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Practices of creating an inclusive safe environment in preschool educational institutions in crisis situations: Ukrainian experience

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Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: April 2nd, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-7867349/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

The experience of transforming preschool education in Ukraine during the war provides a unique case of adapting educational systems to crisis conditions and has significant relevance for international educational practice. This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the functioning of preschool education in Ukraine during the prolonged social and humanitarian crisis that began with the hostilities in 2014 and escalated into a full-scale war in 2022. It highlights the systemic challenges faced by the preschool sector, including the destruction and damage of institutions (as of April 2025, 127 institutions had been destroyed and 1,274 damaged, accounting for 11.9% of all preschools), changes in the preschool network, large-scale population migration, and the suspension of a considerable number of kindergartens.

The study focuses on organizational mechanisms that ensure the continuity of the educational process under martial law and on creating a safe and inclusive environment for young children, including those with special educational needs. It examines new approaches to individualizing the educational process, providing psychological and pedagogical support for children and families, and developing strategies for cooperation between teachers and parents. Particular attention is paid to the implementation of innovative practices aimed at ensuring equal educational opportunities and supporting children's adaptation to a changed reality.

The article also analyzes Ukraine's state policies in the field of preschool education during wartime, as well as the specific features of inter-institutional cooperation at the national, international, and community levels that support educational initiatives in crisis conditions. The methodological framework combines quantitative analysis of statistical data using Data Science and Data Analytics tools with a review of educational policies and findings from thematic case studies.

The findings make it possible to formulate practical recommendations for building a resilient and inclusive preschool education system in Ukraine, both during the war and throughout the post-war reconstruction period. These results may also be relevant for other countries experiencing crises caused by armed conflicts, technological accidents, or natural disasters. The conclusions of the study can serve as a basis for developing effective educational policies in Ukraine and may be of particular interest to the European Union in the context of designing models for organizing early childhood education in crisis situations.

This article is based on the results of research conducted in 2023–2024 by the State Scientific Institution *Institute of Educational Analytics*.

Introduction

Since 2022, Ukraine has been experiencing a large-scale crisis caused by the full-scale war and the associated humanitarian, social, and economic challenges. The education sector, including preschool education, has undergone substantial transformations. The consequences include the destruction and damage of preschool institutions, the temporary occupation of certain territories, large-scale internal displacement, and the migration of families with children abroad. The national education system has faced critical challenges, such as ensuring continuity of the educational process, adapting to conditions of heightened insecurity, and maintaining access to education for all children, including those with special educational needs (SEN).

According to UNICEF (2022), during the first months of the war hostilities posed an immediate and escalating threat to the lives and safety of 7.5 million Ukrainian children. Experts highlighted that children were experiencing severe psychological consequences due to daily exposure to violence, while hundreds of thousands lost access to safe

water and electricity as a result of damage to infrastructure. Data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (as of 1 June 2022) indicated that children were killed or injured every day, while civilian infrastructure suffered extensive destruction. Population displacement, reduced household incomes, and overall economic instability further undermined families' ability to support their children's education.

From the first days of martial law, all social institutions, including education, were severely affected and required rapid reorganization. The Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MES) temporarily suspended classes and gradually resumed the educational process in flexible formats depending on the security situation. Some preschool institutions continued to operate traditionally in relatively safe regions, while others adopted distance or blended learning. In addition, certain institutions were repurposed as humanitarian hubs to support internally displaced persons.

The situation was particularly challenging in the regions of active hostilities in eastern and southern Ukraine, where a significant part of the educational infrastructure was destroyed. In 2022, 788 out of 14,974 preschool institutions were destroyed or damaged. In these regions, the number of preschools decreased from 2,971 in 2022 to 1,770 in 2024, while the number of enrolled children declined almost 2.5 times – from 250,713 to 107,277. Children with SEN required particular attention. In 2022, there were 17,927 children with SEN in the combat zones; in 2023 their number decreased to 10,030, and in 2024 to 9,003.

In this context, the priority tasks included: safeguarding the lives and health of children, especially those with SEN; ensuring access to continued education at places of temporary residence; preserving the human resource potential of teaching staff; organizing a safe environment and providing psychological and pedagogical support; and enhancing teachers' professional competence in working with children with SEN [4]. A distinctive feature of the crisis was the urgent need not only to maintain access to education but also to create an inclusive and safe environment with specialized support mechanisms. Addressing these challenges required prompt and effective management decisions [17].

The MES, in cooperation with local authorities, developed and implemented a set of measures to support preschool education during the crisis. Numerous resources were created for teachers and parents, training webinars were conducted within the framework of the National Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Programme, and specialized information platforms were launched. International humanitarian organizations also played a substantial role. For example, UNICEF has been actively engaged in providing psychological support since the first days of the full-scale war, publishing expert recommendations and practical materials aimed at helping children, parents, and caregivers reduce stress, cope with emotional challenges, and maintain well-being under wartime conditions.

At present, Ukraine faces an urgent need for a comprehensive academic analysis of changes in preschool education, the systematization of practices developed under crisis conditions, and an assessment of prospects for further development. Of particular importance is the evaluation of measures aimed at safeguarding the lives and ensuring the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of preschool children, including those with SEN. Practices that have proven effective in emergency situations may be of value not only for Ukraine but also for other countries affected by crises.

Relevance of the study. The relevance of this research is determined by the unprecedented challenges faced by the Ukrainian education system as a result of the crisis that began in 2022. These challenges have had a profound impact not only on Ukraine but also on the international community, which has been actively involved in supporting the educational process. The accumulated experience of responding to these challenges can serve as a case study for European and other educational systems, both for countries that have already encountered similar crises and for those that may face them in the future.

Purpose of the study. The purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current state of preschool education in Ukraine, with emphasis on ensuring quality education for children with SEN and creating an inclusive and safe environment. The study also aims to identify the most effective mechanisms for stabilizing the educational process disrupted by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine.

