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Professional Development Needs of Early Childhood Educators Supporting War-Affected Children in Ukraine (Kharkiv Region)

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Abstract. This article presents an empirical study of the professional development needs of early childhood educators supporting war-affected children in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine. The **purpose of the study** is to determine the professional development needs of early childhood educators in the Kharkiv region who support children affected by war-related trauma and displacement. **Methods.** The study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collected through a survey administered in October 2025 to 102 in-service early childhood education and care educators working in the pre-front Kharkiv region. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data from open-ended items were analyzed thematically. The **results** show that educators face systemic, interrelated challenges related to children's psycho-emotional states, limited face-to-face interaction, and the technical and organizational difficulties of distance learning. Children display anxiety, fear, withdrawal, emotional instability, regressive behavior, and phonophobia; 66.7% of educators (n=68) reported having children with internally displaced person status in their groups. Only 27.5% of respondents (n=28) reported full familiarity with the trauma-informed approach, while 20.6% (n=21) reported no familiarity at all. Three priority areas of educators' needs were identified: structured professional training, methodological and practical support, and psychological support for educators themselves. **Scientific novelty.** The scientific novelty of the study lies in providing, for the first time, empirical evidence on the professional development needs and trauma-informed readiness of early childhood educators working under conditions of active, ongoing armed conflict, rather than in post-conflict or comparatively stable settings, as is the case in most existing international research. **Practical**

significance. The findings provided the empirical basis for the professional development programme "Psychosocial Well-Being and Resilience in Early Childhood Education," developed within the international AWARE project in cooperation with HAMK University of Applied Sciences (Finland), and can inform teacher training curricula and educational policy for early childhood educators in frontline and near-frontline regions of Ukraine.

Keywords: trauma-informed approach, psychosocial support, martial law, internally displaced children, educator readiness, teacher training needs, resilience, AWARE project, mixed-methods research.

Потреби у професійному розвитку вихователів дошкільних закладів, які працюють з дітьми, що постраждали від війни в Україні (Харківська область)

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Анотація. Стаття присвячена емпіричному дослідженню потреб у професійному розвитку педагогів дошкільної освіти, які підтримують постраждалих від війни дітей у Харківській області. **Метою** дослідження є визначення потреб у професійному розвитку педагогів дошкільної освіти Харківської області, які супроводжують дітей, постраждалих від пов'язаної з війною травми та вимушеного переміщення. **Методи дослідження.** Дослідження побудоване за змішаним дизайном (mixed-methods), що поєднує кількісні та якісні дані, зібрані шляхом анкетування у жовтні 2025 року серед 102 педагогів дошкільної освіти, які працюють у прифронтовій Харківській області. Аналіз кількісних даних здійснювався методами описової статистики, якісні дані відкритих запитань опрацьовано методом тематичного аналізу. У **результаті** дослідження встановлено, що педагоги стикаються із системними взаємопов'язаними викликами: психоемоційним станом дітей, обмеженим особистим контактом, технічними й організаційними труднощами дистанційного навчання. У дітей спостерігаються тривожність, страх, відстороненість, емоційна нестабільність, регресивна поведінка та фонофобія; 66,7% педагогів (n=68) повідомили про наявність у групах дітей зі статусом внутрішньо переміщених осіб. Лише 27,5% респондентів (n=28) повідомили про повну обізнаність із травма-інформованим підходом, тоді як 20,6% (n=21) зазначили повну необізнаність. Визначено три пріоритетні напрями

потреб педагогів: структуроване професійне навчання, методична й практична підтримка, а також психологічна підтримка самих педагогів. На основі цих результатів розроблено освітню програму «Психосоціальне благополуччя та стійкість у дошкільній освіті» в межах міжнародного проєкту AWARE у співпраці з Університетом прикладних наук НАМК (Фінляндія). Наукова новизна дослідження полягає в тому, що вперше отримано емпіричні дані про потреби педагогів дошкільної освіти, які працюють в умовах активної фази бойових дій, а не в постконфліктному чи стабільному середовищі. Практичне значення результатів полягає в можливості їх використання для розробки програм підвищення кваліфікації педагогів дошкільної освіти, освітньої політики та системи підтримки педагогів у прифронтових регіонах України. **Наукова новизна** дослідження полягає в тому, що вперше наведено емпіричні дані щодо потреб у професійному розвитку та готовності до роботи з урахуванням травматичного досвіду вихователів дошкільних закладів, які працюють в умовах активного, триваючого збройного конфлікту, а не в постконфліктних чи порівняно стабільних умовах, як це має місце в більшості існуючих міжнародних досліджень. **Практичне значення.** Отримані результати стали емпіричною основою для програми професійного розвитку «Психосоціальне благополуччя та резильєнтність у дошкільній освіті», розробленої в рамках міжнародного проєкту AWARE у співпраці з Університетом прикладних наук НАМК (Фінляндія), та можуть бути використані при формуванні навчальних програм підготовки та освітньої політики для вихователів дошкільних закладів у прифронтових та прилеглих до фронту регіонах України.

Ключові слова: травма-інформований підхід, психосоціальна підтримка, воєнний стан, діти зі статусом внутрішньо переміщених осіб, готовність педагогів, потреби у підготовці кадрів, стійкість, проєкт AWARE, змішаний метод дослідження.

