

BRIDGING THE GAP

A Study on the Impact of Language Barriers on
Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece

JUNE 2017



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This report was written by Nada Ghandour-Demiri, Senior Project Officer Research at Translators without Borders.

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ABOUT TRANSLATORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Translators without Borders (TWB) envisions a world where knowledge knows no language barriers. The US-based non-profit provides people access to vital knowledge in their language by connecting non-profit organizations with a professional community of volunteer translators, building local language translation capacity, and raising awareness of language barriers. Originally founded in 1993 in France (as Traducteurs sans Frontières), TWB translates millions of words of life-saving and life-changing information a year. In 2013, TWB created the first-ever crisis relief translation service, Words of Relief, which has responded to crises every year since. The organization started responding to the European refugee crisis in 2015, providing much-expanded language services, including rapid translations for partners working in the response; training humanitarians, translators and interpreters (professional and aspiring); setting up a language working group; establishing a humanitarian interpreters' roster; and, conducting research on language and information. TWB's Words of Relief service continues to operate in Greece today.

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Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. In Greece and around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach. We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

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Cover photo courtesy of Translators without Borders.

The cover photos show two drawings from the research game used in this study, in which refugee children indicated the languages in their lives.

Table of Contents

3	Acknowledgements
4	Table of Contents
5	Acronyms and Abbreviations
6	Definitions
7	Executive Summary
9	Introduction
13	Refugee and migrant children's language world
19	Communication challenges experienced by humanitarian aid workers and teachers
25	Bibliography
27	Appendix I: Drawings from first research game activity on daily life in the camp
32	Appendix II: Drawings from second research game activity of body mapping and each child's language world

Acronyms & Abbreviations

CFS	Child-Friendly Space
EU	European Union
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
TWB	Translators without Borders
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Definitions

- Asylum seeker** A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and awaits a decision on his or her application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.¹
- Migrant** A person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his or her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of stay is.²
- Refugee** A person who is outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and unable to return there owing to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity, or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order.³
- Translanguaging** The act performed by multilingual speakers of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential.⁴ The practice of translanguaging allows multilingual users to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system.⁵

¹ IOM, 'Key Migration Terms.' Available at: <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>

² Ibid.

³ UNHCR (2016), 'UNHCR Resettlement Handbook,' December, pp. 81. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/4a2ccf4c6/unhcr-resettlement-handbook-country-chapters.html>

⁴ García, O. (2009), 'Education, multilingualism and translanguaging in the 21st century,' in Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the local, ed. by Ajit Mohanty, Minati Panda, Robert Phillipson, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, pp. 128-145.

⁵ Canagarajah, S. (2011), 'Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging,' The Modern Language Journal 95: 401-417.

Executive Summary

This study analyzes how language affects refugee and migrant children in Greece. It documents children's language journeys since they left their home country and what languages they have learned along the way. The research also explores communication challenges that humanitarian aid workers and teachers face in their daily interactions with these children.

The research was based on a specially designed, participatory activity or game which researchers led with refugee and migrant children. The activity was complemented by interviews with parents, humanitarian aid workers, and teachers. Communication was in **Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani, Farsi, Dari, Greek and English**.

Summary of findings

Language as an asset

The research documents the way in which refugee and migrant children encounter new languages as they cross several countries on their way to Europe. When they arrive in Greece, they often use translanguaging (i.e. a mix of languages) as a way to communicate with children from other backgrounds and interact with adult service providers and others.

Language as an asset

The experience of learning new languages can be empowering and a source of pride, but language support is essential to enable children to develop the communication skills they need in their host country. However, the quality of non-formal and formal education they receive along their journey and in their host community is varied. This is due in part to a lack of preparation and support for teachers on educating children in mixed language groups with little or no proficiency in Greek or English, or children who have experienced war, displacement, and poverty.

A shortage of language support

Humanitarian aid workers and teachers interviewed identified language barriers as one of the main challenges in their work with refugee and migrant children. Findings show that humanitarian aid workers in Greece rely heavily on the assistance of an interpreter or cultural mediator to communicate with refugee and migrant children, but these resources are in short supply, and the interviews suggest that education teams seem to have less access to interpreters or cultural mediators.

Children in adult roles

Children who participated in this study also reported that Greek and English are the main languages spoken when they visit the doctor or hospital. Children are themselves called upon at times to translate

or interpret for family members or peers who do not speak the local language. This can be a matter of concern where the content of the conversation is not appropriate for a child.

Children’s access to information

The research found that at the six camps included in the study, and in the experience of all 22 humanitarian aid workers interviewed, no information was being provided specifically to refugee and migrant children: it was assumed that information provided to parents would be passed on to children. The one exception was unaccompanied and separated children, who often receive information in the form of long and complex written documents inappropriate for their age.

Key recommendations

Language and communication barriers are a two-way phenomenon. They affect refugee and migrant children and their families but also local residents and service providers, teachers, as well as international humanitarian aid and development workers. A number of practical steps could help overcome language and communication barriers and improve programming in the light of these research findings.

- 1
- Relevant authorities should map languages spoken in order to enable service providers to plan to meet needs.

In practice, this means gathering and disseminating information on languages spoken, literacy levels and preferred communication channels, and mapping that against the languages used by service providers.

- 2
- Humanitarian aid workers, teachers, and healthcare professionals working with refugee and migrant children should have the appropriate language skills or support to communicate effectively.

In practice, this means providing them with appropriate communication training, information on the languages of the children in question, language-appropriate teaching aids, suitably skilled interpreters and cultural mediators, and support and resources to promote a culture of inclusion.

- 3
- Anyone who works for an organization coming into contact with children or providing services for children and families, has a responsibility to ensure that essential information is provided in a language and format that children understand. They are also responsible for facilitating child participation in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In practice, this means tailoring information to the age and developmental stage of the child (favoring visual over written content) and providing it in the right language, while also consulting her directly on her experiences. It also implies ensuring that humanitarian aid workers have alternatives to asking children to translate or interpret confidential or potentially distressing information, and know to avoid doing so.

Introduction

1.1. Language and refugee and migrant children in Greece

From 2015 to 2017, Greece has been the gateway to Europe for hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants fleeing war, persecution, violence, and poverty. In 2015, approximately one million people arrived in Greece; a further 176,906⁶ arrived the following year.

While many refugees and migrants continued their journey, tens of thousands have remained in Greece, often because their efforts to reach their intended destination in another country are frustrated. As of March 2017, over 62,000 asylum seekers and other migrants remained in Greece,⁷ an estimated 20,300 of them children.⁸ Currently, the majority live in approximately 50 camps on the islands and the mainland, and the remainder live in other types of temporary accommodation sites, ranging from hotels to squats. A host of service providers try to meet their needs, from local and national authorities to Greek and international humanitarian organizations and volunteer groups.

A striking feature of this humanitarian crisis is the wide range of languages refugee and migrant children speak. Approximately 95 percent of the children who arrived in Greece in 2015 and 2016 came from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran, and speak an array of languages and dialects.⁹ To consult a child on her needs and concerns, service providers have to be able to communicate in her language; they also need to take account of differences in dialect and levels of literacy, and build trust and confidence.

A large number of these children have had interrupted (or no) schooling and the quality of education they have received varies widely. According to Save the Children, on average, refugee children in Greece have been out of school for a year and a half; some have been without formal education for as much as seven years.¹⁰ This level of disruption to learning not only inconveniences and disappoints children,¹¹ it also impacts their safety and wellbeing,¹² and robs them of many of life’s opportunities.¹³ Spending long periods of time out of school can also influence their language and communication skills.¹⁴

⁶ IOM, Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: 2016 Overview, 24 January 2017. Available at: http://migration.iom.int/docs/2016_Flows_to_Europe_Overview.pdf

⁷ IOM, Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overview, March 2017. Available at: http://migration.iom.int/docs/Q1_2017_statistical_Overview.pdf

⁸ UNICEF (2017), Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece - by Region, March. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/55913>

⁹ UNHCR (2016), Men, Women and Children - Trends of Arrivals in Greece, June 2015 - 16 January 2016. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/46726>

UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM (2017), Refugee and Migrant Children - Including Unaccompanied and Separated Children - in the EU: Overview of Trends in 2016. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/55971>

¹⁰ Save the Children (2016), 'Assessment Report: Education Needs Assessment Greece,' May. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/47680>

¹¹ Ressler et al. (2016), Children in War. A guide to the provision of services. New York: UNICEF.

¹² Global Protection Cluster (2015), 'Child Protection and Education in Emergencies.' Available at: <http://educationcluster.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Child-Protection-and-Education-in-Emergencies-Increase-effectiveness.pdf>

¹³ Pliatsikas et al. (2017) Immersive bilingualism reshapes the core of the brain. Brain Structure and Function, 222 (4). pp. 1785-1795.

¹⁴ Trudell (2016), The impact of language policy and practice on children’s learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa. UNICEF. Available

1.2. Research aims

The primary objective of this study is to understand the language barriers refugee and migrant children face, and how these barriers affect their lives. The study sought to trace children’s language journeys from when they left their home to their arrival in Greece, in order to build up a picture of the ways in which language has helped shape their experiences and opportunities. A secondary aim is to identify communication challenges that humanitarian aid workers and teachers face in their interaction with children (especially when they do not speak the same language) and to explore language issues in the transition from non-formal to formal education.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind in Greece. TWB hopes to inform agencies and services supporting refugee and migrant children on the language barriers they are facing and provide useful recommendations on how to tackle these issues.

1.3. Research methodology

Research methods

A thorough initial literature review on sociolinguistics, language politics, and migration informed the study. Researchers also gathered information on the migration crisis and refugee policy, including data factsheets and statistical reports published regularly by international aid organizations and the Greek authorities.

The literature review was followed by field observations and primary data collection. Researchers gathered primary data through a research game (see below) conducted with 25 refugee and migrant children. This was complemented by semi-structured interviews and informal discussions, held with approximately 120 refugee and migrant parents,¹⁵ 22 humanitarian aid workers (Save the Children staff members), nine teachers (from non-formal and formal schools) and a focus group discussion with 30 Greek teachers (from state schools).

Interviews with refugees and migrants in all 51 sites in Greece were beyond the scope of this study. TWB therefore recruited participants among refugees and migrants from various language groups using the haphazard¹⁶ sampling method, and selected other refugees and migrants linked to that initial group (snowball sampling).¹⁷ The research team used the same sampling methods for interviews with humanitarian aid workers and teachers.

