

# Formation of Professional Competence of Future Primary School Teachers Against the Background of Large-Scale Military Aggression (a response to the challenges of the times)

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## Abstract

In contemporary European literature, the problem of shaping future educators against the backdrop of crisis (military) transformations has not been explored. Ukrainian teachers demonstrate valuable experience in the teaching under warfare conditions, which should be the subject of a separate study. In addition, the problem of the professional formation of future teachers is also relevant, given the numerous terminological debates between scientists. The article aims to analyze the formation of professional competence of future elementary school teachers against the background of large-scale military aggression. The work is formed on the use of theoretical pedagogical research methods. Noticeable attention is paid to the methods of generalization, abstraction, analysis, synthesis. Among the empirical methods, the methods of experiment and SWOT-analysis were used. With the help of the latter, the strengths and weaknesses of the formation of professional competence in the system of distance learning of future elementary school teachers against the background of military aggression are reflected. The results considered terminological discussions regarding the concept of "professional competence", highlighted the main features of professionalism of modern teachers, analyzed the use of game techniques and their impact on the formation of important skills for future teachers, developed a training model to ensure maximum exposure to professional competence in future teachers. In the conclusion, it was noted that the appeal to game techniques allows to deepen the assimilation of professional competence, moreover, conducting games during the war has an additional psychological effect. The best training model for future teachers is to conduct distance learning sessions according to the established program, which provides an increase in the amount of practice and actualization of the experience of independent work.

**Keywords:** professional competence, future teachers, primary school, Russian-Ukrainian war, distance learning

## 1. Introduction

The deployment of Russian military aggression in Ukraine has changed the training of elementary school teachers. The transition to distance learning and the chaotic nature of classes has been a significant challenge (Trach et al, 2020). Finding answers to the problems has been the subject of much debate among scholars, but no unified recommendations have been made. Given that the training of elementary school teachers has become a priority (not counting military expenses, the budget fully finances the training and work of teachers), the question of the effectiveness of mastering professional competencies under difficult conditions has become relevant. The topic has additional relevance because of unresolved terminological problems in the structures of “professional competence”, “professional and pedagogical competence”, “pedagogical competence”. This, in turn, requires additional interpretation.

The article aims to analyze the formation of professional competence of future elementary school teachers against the background of large-scale military aggression. This task will be solved consistently by considering the following aspects: peculiarities of the interpretation of professional competence in Ukrainian educational realities, the use of game techniques for the acquisition of professional competence, the formation of a model program of classes that would deepen the understanding of the essence of professional competence by higher education applicants. Note that these issues have been considered by researchers, but there have been no attempts to demonstrate in a synthetic way a program of transformation in the training of elementary school teachers due to military action.

The problem of the formation of professional competence in teachers is not fully investigated and requires a detailed analysis, given the debatable issues of terminology. Bezborodova et al. (2019) characterized the conceptual differences between professional and professional-pedagogical competence. At the same time, these specialists investigated key aspects of the formation of professional skills of higher education applicants. Cherng & Davis (2019) analyzed in detail the formation of multicultural competence and its importance for future educators. Kelly (2021), in his case study, characterized contemporary competences and competencies, defined the difference between them, and explored key in-demand skills in today's society. At the same time, Kem (2022) analyzed the peculiarities of using individual and adaptive learning system, outlined the peculiarities of the formation of certain skills in the specified educational spaces. Mishchenko (2019) highlighted the problem of the formation of communicative competence in future teachers of English. This researcher believes that communicative skill is one of the important components of the professional competence of the teacher as a whole. Renigere & Cela (2019) analyzed the formation of environmental competence for teachers. These experts noted that environmental competence is now one of the in-demand and relevant skills, which is manifested in a careful attitude towards the environment. However, Shakabilovich (2021) believed that tolerance is one of the key features of the professional formation of any specialist. Hipolito-Delgado et al (2018) highlighted the importance of multicultural competence for higher education applicants. They summarized that this competence is shaped by moral tolerant principles. Lash et al. (2020) explored the specifics of becoming an elementary school teacher through the lens of interculturalism. At the same time, Nasution & Rudiyanto (2021) described the core competencies of an elementary school teacher. Suri & Chandra (2021) analyzed the characteristics of becoming a multicultural educator in their action research.

