

Capoeira: A surprising source of social transformation

We are excited to be launching the findings of our research about the psycho-social impact of Capoeira in the lives of refugee youth at an event in London on 9 September 2015. For the past two years, I have been working in partnership with Capoeira4Refugees to identify the ways in which Capoeira can have an impact in the lives of refugees and conflict-affected children. We have found that Capoeira classes have helped children build social skills, personal confidence and discipline, and express their creativity, among other things. One of my visits to Capoeira4Refugees' project at al-Azraq Camp in Jordan, in particular, illustrated this.

Lugging a big wooden drum, about a dozen tambourines, and an assortment of other percussion instruments, we walked onto the big green astroturf. Some members of our team got to work assembling *berimbaus*, the staple instrument of a Brazilian dance/music/sport called *Capoeira*. Others began assembling several dozen young Syrian boys into a big circle. This was the beginning of a series of intensive Capoeira classes for Syrian youth living in the camp.

Al-Azraq camp is astonishingly monochrome: little white pre-fabricated houses lined up neatly against a backdrop of beige sand, for as far as the eye can see. The youth centre, with its bright green astroturf, created quite the contrast. It is easy to imagine how eagerly young people living in the camp flock to the centre, simply to enjoy a few hours of colour. I asked some of the youth what they do when not at Capoeira class, and their answers included helping their mothers get food and water, studying to catch up on the years of school they lost due to war in Syria, and little else.

But, while the initial appeal of the Capoeira classes might have been the fact that they offered something new and different in an otherwise dreary time spent within the camp, I was particularly impressed by how they helped these young people grow in confidence and respect.

When we pulled out the many instruments, which the teacher had brought all the way from Brazil, nearly fifty children ran to them, picked them up, and started banging away. It was fun to watch the joy on their faces as they played with these novelties, and at first their musical attempts created a pleasant cacophony. But soon, the sound grew loud and tedious, and I began to wonder if we would be able to gather the instruments back into one place again. The teacher then began to arrange the children into groups, according to which instrument they were holding.

I watched as students fought over the more popular instruments, complaining when they got stuck with a small drum that they thought "boring". We told them that everyone would eventually get a turn with everything, but few had the patience to wait. So the teacher brought them back into a circle and began to talk about the history of music in Capoeira, the significance of each instrument, and the orchestra that would be created when everyone learned to play in harmony. He also said it was important for them to respect the instruments they were playing, and to take good care of them. Then he instituted a rule: if a student grabbed at an instrument without a trainer offering it to them, that student would have to sit out the rest of the music lesson.

About half of the students nodded and quickly put back the percussion pieces they had snatched. A few others didn't understand at first, but the teacher enforced his rule, and they began to understand the importance of respecting authority and sharing with each other.

These are small victories, but sometimes the small victories are the greatest ones. Today's Syrian refugee teenagers are, after all, the next generation of adults in Syria, and organisations like Capoeira4Refugees are working hard to ensure that they are not a lost generation. In the Capoeira classes, I saw youth who had lost much of the structure in their lives when war broke out in Syria, re-learning discipline. Material loss may have made them desperate, to the point that they might break out in a fight at food distributions or quickly snatch at anything given to them, but they were re-learning the value of sharing with others. They lived in a monochrome camp in the desert and were learning how to make colour in their own lives through music and dance.

All of this happened in a few short lessons; there is so much more that Capoeira classes can offer. Capoeira is interactive in nature, creating a space for its participants to act out their social frustrations inside the *roda*, or circle. It is physically challenging, requiring a great degree of discipline. It is empowering, in that its students are often expected to start teaching others once they have reached even a limited level of competence. It has a rich history of resistance in Brazil, which can inspire its students to address social problems in a productive way. It is expressive, as students learn a variety of songs and eventually learn to improvise as they play and sing.

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