Literature Review

In times of crisis, particularly in the context of armed conflict, the creation of an inclusive and safe educational environment in preschool institutions (PI) becomes a priority. The relevance of this issue is confirmed by numerous studies that examine both the Ukrainian experience and international practices of inclusive education under challenging conditions.

Kasyanenko, Prykhodko, and Saliuk (2024) identify the key challenges of inclusive education during martial law, including limited access to resources, the need to ensure safety, and the provision of psychological support [1]. They also outline prospects for development through innovative strategies such as the use of modern technologies and adapted methodologies. A practical case study by Lukanova (2024) illustrates the organization of distance learning for children with special educational needs (SEN) during wartime, underscoring the importance of psychological and pedagogical support as well as active cooperation with parents [2].

The problem of teacher resilience is emphasized in the study by Smidt et al. (2024), who investigate professional burnout among preschool educators in Ukraine and link post-traumatic symptoms with reduced capacity to maintain an inclusive environment [26]. In a broader perspective, Schaub (2024) demonstrates how armed conflicts erode trust in state institutions and influence parental behavior, including diminished engagement with education and health services [25].

Cross-country comparisons by Zdanevych et al. (2020) highlight the variability of inclusion models in Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia) [3]. Their findings confirm that the most successful practices emerge where inclusion is supported by a comprehensive institutional framework combining public policy, funding, and pedagogical approaches.

A considerable body of research focuses on the role of teachers. Studies by Balik and Ozgun (2024) [16], Štemberger and Kiswarday (2017) [21], and evidence from Serbia (2024) show that teachers' beliefs, professional training, and access to support are decisive factors in the effectiveness of inclusive practices [5]. At the same time, challenges in parent–teacher collaboration are identified as barriers to their successful implementation.

Lesina and Melnyk (2023) [7] and Yemchyk (2023) systematize approaches to fostering tolerant, creative, and inclusive environments [8]. They stress the importance of ensuring emotional safety, addressing children's individual needs, and involving families in the educational process.

European analytical reports (2016, 2017) propose the model of an "inclusive education ecosystem" encompassing five levels of influence – from the individual child to national public policy [18; 19]. These reports provide practical tools for self-assessment of inclusiveness in PIs and emphasize the critical role of interagency cooperation.

Further international studies enrich the discourse: Portugal (Bonança et al., 2023) [20], Jordan (2014) [6], Sweden (Lundqvist et al., 2015) [22], and the United Kingdom (Nutbrown & Clough, 2004) [23] underline the significance of legal reforms, cultural sensitivity, organizational support, adequate infrastructure, and qualified staff, as well as the strengthening of community partnerships.

Practical case studies (Putting Preschool Inclusion into Practice, 2022; Schepis et al., 2013) consistently demonstrate that effective inclusion requires a comprehensive approach that integrates adapted learning environments, structured support systems, staff training, and sufficient financial resources [15; 24].

To summarize, the formation of an inclusive and safe preschool environment in crisis conditions depends on a complex interplay of factors: political commitment, a robust legal framework, interagency cooperation, psychological and pedagogical support, child-centered approaches, parental engagement, access to resources, and teachers' professional competence. Under martial law and in global emergencies, particular emphasis should be placed on institutional flexibility, continuous professional development of educators, and guaranteeing equal access to quality education for all children.

Methods

The study employs a quantitative approach and draws on data from multiple sources. In particular, two monitoring surveys were conducted in 2023 and 2024 to examine practices of creating an inclusive and safe environment in the context of a prolonged crisis caused by the full-scale war.

The analysis of these practices in Ukrainian preschool education institutions under crisis conditions was carried out on the basis of a review of scientific publications, legal and regulatory documents, international experience in organising inclusive and safe preschool environments, statistical data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine and operational educational statistics, as well as findings from monitoring activities.

In accordance with the purpose of the study, the following tasks were identified:

- identification of practical aspects of institutional adaptation to crisis circumstances;
- analysis of the experience of teaching staff in supporting children, including those with special educational needs;
- identification of the main challenges and problems in the implementation of inclusive practices.

To achieve the research objective, the following methods were applied:

Literature review – to examine scientific publications, regulatory documents, and international practices;

- content analysis – to analyse documents regulating the organisation of a safe environment and inclusive education in Ukraine;
- collection and analysis of statistical data – based on information provided by regional education departments in 2023–2024;
- online survey of teaching staff and parents of preschool children regarding the level of safety, accessibility, and convenience of the environment for children, including those with special educational needs.

Given the restrictions imposed by martial law (suspension of institutional activities, difficulties in reaching respondents, etc.), data collection was carried out through an online survey on a representative sample. To ensure the validity of the results, the dataset was weighted using appropriate weighting coefficients.

The analysis of the data was conducted to address the research questions, to synthesise the information, and to identify the key trends in the organisation of an inclusive and safe environment in preschool education institutions in Ukraine.

Population and sample

As noted above, the article draws on data from a variety of sources, including two monitoring studies conducted in 2023 and 2024. In both cases, the sampling process was designed with due consideration of participants' safety. The selection of research participants was based on official statistical reporting, in particular the reports on the activities of preschool education institutions for 2022 and 2023 (Form 85-k) obtained from the database of the national educational information system – the Software and Hardware Complex Automated Information Complex of Educational Management (PAK "AIKOM") of the State Scientific Institution Institute of Educational Analytics (as of 01.01.2023 and 01.01.2024).

The study involved preschool institutions from different regions of Ukraine, covering both urban and rural areas. The sample was formed using probability stratified one-stage sampling, with the exception of temporarily occupied territories. In 2023, a total of 640 institutions were surveyed, while in 2024 the number increased to 2,000, with a particular focus on institutions enrolling children with special educational needs. Respondents included heads of institutions, teachers (of junior, middle, senior, or mixed groups), methodologists, teacher assistants (in 2024), and parents – including those raising children with SEN.

To ensure consistency and clarity, the study adopts the following key definitions.

Inclusive safe educational environment refers to the conditions in a preschool institution that provide equal learning opportunities for all children, including those with special educational needs. Such an environment must guarantee both physical and emotional safety, particularly in times of crisis.

