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Educational Leadership in Crisis and Conflict: A Case Study on Ukrainian Educational Leadership and Institutional Adaptability

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ABSTRACT

This research project aims to improve upon our understanding of the role of education during violent conflict through the Victim, Perpetrator, Liberator, and Peacebuilder (VPLP) framework posited by Pherali et al. (2022). This research uses decolonial theory to move beyond the lens of singularity into the lived and multiple realities of education during conflict. Using reflexive qualitative interviews of five Ukrainian educational leaders who conducted community projects following the full-scale hostilities beginning in 2022 (Mandragelya, 2022), it builds upon the VPLP framework from Pherali et al. (2022), to understand how Ukrainian schools adapted to crisis. These interviews revealed how Ukrainian educational leaders shift between all four roles described in the VPLP framework instead of just performing one role. This research explores the importance of leader agency in prioritizing building resilience to adapt to changing circumstances during conflict and move beyond victimisation and perpetration roles to include liberation and peacebuilding education. During conflict, these educational leaders attempted to balance their educational responsibilities with liberation by resisting Russian hegemonic tradition and peacebuilding through community and trust-building projects. These attempts highlight the crucial role of educational leadership utilising their positionality to make critical decisions regarding how schools function and impact their communities during conflict and crisis situations.

KEYWORDS

Educational leadership, education in emergencies, community support, school leadership, education and conflict

Introduction

Educational leaders are increasingly faced with an extreme challenge – how to navigate education during growing uncertainty and unpredictability to prioritise a child's right to learn during emergencies (Rustad, 2024). With violent conflict not only becoming more prevalent worldwide but also more visible due to social media (Patrikarakos, 2017; Rustad, 2024), all leaders must grapple with how to handle violence and how to support their communities during times of crisis. Within Education in Emergencies (EiE), popular research focuses on how to build resilience[1] and continue to meet the child's right to learn, often at a governmental or higher organisational level. My research seeks to highlight the grassroots nature of school leaders' individual actions and their impact locally rather than on state policies regarding peace or cultivating resilience from the top down. This research expands on the understanding of schools' role during violent war and conflict as both a form of resilience building and civil resistance against Russian hegemony[2] through

1 I use Masten, (2014) definition of resilience as "the capacity to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" because of its flexibility to refer to individual or organizational adaptability.

2 Gramsci introduces *hegemony* when discussing the relationships between civil society, economic basis, and political superstructures of society and defines it at the social, cultural, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group over other groups (Gramsci, 1971, p75).

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Ukrainian educators and leaders.

I draw on decolonial theory of multiplicity to interrogate the Victim, Perpetrator, Liberator, and Peacebuilder (from now on referred to as VPLP) framework proposed by Pherali et al., (2022). My research focuses on educational leadership and attempts to understand how school leaders view their positionality in relation to their work and community through conducting educational projects. I focused on understanding how these projects are understood and implemented on the ground during violent conflict and what we can learn about individual impact and agency to create protective factors of resilience. I posed three questions:

- How do educational leaders in Ukraine perceive their role and the role of education during violent conflict? (RQ 1)
- What is the perceived need and impact of their community projects during violent conflict? (RQ 2)
- How do schools balance conducting these community projects with continuing educational learning? (RQ 3)

Ukrainian Context and Civil Resistance

This research seeks to understand how Ukrainian educational leaders conceptualise education's role following the full-scale hostilities in February 2022, but to understand this, we must understand the Ukrainian context that has led us here. Ukrainian history is fraught with foreign domination, primarily between Poland and Russia, which continues to impact Ukrainian identities today. The historical difference in colonization between the western part of the country, which was colonised by Poland, and the eastern part, which was colonised by Russia, has produced divisions in culture, ideology, language, and experiences that contribute to prejudice, identity, and politics in Ukraine today (Sasse & Lackner, 2018). Despite this, many Ukrainians view themselves as Ukrainian first and foremost, even when faced with 'denationalization' and continued attempts by Russia to 'destroy Ukraine and the 'soul' of their nation' (Etkind, 2022, p395; Hrycak, 1997; Wanner, 1998, p13, 43). Within this context, Ukrainians undertook civil resistance against the Soviet hegemonic state, using 'large-scale resistance of a more passive type', rather than 'armed resistance' and focusing on identity-building through oral forms of remembering which ultimately led to a successful self-determination movement in Ukraine (Hrycak, 1997; Nabavi, 2006; Wanner, 1998, p72). These forms of non-violent resistance have been a pivotal part of Ukrainian freedom fighting and historical successes have led to a nation that regularly utilizes the strength of non-violent protests *en masse* to challenge power structures. The cultural embeddedness of civil resistance to Russian imperialism has made Ukrainians extremely adept at undermining Russian occupation and authority which will continue to make their territorial incursions challenging and these forms of resistance have only continued to increase following the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