For this study weighty also were the works of those scientists who investigated the current trends in the development of higher education in Ukraine and the world. In particular, Ayoub et al. (2020) pointed out the key trends in the development of modern education, described the main opportunities of the Coursera platform for the distance education system or in general for self-education. However, Chan et al. (2021) investigated the features of the formation of relevant skills and competencies based on the application of online learning.

Consequently, as shown by the analysis of the literature, the problem of elementary school teacher training is quite popular among researchers, each of them considered separate aspects of training future specialists. However, under the conditions of real combat operations that have unfolded in Ukraine, some problems of training should be revised and finalized. Accordingly, the disclosure of the purpose of the study (analysis of the formation of professional competence of future teachers of primary classes on the background of large-scale military aggression) is an urgent task for our time.

## 2. Methods

Theoretical pedagogical ways form the basis of this research. For example, with the help of analysis of the main subject of the study - the formation of professional competence of elementary school teachers is divided into smaller parts (analysis of professional literature, highlighting of unresolved problems, characterizing the key aspects of the formation of professional competence of elementary school teachers, determining the impact of the

Russian-Ukrainian war on it). Based on synthesis, the above parts are combined and formed their own hypotheses and conclusions. By means of the inductive method of research, it was possible to characterize some problematic moments of the formation of professional competence in crisis conditions. Of separate importance was the use of the method of generalization, based on which the results on the subject of research were made. Based on the application of the principles of abstraction, it was possible to move from general theoretical schemes and concepts to their own considerations. Additional theoretical methods were deductive, structural, and functional.

Certain attention in the study was paid to empirical methods. For example, the issue of further development of the process of forming the professional competence of elementary school teachers is covered based on the predictive method. The experimental method was used in the formation of the model of elementary school teachers' training. The method of SWOT-analysis had a separate value, based on which it was possible to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the innovative method of forming the competence of teachers during the period of war.

The main empirical materials were training programs for elementary school teachers, and syllabuses of academic disciplines. The methodological basis also consisted of official documents, in particular, the Law of Ukraine "On Education", the Law of Ukraine "On Higher Education", etc.

Also, to model the training program for elementary school teachers used the empirical method of experimentation. Its basis was the previously significantly updated experimental program. The study involved 150 applicants for higher education, the classes were held in a distance format. They were offered a set of disciplines, as well as modified methods of teaching, which included elements of the European teaching experience. All subsequent stages included assimilation of professional competence, familiarization with pedagogical values, identification of their sources and importance for further informational work, including through enhanced work during pedagogical practice. By monitoring students' work, it was possible to track their progress and identify vulnerabilities in training and the program as a whole. The instrument of verification was detailed testing, the teachers were in close contact with the students, since the experiment took place during the Russian military aggression. knowledge improved (as confirmed by detailed testing), so we can conclude that the formation of professional competence also underwent positive changes.

### 3. Results

#### *3.1 Peculiarities of the Interpretation of Professional Competence of Elementary School Teachers in Ukraine*

The term professional competence is understood as a typical characteristic of a specialist's work. It includes substantive (knowledge) and procedural (skill) elements. Professional competence has several main features: 1. Critical analysis (critical thinking), the flexibility of professional work, mobility of skills and knowledge. Given this interpretation, we believe that professional and pedagogical competence is a multilevel sustainable structure of mental traits of the teacher, which is formed as a result of the integration of knowledge, skills, and experience, which are important traits for the teacher-educator (Bezborodova et al., 2019). The mentioned characteristics form new conditions and requirements of the work activity. Somewhat different to this concept is the term "pedagogical competence", which is often confused with professional-pedagogical competence (Kelly, 2021). It is understood as a set of theoretical knowledge, skills, and abilities, experience, personal traits of a teacher, influencing the implementation of exploratory, aesthetic activities, independent acquisition of new knowledge, analysis of the activities of participants in the educational process, decision-making.

Modern psychological and pedagogical literature distinguishes five factors of the development of a teacher's professional competence: communicative, professional, cultural, personal, and self-development criterion.