Introduction

Background and Rationale. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is widely recognised as a critical foundation for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, with long-term consequences for individual well-being and societal resilience [25; 26; 28]. In Ukraine, the ECEC system is simultaneously undergoing significant legislative reforms and adapting to the severe challenges associated with the ongoing war.

ECEC in Ukraine is recognised as an obligatory component of lifelong learning, aimed at ensuring the comprehensive development of children through upbringing, training, socialisation, and the formation of necessary life skills and competences [4]. The sector is regulated by the Law of Ukraine On Education and the Law of Ukraine On Preschool Education, the most recent version of which was signed on 5 July 2024 and entered into force on 1 January 2025, replacing legislation that had been in effect for 23 years. The new law establishes a diverse system of ECEC institution types, ranging from traditional nurseries, kindergartens, and special kindergartens to newer forms including mobile kindergartens, family (home-based) kindergartens, mini-kindergartens, centres for pedagogical partnership, and child development centres [4]. ECEC institutions may be state, municipal, private, or corporate in form. The law covers two basic developmental stages: early childhood (from infancy to three years) and preschool age (from three to six or seven/eight years), with older preschool children aged five to six or seven years required to attend some form of ECEC provision. The law also significantly expanded parents' rights, including the right to shape their child's individual educational trajectory, participate in the development of individual development programmes, and be present during the educational process by prior agreement with the institution's head.

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, early childhood education has been profoundly disrupted across the country, particularly in frontline and near-frontline regions. The Kharkiv region, situated in northeastern Ukraine and directly exposed to ongoing military activity, has been among the most severely affected oblasts. Preschool

institutions in the region have faced forced closures, infrastructure damage, and the mass displacement of both children and staff. Many educators have continued their professional work under conditions of martial law, combining distance learning with intermittent in-person provision where security conditions permitted.

The situation in the Kharkiv region specifically reflects the cumulative effect of three years of sustained military threat on the ECEC system. As of 1 January 2025, the region had 676 preschool institutions of all types and forms of ownership. This data demonstrates a sharp drop from 753 in 2020, reflecting difficult conditions caused by the war [2]. In the 2024/2025 academic year, only 350 of these 676 institutions were actively operating, of which 319 functioned in a fully remote (distance learning) format, 4 in a blended format, and 27 in Kharkiv city in an in-person format [2]. In total, over 16,000 preschool-age children across the region were involved through various forms of preschool education. However, a direct Russian strike on a private kindergarten in Kharkiv city on 22 October 2025, during which children were present and experienced severe acute stress reactions [5], illustrates the immediate threat that educators and children continue to face during the educational process. According to data from regional state (military) administrations as of 1 September 2025, 131 preschool institutions had been fully destroyed and 1,339 damaged across Ukraine ([2]. As of August 2026, the Kharkiv region has the highest number of damaged institutions (292) of any oblast, with 31 being fully destroyed. Restoration works (current or capital repairs) in the Kharkiv region took place in 86 institutions [22].

The continuation of distance and blended learning formats under these conditions has placed additional professional demands on educators. ICT should serve as an additional resource, aligned with children's developmental level, and used in educator-mediated, play-based formats that support rather than displace direct social interaction [1]. In the wartime context of the Kharkiv region, where the shift to distance learning was driven by necessity rather than choice, these requirements have become both more urgent and more difficult to meet.

The Kharkiv region's response to these conditions has required institutional creativity in the form of a unique case of metro ECEC institutions. From January 2024, preschool education for older children in Kharkiv city has been organised in the city's metro system. This initiative has become known as the 'metro kindergarten' [3]. Operating in 5 metro stations in 16 underground premises, it initially accommodated approximately 400 children from 17 preschool institutions, organised into 41 groups of 18 to 20 children each. Sessions run in two shifts and are attended by preschoolers aged 5 to 6 years with educators, a psychologist, and medical staff present. The metro kindergarten operates seven days a week and has a capacity of approximately 1,000 children. This arrangement provides some normalcy and continuity for children with no access to in-person education, although in an environment defined by a certain amount of danger.

In this context, preschool educators need to expand their professional role to those providing psychosocial support. The new law explicitly requires all pedagogical workers to systematically (at least once every 5 years) improve their qualifications in providing psychological support to children, first aid, and ensuring children's safety [4]. However, this requirement does not specify trauma-informed approaches in particular. As a result, there is a gap between the legal obligation to support children's psychological well-being and actual level of professional preparedness. Hence, in the current study we aim at identifying the needs of ECEC educators.

Given the intensity of ongoing hostilities and the prolonged exposure of children and educators to stress and trauma, these challenges are particularly acute in frontline and near-frontline regions such as Kharkiv. Educators in the Kharkiv region not only teach, but also resist the elimination of childhood, the normalisation of trauma, and the collapse of educational continuity. This makes the Kharkiv region an underexamined site for empirical research.

Understanding what professional competences and support systems are needed to sustain that resistance is the central concern of this chapter. Evidence gathered from this context can offer insights into professional development needs and trauma-informed readiness that are grounded in the realities of active conflict, rather than stable educational environments. Such evidence is urgently needed to inform the design of professional development programs, educator support systems, and educational policy responses that are genuinely responsive to wartime conditions.

