EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES (EiE) COMMUNITY

Leading Teams During Emergencies: Building Trauma-Informed, Caring, and Courageous Workplaces

Monthly Call | 11 November, 2025

About the Education in Emergencies (EiE) Community Calls

Staff, alumni and fellows 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!

Community resources

- Insights from the last EiE Community call
- Register for the next EiE Community call
- Join the EiE Facebook Community

Key insights from this call



PERSONAL ACTIONS

- Managing your own reactions to crises
- Leadership practices that help anchor colleagues
- Creating space for invisible grief at work
- The impact of disenfranchised grief



ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES

- Creating psychologically safe workplaces
- Expectations of 'being resilient' or 'professional'
- Sustaining these practices and embedding into org culture

Insights on Personal Actions

Managing your own reactions to crises

The experience of navigating major crises at **Teach For Bangladesh** have underscored the critical importance of proactive self-management for effective leadership. A key strategy employed has been 'adaptive tuning', which involves consciously managing your own news and social media consumption - specifically blocking exposure to emotionally triggering videos and photos of violence or suffering - while still reading essential news to stay grounded and informed. Teach For Bangladesh leaders have focused on separating their personal reactions (like anger at political violence) from their professional response, prioritizing collective healing and resisting the urge to perpetuate negative emotions or a culture of blame.

Teach For Bangladesh have leveraged Conscious Leadership to help their staff process trauma and create necessary distance from overwhelming situations. They

emphasize the need to "Be human," welcoming all normal emotional reactions to abnormal events. This is also supported through flexible work arrangements.

Leadership practices that help anchor colleagues

At the core of trauma-informed leadership is the understanding that it is not merely a management style but an ethic of care, recognizing that people's nervous systems are part of an organization's infrastructure. Courageous leaders must embrace a dual mandate: accountability plus compassion - seeing them not as opposites, but as mutually reinforcing elements, where compassion stabilizes people and accountability provides essential direction. To anchor teams during volatility, leaders must model permission at the top by demonstrating their own humanity. For example, a senior leader opening a meeting during a crisis with "*I'm not at my best today... and that's okay*" grants the entire team permission to feel and pause, countering the harmful narrative that emotional expression is a failure. This approach can be reinforced by embedding micro-rituals of pause at the start of calls - such as a single shared breath or a one-word check-in - which immediately shift the team's nervous system into a calmer state, creating immediate psychological safety.

Leaders can also practice 'nervous-system awareness' by explicitly noticing signs of team activation (tension, urgency) and intentionally slowing the pace, understanding that a calm leadership presence re-regulates a team impacted by trauma. Team leaders can name collective overwhelm and adjust timelines: "*We are in a different season; let's adjust for sustainability*." Even more powerful when paired with transparent, predictable communication, clarifying what is known and unknown with steady, frequent updates, as ambiguity fuels anxiety during crises. Centering relationships over perfection also shifts the focus from "*How do we fix this?*" to "*How do we stay connected?*" This recognizes that connection is the antidote to trauma-induced isolation, and performance naturally follows safety. Leaders can also embed rest, reflection, and repair into the culture, normalizing emotional expression and boundaries, and proactively scheduling recovery time into projects to ensure that organizations don't absorb cumulative trauma under the guise of "resilience."

Creating space for invisible grief at work

Grief is a universal human experience that rarely announces itself directly in the workplace; instead, it often arrives in disguise, manifesting as silence, conflict, overwork, or overwhelm. Leaders have a critical role in creating space for this invisible grief, which asks to be seen even when team members lack the words to articulate their pain. Leaders have a responsibility to recognize the signs of invisible grief, humanizing behaviors that might otherwise be misread as 'poor performance' or a 'bad attitude'. These disguised manifestations include: *the Disappearing Act* (withdrawing, speaking less); *a Shorter Fuse* (increased irritation or conflict); *the Frozen Surface* (a flat tone or "get on with it" energy); *the Over-Protector* (over-controlling or overworking); *the Fog* (forgetfulness or cloudy thinking); and *the Tremor of Injustice* (sharp, emotional reactions to unfairness). By renaming and reshaping these narratives and centering our collective humanity, leaders can begin to address the root emotional cause instead of just the symptomatic behavior.

