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Providing Quality Education to School-Age Children in Times of War in Ukraine: A Netnographic Analysis

Abstract

The main objective of this study is to clarify strategic directions aimed at adapting the system of general secondary education to new conditions of teaching and learning and minimising educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine, on the one hand, and presenting and communicating our specific study to an international audience through describing main activities within each strategic direction identified, on the other hand. The authors employed a netnographic approach for collecting information posted on the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine's official website on the topic of providing quality education to school-age children in war in Ukraine between February 24 and June 30, 2022. The data concerning providing quality education to school-age children in times of war in Ukraine were collected for more than four months, from February 24, 2022 to June 30, 2022. The authors selected 294 news posts that met the selection criteria for further analysis out of 824 news posts available on the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine website during the chosen period. Their analysis and summarisation enabled us to clarify eight main strategic directions, namely, official statements by the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, External Independent Assessment, support of the international community for providing educational opportunities to school-age children outside Ukraine, organising education in times of war, work with teachers in times of war, providing technical support to organising education, out-of-school education, physical and sports education.

Keywords: *educational losses, education in times of war, general secondary schools, general secondary education, quality education, strategic directions*

Introduction

Unfortunately, even in the 21st-century military conflicts which threaten world peace occur regularly. Consequently, civilians fleeing from their countries in search of refuge elsewhere and who have to remain in war-affected areas face various challenges. Among these challenges, the following are the most noticeable: violating human rights, worsening humanitarian situation on the whole, deterioration of the security situation, the spread of poverty, severe health problems, a possible decline in the quality of human resources development, and others. Moreover, one of the most pressing issues, which can adversely affect the sustainable development of human civilisation and today's globalised society, is the violation of the right to education of school-age children because of war conflicts. As mentioned by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, 2021), only in 2021, there were 54 war conflicts in the world, let alone the number of war conflicts that have occurred on our planet since the end of the Second World War. However, the war in Ukraine, which started with a full-scale invasion by Russian Federation on February 24, 2022, is an unprecedented challenge thrown not only to all European countries but to all international communities.

The latest statistical data concerning the number of Ukrainian citizens in general and Ukrainian children in particular who had to leave their homes due to intensifying hostilities conducted on the territory of Ukraine make an indelible impression. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2022c), from the outbreak of hostilities till the middle of July, more than 12 million Ukrainians were forced to flee their homes. Namely, more than 6.2 million Ukrainians became internally displaced, and more than 6.1 million Ukrainians were forced to seek refuge and asylum abroad. Even more tragic is that these military activities threatened the lives of 7.5 million children under 18-year-olds (UNICEF, 2022b; Save the Children, 2022). After the hostilities, approximately 2.5 million Ukrainian children under 18 became internally displaced, and about 2 million Ukrainian children sought refuge or asylum abroad (UNICEF, 2022b; Falk, 2022). It is not difficult to assess the scope of the problems connected with general secondary education in Ukraine, taking into account information concerning the number of general secondary schools, schoolchildren and teachers ready to start the 2021/2022 school year, which was hosted on the official website of the Ministry of

Education and Science of Ukraine (2021). Thus, at the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, there were 14 873 general secondary schools, 4.2 million schoolchildren and 441 000 teachers in Ukraine (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2021). It means that immediately after February 24, 2022, there were well-founded concerns that almost all school-age children directly or indirectly would be denied the opportunity to access quality education. To avoid reducing the quality of education and to minimise educational losses, unprecedented measures have been taken by the Ukrainian Government and the entire international community to give Ukrainian school-age children the opportunity to continue their studies despite the tragic circumstances in which they found themselves.

Therefore, our present study is targeted at clarifying strategic directions aimed at adapting the system of general secondary education to new conditions of teaching and learning and minimising educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine, on the one hand, and presenting and communicating our specific study to an international audience through describing main activities within each strategic direction, on the other hand. The following tasks have been formulated to address the aim: (1) collect, analyse and summarise all the information concerning the measures taken by the Ukrainian government at the national level and by the international community to provide school-age children with equal opportunities for education in order to equip them with skills, confidence and life options they need to succeed in an increasingly interconnected and rapidly changing globalised world; (2) to clarify main strategic directions focused on adapting the system of general secondary education to new conditions of teaching and learning and minimising educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine; (3) to present and communicate our specific study to an international audience through describing main activities within each strategic direction identified.

Literature Review

A literature review indicates that children bear the most harmful consequences of hostilities, and the majority of studies, which address this concern from various angles, constitute indisputable evidence of this fact (UNICEF, 2022a). For the most part, children from war-torn countries experience lack of equal access to quality education, including curricular support and inaccessibility to learning materials. Investigating what impact a war can have on children, Santa Barbara (2006, p. 891) comes to a conclusion that, on the one hand, it “affects children in all the ways it

affects adults...” but, on the other hand, impacts of any war “may adversely affect the life trajectory of children far more than adults” (Santa Barbara, 2006, p. 891). Defending her point of view, the researcher explains that children who are exposed to stress, who lose the opportunity for schooling and social life or who are forced from their homes “will never attain the potential they had before the impact of war” (Santa Barbara, 2006, p. 891).