Literature Review. Recent scholarship increasingly characterizes ECEC as a key driver of resilience in conflict-affected circumstances. A fundamental shift has occurred where authors such as Bou Zeid and Abouchedid [7] argue for a "bounce forward" approach of emphasizing transformation and anticipation rather than the traditional "bounce back" to a pre-crisis situation. This proactive conceptualization is echoed in the Ukrainian context by Zakharova [29], who demonstrates that ECEC institutions under martial law must expand their role beyond academic instruction to include "survival science" and the assimilation of extreme stress. However, while international studies often utilize qualitative focus groups to capture lived experiences, Ukrainian research frequently prioritizes the content analysis of state regulatory documents to ensure physical and legal safety. Resilience in ECEC is increasingly understood as the capacity for post-traumatic growth. This requires safe educational settings as well as individual coping skills. However, research from active conflict zones is still limited, with most studies focusing on policy rather than practice.

Research on trauma-informed education has expanded considerably in recent years, with studies documenting its relevance across a range of conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts [6; 7; 12; 16; 21; 23; 24; 27]. Koliandri and Datsogianni [16] agree with Hockey et al. [13] that trauma-informed education has benefits for academic performance and psychological recovery. However, they warn of fragmented implementation due to the absence of national frameworks. A disagreement emerges from Chudzik et al. [9], who argue that traditional trauma-informed education often pathologizes marginalized children and ignores how education systems themselves can be sites of traumatization through punitive discipline. Additionally, Hockey et al. [13] identify a specific gap in practice, noting that while organizational trauma-informed education is growing, sensory-based individual practices remain underrepresented and are rarely integrated into broader institutional strategies. Hence, the effectiveness of a trauma-informed approach in education is subject to the creation of an institutionally inclusive culture to promote resilience. This body of work consistently demonstrates that trauma-informed approaches, prioritizing safety, predictability, relationship-building, and sensitivity to the effects of adverse experiences, are central to effective educational practice in crisis settings. There is also growing recognition that trauma-informed professional development must address not only educators' knowledge and skills but also their own psychological well-being, as secondary traumatic stress and burnout pose significant risks for those working in high-stress environments [14].

Beyond the structural and organizational dimensions of resilience, recent scholarship emphasizes the necessity of integrating holistic developmental frameworks that bridge the gap between physical health and cognitive learning. Ribeiro [25] argues that the synergy of psychomotricity and psychopedagogy is a fundamental tool for optimizing the educational environment, particularly in promoting affective and cognitive development during early childhood. While Kyianovskiy [17] focuses on sensory play as a rehabilitative mechanism for war-affected children, Ribeiro [25] expands this scope, suggesting that psychomotor activities are not merely restorative but essential for the science of movement, allowing children to re-establish relationships with themselves and the world through their corporeality. Methodologically, while Ribeiro [25] relies on a comprehensive literature review to propose integration, Kyianovskiy [17] utilizes quasi-experimental diagnostics to prove that such sensory-based sessions measurably reduce social anxiety. Hence, holistic development in crisis

settings requires moving beyond isolated psychological interventions toward an integrated pedagogical approach where physical movement and sensory experiences are used for learning and trauma recovery.

Recent longitudinal research has provided important evidence on the social-emotional outcomes of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Wustmann Seiler et al. [28] found that higher process quality in regular ECEC settings was associated with better social-emotional outcomes; however, its compensatory effects for children exposed to family adversity were generally small and inconsistent. In contrast, Sanders et al. [26] demonstrated that a structured preschool social-emotional learning (SEL) intervention reduced the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences, with benefits that persisted into high school. Together, these studies suggest that while high-quality everyday ECEC contributes to children's well-being, children experiencing severe adversity may require targeted, evidence-based interventions in addition to regular educational provision.

Recent literature also highlights a systemic gap in creating "competent systems" that move beyond the "invisibility" of displaced and traumatized populations. Bove and Sharmahd [8] and Karbowniczek et al. [15] agree that ECEC settings must function as culturally sensitive meeting places where the life of refugee children is made visible. Koliandri and Datsogianni [16] find that in frontline countries like Greece and Cyprus, implementation remains fragmented and dependent on NGO data because national education systems lack institutionalized trauma-responsive policies. This mirrors the observation by Karbowniczek et al. [15] that while intercultural education is theoretically mandated in countries like Poland, teachers often struggle to find a "golden mean" between global and national cultures and frequently feel professionally unprepared for the specific trauma of war refugees. Furthermore, Hockey et al. [13] identify a professional silo effect: while trauma-informed care is growing at an organizational level, individual sensory-based practices remain underrepresented and are rarely implemented by specialists like occupational therapists who could provide critical insights into the neurobiology of trauma. The move toward trauma-informed resilience is currently stalled by a lack of national policy frameworks and a shortage of specialized, interdisciplinary training for the frontline educators who manage these complex classrooms.

The professional readiness of educators is further complicated by the diverging digital and pedagogical realities in different international contexts. Lokhvytska et al. [19] provide a comparative analysis between Ukraine and France, finding that Ukrainian preschool teachers are significantly more likely to systematically plan for e-learning (64.7%) to develop "soft skills" and overcome wartime constraints compared to their French counterparts (45.4%). This proactive stance in Ukraine is justified as a necessity for "educational continuity" amidst displacement. However, Chudzik et al. [9] offer a vital critical caution, arguing that if these digital or stationary trauma-informed interventions focus only on "fixing" the child, they risk making institutions sites of trauma through punitive discipline. They advocate for a shift toward "healing-centered engagement" that centers on the well-being of the educator as much as the child, noting that very few teachers receive training on secondary traumatic stress. Professional readiness in active conflict zones requires a dual-track development: increasing technical/digital literacy for continuity while simultaneously fostering critical, self-reflective competencies to manage secondary trauma and avoid pathologizing vulnerable students.

