EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES (EiE) COMMUNITY

Refugee Realities: Stories, Solidarity, and Shifting the Narrative

Monthly Call | 17 June, 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



POWER OF STORIES OVER DATA

- Teach For Sweden
- Enseña por Colombia
- Teach For Malaysia
- Teach For Portugal



FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

- Challenging Problematic Narratives
- Acknowledging Inherent Agency and Voice
- Importance of Context and Specificity
- Problematic Phrases and Their Reimagined Alternatives

Insights on the Power of Stories Over Data

Teach For Sweden

Amira, a Teach For Sweden fellow, arrived in Sweden aged 16 having been displaced from a conflict-affected country. Despite being told her origin-country grades were insufficient and being forced to repeat a year of high-school, she took 12 extra courses to prove her abilities and excelled, earning the highest grades. Later, in university, she faced further discrimination from a teacher who doubted her capability due to her accent, predicting it would take her six years to complete a three-year engineering program. Amira passed her course and ultimately became both a teacher and a building engineer.

As a Teach For Sweden fellow she now aims to be a supportive role model for her students, particularly as 90% of the students in her school are migrants or refugees. She shared the experience of her student Abdi, a 13-year-old boy from Somalia. He was unfairly treated in a recent science class, when he wasn't given a chance to present his prepared work on ecosystems, due to a teacher's preconceptions and

because Abdi didn't speak "perfect Swedish," unlike his peers. He courageously advocated for himself and gave a powerful presentation on the topic.

She shared the experience of another student, Jasmine, a 15-year-old girl from Syria who arrived in Sweden ten years ago. She always dreamed of being a doctor, even pretending to be one in the Lebanese refugee camp she used to live in. She realised she was many years behind in mathematics, and was being advised by teachers to choose a "simpler" career path. But she continues to study hard every day and believes her lived experience is a strength, not a hindrance

Enseña por Colombia

We learned from a Venezuelan student supported by Enseña por Colombia's fellowship. Her family migrated to Colombia due to the deteriorating economic situation in Venezuela, and her displacement journey involved long walks and a reliance on aid from organizations like the Red Cross and UN. With her family she lived on the street and received help from passers-by, until her father found work and they started staying at a friend's home. Her initial school enrollment was challenging due to lack of paperwork, but she eventually started studying, made many friends, and built good relationships with teachers. She participates in various projects led by Enseña por Colombia, including their student leadership program "Armadillos Amarillos". This experience helped her overcome shyness and express herself, enabling her to face people she didn't know.

Samuel, an Enseña por Colombia fellow in Cali, teaches a significant number of internally displaced students (due to the conflict in Colombia). Samuel shared that many of his displaced students lack school supplies or motivation to attend school. Many of his students initially struggled to express emotions beyond "happy" or "sad" but through his Social Emotional Learning (SEL) support have become more comfortable to articulate their feelings, leading to more harmonious classrooms.

Teach For Malaysia

Hilda, a Teach For Malaysia alum, co-founded a refugee-education NGO, Reimagine Education (R.ED), with a refugee colleague. R.ED partners with refugee community schools (often self-started and unmonitored) to run learning programs and provide support. She also mobilizes volunteers to advocate for refugee communities across Malaysia. R.ED focuses on exposing displaced children to different skills and values, such as entrepreneurship, coding, and sports, rather than just academic subjects.

Hilda describes the power of forming a girls' football team, supporting displaced children from the Rohingya refugee community (a community where girls are often married young and are not typically enrolled in schooling). Spurred by R.ED's words of hope, the girls participate in football tournaments and use the classes as spaces for hopeful conversations.

Teach For Portugal

Teach For Portugal fellow, Lucas, is a biologist, educator, and researcher, who is also a migrant from Brazil, having lived in Lisbon for the past two years. His school in Portugal is notably multicultural, representing over 50 nationalities. Lucas believes that education is a form of social justice and a right for all, not a privilege. He notes the injustice of treating migrant and refugee students who might leave Portugal as "less deserving" of educational investment, asserting that every child deserves to learn, no matter where they may go.

Lucas highlights prevailing myths in Portugal about immigrants and refugees, such as them "*stealing jobs*" (despite low migrant unemployment), "*draining the welfare system*" (when data shows migrants increasingly sustain social security), and "*increasing crime*" (when most frequent crimes are committed *against* immigrants). He describes his work as an "everyday act of myth busting".

