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Teaching Peace in Times of War. Exploring Ukrainian Children's Literature through Shared Reading

Abstract

The study addresses the challenge of developing dialogic pedagogical practices for educational and youth work settings during an ongoing war. It presents a qualitative pilot phase of the DaR:UA project, which explores shared reading of contemporary Ukrainian children's and youth literature as a mediated form of dialogue. The pilot involved 47 adult professionals working with war-affected young people and was conducted as an ethical preparatory step prior to research with minors. Data were generated through guided shared reading sessions and online focus group discussions and were analysed thematically. The findings indicate recurring patterns of mediated personal engagement, symbolic interpretation, hope-oriented reflection, and regulated emotional expression, demonstrating the methodological and pedagogical feasibility of shared reading in wartime contexts.

Keywords: shared reading, dialogic pedagogy, wartime education, Ukrainian children's and youth literature

Introduction

Ukraine is experiencing severe disruption of social life and human capital due to the ongoing war. Young people are growing up under conditions of uncertainty, loss, and constant psychological pressure. Education in such circumstances requires approaches that go beyond knowledge transmission and support dialogue, empathy, and peaceful forms of interaction.

Adults who work with children and young people often avoid discussing the war because they fear re-

-traumatisation. This avoidance creates silence and limits young people's ability to make sense of their experiences. Societies also tend to rely on declarative forms of memory, such as slogans, ceremonies, and symbolic gestures, which acknowledge war without addressing personal emotional realities. This tendency became visible during a lecture with Polish university students, who questioned why societies often rely on commemorative practices that remain symbolic and avoid engagement with lived emotional experiences of war. Their question highlights a broader educational challenge: how to create pedagogical tools that allow young people to reflect on war-related experiences beyond declarative forms of memory. Against this background, the present study explores shared reading as one possible pedagogical response to this educational dilemma.

Recent research shows that young people need opportunities to express their experiences in structured and supportive environments (Walker et al., 2025; Davies et al., 2024; Jones & Lucas, 2023). Access to such spaces supports emotional processing, meaning-making, and the gradual restoration of psychological stability. These findings highlight the importance of educational and social practices that enable expression without pressure or exposure.

Peace education emphasises the need for practices that create conditions for reflection, dialogue, and mutual understanding, particularly in contexts of

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conflict and crisis (Sheikh, 2023; Brooks & Hajir, 2020). Shared reading represents one such practice. Shared reading involves reading literary texts aloud in small groups and engaging in open, guided dialogue. Previous studies show that shared reading supports emotional awareness, social connectedness, and the development of dialogue skills (Schapira & Grazzani, 2025; Honglin et al., 2025). Importantly, this approach offers a structured yet gentle framework that allows participants to approach painful or sensitive topics without requiring direct autobiographical disclosure.

State of the Art

Empirical pedagogical research shows that dialogic and shared reading practices support learners' perspective-taking, moral reasoning, and social understanding in educational settings (Deliman, 2025; Gasser et al., 2022; Eekhof & Mar, 2023; Kozak & Recchia, 2019). These studies demonstrate that engagement with narrative fiction, particularly in dialogic formats, encourages learners to consider multiple viewpoints and reflect on social relations beyond their immediate experience.

Research in educational psychology and didactics further indicates that guided literary discussions foster democratic classroom practices. Such discussions teach turn-taking, attentive listening, and respect for diverse interpretations, thereby supporting dialogic interaction and inclusive participation (Robertson et al., 2025). These findings highlight the pedagogical value of structured dialogue around texts as a means of developing communicative and social competencies.

Current research in peace pedagogy emphasises that education in contexts of war or crisis requires indirect and mediated approaches (Cromwell, 2022). Rather than relying on direct confrontation with traumatic experience, pedagogical models stress the importance of symbolic, narrative, and aesthetic forms of mediation. Trauma-informed teaching approaches argue that educators should avoid forcing autobiographical narration and instead create conditions in which learners can engage with difficult themes through mediated forms (Anderson et al., 2023). Within peace education, narrative and emotional mediation functions as a symbolic and mediated

pedagogical setting that allows learners to engage with fear, loss, and violence at a reflective distance (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013).