In Ukraine, schools are targets of colonial violence from Russia, firmly placing them within the victim category of the VPLP framework. Figure 1 shows a school in Zhytomyr that reflects the ways educational infrastructure has been targeted with bomb strikes and destruction (UNESCO, 2023).

However, the category of "education as victim" would be insufficient to describe the role education plays within Ukraine. Children who attend these schools may lack a physical space to continue their education (Balachuk, 2022; Dasey, 2022; UN News, 2023), but the Covid-19 pandemic allowed virtual platforms to become more feasible as a space for education to continue (Stoliarchuk et al., 2022). Therefore, education can continue but the motivations for holding and attending classes have changed significantly. For students, learning is a mechanism for gaining control over the situation by increasing their skill capacity for the future, while adults and teachers often view it as a way to contribute to their community and Ukrainian resistance against Russian oppression (Herman, 2022; Stoliarchuk et al., 2022).

Figure 1
A bombed school in Ukraine. Supplied by Mykhailo Fedorov, the Vice Prime Minister for Innovations, Development of Education, Science & Technologies on X (Mykhailo Fedorov [@FedorovMykhailo], 2022)

Intersecting Roles and Theoretical Framework

Educational research into the roles schools play within crisis education has focused on dissecting the interactive roles education plays during emergencies such as through the VPLP framework created by Pherali (2016). The VPLP framework limits the categorization of education's role to the following: *victim*, wherein teachers, students and educational infrastructure are targets of violence (UNESCO, 2011); *perpetrator*, wherein education is used as a tool for social control and manipulation (K. D. Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2005); *liberator*, wherein education empowers people against oppression and builds critical consciousness (Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2001; Jaramillo & Carreon, 2014; Pherali, 2016); or *peacebuilder*, wherein education attempts to transform how conflict is dealt with by focusing on cooperative solutions (Cremin, 2016; Pherali et al., 2022). However, this is a simplified understanding of education's role during violent conflict.

The decolonial belief in the multiplicity of social realities inherently means that education performs multiple functions and roles simultaneously (Cram & Adcock, 2021; Held, 2019). Where any school falls between the plurality of roles is dependent on the values, vision, and influence of the leadership structure in the school. Leaders as individual agents prioritise one function over another and use their influence as leverage to motivate students and staff toward a common goal (MacBeath & Dempster, 2008). To highlight how education performs multiple functions, I draw on the case study Pherali (2016) utilises to create the VPLP framework - the educational system of Nepal during the Maoist revolution in 1996. In Nepal, educational practices leading up to the Maoist revolution were viewed as a 'unifying force' while simultaneously perpetuating hegemonic policies which damaged perceptions of schools and education (Shields & Rappleye, 2008). As a result, teachers and educational leaders became victims of extreme violence in proxy power struggles between the Communist Party and the state government (Caddell, 2006; Pherali, 2016). While teachers and educational leaders were both victims and perpetrators of violence during the Nepalese 'People's War', they struggled to perform either liberating or peacebuilding educational roles within this context.