The contemporary scientific literature contains numerous studies investigating the impact of war on education in general and general secondary education in particular. All these studies clearly show that their authors are unanimous in the view that without access to education, school-age children will not be able to reach their true potential in the future (Guariso & Verpoorten, 2019; Santa Barbara, 2006; Mayai, 2022). Main reasons for a direct decline in the quality of general secondary education include: (a) refusal of school-age children to return to education (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016); (b) the suspension of schooling as a result of school closures or their destruction (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016; Guariso & Verpoorten, 2019), (c) relocation of school-age children to safer areas paying no attention to availability of schools (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016; Mayai, 2022), (d) a very sharp drop in income which results in parent’s inability to pay for children’s education (Mayai, 2022) or cuts in or withdrawal of spending on education (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016); (e) a substantial decline in primary school enrolment (Mayai, 2022); (f) loss of academic community (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016); (g) non-qualified teaching staff (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016); (h) drastic loss of skills (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016); (i) behavioural problems (Cervantes-Duarte & Fernández-Cano, 2016); lack of textbooks (Gindeel & Etim, 2014).

But at the same time, a search of the literature shows that there are no studies on the issue focusing on clarifying strategic directions aimed at adapting the system of general secondary education to new conditions of teaching and learning, minimising educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine and describing main activities within each strategic direction.

Research Methodology

To achieve a research aim and to complete the formulated tasks which were of great interest to us, we performed a thorough analysis of news posts hosted on the official website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. The authors

employed a netnographic approach for collecting information posted on the official website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, whose choice is justified by the fact that it is one of the central executive bodies of Ukraine charged with forming and implementing the state policy in education and science (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, n.d.). We limited the period between February 24, 2022 and June 30, 2022. The beginning of the period for collecting data is explained by the fact that after the Russian Federation started a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and traditional education was suspended in all educational institutions in Ukraine.

The search keywords for selecting news posts were “education”, “general secondary education”, “international cooperation”, and “out-of-school education”. During this period, 824 news posts were found on the website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. After carefully considering the content of the news posts, we selected 294 posts that met our selection criteria. The selected news posts provided extensive coverage of truly titanic work of the Ministry itself, Ministries of Education of EU countries and countries all over the world, a wide range of Ukrainian and foreign public and private institutions and organisations, individual experts and volunteers who have been contributing considerably to providing quality education to school-age children in times of war in Ukraine.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis and summarisation of 294 news posts selected on the official website of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine enabled us to clarify eight main strategic directions focused on adapting the system of general secondary education to new conditions of teaching and learning and minimising educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine. The obtained results concerning strategic directions are summarised in Table 1.

Official statements by the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine

All the activities within this category were targeted at informing Ukrainians about changes in education in times of war in Ukraine. On February 25, 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine posted an official letter recommending suspending education in all educational institutions in Ukraine and announcing two-week holidays. In two-week time a decision was taken to resume instruction in all educational institutions with due consideration of the specific situation in each

Table 1. Summarised Information on Strategic Directions for Providing Quality Education for School-Age Children in Times of War in Ukraine between February 24, 2022 and June 30, 2022

News Posts on Official Website of Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine	Strategic Directions							
	Official Statements by the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine	External Independent Assessment	Support of International Community for Providing Educational Opportunities to School-Age Children Outside Ukraine	Organising Education in Times of War	Physical and Sports Education	Work with Teachers in Times of War	Providing Technical Support for Organising Education	Out-of-School Education
Number of News Posts	43	38	48	46	25	30	14	50

Source: own study
(n=294)

region of Ukraine. In places where there were no active hostilities and access to the Internet, schools were recommended to provide teaching and learning in different formats (classroom studies, blended or distant learning) or to enable school-age children, mostly internally displaced ones, to continue education as external students.

External Independent Assessment

The External Independent Assessment (EIA), which objectively assesses school leavers' level of academic achievements, is a very important life event on which their future depends. Its main aim is to provide school leavers with equal opportunities to enter those higher educational institutions they dream of regardless of their social status and, in this way, to encourage them to participate in higher education. This year because of hostilities conducted on the territory of Ukraine, it was decided to introduce a National Multi-Subject Test (NMT) in the form of an online computer testing instead of the EIA.