Educational research conducted in war-affected settings suggests that dialogic forms of teaching provide a stabilising pedagogical framework that supports learner agency, interaction, and continuity of learning during periods of crisis (Ben-David Kolkant & Wegerif, 2025; Salha et al., 2024). Studies focusing on Ukrainian educational contexts further underline the importance of maintaining pedagogical orientation toward peaceful meaning-making even when learning takes place under conditions shaped by violence and uncertainty (Frazier et al., 2025).

Despite these advances, pedagogical research rarely addresses contemporary children's and young adult war literature as a systematic educational resource during an active war. Existing studies have primarily focused on post-conflict settings or retrospective memory education, while empirical research examining literature-based and dialogic practices during ongoing war remains limited (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2017; Paulson & Rappleye, 2007). Anderson et al. (2023) identify this gap as a lack of empirical attention to learners' lived experiences and perspectives in crisis contexts.

The DaR:UA project addresses this gap by exploring shared reading of contemporary Ukrainian children's and young adult literature as a dialogic practice implemented in wartime conditions. The study contributes empirical insights relevant to pedagogical, social, and psychological approaches in youth work, particularly in contexts of crisis and instability.

Research Methodology

Project Background

The project *DaR:UA. Dialogues and Reading. Shared Reading for Ukrainian Youth* is implemented by Aarhus University (Denmark) and funded by MS-CA4Ukraine. The project examines how contemporary Ukrainian children's and young adult literature can support peace-oriented dialogue in educational and youth work settings during wartime.

DaR:UA builds on earlier research conducted within the AUFF-NOVA project *PUBLISH: Children's Books*

in the Russia-Ukraine War. Within this project, a corpus of more than one hundred Ukrainian children's and young adult books related to the war and published between 2014 and 2024 was assembled. The project mapped this emerging literary field and included interviews with Ukrainian publishers. These interviews explored how war-themed children's literature is produced under wartime conditions, including ethical considerations, creative constraints, and publishers' responses to the needs of young readers living through the conflict. The findings of this project led to a central research question: how do children and young people perceive and interpret books about an ongoing war?

The DaR:UA project addresses this question by organising shared reading sessions with war-affected young people. Through these sessions, the project explores how participants engage with contemporary war-related narratives and how shared reading can support dialogue, reflection, and emotional regulation in wartime contexts.

Main Study Design

The DaR:UA project examines shared reading as a dialogic pedagogical practice in wartime educational and youth work settings. The main experimental phase of the project focuses on young people aged 14–18 and takes place in cooperation with the Ukrainian-Danish Youth House in Mykolaiv, Kyiv, Odesa, and Chortkiv (Ternopil region). These locations differ in size, proximity to the frontline, and experiences of war and displacement. The project uses quota sampling to balance age, gender, and location. Participation is voluntary and based on online registration.

The planned study involves approximately 100 participants divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental groups receive literary texts and participate in structured shared reading sessions over six months. The control group receives the same books but does not take part in shared reading sessions. All participants complete dialogue skills assessments before and after the experimental phase. The project collects quantitative data from these assessments and qualitative data from recorded sessions, reading diaries, researcher observations, and mentor feedback.

Pilot Study: Participants and Procedures

Before implementing the main experimental phase with young people, a pilot qualitative study was conducted with adults in order to assess the feasibility and pedagogical safety of shared reading in wartime conditions. The pilot involved adult professionals – teachers, youth workers, librarians, and social workers – who work daily with war-affected children and adolescents and who themselves live under wartime conditions.

The pilot study used guided shared reading sessions based on contemporary Ukrainian children's and young adult literature about the war, published between 2014 and 2024. Participants read and listened to literary texts, discussed their interpretations and emotional responses, and reflected on the potential role of shared reading in youth work. The design combined elements of shared reading practice with online focus group discussions.

