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THE ROLE OF TEACHER EMPATHY IN SHAPING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ENHANCING STUDENT WELL-BEING IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

Scientists, practitioners, and policymakers acknowledge schools' vital role in enhancing students' and teachers' mental health and well-being. This research emphasises the increasing awareness of schools' critical role in enhancing students' and teachers' empathy and overall well-being through a combination of social-emotional and academic learning, contributing significantly to the educational institution's climate. When fostering a positive school climate it is crucial to adopt a whole-school approach rather than relying solely on individual teachers' efforts. The war and school closures in Ukraine are causing increased stress among students, disrupting their everyday routines and education. A lack of supportive school environments and sustained social engagement negatively impact students' teamwork, conflict resolution skills, resilience, and understanding of others, affecting their educational and emotional well-being. This study aims to identify factors that teachers, based on their experiences, believe are critical to promoting a positive school climate and building empathic relationships with students. Participants included teachers from four Ukrainian schools. This study addresses several research questions: How do teachers contribute to fostering a positive school climate? How do teachers incorporate empathy into their professional practices? The data collection process took place between September 2022 and February 2023 through focus group interviews and analysed through qualitative content analysis. The open-ended questions were qualitatively analysed to discover categories and themes. Teachers reported the importance of effective communication and ongoing professional development in creating a supportive educational environment. While some emphasised the need to reinforce institutional values, others focused on individual responsibility for applying appropriate teaching methods. The study also found that teachers recognise the role of empathy in interacting with diverse groups, including students, colleagues, administrators, and parents. The findings revealed that teachers recognise the need for training in building and maintaining positive relationships, self-study, upholding organisational values, practising positive discipline, and integrating social-emotional learning into daily classroom activities and assessments.

Key words: *empathy in teaching, social-emotional learning, positive school climate, crisis situations, Ukraine.*

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РОЛЬ ЕМПАТІЇ ВЧИТЕЛЯ У ФОРМУВАННІ ПОЗИТИВНОГО ШКІЛЬНОГО КЛІМАТУ ТА СПРИЯННІ БЛАГОПОЛУЧЧЮ УЧНІВ У КРИЗОВИХ СИТУАЦІЯХ

На думку провідних науковців, практиків та політиків, школа має вирішальне значення для зміцнення психічного здоров'я та благополуччя учнів і вчителів. Це дослідження підкреслює зростаюче усвідомлення критично важливої ролі шкіл у підвищенні емпатії та загального благополуччя учнів і вчителів через поєднання соціально-

емоційного та академічного навчання, що суттєво впливає на клімат у закладах освіти. При створенні здорового шкільного клімату особливо актуальним є загальношкільний підхід, а не виключне покладання на індивідуальні ініціативи вчителів. Війна та закриття шкіл в Україні спричиняють підвищений рівень стресу серед учнів, порушуючи звичний ритм життя та навчання. Відсутність сприятливого шкільного середовища та постійного соціального залучення в його розвиток негативно впливає на формування здатності працювати в команді, навичок вирішення конфліктів, життєстійкості, що позначається на успішності та емоційному добробуті учнів, а також на їхньому психоемоційному самопочутті. Це дослідження має на меті визначити чинники, які, на думку вчителів, ґрунтуючись на їхньому досвіді, є критично важливими для сприяння позитивному шкільному клімату та формування емпатійних стосунків з учнями. В опитуванні взяли участь вчителі з чотирьох українських шкіл. Це дослідження розглядає кілька дослідницьких питань: Як вчителі сприяють створенню позитивного шкільного клімату? Як вчителі використовують емпатію у своїй професійній діяльності? Процес збору даних відбувався з вересня 2022 року по лютий 2023 року шляхом проведення інтерв'ю у фокус-групах та обробки даних за допомогою якісного змістового аналізу. Вчителі відмітили важливість ефективної комунікації та постійного професійного розвитку у створенні сприятливого освітнього середовища. Деякі педагоги наголошували на необхідності зміцнення інституційних цінностей, інші – на індивідуальній відповідальності за застосування відповідних методів викладання. Дослідження також показало, що вчителі вказують на позитивну роль емпатії у взаємодії з різноманітними групами, зокрема з учнями, колегами, адміністрацією та батьками. Результати дослідження також свідчать про те, що вчителі визнають потребу в професійній підготовці з питань формування та підтримання позитивних стосунків, самонавчання, підтримки організаційних цінностей, дотримання позитивної дисципліни та інтеграції соціально-емоційного навчання в контексті повсякденної роботи в класі та під час оцінювання знань учнів.

