

7-year-old brother, and 14- and 16-year-old sisters. The father asked politely not to film any of his family members if it was to be shared publicly. He was a teacher, and he travelled monthly to receive his salary from the government. He was afraid that someone would report him to the authorities and his salary would be stopped. As I mentioned what his son was drawing he told me their story. Most of their house was destroyed by an aerial bomb. The mother and the boys were already inside, but they miraculously survived. He also told me other tragic stories from their town.



I was listening most of the time, encouraging him often to elaborate. His wife and daughters were still there listening. Suddenly, the wife started telling me how she survived the bombing. She said she felt choking frequently as she remembered what happened. When the bomb hit the house, only the youngest kid was near her, and she thought the twins were on the roof as usual watching the aircrafts. She grasped the hand of her boy and started running like crazy, and a scream by her son made her realize that they were running barefoot over the broken glass. When got outside, she found out that everyone was already there and no one was hurt. As she reached this part of the story she and her daughters, who were listening behind her, were already crying. While the mother was telling her story, her husband was consoling her, but in a way that implied his wish to stop this conversation. She ignored him anyway. The parents told me frequently that the kids needed someone they trust to listen to them[30], and were glad that I was patient enough to do that. However, it looked like the adults themselves had many untold stories and wanted someone to listen.

[30] They didn't provide that listening themselves.

## Day 7 - Free Bird

Back to my rapper friend, Free Bird. When he first performed in front of me, I asked him to record some of that later in daylight. I had that chance after a few days. The only place that seemed to be suitable to record was the mosque/school. There were two challenges: first, I was pushing the limits by playing music in the mosque. That was easy to solve by recording in a time away from prayer times. The difficult challenge was that Free Bird didn't want to record with the kids around. He rarely did any of that in front of anyone, and he wasn't sure how the kids would respond to that.

When we entered the mosque there were only some boys, and he immediately started shouting at them asking them to leave the place. I kept silent. That was wrong. It was against the rules I established earlier, but wanted badly to see him performing. Some of the boys left the mosque and started making noise because they knew we'd be recording. Well, the good part was when one of the boys came to me saying, "Aren't you the one who said no one can make us leave the place?" It was shocking somehow, but I was still glad that he confronted me with that. I gathered the boys and told them that Free Bird was timid to perform in front of others. After a short discussion, we agreed that the boys would stay inside at a distance from Free Bird and would observe silently.

Free Bird asked me to download a beat to play, then we started recording. With every shot we had, the kids came closer, until they became just next to me. They were amazed by his performance. They started asking him to teach or sing with them, and Free Bird got more comfortable with them. I thought rap could be a possible pathway towards learning literacy skills and a valuable form of self-expression[31], so I encouraged Free Bird to take things further building on his positive interaction with the kids.

Here's one of his songs.

[31] Following a suggestion from my colleague, Champika Fernando

## Day 8 - Adding Colors

Recently, Raghad joined us. She lost her leg in an airstrike, and never came to school before. That day her friends invited her and helped her to join us. She looked sad and rarely spoke, but she seemed to enjoy the activity because she kept coming on the next days.

I provided the kids with coloring pens for the first time. I gave them to the activity admins, and they had to figure out a way to manage the limited resources they had. After some discussions (and struggle with the kids) a system was established. We were losing small amounts of materials steadily, which caused frustration to the admins, especially the boys. I always told them that was fine as long as they were doing their best in managing what they had -- and they were.

I had the coloring pens right from the beginning but wanted to see what the kids would do with pencils only, and soon I totally forgot about them. That day, one of the girls, Rou'a, brought some crayons from her tent and provided them for the girls to use. I remembered that I had some boxes of coloring pens and brought them. Later that day, I gave one of these boxes to Rou'a. That was the only reward I gave to any of the kids, and I made it clear to the girls that she got that because she was so generous to share a precious resource she had, and that I was sure she'd do the same with the pens she got.

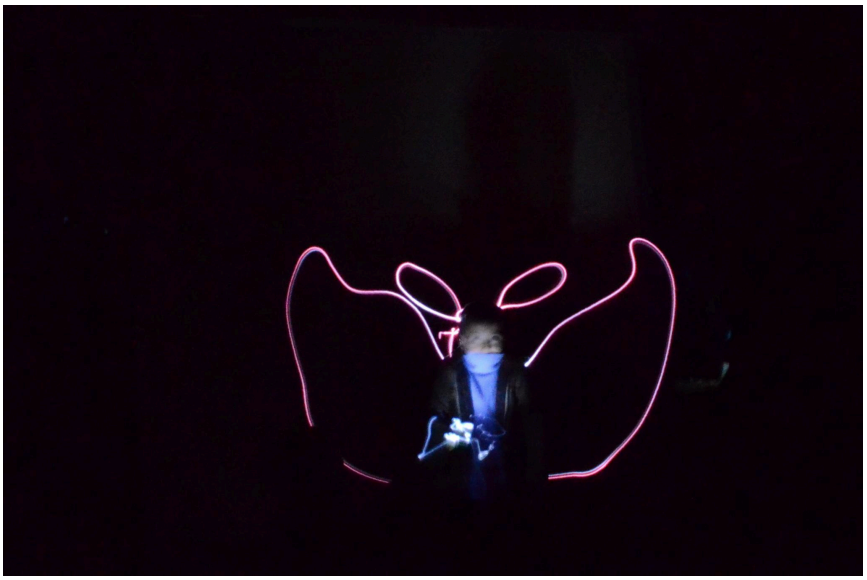
The kids were delighted to have the new tools. Some used them to support the old topics they were drawing, while others decided to explore more themes.