Psycho-emotional support denotes a range of measures aimed at reducing anxiety and improving the emotional well-being of children, educators, and parents. These measures may include individual counselling, group activities, emotional development programmes, and the cultivation of coping skills for stress management.

Access to preschool education is understood as the opportunity for every child – regardless of place of residence, health status, or family circumstances – to attend kindergarten and receive quality education that meets their individual needs.

Inclusion in early childhood education is an approach in which all children, including those with special educational needs, learn together. This requires the adaptation of curricula, teaching methods, and the learning environment to meet the needs of each child.

Assistant teacher refers to an educator who supports a child with special educational needs in kindergarten: providing assistance in learning and communication, as well as coordinating interaction with other teachers and specialists.

The use of such clearly defined concepts made it possible to select appropriate indicators for analysis and to objectively evaluate the results.

Stages of the study and ethical aspects

The 2023 and 2024 surveys were conducted in several stages: preparatory stage – included a review of scientific literature and regulatory documents, as well as the development of standardised questionnaires for the respondents; field stage – focused on data collection through surveys; data processing stage – involved the processing of the collected information using quantitative analysis methods; analysis and reporting stage – encompassed the analysis

of survey results, their interpretation, and the formulation of conclusions and recommendations aimed at improving practices of organising safe and inclusive environments in preschool education institutions under crisis conditions.

The survey was administered via Google Forms, with links provided to all respondents. The 2023 study had a comprehensive character and covered a wide range of issues related to the functioning of preschool education during martial law. Special attention was given to the organisation of an inclusive environment for children with special educational needs. Three separate questionnaires were developed for different groups of respondents: heads of institutions (62 questions), educators (72 questions), and parents (57 questions). The inclusion-related sections contained up to 53 specialised questions, depending on the target group.

In the 2024 study, the questionnaire included an introductory part (4 questions). The fourth question allowed us to differentiate the survey respondents. The questionnaire for the head of an institution (unit) of preschool education contained 19 questions, for the educator-methodologist - 10 questions, for the educator - 11 questions, for the educator's assistant - 8 questions, for parents (other legal representatives) of children with special educational needs - 12 questions. The content of the questionnaires covered the organisation of the educational process and the organisation of an adapted environment for children, including those with special educational needs, in the educational institution.

In both studies, structured indicators developed on the basis of respondents' answers were used to analyse the state of safe and inclusive environment. This made it possible to provide an objective assessment of the level of inclusiveness of the educational environment and the practical implementation of relevant approaches in different types of preschool education institutions.

In order to comply with ethical standards, all participants were informed in advance of the purpose and conditions of participation, and agreed to take part in a voluntary and anonymous survey.

The field stage had a number of limitations due to the security situation in the country. Due to active hostilities, the temporary occupation of certain territories and communication difficulties, not all regions could be covered in full. In addition, the results of the study are based on the subjective perception of the participants in the educational process - teachers and parents, which should also be taken into account when interpreting the data.

Data analysis

The data analysis involved processing the array of respondents' answers collected using Google Forms. This methodology consists of several key stages. The initial cleaning of the array was focused on removing duplicates, checking for missing values and identifying logical errors in the answers. The open-ended answers to the questionnaire were coded, which involved grouping similar answers into content categories and assigning them numerical or text codes. The next step was to download the data into SPSS software for statistical processing and coding according to the developed variable classification system. Categorical variables were converted to numerical values, and nominal variables were converted to binary or ordinal format depending on the specifics of the question. The next stage involved the formation of a dataset as a basis for the construction of frequency and cross-tabulations, and the calculation of statistical indicators. Based on the obtained tables, the results were visualised in the form of diagrams, which allowed for a simplified interpretation of statistical trends and relationships between variables. Next, an analytical report was written, which included an analysis of the visualised research results and a description of the data obtained.

The results of the study made it possible to outline areas for improving educational practices, identify the need for additional resources, professional development of teachers and increased support for children with special

educational needs. These findings are promising for making managerial decisions in the field of preschool education in emergency situations.

Results

The study presented in this article is devoted to the analysis of the peculiarities of organising a safe inclusive educational environment in preschool educational institutions of Ukraine under martial law. A special emphasis is placed on practical measures aimed at ensuring access to quality educational services for children with special educational needs. The paper analyses empirical data collected during monitoring studies conducted in 2023-2024 in different regions of Ukraine. Data analysis using standard statistical methods allowed us to comprehensively highlight both the key challenges for preschool education in times of war and practical steps to preserve the health and lives of children.

In 2023, 5,686 people took part in the study. The respondents were heads of preschool education institutions (658 people), educators of preschool education institutions (1195 people), and parents of children (3833 people) from 24 regions of Ukraine and the city of Kyiv. The highest response rate was observed among heads of institutions in the central and western regions of Ukraine, which are the rear areas. Here, the sample was exceeded by more than 100%. These are Zhytomyr, Khmelnytskyi, Dnipro, Ivano-Frankivsk, Volyn and Chernivtsi regions and the city of Kyiv. Instead, the least active were the heads of institutions located in regions close to the area of active hostilities: Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia regions.

In the study, 14% of the surveyed directors of preschool education reported suspension of the educational process. The main reasons they mentioned were:

- lack of shelter (48%);
- the consequences of a full-scale invasion (33 per cent);
- the location of the institution in the area of active hostilities or on the frontline (10 per cent);
- location in the temporarily occupied territory (7%).

Special attention was paid to the social composition of the children. In particular:

- 75 per cent of institutions have children with one of their parents being a military serviceman or woman;
- 16 per cent have children whose parents died in the war;
- about 60 per cent of institutions are attended by children of internally displaced persons;
- more than 55 per cent have children who are temporarily abroad.

Only 3 per cent of managers reported the absence of children belonging to these categories.

In the 2024 survey, the number of participants was 9693. The respondents were 1829 heads of preschool education institutions (92% of the planned sample); 895 educators-methodologists (45%); 3311 educators (55%); 1339 educators' assistants (67 2319 parents of pupils (19%).