A more recent case in which the VPLP framework can be applied to assess the variety of roles education plays during conflict is the protracted violence in Palestine. In Palestine, schools are regularly targets of state-sponsored violence from military forces, regular gun violence, and bombings, in addition to restricted movement (Affouneh, 2007; Simaan, 2020; Veronese et al., 2017). While educational institutions

are continuously victims of violence, students perceived them as places of community and therefore of safety (Veronese et al., 2017) [3] and they performed community protective functions as UNRWA schools provided food and shelter to hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians in Gaza since October 2023 (UNRWA, 2024). In addition to physical violence, Palestinian educators are limited in their ability to teach for liberation without losing their jobs, resulting in subversion of Israeli apartheid in ways that allow teachers to bend these policies without drawing attention (Makkawi, 2002; Nakhleh, 1979). Protracted violence in Palestine has led to more informal education practices in which liberation and peacebuilding are more accessible roles for educators to play (Feldt, 2008; Vered, 2015, 2016; Veronese et al., 2017). Israeli apartheid and control form the basis of education as perpetrator, and actions to counteract Israeli hegemony are perceived to thwart peacebuilding efforts between Palestine and Israel (Feldt, 2008; Vered, 2015, 2016). However, the experience of Palestinian subversion is also within the role of liberation as Palestinian practitioners attempt to support Palestinian independence movements in both formal and informal settings (Makkawi, 2002; Nakhleh, 1979).

In Ukraine, the VPLP framework can also be applied to demonstrate the multifunctionality of the educational system. In addition to the aforementioned community building and skill building functions, education is also seen as a way to liberate Ukraine and subvert Russian hegemony (Tiostanova & Mignolo, 2012). Schools function as community hubs where they distribute humanitarian aid and build social cohesion which is critical to peacebuilding efforts (Novelli & Sayed, 2016; Orzhel, 2022). These changes in attitude highlight victimisation as they would likely not happen without direct attacks, while simultaneously demonstrating how education performs multiple roles through resistance of Russian hegemony and community building.

Role of Educational Leaders

To understand how educational leaders adapt to crises, we must first examine how educational leadership is structured. These structures can change how a school operates, makes decisions, constructs collective identity, which stakeholders are included or excluded, as well as how various voices inform the decision-making process. Research on school leadership brings to light a wide variety of structures from instructional leadership, which focuses on teaching and learning of educational content, to social justice leadership, which actively dismantles forms of marginalization in society, and everything in between (T. Bush & Glover, 2003, 2014; Ryan, 2006; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Regardless of the format leadership takes, it is frequently composed of these 3 concepts: influence, vision, and values (T. Bush & Glover, 2014). Influence allows leadership to make intentional decisions which shape their community and which direction their school will move collectively (T. Bush & Glover, 2014; Leithwood, 2012; Southworth, 1993). This collective directive highlights vision and the way that leadership either creates a shared vision actively with their community to progress forward and implement change (T. Bush & Glover, 2003; MacBeath et al., 2018; Southworth, 1993) or imposes a vision through power relations and authority which isn't receptive to other ideas (Thoonen et al., 2011). Values link these two together as they lay the foundation for actionable goals and ideas and the tension between values, vision, and influence is often where priorities are defined, and decision-making occurs. The school's values often include personal values of the leaders and imposed values of governing bodies to which the institution is accountable (T. Bush, 2008; Day et al., 2001).

The challenge for leadership studies is to understand what shifts occur to account for new roles of school leaders during crisis situations. Schools need crisis management planning but should be adaptable and understand that crisis management policies "are useful for forward planning and envisioning scenarios but… in reality [emergency and crisis management] falls back onto something less tangible than 'processes and guidelines and paper'" (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Mutch, 2015, p 52; Tarrant, 2014). To be ready and able to make critical decisions, schools benefit from collaborative models and must often be able to act

3 This research predates the 2023 escalation of Israeli state violence against Palestine.

without complete information due to situational demands and the sensitivity of crisis (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Mutch, 2015). In the leadership for learning framework, an emphasis is placed on learning as the common purpose of schools and driving vision of progress (MacBeath & Dempster, 2008), but this aim is insufficient when it comes to leadership during crisis which focuses on engendering hope and the well-being of students and the community first and foremost (L. Smith & Riley, 2012; Tarrant, 2014; Wanjiru, 2021). While international humanitarian law is supposed to protect education during crises (INEE, 2010; Tawil, 2000; UNESCO, 2000), educational leadership frequently finds they must sacrifice academic learning in favour of security and community resiliency (Stoliarchuk et al., 2022). When leadership values include resistance against an oppressive colonial power, schools have the capacity for transformative change within their communities. This can be achieved through civil resistance that is responsive to their community and encompasses the educational and crisis management roles that schools must take on during conflict through the VPLP framework (Pherali, 2016, 2021; Selvik, 2021; Zakharia, 2016).