¹⁵ The majority of the informal discussions with parents took place as part of a comprehension study TWB conducted with 202 interviewees (of whom 112 were parents who had their children with them in Greece) on the effects of language barriers on adult refugees and migrants in Greece. The comprehension study was conducted in 11 sites around Greece (Schisto camp, Elefsina camp, Orange House, Khora Community Center, Theoxenia Hotel, Soho Hotel, Kara Tepe camp, Olive Grove, and Softex and Nea Kavala camps.) The comprehension study is available at: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/>. In addition, TWB interviewed the parents of eight children who participated in the research game.

¹⁶ Haphazard (or non-probability) sampling is a sampling method that does not follow any systematic way of selecting participants (Bryman 2008, 183).

¹⁷ Snowball or ‘network’ sampling is used “to obtain a sample when there is no adequate list to use as a sampling frame. It is a method for obtaining samples of numerically small groups, such as members of minority ethnic groups” (Gilbert 2008, 179).

As research with children requires particular ethical and methodological care, the methodology was designed in accordance with a “do no harm” approach. Because tracing a child’s linguistic journey since leaving home could trigger distressing memories, qualitative data was gathered through an informal participatory game, as a more careful and playful way to explore children’s language journeys. This data was complemented by informal discussions with parents.

The research game

The research game took place in April 2017 at the camp of Skaramaga, in Save the Children’s Child Friendly Space area. At the time of the research, this camp had the highest population in the region of Attica, with a population of approximately 3,100.¹⁸ It was selected as one of the most diverse camps in terms of countries of origin and languages spoken.¹⁹

The game was implemented with three groups of children aged between seven and 14:

Language	Boys	Girls
Dari	5	3
Kurmanji	5	4
Arabic	5	3
Total	15	10

The game was divided into two activities. In the first activity, children were asked to draw their daily life in the camp, and then note the languages they speak or hear at each point (see Appendix I). In the second activity, children colored in and decorated a life-size outline of their body. The researchers then asked them what languages they speak and what other languages exist in their world, and the children took labels with the names of those languages and stuck them wherever they wanted on their body map (see Appendix II).

During the game, the researcher and game facilitators asked the children questions such as: What language do you say good morning in when you wake up? What languages do you speak when you play with your friends? What languages does the doctor speak? What language do you speak or learn at school?

Profiles of research participants

Fifteen boys and ten girls from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq took part in the research game. Their first languages were Dari, Arabic, Kurmanji, and Sorani.

Researchers interviewed 48 mothers and 64 fathers who had their children with them in Greece. The majority were from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq - the main countries of origin of refugees and migrants in

¹⁸ UNHCR (2017), ‘Greece sites as of April 25.’ Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/56107>

¹⁹ According to UNHCR, on January 31, 2017, it was estimated that the refugees and migrants living in the camp of Skaramaga were primarily from the following countries: Syria (65%), Iraq (25%) and Afghanistan (10%). See UNCHR (2017), Site Profiles - Greece.’ Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/53941>

Greece. The others were from Iran, the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), and Morocco.

Twenty-two humanitarian aid workers were interviewed, 12 of them Greek nationals. Nine teachers were interviewed individually and a further 30 in a focus group discussion, all of them Greek nationals. The other ten humanitarian aid workers interviewed were from other European countries (Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Spain) and the Middle East (Syria, Egypt and Iran).

1.4. Research limitations

The research faced a number of limitations. One is ‘survey fatigue’ among refugees and migrants as a result of recurrent information requests from media and aid organizations, leaving refugees and migrants reluctant to be interviewed again. This limited the quality of responses researchers could obtain from parents.

Five main languages spoken among refugees and migrants supported by TWB’s partner organization Save the Children were selected as the focus of the study: Farsi, Dari, Kurmanji, Sorani, and Arabic. These were also languages in which particular communication difficulties were initially observed by Save the Children in Greece. Owing to a lack of information on the numbers and geographical distribution of speakers of any given language, language selection could not be based on objective statistical prevalence.

In view of the limitations outlined above, this report does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the impact of language barriers on children’s lives and no generalizations can be made. However, the research findings pinpoint a number of important language and communication practices that are relevant to the overall humanitarian situation. This report aims to inform efforts to provide children with access to vital knowledge in their own languages.

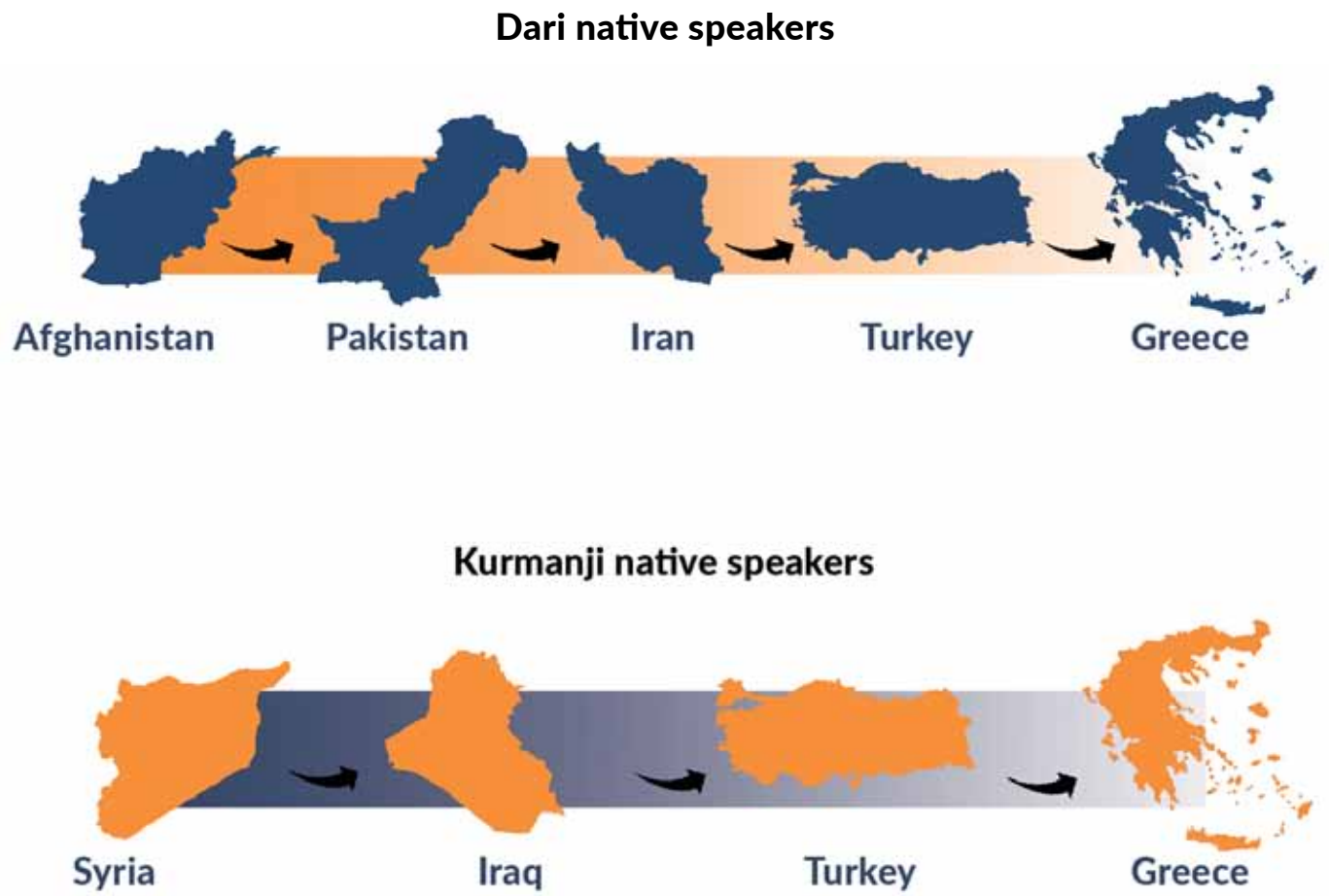
Refugee and migrant children’s language world

2.1. A long and complex language journey to Europe

Refugee and migrant children arriving in Greece have often crossed more than one country on their way. In each of these countries, children would hear not only the official language, but also the languages of other refugees, migrants, and other foreigners they encountered.

For example, an Afghan boy who left Afghanistan with his family two years ago, said that he had crossed five countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and Greece) during his journey to Europe. His mother tongue is Dari, but he is now able to communicate using some words in Urdu, Farsi, Turkish, Greek, and English.

The children who participated in this study broadly took the following routes to Greece:



Sorani native speakers



Arabic native speakers



However, for the majority of the refugee and migrant children, the journey does not end in Greece. They will often cross more countries until their final resettlement destination, spending anywhere from a few days to several months or years in each.²⁰ Sometimes children attend non-formal or state schools on their way to Greece, but from parents' reports the quality of the learning they receive varies widely. Parents are often not obliged to enrol their children in school in refugee camp settings. Some may prefer not to, as the classrooms and composition are often considered by the parents as not ideal for learning and some are not willing to stay in Greece for a long time. Nevertheless, children pick up words in various languages along their way to Europe. For example, a 12-year-old Kurdish boy from Syria, whose mother tongue is Kurmanji, told the researchers in perfect Arabic how he had learned Turkish over the past four years while in Turkey with his family before coming to Greece.

“For the past four years I was living in Turkey and learned how to speak and write Turkish.”

12-year-old Kurdish boy from Syria, mother tongue Kurmanji, speaking in Arabic

²⁰ UNHCR (2017), 'Desperate journeys: refugees and migrants entering and crossing Europe via the Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes.' Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/58b449f54>

2.2. Translanguaging in a refugee camp setting

In the current migration situation in Greece, it is common for refugee and migrant children to speak a mixture of languages. Apart from their mother tongue, which they speak fluently but cannot always read or write, the children have learned words in many other languages. However, often the children have not learned these languages in a systematic way, and can use only certain words.

All humanitarian aid workers and teachers interviewed confirmed that children use a combination of words in various languages to express themselves. This practice of shifting between languages is known as translanguaging,²¹ and it can have several explanations in the refugee camp setting in Greece. One is that the people with whom a child interacts most (humanitarian aid workers, teachers, and other children) do not understand the child's mother tongue. As interpreters and cultural mediators are often not available, children have to learn and use words in other languages to communicate. Another reason is that in a camp environment, key words of certain features of daily life, such as “play” and “doctor,” are commonly referred to in English or Greek.

