

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AND DISPLACEMENT: EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF STUDENTS AFFECTED BY WAR

DESIGUALDADE EDUCACIONAL E DESLOCAMENTO: TRAJETÓRIAS EDUCACIONAIS DE ALUNOS AFETADOS PELA GUERRA

DESIGUALDAD EDUCATIVA Y DESPLAZAMIENTO: TRAYECTORIAS EDUCATIVAS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES AFECTADOS POR LA GUERRA



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ABSTRACT: During wartime, students experience inequalities in educational access, learning continuity, and academic performance within unstable institutional and social environments. This study examines how the war in Ukraine reshapes students' educational trajectories and assesses whether innovation, competency-based education, and project-based learning reduce or reinforce educational inequalities. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on a critical synthesis of scientific literature, policy documents, and secondary analytical sources addressing education during the war in Ukraine. The findings demonstrate that students' educational trajectories become fragmented, unstable, and contingent. Educational inequality extends beyond access to encompass learning continuity, instructional intensity, student engagement, and the availability of educational support. These challenges undermine students' capacity to sustain consistent participation and academic progress throughout prolonged crises. The study provides evidence to support inclusive education policies aimed at ensuring learning continuity, reducing vulnerability, strengthening educational resilience, and fostering students' autonomy in contexts of prolonged armed conflict and social disruption.

KEYWORDS: Ukraine. Educational inequality. Student trajectories. Innovation. Competence.

RESUMO: Em tempos de guerra, os alunos enfrentam desigualdades no acesso à educação, na continuidade da aprendizagem e na manutenção do desempenho acadêmico em contextos institucionais e sociais instáveis. Este estudo objetiva analisar como a guerra na Ucrânia transforma as trajetórias educacionais dos alunos e verificar se a inovação, a educação orientada para competências e a aprendizagem baseada em projetos reduzem ou reproduzem desigualdades educacionais. A pesquisa adota uma abordagem qualitativa, fundamentada na síntese crítica da literatura científica, documentos de políticas públicas e fontes analíticas secundárias sobre a educação em contexto de guerra na Ucrânia. Os resultados evidenciam que as trajetórias educacionais tornam-se fragmentadas, instáveis e contingentes. Além do acesso, a desigualdade manifesta-se na continuidade dos estudos, na intensidade da aprendizagem, no engajamento e no apoio educacional disponível. O estudo oferece subsídios para políticas de educação inclusiva voltadas à continuidade da aprendizagem, à redução da vulnerabilidade e ao fortalecimento da autonomia estudantil durante crises prolongadas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ucrânia. Desigualdade educacional. Trajetórias dos alunos. Inovação. Competência.

RESUMEN: En tiempos de guerra, los estudiantes enfrentan desigualdades en el acceso a la educación, la continuidad del aprendizaje y el mantenimiento del rendimiento académico en contextos institucionales y sociales inestables. Este estudio analiza cómo la guerra en Ucrania transforma las trayectorias educativas de los estudiantes y evalúa si la innovación, la educación basada en competencias y el aprendizaje basado en proyectos reducen o reproducen las desigualdades educativas. La investigación adopta un enfoque cualitativo basado en una síntesis crítica de la literatura científica, documentos de políticas públicas y fuentes analíticas secundarias sobre la educación en tiempos de guerra en Ucrania. Los resultados muestran que las trayectorias educativas se vuelven fragmentadas, inestables y contingentes. La desigualdad educativa supera el problema del acceso e incluye la continuidad del aprendizaje, su intensidad, el compromiso estudiantil y el apoyo educativo disponible. El estudio aporta evidencias para orientar políticas de educación inclusiva que fortalezcan la continuidad educativa, reduzcan la vulnerabilidad y promuevan la autonomía estudiantil durante crisis prolongadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ucrania. Desigualdad educativa. Trayectorias de los estudiantes. Innovación. Competencia.

INTRODUCTION

War affects education not only through the destruction of infrastructure, but also through changes in the conditions of learning and the formation of children's futures. In Ukraine, the educational process has become unstable due to displacement, danger, stress and dependence on technology. Formal enrollment is maintained, but real learning opportunities are determined by access to the Internet, security and flexibility of institutions. Therefore, educational inequality is manifested not only in access, but also in quality, continuity, motivation and the opportunity to realize educational potential.

The social consequences are significant: the accumulation of educational losses increases poverty, reduces social mobility and complicates post-war recovery. The Ukrainian experience emphasizes the need to consider inequality through the prism of displacement, digital vulnerability and psychosocial factors. At the same time, war stimulates the development of innovative approaches—blended, competency-based and project-based learning, which can increase resilience, but unequal access to resources can widen gaps.