The activity of respondents in 2024 was generally in line with the trends of the previous year: the highest participation was demonstrated by representatives of western regions far from active hostilities.

General trends in the organisation of a safe educational environment

An analysis of the results of two consecutive studies conducted in 2023 and 2024 showed targeted actions by the heads of preschool education institutions and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine to organise a safe educational environment under martial law. In 2023, the key challenges remained the preservation of the lives and health of preschool children, the preservation of the network of institutions, the functioning of teaching staff and the continuity of the educational process for children. Therefore, the decision on the mode of operation of preschool education institutions was made by local executive authorities and local self-government bodies based on an assessment of the specific security situation

The educational process in preschool education institutions was carried out in three main formats: in-person, remote and mixed. Overall, in the 2022-2023 academic year, about 60 per cent of preschool education institutions were able to operate in person. At the same time, there were significant regional differences: all institutions in western regions of Ukraine operated in a full-time format, while in regions close to active hostilities - Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions - the educational process was carried out exclusively remotely.

The air alert has been and remains the biggest challenge for teachers working in person. In 2023, 85% of teachers participating in the study reported that they were forced to evacuate children during the air alert. Only 2 per cent of respondents said they had organised a "daytime nap" for their pupils in specially equipped shelters. Given the urgency of safety issues, preserving the life and health of children, 65% of managers and 55% of educators have been trained in first aid. As an additional safety measure, more than a third of the facilities are equipped with a panic button, and 30% have a general alarm notification system. To strengthen cooperation between parents and kindergarten staff, about 98% of parents were familiarised with the procedure for evacuating children to shelters, and 94% were familiarised with the algorithm of actions in case of failure to communicate with the teacher during an alarm.

As of 2023, distance learning was launched to maintain the continuity of the educational process. The distance learning format is flexible and variable: 52% of educators worked from home using their own equipment, while another 40% worked from the premises of the institution. According to the survey, about 60% of children used phones for distance learning, 19% used laptops, 16% used tablets, and the rest used desktop computers. Only 0.4 per cent of parents received the necessary equipment to keep in touch with their child's teacher directly from the educational institution.

Before the outbreak of the full-scale war, Ukraine was actively implementing digital transformation. This factor played a positive role in ensuring the continuity of the educational process and compliance with its security component. In 2023, according to the study, educators actively used state and author's online services for distance learning. Most often, they used videos and images from open sources (90% and 87%, respectively), and created their own videos (72%) and presentations (65%). In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Science , with the assistance of the UNICEF programme, launched the NUMO online kindergarten. Its website contains video lessons for children aged 3 to 6; tips on providing first psychological assistance to people who have experienced a crisis event; practical advice, activities, exercises - all for teaching children through interaction and play. According to a 2023 study, 53% of educators used this platform in their work. The MES website also has useful links and educational materials (video lessons, literary works, interesting exercises, psychologists' advice on how to support children and parents in crisis situations, including during war) in the section "Modern Preschool under the Wings of Protection". According to the 2023 survey, 38% of educators used the materials in this section.

Safety infrastructure

In the context of a full-scale war, a key factor in organising a safe educational environment is the availability of shelters suitable for long-term stay of children and staff during air raids. According to the monitoring data of 2023,

91% of the preschool education institutions that participated in the study were provided with a shelter either directly on the territory of the institution or at a certain distance. At the same time, 9 per cent of respondents said they were unable to use the shelter. The main reasons for this were that the available shelter was unsuitable for use due to non-compliance with sanitary standards, lack of ventilation, water supply, and too far away from the location of the preschool. Experience has shown that the latter factor is quite critical given the importance of preserving the lives and health of children. State building regulations do not set specific requirements for educational institutions, so they are subject to general regulations (https://dsns.gov.ua/upload/2/3/4/1/8/3/7/metodicni-rekomendaciyipdf-metodicni-rekomendaciyi.pdf.) According to them, the location of a protective structure is allowed at a distance of 500 m from an educational institution. However, a number of difficult situations arise when it comes to evacuating preschool children. For example, preschool children may have a "daytime nap" during an air raid, which will significantly extend the time for evacuation. In winter, more time is spent on dressing children. It is also necessary to take into account the psychological factor: a child's acute reaction to a stressful situation, panic - all these components often make it impossible to evacuate children during an air raid to a shelter located at a distance of 500 metres. With this in mind, the optimal safe distance from an educational institution to a shelter should be 100 metres.

In the 2024 survey, the situation with shelters in preschool education institutions shows positive dynamics compared to the 2023 survey: the share of unsuitable shelters decreased from 9% to 3% due to the reconstruction or re-equipment of at least 6% of shelters. According to directors of preschool education institutions, the share of institutions with functional shelters was 89%. The positive dynamics in strengthening the security infrastructure of preschool education under martial law is determined by a set of factors, including: funding from the state budget, funds from local governments, assistance from charitable foundations and international technical assistance.

It can be stated that during the period under study, the preschool education system has demonstrated resilience and ability to withstand the challenges caused by the war. The management and organisational components of security in preschool education institutions were established, instructions were developed to preserve the life and health of preschool children, various forms of education were organised depending on the security situation, interaction between the teaching staff and parents of pupils was strengthened, and effective digital educational resources for distance learning were created. Despite the noticeable progress, the issue of ensuring an adequate level of physical security remains particularly relevant in communities located near active hostilities. This requires further systemic solutions at the level of public policy and sustainable interagency partnerships.

Psycho-emotional security

In 2023, anxiety levels among children, parents, and educators remained extremely high, which led to an urgent need to introduce systematic psychological support for all participants in the educational process. However, in many preschool education institutions, such measures were sporadic or fragmentary.

According to the 2023 study, to ensure a favourable psychological climate in teaching teams, the most common practice was individual conversations with staff, conducted either by directors of institutions (58%) or by staff psychologists (67%). In addition, psychologists provided individual counselling for teachers and pupils, as well as organised group trainings for the staff. Information on stress reduction techniques was provided in 43% of institutions.

