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## Pedagogical discourse on educational management in wartime: The Ukrainian case

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### Abstract

**Research objectives (aims) and problem(s):** The aim of this article is to present the theoretical foundations of educational management during wartime and to share the results of research on various aspects of school leadership in Ukraine. It focuses on practices necessary to sustain the educational process under wartime conditions, particularly in support of internally displaced students (war refugees).

### Keywords:

educational management, Ukrainian children of war, learning environment, war trauma, school principal, internally displaced persons (war refugees)

**Research methods:** A survey was conducted using a questionnaire developed by the author, targeting principals from various types of schools in western Ukraine. The study also involved an analysis of contemporary literature on school management in crisis situations, especially during armed conflict. The findings were organized into tables and visualized in graphs.

**Process of argumentation:** Since the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a significant number of families with children have been displaced from the eastern and southern regions to the west. School principals faced numerous new challenges in the following areas: ensuring the safety and well-being of students and staff, integrating internally displaced students into new school environments, delivering education in hybrid formats (in-person and remote), providing psychological and pedagogical support, and ensuring stress resilience in educational communities. These conditions have created a pressing need for research and pedagogical discourse on educational management in times of war.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences:** The study indicates that schools in western Ukraine have successfully adapted to working under wartime conditions. Principals implemented changes to protect students and staff and have met the integration needs of children traumatized by war.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** The research shows the changes introduced in the management of Ukrainian schools to ensure educational continuity during wartime. Under crisis conditions, key recommendations include maintaining stable funding for educational institutions, ensuring clear and effective communication, and promoting innovation in online learning platforms.

## Introduction

Education must remain a primary focus of public attention. This emphasis was reinforced by the United Nations, which declared September 9 as the **International Day to Protect Education from Attack** – a call to prioritize schools as safe learning environments for both students and educators. In 2015, the **Safe Schools Declaration** was opened for endorsement by the United Nations. Ukraine, by endorsing this Declaration, became the 100th country to adopt all its principles. These have proven crucial for the Ukrainian government and communities since the start of the military invasion by the Russian Federation.

Under such circumstances, educational management takes on the characteristics of crisis management, marked by ongoing monitoring, identification of emerging problems within the school environment, proactive crisis prevention, and the ability to mobilize the resources needed to ensure the stable functioning of teaching staff (Voznyuk & Dobrohorskyi, 2022, p. 51).

Amid the Russian military aggression, advancing educational policy and implementing innovations in Ukraine have become critically important tasks for educational institutions. Even during the “hot phase” of the war, children retain their right to education and continue to study in various formats. To support this, the Ukrainian education system must be adapted to current wartime realities (Panchenko et al., 2022). In this context, the school principal plays a crucial role – exercising sufficient autonomy and responding flexibly and swiftly to challenges in order to protect the health and lives of children in the educational environment (Barling & Cloutier, 2016).

Broadly speaking, the issue is not only about ensuring continuity of the educational process, but also about creating safe conditions and making strategic management decisions that support quality education. Martial law demands a specific approach to educational leadership (Thomas, 2016), and this depends on several factors, including the principal’s competence and readiness to manage complex emergencies (Darmody & Smyth, 2016). For these reasons, the study of educational management under martial law is relevant and timely.

The purpose of the article is to (1) outline the theoretical foundations for implementing educational management under martial law in the country from a pedagogical perspective; and (2) investigate specific aspects of school management practices in the western region of Ukraine aimed at sustaining the educational process during wartime and supporting temporarily displaced students from other regions (war refugees).

## Theoretical background

Today, the head of an educational institution is “required to be personally, philosophically and ontologically at ease with simultaneous educational–commercial discourses”; they “have to respond not only to the needs of educational stakeholders, but also to the commercial demands” (Machin, 2014). The values and qualities of an educational manager include academic credibility, communication and negotiation skills, the ability to listen and understand others (Spendlove, 2007), proficiency in coordinating the efforts of different departments, collaboration with staff, familiarity with leadership models in education (Hoekstra & Newton, 2017), creativity in problem-solving, tolerance for ambiguity, a flexible management style, and strong communication abilities (Einsiedel, 1987). From a socio-psychological perspective, management involves the leader’s engagement with others (subordinates, supervisors, etc.), as well as fostering their coordinated and active participation in achieving shared goals (Baibakova, 2011, p. 15).