The communicative criterion is one of the most important in the system of professional competence. The main part of the professional work of the teacher is a specially arranged system of communication. The requirement in communication is an important condition for the professional definition of the teacher (Mishchenko, 2019). Such a need is usually manifested in an attempt to become a mentor for students, transferring important mental and moral experience to them (Mishchenko, 2019). The next is the professional criterion: successful learning in school is possible only when the teacher knows the material in depth, is fluent in all the subtleties of academic subjects, and when the teacher correctly forms the goal and objectives for each lesson (Cherng & Davis, 2019). We consider the key markers of pedagogical competence of the teacher to be: mastery of the content of the disciplines, knowledge of modern theories and methods of teaching and learning, and understanding the genuine consideration of the factors that contribute to the success of the pedagogical activity. The cultural criterion is also important because the teacher needs a thorough education, and mastery of good manners in explaining material and communication

(Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2018). Modern specialists note such markers of cultural competence of the teacher 1. General awareness, 2. Awareness in cultural novelties, 3. Features of the culture of communication (Lash et al., 2020). No less significant is the personal criterion because the quality of professional activity is determined by the traits that the specialist possesses. Of separate importance in this system is multicultural competence, a tolerant attitude towards cultures should be basic for modern learning (Bezborodova et al., 2019).

In order to be successful, teachers need to know and possess various characteristics and qualities of their own. Of particular importance in this system is the possession of specific professional traits, in particular: organization, initiative, demanding, fairness, flexibility, intellectual property, creativity. However, the presence of special psycho-physiological traits is also important. We are talking about a high volitional tone, resilience of the nervous system, a good level of performance and endurance. In this structure, a weighty role is also assigned to self-development and self-education (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2018). We believe that professional pedagogical capacity cannot be created once and for all. The process of professional improvement and accumulation of experience should be realized based on a critical and meticulous attitude of the teacher to himself/herself and his/her own activity. Systematic personal and phase growth is an integral component of educator professionalism (Kelly, 2021). We consider the key markers of a teacher's professional competence according to the self-development factor to be: demanding, self-critical, the requirement for constant updating of theoretical and practical material, the tendency to use innovative methods of activity, the research approach to work.

### *3.2 Didactic Games as a Method of Forming Professional Competence (features of use in wartime)*

European researchers have proven that a progressive method of educational work with students is conducting didactic games (Vishnoi, 2021). According to sociological studies, the degree of assimilation of educational material by applicants for higher education in the form of games is close to 90%. Other ways of delivering information are much less productive: for example, it is considered that the percentage of assimilation during lectures reaches only 20%, while lectures and the use of supplementary materials ensure only 30% of progress, the use of audiovisual means increases this figure to 50%, the organization of discussions during seminars ensures 70% of progress (Vishnoi, 2021, p. 150).

Appeal to the methodology of didactic games makes it possible to turn students from objects of training into objects of professional directed work. It stipulates purposeful, active, and creative participation in independent learning of professional competence (Sapoyevich, 2021). A similar view is also held by American researchers who argue for high educational productivity in an environment where students are not passive observers of the educational process (Kelly, 2021).

There are certain specifics of using the game-based learning method in a military setting. First of all, we are talking about distance learning. An important task of teachers is to provide a comfortable position for working online and conducting games. Options for the use of the competitive principle or teamwork are possible (Devadze et al., 2022). Appeals to such didactic games allow psychologically discharging, relaxing and acquiring professional competence. Also, didactic games develop critical thinking, which in war conditions is extremely important (Vishnoi, 2021). Criticality as an element of professional competence allows one to identify misinformation and counteract it (Nasution & Rudiyanto, 2021). Additionally, the use of game techniques activates students' creative abilities, develops their cognitive activity, teaches initiative, independent judgment, teaches self-activity, produces active citizenship, creates an emotional and intellectual atmosphere, psychological stability, promotes the ability to take an active position, improves, 2021). The use of game technology in the digitalization of education and forced recourse to a distance format sets up future elementary school teachers for innovative and pedagogical activities, which is a necessary aspect of the successful work of the modern teacher, part of the maximum realization of the teacher's potential with the subsequent progressive self-development (Perez-Brena, 2018).

