EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES (EiE) COMMUNITY

Supporting Student Wellbeing in Emergency Contexts

Monthly Call | 5 December, 2024

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



INSIDE THE CLASSROOM

- Building Safe and Predictable Environments
- Prioritizing Social Emotional Learning
- Trauma-Sensitive Teaching
- Incorporating Play and Creativity



OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

- Engaging with Families and Communities
- Peer Support Systems
- Psycho-Social Support Initiatives
- Meeting Students' Basic Needs



TEACHER MINDSETS AND ACTIONS

- Teacher-led Wellbeing Initiatives
- Training Teachers on the Neuroscience
- Listening to Teachers and Addressing their Material Needs
- Flipping the Narrative

Insights on Strategies for Inside the Classroom

Building Safe and Predictable Environments

Creating a sense of stability through consistent routines and clear expectations can significantly ease anxiety for students living through emergencies. **Teach For Palestine** offers a compelling example of this approach. Despite being a newly launched program, Teach For Palestine has prioritized safe and predictable learning environments from the outset, recognizing the acute stressors their students face daily, such as settler violence and military checkpoints across the West Bank. Following the tragic killing of 12-year-old Hatem, one of their students, Teach For Palestine has doubled down on its commitment to emotional safety in classrooms.

Their fellows begin each day with a morning circle for emotional check-ins, use visual daily schedules tailored for their young learners (Grades 1–4), and close lessons with calming reflections like gratitude sharing or journaling. Students co-create classroom

rules, which fosters ownership and a sense of agency, and take on simple roles to build responsibility and belonging. Even small gestures -like personalizing their desks -help make the classroom a refuge from the volatility outside.

Prioritizing Social Emotional Learning

Integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into daily classroom practice helps students regulate emotions, build resilience, and foster healthier relationships - critical skills in crisis-affected settings. **Enseña por Colombia** has been leading an ambitious, USAID-funded initiative to embed SEL into classrooms serving Venezuelan refugees and internally displaced Colombian students. Their holistic curriculum focuses on four key SEL skills: self-leadership, responsible decision-making, relationship-building, and purposeful collaboration. To support implementation, Enseña por Colombia developed a repository of practical classroom strategies, updated observation tools to assess SEL integration, and introduced student surveys (Grades 4–11) to gather SEL data and inform instruction. As a result, Enseña por Colombia has seen notable shifts in teaching practices: their fellows are more intentional in planning for SEL, and both fellows and students now use SEL-related language more frequently, helping embed these skills into daily routines and classroom culture.

Trauma Sensitive Teaching

In emergency settings, trauma-sensitive approaches are essential for helping students feel safe, seen, and supported. This means using calm, patient communication, avoiding triggering behaviors like shouting, and offering students choices to foster a sense of control. **Teach For Armenia** demonstrates this beautifully, especially in light of conflict-related stress affecting their students over the past 5 years. Their fellows are trained to approach sensitive conversations with empathy, setting aside other tasks to be fully present with students. They use active listening techniques and validating language, such as "*I'm here to listen if you'd like to connect*" or "*It's completely understandable to feel this way given everything that's happening*." These strategies not only acknowledge students' emotions but also build trust and emotional safety in the classroom.

Incorporating Play and Creativity

Integrating creative and playful activities - such as art, music, drama, and games - into the school experience can be a powerful way to reduce stress, foster peer relationships, and build resilience among students in crisis settings. For example, **Teach For Ukraine** has embraced this approach through their summer camps, which continue to provide displaced children with opportunities for joy, expression, and connection. These summer camps include media literacy sessions, creative arts, and group activities designed to simulate a sense of normalcy - even when held in bomb shelters. For many students, these moments of play and creativity offer emotional relief, help strengthen social bonds, and allow them to reconnect with their childhood in the midst of ongoing conflict.

Insights on Strategies for Outside the Classroom

Engaging with Families and Communities

Strengthening ties between schools, families, and communities plays a vital role in supporting student well-being, especially in crisis-affected contexts. **Anseye Pou Ayiti,** in their work across Haiti, actively breaks down the barriers between education and community, recognizing that students can only thrive when their

cultural identity, community assets, and local knowledge are truly valued in their learning. Anseye Pou Ayiti challenges the notion that education should be confined to the classroom, instead fostering collaboration between teacher leaders, parent leaders, and school leaders. This holistic approach not only prepares Haitian children to become active, engaged citizens but also creates a broader, more inclusive support system around them. By aligning educational efforts with the lived realities of their communities, Anseye Pou Ayiti ensures that students are better supported both emotionally and academically.

Peer Support Systems

Creating opportunities for students to support one another - through buddy systems or peer mentorship - can play a powerful role in reducing isolation and fostering connection, especially in crisis settings. **Teach For Afghanistan** has demonstrated this in profoundly challenging circumstances. Since the transition in de facto government, Teach For Afghanistan has set up a peer support system that connects students with one another, helping them maintain a sense of solidarity and reducing the emotional toll of isolation. These connections have become lifelines, supporting both learning and mental health.