***Ключові слова:** емпатія в навчанні, соціально-емоційне навчання, позитивний клімат у школі, кризові ситуації, Україна.*

Introduction. There is an increasing awareness among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that schools play an important role in promoting the mental health and well-being of students and teachers. Social-emotional and academic learning have been recognized as equally important and related to the overall climate of an educational institution. The consistent development of students' social-emotional skills and sustaining a favourable school climate are expected to bring improvements at the individual and the system levels. The role of schools extends beyond imparting academic knowledge, including the responsibility to foster a positive and safe environment that supports mental health and well-being.

This responsibility becomes even more critical in times of crisis. The recent situation in Ukraine presents a rough example. The ongoing war and its resulting school closures have profoundly impacted the lives of students and teachers, disrupting not only their educational routines but also their sense of security. The war has created a backdrop of stress, uncertainty, and trauma, deeply affecting the mental health and emotional well-being of teachers and students.

Education, as a social sphere, is directly dependent on the security situation in which the participants of the educational process find themselves. During the war, the population's safety becomes a priority for the entire educational system. Military actions on the territory of our country have been a significant shock to the mental health of all Ukrainians. Children in many regions of Ukraine have suffered severe psychological trauma since the beginning of military actions in Ukraine. Ukrainian society is grappling with unprecedented social-psychological and educational challenges affecting children from internally displaced families. Schools in relatively safe areas were unprepared to accommodate these students, prompting the education system to prioritize creating a safe learning environment and offering psychological support to all participants, especially displaced children.

The war has led to emerging issues of accessibility and security of education. Many children have lost the opportunity to access the study, and teachers have been teaching in regions where hostilities occur or may occur under the threat of shelling. Despite the overwhelming pressure on the education sector, teachers understand that their role goes beyond academics and that they should provide stability and comfort to children managing such difficult circumstances. The war will likely leave Ukrainian schoolchildren far behind their peers.

The recent research «War and Education: How a Year of the Full-Scale Invasion Influenced Ukrainian Schools», conducted by the CEDOS think tank for the savED charitable foundation with support from the International Renaissance Foundation, aimed to understand how the full-scale war impacted access to secondary education, particularly in communities affected by combat or occupation. The comprehensive study analyzed infrastructure damage, educational process organization, and displacement of students and teachers (Cedos, 2023). It included a national survey of parents and case studies from liberated regions like Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Kharkiv, offering insights and potential solutions for restoring access to education among the challenges posed by war.

Since the initial invasion of Ukraine's eastern regions in 2014, a Social-Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEEL) program was implemented. Its effectiveness and relevance significantly increased during the war. The program pilot began in 2019, involving 26 schools in a nationwide experiment led by the

Institute for Modernization of Educational Content, the NGO «EdCamp Ukraine» (Linnyk et.al., 2024). Based on this, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, in cooperation with the State Emergency Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, with the support of international partners – «Eurasia Foundation» and «Terre des Hommes,» and companies «EPAM Ukraine,» «Baker Tilly International,» and «METRO Ukraine» – developed and published relevant online courses and recommendations for educators. Pedagogical universities immediately began incorporating these materials into the curriculum to train future teachers.

The aim of the study. The study aims to provide insights into the critical role of teachers and schools in supporting mental health and well-being well-being under challenging circumstances. The findings are expected to guide educators, policymakers, and practitioners in creating more resilient and empathetic educational environments.