In times of warfare, understanding the situation of others is important. A tangible advantage of using game techniques is that they develop an emphatic attitude toward others, allowing us to understand the specific attitudes of potential students at work. Empathy allows one to put oneself in the shoes of the other, to feel thoughts and experiences, to understand expectations and actions (Renigere & Cela, 2019). In view of the difficult psychological situation that teachers will have to face in the future when working in the early grades, mastering empathy skills can also be considered part of the professional competence of higher education applicants (Bondar et al., 2020).

Therefore, the use of game-based learning methods allows deepening the assimilation of professional competence. At the same time, in the conditions of Russian large-scale military aggression, the introduction of distance learning games have an additional psychological effect, which together with the qualitative assimilation of new teaching material leads to an increase in learning indicators in general.

### *3.3 Model Program for Training Future Primary School Teachers in War Conditions*

To develop the professional competence of future teachers of primary classes it was proposed to conduct an experiment, which had both initial provisions and results. In particular, as a result of the organized ascertaining experiment, it was possible to find out that applicants for higher education have an insufficient level of mastering the knowledge of pedagogical theory, a low level of creativity, average interest in the quality of education, and more detailed knowledge of pedagogical disciplines, show little activity in conducting classes in pedagogical disciplines. These results are primarily associated with not detailed forces of academic disciplines, curricula and work programs that are not aimed at the development of creativity in students, and very often in the Ukrainian context pursue the goal of reproducing already ready-made knowledge, which is an extremely low level of cognition. Materials and lectures contain little information of interest, and the performance of tasks is aimed only at the exploitation of imitative and reproductive reproduction, exercises are often built on outlining books, translating the actions of the participants.

The basis for the formative experiment was the previously significantly updated experimental program, which has the main purpose of using pedagogical tasks and situations, which, in turn, has a positive impact on the acquisition of professional competence of higher education applicants. The first stage provides for the formation of professional competencies of future elementary school teachers in the first-year students mastering the disciplines “Introduction to Specialty”, the second year was supposed to study the courses “General Pedagogy” (II course), “Fundamentals of Pedagogical Skills” (PI course) and free choice disciplines related to additional assimilation of educational culture, professional competencies of elementary school teachers, etc. 150 future teachers participated in the experiment. For teaching used the latest experience of European universities, in particular, attention was paid to increasing the practical component, improving the ability to work with digital technology, etc.

At the next stage, the basic and additional disciplines were supplemented by pedagogical practice, during which students had the opportunity to test their own theoretical knowledge, obtained in order to form the professional competence of future elementary school teachers. The third stage provided for the introduction of an additional seminar related to the methodology of forming the professional competence of future elementary school teachers. At the same stage, additional practice is also important for gaining experience and adjusting ideas about the specifics of the profession. At these stages, it was proposed to apply the methodology of using projects to deepen knowledge of the profession.

At the same time during the work and at each lesson in the experimental groups the emphasis was placed on the peculiarities of theoretical training. In the classroom all efforts were focused on assimilating new information, containing information about the essence of the components of professional competence of future teachers of elementary school. Provided assimilation of exercises and methods of work related to the potential establishment of continuous dialogue, solving problems and exercises, solving situations, analysis of educational phenomena and processes, their evaluation.

Seminars, practical classes with a variety of teaching methods, classes in a game manner, work with pedagogical dictionaries, oral reports, and writing essays were used for this purpose. Many initiatives were also given to the students themselves, who could teach their colleagues, act as experts, and evaluate the experience of others (Suri & Chandra, 2021). Extracurricular and independent learning was aimed at implementing a system of tasks during pedagogical practice, stimulating students' work towards their further self-development and self-improvement, organizing professional-cognitive group research (Wang et al., 2016). It was important to form a motivational basis of activity so that the higher education applicants assimilate the pedagogical system of values, involve them in solving practical situations, forming a favorable microclimate in the team (Bezborodova et al., 2019). Each proposed stage included the assimilation of professional competence, familiarization with pedagogical values, identification of their sources, and the importance of further information work. However, the content and structure of the classes were structured in such a way as to orient students to understand the pedagogical process, form positive motivation, and provide in-depth advice on issues that would arise during their studies. All classes were held remotely since martial law and Russian aggression prevented them from gathering at the university. This format was also suitable for the experiment from the psychological side: teachers who found themselves in extreme conditions were in close contact with the students. As a result of the experiment, students noted an improvement in their social communication skills, their knowledge improved (as confirmed by detailed testing), so we can conclude that the formation of professional competence also underwent positive changes.