Despite the existing research on education in crises, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis of how war transforms educational trajectories through continuity and discontinuity, participation and access, expectations and realities. It is therefore important to consider war not only as an external shock but also as a factor that changes students' educational paths, and to assess whether innovative, competency-based and project-based approaches contribute to reducing or deepening inequalities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Russian Federation's major invasion of Ukraine (since 2022) created a "perfect storm" of geopolitical, social, and educational shifts, forcing a rethink of not only infrastructure but also the ontological foundations of education (Papastephanou, 2023; Oleksiienko et al., 2023; Krawchuk, 2024). Higher education has been transformed into a form of social solidarity, but inequalities have worsened due to displaced persons (Brooks & Rensimer, 2025), and a conflict has arisen between academic continuity and "enlightenment" (Brooks & Rensimer, 2025; Krawchuk, 2024). The main causes of educational inequality in wartime are: differences in learning environments and the digital divide (Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008). The transition to distance learning has been uneven (Shlenova et al., 2024). Holovchak et al. (2026) showed that the institutions' own capacity, teaching stability and technical support are key to teacher

satisfaction. Kruszewska and Lavrenova (2024) explored the role of teachers. Suprun (2026) notes that performance-based funding policies can exacerbate inequality.

The educational trajectories of affected students are fluid and discontinuous. Olumba (2025) examines the challenges of international students. Proshkin and Foster (2025) describe the “dual schooling” of Ukrainian refugees in the UK. For primary school refugees in Poland, differences in curricula are a barrier (Nazaruk et al., 2026; Chudzicka-Czupala, 2025). Beregszászi et al. (2025) highlight the situation of Hungarian-speaking students in Transcarpathia. Geopolitical changes have become a “tipping point” in students’ career expectations (Gaweł et al., 2025). Longitudinal studies confirm increases in anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Kokun & Bezverkhyi, 2024; 2026; Kolisnyk & Mehlsen, 2025). Chudzicka-Czupala et al. (2025) show that coping strategies are predictors of well-being.

A competency-based approach is the basis of NUS reform (Kolesnyk & Biseth, 2024). Matiushchenko et al. (2025) emphasizes the importance of interaction for children with SEN. However, Petryk et al. (2024) identified a gap in teacher training that fails to see the interdisciplinary potential of STEM. Innovation and project-based learning (PBL) can reproduce inequalities. Virtual exchange (Ibunka project) offers a space for trauma and solidarity (Lavrysh et al., 2026; Oleksiyenko et al., 2023), but implementation is uneven due to lack of funding (Jakubakynov et al., 2024; Shalgimbekova et al., 2024). High-tech tools are only available to leading universities (Jakubakynov et al., 2024; Oleksiyenko et al., 2023).

Thus, a literature review (Proshkin & Foster, 2025; Gorokhova et al., 2025) showed that despite the sustainability, there is a lack of longitudinal data, disciplinary research and holistic analysis of the impact of innovations on the most vulnerable groups.

The aim of the study is to analyze the impact of the war in Ukraine on students’ educational trajectories and the formation of educational inequality. Particular attention is paid to factors such as displacement, interruption of education, limited access to technology, psychosocial stress and uneven institutional support that determine continuity, participation and learning outcomes. Educational inequality is considered as a multidimensional phenomenon that depends on the conditions of learning and the ability of students to adapt to a prolonged crisis. The main objectives of the study: to identify key mechanisms of the impact of the war on educational trajectories; to identify manifestations of inequality (in access, continuity, resources and development); to assess the potential of innovative, competency-based and project-based learning in supporting the educational process; to formulate recommendations for increasing the inclusiveness and sustainability of education.

The study answers the following questions: how did the war change students' educational trajectories; which manifestations of inequality are the most significant; under what conditions can innovative and competency-based approaches mitigate educational losses. The working hypothesis is that a supportive, competency-based, and project-based educational environment promotes more stable educational trajectories.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is qualitatively analytical and is based on secondary sources without primary data collection. Its goal is to understand the impact of the war on students' educational trajectories, the growth of educational inequality, and the role of innovative, competency-based, and project-based approaches in education.

The methodological basis is a systematic review of scientific publications, international reports, and analytical materials on the functioning of education in wartime conditions in Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to the issues of access to education, continuity of education, adaptation of the educational process, and pedagogical practices in crisis conditions.

