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TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN TRANSITION: EXPLORING RESILIENCE, VALUES, AND CHANGE IN EDUCATION

ПРОФЕСІЙНА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ УЧИТЕЛЯ В УМОВАХ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЇ: РЕЗИЛІЄНТНІСТЬ, ЦІННОСТІ ТА ЗМІНИ В ОСВІТІ

In the turbulent times when the future is uncertain, the professional identity of teachers is important in sustaining quality of education and community resilience. This study examines the transformation of teacher professional identity in Ukraine by analysing how educators reform their roles, values, and sense of purpose during the war and systemic disruption. Amid displacement, institutional instability, and ongoing insecurity, teachers have assumed expanded responsibilities as leaders, providers of emotional support, and agents of social cohesion within their communities. The identity is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing negotiation shaped by policy environments, collegial relations, and broader socio-political forces. During relative stability, this negotiation typically reveals gradually through professional learning, reflective practice, and established socialisation. In contrast, periods of severe societal disruption compress these processes, compelling rapid identity reconfiguration under heightened psychological and professional strain. The research involved 58 secondary school teachers from different regions of Ukraine who participated in semi-structured interviews. To situate identity transformation within broader contextual dynamics, a STEEP (Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political) analysis was conducted to identify external forces shaping professional experience. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's approach, revealed three interrelated dimensions of identity transformation: (1) resilience and moral strength as foundations of professional continuity; (2) collaboration and cohesion as mechanisms of mutual support; and (3) pedagogical transformation characterised by heightened social responsibility, empathy, and adaptive creativity.

The findings indicate that wartime conditions, while intensifying psychological and professional pressures, have also deepened teachers' commitment to their profession and reinforced their role in sustaining stability, hope, and shared national values. The study highlights the importance of integrating reflective, identity-oriented components into teacher education programmes in order to strengthen emotional resilience, professional agency, and adaptive capacity in contexts of extended uncertainty.

Key words: teacher professional identity, resilience, wartime education, STEEP analysis, Ukraine, identity transformation, pedagogical change.

У часи нестабільності, коли майбутнє є невизначеним, професійна ідентичність вчителів відіграє важливу роль у забезпеченні якості освіти та зміцненні стійкості суспільства. У цьому дослідженні розглядається трансформація професійної ідентичності вчителів в Україні шляхом аналізу того, як педагоги реформують своє призначення, цінності та мотивацію під час війни та систематичних потрясінь. У зв'язку з переміщенням населення, політичною нестабільністю та постійною небезпеккою вчителі взяли на себе додаткові обов'язки лідерів, тих, хто надає емоційну підтримку, та агентів соціальної згуртованості у суспільстві. Ідентичність не є сталим властивістю, а є результатом тривалого формування під впливом законодавчого середовища, міжособистісних відносин та інших соціально-політичних чинників. У періоди відносної стабільності це формування відбувається поступово через професійне навчання, рефлексивну практику та набуття досвіду взаємодії. Натомість у періоди серйозних суспільних криз ці процеси прискорюються, що змушує швидко переосмислювати свою ідентичність в умовах підвищеного психологічного та професійного навантаження. У дослідженні взяли участь 58 вчителів середніх шкіл з різних регіонів України, які пройшли інтерв'ю. Для розуміння глибини перетворення ідентичності в контекстуальній динаміці, було проведено аналіз STEEP (соціальний, технологічний, економічний, екологічний та політичний), щоб визначити зовнішні сили, що формують професійний досвід. Тематичний аналіз, проведений за підходом Брауна та Кларка, виявив три взаємопов'язані напрямки трансформації ідентичності: (1) стійкість та моральна сила як основи професійної безперервності; (2) співпраця та згуртованість як механізми взаємної підтримки; та (3) педагогічна трансформація, що характеризується підвищеною соціальною відповідальністю, емпатією та адаптивною креативністю.