Methodology

My project utilized asynchronous semi-structured interviews with 5 educational leaders who were selected based on the types of community work that these leaders have conducted at their school following the full-scale hostilities beginning in 2022. This allowed me to target institutions that are explicitly intertwining themselves with their communities on a deeper level than solely as an educational institution. By targeting these schools and their leaders, I hoped to better understand how their deeper community connection may also lead to more complex role-play within their communities.

Voices of Ukrainians and their subjective experiences continue to be usurped by Russian hegemonic practices and Russian power in the modern world (Chernetsky, 2003). However, this research is a testimony of both resilience and resistance as told through the voices of Ukrainian educators and leaders at the forefront of the civil resistance movement against Russian aggression. It aligns with decolonial understandings of multiple realities and thus attempts to understand individual subjectivity and perspectives through co-created realities and subjectivities of interview text and narratives (Worth, 2017). My process acknowledges my role as a researcher in influencing these dialogic discussions with participants in creating data together and interpreting understandings (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; P. L. T. Smith, 2021).

Sample

This project used purposive sampling techniques to capture participants located at schools who have engaged in community work beyond the school institution since the onset of full-scale hostilities in 2022. To define what was considered a community project, I focused on schools that began working on projects for their communities which included members who were not affiliated with the school in any way. I kept the definition quite broad to capture a wide range of schools with varying types of projects. Participants were found using personal connections from the researcher's previous work in Ukraine. 11 participants were contacted in total, however only 7 responded with signed consent. Answers to the first and second sets of interview questions were received by 5 of the participants with only 3 responding to the third set of questions. These challenges were attributed to a range of factors including the context of the participants living through conflict and the asynchronous interview format. While the text format mitigated physical safety risks and allowed for optimal flexibility of participants, it was difficult to follow up and continue the interview process due to the asynchronous style (Chiumento et al., 2018; Opdenakker, 2006).

Interviews

Asynchronous semi-structured interviews were conducted via email to gather data.[4] This style allowed

4 One exception was made for a participant who requested the interview be conducted via Google Meet. They noted during the interview that their first language was Russian, which they did not want to use. They preferred to use English, however, were not

school leaders flexibility to respond, an advantage in light of air raids or sudden issues that may arise in an active conflict zone (Opdenakker, 2006). This method also addressed unstable connectivity during conflict by allowing participants more freedom to answer according to their ability rather than at a specific time. Before interviews, participants were sent informed consent for electronic signature. This form underwent a triple translation[5] into Ukrainian to ensure understanding and included information regarding how participants could protect themselves against the risk of cyberattacks, assurance of data security and GDPR compliance, and information about the research project itself. All data has been anonymised in this article to protect the leaders and their identities.

These interviews were conducted in Ukrainian and sent to participants in 3 thematic sets, divided to tackle each of the 3 research questions. The first set of questions addressed leadership conceptions of resilience and how they perceive the school's role within their community. The second set of questions addressed a specific community project that each leader has conducted. The third and final set of questions addressed how leaders attempt to balance learning and the organization of these community projects. The interviews were then translated or transcribed and imported into qualitative analysis software, NVIVO, to code the data. Thematic analysis was then utilized to identify patterns in the interview data. This type of analysis is used in qualitative research to identify and interpret patterns and themes within the data to develop insights and understanding (Boyatzis, 1998; Naeem et al., 2023).