Support of International Community for Providing Educational Opportunities to School-Age Children Outside Ukraine

To adapt quickly to education in many European countries, school-age children seeking refuge or asylum abroad were offered educational materials in the Ukrainian language. Moreover, the Education Department of the Council of Europe created a special website, “Education in Time of Crisis”, to adapt Ukrainian school-age children to European educational standards (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022a). European countries created educational hubs to allow teachers, school-age children and their parents to find necessary learning tools and to accelerate the integration of Ukrainian educational resources, teachers and schoolchildren into their systems of general secondary education. Also, due to the comprehensive support of the international community, Ukrainian school leavers got the opportunity to take a National Multi-Subject Test outside Ukraine.

Organising Education in Times of War

In most regions of Ukraine, wherever security conditions were permitted, education was restored on March 14, 2022. Taking into account that many teachers and school-age children were forced either to leave their homes or stay in temporarily occupied territories, and many schools were severely damaged or destroyed, it was necessary to provide them with free distance learning and free online services. On March 14, 2022, Ukrainian television launched a joint educational project, “Learning without borders”, which broadcast video lessons on different school subjects for 5th-11th graders (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022b). The teachers delivered instruction in synchronous or asynchronous formats for school-age children who stayed home in the same living conditions they had before the war started. More than twenty private online schools provided school-age children in Ukraine and abroad free access to education, including synchronous and asynchronous instruction. These schools conducted lessons according to the all-Ukrainian curriculum and provided psychological support to school-age children and their parents. It has to be mentioned that in case of submitting documents and becoming a student of one of these online schools, school-age children were guaranteed to be provided with state-recognised education certificates at the end of the current school year.

Work with Teachers in Times of War

Systematic work with teachers was carried out to equip teachers with innovative approaches, technologies, methods and techniques for organising education and minimising educational losses in times of war and post-war period in Ukraine and with special knowledge and skills necessary for delivering quality education. Special webinars and online seminars were organised to train teachers on how to incorporate innovative digital tools into teaching, how to motivate school-age children into learning, and how to work with them and reduce stress among them.

Providing Technical Support to Organising Education

Teachers and school-age children need present-day computer equipment to deliver and receive education online synchronously or asynchronously. As a result of hostilities, many general secondary schools were badly damaged or destroyed, and many people, including teachers and schoolchildren, were left without belongings. Various international organisations and companies provided teachers from different regions of Ukraine with laptops which helped them deliver quality education remotely. Thus, for instance, the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and Google signed an agreement to provide Ukrainian teachers with 43 000 devices (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2022c).

Out-of-School Education

Because out-of-school education is an integral part of the general secondary education system, it is targeted at developing the talents and abilities of school-age children, equipping them with knowledge and skills that are of utmost importance for their successful socialisation and the realisation of their potential. The system of out-of-school education, which restored its activity on March 14, 2022, provided school-age children with a weekly online timetable. School-age children were able to join online classes at their convenience. Moreover, GoGlobal, a non-governmental organisation, offered the all-Ukrainian online programme called “Creative Camp: We Are from Ukraine!” for school-age children aged 8 to 16 years. The online programme brought together teachers and schoolchildren from different regions of Ukraine who were able to take part in various master-classes, drawing workshops, improvisation, and choreography, provided by Ukrainian artists.

Physical and Sports Education

Considering that school-age children's psychological and physical state is highly dependent on their physical activity, much emphasis was placed on involving them in real-time sports activities. It was possible by introducing a new all-Ukrainian project, "We'll win together", and implementing an entirely new form of organising online lessons. The project started on March 17, 2022 and created favourable conditions for reducing anxiety among school-age children and teachers and sharing the experience of coping with stress.

Conclusions

The present research was conducted to clarify strategic directions aimed at adapting the general secondary education system to new conditions of teaching and learning in times of war in Ukraine and minimising educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine. These strategic directions included official statements by the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, independent external assessment, support of the international community for providing educational opportunities to school-age children outside Ukraine, organising education in times of war, working with teachers in times of war, providing technical support to organising education, out-of-school education, physical and sports education. Summarising all the above, we can state with confidence that all school-age children who had to be provided with quality education in times of war in Ukraine could be conditionally divided into five groups: (1) school-age children who stayed at home in the same living conditions which they had before the war started; (2) internally displaced school-age children; (3) refuge- or asylum-seeking children; (4) forcibly displaced children; (5) children who remain in the war-affected areas. All school-age children who fall into these five groups found themselves in entirely different conditions for continuing their studies. That is why an urgent need arose to adapt the system of general secondary education to new conditions of teaching and learning and to minimise educational losses both in times of war and in the post-war period in Ukraine through transforming existing approaches, technologies, methods and techniques of teaching and learning to present-day conditions, on the one hand, and through implementing the system of purposeful, methodical work with teachers.

Our research demonstrates that all the activities implemented within identified strategic directions were no coincidence as they were targeted at preventing

the degradation of the quality of general secondary education and maintaining uniform general secondary education for different groups of school-age children. The description of main activities within each strategic direction was targeted at presenting and communicating our specific study to an international audience.

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