Результати дослідження свідчать, що умови війни, одночасно посилюючи психологічний та професійний тиск, також посилюють відданість вчителів своїй професії та зміцнюють роль вчителів у підтримці стабільності, надії та спільних національних цінностей. Дослідження підкреслює важливість інтеграції рефлексивних, орієнтованих на ідентичність компонентів у програми підготовки вчителів з метою зміцнення емоційної стійкості, професійної активності та адаптивних здібностей в умовах тривалої невизначеності.

Ключові слова: професійна ідентичність вчителя, стійкість, освіта в умовах війни, STEEP-аналіз, Україна, трансформація ідентичності, педагогічні зміни.

Introduction. In today's context of interconnected environmental, economic, social, and political challenges, fostering responsible social responsibility has become increasingly vital. Education serves as a foundational prerequisite for qualifying people to make informed decisions and act responsibly, thereby contributing to social, economic, and environmental sustainability at both local and global levels. This reality underscores the importance of adopting a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective in education and places new demands on teacher preparation. Specifically, teacher education underlines the development of professional identity and support continuous, lifelong learning, fostering the advance of teachers as completely comprehended, holistic individuals. The professional identity of teachers represents one of the most fundamental yet insufficiently explored dimensions of educational quality. Identity is not a static self-concept but a dynamic and socially negotiated process shaped by professional contexts, relationships, and historical conditions [23]. During stability, teacher identity changes gradually through professional development and institutional participation. However, during periods of profound societal disruption, identity transformation may occur rapidly under psychological strain and professional uncertainty.

Ukraine has faced such circumstances since the full-scale Russian military invasion of 24 February 2022. The war has fundamentally reshaped both educational structures and teachers' lived professional realities. By early 2023, more than 2,600 educational institutions

had been damaged and over 400 destroyed, while only approximately 25% of schools nationwide were able to sustain full-time in-person instruction [27]. More than 5.3 million children experienced disruptions in access to education, and over 40,000 teachers were displaced internally or abroad [6; 27].

Teachers maintaining coherent professional identity demonstrate greater capacity to provide stability, pedagogical continuity, and psychosocial support for war-affected learners [9; 30]. Conversely, identity disruption under crisis conditions is associated with burnout, professional withdrawal, and risks to educational continuity [2; 13].

Analysis of recent research and publications. Teacher professional identity is widely conceptualised as a multidimensional construct integrating self-perception, professional practice, institutional belonging, and moral commitment [1; 10]. Identity is continuously reconstructed through interaction with social and professional environments rather than pre-determined or fixed [12; 32].

Communities of practice model emphasizes the role of social participation and belonging in shaping professional mindset [37, p. 73]. Other distinguish between institutionally conferred discourse identities and those that emerge through everyday interaction [12, p. 99]. More recently, scholars have drawn on narrative approaches to identity, emphasizing how teachers construct coherent professional stories from often fragmented and contradictory experiences [7, p. 89]. Particularly relevant to the present

study is the concept of moral identity in teaching. It has been argued that teaching is fundamentally an ethical vocation grounded in a care orientation and a commitment to human flourishing [14, p. 1; 22, p. 16].

The Ukrainian context adds a further dimension: national and civic identity.

Resilience in teaching has evolved from a trait-based to an ecological conceptualization, viewed as an ongoing process embedded in relational and contextual factors [9; 2]. Research consistently identifies strong vocational purpose, collegial support, and reflective practice as key contributors to resilience, while excessive workload, economic precarity, and professional marginalization undermine it [13, p. 1302].

Ukraine's educational system entered the full-scale invasion phase already partially adapted to distance learning following two years of COVID-19 pandemic disruption. Average daily traffic on the AllUkrainian Online School platform increased twenty-fold following the invasion [26]. However, the systematic targeting of Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the winter of 2022–2023 produced widespread power outages, cancelling an estimated half of all scheduled online classes [27].