However, children are not the only translanguaging users. Humanitarian aid workers and teachers who interact on a daily basis with these children and do not speak the children's mother tongue, have also started using a mixture of languages. While almost none of the humanitarian aid workers and teachers interviewed speak a third language in addition to Greek and English, they have all learned a few words in Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Kurmanji and/or Sorani to communicate better with the children. For example, in one of the camps in the region of Attica, refugee and migrant children will spend five minutes at the end of their Greek class teaching their teachers some words in their own languages. Humanitarian aid workers and teachers have come to know words and phrases such as “good morning”, “how are you?”, “good”, “bad”, “school”, “sick”, and “hungry” in various languages. This not only improves the communication with the children and their families, but, as observed in the study, builds trust and respect.

2.3. The polyglot life of a refugee child in Greece

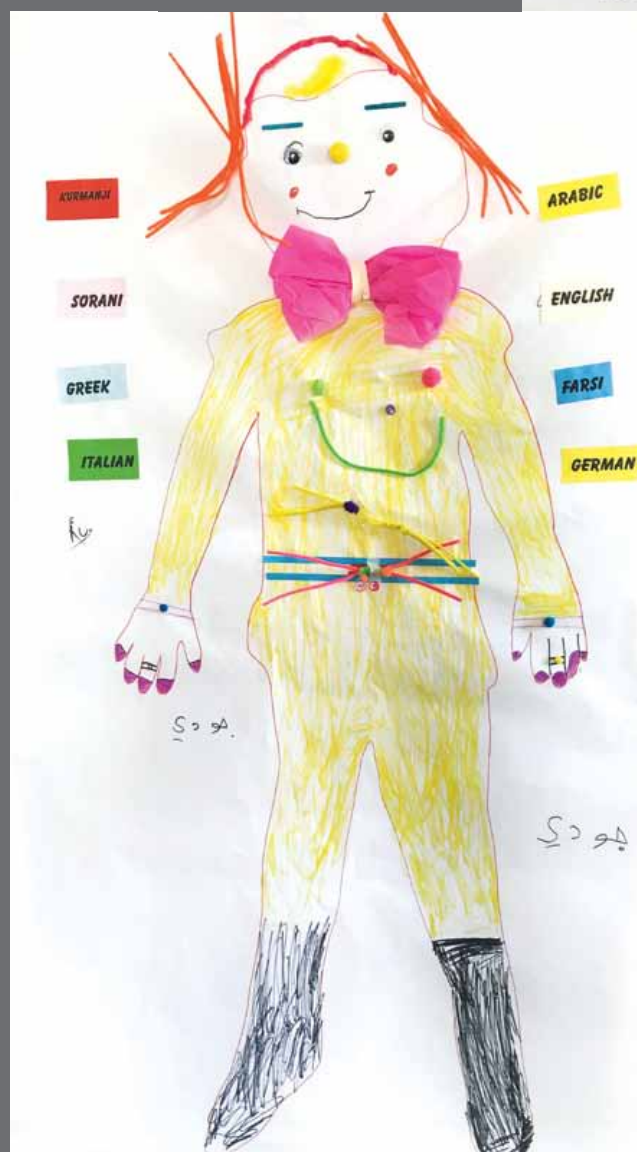
The research highlights that refugee and migrant children in Greece, particularly those living in sites with mixed populations, are exposed to a diversity of languages in their daily lives (see Figures 1 and 2, and Appendix II). The children's drawings and discussions with them during the game, indicate that a typical day in the life of a child in Skaramaga camp would include the following activities: waking up and having breakfast with the family; queueing for food; playing outdoors with other children; having lunch with the family; going to school; listening to music; using a smartphone; and sometimes going to the doctor or to the hospital.

As the drawing in Figure 3 (and those in Appendix I) show, each activity is associated with a number of different languages. During activities associated with the family (e.g. waking up or eating), the children would speak in their mother tongue. During play and leisure time, the children would use their mother tongue but also other languages predominant in the camp. At school they speak mainly Greek and English. At the doctor's or at hospital, Greek and English are also the main languages spoken, but Arabic translators are sometimes available.

²¹ García, O. 2009. 'Education, multilingualism and translanguaging in the 21st century.' In *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the local*, ed. by Ajit Mohanty, Minati Panda, Robert Phillipson, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan (former Orient Longman), pp. 128-145.

FIGURES 1 & 2
Drawings by an Afghan girl (left) and a Kurdish girl from Syria (right) showing the languages they speak and hear in their daily lives.

FIGURE 3
Drawing by Kurdish children of daily life in the camp and the languages associated with each activity.



Skaramaga camp is small and tends to stick together. In contrast, Arab and Kurdish children are more likely to play together. This is largely because the Kurds, whose first language is Kurmanji or Sorani,²² have lived in an Arab country, such as Syria or Iraq, and have learned some Arabic. When two children have no knowledge of each other's mother tongue, they tend to use English and Greek words, or translanguaging, to communicate.

For example, in a shelter in Athens, two six-year-old girls, one Afghan and one Iraqi, were playing together using translanguaging. One researcher asked them what languages they knew. The Iraqi girl said shyly, "I speak Arabic, and a bit of English and Greek." The Afghan girl said with enthusiasm "I speak Dari, English, Greek, and Arabic! But my friend [the Iraqi girl] doesn't speak Dari." The researcher then asked the Afghan girl where she learned Arabic, and she said, "In the camp where I was living and here in the shelter, while playing with my friends."

2.4. The power of language - for better or worse

Language barriers can have both devastating and empowering effects on a child's life. A psychologist working with refugee and migrant children in Attica described how being unable to communicate in a language they understand can have distressing and harmful effects on a child. This can result in missing important pieces of information, and being unable to ask for help and express their needs and feelings, to feeling marginalized and neglected and facing exposure to increased risks.²³ For example,

This highlights both the importance of the mother tongue in a child's life and the fact that essential services such as health care and education are not provided in the languages refugee and migrant children understand best.

While children tend to socialize mostly within their own ethnic group, they also sometimes play and interact with children whose mother tongues are different. For example, Afghan children will mostly play together, communicating in their first language, Dari. The Afghan community in

in a shelter housing unaccompanied refugee and migrant children in the region, the situation of a traumatized Kurdish boy of 11 was aggravated because there were no Sorani translators available and the psychologist could not communicate with him. None of the other staff or children at the shelter spoke Sorani, and the boy could not speak any other language. The psychologist reported that, as a result, his health deteriorated and he felt increasingly marginalized.

Another example, described by a teacher, was the case of a young girl from Syria who swallowed the pin of her headscarf and could not explain to her Greek teachers at school what was happening to her. Teachers reported that it was often the case that children could not explain where they were hurting in a language other than their mother tongue, and it was difficult to understand and hence take the necessary measures for the child.

Yet children can also be empowered by having the chance to learn new languages and communicate with others. The children who took part in the research game expressed enthusiasm and pride in their ability to speak even a few words in another language. A nine-year-old Kurdish girl from Iraq looked at her complete body map with all the language tags and said proudly: "I can't speak any of these languages, but I understand all of them!"

As professional interpreters are not readily available, children frequently translate or interpret for family members and their peers. One 13-year-old Afghan boy described to researchers how, on his first day at the state school, the Greek teacher asked him to help her translate from English for his Afghan classmates. This is a common phenomenon among refugee and migrant populations in various countries.²⁴ Despite the fact that many children felt proud to be able to interpret for their parents, adults have a responsibility to analyze this power dynamic carefully to ensure they are not creating a stressful and exploitative environment for vulnerable children. Interpreting is a difficult skill and should be resourced appropriately through professional, paid cultural mediators. This is especially important when the content of what is discussed may be confidential, or distressing for a child.

²⁴ University College London (2016), 'Child Language Brokering: Understanding the lives of young translators and interpreters.' Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research/featured-research/child-language-brokering>

Communication challenges experienced by humanitarian aid workers and teachers

Language and communication barriers are a two-way experience. In Greece, interviews revealed that language and communication impact not only refugee and migrant children, but also the local residents, humanitarian aid workers, and teachers who interact with them. Humanitarian aid workers and teachers must understand these language barriers in order to better overcome them.

Since the beginning of the crisis, NGOs, universities, and grassroots organizations have implemented both non-formal and informal education initiatives for refugee and migrant children.²⁵

Formal education for refugee and migrant children in Greece began in October 2016. As of February 2017, the program of the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs was open only to children on the mainland between the ages of four and 15.²⁶ Of the 20,300 migrant children in Greece, only 2,500 are attending formal education.²⁷

Interviews with humanitarian aid workers and teachers in Greece found that:

- The majority of the humanitarian aid workers and teachers interviewed do not speak any of the mother tongues of the refugee and migrant population, and they work primarily in English and Greek. However, as English is not a prerequisite for working in Greek state schools, not all Greek teachers speak English.
- The humanitarian aid workers interviewed largely rely on interpreters or cultural mediators to communicate with refugees and migrants. However, as this assistance is not always available, they have to find other ways to communicate with the children they aim to support. No interpreters or cultural mediators are available in the Greek state schools to support with lesson preparation, etc.
- As interpreters and cultural mediators are in short supply, particularly in the education sector, humanitarian aid workers often "borrow" an interpreter from another team or organization, particularly in an emergency, or ask the help of an English-speaking refugee or migrant, who is sometimes a child.

²⁵ According to Save the Children (2016), non-formal education is "any organized educational activity outside the established formal system that has learning objectives and outcomes." Informal education is the "lifelong process where individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from daily experiences and educational influences and resources in their environment."
²⁶ Greek Ministry of Education Research and Religious Affairs (2017), 'The Information on Access to Education for Refugee Children.' Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/56002>
²⁷ UNHCHR (2017), 'Refugee and migrant children in Greece,' March 31. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/56000>

●	Teachers from Greek state schools who were interviewed said that they have not received any training on how to interact with children who might have experienced war, displacement, or poverty, or with children who speak different languages from those taught at school. They often fall back on an online translation tool or extensive use of mime and gesture to aid communications with children from the refugee and migrant community.
●	Humanitarian aid workers and teachers often lack sufficient knowledge about the origin of and the nuances among certain languages. For example, at least 20 of the 31 interviewed thought that there was one Kurdish language and that, therefore, all Kurds could understand each other.
●	In Skaramaga, Schisto, Elefsina, Kara Tepe, Nea Kavala, and Softex camps, the researchers observed that, apart from the class schedule, which was usually available in English and the most dominant languages in a camp (e.g. Farsi and Arabic), no other written informational material was provided specifically for children. All 22 humanitarian aid workers interviewed confirmed that was the case at those sites, several suggesting this was due to a common perception that it is sufficient to inform parents. Only unaccompanied children are provided with written information, and that is often long and complex.
●	The way in which schooling for refugee and migrant children is organized, often for lack of resources, can add to the communication challenges. Pupils from a range of countries, speaking diverse first languages and spanning a wide range of ages, are sometimes grouped together in one class.
●	While humanitarian aid workers working in a specific site often know a child's family and the background, the teachers in Greek state schools interviewed reported having no information on their pupils' backgrounds.
●	The biggest communication challenge humanitarian aid workers and teachers face is related to resolving disputes among children, disciplining them, engaging them with storytelling, and explaining complex situations or concepts such as respect or care.
●	Humanitarian aid workers and teachers observed that children of minority languages (especially when unaccompanied) are more likely to feel marginalized. ²⁸ This tallies with findings from the research that children from minority language groups are more likely to socialise within those groups rather than more widely.
●	Interviewees stressed the importance of trust in interacting and communicating with children. One humanitarian aid worker responsible for a Child Friendly Space in a camp in Greece said that although she does not speak the children's mother tongues, she prefers not to have an interpreter at all rather than to have a different interpreter once a week or once every two weeks, as the children do not feel comfortable with strangers and it hinders the educator's work.