Theoretical framework and research methods. There aren't many publications about the peculiarities of conducting teaching in times of war, making it difficult to claim comprehensive research into all aspects of this issue. Ukrainian researchers such as V. Bohuta, T. Kornisheva, I. Kramarenko, O. Mondych, S. Nahorniak, I. Siliutina, K. Twum, and O. Shevchenko focused on distance learning as the optimal solution during the war. For educators in Ukraine, studies that consider both the education policy for refugees and internally displaced persons and education as a protective and preventative measure have become valuable. The analysis of studies showed that existing thematic research in this direction is focused on such geographical regions as Pakistan, Turkey, Israel, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Sudan.

The previously developed emergency education strategy has proven relevant and appropriate for application in the relatively safe territories of Ukraine. Ukrainian researchers continue to analyze global experiences in organizing education in emergencies of a military nature. Yet, the problem of preparing teachers for professional activity in war conditions remains unresolved in pedagogical science. Recent studies highlight the critical role of social-emotional competence (SEC) and school climate in promoting positive educational outcomes. At the individual level, research shows a strong link between students' SEC and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Corcoran et al., 2018). Higher SEC is associated with improved learning motivation and better behavioural adjustment, even in preschool-aged children, regardless of socioeconomic status (Martinson et al., 2021). At the system level, the WHO's Global School Health Initiative (WHO, 2020) underscores the importance of a positive psychosocial environment for the well-being well-being of the entire school community. Positive social-emotional and behavioural outcomes are closely linked to a favourable school climate (Hough et al., 2017). Building and maintaining a favourable school climate requires a whole-school approach, which emphasizes relationship-oriented and supportive learning environments, adopts a student-centred pedagogy, fosters inclusion and non-discrimination, and implements social-emotional learning (Thapa et al., 2013; CASEL, 2015; Dusenbury et al., 2015). Such efforts should also respect cultural norms, beliefs, and values (La Salle et al., 2021). School climate, as a multidimensional construct, includes norms, values, teaching practices, and interpersonal relationships (Cohen et al., 2009).

Student well-being plays a crucial role in their ability to learn effectively (Bücker et al., 2018). When students experience poor well-being can negatively affect their academic performance (Geertshuis, 2019). Additionally, a lack of resilience, which is necessary to protect well-being, can limit a student's capacity to engage with learning and reduce their overall academic success, potentially affecting their continuation in education and achievement levels (McIntosh & Shaw, 2017).

Understanding how teachers can contribute to a favourable school climate is important in light of these challenges. Our study focuses on identifying the factors that, according to teachers' experiences, are crucial in promoting a favourable school climate. Specifically, it examines how Ukrainian teachers can foster empathic relationships and a supportive atmosphere in the face of adversity and disruption. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do teachers contribute to fostering a favourable school climate, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the war and school closures in Ukraine?

2. How do teachers incorporate empathy into their professional practices to enhance the well-being of students and themselves?

Our study employed a qualitative research method, which is particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena within their specific contexts. Four stages of data analysis were applied, and each stage was performed several times to ensure the data's quality and trustworthiness: 1) decontextualization, 2) recontextualization, 3) categorization, and 4) compilation.

Data collection was primarily conducted through focus group interviews. Between September 2022 and February 2023, 54 teachers from three Ukrainian schools were interviewed in four focus groups.

Two schools were from the capital city Kyiv, and one from Kyiv region. All schools were general education secondary schools (grades 1–12). The groups of participants were as follows: Group A – 12 participants (10 women, two men) from a town close to Kyiv; Group B – 15 participants (14 women, one man) from Kyiv; Group C – 15 participants (17 women, one man) from Kyiv as well; Group D – 13 from Kyiv (10 women, three men).

The focus group sessions encouraged open and detailed discussions among participants. Different researchers suggest different sizes for focus groups. Based on the researchers' opinions about the size of the focus groups and the research design, we determined that one focus group should have no fewer than 12 and no more than 20 participants.

Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was structured around a set of open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives. These questions were intended to prompt discussions about the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding creating a favourable school climate and integrating empathy into their professional practices.

