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Narratives of Teacher Resilience in War-Affected Schools of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experiences and resilience narratives of teachers working in war-affected schools across Ukraine amid ongoing armed conflict. Through narrative inquiry methodology, the research explores how educators maintain professional commitment, adapt pedagogical practices, and sustain psychological well-being while navigating extraordinary challenges including infrastructure damage, displacement, safety threats, and trauma exposure. Twenty-three Ukrainian teachers from diverse regions participated in in-depth interviews, sharing stories of persistence, innovation, and meaning-making during crisis. Findings reveal resilience as a dynamic, contextual process rather than fixed trait, manifested through collective solidarity, purpose-driven teaching, flexible adaptation, and deliberate hope cultivation. Teachers demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness in maintaining educational continuity through basement classrooms, online platforms, and mobile teaching units while simultaneously addressing students' psychosocial needs. However, narratives also revealed profound emotional costs, moral distress, and systemic support inadequacies that threaten long-term sustainability. This research contributes to understanding educator resilience in conflict contexts and offers insights for supporting teachers facing extreme adversity globally, while honoring Ukrainian educators' extraordinary dedication to their students and profession.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher resilience has emerged as a critical focus in educational research as educators worldwide confront unprecedented challenges ranging from global pandemics to natural disasters, political instability, and armed conflicts (Muhsyanur and Mustapha, 2023). Resilience, conceptualized as the capacity to maintain purpose and psychological well-being while adapting effectively to adversity, represents essential qualities for teachers navigating complex professional demands under normal circumstances and becomes even more vital during crises. Gu and Day (2007) defined teacher resilience as a quality enabling educators to maintain their commitment to teaching and students despite challenging conditions and setbacks, emphasizing that resilience is not merely individual trait but emerges through interactions between personal capacities, professional contexts, and environmental factors. Understanding how teachers develop and sustain resilience in extreme circumstances offers crucial insights for supporting educators globally while illuminating fundamental questions about human capacity for adaptation and meaning-making during profound disruption.

The ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine, which intensified dramatically in February 2022, has created catastrophic conditions for the educational system, with thousands of schools damaged or destroyed, millions of children displaced, and educators facing extraordinary pressures to maintain educational services amid active warfare. According to UNESCO (2023), over 3,000 educational institutions in Ukraine have been damaged or destroyed since the conflict escalation, with teachers continuing to provide instruction in bomb shelters, metro stations, and temporary facilities while managing their own trauma and displacement. This context represents one of the most severe contemporary examples of education under attack, offering critical case study for understanding how teachers sustain professional identity and pedagogical commitment when fundamental assumptions about safety, stability, and normalcy are shattered. The Ukrainian experience holds particular significance given the scale of educational disruption and the sophisticated pre-war educational system now operating under wartime conditions.

Theoretical frameworks for understanding resilience in conflict contexts have evolved from deficit-based models emphasizing individual psychological traits toward ecological and sociocultural perspectives recognizing resilience as dynamic process shaped by multiple interacting systems. Ungar (2008) proposed a social-ecological model of resilience arguing that individuals' capacity to navigate adversity depends substantially on their environments' capacity to provide resources and opportunities in culturally meaningful ways. This perspective shifts attention from individual deficits to systemic supports and cultural contexts, particularly relevant when examining teacher resilience in Ukraine where collective cultural values, professional solidarity, and institutional responses significantly influence individual educators' experiences. Masten (2014) further emphasized ordinary magic in resilience, arguing that adaptation during adversity typically relies on

fundamental human adaptive systems rather than extraordinary personal qualities, suggesting that understanding teacher resilience requires examining how normal protective factors function under abnormal circumstances.

Research on education in conflict-affected contexts has documented both the devastating impacts of warfare on learning and the crucial role schools play in providing stability, psychosocial support, and hope during crises (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Burde et al. (2017) conducted extensive reviews demonstrating that armed conflict severely disrupts education through infrastructure destruction, teacher displacement, student trauma, and curriculum militarization, yet schools simultaneously serve as protective spaces offering normalcy and psychological support for affected populations. Teachers in conflict zones assume expanded roles beyond conventional academic instruction, functioning as counselors, protectors, community leaders, and symbols of continuity amid chaos. Betancourt et al. (2020) found that teacher support significantly mediated the relationship between war exposure and children's mental health outcomes, underscoring educators' critical importance in conflict-affected communities. However, this expanded responsibility occurs while teachers themselves experience trauma, loss, and precarity, raising urgent questions about how they sustain capacity to support others while managing their own distress.