When I first came, my activities were running between 10 am - 2 pm. Soon, the kids were staying till sunset. In the late afternoon, they'd be crowded near the windows to make use of the little light coming in.

It was unusual to see any kid around the camp after sunset. It was totally dark and there was nothing for them to do anyway. I told some of them that if they came in the evening we could have a fun activity: light painting. When we met in the evening, it was mostly boys. We spent almost an hour doing that using cheap lighter flashlights which every kid had. Next day, we showed the rest of the kids what we did. More kids (including more girls) joined us in the evening, although it was terribly cold. I had to divide them into teams waiting in a line for their turn. With each shot, all the kids would run to me to see how it looked. I tried occasionally to point out specific techniques or ideas, but they didn't listen. They were fascinated by what they

were seeing, laughing at and admiring every picture. That was also fine.

With all the noise the kids were making, a few women came to us full of curiosity. After observing what we were doing, they asked me if they could try. I told them they could join the queue, and they did. They liked it! That made me think of activities that would be appealing to both kids and adults which they can do together.



I want to mention an incident which happened while we were light painting on the first night, just outside the mosque. One of the camp armed guards noticed me as he was going into the mosque. He approached me asking if it was ok to enter the mosque with his weapon. I wasn't expecting that of him, but with him asking I decided to play it as a gentleman and told him it was better not to. I thought he'd put his assault rifle back in his tent at the camp's gate, just 30 meters away, and then come back to enter the mosque. Instead, he looked around at my kids, called the tallest one, and handed him his AK-47 :-| That was normal in that environment. Occasionally, one would hear shooting and bombing in the distance.

## Day 9 - A New Mentor Introduced

I spent most of the evenings with the volunteering teachers, Waseem and Abu-Abdul discussing different matters related to the kids, the way we teach and the camp community in general. Sometimes, other people joined the discussion and one of them was Ghazi, a kind young man in his late twenties who was working as a tailor before leaving his town to the camp. He told me once that he knew a few songs which his little daughter liked and suggested that *I* teach them to the girls. I knew he cared about the kids, so I told him he could. He was reluctant to accept, saying that he wasn't a teacher and he had no prior experience. I encouraged him to give it a try, so he did.

He appeared in the afternoon during the drawing session, introduced himself, and told the girls he had a few songs they could sing together if any were interested. Soon, many girls were sitting around him learning the lyrics and practicing the new song. After some practicing he gave them a ten-minute break. All the girls left except for two sisters whom I didn't remember seeing before. They stayed with Ghazi and talked to him. I came closer to listen to the conversation and noticed the girls were almost in tears telling him how they missed their village and their grandparents who were staying in a different camp. Ghazi was consoling them and reminding them that they had other family members and friends around them for support. The girls also started gathering, listening carefully, then one of them started also offering support. That was amazing. Those were people talking to each other for the first time, yet were able to show a high level of sympathy and support. This was unfamiliar in the camp. I was glad to see how the community settings in the mosque were inviting such positive interactions, even for newcomers. [32]

[32] [Teachers: please don't read this because you'd hate me] When schools are currently built for refugees, teachers are sought to lead the learning process. However, because I value the kind of interactions I describe through this report, I refrain usually from recruiting teachers for handling similar learning

After the break, the girls gathered again to do more singing, offering this time to perform their own songs. I was filming that while the boys were watching with jealousy. They asked me to film them performing a song. I told them I would if they could organize themselves quickly because we had only very little time left before sunset. They called each other in a hurry, selected a leader and ran to me saying they were ready. They really were. Here's their performance.