Teach For Armenia continues to support displaced staff, fellows and students following multiple conflicts and blockades. Their displaced students continue to exhibit clear trauma responses, such as mutism and being afraid of the school bell, and staff carry their own traumas. In the face of such systematic pain, Teach For Armenia's initial impulse was to respond with solutions - such as motivational talks,

wellness programs, or counseling. But what people needed most was the permission to *not* be OK - the opportunity to stay silent and show their vulnerability. This courageous leadership meant being willing to simply sit with someone and talk about feelings, rather than rushing to make the conversation productive or professional.

For **Teach For Armenia**, creating space for invisible grief is fundamentally about restoring dignity and humanity within the organization. This has meant openly acknowledging that the pain of their fellows and students was not private but a shared, systematic pain. The simple act of having team meetings where everyone cried were moments of collective healing, validating the reality that *all* emotions are welcome in the workplace (and classrooms). By acknowledging grief openly, they have been able to combat the isolation that trauma creates, and communicate that Teach For Armenia sees and accepts the full complexity of what its people are carrying. This practice has transformed their workplace into a container for processing reality, rather than a place where pain must be masked to maintain a professional facade.

The impact of disenfranchised grief

Leading and working in emergencies is intensely emotionally demanding, as crises not only destabilize impacted communities but also the individuals serving them. Grief, whether acknowledged or not, inevitably enters the workplace. Specifically, disenfranchised grief is pain that a system, culture, or community does not validate or permit, forcing individuals to carry it quietly while still being expected to function professionally. In contexts marked by war, political violence, or displacement, this grief is not merely personal; it is often collective, identity-based, ancestral, and ongoing, and can feel dangerous for staff to articulate openly.

When organizational structures, rhythms, or the sense of urgency prevent leaders from creating space for this experience, the grief does not vanish. Instead, it goes underground and manifests through damaging secondary behaviors such as withdrawal, irritability, silence, over-performance, numbness, or heightened moral outrage. Addressing this unseen, minimized, or unwelcome grief is critical because its avoidance leads to further systemic distress and undermines the psychological safety of the very people relied upon to respond to the crisis.

Insights on Organizational Policies

Creating psychologically safe workplaces

The arrival of COVID-19 prompted **Teach For Bangladesh** to prioritise creating a psychological safe workplace, given the period of extreme stress and confusion. With closed classrooms and unclear roles, the chaos highlighted an immediate and urgent need for open conversations about managing emotions, accessing support, and understanding "what to do." Teach For Bangladesh recognized that finding contextually relevant support was crucial. They proactively sought external expertise, including on trauma-informed pedagogy and brain-based learning. This led to the fundamental realization of "Secure your own mask first": the necessity for coaches and mentors to look after their own well-being before they could effectively support their fellows.

COVID-19 built a crucial muscle of readiness for unpredictability, a vital component of psychological safety. Living in a region frequently facing cyclones, floods, heatwaves, and political instability, **Teach For Bangladesh** have had to accept that

things can change overnight. They recognized the high risk of burnout, particularly among a Gen Z workforce acutely aware of mental health. In response, they've partnered with an organization to provide expert sessions on workplace stress and offered 1:1 professional services to both fellows and staff. They also foster collective healing and joy: increasing time for fun, games, movies, and team processing.

Enseña por México has embedded psychological safety by adopting a distinctly transparent approach: they openly acknowledge and normalize the insecure conditions they operate in. This acceptance has allowed them to move from *reacting* to *planning*, making it OK for staff to talk about the challenging realities of their work. To ensure organizational decisions are informed by staff needs, Enseña por México have created systematic tools for listening, such as bi-annual assessments that rigorously measure staff perceptions of psychological and physical wellbeing, and safety issues. Furthermore, their monthly culture calls provide a dedicated, open forum to discuss these experiences and identify how the organization can better support its team members, reinforcing a culture of constant communication.

To ensure its permanence, **Enseña por México** has elevated 'wellbeing' as a strategic organizational priority, emphasizing its cross-cutting nature and importance at every level and for every person. This strategic focus helps cement the expectation that open communication on these challenging conditions is a responsibility shared by all. Beyond listening and strategy, Enseña por México has implemented robust prevention and response protocols for unsafe situations, which are circulated frequently and integrated into new staff onboarding. They also ensure practical support is readily available by providing free psychological crisis support services to all staff and fellows. This systematic approach is further fortified by training staff to proactively identify their needs, set boundaries, and make requests, complemented by flexible work arrangements that grant staff necessary agency over their schedules in volatile contexts.