Additional Ethical Considerations

When conducting research in a conflict zone, it is crucial to minimise harm and ensure that research is truly necessary within the context and ethically sound. For this project, I obtained ethical approval from the University of Cambridge and investigated Ukrainian social science research to check for compliance with Ukrainian ethics board approval, but discovered Ukraine does not have one. In lieu of this, I contacted several Ukrainian researchers or American researchers who work predominantly in Ukraine to verify my ethics and methodological process with them to ensure it did not cause undue harm. All personally identifiable information was removed prior to data storage and all names were removed as well as geographical markers. The details of the educational projects each school conducted were redacted to ensure the school is not identifiable. Responses were stored in a password protected and secured drive available only to the researcher.

The interviews focused on how directors viewed the role of education during active conflict. While these interviews did not discuss the conflict itself, I acknowledge that these projects were conducted during active conflict and therefore may be linked to sensitive memories that could cause psychological distress. To minimise harm, I used asynchronous interviews that allowed participants to respond at suitable times and when they are comfortable as well as take breaks if needed. The interview schedule was piloted multiple times to ensure minimisation of triggering language and participants were reminded of their ability to withdraw at any time in case the interviews were too triggering to continue. In addition, I gathered resources which included free psychological support in Ukrainian to give to participants but recognise that these resources and discussions regarding mental health are considered taboo in Ukrainian culture, so I was cautious not to press leaders to use them.

Findings

Using thematic analysis, I identified 5 common themes that emerged from my participants' discussions:

confident enough in their English to be certain they would understand the questions correctly or be able to communicate them effectively in written English.

5 Triple translation is the process through which a document is translated by 3 separate translators. While many researchers use only two translators (double translation), I pursued the task by first discussing what I intended with the first translator, and then checking with two others to ensure that understanding was maximized across regional differences of Ukraine.

resilience, resistance, safety and security, stability, and community and unity. I created Figure 2 to demonstrate how these themes fall into the VPLP framework as well as how these themes were created within our discussions.

Figure 2
shows thematic groups and their connection to the VPLP framework and resilience building capacity; created by author.

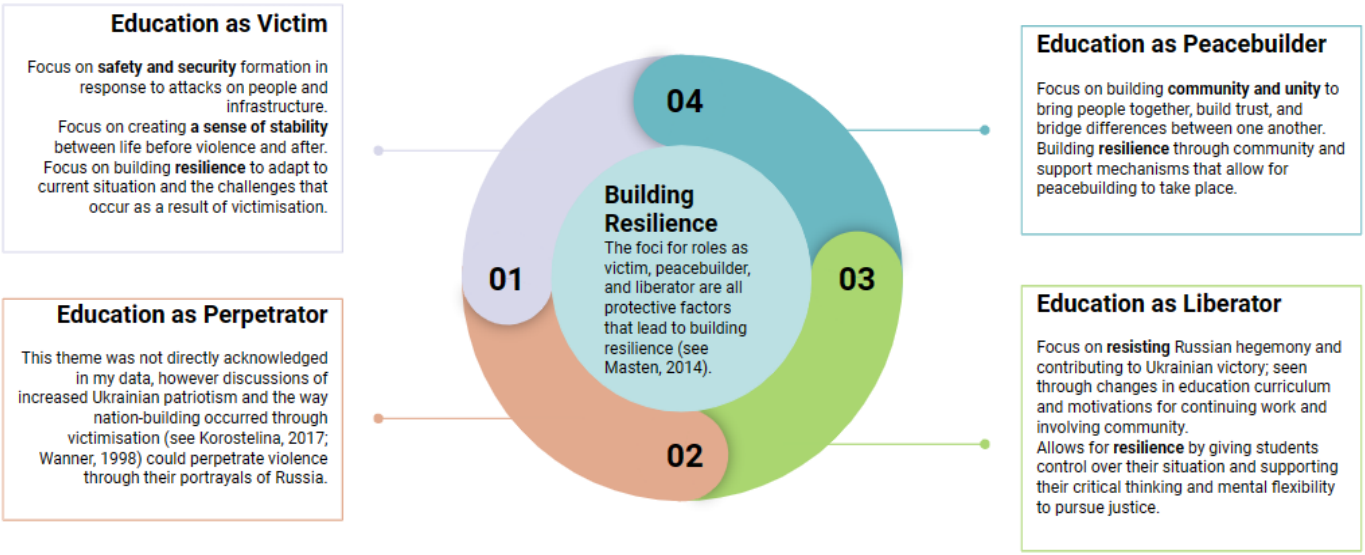
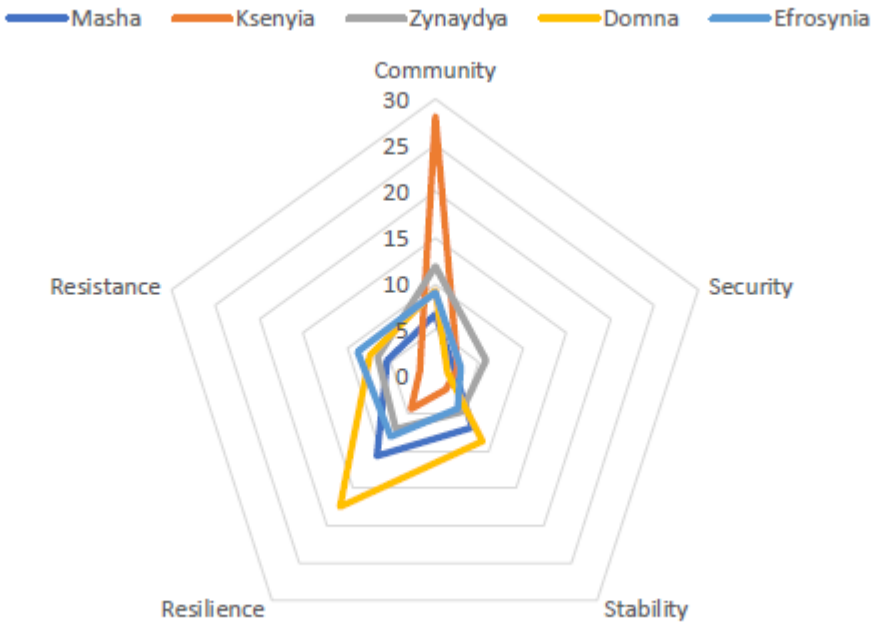