Special attention should be given to educational management, especially in the context of introducing innovations during crises. Numerous publications have addressed this issue, likely because, for the first time in human history, the educational system is continuing to function at all levels – from kindergartens and schools to higher education institutions – during an active war, as exemplified by Ukraine (Budnyk et al., 2022). Scholars define the concept of crisis management as “management of systems in a state of imbalance, which includes a set of procedures, methods, and techniques aimed at recognizing crises, preventing them, creating conditions for reducing their negative impact, and overcoming the consequences” (Epifanova & Oranska, 2016, p. 10). Accordingly, the school education manager should adopt a strategy that incorporates three main components: (1) monitoring and diagnostics using organizational indicators, (2) developing and outlining an anti-crisis strategy, and (3) implementing effective control measures.

The professional profile of a modern education manager encompasses professional, business, and personal attributes: a strong emphasis

on active communication, interaction, and dialogue (Fomin et al., 2020); a drive for leadership (Bashkir et al., 2023); determination, ambition, and a diligent work ethic; erudition, commitment to pedagogical principles, and sincerity; a readiness to take responsibility in challenging situations; self-reliance, integrity, and creativity; emotional resilience in communication (Fredrickson et al., 2002); and the ability to handle stress and adapt to new – and at times crisis-ridden – educational environments (Nikolaesku et al., 2021, pp. 80–81). The goal of educational management is to create an educational environment that functions effectively, aligns with modern standards, appeals to both current and prospective stakeholders (Baibakova, 2011, p. 15), and above all, prioritizes the safety of students' lives and learning. In Ukraine, which is currently at war due to the armed invasion by Russia, principals face extreme challenges that demand exceptional flexibility and responsibility.

## **Materials & Methods**

### **Research methods**

A subject-targeted method was used to analyze current scientific literature on the implementation of school management in times of crisis, particularly under martial law. Additionally, online resources were reviewed to collect up-to-date information about the challenges encountered by teachers when working with children affected by war trauma. An empirical approach, based on survey research, was adopted to assess the operational status of schools during wartime conditions. This approach focused on various aspects of school management undertaken by principals. The objective was to support temporarily displaced individuals and ensure the continuity of the educational process.

### **Instruments and procedures**

This article presents the results of an empirical study conducted in western Ukraine, where a significant number of families with children have been displaced since the beginning of the war, having fled their

homes in the eastern and southern regions of the country. Consequently, schools have adapted to accommodate internally displaced students, which has posed school principals with new challenges in organizing the educational process under martial law. An anonymous survey was conducted among school principals, involving 50 respondents across various age groups. The questionnaire sought to assess the changes implemented in these schools since the onset of the conflict to ensure the continuity of children's education, as well as the challenges involved in integrating students from different regions of the country who have experienced war trauma, among other related issues.

**Table 1. Research sample**

Variable		School principals	
		N=50	%
School location	Countryside	4	8
	Small town (up to 20,000 inhabitants)	1	2
	Medium-sized city (20,000–100,000 inhabitants)	2	4
	Large city (over 100,000 inhabitants)	43	86
Region	Ivano-Frankivsk	5	10
	Ivano-Frankivsk region	4	8
	Lviv	40	80
	Lviv region	1	2
Work experience	1-5 years	20	40
	6-10 years	2	4
	11-15 years	10	20
	Over 15 years	18	36
Gender	Woman	40	80
	Man	10	20

Source: Authors' research

The online survey was conducted between September and December 2023, using a questionnaire developed by the author and distributed to Ukrainian school principals. The target group was deliberately selected from two western regions of Ukraine, specifically Lviv and Ivano-Frankivsk, due to the significant number of displaced children attending schools in these areas. These students came from regions heavily affected by missile attacks or currently under Russian occupation. This sampling approach allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the indicators within a population among which the relevant phenomena and processes were most likely to be observed (Silverman, 2008).