#### 4. Discussion

The training of elementary school teachers under conditions of hostilities and martial law is characterized by its unpredictability. The situation with infrastructure, material support of the form of training (distance or full-time) depends not only on the position of administrative bodies or institutions of higher education but also on the state and intensity of hostilities, rocket attacks, destruction of critical infrastructure, etc. (Kem, 2022). Under such circumstances, an important challenge is to turn to flexibility in the use of tools and method of instruction that would expose students to the professional competence of elementary school teachers (Bakhmat et al., 2022).

Let us agree with Ayoub et al (2020) that distance learning is just as productive as traditional learning, so even with remote access to learning materials and online lectures, the essence of the educational process remains constant. These findings can also be confirmed in a state of war when distance learning also comes to the fore.

The importance of digital technology methodology was also confirmed by Chan et al. (2021). Although their study focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning process, the results, which speak to the characteristics of training in non-standard settings, can be applied to analyze other situations (Chan et al., 2021). It is important, however, to highlight the positives and negatives of acquiring professional competence in a warfare environment (with the possible use of distance learning). SWOT analysis of acquiring professional competence under martial law is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1.** SWOT Analysis of Acquiring Professional Competence under Martial Law

SWOT analysis of acquiring professional competence under martial law	
<p><b>Strengths:</b></p> <p>experience of distance learning gained as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine measures;</p> <p>use of modern digital technologies (Rakhimov&amp;Mukhamediev, 2022);</p> <p>formation of updated programs and use of the latest teaching practices.</p>	<p><b>Weaknesses:</b></p> <p>difficult psychological state;</p> <p>loss of material base and destruction, emigration of students abroad, and dispersion of academic groups;</p> <p>the conservatism of the teaching environment, where new and modern methods remain unpopular due to unwillingness to change and self-development.</p>
<p><b>Opportunities:</b></p> <p>improving the acquisition of professional competence through new forms of work, independent development of students (Devadze, et al., 2022);</p> <p>further use of the latest teaching methods, free pedagogical experimentation to improve the level of education development.</p>	<p><b>Threats:</b></p> <p>continuation of military operations, as a result of which the funding and material base of the education sector will degrade, and attracting specialists to teaching will become more difficult;</p> <p>brain drain and related crisis of motivation of young teachers.</p>

*Compiled by the authors of the article*

Therefore, the acquisition of professional competence by future primary school teachers has both its strengths and weaknesses. Much depends on external factors related to the activities of the Russian aggressor and the general situation in the country. Probably, this formula is universal for countries suffering from military actions.

#### 5. Conclusions

So, under the term “professional and pedagogical competence” we define a multi-level sustainable structure of mental traits of the teacher, which is formed as a result of the integration of knowledge, skills, and experience. At the same time, the formation of professional competence of elementary school teachers is an indispensable stage of professional training, even considering the realities of martial law. The results of the study demonstrated that important elements of pedagogical competence are mastery of the content of disciplines, knowledge of modern theories and methods of teaching and education, understanding the genuine consideration of factors that contribute to the success of the pedagogical activity. Also, an important role is played by the communicative component, which in war conditions allows additional work with applicants for higher education and prepare them for the teaching profession. Even distance work must be characterized by empathy, which is due to the difficult psychological

situation of all trainees. In addition, empathy will come in handy for future teachers when working in elementary classrooms. An important element is the use of play techniques. This allows not only to deepen the assimilation of professional competence but also has a certain psychological effect, which, along with the qualitative assimilation of educational material leads to an increase in learning performance in general. The formation of primarily distance learning courses, the use of digital technologies, and methods of work associated with a combination of theoretical disciplines, teaching practice, and independent work of higher education applicants (for example, the method of projects) is proposed for training. This system will have problems when used but will be an important element for the formation of the professional competence of elementary school teachers.

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