Finally, while the importance of caregiver participation is a point of consensus, recent studies reveal a significant "moderation gap" in how these relationships are operationalized. Lesinskiene et al. [18] report that a high percentage of parents in regions adjacent to the conflict choose a "tactic of silence," avoiding war-related discussions to protect their children. This is directly contradicted by the empirical findings of Kyianovskyi [17], where the Parent Involvement Index was the primary predictor of a child's reduction in anxiety; children whose parents were "active pedagogical participants" rather than silent observers showed the strongest gains in school readiness. Bove and Sharmahd [8] attempt to reconcile this by calling

for "competent systems" that invest in the family and the institution simultaneously, ensuring that parents are honored as "experts on their child" rather than being forced to adhere to host-country or institutional standards. Effective resilience is not a child-only outcome but a result of a triangulated relationship between the educator, the caregiver, and the institution, where moving parents away from "protective silence" is essential for long-term recovery.

In summary, current research has established that ECEC is a multisystemic meta-capability for resilience and that high-dose, trauma-informed interventions can buffer children against the negative effects of early adversity into adolescence. It is widely recognized that flexible models like mobile and digital preschools are viable for educational continuity and that active parental involvement is a critical moderator of success. However, several **research gaps** remain. First, the majority of studies focus on school-age learners or refugee-hosting settings, with preschool education in active conflict zones receiving limited attention. Second, most existing research has been conducted in post-conflict or stable settings, leaving the professional realities of educators facing daily air raids, displacement, and insecurity largely undocumented. Third, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the specific professional development needs of educators remaining in pre-front areas who must balance trauma-informed care with "survival science." These gaps lead to the purpose of the present study, which **aims** to determine the professional needs, challenges, and trauma-informed readiness of preschool educators in the pre-front Kharkiv region of Ukraine who support war-affected children under the extreme conditions of martial law.

Scientific Novelty. The study provides empirical survey evidence on the professional development needs and trauma-informed readiness of early childhood educators working under conditions of active, ongoing armed conflict, rather than in post-conflict or comparatively stable settings, as is the case in the majority of existing international research.

Practical Significance. The findings provide the empirical basis for the professional development programme "Psychosocial Well-Being and Resilience in Early Childhood Education," developed within the international AWARE project, and can inform teacher training curricula and educational policy for early childhood educators in frontline and near-frontline regions of Ukraine.

Methodology

Research Methods. This paper adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a nuanced understanding of preschool educators' professional experiences and needs in a crisis-affected context. A descriptive survey approach was selected as the most appropriate method for capturing both key trends and educators' lived experiences under martial law. This design is well established in educational research conducted in crisis and conflict-affected settings, where it enables the systematic documentation of professional realities that may otherwise remain unrecorded [10; 11].

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to summarize frequencies, distributions, and central tendencies related to educators' experiences, perceptions, and reported practices. Descriptive statistics were used as the primary analytical tool, as the study's aim was to document and characterise educators' professional experiences rather than to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships.

Qualitative data obtained from open-ended responses were subjected to thematic analysis. Responses were coded inductively to identify recurring themes, patterns, and priorities related to trauma-informed practice and professional needs. Inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding by two researchers and subsequent iterative discussions to resolve discrepancies and refine the coding framework.

Data Sources. Data were collected in October 2025 in the pre-front Kharkiv region, an area characterized by ongoing security threats, intermittent displacement, and disruptions to educational provision. The survey was administered to a non-probability, purposive sample of in-service ECEC educators working in Kharkiv city and Kharkiv oblast (N = 102).

Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently employed as preschool educators during the period of martial law. Participants represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds and levels of teaching experience. The majority reported between 3 and 20 years of professional experience, with both early-career educators and highly experienced practitioners also represented. Respondents worked with various preschool age groups, including early, younger, middle, and senior preschool children, as well as mixed-age groups. This diversity reflects the organizational and staffing adaptations commonly observed in preschool institutions operating under wartime conditions.

A deliberate decision was made not to collect detailed demographic variables (such as gender, educational qualifications, and institutional type) in order to minimize participant burden and protect respondent anonymity in a conflict-affected setting. In the pre-front context of the Kharkiv region, even seemingly non-sensitive demographic indicators may increase the risk of indirect identification, particularly within small professional communities and geographically constrained samples. Ensuring a heightened level of confidentiality was therefore prioritized to promote psychological safety and encourage participation.

Additionally, the study's primary analytical focus was on educators' professional experiences, perceived challenges, and trauma-informed practices under martial law, rather than on demographic comparisons between subgroups. As such, the inclusion of demographic variables was not essential to addressing the core research questions and could have introduced unnecessary complexity without corresponding analytical value.

Data were collected using a researcher-designed questionnaire comprising both closed- and open-ended items. The instrument was developed to address the study's research objectives and to capture educators' perceptions, practices, and professional needs. Content validity was ensured through alignment with the research questions and a systematic review of relevant literature on trauma-informed professional development in early childhood education prior to administration.