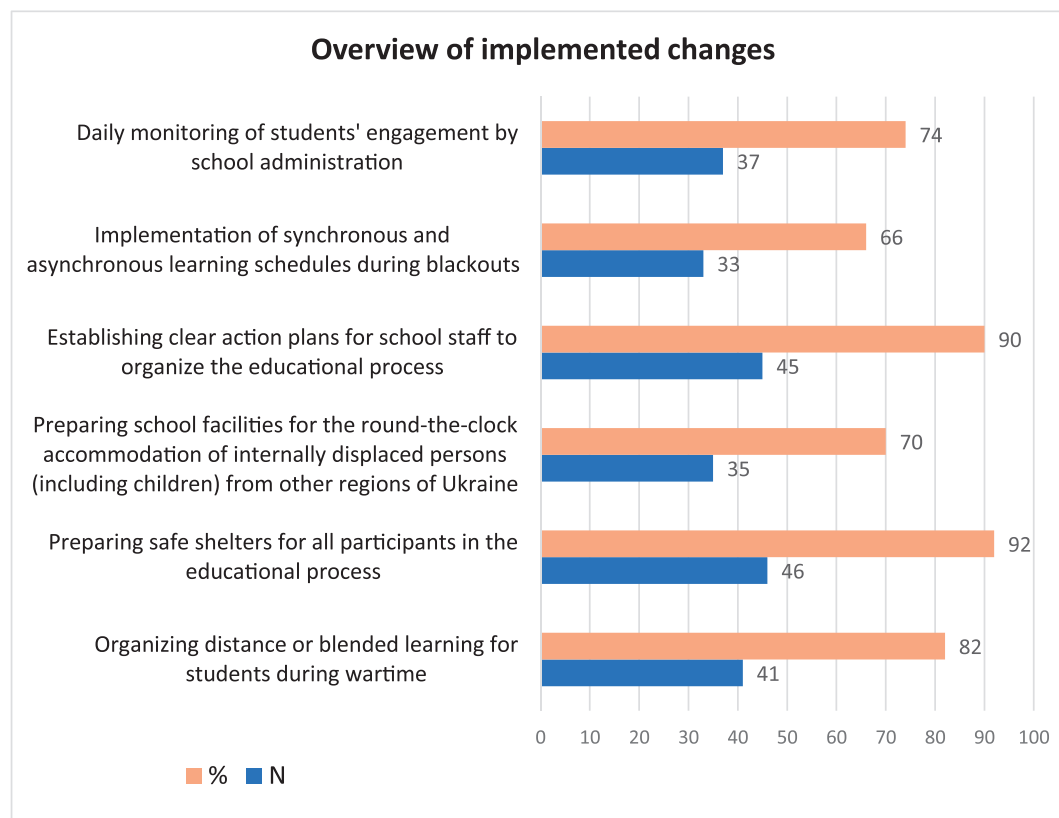
### Research results

This study sought to answer the following question: *What measures have been implemented in schools since the beginning of the Russian armed aggression in Ukraine to maintain the educational process, particularly for temporarily displaced children?*

School principals actively responded to the challenges posed by current realities in an effort to create a safe educational environment for all students and staff. A total of 92% of respondents stressed the importance of establishing secure shelters for everyone involved in the educational process. Furthermore, 90% indicated the need for developing a well-defined action plan for school staff, while 82% reported the implementation of structured wartime teaching plans. Another crucially important step noted by 74% of respondents was the daily monitoring of student participation in learning activities (see Figure 1). Therefore, even in the context of distance learning, it is necessary to track the actual number of students, ensure that they all connect on time, and follow up on any absences. This is particularly important given the direct threat to students' health – and even their lives.



**Figure 1. Measures implemented by principals to continue the educational process (based on survey data)**



Source: Authors' research

In promoting the well-being of refugee children, research by C. M. Somo (2024) identifies three main categories: (1) children who suffer from war-related trauma, (2) children who live in a constant state of fear and anxiety, and (3) children whose exposure to war-related violence triggers aggressive behavior. All of these student groups were present in the schools surveyed by the principals who participated in our study. Respondents unanimously agreed that primary attention should be given to mental health, specifically by “implementing trauma-informed therapy focused on reducing psychosocial reactions to war” (Somo, 2024). In this context, we advocate for incorporating considerations of ethnocultural diversity into psychological therapy and pedagogical support.

Our research also addresses another urgent concern for school administration: the need to prepare school facilities to accommodate



internally displaced individuals for overnight or extended stays. This concern was acknowledged by 70% of respondents. Given the high population density in western regions of the country and the shortage of available housing, school classrooms, kindergartens, dormitories, and other facilities were repurposed into temporary accommodations. A total of 36% of school principals reported addressing this challenge by converting school spaces, installing amenities such as shower cabins and washing machines, and establishing playrooms for schoolchildren.

In some educational institutions (56% of respondents), classrooms and sports halls were transformed into sleeping quarters for temporarily displaced individuals, including children. Moreover, schools have become hubs of volunteer activity and “resilience centers,” equipped with electric generators (to compensate for potential damage to energy infrastructure), internet access, water supplies, and more. The mobilization of volunteers and compassionate community members to set up humanitarian aid centers for internally displaced children and their families – providing them with essential items – was recognized as a key administrative achievement by 66% of respondents.