²⁸ See also World Inequality Database on Education, UNESCO. Available at: <http://www.education-inequalities.org>

Interviewees highlighted a number of language issues in the transition from non-formal to formal education:

●	Mother tongue education for refugees and migrants is rarely provided in either non-formal or formal state school systems.
●	Formal education in Greece is primarily offered in Greek. However, some refugee and migrant families who want to leave Greece prefer not to send their children to school, as they feel Greek will be not useful to them in the future.
●	The education content in non-formal and state schools is not consistent between various organizations and grassroots initiatives.
●	According to parents, humanitarian aid workers, and teachers interviewed, children are usually very enthusiastic about going to state schools. But sometimes they are upset because they are put in advanced Greek classes, which they cannot understand. This impacts their confidence, making them feel incompetent; as a result they often drop out of school. ²⁹ For example, one humanitarian aid worker in the north of Greece said that whereas in the first days of the formal education program all the buses taking refugee and migrant children to the state schools were full, it is now (in March 2017) considered a success if five children get on the bus each day.
●	Some children fall behind in their studies not for lack of ability but because of repeated changes in the language of instruction since leaving their home country. ³⁰

²⁹ UNICEF and REACH (2017), 'Perception of Access to Basic Services by Refugee and Migrant Children outside Accommodation Sites,' April. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/ceecis/REACH_GRE_Situation_Overview_Access_to_services_off_site_final_v6.pdf

³⁰ See Reale D. (2008), 'Away from home: Protecting and supporting children on the move, Save the Children UK,' Save the Children. Available at: https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Away_from_Home_LR_1.pdf

Conclusion

The study found that refugee and migrant children in Greece have learned a host of languages over the course of their journeys to Europe. Their education levels vary widely, as do the languages and accents they speak on arrival. Once in Greece, they use a mixture of languages and often “translanguage” to communicate with other children, humanitarian aid workers, and teachers. Nevertheless, the children feel more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue, even if they did not have the chance to study it at school.

Effective communication with refugee and migrant children was identified by humanitarian aid workers and teachers interviewed as one of the most important challenges in their work. Humanitarian aid workers, teachers, and health professionals have to develop new ways to provide children with information and support. In addition, children who cannot communicate in Greek or English are more vulnerable in a situation where interpreters are often not available, particularly in the education and healthcare sectors.

Children are empowered by learning new languages and cultures. Apart from the feeling of pride and enthusiasm about their ability to communicate in different languages, learning languages will contribute to their cognitive development, and increase their life chances.³¹

However, language barriers can also have detrimental effects on a child’s life. An inability to communicate and express oneself in a given language can affect academic performance, health, security, and wellbeing. Moreover, it can affect the child’s socialization and increase the chances of marginalization.

Language can empower and it can exclude. Recognizing the integral role language plays in a refugee’s life, especially among multilingual refugee and migrant children, should be a priority for aid organizations and government authorities. Humanitarian aid workers, teachers, and health professionals who interact with refugee and migrant children need to have the appropriate skills and language support to communicate effectively.

Key recommendations

Language and communication barriers are a two-way phenomenon. They affect refugee and migrant children and their families, but also local residents and service providers, teachers, international humanitarian aid and development workers, and even volunteers.

Below are a number of practical steps that could help overcome language and communication barriers and improve programming in the light of these research findings.

1. Relevant authorities should openly map written and spoken languages in order to enable service providers to better meet needs.

In practice, this means:

- Gather data on written and spoken languages; distribute among all those providing services to refugees and migrants (humanitarian aid and development workers, volunteers, local services, etc.).
- Gather and disseminate data on levels of literacy, and preferred communication media (e.g. smartphone use, languages spoken and read).
- Gather and disseminate data on preferred format of communication (e.g. written, verbal or audio-visual).

2. Humanitarian aid workers, teachers, and health care professionals working with refugee and migrant children should have the appropriate language skills or support to communicate effectively.

In practice, for aid organizations and health and education service providers, this means:

- Recognize and support the critical role of the interpreter in communications.
- Ensure interpreters and cultural mediators are trained and chosen to best suit the situation in which they are working (for example, with health or protection knowledge) and the person for whom they are interpreting (for example, a young woman interpreter for a girl).
- Provide specific training for humanitarian aid workers, teachers, healthcare professionals, and others on communication challenges and strategies when working with children and families who do not necessarily speak, understand, or read the working languages of the camp or host country (Greek and English, in this instance).
- Brief those working with refugee and migrant populations on the origin and nuances of different languages, to counter fundamental misconceptions identified in the study.
- Train those working with refugee and migrant populations on non-verbal communication skills. Where potential good practice and communication strategies are being developed, gather “lessons learned” and use it to train others.
- Provide essential vocabulary “crib sheets,” in the form of posters displayed in prominent places e.g. in a doctor’s waiting room or in the classroom. These should convey a key word or concept, “doctor,” visually and then in written form. Where the language in question uses a non-Latin alphabet, the word should be spelled phonetically.
- Understand the implications of large refugee and migrant influxes for the Greek education system and for local children. Seek extra teaching support and resources where possible, and provide language guidance to teachers; consider networking teachers to help them share ideas from their classrooms. Promote a positive and inclusive approach among staff. (How can we learn from new arrivals and what can we share with them?)

³¹ Pliatsikas et al. (2017), ‘Immersive bilingualism reshapes the core of the brain,’ Brain Structure and Function, 222 (4): 1785-1795.

3. Anyone who works for an organization coming into contact with children or providing services for children and families has a responsibility to ensure that essential information is provided in a language and format that children understand, and to facilitate child participation. This is the case even if they are not specifically in a “child protection” or “education” role.

This study found that, at the six camps included in the study and in the experience of all 22 humanitarian aid workers interviewed, no information was being provided specifically to refugee and migrant children: instead it was assumed that information provided to parents would be passed on to children. The one exception was unaccompanied and separated children, who often receive information in the form of long and complex written documents inappropriate for their age.

Child participation is a guiding principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),³² and it supports the fulfilment of a range of other fundamental rights: to health, to education, and to life, among others. Child participation is a vital way of ensuring accountability and effectiveness for humanitarian actors and associates. The UNCRC includes a variety of communication rights, including to free speech and to information; to privacy; to cultural identity and freedom of thought, religion and belief. Communication efforts need to respect children’s privacy and dignity and to foster self-esteem and confidence.

In practice, this means:	
●	Information should be provided in a format that is appropriate to the child’s age and developmental stage.
●	Do not assume that a person who converses easily in a language will also understand written information in that language.
●	As a general rule, keep written information to a minimum. Privilege visual communication (cartoons, posters, etc.).
●	Children often learn languages more quickly than adults, and are commonly called upon to act as translators or interpreters for older family members. Humanitarian aid workers, teachers, and healthcare staff should be mindful of this “language broker” role. While a child’s role as translator/ interpreter should be celebrated as a skill and a source of pride, she should not be called upon to translate confidential or potentially distressing information (for example in a healthcare setting).
●	Children know their daily realities better than any humanitarian aid worker ever can. Diverse experiences show the value of consulting children and young people of all ages. Not only does this give them an opportunity to tell of the fears, pressures, and injustices they face, but it enables them to develop solutions to improve their lives. Seek children’s input and advice on programming wherever possible. ³³