The key analytical concept is the “educational trajectory,” which is considered as a dynamic path of student interaction with education in wartime conditions. The analysis is carried out along the following interrelated dimensions: access to resources, participation in education, continuity of education, psychological factors, adaptation, and expectations for the future. Thematic and comparative analysis was applied, which allowed us to identify the main themes: the impact of war on learning, student displacement, digital inequality, institutional changes, skills development and innovative educational practices. The role of innovation and project-based learning as tools to support the educational process is separately assessed, taking into account unequal access to resources.

The chosen approach provides a generalization of existing knowledge and the formation of a holistic analytical framework but is limited by its dependence on the quality of secondary sources and the lack of empirical data directly from students.

RESULTS

The results section in the research that relies on secondary rather than the collection of primary data represents the main findings from the analysis of reviewed documents—policy

documents, analytical papers, and secondary sources. In this paper, the interpretation is based on the literature and documentary corpus discussed previously, especially studies on higher education responses, institutional resilience, distance learning during martial law, displacement, refugee schooling, psychosocial vulnerability, and pedagogical innovation in crisis contexts (Brooks & Rensimer, 2025; Holovchak et al., 2026; Oleksiyyenko et al., 2023; Olumba, 2025; Shlenova et al., 2024). The findings show that war in Ukraine is not an interruption of education per se, but a differential, uneven trajectory of education. The war has exacerbated old categories of disadvantage and produced new ones. These sources consistently recognize that wartime education is not a suspension of the normal educational process but an environment within which schooling participation, continuity, attainment, planning for the future, and educational trajectories are uneven (Gorokhova et al., 2025; Krawchuk, 2024; Papastephanou, 2023).

The first significant finding is that educational paths in wartime Ukraine are fragmented. Stable continuity of students' education has been disrupted by constant relocations, emergency school closures, transitions to remote or hybrid learning, unstable access to education, and general insecurity (Holovchak et al., 2026; Kruszewska & Lavrenova, 2024; Shlenova et al., 2024;). Educational trajectories thus do not follow linear or fixed patterns; instead, they constitute a progression through various types of participation, ranging from steady involvement in education to some attendance, intermittent study, disenrollment, and re-enrollment, a dynamic also visible in studies of refugee pupils and dual schooling (Nazaruk et al., 2026; Proshkin & Foster, 2025).

This fragmentation of schooling is the most salient finding of the inquiry since it suggests that the experience of unequal education in wartime is not limited to formal exclusion from schooling. For many, enrollment continues, but actual school participation is erratic, compromised, or highly volatile. The literature has therefore highlights the need to consider schooling continuity as an indicator of wartime educational inequality, especially when psychosocial stress and support needs affect students' ability to remain engaged (Kokun & Bezverkhyi, 2024, 2026; Kolisnyk & Mehlsen, 2025).

Another important finding from the research is the multidimensional nature of educational inequality in wartime Ukraine. Across the analyzed literature, access to education appears as only one part of the problem. The effects of war are felt across multiple levels: quality of education, contact with teachers, access to technology, flexibility of the system, emotional support, language and cultural conditions, and organizational support (Beregszászi et al., 2025; Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008; Brooks & Rensimer, 2025; Gorokhova et al., 2025).

This implies that two students may continue to be officially attached to education while experiencing very different learning conditions, from the student with stable access to technology, proactive teachers, and supportive routines, to the one with fragile communication, fragmented time, and limited opportunities to be seriously involved in learning activities. Thus, the lesson learned from the analysis is that the inequality in wartime education results from differences in educational conditions and paths, not only from nominal enrollment.

Thirdly, as revealed by the sources, displacement, both internal and international, is the most powerful drivers of educational inequality. Evidence on student mobility, refugee schooling, minority-language schooling, and the adaptation of displaced Ukrainian students suggests that mobility, resettlement, and institutional upheaval significantly affect student success (Beregszászi et al., 2025; Gorokhova et al., 2025; Nazaruk et al., 2026; Olumba, 2025; Proshkin & Foster, 2025).

Mobility, therefore, affects more than just the location of students' learning. It affects a sense of continuity, belonging, curriculum relevance, peers, and institutional recognition. This analysis demonstrates that those with mobility concerns often face multiple difficulties; education disruption is combined with psychological and emotional stress, anxiety about the future, adaptation to bureaucracy and new institutional structures, and pressure to adjust quickly to unfamiliar educational systems (Chudzicka-Czupała et al., 2025; Gawel et al., 2025; Olumba, 2025). The overarching argument within this section is that mobility should be understood as a structuring factor of educational trajectories, rather than as an ad hoc logistical event.