The questionnaire covered the following thematic domains: educators' professional background and teaching contexts; perceived challenges of working with young children during martial law; observed psycho-emotional and behavioral characteristics of children affected by war and displacement; pedagogical and psychosocial support strategies employed in practice; familiarity with trauma-informed approaches; self-reported readiness to provide psychosocial support; perceived professional development and training needs.

A pilot study was not conducted due to ethical and logistical constraints related to data collection in an active conflict setting, where minimizing participant burden and ensuring timely documentation of educators' experiences were prioritized.

The survey was administered online to ensure accessibility and participant safety in a conflict-affected setting. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Measures taken to ensure confidentiality and psychological safety included anonymous data collection, the absence of personally identifiable information, and the use of neutral, non-intrusive wording in all questionnaire items. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Given the conflict-affected context, the questionnaire was designed to minimize emotional burden and avoid direct exposure to potentially retraumatizing content. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and data confidentiality, with additional safeguards applied in recognition of the active conflict setting in which data collection took place.

The data that support the findings of this paper were collected via an anonymous online survey instrument available at <https://forms.gle/tiWHLAU6RqYTP3tPA> and are openly available as a dataset deposited in the Zenodo repository at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19475425>.

Data Analysis Tools. Quantitative data were processed using Microsoft Excel, which was used to calculate descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and to generate the summary tables presented in this article. Qualitative data from open-ended survey items were analyzed manually through inductive thematic coding by the first author, without the use of specialized qualitative data analysis software.

Limitations of the Study. This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample was non-probability and purposive rather than random, thus limiting the statistical generalizability of the results to the broader population of preschool educators in Ukraine. Second, a deliberate decision was made not to collect demographic variables such as gender, educational qualifications, or institutional type, in order to minimize participant burden and protect respondent anonymity in a conflict-affected setting; while this choice was ethically justified, it precludes subgroup comparisons that might otherwise have enriched the analysis. Finally, the research instrument was not piloted prior to administration, due to ethical and logistical constraints associated with data collection in an active conflict setting; although content validity was ensured through alignment with the research questions and a review of relevant literature, the absence of piloting may have affected the clarity or interpretability of some items.

Results

Participant Profile. A total of 102 in-service ECEC educators completed the survey. As shown in Table 1, the largest group of respondents worked with senior preschool children aged 5 to 6/7 years ($N = 28$, 27.5%), followed by those working with the middle group aged 4 to 5 years ($N = 25$, 24.5%). A substantial proportion ($N = 24$, 23.5%) worked in mixed-age groups, reflecting the staffing and organisational adaptations common in preschool institutions operating under wartime conditions. Fewer educators worked with younger ($N = 15$, 14.7%) or early-age children ($N = 10$, 9.8%).

In terms of professional experience, the sample was distributed across all career stages, with the largest share reporting 10 to 20 years of experience ($N = 27$, 26.5%). Highly experienced practitioners with over 30 years in preschool education comprised nearly a quarter of the sample ($N = 25$, 24.5%), while early-career educators with up to 3 years of experience represented 8.8% ($N = 9$). This distribution indicates the predominance of experienced educators, which is relevant to interpreting respondents' perceptions of professional development needs.

Table 1

Participant Profile by Age Group and Years of Professional Experience ($N = 102$)

Characteristic	n	%
Age group participants work with		
Senior preschool (5–6/7 years)	28	27.5
Middle preschool (4–5 years)	25	24.5
Mixed-age group	24	23.5
Younger preschool (3–4 years)	15	14.7
Early age (1–3 years)	10	9.8
Years of professional experience		
10–20 years	27	26.5
Over 30 years	25	24.5

3–10 years	21	20.6
20–30 years	20	19.6
0–3 years	9	8.8

Note. Data were collected in October 2025. Age groups follow the Ukrainian state classification for preschool education.

Challenges in Working with Children During Wartime. During martial law, the most frequently reported difficulties in working with children concern children's emotional states and limited face-to-face interaction. Technical and organizational challenges, such as unstable internet, electricity, and limited equipment, significantly complicate distance learning. Educators face both organizational and psycho-emotional burdens which increase the risk of professional burnout. The primary causes of these difficulties include the war and martial law, which generate safety, psychological, and organizational problems. Additional factors, such as technical limitations, distance learning, adults' psychological states, children's limited socialization, and lack of resources and support, create systemic challenges in maintaining a full educational process.

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses revealed that educators perceive these challenges as systemic and interrelated rather than isolated. The primary underlying cause identified was the war itself and the associated conditions of martial law, which generate ongoing safety concerns, psychological strain, and organisational disruption. Contributing factors included technical limitations, restricted opportunities for children's socialisation, the psychological states of parents and caregivers, and a lack of methodological resources and institutional support. Educators described managing the distance learning and the psycho-emotional needs of children and families. Several respondents indicated these as increasing the risk of professional burnout.

Psycho-Emotional States of War-Affected Children. Educators reported observing a broad range of war-related psycho-emotional manifestations in preschool children. Educators most often identified children's psycho-emotional difficulties and the loss of direct contact as the most challenging aspects of their work. Technical and organizational limitations intensify these issues, and the war, along with the constant sense of danger, creates a complex effect on children's learning, behavior, and mental state. Children affected by war-related trauma frequently display anxiety, fear, withdrawal, emotional instability, irritability, tearfulness, sleep and appetite disturbances, difficulties with concentration, delayed speech, and excessive attachment to adults. More severe manifestations reported include panic attacks, aggression, self-harm, apathy, hyperactivity, regressive behavior, and fear of loud noises.