In a number of regions of Ukraine, special psycho-emotional rehabilitation programmes were introduced, which had a positive impact on the adaptation processes of the participants in the educational environment. One such tool was the training course "First Psychological Aid to Educational Process Participants During and After Military Operations"

developed by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine as part of the National Programme for Mental Health of Ukrainians. As of 2023, almost 25 per cent of educators had completed the course, and about 10 per cent were in the process of completing it at the time of the study.

As part of the National Programme of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, the Ministry of Education and Science, together with the NGO "Support the Child", held a series of webinars on psychological support for children with SEN in preschool education institutions in October-November 2022, entitled "Safety Zone: Psychological Support for Children with SEN in Educational Institutions during Air Alert". https://iea.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/education-of-ukraine_2022.pdf. To keep in touch with their students, teachers and child psychologists, with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, launched the Support Your Child telegram channel with simple recommendations, audio stories, games and developmental exercises that can be performed in a shelter, at home or during evacuation. Six webinars were held for parents as part of the Parents' HUB project. Together with the Creative Practice online platform, we created an animated video "How to talk to a child about war" - 7 tips from psychologists.

Thus, the formation of a system of psycho-emotional safety is gradually becoming one of the priority components of the modern educational process. The intensification of support measures at all levels of education management indicates an increase in the awareness, responsibility and readiness of institutions to ensure the psycho-emotional resilience of teachers and students in crisis situations.

Ensuring the psycho-emotional well-being of all participants in the educational process is impossible without proper training and support for teachers. The daily interaction with children under martial law has a negative impact on the emotional health of teachers. That is why the next important aspect of the study is to examine the level of professional support for educators, their readiness to work in an inclusive environment, and their needs for professional development.

Professional support for teachers

In the 2023 study, more than 40 per cent of respondents - heads of preschool education institutions - indicated the need for additional training on creating a safe educational environment. In 2024, this figure decreased to 29%, which can be explained by the active implementation of online educational resources, webinars and courses on this issue. These events were organised by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, NGOs and international partners.

In 2023-2024, the need for methodological support in organising the educational process for children with special educational needs (SEN) remained relevant for educators. This need was noted by 74% of respondents in 2023 and 75% in 2024, in particular in the context of interaction with specialists from inclusive resource centres (IRCs), which ensure the rights of children with special educational needs (SEN) aged 2-18 to receive quality preschool and general secondary education. The main functions of the IRC are to provide comprehensive psychological and pedagogical assessments of a child's development, covering such areas as physical, speech, cognitive, emotional and volitional development and the level of educational activity. These assessments allow us to determine the individual needs of the child, take into account the peculiarities of his or her development and develop recommendations for the formation of an individual educational trajectory. The IRCs provide a comprehensive approach to the development of children with SEN, including psychological and pedagogical support, correctional and developmental services and professional support in the learning process. The IRCs pay special attention to preschool children, as early intervention is crucial for the development of basic skills, emotional well-being and social adaptation. If necessary, the RRC specialists also assess the level of social adaptation and the child's relationships with peers and adults, which is an important aspect of creating a safe and inclusive environment in a crisis. In addition to diagnostics, the

IRCs provide consultations for parents and teachers, promote the development of an inclusive culture in educational institutions, including kindergartens, and participate in the formation of support teams for children with SEN. Such a set of measures creates a support system that takes into account the individual characteristics of each child, providing them with maximum opportunities for development and learning, even in difficult socio-economic conditions[1] . As of 2025, the IRC network in Ukraine includes 722 institutions.

At the same time, according to the 2024 survey, 67% of preschool education institutions expressed full or partial readiness to enrol children with SEN. At the same time, 33% of managers claim that their institution is completely unprepared for inclusive education. According to the teachers (methodologists) responsible for methodological support in the IPE, 66% of teachers in their institutions are fully prepared for inclusive work, and 33% are partially prepared for such work.

Instead, the majority (63%) of educators say that despite their knowledge, they need additional training and methodological support. Thus, only 27% of respondents believe that they are fully proficient in the necessary methods and tools for inclusive education.

The administrations of educational institutions mostly provide methodological support to educators in organising the educational process for children with SEN: 88 per cent of institutions provide it on a regular basis, and 11 per cent periodically. Similar support is also provided by psychological and pedagogical support teams: permanently in 85% of cases,

occasionally - in 11%. Psychological and pedagogical support teams are formed directly in the institution of preschool education to organise support for children with special educational needs. Such teams usually include an educator, an educator's assistant, a practical psychologist, a speech therapist, a defectologist, a head of an institution or a methodologist, parents of a child with SEN, and specialists (consultants) of the IRC.

Organising an inclusive educational environment

Military actions in Ukraine have become a major challenge for the functioning of preschool education institutions, especially in the context of inclusion. However, despite the difficult circumstances, the efforts of teaching staff and management of institutions are aimed at ensuring the accessibility and quality of preschool education for all children, including those with special educational needs.

According to research conducted in 2023-2024, the majority of surveyed preschool education institutions continue to implement an inclusive approach even under martial law. The responses of the heads of the surveyed institutions show a high level of readiness to adapt the educational process, including the organisation of distance and blended learning for children with special educational needs, and their psychological support.

Successful implementation of the inclusive approach largely depended on the level of teachers' training. The 2024 study showed that teachers who had previously received relevant training or participated in trainings on inclusive education were more effective in working with children with SEN. At the same time, the lack of resources, including teaching materials and qualified specialists (defectologists, speech therapists, psychologists), remains a serious problem.

International organisations, such as UNICEF and the LEGO Foundation, provided significant support in organising work with children with special educational needs, providing institutions with the necessary didactic materials, remedial tools and professional development for teachers. This allowed a significant number of IPE to adapt to the new conditions and prevent children with SEN from being excluded from the educational process.

One of the trends resulting from the priority task of preserving the life and health of pupils with SEN is the creation of barrier-free shelters of a new type. For example, in the Kyiv region, in 2023-2025, many communities opened shelters with wide entrances without thresholds, designed to meet the needs of children with limited mobility who use wheelchairs. The shelters are equipped with lifts and elevators, which makes it easy for children with musculoskeletal disorders to move around. For children with visual impairments, tactile elements and contrasting markings have been installed to help them navigate in space, increasing their safety and comfort. The shelters are equipped with places for recreation, educational games and resources to help children stay in the shelter stress-free and beneficial to their development.