School principals (72%) (Figure 2) indicated that their top priority was creating a safe school environment. This included: (a) reviewing classroom layouts and ensuring unobstructed movement, (b) conducting daily reviews of evacuation protocols with students and holding periodic drills, despite the loss of instructional time, as such measures are necessary and extremely important in the face of real threats to the lives of students and staff, and (c) teaching children the fundamentals of mine safety, which is essential given the increasing number of reports about the use of mines in schools and other civilian infrastructure in recent months of the war in Ukraine.

Based on our research findings, school management also proposed the creation and enforcement of clearly defined protocols for responding to and operating during emergencies. This so-called “safety protocol” consists of a set of guidelines that all participants in the educational process should follow in critical situations caused by the war. In response to safety risks, schools are in the process of developing multiple protocols covering

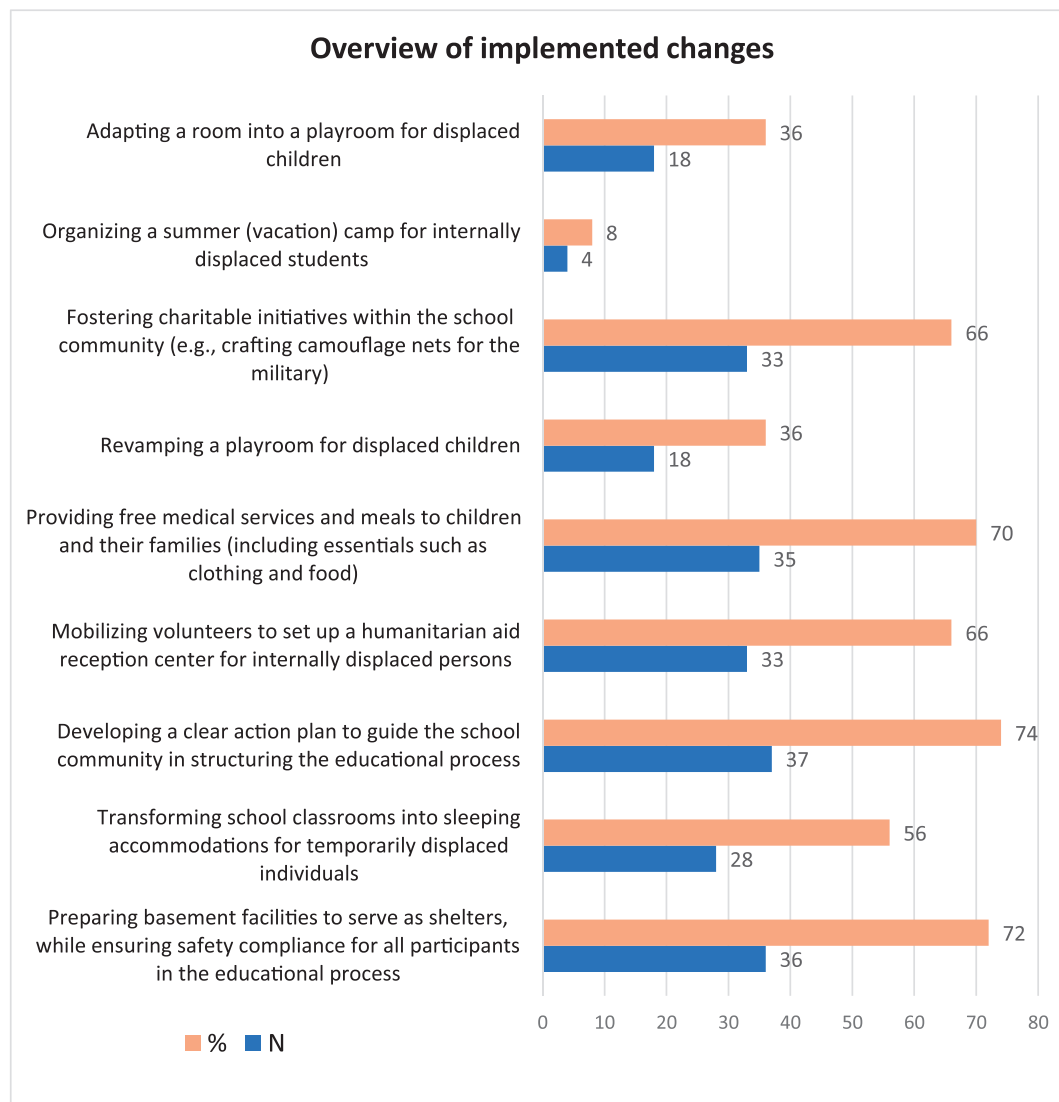
responses to air raid alerts, bomb threats, evacuation procedures, sheltering, remote instruction during classes, and more. To achieve this, the administration of each school must design its own safety strategy, taking into account factors such as the school's location, threat level, number of students, and available safety resources.