Phonophobia, that is, a heightened fear of loud noises, was specifically mentioned by multiple respondents and reflects the documented impact of air raid alerts and shelling on young children's neurological and emotional responses. Children with internally displaced person (IDP) status were identified as a particularly vulnerable subgroup. As shown in Table 2, 66.7% of respondents (N = 68) reported having children with IDP status in their groups. These children were described as exhibiting heightened anxiety, withdrawal, emotional instability, and a pronounced need for adult support, predictable routines, and individualised approaches to facilitate adaptation and integration.

Table 2

Presence of IDP Children in Groups and Difficulties in Working with Parents (N = 102)

Response	n	%
Presence of IDP children in the group (Q9)		
Yes	68	66.7

No	34	33.3
Difficulties in working with parents (Q13)		
Occasionally	50	49.0
No difficulties	47	46.1
Frequently	5	4.9

Note. IDP = internally displaced persons. Q9 and Q13 refer to closed-ended survey items.

Supporting Children's Emotional Well-Being. Despite the considerable difficulties described, educators employ a variety of methods to support children's emotional well-being, including online and face-to-face communication, individual consultations with children and parents, conversations, games, play therapy, art and fairy-tale therapy, music therapy, role-playing and creative activities (drawing, modeling, appliqués), physical activity, breathing exercises, relaxation practices, therapeutic stories, and creating a safe and predictable environment. Positive reinforcement, attention to the child's emotions and needs, and partnership with parents are emphasized, with approaches combining warmth, stability, and creativity considered the most effective.

Regarding essential professional competences, educators identified a combination of knowledge, practical skills, and personal qualities as most significant for effective wartime work. These include knowledge of child and developmental psychology, psycho-pedagogical support methods such as play, art and fairy-tale therapy, and relaxation practices; creating a safe, predictable environment; adapting teaching to distance and blended formats; and communication and collaboration with parents and specialists. Personal qualities such as patience, empathy, stress resilience, friendliness, professional love, and the ability to maintain a positive emotional atmosphere were also highlighted.

The importance of providing psychosocial support is closely connected to the implementation of the trauma-informed approach. According to Table 3, the majority of respondents reported partial familiarity with trauma-informed principles ($N = 53$, 52.0%), while 27.5% ($N = 28$) indicated full familiarity. A notable proportion — 20.6% ($N = 21$) — reported no familiarity with trauma-informed approaches. These findings indicate uneven professional preparedness across the sample and point to a significant gap in systematic training on trauma-informed practice within the ECEC sector. Additionally, educators unanimously emphasized the central role of the family in fostering children's psychological resilience and emotional well-being, providing safety, stability, love, and support, modeling adult behavior in stressful situations, and helping children cope with challenges.

Table 3

Familiarity with Trauma-Informed Approach and Self-Reported Readiness to Provide Psychosocial Support ($N = 102$)

Response	n	%
Familiarity with trauma-informed approach (Q11)		
Partially familiar	53	52.0
Fully familiar	28	27.5
Not familiar	21	20.6
Self-reported readiness to provide psychosocial support (Q14)		
Difficult to answer	48	47.1

More ready than not	33	32.4
Fully ready	18	17.6
More not ready than ready	2	2.0
Not ready at all	1	1.0

Another layer of providing psychosocial support to children is pedagogical cooperation with parents. As shown in Table 2, nearly half reported occasional difficulties (N = 50, 49.0%), while 46.1% (N = 47) reported no difficulties at all. Only 4.9% (N = 5) described difficulties as frequent. These results suggest that, despite the stressful wartime context, interaction with parents generally proceeds without serious problems, though periodic attention and support are required.

Professional Development of ECEC Teachers. The analysis of the qualitative data received from educators' responses to open-ended questions regarding desired support revealed three primary areas of their needs, essential for strengthening their professional capacity. First, there is a clear demand for structured professional training and continuous development opportunities: respondents mentioned a demand for workshops, seminars, and webinars covering trauma psychology, methods for working with emotionally traumatised children and IDP families, trauma-informed approaches, art and fairy-tale therapy, relaxation techniques, and practical guidance on managing regressive behavior and aggression.

Second, participants highlighted the need for continuous methodological and practical support. This includes access to high-quality teaching materials, structured lesson scenarios, board and developmental games, and targeted exercises aimed at psycho-emotional stabilization. Educators also emphasized the importance of clear guidance for organizing distance or hybrid learning, alongside practical recommendations for establishing safe and supportive learning environments under conditions of instability and disruption.

Third, psychological and emotional support for educators themselves emerged as a critical priority. Respondents underscored the importance of access to professional psychological consultations, supervision, and peer-support mechanisms, including collaborative teamwork and opportunities for professional exchange. Resources and strategies for self-care, stress management, and emotional regulation were also identified as essential for sustaining educators' well-being and preventing burnout in high-stress contexts.

In addition to these core areas, educators pointed to the importance of adequate material and technical resources, expanded access to online platforms and digital tools, and targeted support for parents navigating crisis situations. More broadly, the need for stability and security was recognized as a fundamental precondition for effective educational practice.