³² UN (1989), Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

³³ Further reading on Communicating with Children:
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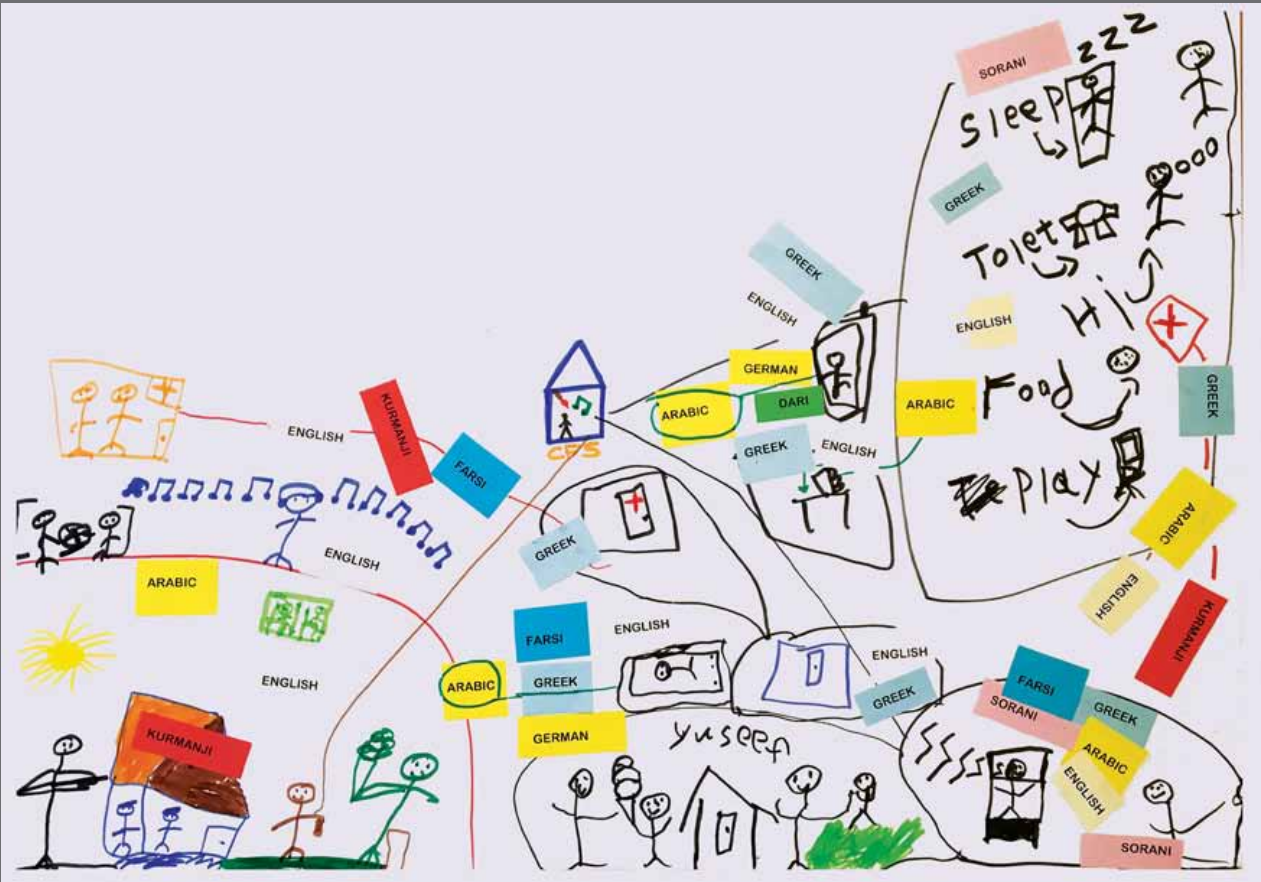
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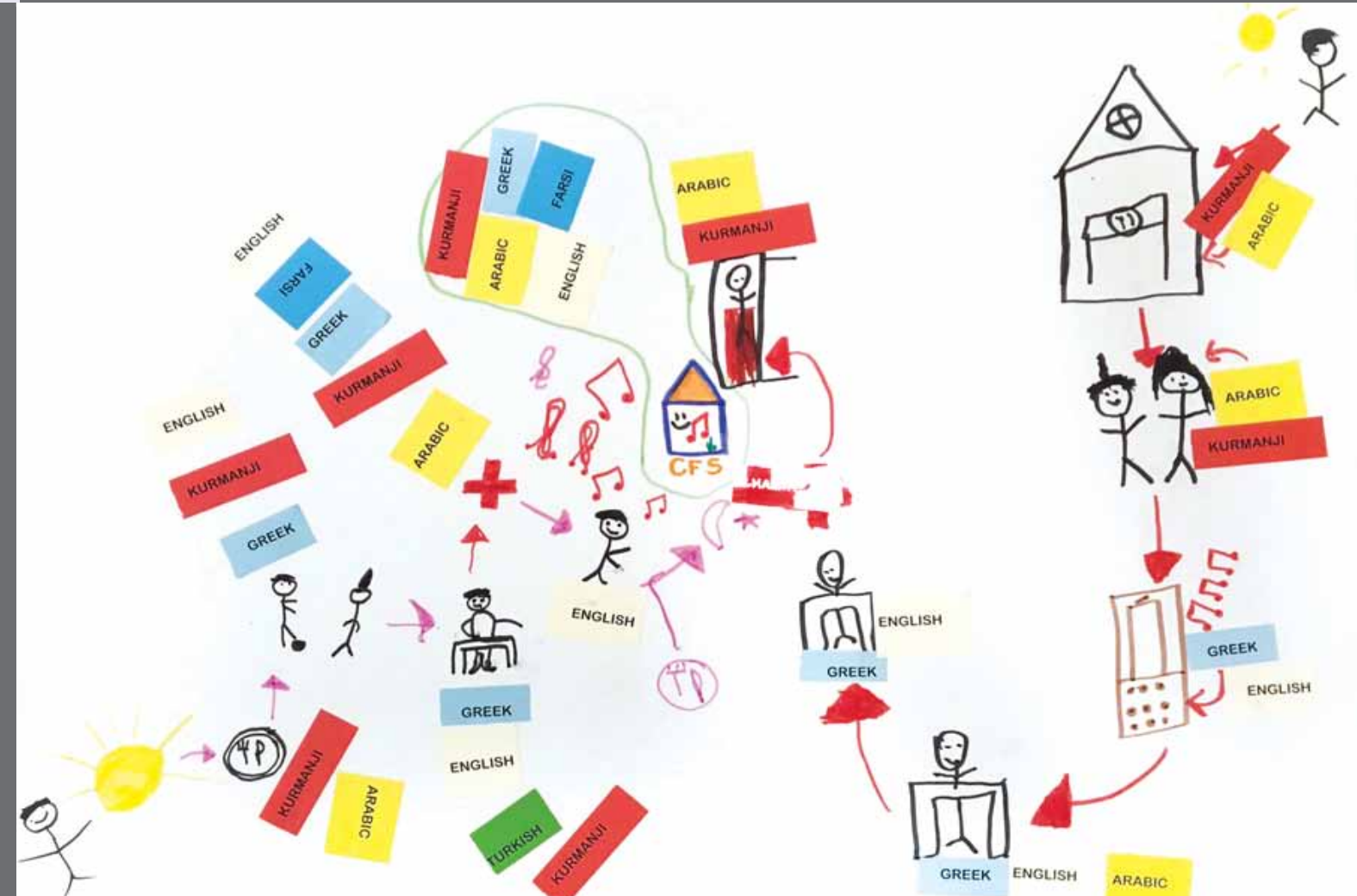