Results of the scientific research. This study's findings emphasize teachers' multifaceted role in cultivating a favourable school climate and integrating empathy into their professional practices. This aligns with prior research highlighting the importance of fostering supportive educational environments, particularly in challenging contexts. For instance, studies by Pianta et al. (2012) and Jennings & Greenberg (2009) suggest that effective communication, ongoing professional development, reinforcement of institutional values, individual responsibility, positive discipline, and the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) are critical elements in creating a nurturing school climate. These themes reinforce educational practices' complex and dynamic nature, especially in the face of adversity and disruption.

Addressing the first research question, the findings reveal how teachers have responded to the educational challenges imposed by Ukraine's ongoing conflict and disruptions. Educators have adopted various innovative and adaptive strategies, many reflecting the flexibility and resilience described in the literature on teacher adaptability in crises (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For example, 92% of responding Ukrainian study teachers demonstrated increased flexibility and creativity in adjusting lesson plans for in-person and remote learning contexts, a practice supported by previous studies emphasizing adaptability in rapidly changing environments (Guskey, 2002). Furthermore, 82% of teachers prioritized building supportive relationships by extending their availability beyond regular school hours. This practice resonates with research by Marzano and Simms (2013), who emphasize the importance of teacher accessibility and emotional support in fostering positive student outcomes. Additionally, 62% of teachers engaged in community-building initiatives, organizing voluntary and out-of-school events to strengthen students' sense of belonging. This reflects findings from Klem & Connell (2004), who suggest that students' connection to school is crucial for promoting academic success, particularly during stress and uncertainty. The second research question focused on teachers' empathy-driven practices to support student well-being and learning during the ongoing disruptions. The findings indicate that empathy has been integral to the teachers' professional practices. 75% of teachers participated in peer support networks, which have proven essential spaces for sharing strategies, providing moral support, and enhancing teachers' emotional resilience (Ladd, 2007).

Additionally, 67% of teachers implemented active listening sessions, allowing students to express their thoughts and concerns in a safe, open environment. These findings align with the work of Noddings (2013), who argues that empathy and active listening are critical in fostering emotional connection and support in educational settings. Furthermore, 50% of teachers emphasized empathetic feedback practices, recognizing student effort and personal challenges, and creating a more supportive and reflective learning environment. This is consistent with research by Hattie and Timperley (2007), which highlights the importance of formative feedback in enhancing student motivation and learning. Lastly, 45% of teachers integrated Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into subject instruction, utilizing academic content to explore emotional and ethical dimensions. This integration reflects the growing body of literature on the benefits of SEL in promoting students' emotional and academic development (Zins et al., 2007).

Together, these findings underscore the resilience, adaptability, and dedication of educators, who not only respond to academic challenges but also prioritize their students' emotional health and development in times of significant uncertainty and stress. The study highlights the critical role of empathy in teaching and the importance of building supportive networks, fostering emotional connections, and integrating social-emotional learning into academic content to help students navigate the complexities of a disrupted educational landscape.

Conclusion. Educators' multifaceted roles in crisis management underscore the integral nature of their positions within both the educational sphere and broader community contexts. Integrating social-emo-

tional learning into school curricula has emerged as a crucial element, providing students and teachers with the tools necessary to navigate the challenges of crises, particularly the emotional and psychological strains. As schools adapt to disrupted learning environments through innovative delivery methods, the necessity for ongoing professional development becomes increasingly important. Policy implications stemming from these insights are profound. Educational reforms prioritize developing strategies that ensure all school participants' safety and psychological well-being. This involves substantial investment in teacher training, infrastructural adaptations for blended learning, and sufficient resources for psychological support. Comparative studies with other war-affected regions can provide valuable lessons

and integrate global best practices into a cohesive educational framework tailored to crises. Ultimately, the long-term impacts of the ongoing war on the educational landscape are profound and far-reaching. A thorough understanding of these effects is crucial for any efforts to rebuild and strengthen educational systems post-crisis. Ensuring that education remains a stabilizing force rather than a source of additional stress requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders, highlighting the undeniable link between education and societal resilience in the face of adversity. By exploring the roles and responses of teachers during the war in Ukraine, this study highlights the critical contributions of educators under pressure. It provides a roadmap for enhancing educational resilience and support mechanisms in times of crisis.

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