

## Explorative Study of Psychosocial Stress Factors that Cause Professional Burnout Among Teachers, Who Leave Near the Front-Line Zone in the East of Ukraine

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**Introduction.** The purpose of the research was to determine the degree of the pedagogists' burnout and to develop recommendations for a training program on burnout prevention among teachers working near the contact line (0 to 15 km) between the Ukrainian army and the groups of separatists. The research was conducted in the framework of the United Nations Children's Fund project "Strengthening resilience of educational professionals and building capacity of community members in provision of psycho-social services in conflict-affected eastern areas of Ukraine". The National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy" has previously carried out a series of quantitative and qualitative studies of psychosocial stress and its impact on children in Lugansk and Donetsk oblasts (Bogdanov, 2017a). In particular, the level of psychosocial stress among schoolchildren was studied and stress factors that affect children living near the front-line were investigated (Bogdanov et al, 2016). However, prior to this a systematic study of the Ukrainian teacher's resiliency and mental health has not been carried out despite convincing observations and burnout complaints, which were repeatedly proclaimed by teachers and school psychologists. The current study is the first step in exploring the causes of psychosocial stress and assessing the level of emotional and professional burnout among teachers in the East of Ukraine. The results of the study will inform the development of a training program on burnout prevention and stress management for teachers working in the 15-km zone from the front-line.

### Related Work.

There is common agreement among researchers on the main factors that describe the phenomenon of burnout. These include: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization and reduced professional performance (Bianchi, Shonefeld & Laurent, 2015, Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1997). Emotional exhaustion is characterized by a feeling of emotional emptiness and physical overload; a person lacks energy, their mood is low. Cynicism is characterized by a distant attitude to their work; individual demotivation and rejection of their work. Finally, the lack of professional effectiveness involves a sense of inadequacy and incompetence associated with a loss of self-confidence (Maslach, Shaufeli & Leiter 2001).

Concepts of burnout share the general view that burnout could be seen as a result of a long, unresolved stress at work or that burnout is caused by a long-term mismatch between the requirements related to the work and the available resources of employee (Maslach, 2001). Thus, burnout is the result of the chronic failure of adaptive mechanisms and should not be confused with period of acute stress at work.

The influence of psychosocial factors on teacher burnout has been considered in previous studies (Vodopianova, Starchenko & Nasledov, 2013, Kuprianova, Dashieva & Karaush, 2013, Pavlova, 2014), yet none of these studies have explored the influence of war and prolonged stay near the zone of military action on teacher's professional burnout.

### Results and Discussion.

This study has a mixed quantitative and qualitative design. The level of burnout was measured using the questionnaire "Professional burnout" (version for teachers and university professors), developed by N. Vodopianova (2001, 2013) based on the model described by K. Maslach and S. Jackson (Maslach, 1997). The questionnaire consists of three scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization / cynicism and professional success. The answers are assessed based on scale of frequency varying from "never" (0 points) to "always" (6 points). The causes of psychosocial stress among teachers, the effects of the military conflict on teachers, and the teacher's need in psychological support were studied within individual and focus group interviews. Group discussions were more focused on identifying the main causes of stress, and individual interviews on description of stress influence on physical, emotional, and behavioural levels. The readiness of teachers to participate in burnout prevention activities and their interest to attend such training was studied both in group and in individual interviews.

Field research was conducted on August both in the Luhansk and Donetsk region. All respondents (41 people from the Luhansk region and 40 people from the Donetsk region from the age of 21 to 56 years old) fulfill the questionnaire "Professional stress".

The 53 respondents of the focus groups were teachers from different educational institutions such as schools, professional colleges, school psychological services. Participants have had possibility to choose, if they want to speak with Interviewers Russian or Ukrainian languages. In total, 5 focus groups were held (3 in Lugansk and 2 in Donetsk oblast). There were also 8 individual interviews with pedagogical staff working near the front-line zone in Luhanska Oblast and 20 individual interviews in Donetska Oblast. All interviews were audio recorded, and written transcripts were content-analysed.

The research identified five key factors that are correlated with psychosocial stress among teachers.

1. Influence of war and leaving close to the front-line zone
2. Excessive workload and poorly organized work environment
3. Uncertainty about the future, sense of insecurity, and inability to plan their own lives
4. Working with difficult students
5. Ideological differences with students and their parents.

The factor “Influence of war” is one of the most frequently mentioned factors among teachers who are living close to the contact line and it consists of five sub-categories.

- Stress due to the risks of living in the armed conflict area as well as feeling responsibility for the student’s life in the conflict area.