Another important finding from this literature study is the relevance of competence-based education. Competence-based approaches become even more relevant in wartime because communication, cooperation, problem-solving, self-control, and adaptability are crucial when routines are uncertain and schoolwork must be completed under stress (Kolesnyk & Biseth, 2024; Matiushchenko et al., 2025). At the same time, studies on teacher preparation and STEM-oriented training indicate that such approaches require pedagogical mediation and cannot be reduced to formal curricular rhetoric (Petryk et al., 2024).

However, the study demonstrates that the equalizing effect of competence-based approaches does not work automatically but can be a consequence of the conditions under which such an approach is applied. The positive action of these approaches is more likely when teachers are well-trained and supported, when learning is properly structured and guided, and when institutions are able to maintain organizational stability during crisis (Holovchak et al., 2026; Kolesnyk & Biseth, 2024). When teachers are not adequately trained and the learning

environment is unstructured, competence discourses can remain empty and formal, with limited capacity to respond to students' real learning needs.

The findings also offer interesting insights into innovative/project-based learning. These approaches appear throughout the documents as potentially positive responses to disruption because they can promote motivation, relevance, teamwork, and student engagement. Project-based learning, in particular, can promote real-world problem-solving, community involvement, and purposeful activity during times of war, helping build students' sense of purpose (Jakubakynov et al., 2024; Lavrysh et al., 2026; Shalgimbekova et al., 2024).

At the same time, the literature indicates that these solutions cannot be assumed to be universally accessible or to have the same positive effects on all students. If innovation helps maintain continuity, it can also reproduce inequalities when participation requires digital access, teacher proactivity, a stable form of communication, or a safe space to learn (Jakubakynov et al., 2024; Oleksiyenko et al., 2023; Shlenova et al., 2024). What can work well in one case could be almost impossible to implement in another. Consequently, the key finding of this section is that innovation should not be assumed to be inclusive by its nature. It can have an educational impact only if it is implemented with structural support and remains accessible to students most affected by disruption.

Overall, the analysis of the reviewed sources shows that several general forms of trajectories are possible among students in war conditions, especially in the Ukrainian case, though the model can also be analytically useful in other contexts of prolonged crisis. These trajectories are not mutually exclusive categories, but rather interpretive patterns that help describe different wartime educational experiences (Gorokhova et al., 2025; Kolisnyk & Mehlsen, 2025; Proshkin & Foster, 2025).

The first pattern can be defined as “discontinued trajectory,” unsteady routines of engagement and learning, and fragmented, unstable participation in education. The second is “precariously integrated trajectory,” where sustained participation takes place but in unstable and “stressful” conditions, as students are participating, the continuity is uncertain. The third can be described as “rescuing and restoring trajectory,” when education is maintained in an effectively functioning system with good digital affordances, pedagogical support, and effective learning strategies. A fourth can be “reintegration trajectory,” characterized by resuming continuous education after suspension (Gorokhova et al., 2025; Kokun & Bezverkhyi, 2026; Nazaruk et al., 2026).

The typology is an essential finding because it reveals how wartime schooling should not be collapsed into a dichotomous relationship between inclusion and exclusion. Instead, students take multiple paths that vary depending on the roles of risk, support, and adjustment, as well as the institution. Wartime schooling inequalities in Ukraine are thus characterized by variation over the trajectory, stability, and quality of educational path-making (Olumba, 2025; Brooks & Rensimer, 2025; Gorokhova et al., 2025).

These show how the findings indicate that wartime schooling in Ukraine should not be reduced to a binary distinction between inclusion and exclusion. Instead, students appear to move along several distinct yet overlapping educational trajectories, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Typology of students' educational trajectories under wartime conditions