Figure 3
Percentage of Conversation focused on Themes; created by author



All of the above themes were used when discussing the role of education through violent conflict (RQ 1) and the perceived impact of each school's community projects (RQ 2). When discussing how these projects were balanced with educational learning (RQ 3), leaders often focused on integrating learning and

skill building into each project by building resilience, inspiring resistance, promoting student safety and security, providing stability, and offering a supportive community. Figure 3 (below) attempts to demonstrate the interaction between personal and professional values and how these show up in conversations about the role of schools during emergencies.

Understanding what themes [resistance, resilience, stability, security, and community] leaders focused on most is critical as Day et al., (2001) describes the way these values influence the vision and performative methods of influence for each school. While some researchers described how values can be imposed by the state, all leaders interviewed mentioned a reduction in state-required reporting and influence following the full-scale hostilities, meaning that the direction of the school is more flexible during this time and subject to personal values over state prescribed values (T. Bush, 2008). What leaders choose to prioritise now could have long-term impacts on their students and communities and the way these bodies build resilience, view peace in the future, etc., that could be explored in further research.

Role of Education and Leadership in Violent Conflict

Leaders have agency in determining what role schools and education will play in their communities and often shift roles according to a situation's needs (MacBeath & Dempster, 2008). In addition, leaders rarely stick to only one type of leadership, instead adjusting the form of leadership for certain projects or people and often leadership must further reprioritize during crisis to shift from a focus on educational content to inspiring hope, building community, and improving security (L. Smith & Riley, 2012; Stoliarchuk et al., 2022). In Ukraine, schools continue to provide educational content in addition to new responsibilities of crisis management and leadership during violent imperial conflict, demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Types of Leadership in Ukrainian Education

Type of Leadership	**Impact in Ukraine**
Educational Leadership	Providing educational content and learning processes
Crisis Leadership	Crisis management and reprioritizing of responsibilities
Emancipatory or Resistance Leadership	Dismantling Russian colonialism and hegemony