One teacher says: “I go to work and I think: what if it shoots, where will I immediately fall down? Where will I be. where will I lie? Where am I going to hide? And I have already told my husband: if there is a hatch – I will jump into the hatchway and hide. And one is even more scared for children.”

- Sense of loss of control over the situation, insecurity and unwillingness to act under extreme conditions:

"Since the onset of the war I have somehow developed the perception of my helplessness and limited opportunities"

- Feeling of danger, tension, anxious reaction to sounds, rustling, explosions:

“Any knock somewhere, and the first thought is about that shelling starts again. Even if it is some event, fireworks, immediately the first thought is about that it begins.”

- Losses, injuries of loved ones, death of neighbours, acquaintances:

" A shell in Balka exploded right in front of me.I thought that was it, that’s how the house was shaken. And my husband was outside, he was barring the windows. his had a shell-shock, was thrown into the snow. It’s very hard for me to talk about it now."

- Loss of housing, property and the threat of loss of work by family members:

" Three shells hit in her [my colleagues] hous, the house was destroyed. Antonina only had the things left that she was wearing."

The factors presented above are relevant only for the group of pedagogists from Luhanska Oblast, because responders from Donetska oblasts are living relatively far away from the fighting area. Therefore both groups have fulfilled self-assessment questionnaire and it seemed interesting to compare the degree of burnout in groups within 15 km from the contact line with the degree of burnout in the group located at a relatively safe distance. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The degree of self- assessed professional burnout of pedagogists in Donetska and Luhanska oblasts

Degree of burnout		Donet-ska Oblast, %	Luhan-ska Oblast, %
The total degree of professional burnout	Low	2.5	0
	Medium	15	19.5
	High	45	41.1
	Extremely high	37.5	39.4
Emotional burnout	Low	2.5	2.4
	Medium	25	22
	High	37.5	39
	Extremely high	35	36.6
Depersonalization/ cynicism	Low	0	0
	Medium	20	31.7
	High	10	4.9
	Extremely high	70	63.4
Professional success	Low	85	68.3

Medium	15	24.4
High	0	7.3
Extremely high	0	0

The Cronbach's alpha is high in the both groups studied -.769 in Donetska Oblast and -.754 in Luhanska Oblast. Reliability by scale:

- Depersonalization/cynicism scale: in Donetska Oblast.837, in Luhanska -.788
- Emotional exhaustion scale: in Donetsk Oblast.847, in Lugansk -.770.
- Professional success scale: in Donetsk Oblast.177, in Luhanska Oblast.379.

The results show that both groups of teachers experience an equally high degree of professional burnout. Of the teachers within 15km of the contact line 41.1% had a high degree of burn out and 39.4% had extremely high degree of burnout, while the prevalence of high and extreme levels of burnout were 45% and 37.5% for the teachers 40-60km from the contact line. This indicate no noticeable effect of proximity to the contact line on the degree of the pedagogists' professional burnout based on their self-assessment. This can be explained by the fact that the experience of their four-year stay in an area where there are high risks for their life and health has helped them to develop protective mechanisms against the threat of death, loss of housing and property, and uncertainty about their future.

On the other hand, some of the stress factors that arose as a result of the war situation, have an effect on representatives of both groups. These factors include overload due to an increase in the number of reports and the amount of extra-curricular work. So one teacher reported: "Teachers are so loaded with work that when lessons are over he thinks: God, there are still the notes, notebooks, prepare this, do that! That is, your working day is over at 1 pm, roughly speaking, but you leave school at 4 pm."

Other factor is an impact of the uncertainty about the future and the inability to plan their lives. One teacher says: "Before the war, we used to develop some plans for the future, while now we just really live today. One lives through a day and says "Thanks God." Because nobody can predict what will happen tomorrow, because we have already been there".

Similarly, the both groups are characterized by increased stress due encountering a greater number of complicated cases at work (teaching to IDP children, teaching to children with special educational needs). "We are confronted with the fact that children are very vulnerable. It has happened that we were under shelling, we had to observe fear in the eyes of children, and we had to do something to avoid that. There was a child who just started weeping. Shelling starts – and he gets hysterical." Such difficulties could be effectively resolved through implementing in-service training programs for teachers that will concentrate on obtaining knowledges about psychological trauma and its impact as well as on development communicative skills needed for establishment supportive relationships with affected children.

The last group of stress factors that causes burnout in both groups of teachers is ideological contradictions with parents and students regarding their perception of the causes of the armed conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine. "Some are for Ukraine, some – for the militia. And when you come and start speaking. And when you start speaking, say, about the "Heavenly Hundred" and so on, while completely opposite things have been told to the children. And how could all of that be combined? Well, for me, for example, it is very hard."

