

Navigating Uncertainty: How Teach For Armenia are supporting their staff, teachers and students during escalating conflict

EiE Community Monthly Call | 22 November, 2022

About the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Community Calls

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 LEADERSHIP MINDSETS



Quickly Mobilise Capacity and Resources

As soon as the war started on 27th September, 2020 Teach For Armenia **instinctually responded fast**. Within 2 weeks they had hired 5 Education in Emergencies (EiE) Programme Managers, and then deployed a team of EiE Responders across the whole country. At the height of the 2020 war, Teach For Armenia was able to reach 1 out of every 24 displaced students through their EiE activities. By the end of the effort, they were reaching 1 out of the 6 of the students who remained in Armenia.

Such national uncertainty and flux was, on the one hand, the hardest circumstances Teach For Armenia had so far had to navigate, but on the other hand it also pushed them to be **innovative, courageous and take risks**. When all their normal parameters were removed, teams were pushed to find creative solutions and channel their energy into something productive and impactful for their country.

Lean into Leadership Competencies



These recent times of crisis have allowed Teach For Armenia to really put their **Leadership Framework** to the test. By viewing their core competencies through the lens of war, they saw that their competencies (which were developed in times of peace) were even more relevant and critical. Although in some emergency contexts it can be harder to **collaborate**, Teach For Armenia has been able to use periods of conflict to truly leverage **collective leadership**. For example, their network of EiE Responders fanned out across the country to work in deep partnership with Mayors, Regional Governments, and Community Leaders. Teach For Armenia also supported their alumni to lead in the emergency response efforts, giving them the space and tools to do this.



Move from Reactive to Proactive

Teach For Armenia have embedded **EiE into their funding proposals** so that as an organisation they are prepared for what their emergency activities will look like in the future. They are also building EiE costs into their **annual organisational budget** so that they are ready and not caught off guard in the future.

“Thank you for sharing this - trying to think ahead and prepare for crisis situations is a remarkable step indeed - it helps teams be proactive rather than reactive!”

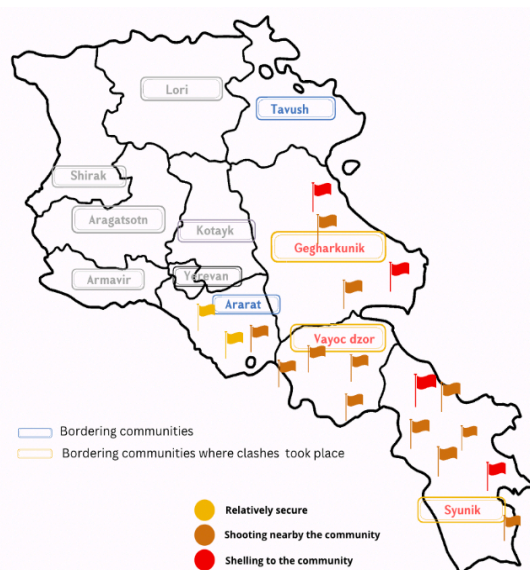
— Teach For Lebanon EiE Community Member

INSIGHTS ON ORGANISATIONAL SHIFTS



Continuously Analyse the Evolving Crisis

During the conflict, Teach For Armenia collected information and news from their Teacher-Leaders, community partners and other stakeholders, feeding this into their **information management system** to ensure the whole organisation had the most recent updates. Emergency Response **team meetings** were held early in the mornings and late at night, and team roles were adapted to support Teach For Armenia's crisis response efforts. Surveys were done with their Teacher-Leaders to analyse the needs of the students, communities and teachers.



Based on security updates, **maps** were produced to show the teams where shootings were taking place, which schools were paused, which regions were more stable, etc.



Prioritise Safety and Mental Health

Teach For Armenia recognised that these times of crisis have such a deep impact at all levels of the organisation - their staff teams, Teacher-Leaders and alumni - who were experiencing the conflict as traumatic, ongoing, difficult and uncertain. Knowing this, they **provided psychosocial support** by contracting counselling and psychologist services.

During times of war and fighting, Teach For Armenia stayed in touch with their Teacher-leaders around the clock, arranged transportation for evacuations, provided Teacher-Leaders with emergency accommodation away from the impacted communities where they were based, and gave them security guidelines and steps to follow including what to pack in their 'grab bags'.

“This must have been (and continues to be) such a difficult and traumatic period for all those in the impacted regions and beyond... So powerful to hear how Teach For Armenia staff leant into the feeling of responsibility for Teacher-Leaders and students and made moves to ensure their safety.”

— Teach For All EiE Community Member



Decide Your Emergency Response 'Value Add'

At an organizational level, Teach For Armenia reflected on "**What can we influence? What is outside our scope of work?**" They then analysed what other organizations and NGOs were doing in order to focus their efforts and avoid duplication of activities. This analysis led Teach For Armenia to decide not to focus on organizing humanitarian relief, such as food and medical supplies, and instead focus on education-related activities.