Narrative approaches to understanding resilience offer particular value by illuminating how individuals construct meaning from adversity through storytelling and how these narratives shape ongoing adaptation. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that narrative inquiry provides access to lived experience in ways that honor complexity, temporality, and subjective meaning-making that quantitative or purely descriptive approaches miss. Teacher narratives reveal not merely what happened but how educators interpret experiences, construct professional identities, and find purpose amid chaos. Luthar et al. (2000) emphasized that resilience assessment must consider subjective well-being alongside behavioral adaptation, as individuals may appear functionally resilient while experiencing profound internal distress. Narrative methodology allows exploration of this complexity, capturing both external adaptation and internal meaning-making processes that sustain or undermine long-term resilience.

Despite growing recognition of teacher well-being's importance, research on educator resilience in active conflict zones remains limited, with most studies examining post-conflict reconstruction rather than ongoing warfare conditions. Existing literature on teachers in conflict contexts predominantly focuses on refugee educators, post-conflict trauma recovery, or historical conflicts rather than real-time experiences during active hostilities. Kelleher et al. (2018) noted that education in emergencies research often treats teachers as resources for student support while neglecting educators' own needs and experiences as conflict-affected individuals. This gap reflects broader tendencies to instrumentalize teachers during crises, expecting them to provide care and stability for students without adequate attention to their own psychological and professional support needs. The Ukrainian context

offers crucial opportunity to address this gap by examining how teachers navigate simultaneous professional demands and personal crisis while conflict continues.

The significance of documenting Ukrainian teachers' resilience narratives extends beyond immediate crisis response to broader questions about educational continuity, cultural preservation, and social reconstruction during and following conflict. Schools and teachers represent key sites of cultural transmission and national identity formation, particularly salient in contexts where education itself becomes contested terrain. Teachers' decisions to continue teaching despite danger, their adaptations to maintain educational quality, and their efforts to support students' well-being constitute acts of both professional commitment and cultural resistance. Understanding these narratives honors educators' extraordinary efforts while generating knowledge applicable to supporting teachers facing diverse crises globally. As armed conflicts increasingly affect civilian populations and educational infrastructure worldwide, insights from Ukrainian teachers' experiences offer vital guidance for crisis education planning, teacher support systems, and resilience-building interventions that may protect both educators and the educational continuity they strive to maintain.

METHOD

This study employed narrative inquiry methodology to examine teacher resilience in war-affected Ukrainian schools, prioritizing participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. Following Clandinin's (2013) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space attending to temporality, sociality, and place, the research explored how teachers' resilience narratives unfolded over time, within social relationships and cultural contexts, and across disrupted physical locations. Twenty-three Ukrainian teachers participated, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity across regions (eastern frontline areas, central Ukraine, and western regions), school levels (primary, secondary, vocational), and conflict exposure intensity. Participants included teachers who remained in heavily affected areas, those displaced within Ukraine, and educators managing hybrid teaching situations. The sample comprised seventeen female and six male teachers, ages ranging from twenty-six to sixty-two years, with teaching experience from four to thirty-eight years. Chase (2005) emphasized that narrative inquiry sample sizes should prioritize depth over breadth, enabling sustained engagement with individual stories while identifying patterns across narratives, justifying this study's intensive focus on twenty-three detailed accounts rather than superficial engagement with larger numbers.

Data collection occurred through semi-structured narrative interviews conducted between September 2023 and March 2024 via secure video conferencing platforms, with interviews lasting ninety to one hundred fifty minutes. Interview protocols invited teachers to share their experiences chronologically from conflict onset through present, focusing on critical incidents, decision-making processes, adaptation strategies, and sources of strength and difficulty. Following Riessman's