According to our study, 74% of school principals (Figure 2) emphasized the importance of developing a well-defined wartime strategy for the entire school community. In particular, it is essential to ensure that students who have relocated from areas impacted by active conflict are familiar with evacuation routes, including directions to the nearest shelter if the school does not have one. These students should also be taught the proper behavior protocols for air raids, evacuations, and sheltering.

Every educational institution has unique structural features, architectural specifics, educational resources, and financial capacity that should be optimally utilized to support children who have experienced or are currently experiencing stress due to the war. According to 70% of principals, such students receive free medical services and meals. Another important issue is ensuring that teaching staff are trained in providing first aid (Drennan et al., 2005). Among these safety measures, key emphasis is placed on providing psychological training to various categories of school employees.

Findings from the Go Global study reveal the psychological and emotional exhaustion experienced by teachers under ongoing threat during wartime. According to the study, 54% of Ukrainian teachers reported experiencing professional burnout and expressed a need for psychological support. More than 70% observed signs of burnout in their colleagues, and 80% noted an increased workload following the Russian invasion (Poya, 2023). This rise in workload is associated with the need to implement security measures, concern for the safety of students and their families, preparation of materials for online instruction, and conducting lessons in shelters during missile threats. As a result, teachers' personal resilience and their ability to support students during emergencies are critical in times of war.

**Figure 2. Initiatives implemented in schools  
for temporarily displaced children from other regions**



Source: Authors' research

To strengthen resilience, safeguard psychological well-being, and protect the health of educational staff and administrators, it is necessary to implement effective psychological support strategies. Education managers should actively participate in planning and coordinating safety measures for schools located in military zones. They are also responsible for ensuring that teachers have the resources, support, and training they need. Additionally, they can help coordinate efforts with professionals from other sectors, such as healthcare, social services, and humanitarian

aid, to provide comprehensive support for the educational process during wartime.

Significant attention is paid to motivational factors in educational management, which are based on the principles of partnership among all participants in the educational process. In addition to addressing the specific challenges that school staff face in crisis conditions, an essential task of the principal is establishing favorable conditions for effective work and motivating teachers: encouraging professional development, improving the quality of education, and conserving personal resources in wartime (e.g., preventing burnout, building resilience, etc.) (Voznyuk et al., 2022, p. 52).

When working with children forced to migrate, it is important to orient the educational process toward restoring their sense of inner strength, resilience, and adaptability (Hart, 2009). To achieve this, schools – starting with the youngest students – have involved them in volunteer and charitable activities designed to inspire a sense of achievement and provide moral support to the Ukrainian military. According to school principals, this has been manifested in students' participation in writing postcards and playing games with adults (including parents), which helps set a tone for coping with life's challenges. The goal was to help these children feel safe and shielded from exposure to distressing news on television or the internet, as they already feel vulnerable and overwhelmed due to the traumatic experiences that they have endured (Budnyk et al., 2023a).

Psychologists emphasize the importance of engaging in conversations with students who have experienced war trauma, but caution that this information must be introduced in appropriate doses. Adopting an "avoidant" approach, in which educators refrain from discussing difficult or psychologically challenging topics, can hinder children's ability to understand, show empathy, and process traumatic experiences. By addressing these issues and helping students work through their emotional wounds, schools can support the healing process and enable children to begin overcoming the trauma that they have experienced (Budnyk et al., 2023b, p. 13). An empathetic approach allows children of war and their

parents to share traumatic experiences, helps educators identify early signs of behavioral or mental health issues, and facilitates the recognition and expression of feelings as part of socio-educational support in schools.

The issue of organizing volunteer activities within school communities, including students and teachers, is a high priority. These activities, such as weaving camouflage nets for the military, creating motivational postcards and drawings, and organizing charity fairs, were cited by 66% of surveyed education managers. Such initiatives help build solidarity and a shared sense of purpose through charitable efforts aimed at reinforcing collective values, such as independence, freedom, faith, culture, and national identity. Conversations with school principals revealed significant difficulties in maintaining the educational process due to periodic air raid alerts and false evacuation alarms.