STEEP analysis is a framework encompassing Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, and Political factors that has been widely used in strategic planning and organizational research to systematically assess the macro-environment [11, p. 15]. Its application to educational research enables scholars to situate teacher experience within the broader structural conditions that enable or constrain professional identity development [11, p. 34].

The aim of the study is to examine how Ukrainian secondary school teachers reconstruct their professional identities in the face of war-induced disruption. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 58 teachers, analyzed through STEEP analysis and Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, the research identifies three core themes of identity transformation with lasting implications for Ukrainian teacher education and educational reconstruction.

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, grounded in the recognition that understanding teacher identity transformation requires access to the subjective meanings and lived experiences of teachers themselves [8, p. 45]. The study involved 58 teachers from secondary schools across Ukraine, recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 61 years ($M=38.4$), with teaching experience ranging from 2 to 35 years ($M=14.7$ years). The sample included 49 women and 9 men. Seventeen participants had experienced internal displacement; seven had returned from temporary displacement abroad. All participants provided written informed agreement. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between March and September 2025, via online videoconferencing platforms. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes.

Presentation of the main research material. The following STEEP analysis integrates empirical evidence from institutional sources with participant accounts to provide a systematic account of the macro-contextual forces shaping teacher professional identity in Ukraine.

Table 1

STEEP Analysis: Macro-Contextual Factors and Their Influence on Teacher Professional Identity in Wartime Ukraine

Factor	Key Indicators	Impact on Teacher Identity	Representative Participant Voice
Social	5.3 million children's education disrupted (UNICEF, 2023); 2.8 million children displaced; 14 million Ukrainians displaced overall	Intensified moral duty; expansion into psychosocial and community leadership roles; heightened empathy toward students and families	<i>"We are not just teaching mathematics. We are holding these children together. We are the one thing that hasn't changed for them"</i>
Technological	84% of schools switched to hybrid/remote formats (2022–23); frequent power outages disrupted online learning winter 2022–23	Digital adaptation as professional survival strategy; intensified workload and emotional strain from screen-mediated care; reinforcement of continuity commitment	<i>"Teaching online to a child who might be sitting in a shelter is a different kind of teaching entirely. You have to reach them through the screen even when you cannot see their fear"</i>
Economic	Teacher salary budget; average education); salary increases legally mandated but repeatedly postponed	Tension between vocational commitment and material insecurity; risk of attrition; moral injury from gap between professional importance and economic recognition	<i>"I know my work has never mattered more. And I have never been paid less in real terms. That contradiction is hard to carry"</i>

Continuation of table 1

Factor	Key Indicators	Impact on Teacher Identity	Representative Participant Voice
Environmental	Over 3,790 educational facilities damaged or destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 2023); only 25% of schools offering full-time in-person learning (Jan. 2023)	Adaptive creativity under physical danger; reconfiguration of teaching spaces; permanent awareness of student safety as pedagogical prerequisite	<i>“We teach in basements during alerts. We teach with generators when the power is out. The classroom is wherever safety allows us to make it”</i>
Political	New Ukrainian School reform continued amid war; civic education repositioned as national survival	Redefinition of teacher as agent of national resilience; civic and identity-oriented pedagogy; heightened sense of historical mission	<i>“Every lesson is now also a lesson about who we are and why Ukraine must survive”</i>

Social Factors

Ukraine’s wartime social landscape has been devastated at a scale that directly and profoundly affects the conditions of teaching. More than 14 million Ukrainians have been displaced since February 2022, representing the largest population displacement in Europe since World War II [25]. By January 2023, UNICEF reported that over 5.3 million children faced barriers to accessing education [32]. One in four Ukrainian teachers is reported to be balancing teaching with humanitarian work [29]. Participants in the present study reflected this dynamic:

“We are not just teaching mathematics. We are holding these children together. We are the one thing that hasn’t changed for them. If we fall apart, everything falls apart.”

