

The power of storytelling to nurture a sense of belonging for displaced students

EiE Community Monthly Call | 20 June, 2023

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Staff, alumni and participants from across the Teach For All network come together regularly to share ideas, solutions and resources to support students and communities impacted by emergency situations. If you'd like to become a Member of the EiE Community and receive invites for future calls, please complete this [short form](#)!

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INSIGHTS ON CREATIVE STORYTELLING



The Power of Storytelling

[Leah Juelke](#) and [Jessica Lander](#), two Global Teacher Prize Finalists, shared with us how they use storytelling to empower their immigrant-origin or refugee students. They reflected on how all students have a need to express themselves, and by finding ways for students to feel comfortable to do this, teachers are better able to understand their needs, their personalities, their personal histories, and their lived experience of crises. Storytelling helps teachers to teach their students more effectively, and makes learning more enjoyable for all.



Creative Ways To Share Stories

They explained three examples of how they've supported immigrant-origin students to share their stories. Firstly, Jessica's [We Are America](#) project, which has now expanded to across 25 USA states. Teachers work with their students to grapple with what it means to belong, and their role in redefining what it means to be 'American'. Students dive into their personal histories and choose one story of self, which they then draft and edit. The stories are published in a book, and they then go and share their stories out into their communities - for example by speaking at local universities or on radio programs. This project is now co-run by Jessica's former students - a powerful example of how students are leading a national effort to help others claim their identity as Americans.

Secondly, Leah's [Journey to America](#) project, where for the last seven years she has supported her students to share their stories of how they arrived to the USA, what they experienced before and during their migration journey, and their reactions upon arriving. Her students are in charge of their stories, so they write whatever they want to focus on - some choose to start their story when they first landed in Fargo and saw the snowy airport, and others choose to reflect on their home country and reasons for displacement. They are encouraged to include some poetry elements, and they also visit art museums to help them paint a scene from their story. Their stories are published in a book and sent out across the USA and different countries abroad. The project ends with a public-speaking unit, where the students read out their stories during celebration events in local universities.

Leah also shared with us the [Greencard Voices](#) project, where her students are supported to verbally share their stories, taking away the pressure to write them down. A recording studio comes into her school for one week and the audio is then transcribed. The stories are then shared across different venues, including the US Senate, radio programmes and conferences. The key objective of this project is to use storytelling to foster empathy, empowerment and engagement with newcomer communities.



Using Tastebuds to Celebrate Diversity

Jessica teaches history and civics, and uses food as a tool for her immigrant-origin students to see their histories as now part of America's DNA. Each student chooses their favourite family meal, and finds ways to record down this recipe, for example by interviewing their grandparents who are overseas. They then need to translate the recipe into English and write a story about that dish, perhaps tied to their childhood memories of the food, or how it's eaten on certain holidays. As part of this story they can also choose to share their migration story.

The project culminates in them all bringing in their different dishes for everyone to try - quite a feast given her students are from over 30 countries. They take photos of each dish, and their recipes and photographs are published in a [Tasting History book](#), which is then shared out into the community. The local District food services have started to pick recipes from the cookbook to be adapted and served in school canteens across the District. It's the first time that these schools have served food from Afghanistan, Guatemala, Somalia, Bangladesh, etc.

Not only do these teaching approaches centre each of their stories within the broader history of migration in the USA, but they show the students the value of the knowledge and traditions that they've brought with them. These projects demonstrate to students how their personal histories are valued, as well as celebrating their cultures and creating spaces for students to be teachers.

INSIGHTS ON STUDENTS AS LEADERS



Asset-Based Pedagogy

By coming into their classroom with an asset-lens, teachers are able to see the deep strengths that their immigrant-origin students bring with them, as well as their grit, perseverance and rich knowledge from around the world. They recognize these students as cultural and linguistic navigators, who are creating new homes for themselves, and who are driven to build a sense of community in their new country. When teachers empower their classes to share their displacement stories, students can take a lead in how countries reimagine immigrant education.



Solving Issues in the Community

Jessica reflected on her passion for civics education. She finds ways to develop her students' voices and skills as active global citizens - they don't just learn about civics, they engage in civics! Through her [Action Civics](#) project, students choose a problem that they've witnessed in their community - perhaps Islamophobia, food insecurity or low digital literacy. They spend time researching in the community what the root causes of this issue are, and set themselves a goal for how to achieve systemic change. Her students meet with politicians and community leaders, they conduct surveys and analyse data, they draft proposals and memos, and write op-eds which are published in their city newspaper.