To foster belonging, Lucas's class designed a "Flower of Sustainability," with a world map showing students' countries of origin at its center. He also organised "Friends Day" - an event to transform the school's old 'inclusion space' (previously only for migrants) into a space for everyone, promoting "bilateral inclusion". Student leaders from various nationalities facilitated activities, translated, and helped others, showing agency, resistance, and hope, and enabling them to co-create the present and future together. For him, inclusion means reshaping the school to embrace human diversity, rather than asking students to fit a rigid mold.

Insights on Flipping the Script

Challenging Problematic Narratives

A core objective of the call was to critically examine common phrases and narratives in refugee education discourse that, while well-meaning, can also be problematic, harmful, and adopt a "deficit lens". Often refugee-education phrases dehumanise, generalise, and perpetuate stereotypes or a "saviour complex". This workshop activity aimed to work collaboratively to challenge, reframe, and replace these phrases with more accurate, respectful, and empowering alternatives.

Acknowledging Inherent Agency and Voice

Refugees possess their own voices, agency, and insights - and the role of organisations or individuals should be to create platforms, remove structural barriers, and amplify existing refugee voices and leadership, rather than assuming voicelessness or passivity.

Importance of Context and Specificity

Many problematic narratives are overly generalised and fail to account for the diverse backgrounds and specific struggles of different refugee groups. It was stressed that narratives need to be specific, detailing the experiences of individuals such as single mothers, children, or senior citizens, rather than offering a "generic" narrative.

The discussion highlighted the need to understand the historical and global contexts that lead to displacement and conflict. Phrases that erase this history, or that suggest a "saviour" mentality, prevent a deeper engagement with the systemic causes and perpetuate a cycle of misunderstanding.

Problematic Phrases and Their Reimagined Alternatives

E.g. "*Our project/program/organisation has given refugees a voice*". Problem: This phrase presumes voicelessness and passivity on the part of refugees, implying they had no voice until external intervention. It also erases historical and ongoing expression, and often centres the intervening organisation rather than the community itself. Reframe: Emphasise creating platforms, removing barriers, and amplifying what refugees are already saying. Use phrases like: "*This project amplifies refugee voices that have often been ignored*," "*We are learning to listen to the stories and insights refugees bring*," "*Co-creating spaces*," "*Shifting power to refugees*," or "*Refugee-led storytelling*".

E.g. "*Refugees came here with nothing.*" Problem: This dehumanises individuals by associating them with "nothing," devaluing their inherent worth and non-monetisable contributions. It can lead to harmful stereotypes, trigger xenophobia, and affect how refugee children are perceived and treated by peers and institutions. Reframe: Acknowledge they came with all that they have. Focus on humanising and particularising their stories, recognising their skills, culture, and heritage.

E.g. "*We need to empower refugees.*" or *"Refugees are vulnerable."* Problem: Implies inherent powerlessness, suggesting refugees are "objects of stories to be told" rather than active agents. It also risks creating a "saviour" dynamic where others are seen as needing to save those who cannot help themselves. Reframe: Frame refugees as active agents who are taking charge of their own futures. Recognise and amplify the leadership and resilience already present in displaced communities.

E.g. "*Refugees are just like us.*" or "*Refugees are so strong.*" Problem: While seemingly benevolent, these phrases can oversimplify or avoid deeper engagement with the specific contexts, histories, and ongoing challenges faced by refugees. Reframe: Engage with the historical context and global complicity that create conditions that force people to seek refuge. Focus on understanding individual stories and acknowledging the complex realities without sanitising or overgeneralising.

E.g. "*An influx of refugees.*" Problem: This language suggests chaos, invasion, and can be used by far-right groups to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. It removes the human context and the agonizing, often forced, decision people make to seek refuge, ignoring the historical role that some nations (e.g., former colonial powers) played in creating the conditions for displacement and instability in refugees' home countries. Reframe: Ground the language in reality and historical context, acknowledging the reasons for displacement and the humanity of those seeking safety.

Attendees dialed in from:

Enseña por Colombia, Enseña por México, Ensina Brasil, Teach First, Teach For India, Teach For Italy, Teach For Lebanon, Teach For Malaysia, Teach For Morocco, Teach For Nigeria, Teach For Portugal, Teach For Slovakia, Teach For Sweden, Teach For Uganda, and Teach For Zimbabwe.