(Teacher, Kharkiv Oblast)

Approximately 30 per cent of adolescents in Ukraine are now estimated to experience moderate to severe depression, and nearly 70 per cent of children seeking mental health treatment meet clinical criteria for PTSD [25].

“My subject is Ukrainian language. But every lesson now is also a lesson in how to stay human, how to hope, how to keep going. The curriculum is almost secondary.”

(Teacher, Mykolaiv Oblast)

Technological Factors

Over 84 per cent of educational institutions switched to mixed-mode or fully remote formats in the 2022–2023 academic year. The AllUkrainian Online School e-platform became a critical medium for educational continuity, with daily traffic increasing twenty-fold following the February 2022 invasion [26]. However, systematic targeting of Ukrainian energy infrastructure produced widespread power outages throughout the winter of 2022–2023, cancelling an estimated half of all scheduled online classes [27]. Teachers described managing instruction under conditions of profound technological instability:

“Teaching online to a child who might be sitting in a shelter is a different kind of teaching entirely. You have to reach them through the screen even when you cannot see their fear. And then the light goes out and the lesson is gone.”

(Teacher, Dnipro Oblast)

Despite these challenges, many participants described the acquisition of digital competencies and the development of technologically mediated care practices as significant components of their professional identity transformation.

Economic Factors

Ukrainian law requires that teacher salaries should be no less than three times the minimum wage, but this provision has been postponed every year since its enactment. Participants linked the psychological tension between professional profession and economic view:

“I know my work has never mattered more than it does right now. And I have never been paid less in real terms. That contradiction is hard to carry. Some of my colleagues have left the profession not because they wanted to but because they could not survive on a teacher’s salary during a war.”

(Teacher, Poltava Oblast)

Environmental Factors

By November 2023, Human Rights Watch reported that over 3,790 educational facilities had been damaged or destroyed since February 2022, more than every seventh school in the country [15]. By the end of 2022, shelters had been arranged for 71 per cent of schools nationwide [6]. In the six frontline regions surveyed by Save the Children (2024), 64 per cent of enrolled children were confined exclusively to online learning [29]. Teachers described conducting lessons in school basements during air raid alerts:

“We teach in basements during alerts. We teach with generators when the power is out. We teach

in parks when the weather allows and we have no shelter. The classroom is wherever safety allows us to make it. I used to think a good lesson needed proper equipment. Now I think a good lesson needs a teacher who refuses to give up.”

(Teacher, Zaporizhzhia Oblast)

Political Factors

The New Ukrainian School reform was not suspended but actively sustained through wartime. The subject “Defence of Ukraine” was comprehensively overhauled, with over 900 inter-school resource centers established to support its delivery [36; 16]. Participants’ self-descriptions reflected this political reorientation:

“Every lesson is now also a lesson about who we are and why Ukraine must survive.”

(Teacher, Lviv Oblast)

Resilience and Moral Strength as Foundations of Professional Continuity

The most pervasive theme across the interview data concerned the role of resilience and moral strength in sustaining teachers’ professional engagement under conditions of extreme adversity. Participants described an intensification of vocational commitment in the face of crisis, articulating a heightened sense of purpose grounded in the belief that their continued presence and dedication constituted a form of resistance and service, a dynamic consistent with the broader literature on post-traumatic growth [30, p. 1]. Many participants described a process of identity clarification under pressure:

“Before the war I sometimes wondered whether what I was doing really mattered. Now I never wonder. I know exactly why I teach. I teach because if I don’t, something essential – for these children, for this community, for Ukraine – will be lost.”

(Teacher, Donetsk Oblast)

This moral fortification was, however, accompanied by significant psychological costs. A study of burnout dynamics among Ukrainian academic staff during the war documented significant increases in personal and reactive anxiety across all categories of educational personnel [31]. Participants described navigating chronic emotional exhaustion, the effects of vicarious trauma, and the challenge of maintaining professional composure while managing their own grief, fear, and uncertainty.