Through these reprioritisations, schools in crisis occupy various categories within the VPLP framework by pairing an acknowledgement of victimization through crisis management, focus on liberation to dismantle hegemony, and building stability and community to reflect quintessential components of peacebuilding education (Giroux, 2020; Novelli & Sayed, 2016; L. Smith & Riley, 2012). In the oscillation between all three leadership styles, Ukrainian schools demonstrate the permeability of the VPLP categories and the way they can occupy multiple roles simultaneously during violent conflict. While they are victims of Russian violence and aggression, they increase their capacity to act within the liberation and peacebuilding roles of the VPLP framework. This increase in capacity occurs through resilience building, resistance leadership, and supporting community.

Perception of Impact

All participants were selected based on the premise that they conducted community projects to fully gauge their perception of community impact beyond their school. When asked how leaders knew the needs of their community, each leader had a different response. Only Ksenyia[6] conducted an actual needs analysis, while the others said they would normally do so but the nature of their project was too time-sensitive, which corroborates crisis research findings (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020). Leaders cited either intuition (Domna and Efrosynia) or experience (Domna, Masha, Zynayda) to identify community needs and justify their actions

6 Ksenyia, Domna, Masha, Zynayda, and Efrosynia are anonymized names chosen to represent my participants.

in their projects. While schools are often more geographically isolated and their impact is often localised in comparison to universities (Curran & Kitchin, 2021; Orzhel, 2022), schools conducting community projects in Ukraine expanded well beyond their local community to increase their impact. One school had over 60,000 students engaged in a virtual project with volunteers countrywide, another discussed the change from highly localized community impact prior to February 2022 to conducting some projects at a national level post-February 2022.

In discussing the impact on individuals, leaders stated that their projects were crucial to building resilience and coping with the crisis and violence they experienced. All participants viewed the role of the school as quintessential to building community resilience, citing their own experiences to demonstrate this. Domna stated:

> Participation in public projects prevented us from falling into the abyss of hatred for the enemy, from becoming inhuman and moral criminals, from hating the whole world, which has been simply watching Ukraine for so long (and in some places even now). We turned our anger into useful deeds, care and... love.

This demonstrates how schools became essential for stability and cultivating community-wide resilience through their projects by fostering hope, and promoting stronger relationships between community members involved in each project (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 1990). The impact of each school expanded their circle of influence, allowing them to build resilience, trust, community support, stability and safety, which can pave the way for subjective influence of peacebuilding and liberation beyond the local community. These projects differ from projects that are not receptive to lived realities on the ground, which make peacebuilding projects hollow (Zakharia, 2016), in comparison to those described by my participants. They limited Russian imperial aspirations and undermined colonial ambitions through collective forms of resistance within existing institutions which research shows have been historically overlooked by Russian forces (Hrycak, 1997; Scott, 1985; Wanner, 1998). These projects also allowed educational institutions to move collectively into liberation and peacebuilding roles by reducing the impact of Russian aggression and victimization.

Balancing Learning and Crisis Response

Despite the war, leaders must continue to provide learning content for their students. When asked how leaders manage, Ksenyia said, "The school has significantly changed its vision of its role in the community, [it] has become more community-oriented…solving problems not only of the school, but also of the community." These shifts, however, have not led schools to abandon educational pursuits. Instead, leaders must continue pursuing education as a core component of the educational institution while simultaneously responding to the traumatic circumstances that surround them. The pressure to maintain a balance in action was particularly poignant in my discussion with Zynayda who stated that "fate would not give us a second chance" if they committed an error in judgement. During violent conflict, it is impossible to know what tomorrow will bring and therefore it is a challenge to plan or strategize what to prioritise. Instead, leaders work with the immediate needs to balance their roles and make decisions. A lot of their decision-making occurs in the moment rather than through a devised plan or strategy of any kind (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020).