The three areas of need identified through the survey results became the basis for the development of a professional development programme, implemented as part of the international project AWARE (Advancing Psychosocial Wellbeing and Resilience in Early Childhood Education in Ukraine, September 2025 – July 2027), developed in cooperation with HAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland, and hosted by V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Teachers' Academy. The programme Psychosocial Well-Being and Resilience in Early Childhood Education was designed to address the professional competence gaps documented in this study and is grounded in the Professional Standard for Early Childhood Education Teachers and the National Qualifications Framework of Ukraine.

Such a framework is designed as a modular blended learning course (3 ECTS credits, 90 hours), structured around three interconnected domains: (1) psychosocial support in early childhood education, (2) implementation of trauma-informed approaches in work with young and preschool children, and (3) personal resources and professional resilience of the educator.

Module 1, Psychosocial Support in Early Childhood Education (30 hours), addresses children's mental health, coping strategies, educator-parent interaction, and the creation of stress-resilient educational environments. Module 2, Implementation of a Trauma-Informed Approach in Working with Preschool Children (30 hours), covers trauma-informed principles, play and storytelling as therapeutic tools, children's emotional regulation, and psychological first aid — directly addressing the documented gap in trauma-informed knowledge. Module 3, Personal Resources and Professional Resilience of a Trauma-Informed Educator (30 hours), focuses on professional identity, pedagogical partnership, burnout prevention, and self-regulation strategies — responding to educators' need for psychological support for themselves. Each module concludes with a test or project defence (Table 4).

Table 4

Curriculum Outline of the AWARE Certificate Programme "Psychosocial Well-Being and Resilience in Early Childhood Education" (90 Hours / 3 ECTS)

Module / Topic	Content Focus	Hours	Format
Module 1. Psychosocial Support in Early Childhood Education		30	
Topic 1. Mental Health of Preschool Children	Age-related emotional, social, and behavioural development; signs of psychological well-being and difficulty; role of ECEC in mental health support	6	Lecture + practical
Topic 2. Coping Strategies of Preschool Children	Age-specific stress responses; adaptive vs. maladaptive coping; adult role in fostering children's stress resilience and emotional flexibility	8	Lecture + practical
Topic 3. Interaction with Parents on Mental Health Issues	Family partnership principles; sensitive communication without stigmatisation; professional boundaries; referral to specialists	6	Practical
Topic 4. Stress Resilience in the Educational Environment	Impact of stress on preschoolers; predictability, routines, and safe relationships; creating a psychosocially supportive classroom environment	8	Practical
<i>Module 1 assessment</i>	<i>Test</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>—</i>
Module 2. Implementation of a Trauma-Informed Approach in Working with Preschool Children		30	

Topic 5. Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach in Educators' Practice	Impact of trauma on preschoolers; types of traumatic events; protective factors; core TI principles; designing a safe and predictable environment	4	Lecture + practical
Topic 6. Play and Storytelling as Tools of a Trauma-Informed Environment	Therapeutic role of play; adult support for children's play; storytelling for processing emotions; safe play spaces; digital tools and age-related limitations	6	Practical
Topic 7. Regulation of Children's Emotional State	Emotional literacy; empathic listening; co-regulation; anchor toys; calm corner; breathing and sensory techniques; role of routines in emotional regulation	10	Lecture + practical
Topic 8. Provision of Psychological Support to Children	Psychological first aid: basic principles; recognising distress and trauma signs; crisis support techniques; educator-parent interaction; referral to specialists	8	Practical
<i>Module 2 assessment</i>	<i>Project defence</i>	2	—
Module 3. Personal Resources and Professional Resilience of a Trauma-Informed Educator		30	
Topic 9. Professional Identity of a Trauma-Informed Educator in the Context of War	Educator as figure of safety and stability; values, responsibilities, and ethical principles; awareness of own capabilities and limitations in wartime	6	Lecture + practical
Topic 10. Psychological Aspects of Pedagogical Partnership and Team Interaction	Significance of partnership in professional practice; teamwork with colleagues, psychologists, and specialists; assertive communication and conflict resolution	6	Lecture + practical

Topic 11. Educator Burnout: Prevention and Self-Help	Signs and stages of burnout; impact of working with traumatised children on educators' psycho-emotional state; risk and protective factors; self-help strategies	8	Practical
Topic 12. Self-Regulation, Stress Management, and Care for Educators' Mental Health	Emotional literacy of educators; breathing, body-based, and sensory self-regulation practices; developing individual mental health strategies; culture of self-care	8	Practical
<i>Module 3 assessment</i>	<i>Project defence</i>	2	—
Total		90	Online / blended

Training on trauma-informed approaches and supportive practices is systematically aligned with concrete methodological tools, including structured activities, play-based interventions, and interaction strategies tailored to early childhood settings. This ensures that educators are able to translate theoretical knowledge into developmentally appropriate educational activities and everyday interactions with children. At the same time, the inclusion of reflective practices, peer exchange, and elements of supervision responds to the need for continuous professional and emotional support. Furthermore, the modular and blended format enhances flexibility and accessibility, allowing educators to be involved in focused learning units adapted to conflict-affected settings.

Discussion

Interpretation of Results. The study results illustrate a snippet of reality of how educators of ECEC institutions in Kharkiv oblast operate in the context of an active phase of ongoing war. The results extend the previous body of research on the needs of educators working with crisis-affected cohorts of children, while revealing various facets of the wartime ECEC experience that remain largely unaddressed in the international literature.