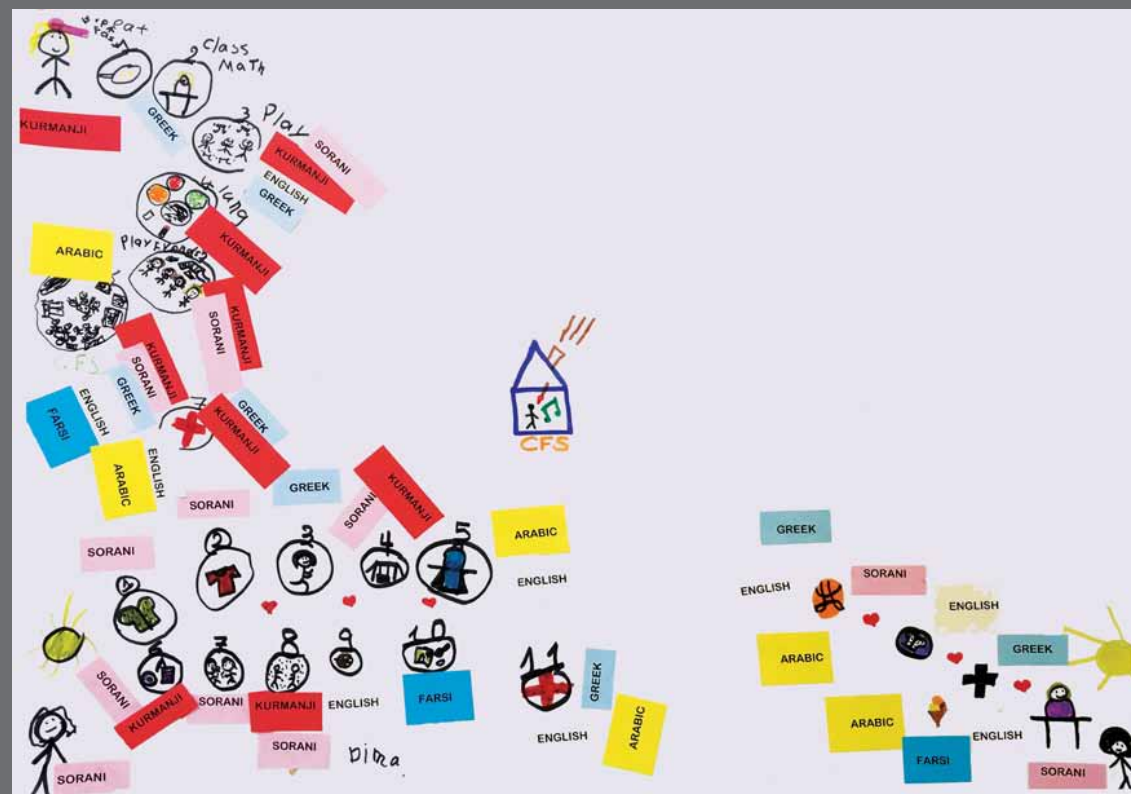
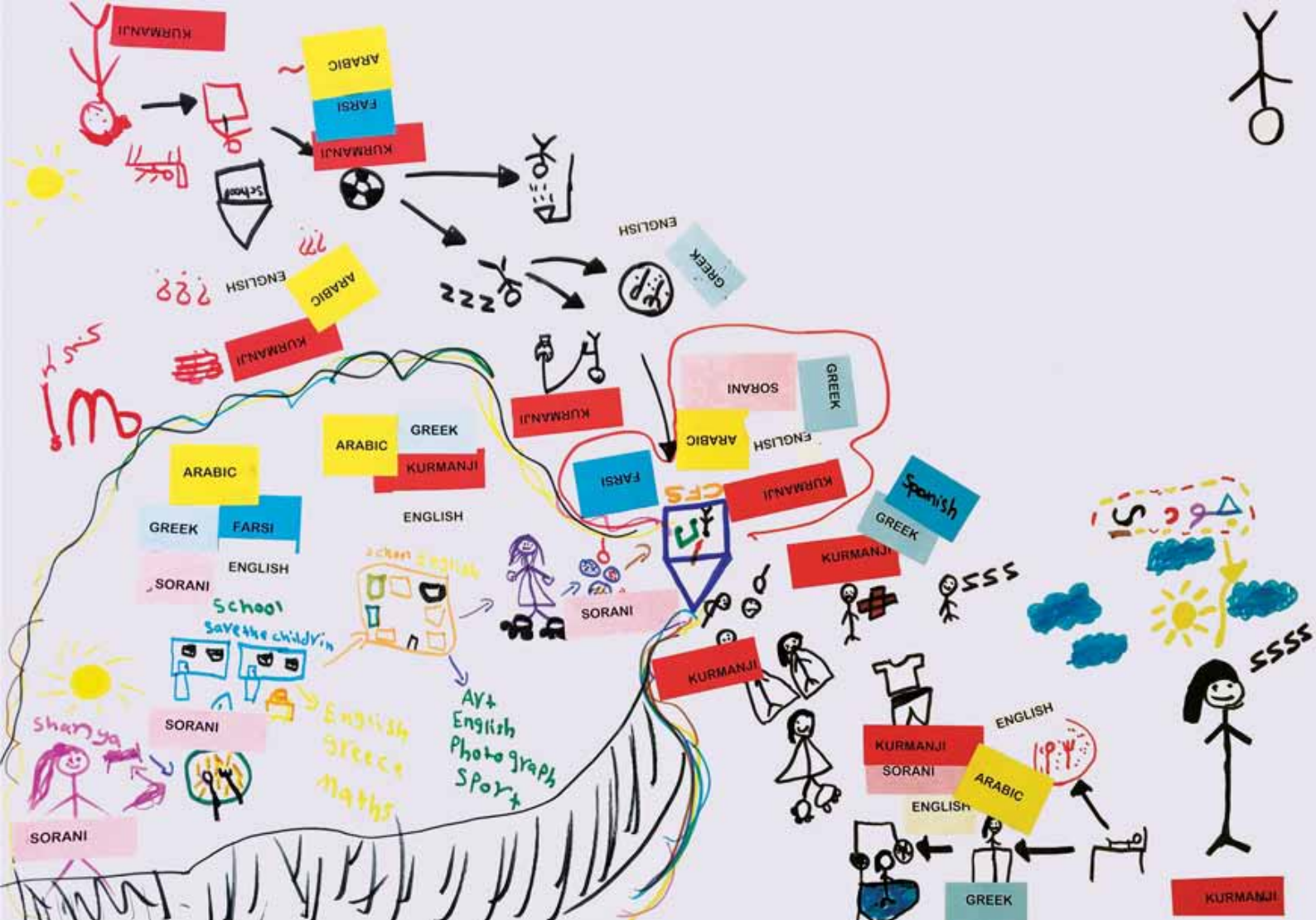
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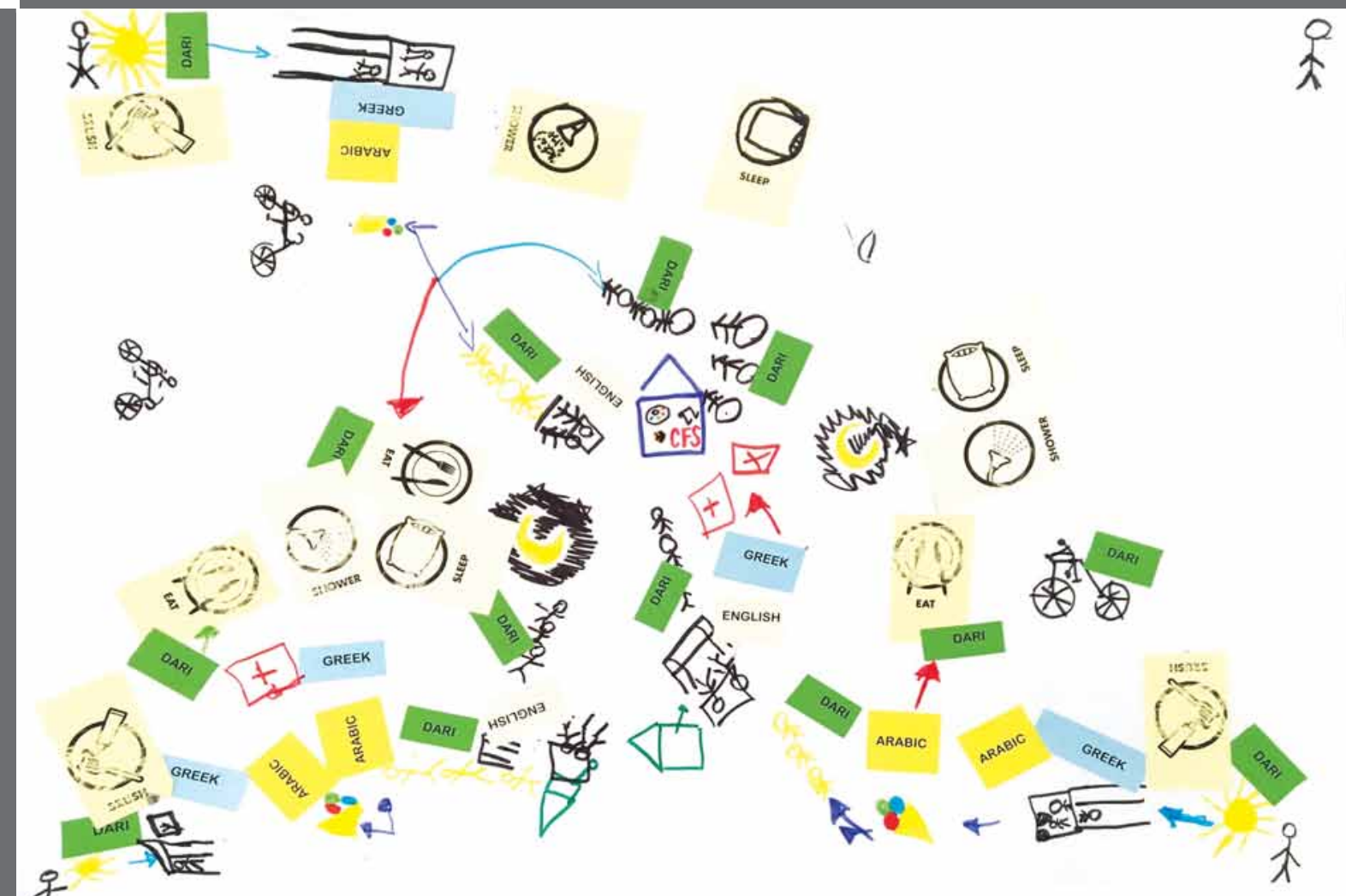
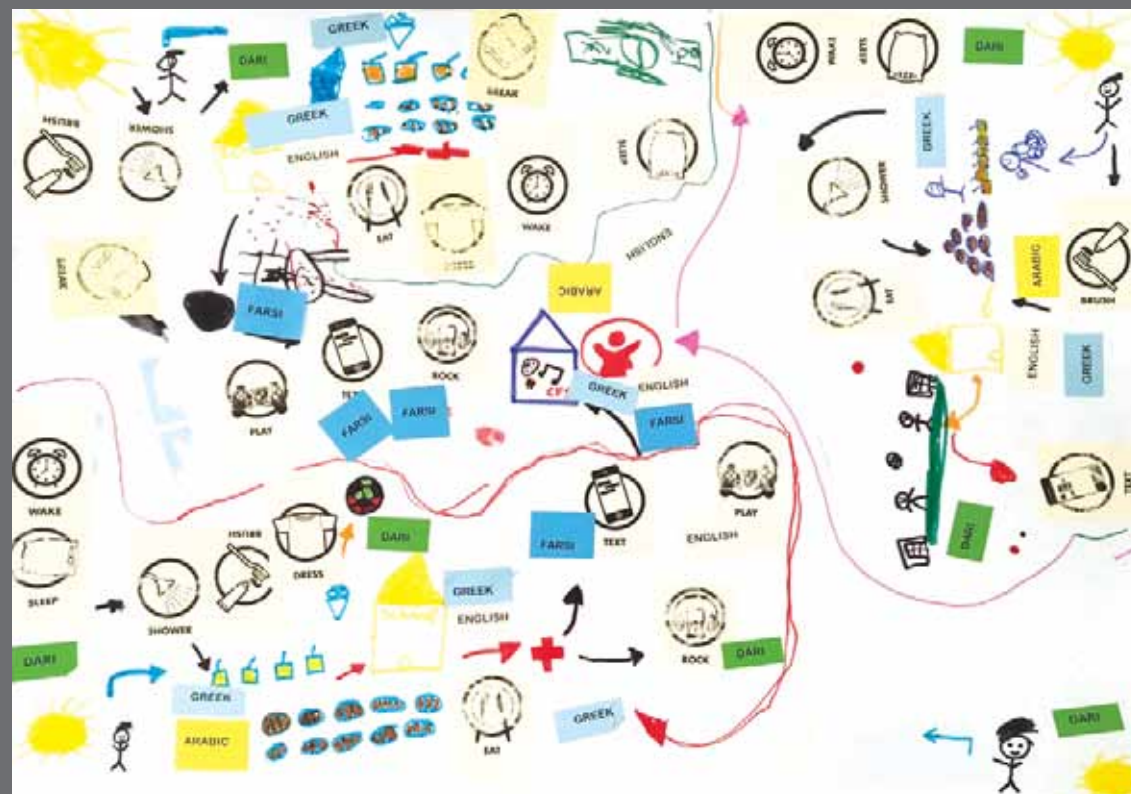
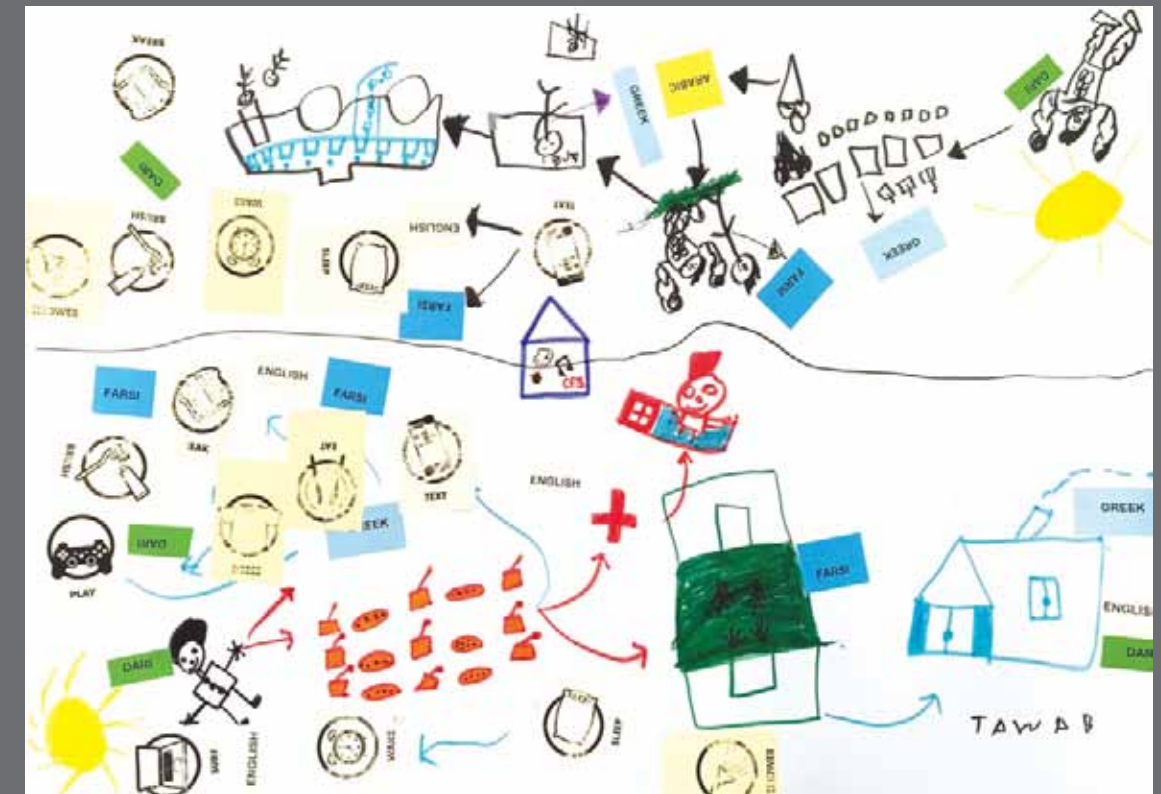
Appendix I