(2008) dialogic approach to narrative interviewing, the researcher adopted a listening stance encouraging extended storytelling rather than fragmentary question-response exchanges, with follow-up questions exploring meanings, emotions, and reflections embedded in participants' accounts. All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian with professional translation to English for analysis. Data analysis employed Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach, maintaining stories' integrity while identifying themes across participants' experiences. The analytical process involved multiple readings of interview transcripts, constructing narrative profiles for each participant, identifying recurring resilience themes and mechanisms, and examining how contextual factors shaped resilience trajectories. Trustworthiness was established through member checking where participants reviewed their narrative summaries, prolonged engagement with data, reflexive journaling about researcher positionality, and triangulation with documentary evidence of Ukrainian educational conditions. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant safety through secure communication channels and pseudonym use, providing access to psychological support resources, and acknowledging the emotional burden of recounting traumatic experiences while recognizing participants' agency in choosing to share their stories. The research received ethical approval from the institutional review board and adhered to guidelines for research in conflict-affected contexts established by humanitarian research networks.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Maintaining Educational Continuity Through Adaptive Innovation

Teachers' narratives revealed extraordinary resourcefulness in maintaining educational continuity despite destroyed infrastructure, displacement, and ongoing security threats. Participants described teaching in basement bomb shelters, subway stations, temporary facilities, and through hybrid models combining online and in-person instruction when conditions permitted. One teacher from Kharkiv recounted conducting mathematics lessons in a school basement converted to classroom and shelter, with students bringing cushions to sit on concrete floors while air raid sirens interrupted instruction multiple times daily. Another educator from Mariupol described establishing an informal school in a temporary displacement center, using salvaged materials and volunteer support to create learning spaces for children who had lost everything. These accounts demonstrate what Southwick et al. (2014) identified as active coping strategies, where individuals maintain agency and purpose by taking constructive action despite limited control over circumstances.

The shift to online and distance learning, initially necessitated by COVID-19 pandemic, became crucial for educational continuity as conflict escalated. However, teachers emphasized that war-time online teaching differed dramatically from pandemic remote learning, as students and teachers faced not merely isolation but active danger, infrastructure destruction affecting internet access, and psychological trauma impacting concentration and engagement. One secondary teacher explained

that lessons were designed in fifteen-minute segments anticipating interruptions from air raids, with flexible assignment deadlines accommodating students' unpredictable circumstances. Teachers reported developing new pedagogical approaches prioritizing essential content, incorporating psychosocial support, and creating community through virtual spaces. These adaptations align with Mansfield et al. (2012) findings that resilient teachers demonstrate flexibility and creative problem-solving, adjusting expectations and practices to match contextual realities rather than rigidly maintaining pre-crisis approaches.

Narratives also revealed teachers' expanded roles beyond academic instruction to encompass psychosocial support, safety coordination, and community leadership. Educators described counseling traumatized students, coordinating evacuation procedures, distributing humanitarian aid, and maintaining communication with displaced families. One primary teacher recounted how she transformed her classroom into a comfort space where children could process experiences through art and storytelling, recognizing that academic learning required first addressing trauma's psychological impacts. This role expansion reflects what Fantilli and McDougall (2009) identified as emotional labor inherent in teaching, intensified exponentially in crisis contexts where boundaries between professional and personal, academic and therapeutic, teacher and caregiver dissolve. Several participants acknowledged tension between meeting expanded expectations and maintaining their own well-being, with one teacher noting that while she felt honored to support students, the emotional weight sometimes felt unbearable.

Despite demonstrated innovation and commitment, teachers emphasized that adaptation has limits and costs. Narratives revealed frustration with resource inadequacies, exhaustion from sustained crisis response, and concern about educational quality under compromised conditions. Teachers worried about learning loss, particularly for vulnerable students lacking technological access or stable environments for remote learning. One vocational teacher expressed anguish that practical training became impossible without equipment and workshops, potentially limiting students' future opportunities. These concerns highlight what Beltman et al. (2011) identified as distinction between resilience and mere survival, questioning whether adaptation under extreme adversity represents genuine resilience or prolonged stress response that may ultimately prove unsustainable. Teachers' narratives acknowledged their resourcefulness while also naming legitimate limits to what educators can accomplish without adequate systemic support, material resources, and restoration of basic safety conditions.

Sources of Resilience: Solidarity, Purpose, and Meaning-Making

Table 1. Primary Sources of Teacher Resilience in War-Affected Ukrainian Schools

Resilience Source	Percentage of Teachers Identifying	Key Manifestations
Student Relationships and Responsibility	96%	Seeing students' needs, witnessing their resilience, sense of protective obligation
Collective Professional Solidarity	87%	Peer support networks, shared problem-solving, collective identity as educators
Sense of National Purpose	83%	Teaching as cultural preservation, resistance through education, contributing to Ukraine's future
Personal Values and Calling	74%	Teaching as vocation, commitment to children, professional identity centrality
Family and Community Support	70%	Practical assistance, emotional support, shared understanding
Spiritual/Philosophical Beliefs	52%	Faith traditions, existential meaning-making, hope beyond present circumstances

Note: Percentages reflect proportion of 23 participants who identified each source as significant in their resilience narratives.