According to the survey, ECEC educators experience systemic and interrelated challenges in their professional practice during wartime. The most frequently reported difficulty relates to catering to children's psycho-emotional needs together with educational process disruptions, distance learning, infrastructure damage, and safety restrictions. Technical constraints, including unstable internet access, electricity outages, and lack of equipment, further complicate educational work. Educators here are not managing the impact of trauma but rather navigating its continuous unfolding, with no clear endpoint, being in the same circumstances as the children they support. This is a distinguishing feature of the wartime ECEC context compared with post-conflict settings typically described in the international literature.

The survey comprised a self-reported readiness question to provide psychosocial support and the question on the support necessary for educators. The most frequent response to the readiness question is "difficult to answer" (47.1%, N = 48). In the context of the open-ended responses, it reflects a professional awareness: educators are actively supporting and engaging with children's needs, but feel that their current knowledge level is not adequate to what the

situation demands. This aligns with broader findings from teacher surveys in other professional development contexts, where lack of confidence in specialised competences coexists with strong motivation to improve [20].

Comparison with Other Studies. This is consistent with evidence that educators in conflict-affected settings occupy a dual role as both instructors and frontline providers of psychosocial support [7; 14; 23]. However, the intensity and duration of Russian military aggression in the Kharkiv context exceeds what is typically described in post-conflict literature.

The three priority areas identified by respondents (structured training, methodological resources, and psychological support for educators) correspond directly to what the literature identifies as the components of sustainable trauma-informed practice. Loomis et al. [20] emphasise that success in trauma-informed professional development initiatives is linked to long-term support programmes and supervision rather than short-term training events, as well as embedding support structures into institutional culture. The educators in this study have independently concluded the same.

The finding that only 27.5% (N = 28) of respondents are fully familiar with trauma-informed principles, and that 20.6% (N = 21) have no familiarity at all, is consistent with evidence from other frontline educational contexts. Koliandri and Datsogianni [16] explain the implementation challenges in Greece and Cyprus by the lack of a holistic system of trauma-informed support at educational institutions and limited teacher training in trauma-informed practice. It echoes the situation in Ukraine. However, what makes the situation different and acute is that ECEC teachers work with children experiencing war daily, and under such conditions insufficient preparation has immediate consequences for children's well-being and development.

Scientific Novelty. The findings extend the previous body of research on the needs of educators working with crisis-affected cohorts of children by revealing facets of the wartime ECEC experience that remain largely unaddressed in the international literature. Unlike prior studies conducted in post-conflict or comparatively stable settings, this study documents the professional realities of educators working under conditions of daily air raids, displacement, and chronic insecurity.

Practical Significance. The findings have practical implications for the design of professional development programs, teacher training curricula, and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening the ECEC system in Ukraine and other conflict-affected regions.

The three priority areas identified by educators (structured professional training, methodological support, and psychological support for educators) became the empirical basis for the professional development programme "Psychosocial Well-Being and Resilience in Early Childhood Education," implemented within the international AWARE project (Advancing Psychosocial Wellbeing and Resilience in Early Childhood Education in Ukraine, August 2025 – July 2027) in cooperation with HAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland, and hosted by V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University. The 90-hour (3 ECTS) modular blended-learning programme directly addresses the documented gaps in trauma-informed knowledge and psychological self-support (see Table 4), offering a concrete, evidence-grounded response to the needs documented in this study.

Conclusions

This paper presents unique empirical evidence on the professional development needs of ECEC educators working with war-affected children in the Kharkiv region of Ukraine during the war. Based on survey data collected from 102 in-service ECEC educators in October 2025, the study has documented the challenges, psycho-emotional observations, instructional strategies, and professional support needs of teachers in one of the most severely affected areas in Europe.

The findings indicate that wartime ECEC educators in the Kharkiv region not only have to work in distance and blended modes but provide psychosocial support to children and families. The children in their groups show signs ranging from anxiety and withdrawal to panic attacks and regressive behaviour. Despite these conditions, educators actively provide support through pedagogical approaches (play therapy, art and fairy-tale therapy, relaxation techniques, and family partnership). It is worth mentioning educators often draw on their pedagogical intuition rather than formal training in trauma-informed practice.

The most striking finding of the study shows the gap between what educators are expected to do and what they have been prepared to do. Over half of respondents reported only partial familiarity with trauma-informed practice, and nearly half expressed uncertainty about their own readiness to provide psychosocial support. This is due to the fact they have not been prepared to overcome challenges posed on them by the wartime context. This gap is systemic, and needs a systemic response.

The three priority areas identified by educators (structured professional training, methodological support, and psychological support for educators) have become a basis for the development of the professional development programme “Psychosocial Well-Being and Resilience in Early Childhood Education”, implemented in cooperation with HAMK University of Applied Sciences, Finland. This programme represents one concrete and replicable response to the needs documented here, grounded in practitioner evidence rather than assumptions about what educators’ needs during war are.

An additional layer of context of this study is educators in this study are not simply managing a professional challenge of working in a difficult setting. They are refusing to allow war to erase a happy childhood for Ukrainian children. Supporting these educators is an ethical imperative.

The prospects for further research are the design of professional development programs, teacher training curricula, and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening the ECEC system in Ukraine and other conflict-affected regions.

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