During times of war, education managers face significant challenges as they must take into account several critical aspects:

1. ensuring the safety of students and staff (developing evacuation plans, establishing shelters, and training both educators and students in emergency response procedures);
2. continuing the educational process despite the military situation by implementing alternative teaching methods such as distance learning or holding classes in safe locations;
3. facilitating effective communication with the community, parents, students, and other stakeholders regarding safety protocols, changes in the academic schedule, and other important issues;
4. providing psychological support to help participants in the educational process cope with stress and emotional trauma;
5. collaborating with local authorities and military personnel to obtain timely information and develop coordinated protection strategies.

## Discussion

The displacement of Ukrainian children to the western part of the country as a result of the Russian invasion, as highlighted in the survey, has created numerous challenges for school principals in the region. Among these challenges are:

1. language barriers – difficulties adapting displaced children to learning in Ukrainian-speaking schools;
2. psycho-emotional trauma – many of these children have experienced fear, witnessed suffering, lost their homes or loved ones, and require additional psychological support;
3. insufficient infrastructure – the increased number of students has overwhelmed school facilities, including classrooms, libraries, and other spaces, leading to a lack of resources for all learners;
4. financial limitations – limited funding to meet the growing needs for additional staff, psychological support, and related services;
5. social integration – internally displaced students sometimes experience a sense of alienation from local peers due to cultural, ethnic, or social differences;
6. curricular and instructional challenges – students may arrive with differing cognitive needs and levels of prior knowledge, which complicates the planning and delivery of educational programs.

In today's circumstances, educational institutions must give greater attention to the adaptation of students to the school environment, especially in schools that enroll children who are internally displaced. As Somo (2024) notes, "refugee children suffer enormous amounts of psychological trauma during war displacement and, as a result, suffer poor mental health, including psychological trauma, fear, anxiety, and aggressive behaviors."

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the number of children whose families have been forced to relocate to safer areas has increased in schools in western Ukraine, where this study was conducted. In many cases, these

children have nowhere to return to, as their homes, and sometimes entire cities, have been destroyed (e.g., Mariupol, Selydove, and Bakhmut). As a result, in addition to traditional adaptation practices, schools have worked to ensure continuity between different stages of education and have provided appropriate psychological, pedagogical, and informational support. School administrations are also developing various contingency plans so that, in the event of an emergency, the institution can quickly transition to distance or hybrid learning during or after the war.

Based on the research findings, it is worth emphasizing the necessity of studying effective mechanisms and strategies for providing psychological and pedagogical support to Ukrainian children affected by Russian aggression. To that end, school administrations are creating additional opportunities to train staff in methods and techniques for managing stress and psychological overload, as well as for providing psychological support to all participants in the educational process (Hilado et al., 2021). To support this effort, relevant informational resources for both parents and students are being developed and organized. These may include popular science articles, guides, webinars, advice columns, thematic interviews, seminars, consultations, self-help techniques, children's books about war, educational infographics, and more.

However, education managers themselves face significant stress during crises such as war. School administrators often experience strain on both their mental and physical well-being (Horwood et al., 2021), as they confront issues that they have never encountered before. These include navigating social, technological, and structural changes, managing conflict and destruction, and responding to new and unfamiliar demands – what Brimm (1983) describes as a “nonspecific response to any type of need.”

## Conclusions

The implementation of educational management should be based on a thorough consideration of the needs and interests of students, teachers, administrative staff, and parents in order to achieve the shared goal



of organizing a sustainable educational process. Under crisis conditions, particularly during wartime, it is essential to maintain stable funding for educational institutions, ensure effective communication, and implement innovations in remote learning platforms and other forms of interaction.

Key challenges for pedagogical management in the context of war include:

- ensuring conditions for the delivery of quality educational services to students (a safe educational environment for in-person learning, technical support for remote learning, teacher preparedness to carry out professional duties under martial law, high-quality logistics and management processes, etc.);
- promoting the positive adaptation of internally displaced students from areas of active hostilities to new environments in educational institutions;
- creating a digital marketing system to support effective interaction between the school and all participants in the educational process, along with systematic monitoring of the school's public image, the implementation of innovations, and the development of new digital communities; this includes the use of platforms for distance or blended learning in digital spaces;
- providing psychological support to all participants in the educational process, especially children who have been most affected by the war;
- preventing professional burnout among teaching and administrative staff caused by excessive workloads and psycho-emotional stress during times of crisis;
- maintaining productive cooperation and communication with parents, students, teachers, the broader community, volunteers, local authorities, and other stakeholders.

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