According to all leaders, learning has suffered due to the war and schools are attempting to counter these effects which have changed students' perceptions of self through their practice. When asked about the quality of education during war, Zynayda asked,

> Can we talk about the quality of education? [I]t is most difficult for those who saw the ruins of their school. [For those] who know about the death of their teachers, classmates[, w]ho will never return to their native home[, w]ho can lose faith in humanity. Or have already lost [it]... It will take years, maybe decades, for everything to recover. This time is forever lost for a whole generation of children

of war.

While I expected students to have difficulties continuing educational learning and being motivated to learn due to trauma (Adonteng-Kissi et al., 2019; Brück et al., 2019; Hamilton & Moore, 2003), it seems the war had the opposite effect. Four of five leaders described how students became more passionate about learning, Masha said, "[W]hat struck us the most was that despite all our troubles, the children were eager to learn. They caught every word of the teacher." Only one leader noted a decrease in student motivation, and this finding is important as this school was located in a region which was under Russian occupation longer than any other participant's school or region. This is important as research shows students who endure long-term trauma often struggle academically (Hamilton & Moore, 2003; Masten, 2014), and students who live in areas where direct violence was less long-lasting or prevalent had a more hopeful outlook by comparison.

Limitations

Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, so some ideas and information may have been lost in translation when they cannot be accurately reflected in English terms. To decrease the impact of this limitation, I conducted my analysis in both Ukrainian and English to ensure accuracy of translations and utilised member checking to ensure my findings were grounded in the experiences of my participants and that my data conclusions did not misrepresent them (Bryman, 2016).

This was a small-scale research study with only five participants. As described earlier, Ukraine is incredibly diverse from language and ethnicity to culture and politics, which means this data and the opinions gathered may not reflect the experience of other school directors in Ukraine (Sasse & Lackner, 2018). While the data collected attempted to capture the views of a variety of directors across different geopolitical regions of Ukraine, it does not mean those views are reflected or encompass the ideas of Ukrainians as a whole. In addition, the geopolitical and sociocultural location of Ukraine and the context of war between Russia and Ukraine means that this study may not be generalisable beyond Ukrainian borders.

Finally, the interview style itself posed limitations as the subtleties of physical interaction including non-verbal body language, are missing from these interviews (Holt, 2010; Opdenakker, 2006). This interview style can also lead to difficulties building relationships with participants as the interviews are conducted via text format instead of verbal or face to face (Chiumento et al., 2018). However, my sampling technique allowed me to access participants through trusted relationships to minimise this limitation. Instead of having spontaneous data collection, leaders were able to think carefully about their answers and take additional time. As a result, these answers could be more carefully selected and potentially more biased than if the interviews were conducted face to face.

Implications for Practice

In general, the phenomenon of schools conducting social projects within the wider community is under-researched, but especially so during violent conflict (Shah et al., 2019). As the EiE field continues to pursue resilience studies, I think these projects are extraordinarily important to recognise and bring to light. Given the limited scope of my project, the transferability of findings may be low. Expanding the investigation to a larger scale could be beneficial to understanding how community projects and education are intertwined. Additionally, my research timeframe was short and understanding how this phenomenon progresses during protracted violence would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Throughout the research, I came to recognize that these community projects represented more than just resilience building, extending into forms of civil resistance movements (see Boichak, 2021). In Ukraine,

education is breaking and restructuring our perceptions of how the VPLP framework functions on the ground. Leaders are using their agency to make changes in the function of education by balancing a variety of roles and moving beyond a singular space which feeds into others as Pherali et al., (2022) conceptualises. Instead, schools occupy multiple spaces and roles simultaneously – building resilience and support within the community, which in turn sets the foundation for trust and increases their influence, expanding their capacity to move beyond singularity. Community projects further emphasise the school's receptivity to their community's needs, contextualising their work rather than prescribing a remedy based on their own preconceived notions. Motivating factors include resistance of Russian aggression and breaking Russian hegemonic influence over education, highlighting the liberation and activism aspects of education (Apple, 2011; Freire, 2000; Giroux, 2020; Orzhel, 2022). Emphasizing stability and security allows schools to interact with their victimisation to move beyond (Kalinicheva, 2022). These factors place Ukrainian education firmly at the nexus of all roles described in the VPLP framework, rather than in a singular space which interacts loosely with others.

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