Expectations of 'being resilient' or 'professional'

Using the terms 'resilience' and 'professionalism' in crisis contexts is often felt as dehumanizing, serving as a mechanism that asks colleagues to function productively while muting their pain. **Teach For Armenia** experiences this expectation of being "resilient" as "please keep functioning so I can't see your pain," and as an echo of colonial logic that demands productivity even through grief. Such language or mindsets ask humanitarians to repress tears, exhaustion, and moral pain. This 'myth of professionalism' rewards the ability to perform, often silencing those whose authentic grief or rage does not fit the dominant tone of calm neutrality, and consequently disadvantages those closest to the crisis.

In the Education in Emergencies sector, the term 'resilience' is frequently misused as a compliment for surviving what one should never have had to endure. When staff or communities are praised for endless endurance, this unintentionally glorifies over-functioning and emotional suppression, whereby staff or fellows feel shame for breaking down or guilt for needing rest. **Teach For Armenia** actively works to reframe this concept, emphasizing that true resilience is not about pushing through or enduring pain; rather, it's a relational quality born from a system that allows for rest, care and dignity. They celebrate colleagues who can pause and reflect, acknowledging how their feelings affect their work. This quiet but radical shift in

defining performance acknowledges people's need for help or space to process (rather than expecting people to function over their pain).

To foster a healthier organizational culture, leaders can pivot from a "resilience narrative" to a "resourced narrative," instead asking: "*What support do people need to stay whole?*" True resilience is perhaps more about bending without breaking, which is only possible with intentional community, compassion, and rest. This is helped by modeling vulnerability at the top, where a leader can say, "*I'm carrying a lot too, and I'm grateful we can still show up for one another*." Allowing space for emotions doesn't derail the work; it builds deeper trust and ensures authenticity can coexist with clarity, supporting the team's long-term sustainability.

Sustaining these practices and embedding into org culture

Sustaining a culture of psychological safety can be achieved through moving beyond reactive measures to establish proactive, systemic practices and continuous learning. **Teach For Bangladesh** has embedded this through contingency planning where the full team sits together to plan for scenarios and hypothetical future crises that could impact their program. This has helped to build foresight and preparedness. A thorough step-back analysis is conducted after every real crisis (like last year's July Revolution or Cyclone Remal) to capture lessons learned. This process directly informed practical changes, such as designating Regional Offices as 'safe houses' for staff and fellows during emergencies, addressing the realized need for secure spaces. To sustain the ongoing culture of openness, Teach For Bangladesh has also embedded Evolving Ways of Working with a long-term focus on well-being and mindfulness as essential life practices, complemented by the introduction of wellbeing staff dedicated to supporting the team.

Teach For Armenia has focused on capturing organizational learning after crises and codifying it into Handbooks and protocols, ensuring that emergency procedures are not just checklists but a system of care that protects both safety and wellbeing. These include prioritizing physical and emotional safety through check-in systems that allow the expression of fear, confusion, and grief without judgment. Central to their success has been building trust and transparency, maintaining clear, timely, and honest communication - even when information about a crisis is incomplete - because trust in the leader is key to people's ability to adapt.

To support the emotional anchoring of staff, **Teach For Armenia** has also focused on empowerment and collaboration. Staff share their emotions, tears and fears, and the implementation of a buddy system has fostered a sense of unity and mutual care across the organization. Furthermore, empathy and care have become core organizational values, demonstrated through small but powerful shifts in language, such as naming emotions instead of avoiding them ("*I know this is hard*," or "*It's okay to feel overwhelmed right now*"). Teach For Armenia has realised that it's not how quickly an organization recovers, but how long it remembers.

Enseña por México has embedded safety protocols through continuous monitoring and preparedness. They have sustained these practices by maintaining an org-wide openness to listening and normalizing conversations about safety and security. By keeping close contact with colleagues across Mexico, they are able to keep their "finger on the pulse", quickly detect potential security situations and immediately activate protocols.

Resources

1. Videos of Enseña por México, Teach For Armenia and Teach For Bangladesh
2. 'Supporting Colleagues in Crisis: Insights from network partners'
3. 'Disenfranchised Grief in the Global Context: A Workplace Imperative'

Attendees dialed in from:

Enseña por México, Teach For America, Teach For Armenia, Teach For Bangladesh, Teach For Lebanon, Teach For Malaysia, Teach For Niger, Teach For Nigeria, Teach For Poland, Teach For Qazaqstan, Teach For Slovakia, Teach For Uganda, Teach For Ukraine, and Teach For Zimbabwe.