They recognised that although there was a sense of urgency and high needs, **trying to 'do it all' would also lead to staff burnout**. In line with their skills, experience and capacity, Teach For Armenia's EiE response focused on: social-emotional learning; online classes; first-aid sessions; 'parenting in times of crisis' support sessions and educational care packages. More details can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

INSIGHTS ON CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Understand the Impact of Trauma on Learning



Teach For Armenia employed a **Psychologist to train their Teacher-Leaders** on three common reactions that children have in times of crisis: rejection, survival and hyperexcitability. They were shown how to **spot signs of trauma** in their students, and reminded that during this time of national upheaval children would not have the same level of cognitive processing and learning. The Psychologist explained how a child's brain would be overwhelmed by emotions, resulting in high levels of cognitive stimulation and hyperactivity, making it much harder for students to study.

“It's heartbreaking to hear about the disruption, dislocation and trauma both students and adults have been dealing with. Much respect for everything Teach For Armenia has been able to provide for fellows and students, and how you re-grouped in order to stay proactive.”

— Teach For Bulgaria EiE Community Member

Adapt Teaching Practices



Teach For Armenia Teacher-Leaders were trained on a variety of teaching strategies to help their students to work through their feelings and adapt to their new reality. Such **teacher tools and techniques** include:

- Be next to the children and in constant contact (for example, walk around the corridors and classrooms);
- Listen to the student, be patient and caring;
- Accept their emotions - do not deny them;
- Help students to express their emotions;
- Reassure children that their fear and emotions are normal and natural;
- Accept that in such situations children's emotions will be expressed more sharply;
- Teach children some constructive ways of expressing their emotions (for example, painting, sports, writing, keeping a diary);
- Create a safe and stable learning environment;
- Set a routine for the school day, allocating time to study, rest, play and socialize;
- Convey a sense of protection and security;
- Design the classroom with rest areas and a 'worry box';
- Set up extracurricular activities, which can include: art, theatre and museum trips, reading clubs, open air yoga, contests, excursions and picnics, guest speakers and cultural events.



“We have used many of these teaching techniques during the war in Ukraine, so it’s great to hear that they were also helpful for your Teacher-Leaders in Armenia.”

— Teach For Ukraine EiE Community Member



Invest in Teacher Well-Being

Teach For Armenia understands how teachers are ‘frontline responders’ during times of crisis, living within and alongside impacted communities and seeing firsthand the impact that conflict has. Teacher-Leaders are supported to be open in expressing their feelings, and are reminded how students mimic their teachers, including when they practice self-care and recovery. Teacher-Leaders are also taught that living through traumatic situations can trigger and awaken adults’ hidden and repressed emotions, which then become a source of secondary trauma for educators.

Psychologists were used to support Teach For Armenia’s Teacher-Leaders focus on their own well-being and practice strategies to avoid burnout. Such **teacher well-being tools and techniques** include:

- Self-reflection: What has worked in the past? What can help me now? What can I do? Who can help me? Expressing emotions: Talking about emotions, writing, keeping a diary, creating, crying, doing sports and physical activity;
- Keeping healthy: Maintaining working hours, healthy eating, physical exercise, enough rest and sleep, time for yourself;
- Zone of influence: Teachers naturally try to help with any problem, but it’s important to understand that it’s not possible to help everyone. If it’s not possible for a teacher to

control an issue or situation (e.g. wounded community members or military tactics), then it is unproductive to focus on it;

- Activating the senses: Stay in the present by activating the 5 senses - teachers to name 5 things they can see in front of them, 5 things they can smell, 5 things they are touching, etc. This technique can also be used by teachers to help their students stay focused and present in the classroom;
- Self-regulation using breath: breathing in (counting 1, 2) and breathing out (counting 1, 2, 3, 4), or changing the strength of breathing by imagining to blow out 1 candle, then 2 candles, etc;
- Self-regulation using words: Repeating comforting words, prayers, a favourite line from a song or other phrases that are soothing;
- Muscle energy: tensing muscles gradually and smoothly, and then relaxing them quickly;
- First-Aid Kit: A toolkit that can be used with all the activities, thoughts, feelings and people that helped you previously through difficult times;
- Managing expectations: Reflecting on what are my expectations of myself in this situation, and how realistic are these expectations of myself for this given moment? Teachers' expectations should be adjusted in emergencies, the techniques they use won't produce perfect results or take the classroom environment back to how it was pre-crisis.

Attendees dialled in from:

Ensina Brasil; Teach For Afghanistan; Teach For Armenia; Teach For Austria; Teach For Bangladesh; Teach For Bulgaria; Teach For Ethiopia; Teach For Lebanon; Teach For Nepal; Teach For Nigeria; Teach For Uganda; Teach For Ukraine.