As mentioned above high and ultra-high rates of emotional exhaustion, both at the physiological level and at emotional level, have found numerous reflections in teacher's expressions. Such symptoms of mental health problems as avoidance, hyperarousal, intrusions, lack of energy, sleeping problems, unexpected fears were identified in teacher's statements. Considering the predominance of high and super-high levels of burnout, one can predict the high level of spread of mental health disorders among educators in the East of Ukraine, primarily among those living on the front-line. At the moment, no other existing data is available that could specify mental health problems among teachers. However, other researchers point to a limitation of the concept of burnout, noting that it is not something different from the already known depression or its other varieties, such as neurasthenia. (Bianchi, 2015) The proponents of the burnout concept argue that depression is more general, and burnout is conditioned by the specific situations at work (Maslach, 2001). As Bianchi et al. (2015) mentioned in his last review the current state of research knowledge does not allow unanimously to resolve this controversial issue, but there is a significant number of studies that indicate the interconnectedness of these phenomena and the causal link between them. It should also be noted that today there is a lack of research that would study the clinical manifestations of depression and clinical manifestations of burnout. Similarly, there are no statistics on the health status of teachers in the East of Ukraine, in particular the spread of cardiovascular diseases, which in some other studies correlate with high levels of burnout (Melamed et al., 2006). This finding is also confirmed by numerical references provided by teachers in this study.

#### **Limitations of the study**

Its limitation was use of a small number of respondents that increase possibility for a non-representative sample of the teachers in each area.

**Strength of the study:**

The strength of this study was its relevance, given the length of the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine and its negative impact on teacher's psychosocial wellbeing, especially for those, who are living close to the front-line zone.

**Conclusions (and Future Work)**

Considering high rates of professional burnout, it is important to carry out a prevalence study of symptoms of depression and post-traumatic disorders among teachers working on the front-line and the organization of specialized programs of psychological and psychotherapeutic care.

Dealing with psychological trauma requires additional training of teachers and changes in the attitude towards the child that emphasizes showing understand, empathy, and support in the teacher child relationship. The relevant teacher training program has been developed and implemented by National University of "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy" and United Nations Children's Fund office in Ukraine earlier and can be used further in improving the skills of teachers (Bogdanov, 2017b). Based on this already piloted training program and on the presented in this article research findings new modules for teachers on preventing burnout are expected to be developed. A system of supervisory support for teaching staff need to be included as an important component of the prevention of professional burnout.

**Acknowledgments.** The authors are grateful to United Nations Children's Fund in Ukraine and NGO "Volunteer" for excellent technical and organizational support of this study. The authors are also grateful to Iryna Ivanyuk for her assistance in organizing the research.

**Authors contributions.**

Andriy Girnyk – development of individual and group interview guides, moderating 2 focus group discussions and 20 interviews, testing 40 respondents, analysis of findings of the qualitative research and writing the text of the article

Yulia Donets – moderating 3 focus group discussions and 8 interviews, testing 41 respondents, analyzing test results and writing the text of the article

Sergiy Bogdanov – development of research methodology, analysis of research results, writing the text of the article.

Victoriya Solovyova – recruiting respondents and logistics support of the research in Donetsk Oblast

Liudmyla Romanenko – recruiting respondents and providing logistics support for the research in Lugansk region.

**Conflict of interest.** The authors whose names are listed above certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest, or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

**Abstract.** The subject of the research was the correlation between life circumstances and the degree of emotional and professional burnout of pedagogical staff working near (0 to 15 km) the contact line between the Ukrainian troops and the separatist groups in Donbas. The purpose was to develop recommendations to design a training curriculum on stress prevention and management for pedagogical staff. The sample consisted of 81 teachers who were divided into two groups: teachers, who work in the area 0-15 km from the front-line (41 persons) and the second group, who work in the area 40-60 km from the front-line (40 people). The mixed method approach utilized both quantitative self-assessment and qualitative group and individual interviews. The results show that both groups of teachers experience an equally high degree of professional burnout. Of the teachers within 15km of the contact line 41.1% had a high degree of burn out and 39.4% had extremely high degree of burnout, while the prevalence of high and extreme levels of burnout were 45% and 37.5% for the teachers 40-60km from the contact line. Among stress factors that are correlated with teacher's burnout we found: war, excessive and poorly organized work, uncertainty about the future, working with difficult students, ideological differences with students and their parents. Based on these results, recommendations for the design a training agenda on professional burnout prevention pedagogical staff have been developed.

**Keywords:** mental health, mental stress, disease prevention, in-service training, war.

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