Despite the ongoing risks to life and health, restrictions on access to resources, and the forced migration of some children, the efforts of educational institutions have been aimed at maintaining psychological comfort and an inclusive environment. The results of the study confirm that inclusion in preschool education in Ukraine is gradually moving from formal to substantive, with a focus on supporting each child, taking into account their individual needs.

Activities of an educator's assistant

According to Ukrainian legislation, a comprehensive approach to the organisation of a safe inclusive environment in the preschool education system involves the participation of an educator's assistant in the educational process. They provide social and pedagogical support for children with special educational needs, help organise the educational process in an inclusive group, observe a child with SEN and record their results in a special diary, ensure healthy and safe conditions for the child's education, upbringing and development, and help organise the child's workplace. The duties of an educational assistant include interaction with parents and IRC specialists. Thus, he/she is entrusted with a number of important tasks: organisational function, advisory, communicative and diagnostic functions, implementation of educational and developmental activities. An applicant for this position must have a pedagogical education or higher education and professional qualifications.

In the 2024 study, special attention was paid to the activities of teaching assistants who work directly with children with special educational needs. According to the study, 66.2% of the preschool education institutions that participated in the survey were provided with teaching assistants. This indicates a staff shortage in this category of workers, and in general may have a negative impact on the provision of children with special educational needs with the necessary social and pedagogical support. In one of the blocks of the questionnaire, the educator's assistant was asked to assess the effectiveness of his/her interaction with various participants in the educational process of preschool education on a five-point scale (where 1 - no cooperation, 5 - productive and effective cooperation). The results show that the assistant's interaction with the preschool teacher is best established - 81% of respondents gave a score of 5. Interaction with the management of the institution is in second place (77% of "5" ratings), and cooperation with the team of psychological and pedagogical support for the child is in third place (74%). At the same time, the lowest score was given to cooperation with IRC specialists - only 62% of assistants rated it at the highest level.

Regarding communication between the tutor's assistant and parents of children with SEN on issues of education, upbringing, and progress of pupils, 73% of tutor's assistants consider personal meetings and contacts with parents of such children to be the most productive.

How parents assess the organisation of a safe inclusive environment

The 2024 study examined the opinion of parents of children with special educational needs on the organisation of a safe inclusive environment for their children. A total of 2,319 parents answered the questionnaire. They are active

participants in the educational process and make decisions about the format of their child's education - in-person, remote or mixed - in accordance with the security situation in the region. Therefore, it was important to record their opinion on the organisation of a safe educational environment in preschool education institutions. In particular, what forms of organising children's education parents prefer, whether correctional and developmental classes are held in the educational institution, and whether their children enjoy attending kindergarten.

The results of the parental survey showed that most children (76%) attended full-day groups. Another 19% attended short-term groups. Other formats were also mentioned: asynchronous learning, individual lessons with specialists, mixed groups or rotating groups. Overall, 88 per cent of parents are satisfied with the quality of correctional and developmental classes provided to their children in educational institutions.

Almost half (46%) of parents said that the institutions have adequate reasonable accommodations for their child's stay and learning; 17% share the opposite opinion. Regarding the barrier-free environment, 40 per cent of parents believe that it is provided, while 26 per cent disagree. The overwhelming majority of parents (91%) said that their children with special needs attend kindergarten with pleasure. The factors that shape children's satisfaction include the desire to communicate with other children (37%), play in the kindergarten (27%) and interesting activities (26%). Among other advantages of a child's stay in kindergarten, parents mentioned classes with a defectologist and psychologist.

Thus, there is a predominantly positive attitude of parents towards the organisation of a safe and inclusive educational environment, which is a critical factor in the stable functioning of preschool education institutions under martial law.

Challenges and needs of preschool education institutions

Creating a safe and inclusive space requires additional resources: human, material, financial, and managerial. According to the results of surveys conducted as part of the 2023 and 2024 studies, a wide range of needs of IPE was identified for all items proposed in the questionnaires. The respondents were heads, educators, and assistant educators of preschool educational institutions. Generalisation of their answers allowed us to identify the key challenges faced by preschool education institutions under martial law. These include: insufficient number of specialists in inclusive education; poor technical equipment of institutions; and the need for constant coordination with the REC. The need for a single digital resource for teachers was also mentioned, which should contain methodological recommendations, case studies, algorithms of actions, and serve as a platform for sharing experience in working with children with special educational needs.

A differentiated approach was taken to analysing the needs identified by respondents. Thus, according to educators, the main needs in their work are material and technical support, professional development, and methodological support.

As part of the material and technical support for creating a safe inclusive space, educators included

- didactic materials, games, toys - 15 per cent;
- computer equipment - 10%;
- rehabilitation equipment, sensory materials (10%),
- playgrounds, ramps (8%).

Among the priority needs for professional development, educators identified

- mastering the skills of reducing unwanted behaviour, psychological support, and developing new skills - 80%;
- organisation of the educational process taking into account the categories of children with special educational needs - 76%;

Teachers included the following in the component of methodological support needs:

- adaptation/modification of educational programmes - 75 %;
- use of personality-oriented teaching methods - 68%.
- cooperation with the IRC (59%).

Separately, educators noted that they need psychological (17%) and moral (13%) support.

The needs of heads of preschool education institutions lie in the area of professional development and the need for quality inclusive education

Thus, according to the managers, they need advanced training in the following areas:

- strategic planning of activities - 53
- monitoring and quality assurance of education - 51%;
- digital competence - 42%;
- catering and creating a safe environment - 40 per cent;
- psychological support for participants in the educational process - 25%.

For the quality organisation of inclusive education, the managers highlighted the material and technical support of the institution and methodological support:

- provision of equipment and teaching aids - 89%;
- organisation of the process of teaching children with SEN - 84%;
- creation of an inclusive environment - 74%;
- interaction with the IRC - 84%;
- methodological support from professional development centres - 61%.