Drawings from first research game activity on daily life in the camp

In the first activity, the children had to draw their daily life in the camp. All children started by drawing themselves in one corner of the cardboard, then they drew various activities, such as waking up, brushing their teeth, queuing for food, taking the bus to school, learning at school, playing with their friends in the camp, going to the doctor, having dinner, listening to music, playing on mobiles, watching TV and more. The final point was the CFS (a small blue house - as the CFS in Skaramaga camp is inside a blue metallic structure) that the facilitator had already drawn in the middle of the cardboard. Then the children took labels with the names of various languages (in English) and stuck them next to the activities during which they usually speak or hear these languages.





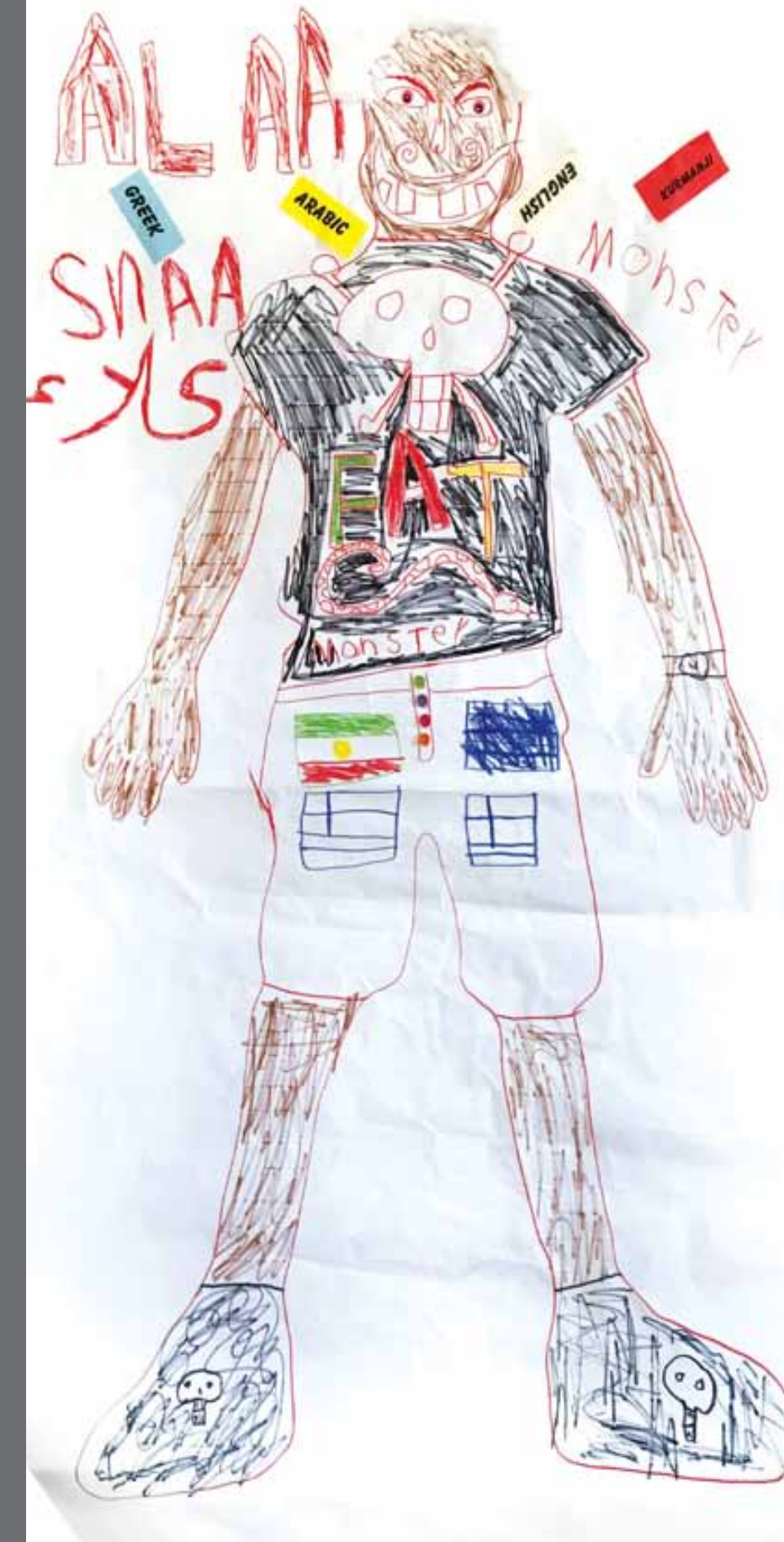
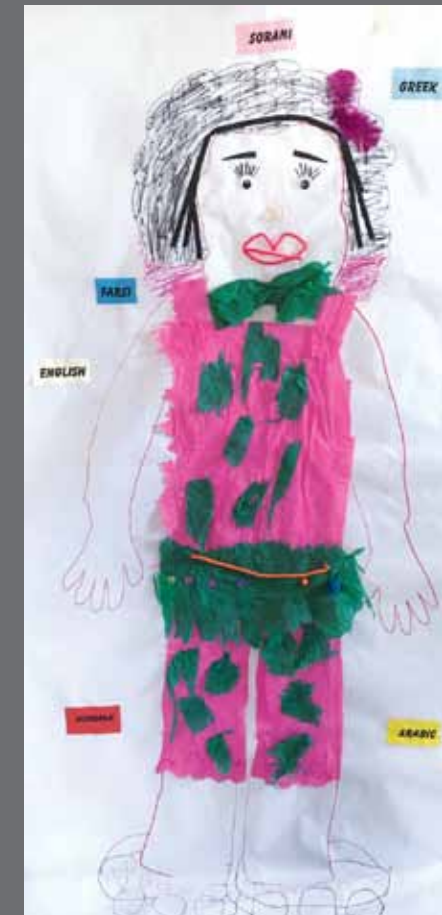


Appendix II

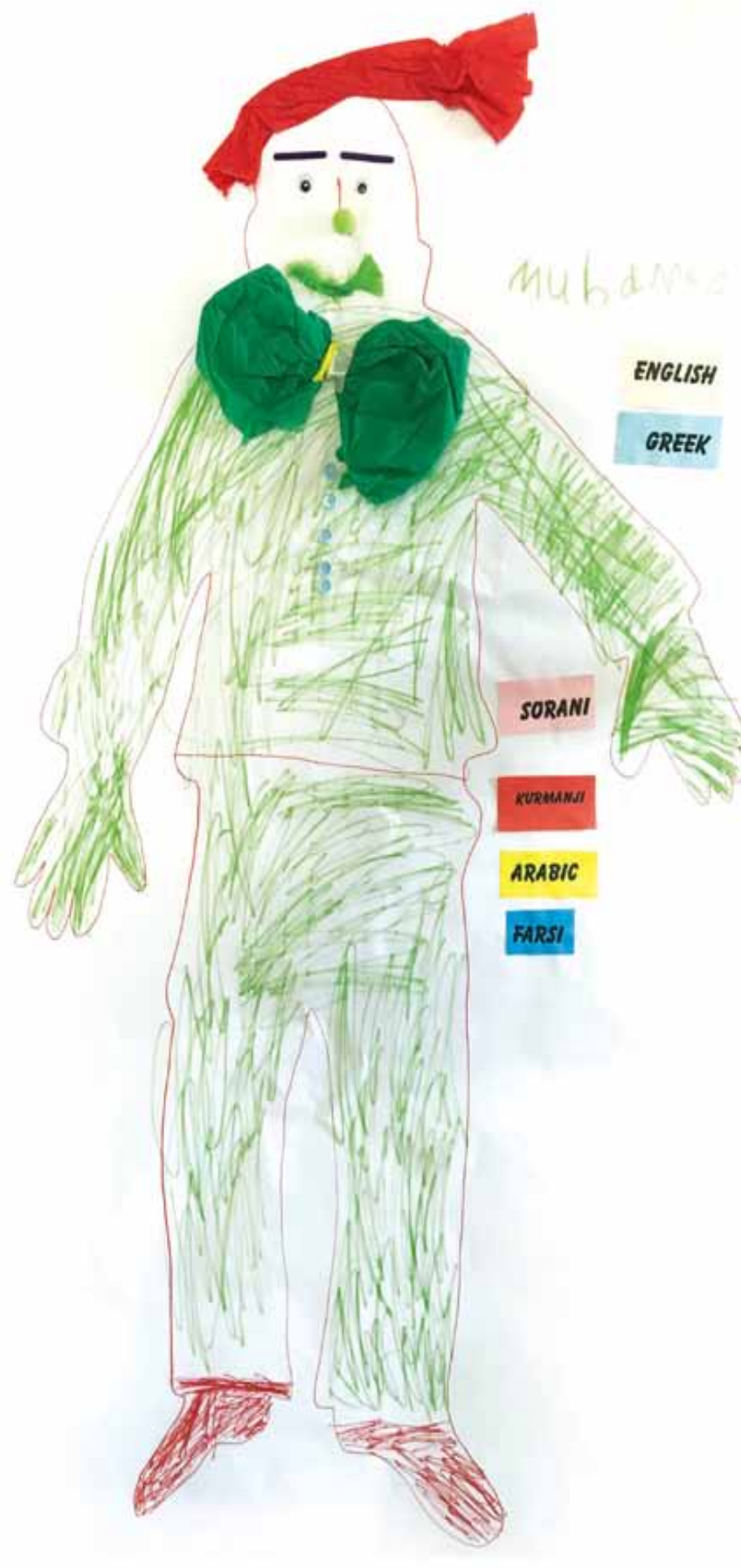
Drawings from second research game activity of body mapping and each child's language world

In the second activity, the Save the Children animator drew a real size outline of each child's body; it was then hung on a wall and the child colored and decorated the outline. The researchers then asked the children what languages they speak and what other languages exist in their world, and the children took labels with the names of those languages (in English) and stuck them wherever they wanted on their body maps.