Collaboration and Solidarity as Ways of Mutual Support

Participants described the development of intensified bonds of solidarity with colleagues driven by shared adversity and collective commitment to

educational continuity. Informal networks of mutual support emerged as critical infrastructures of professional survival. Many participants described a breakdown of hierarchical barriers within school communities, fostering a sense of collective professional identity grounded in shared experience and shared purpose:

“We created a group with teachers from three other schools who had all been displaced. Every evening we share something: an idea for online teaching, a resource we found, sometimes just a message that we are still here, still working. That group kept me going in the worst months.”

(Teacher, Kherson Oblast, internally displaced)

Cross-school and cross-regional networks facilitated by digital communication platforms expanded teachers’ professional communities beyond their immediate institutional contexts, generating a form of collective professional identity that transcended individual school affiliations. This dynamic parallels findings from other conflict-affected contexts, where teacher solidarity and community embeddedness have similarly been identified as core mechanisms of professional resilience [18, p. 12; 21, p. 612].

Pedagogical Transformation through Civic Responsibility, Empathy, and Adaptive Creativity

Participants described a fundamental reorientation of pedagogical priorities, with a heightened emphasis on emotional safety, psychosocial well-being, civic education, and adaptive creative practice. A central component of pedagogical transformation was the cultivation of psychological safety as a prerequisite for any meaningful learning. Research documents a 35 per cent increase in internalizing symptoms among Ukrainian students since the start of the war, with approximately 30 per cent of adolescents experiencing moderate to severe depression [25]. Teachers described developing sophisticated practices of emotional strain, recognizing signs of trauma in students, adjusting instructional pace and content in response to emotional readiness, and creating relational conditions in which learning remained possible despite pervasive anxiety and fear.

Community education and the development of national identity emerged as explicit pedagogical priorities for most participants. Adaptive creativity was also prominent: teachers described improvising new teaching strategies, repurposing available resources, innovating rapidly in response to changing constraints, and developing a repertoire of flexible pedagogical approaches. UNICEF estimates of a two-year average learning loss underline the stakes of this pedagogical creativity, making the wartime

professional development of teachers a matter not merely of professional identity but of national educational recovery [33; 20].

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, conducted, identified three themes, each comprising three subthemes.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis of Teacher Professional Identity Transformation (N = 58; Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Theme	Subtheme	n	%	Representative codes
Theme 1. Resilience and Moral Strength	1.1 Intensified vocational commitment under crisis	52	89.7%	purpose clarification; refusal to abandon students; teaching as resistance; war as identity catalyst
	1.2 Moral injury and psychological burden	47	81%	emotional exhaustion; vicarious trauma; grief management; composure under fear
	1.3 Meaning-making and post-traumatic growth	39	67.2%	finding purpose in adversity; strengthened professional self; transformation through crisis
Theme 2. Collaboration and Solidarity	2.1 Informal peer support networks	50	86.2%	resource sharing; emotional mutual support; digital communities; cross-school groups
	2.2 Breakdown of institutional hierarchy	34	58.6%	horizontal collegiality; collective decision-making; shared professional identity
	2.3 Community embeddedness beyond school	41	70.7%	teacher as community anchor; humanitarian roles; family liaison; psychological first aid
Theme 3. Pedagogical Transformation	3.1 Emotional safety as pedagogical precondition	53	91.4%	trauma-informed practice; psychological safety; attunement to student readiness; grief-sensitive instruction
	3.2 Civic identity and national pedagogy	48	82.8%	Ukrainian identity reinforcement; patriotic repositioning; historical mission; language shift
	3.3 Adaptive creativity and instructional innovation	44	75.9%	improvised teaching environments; low-resource pedagogy; flexible curriculum delivery; digital repurposing

The most pervasive theme across the interview data concerned the role of resilience and moral strength in sustaining teachers’ professional engagement under conditions of extreme adversity. Participants described an intensification of vocational commitment in the face of crisis, articulating a heightened sense of purpose grounded in the belief that their continued presence and dedication constituted a form of resistance and service – a dynamic consistent with the broader literature on post-traumatic growth [30, p. 1]. Many participants described a process of identity clarification under pressure.