Psycho-Social Support Initiatives

In emergency contexts, providing students with access to specialized mental health support is essential - especially for needs that go beyond what teachers can offer alone. Across the Teach For All network, several partners have effectively integrated psycho-social support through external collaborations. For example, clinician Anna Jesseman of **MedStar WISE** has delivered workshops and support sessions for teachers in Teach For Ukraine, Teach For Armenia, Teach For Lebanon, Teach For Bangladesh, and others, equipping them with tools to help students process and express emotions after traumatic events.

Similarly, our global partnership with the **International Rescue Committee** (IRC) provides students with direct access to mental health resources. These initiatives ensure that both educators and students have the emotional support systems they need to navigate crisis-affected learning environments.

Meeting Students' Basic Needs

In times of crisis, ensuring students' basic needs are met is foundational to supporting their well-being and ability to learn. Many partners in the Teach For All network take concrete actions to address these basic needs. For example, after the 2024 floods in Kenya, **Teach For Kenya** quickly identified the impact on students' lives and mobilized to distribute care packs containing essential items like maize flour, soap, and cooking oil, while also replacing destroyed school materials and installing new handwashing stations.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, **Teach For Liberia** launched a community-based emergency feeding program that reached over 600 families with food, cleaning supplies, and health information. Their fellows also played a critical role in spreading public health messages and distributing masks and awareness materials. These efforts went beyond the classroom, reinforcing a safety net that allows students to focus on learning and emotional recovery.

Insights on Teacher Mindsets and Actions

Teacher-led Wellbeing Initiatives

Supporting student wellbeing begins with supporting teacher wellbeing - especially in prolonged crisis contexts. **Teach For Lebanon's** Wellbeing Programme is a powerful, fellow-led initiative that has been running for several years, with a rotating Fellow Leadership Team driving its design and implementation. The programme includes weekly WhatsApp messages from the Wellbeing Guides - motivational tips sent on Mondays and interactive wellbeing challenges on Wednesdays to build connection and resilience.

Fellows also engage in 1:1 check-in conversations, which are not about "fixing" emotions but about creating a space to collectively navigate trauma and grief. A key principle is that wellbeing support must be sustainable: each Wellbeing Team member reflects on their own needs, including giving themselves the permission to postpone a 1:1 if they themselves are not in the right space to support others. This model prioritizes mutual care and emotional endurance, ensuring teachers can continue to show up for their students.

Training Teachers on the Neuroscience

Many network partner organizations have begun equipping their fellows with the neuroscience of wellbeing, trauma and toxic stress - emphasizing that students often mirror the emotional states of the adults around them. This foundational insight teaches that a calm, regulated teacher can help students feel safe, while a stressed teacher may inadvertently transmit that anxiety to their students. For the past four years, Teach For All has led a range of **'Trauma Sensitive Teaching'** learning experiences, attended by hundreds of fellows and partner staff globally. These workshops guide participants to examine the systems and stressors that may be impacting their own wellbeing. By mapping these influences and reflecting deeply on their personal experiences, fellows often undergo a transformative process - recognizing that tending to their own healing is not optional, but essential if they hope to foster healing and safety in their classrooms.

Listening to Teachers and Addressing their Material Needs

In crisis-affected contexts, teachers face immense pressures - not only in their classrooms but in their daily lives. It's critical that this adversity is acknowledged. Simply being heard and having their challenges validated can ease emotional burdens and create a sense of solidarity. We've seen that network partners who actively listen to their fellows are better able to gain a more nuanced understanding of on-the-ground realities and can respond with thoughtful, practical solutions.

A strong example comes from **Teach For Lebanon**. Against the backdrop of the conflict, and the country's fuel and economic crises, many fellows were experiencing intense stress just commuting to school or affording basic supplies. In response, Teach For Lebanon introduced a transport reimbursement system and provided access to essential materials like stationery and phone cards - small but meaningful actions that alleviated pressure and showed teachers they weren't alone.

Flipping the Narrative

The self-sacrifice of teachers - often expected, praised, and romanticized - should no longer be normalized. Teacher wellbeing must be reframed not as a luxury, but as a necessity. Prioritizing self-care is not indulgent; it's foundational to a sustainable teaching practice and to students' success. Network partners in all regions are actively working to shift this mindset. For example, **Enseña por Colombia** has taken a holistic and proactive approach: they've compiled regional directories of mental

health professionals, set up early warning systems to detect signs of mental distress among their fellows, trained their staff in mental health awareness, and created socioemotional support circles. They also hold regional Teacher Wellbeing meetings - spaces that send a powerful message: your wellbeing matters, and we will protect it.

Attendees dialed in from:

Teach For Bangladesh, Enseña por Colombia, Teach For India, Teach For Kenya, Teach For Lebanon, Teach For Liberia, Teach For Nepal, Teach For Nigeria, Teach For Pakistan, Teach For Sierra Leone, Teach For Viet Nam.