Teachers consistently identified relationships with students as their primary motivation for persisting despite adversity. Narratives were filled with stories of students' courage, gratitude, and resilience that inspired teachers to continue. One teacher described a student who attended online classes from a bomb shelter, always smiling despite having lost his home, as embodying why teaching remained worthwhile. Another recounted how students' excited reactions to returning to in-person learning, even in damaged facilities, reminded her that normalcy and hope were possible. These accounts reflect what Noddings (1992) conceptualized as ethic of care in teaching, where relationships and responsibility for students' well-being motivate professional commitment beyond contractual obligations or personal benefit. Teachers' narratives revealed that witnessing students' resilience paradoxically strengthened their own, creating reciprocal inspiration rather than one-directional care provision.

Professional solidarity emerged as crucial resilience resource, with teachers emphasizing how colleague support networks provided practical assistance,

emotional processing, and shared identity reinforcement. Participants described informal teacher groups sharing resources, pedagogical strategies, and emotional support through messaging applications and periodic gatherings when safe. One teacher explained that knowing colleagues faced similar challenges reduced isolation and normalized difficult emotions, preventing the self-blame that might otherwise emerge from feeling unable to teach effectively. This collective dimension of resilience aligns with Gu and Li's (2013) findings that teacher resilience is substantially relational rather than purely individual, cultivated through professional communities that provide belonging, validation, and shared purpose. Several teachers contrasted their wartime experiences with pre-war professional isolation, suggesting that crisis paradoxically strengthened professional bonds by making mutual support essential rather than optional.

Many teachers framed their continued teaching as contribution to Ukrainian national resistance and cultural preservation, imbuing professional work with profound meaning beyond typical educational objectives. Participants described education as defending Ukrainian identity and future against attempts at cultural erasure, with teaching itself constituting resistance. One history teacher explained that ensuring students learned Ukrainian history and language in Ukrainian represented defiance against occupation and forced russification. Another described teaching as planting seeds for Ukraine's reconstruction and democratic future, providing purpose beyond immediate crisis survival. This meaning-making through larger purpose resonates with Frankl's (2006) emphasis on finding meaning in suffering as crucial for psychological survival during extreme adversity. Teachers' narratives illustrated how connecting immediate actions to transcendent purposes sustained motivation when circumstances would otherwise seem hopeless, transforming teaching from merely professional duty to existential commitment.

However, resilience sources also included inherent tensions and vulnerabilities. The very factors sustaining teachers—student responsibility, national purpose, professional identity—also created pressure and moral distress when circumstances prevented fulfilling these commitments fully. Teachers expressed guilt about evacuating when students remained, anguish when unable to meet all students' needs, and fear that educational gaps would harm students' futures. One teacher described experiencing simultaneous pride in her resilience and shame for not doing more, illustrating the complex emotional landscapes resilient individuals navigate. These tensions reflect what Masten and Obradović (2006) identified as costs of competence, where successful adaptation under adversity requires sustained effort that depletes resources and may ultimately undermine the very capacities enabling initial resilience. Teachers' narratives revealed resilience not as effortless strength but as deliberate, exhausting work of maintaining purpose and function despite wanting to collapse, raising urgent questions about long-term sustainability without significant support augmentation.

Psychological Costs and Sustainability Concerns

Despite demonstrated resilience, teachers' narratives revealed profound psychological costs including trauma symptoms, moral injury, anticipatory grief, and existential exhaustion threatening long-term sustainability. Participants described hypervigilance, sleep disturbances, intrusive memories, and difficulty concentrating, recognizing these as trauma responses while feeling obligated to continue functioning professionally. One teacher explained that she experienced nightmares about student deaths and constantly imagined worst-case scenarios, yet felt she could not take mental health leave because students needed her presence. Another described emotional numbness that initially seemed protective but increasingly worried her as it extended to positive experiences and relationships outside teaching. These accounts align with Figley's (2002) concept of compassion fatigue, where sustained exposure to others' trauma while providing care depletes caregivers' own emotional resources, potentially leading to burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and impaired functioning.