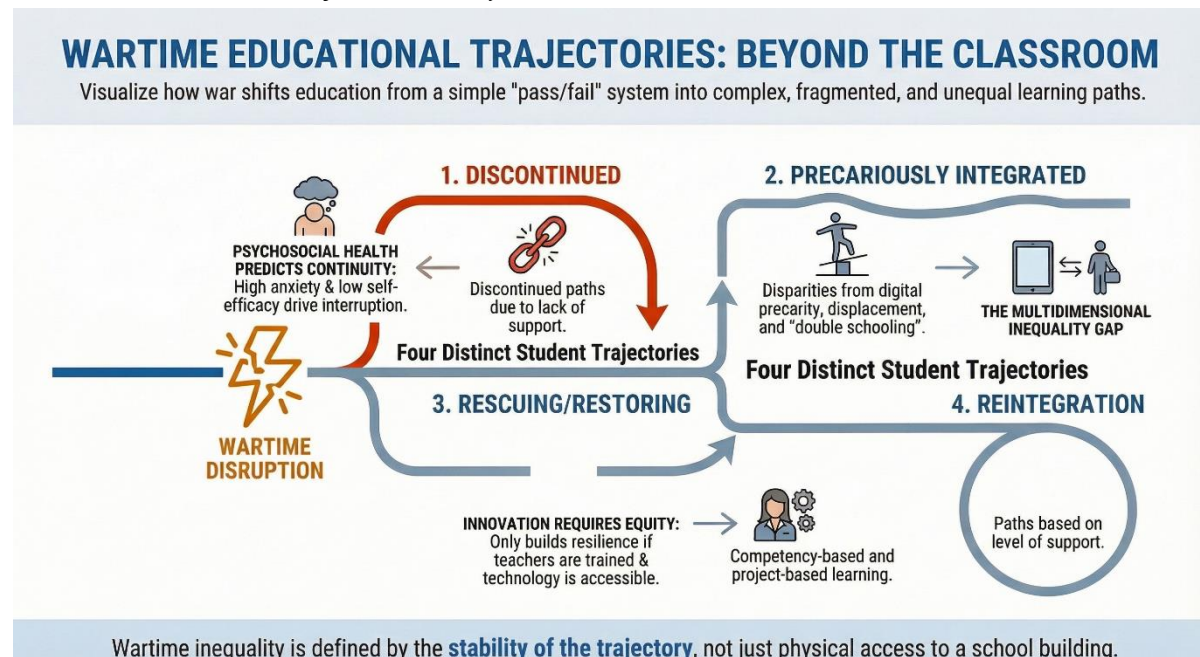
Trajectory type	Core characteristics	Typical wartime conditions	Likely educational outcome
Discontinued	Irregular or broken participation, unstable routines	Repeated relocation, insecurity, weak digital access, low support	High risk of disengagement and learning loss
Precariously integrated	Continued enrollment but under stressful and unstable conditions	Hybrid learning, fragmented communication, emotional strain	Participation persists, but quality and continuity remain fragile
Rescuing/restoring	Education maintained through effective support and adaptive pedagogy	Strong digital access, proactive teachers, institutional flexibility	Greater continuity, engagement, and resilience
Reintegration	Return to more stable learning after interruption	Re-entry into education after displacement or suspension	Recovery possible, but uneven and support-dependent

Note. The Authors.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that the war in Ukraine is transforming education not into a single crisis process, but into differentiated educational trajectories. Educational inequality in these conditions is dynamic and manifests itself through different levels of participation, continuity of learning, and motivation of students. A generalized model of the formation of such trajectories is presented in Figure 1.

It has been established that continuity of learning is a key indicator of inequality: some students maintain a stable educational process thanks to support and resources, while others study fragmentarily or unstable. Inequality is formed both through structural factors and through the different ability of institutions and households to adapt to the crisis.

Figure 1.*Wartime Educational Trajectories: Beyond the Classroom*

Note. The Authors.

Displacement is considered as a systemic factor that changes the student's connections with education, the pace, and conditions of learning. Even with formal involvement, educational trajectories can be complicated by instability, program inconsistency, and psychological stress.

The competency-based approach and innovative (in particular, project-based) teaching methods have the potential to support the educational process, but their effectiveness depends on the conditions of implementation. In the absence of resources, teacher training, and a stable environment, they may not only not reduce but also increase inequality.

The generalization of the results confirms the feasibility of analyzing education through types of trajectories (interrupted, unstable, restorative, reintegration), which allows taking into account different levels of risks and support. For Ukraine, this means the need to focus not only on access to education, but also on its real continuity and inclusiveness.

Among the limitations are the use of only secondary sources, the lack of empirical data, and the difficulty of taking into account rapid changes in war conditions. At the same time, the study forms a holistic vision of educational inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study showed that the war in Ukraine not only interrupted the educational process, but also significantly transformed the educational trajectories of students, increasing their

inequality and multidimensionality. Educational experiences have become differentiated: different access to resources, support, pedagogical practices and stability shape different paths—from interruption to adaptation and resilience. It was found that innovative, competency-based and project-based approaches can support learning and motivation, but their effectiveness depends on the conditions of implementation.

With limited access to technology, teacher training and a safe environment, they can reproduce inequality. A key analytical approach is to consider education through educational trajectories, which allows us to consider the dynamics of participation, outcomes and prospects of students over time. The practical significance of the study lies in the need to focus on education policies not only on ensuring access, but also on supporting the continuity of learning, reducing instability and developing inclusive pedagogical practices. The limitations of the study are related to the use of secondary sources and the limited availability of current data. Further research should be directed at long-term analysis of educational trajectories and assessment of the effectiveness of policies to reduce inequality in conditions of protracted crises.

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