This moral strengthening was, however, accompanied by significant psychological costs. A study of burnout dynamics among Ukrainian academic staff during the war documented significant increases in personal and reactive anxiety across all categories of participants [31]. Participants described directing chronic emotional exhaustion, the effects of trauma, and the challenge of maintaining professional self-control while managing their own fear, and uncertainty.

Participants described the development of increased collaboration of unity with colleagues

driven by shared adversity and collective commitment to teaching. Informal networks of mutual support emerged as critical infrastructures of professional survival. Many participants described a breakdown of hierarchical barriers within school communities, fostering a sense of collective professional identity grounded in shared experience and shared purpose.

Cross-school and cross-regional networks facilitated by digital communication platforms expanded teachers’ professional communities beyond their immediate institutional contexts, generating a form of collective professional identity that transcended individual school affiliations. This dynamic parallels findings from other conflict-affected contexts, where teacher solidarity and community embeddedness have similarly been identified as core mechanisms of professional resilience [18, p. 12; 21, p. 612].

Participants described a fundamental reorientation of pedagogical priorities, with a heightened emphasis on emotional safety, psychosocial well-being, civic education, and adaptive creative practice. A central component of pedagogical transformation was the cultivation of psychological safety as a prerequisite for

any meaningful learning. Research documents a 35 per cent increase in internalizing symptoms among Ukrainian students since the start of the war, with approximately 30 per cent of adolescents experiencing moderate to severe depression [25]. Teachers described developing sophisticated practices of emotional adaptation, recognizing signs of trauma in students, adjusting instructional pace and content in response to emotional readiness, and creating relational conditions in which learning remained possible despite pervasive anxiety and sorrow.

Civil education and the development of national identity emerged as explicit pedagogical priorities for most participants. Adaptive creativity was also prominent: teachers described improvising new teaching strategies, repurposing available resources, innovating rapidly in response to changing constraints, and developing a repertoire of flexible pedagogical approaches.

Conclusions. This study has explored the transformation of teacher professional identity in Ukraine under conditions of war-related disruption and uncertainty. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 58 secondary school teachers and analyzed through STEEP analysis and reflexive thematic analysis, the research identified three core dimensions of identity transformation: resilience and moral strength as foundations of professional continuity; collaboration and solidarity as ways of mutual support; and pedagogical transformation through social responsibility, empathy, and adaptive creativity.

The findings demonstrate that war, for all its destructiveness, does not simply erode professional identity: it may also catalyze its deepening,

clarification, and transformation. Ukrainian teachers have emerged from the experience of crisis as more committed, more empathic, more civically engaged, and in many cases more pedagogically innovative professionals. At the same time, the study documents significant psychological, economic, and practical costs, and emphasizes the urgent need for sustained systemic support encompassing mental health provision, economic security, and meaningful professional development.

The study supports the environmental conceptualization of resilience, demonstrating that resilience among Ukrainian teachers is not simply a psychological attribute but is actively produced through links of cohesion, structures of sense, and moral commitments that are themselves transformed by the experience of the war. Evidence confirms that targeted psychosocial support can produce sustained reductions in burnout, anxiety, and depression among Ukrainian teachers.

For teacher educators, the findings emphasize the importance of incorporating reflective, identity-oriented components into initial and ongoing teacher education programs. For policymakers, the findings highlight the need for systemic investments in teacher support structures and the consistent fulfillment of legally assigned salary commitments. Future research should explore the long-term trajectories of teacher identity transformation in post-war Ukraine, the gendered dimensions of professional resilience and care work in conflict contexts, and the potential institutionalization of wartime pedagogical innovations within the New Ukrainian School reform.

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