Teaching assistants identified the following urgent needs for organising their work

- mastering the skills of reducing unwanted behaviour, psychological support, and skill development - 74%;
- personality-oriented methods of working with children with SEN - 69%;
- cooperation with group educators (only 38%, so most already have these skills).

The needs of educators indicate systemic challenges in ensuring an inclusive, psychologically safe and technically equipped educational environment. Significant attention should be paid to the development of teachers' professional competencies, coordination with the IRC, and the creation of a modern digital support resource.

Discussion and Conclusion

The hostilities in Ukraine have become a serious challenge for the functioning of preschool education institutions. However, despite the extremely difficult conditions and lack of resources, the teaching staff and management of

institutions demonstrate resilience and focus on providing accessible and quality preschool education for all children, including those with special educational needs.

Studies conducted in 2023-2024 showed that most preschool education institutions continue to implement an inclusive approach even under martial law. Respondents' answers demonstrated a high readiness to adapt the educational process to the security situation. The preschool education system, in addition to full-time education, has flexibly switched to distance or blended learning for children with special educational needs and psychological support.

A key factor in the successful implementation of inclusive education is the level of teacher training. Practice has shown that teachers who have received special training or participated in trainings on inclusive education are much more effective in working with children with special educational needs. At the same time, limited resources - lack of teaching materials and specialists (defectologists, speech therapists, psychologists) - remain a serious problem.

Despite the risks, limited access to resources and migration of some children, preschool education institutions made every effort to maintain inclusiveness and psychological comfort of the educational environment. The results of the study show that inclusion in preschool education in Ukraine is gradually transforming from a formal approach to a substantive one, focused on supporting each child according to their needs.

A comparative analysis of the results of the 2023 and 2024 surveys shows that the system of safe educational environments is strengthening. Key trends include the adaptation of preschool education institutions to new learning formats, increased staff readiness to act in crisis situations, the creation of shelters focused on the needs of children with special educational needs, and the active implementation of digital solutions to ensure the continuity of the educational process. The level of communication between teachers and parents has increased, as evidenced by the growing awareness of parents about child evacuation. The number of teachers trained in first aid has increased.

The improvement of the security infrastructure deserves special attention: the share of unsuitable shelters has decreased as a result of joint efforts by the state, communities and international partners. However, the issue of adequate physical protection remains relevant, especially in the regions bordering the combat zone. Providing quality and accessible shelters should be among the priorities of state policy.

Psycho-emotional safety has become a priority. While psychological support was fragmented in 2023, in 2024, this area is gradually being institutionalised: specialised courses are being introduced, including first aid. Further development of this component requires the integration of psychosocial support into the daily activities of institutions and the formation of a culture of care for the mental health of teachers and students.

Despite the positive dynamics in creating a safe environment, inclusive education remains one of the most vulnerable areas. The demand for teacher training to work with children with SEN remains consistently high, indicating deep structural challenges. A positive factor is the intensification of methodological support and professional development, but additional investment, upgrading of material and technical resources, and intersectoral cooperation are needed to make real progress in inclusion.

The experience of 2023-2024 has shown both the viability of the preschool education system in times of war and its adaptability and focus on the needs of the child. Despite limited resources, preschool education has shown positive dynamics in developing an inclusive component aimed at ensuring equal access for all.

In modern conditions, the role of teaching assistants in ensuring the quality of inclusive education is growing. Interaction with teachers, administration, support team and parents demonstrates their integration into the internal

processes of preschool education institutions. The intermediary role of teaching assistants has a positive impact on the formation of a favourable inclusive environment. At the same time, insufficient cooperation with the IRC indicates the need to strengthen interagency coordination.

International organisations have made a significant contribution to supporting preschool education by providing didactic materials, correctional tools, and training for teachers. This helped many institutions to adapt to the new conditions and prevent the exclusion of children with SEN from the educational process.

In summary, it can be stated that preschool education in Ukraine under martial law faces systemic challenges, including the need to preserve the lives and health of children, ensure the continuity of the educational process, lack of highly qualified personnel, limited resources, the need for psychological and pedagogical support for all participants in the educational process, and lack of coordination with the IRC. At the same time, the opinions of teachers and managers indicate a readiness for change, a desire for professional development and inclusion. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive state strategy to support preschool education based on sustainable funding, cross-sectoral cooperation and institutional support for teachers.

Based on the results of the study, which covered the period from 2023 to 2024 and partially 2025, a number of strategic and practical recommendations for Ukraine and the European Union were developed.

Recommendations for Ukraine

1. **Develop a comprehensive national strategy for crisis-resilient preschool education.** Develop and implement a national strategy that will ensure sustainable funding, inclusive practices and a security component for the resilience of preschool education during crises, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups, including children with special educational needs.
2. **Strengthening the capacity of preschool teachers to work in crisis conditions.** Expand and systematise access to specialised training and professional development for educators, assistants and administrative staff. The training should include inclusive practices, crisis management, mental health support for children and teaching staff, and digital competencies. An important part of the training is a practical component, such as practicing an algorithm of actions in a dangerous situation, first aid, evacuating children to a shelter in case of a threat, etc.
3. **Institutionalise psychosocial support in preschool education institutions.** Integrate psychological and psychosocial support as a key component of the institutions' activities. Introduce regular first aid training and mental health awareness programmes for all staff.
4. **Improve security infrastructure in educational institutions.** Prioritise the repair and construction of child-friendly, accessible and properly equipped shelters. Ensure that safety standards are regularly updated and implemented, especially in regions close to the war zone.
5. **Strengthen cooperation between teachers of preschool education institutions and IRCs.** Improve the interaction between preschool education institutions and IRCs to ensure comprehensive support for children with SEN, develop clear protocols for coordination and joint work.
6. **Promote the use of digital technologies.** Develop and implement digital tools to support inclusive and crisis-resilient preschool education, ensuring their accessibility and adaptability for children, including those with SEN.
7. **Active involvement of parents.** Systematically involve parents in the assessment and development of inclusive and safe educational environments, support initiatives to raise parental awareness of inclusion, and develop clear instructions for parents in emergency situations.
8. **Rethink the role of teaching assistants in the educational process.** Recognise teaching assistants as important participants in inclusive education, a kind of "bridge" between the teaching staff and parents of students. Provide

them with targeted professional development.