Through this work they recognise themselves as community leaders with important voices that need to be listened to. Students work together as a team, drawing on each other's wisdom, determination and leadership skills. They organise campaigns and implement real change - for

example, opening up an in-school food pantry or a community gun buy-back. They also hone their public speaking skills by presenting their projects at the Massachusetts State House.



Providing Each Other with Peer Support

Leah shared with us her '[Partnership for New Americans](#)' project, where newcomer students are partnered with a buddy. Their buddies share with them about American culture, local traditions and customs, the different holidays, etc. Community leaders, such as nurses, police and mayors, are invited into the school to help newcomer students understand what community services are available, and what American laws are. The students teach lessons together to other classes, and organise Food Days where they share foods from different cultures, noticing surprising similarities between cuisines. The buddy pairs build a mutual respect and understanding of each other's backgrounds.

INSIGHTS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Classrooms Without Walls

Jessica and Leah reflected on a key part of immigrant-origin and refugee education - classrooms which take their learning out into the community, which bring people into the school, and which foster strong connections between newcomer students and their new neighbours. They recognize that communities and schools are one and the same, as schools don't exist on an island, but are situated within local norms and contexts. They shared how important it is for host communities to understand who the new families are, and how they can play a role in helping them rebuild their lives. Check out [this music video](#) which stars Leah's students - an energising example of local community collaboration, in order to celebrate diversity. Other ways to bring learning into the community include students supporting community gardens or going into nursing homes for the elderly.



Support Systems for Parents

It's important to remember that trauma is likely to exist inside newcomer students' homes, and this can become evident as teachers communicate with caregivers or siblings. Leah and Jessica reflected on the key role that language plays when trying to bring caregivers into conversations

about their children's academic progress or wellbeing. They advised arranging for live interpreters to support with two-way communication, as well as translating any written information that goes home. It's also key to invite parents and caregivers into the school, so that they can become familiar with the environment, teaching staff and services available to them. It's not only students who need help with adjusting to their new life, but their parents do too.

INSIGHTS ON SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING



Joy, Laughter and Mindfulness

Leah shared how she incorporates games into her teaching, to support the wellbeing of her students. For example, on the first day of school each student has to share their name as well as a funny action that goes with their name. Everyone in the class has to repeat the name and the corresponding action, until all are memorised. She also carries a ziplock bag with her, which is full of supplies for spontaneous fun - cotton, plastic spoons, balls, stickers, candy, etc. The set-up of a classroom is also key to helping students laugh or relax. For example, Leah's classroom has a Peace Corner, where students can go whenever they need some timeout to reset or calm down. In the corner she has a timer so that students can give themselves five minutes there, to colour, play with a fidget spinner or make something out of play doh. She also starts each class with five minutes of mindfulness, which can include silence with eyes closed, guided audio meditations or laying down on the floor with the lights off.



Getting Out Into Nature

Going outside and allowing students to spend time outdoors has been a successful strategy with their immigrant-origin classes. By sitting on the ground, feeling the grass, looking at the trees and flowers, listening to the birds, students are able to ground themselves in their new surroundings. Each year Leah starts the academic year by going to a nearby park with her students, sitting in a circle without any books or syllabus. This helps them feel comfortable and feel seen, even if they aren't yet able to communicate in English. Jessica also shared the example of 'trauma-sensitive gardens' which have herbs and plants from around the world, which students can recognise as familiar sights and smells. These are spaces that students can go to when they're feeling sad or lonely, and are a calming place to help focus on their holistic wellbeing.



Reframing Student Behaviour

When teaching immigrant-origin or refugee students, it's helpful for teachers to acknowledge that these students are likely to be coming into school with some level of trauma. With this in mind, teachers can then use a trauma-responsive lens to reframe students' behaviour. For example, instead of seeing a student as manipulative, they are likely doing whatever is necessary to survive. Instead of labelling a student as lazy, perhaps they are overwhelmed and have underdeveloped executive functioning skills. Instead of assuming a student is being resistant, maybe they are actually scared to make progress and lose everything again. A student who seems unmotivated is perhaps suffering from depression, fear, anxiety or feels frozen in time. When you feel a student is being disrespectful, it's likely they feel threatened, unsafe and not in control. It helps to assume that these newcomer students have needs to be met, and it helps to spend time trying to understand the root causes of their behaviours.

Attendees dialled in from:

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