

The power of play, movement and sports for crisis-affected students

EiE Community Monthly Call | 22 March, 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 TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING



A Tool for Healing

Maggie MacDonnell, Global Teacher Prize Winner 2017, lived and taught in an indigenous community in the Canadian arctic for a decade. During this call she shared the history of Canada, including how Inuit communities were forcibly displaced from their land, and told that their culture and language held no value. Historically indigenous children were also sent thousands of miles away to 'residential schools', which have since been found to have been rife with abuse. Given this intergenerational context, Maggie's students were coming to school 'with a lot of trauma in their backpacks'.

In this fly-in Inuit community, her students were affected by addiction, alcohol consumption, poverty (the highest cost of living in Canada), isolation (they could not be accessed by roads,

only planes) and mental health issues. There was also a suicide crisis, with Maggie's school losing 1 student per month on average.

Most of her students used unhealthy coping mechanisms during school hours, such as smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. When witnessing such behaviours she found it critical to 'look beneath the iceberg' and assess the many reasons her students were acting this way. It's key to remember that these are normal reactions to abnormal environments, characterised by toxicity and stress.

Maggie drew on the power of sport and movement to help her students with self-regulation. Through starting a student running club, students were able to be reintegrated into school and be taken off their prescribed medication due to decreased levels of depression, anxiety, insomnia or suicidal thoughts. One of Maggie's students reflected that through exercise 'his thoughts became clear again, and gave him a better high than drugs.'

Maggie shared the neuroscience behind why trauma-informed teaching is so essential - when children are dealing with trauma, their brains 'shut down' into fight or flight survival mode. Only through feeling safe, welcomed and relaxed does brain functioning increase for learning.



Culturally-Sustaining Pedagogy

Education needs to meet students on their own terms, accept their cultural identities, and take a broader, more holistic view of children away from the silo of academic success. Maggie reflected that many parts of society sadly teach us that sports and play exist primarily for fun, minimising the role and power that they hold.

Using the example of kayaking, Maggie shared how sport is an important tool for educators to connect with students and their culture, and also help communities reconstruct their identities.

Although the Inuit invented the kayak, which has since become a popular sport across the world, Maggie didn't see anyone kayaking when she arrived in the Canadian arctic. Due to the cultural genocide that took place in this region, this traditional sport died. Communities weren't able to access the land to get kayak skins, and parents weren't able to pass on the traditions and skills to the next generation.

Knowing the power of sport and movement, Maggie helped to revive kayak culture in this community, training adults and youth to be comfortable in kayaks again through skills such as paddle safety, rolling and map navigation. When she asked a student how she felt after a session out in the kayak, the reply was "I felt like I was with my ancestors again." Education had historically taken them away from their culture, but now education (through sports) was playing a role in their healing and reconnection.

INSIGHTS ON STUDENT LEADERSHIP



Co-Creating with Students

Maggie shared that she would frequently come across many negative stereotypes and judgements about her students wrestling with drug usage, drinking, smoking and dropping out of school. *“It would have been easy to look at these children as ‘bad seeds’, but it’s so important to look at the garden they’re planted in. How are we nourishing this garden with healthy opportunities, and how can we build and nourish this garden together with the youth themselves?”* Maggie’s approach was about turning students from ‘problems’ to ‘solutions’.

She heard from her students how it was lonely to be healthy in this community, as so many youth were affected by addiction and unhealthy lifestyles. Maggie set out to foster a community of healthy peers, in order to solve their loneliness - a root cause preventing them from making healthier lifestyle choices.

By working with her students (as well as the mayor, town council and other decision-makers), she created a Community Fitness Centre. She trained her students on how to manage the Centre, and it quickly became a hub where the community would exercise together, grandparents coming to train with their grandchildren. It became a safe space for youth to spend their free time, and also created employment opportunities for them.

INSIGHTS ON INCLUSION



Refugee Camp Contexts

In Tanzanian refugee camps, Maggie worked with displaced adults who had backgrounds in drumming, basketball, dance, football and play. She supported play-based programmes for refugee students, which included daily play sessions leveraging low-resource games and music. She saw that for the many children who had lost their parents or caregivers along their difficult displacement journey, these sports coaches became their consistent adults who they could depend on and interact with everyday.

For the sports coaches, she saw that being engaged in sports programmes gave them a meaningful structure to their day. In the Tanzanian context, refugees are prevented from working or accessing agriculturally-relevant land, resulting in a lot of ‘down time’ in camp settings. The sports coaches filled their days planning the play sessions, creating low-cost sports ideas, and organising soccer tournaments or dance festivals.

For both the students and the coaches, Maggie saw that sport was a powerful way for people to reconnect with their own bodies, find joy and strength in them, feel strong, and be confident on and off the pitch.



Barriers to Girls' Participation

There are tremendous gender issues in this Inuit community, where teenage pregnancies are common, high levels of sexual abuse exist, and gender roles often burden young girls with large domestic duties. Maggie found the most successful way to ensure girls were able to fully participate in sports and play was through developing trusting relationships so that girls would name the barriers that stand in their way. The most common barrier she heard was childcare. Many of her female students had young children, and so by finding ways to provide childcare, Maggie was able to increase female participation in sports.

Another barrier was the sexualisation of female bodies. Maggie would continuously tell male coaches that their male students were making sexualised comments about female players, on and off the sports field. To overcome this, they regularly talked to male students about expectations and appropriate behaviours, as well as creating girls-only sports spaces.

By finding and cultivating allies for girls playing sports, Maggie was also able to increase the number of female role models her students had, create safer spaces for them to participate, and make visible to invisible gender barriers.

Attendees dialled in from:

Enseña Perú; Enseña por México; Teach For Afghanistan; Teach For Armenia; Teach For Ethiopia; Teach For Lebanon; Teach For Nigeria; Teach For Pakistan; Teach For Ukraine; Teach For Zimbabwe.