9. **Promote inter-sectoral and public interaction.** Develop links between the education, health and social protection sectors at the local and national levels; encourage active community participation in creating a safe and inclusive preschool environment.
10. **Ensure data-driven decision-making.** Improve the system of collecting and analysing data on the inclusiveness and safety of preschool education, and use this data for informed policy decision-making and effective resource allocation.

Recommendations for the European Union

1. **Strengthen support for inclusive preschool education.** Expand training programmes for educators in inclusive practices, especially for working with children with SEN in crisis settings, with priority given to funding for specialised training and long-term professional development.
2. **Invest in mental health and psychosocial support.** Support the integration of psychological support into the daily activities of preschool education institutions, develop joint initiatives between Ukraine and the EU to create a culture of emotional well-being among staff, children and parents.
3. **Improve the safety infrastructure for children.** Prioritise investments in the physical security of educational institutions, in particular in regions affected by conflict, natural disasters, etc. by supporting projects for the construction, reconstruction and adaptation of safe shelters.
4. **Promote the development of digital solutions for crisis-resilient education.** Expand access to digital tools and distance learning adapted for early childhood education, encourage pilot projects and grant programmes to develop accessible educational platforms for young children, including those with SEN.
5. **Promote intersectoral coordination.** Support effective cooperation between educational institutions, local authorities, and health services to ensure timely, comprehensive care for every child.
6. **Encourage parents to participate in creating a barrier-free environment.** Support initiatives that involve parents in assessing and improving inclusive educational spaces, including the design of barrier-free learning environments.
7. **Strengthen the resilience of teaching staff.** Implement policies that strengthen the role of teaching assistants, develop programmes to develop leadership, crisis response and psychosocial skills among staff.
8. **Ensure stable funding and strategic planning.** Guarantee long-term support for the development of a sustainable, inclusive and crisis-resilient early education system in Ukraine that is child-centred.
9. **Learn from the experience of countries that have gone through crisis and crisis situations.** To develop communication and sustainable international vertical and horizontal links in order to exchange information on the safety, life and health of children in crisis.

Ethical Review

In Ukraine, there is currently no specialised legislation that regulates the ethical standards for conducting monitoring studies. Nevertheless, a number of regulatory and advisory documents partially address ethical principles relevant to research in the fields of education and science.

In conducting the present study, the authors adhered to the Ethical Code of the Scientist of Ukraine[2], the Procedure for Conducting Education Quality Monitoring[3], and the annual Operational Work Plans of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine.

Throughout the research process, the authors complied with the fundamental principles set out in these documents, including equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender, race, age, political or religious beliefs, and cultural or social background. The study was also guided by the principles of honesty, accuracy of data, respect for respondents, and confidentiality.

The research conducted by the authors was initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, in accordance with subparagraph 1, paragraph 2, Section II of the Procedure for Conducting Education Quality Monitoring. Evidence confirming the Ministry's role as the initiator of the research is provided in the Operational Plan of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine for 2024 (Priority 1 "Education of early-childhood and preschool-aged children", Task 1.1.1.1, items 1 and 2)[4] and the Operational Plan of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine for 2023 (Priority 1 "Education of early-childhood and preschool-aged children", Task 1.1.1.1, item 3)[5].

Declarations

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Consent to Participate

All participants were informed about the purpose, content, and procedures of the study in the introductory section of the electronic questionnaire. Prior to completing the survey, they were provided with information regarding the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity of responses, and their right to withdraw from the study or skip any question without any consequences.

Informed consent was considered to have been obtained upon the voluntary completion and submission of the questionnaire. This procedure was consistent with the principles of voluntary participation and informed consent outlined in international ethical standards.

The survey was conducted electronically in May–June 2023 across Ukraine and involved directors, teachers, and parents of children attending preschool education institutions.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the study are not publicly available due to the data protection policy of the State Scientific Institution "Institute of Educational Analytics". Data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

The empirical data were collected as part of two monitoring studies conducted by the State Scientific Institution "Institute of Educational Analytics":

- "Study on the State of Organisation of Educational Activities in Preschool Institutions under Martial Law" (2023);
- "Organisation of Inclusive Education in Preschool Institutions" (2024).

In 2023, surveys were administered to directors, teachers, and parents of preschool-aged children (three questionnaires comprising 62, 72, and 57 questions respectively). The questionnaires covered issues related to the functioning of preschool institutions under martial law, including the organisation of inclusive educational environments for children with special educational needs.

In 2024, the survey was conducted among directors and heads of preschool institutions or units, teachers, teacher assistants, and parents of children with special educational needs (ranging from 8 to 19 questions depending on the target group).

All surveys were administered electronically via Google Forms. The collected data include single-choice and multiple-choice responses, scale ratings, and open-ended comments. The datasets are stored in XLSX and SPSS formats.

The sampling of respondents was based on official statistical reporting data (Form 85-k) obtained from the national educational information system database – the Automated Information and Analytical Management System (AIAMS) – as of 1 January 2023 and 1 January 2024, as well as additional information provided by regional departments of education.

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Footnotes

[1] On Approval of the Regulation on the Inclusive Resource Centre: Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine of 12 July 2017 No. 545. URL: https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/545-2017-%D0%BF#n11.

[2] https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/rada/show/v0002550-09#Text

[3] https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0154-20#Text

[4] https://mon.gov.ua/static-objects/mon/sites/1/docs%20osvita/operativny%20plany%202024/Operativn.plan.MON.2024.1.pdf

[5] https://mon.gov.ua/static-objects/mon/sites/1/rizne/Plany.roboty/2023/10.01.2023/Operativn.plan.MON.2023.pdf