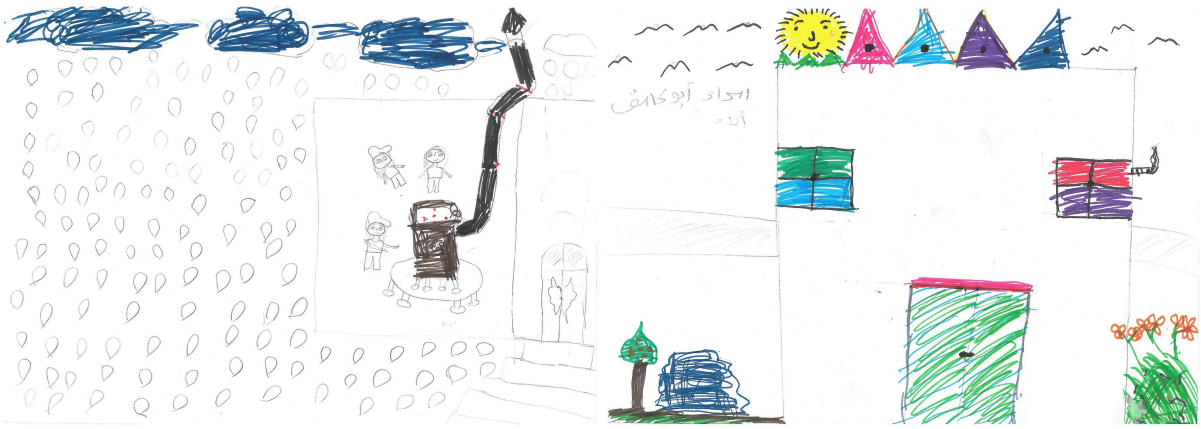
experiences. There are many good teachers of course, but none was trained to deal with the current situation. Additionally, teachers by training tend to give the curriculum and assessment a higher priority than anything else -- even learning itself, and see themselves as the center of the learning/education universe :) I prefer selecting people who care about what they do and about the kids, and it would be much easier and productive to help those people develop as better teachers/mentors.

## Day 10 - One Last Activity to Try

While I was having fun with the kids, my teammates in Boston were designing activities that could be held with the scarce resources I had. I received an activity the day before, and the theme was urban planning. The kids were supposed to design and create (in my case, draw) different buildings from the inside and outside over multiple stages, discuss the differences and how they can organize and connect them.

When the girls came in the morning I explained the new activity, divided the group into teams of 2, and distributed the materials. The girls were not so excited because they came with other plans in mind, but because the new activity included drawing it was ok. The major obstacle was something else. Till the day, all the activities were loose in structure: the kids would come in whenever they wanted, learn the general guidelines and goals of the activity, then approach them at their own pace. This kind of structure and activities tolerated having some kids doing totally different things (ranging from receiving formal instruction in the front of the mosque to running around and wrestling).

The new activity didn't have that tolerance. It required a different structure that wasn't in place yet. It was too noisy and distracting, the girls were of different ages and skills, and the number of participants was high. The girls started drawing following my requirements but didn't take the activity to the next level. Adding more structure and organization wasn't impossible, but it required more preparation and practice that didn't fit in what was left of my time in the camp.



We had a prayer break at noon. When we met after that it was obvious that it wouldn't be fruitful to continue the new workshop, so we just did what we used to do. During the break, some of the girls agreed on bringing their younger siblings to the mosque (babies actually). So, when we gathered again I had new students :)

The girls were asking about Ghazi because they wanted to perform songs with him again. Unfortunately, he was outside the camp on day labor. He came back in the evening, and we met as usual with the other teachers. Suddenly, we heard the girls outside the tent chanting "Ghazi.. Ghazi.." They knew we met, and came to us in a large group asking for more singing, although it was totally dark.

# Part 3 - What's Next, in a Few Words

If you want to open a school, whether in a refugee camp or not, you don't have to take a trip similar to the one I had. Just throw a bunch of kids in a room with an adult, a curriculum and a black board, and you'll be probably fine.

However, if you want to empower these kids as learners, that's a totally different story.

When I started communicating with volunteers working with kids in refugee camps, one of them told me the kids wanted to go to school badly. My immediate thought was "Are you kidding me?" I spent most of my life in the same country as those kids, and went to a relatively good school in the same educational system, and no normal kid liked to go to school :) Those kids wanted to go to school, but that wasn't because it was *the School*. That was because it was the only community they knew where they could meet their peers and do some activity. Similar misconceptions dominate our discussion about education, schooling and meeting the children's needs.

In a world that's rapidly changing, the School is already falling behind in preparing the kids for the future. For refugee kids, the challenge is much harder. They're already living in uncertainty, and it doesn't make sense to meet their unconventional needs with conventional solutions.

These are supposed to be a few words, so I'll save discussing the alternatives for another time (I don't have fully-developed ones anyway). This's an invitation for those working with these kids to start asking the right questions.[33] We'll build the right solutions together.

*A colorful, cheerful greeting from my little friend, Omaimah.*

[33] This short film may provide an inspiring start: Connected Learning: 'Essence'