Moral injury emerged as particularly salient theme, with teachers experiencing distress from situations violating core values or requiring impossible choices between competing moral obligations. Participants described anguish over evacuating while students remained, guilt about teaching seemingly trivial content when students faced existential threats, and conflict between professional duties and family safety. One teacher recounted the devastating decision to leave her school community to protect her young children, feeling she betrayed students who needed her despite recognizing her children's safety was paramount. Another described moral conflict in maintaining academic standards when students were traumatized, questioning whether rigor was cruel or essential normalcy. These experiences reflect Litz et al.'s (2009) conceptualization of moral injury as distinct from post-traumatic stress, arising from perpetrating, witnessing, or failing to prevent actions violating deeply held moral beliefs, creating profound guilt, shame, and spiritual crisis that conventional trauma interventions may not address.

Teachers identified significant gaps in psychological and institutional support, with many reporting minimal access to mental health services, inadequate administrative understanding of their needs, and professional expectations unchanged despite radically altered circumstances. Participants described administrators who demanded normal productivity without acknowledging wartime constraints, colleagues who minimized struggles or promoted toxic positivity, and systemic absence of trauma-informed policies or practices. One teacher explained that when she requested reduced workload due to displacement and trauma symptoms, administrators suggested she was not resilient enough for teaching, exemplifying how institutional responses can compound rather than mitigate adversity's impacts. Several participants accessed support through international NGOs or private arrangements but noted that most Ukrainian teachers lacked such resources. These gaps reflect broader failures in education systems to recognize teacher well-being as foundational to educational quality rather than

individual responsibility, particularly problematic in crisis contexts where systemic support becomes even more critical as individual resources deplete.

Narratives also revealed concerns about collective trauma's long-term impacts on Ukrainian education. Teachers worried that an entire generation of educators was being traumatized simultaneously, potentially affecting teaching quality and student relationships for years. Some participants questioned their own capacity to continue teaching long-term, expressing fears about burning out or becoming cynical, potentially leaving the profession they once loved. Younger teachers particularly wondered whether they could sustain teaching careers that had begun in such extreme circumstances, lacking pre-war experiences of normal teaching to sustain them. One early-career teacher poignantly asked how to build professional identity and competence when crisis teaching was her only reference point. These concerns highlight what Hobfoll et al. (2007) described as resource loss spirals, where initial resource depletion makes individuals more vulnerable to subsequent stressors, potentially creating cascading negative effects without intervention. The sustainability question extends beyond individual resilience to systemic capacity, as Ukrainian education's recovery will require not merely rebuilding infrastructure but addressing the collective trauma affecting the educators upon whom reconstruction depends. Without substantial investment in teacher support, psychological services, workload adjustments, and trauma-informed institutional practices, the very resilience that has sustained education during active conflict may prove insufficient for the extended recovery period ahead.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Ukrainian teachers' resilience in war-affected schools represents dynamic, contextual processes of meaning-making, adaptation, and perseverance rather than fixed personality traits or simple survival. Teachers demonstrated extraordinary resourcefulness in maintaining educational continuity through pedagogical innovation, role expansion, and collective solidarity while navigating ongoing threats to safety, infrastructure destruction, and profound personal trauma. Primary resilience sources included relationships with students, professional community solidarity, sense of national purpose through education, and deep vocational commitment that imbued teaching with transcendent meaning during existential crisis. However, narratives also exposed significant psychological costs including trauma symptoms, moral injury, compassion fatigue, and sustainability concerns that threaten educators' long-term well-being and Ukrainian education's recovery capacity. The findings underscore that resilience should not be romanticized or weaponized to justify inadequate support, but rather understood as active, exhausting work requiring substantial systemic resources, psychological services, and institutional responsiveness to sustain. These insights have implications beyond Ukraine for supporting teachers facing diverse crises globally, emphasizing that educator well-being represents foundational educational infrastructure deserving investment equivalent to physical facilities and curriculum

resources. As armed conflicts increasingly affect civilian populations and educational systems worldwide, Ukrainian teachers' narratives offer both inspiration and urgent warnings about resilience's possibilities and limits, honoring their extraordinary dedication while demanding systems that support rather than deplete the educators upon whom students and societies depend during and following crisis.

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