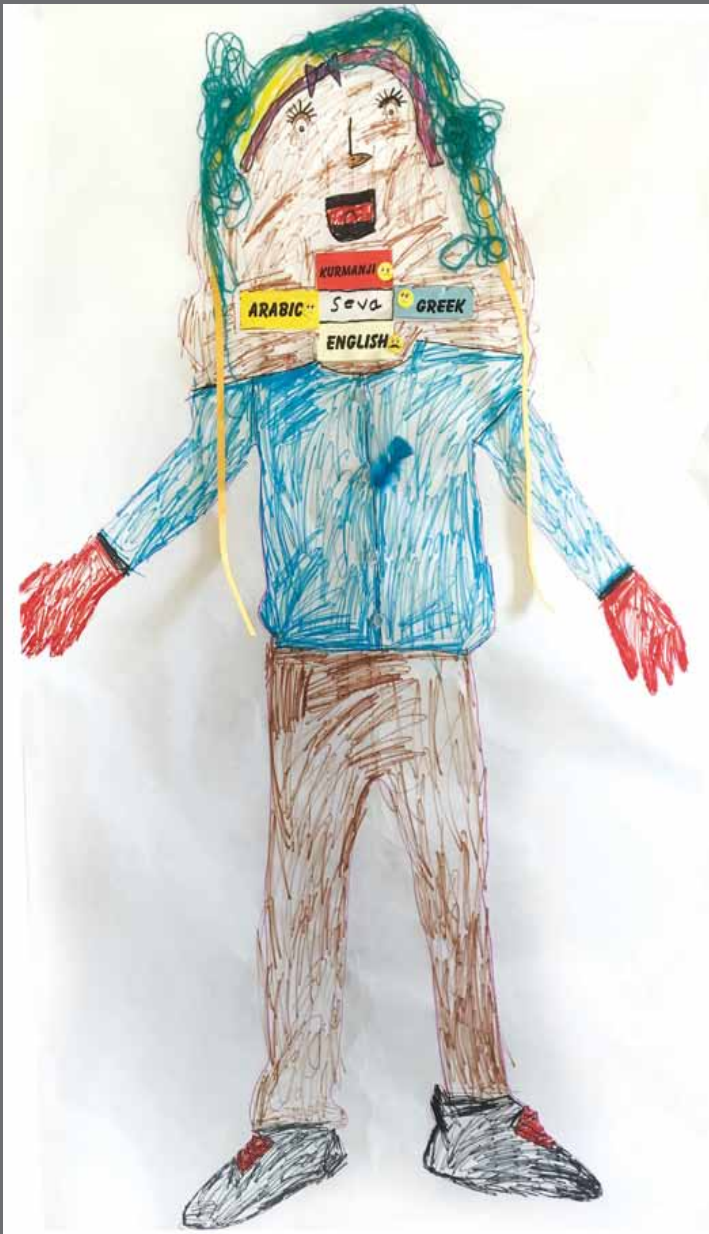
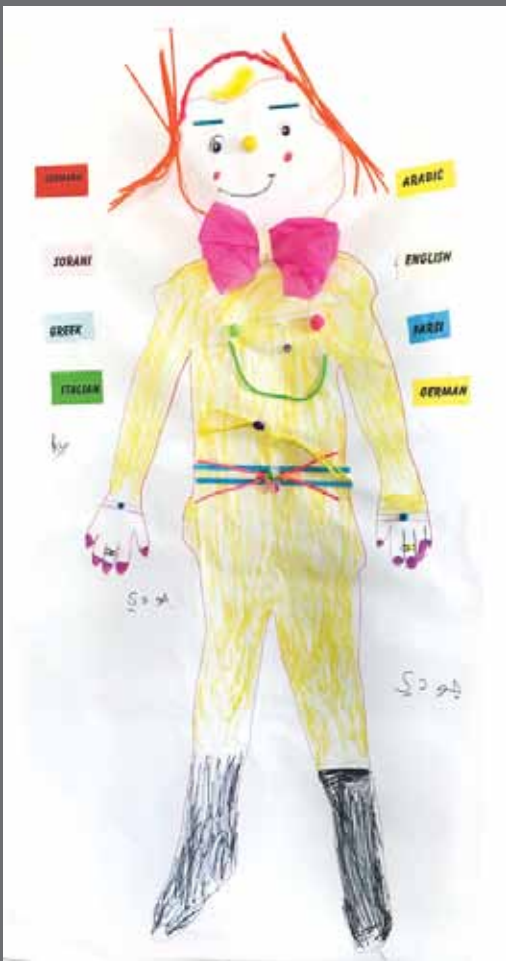
Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani) Speaking Children's Group

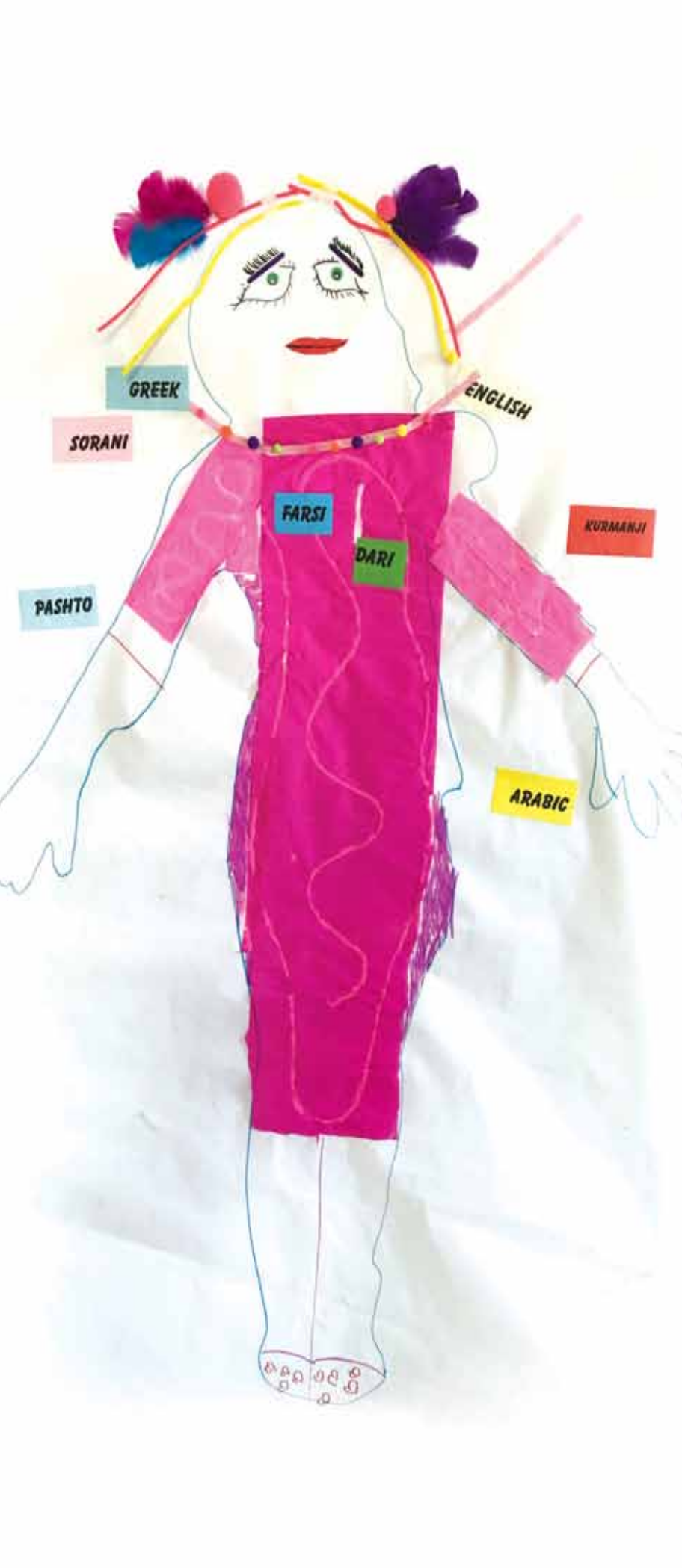
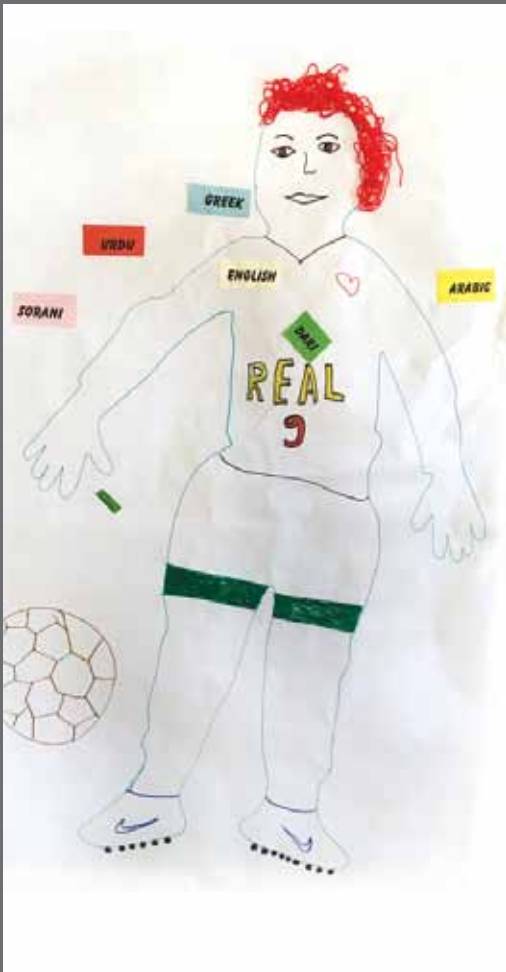


Kurdish Speaking Children's Group



Arabic Speaking Children's Group

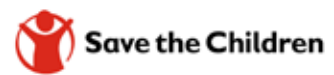




The study was carried out as part of TWB's Words of Relief crisis relief program in Greece. The complete study, and other research products, such as the language factsheets, are available at: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/about-us/resources/>



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