In April 2025, three online focus group sessions were conducted: with educators (in collaboration with Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University, 7 April 2025), librarians (in collaboration with LITTERA, Municipal Institution “City Public Libraries”, 8 April 2025), and social workers (in collaboration with the Charitable Foundation “Caritas Zhytomyr,” 15 April 2025). A total of 47 participants took part in the pilot study. During the sessions, shared reading encouraged dialogic practices such as attentive listening, turn-taking, respect for different interpretations, and non-judgmental responses. Facilitation focused on creating conditions of equality, emotional containment, and facilitated dialogue within the shared reading setting.

Ethical Considerations

All data collection and storage procedures in the DaR:UA project follow GDPR data protection standards. As the project involves minors in its main phase, particular attention is given to confidentiality, informed consent, and participant safety. The wartime context adds further ethical sensitivity, as participants have diverse experiences of loss, displacement, and trauma.

The pilot study with adults served as an additional ethical safeguard. It allowed the project to test shared reading as a peace-oriented pedagogical space before introducing this practice to young people. This step

supported the development of facilitation strategies that avoid pressure, respect emotional boundaries, and maintain a protective dialogic environment.

Data Analysis

The pilot phase relied exclusively on qualitative analysis. I applied a thematic analysis approach to the pilot data in order to identify recurring patterns of meaning, emotion, and interaction (Nowell et al., 2017; Kalpokas & Hecker, 2023; Kushnir, 2025). This approach allowed systematic examination of how participants engaged with literary texts and with one another during shared reading sessions. Throughout the analysis, I adopted a reflexive positioning by continuously considering how my role as a researcher and my proximity to the Ukrainian wartime context shaped the interpretation of the data.

The analysis drew on multiple data sources, including transcripts of shared reading discussions, researcher field notes, and participants' written reflections. I read all materials repeatedly to familiarise myself with the data and to identify recurring themes across the corpus. I then grouped these themes into analytic categories that describe how participants used literary narratives to reflect on wartime experiences and to engage in peace-oriented dialogic practices. I supported analytic credibility through triangulation of data sources, comparing patterns across discussion transcripts, field notes, and written reflections.

Results

The pilot study identified four interrelated patterns in adult participants' engagement with literary texts during shared reading sessions. Across discussions, participants consistently connected fictional narratives to their own wartime experiences, interpreted texts symbolically through the lens of war, articulated peace-oriented hope, and expressed complex emotions within a regulated dialogic space.

Participants frequently aligned narrative situations with their lived experiences, particularly experiences of separation, waiting, and uncertainty. Literary scenes functioned as indirect prompts that activated personal associations without requiring explicit autobiographical disclosure. As one participant noted, "This is about my current life. I am also waiting, every

day, and it feels like I am not breathing fully". These responses suggest that shared reading enabled participants to relate personal experience to fiction in a mediated and emotionally manageable way.

Participants also moved beyond literal interpretation and engaged in symbolic readings shaped by the broader wartime context. Narrative details were interpreted as references to captivity, loss, and endurance, reflecting shared social realities rather than individual stories alone. One participant explained: "This is about captivity. That line – 'Never give up, dream!' – sounds like something people say about prisoners of war or those who are missing". Such interpretations indicate that shared reading supported collective meaning-making grounded in common wartime experiences.

In addition, shared reading discussions elicited expressions of calm, hope, and future orientation. Participants articulated reflections that emphasised perseverance and emotional continuity despite ongoing uncertainty. One participant expressed this orientation succinctly: "We must dream that sooner or later everything will be fine". These responses suggest that literary dialogue created space for peace-oriented reflection without denying the reality of war.

Finally, participants described deep and layered emotional responses that remained regulated within the structured shared reading setting. The dialogic structure of the sessions appeared to provide a protected space in which strong emotions could be acknowledged without emotional escalation. As one participant reflected, "It's like I want to cry, but at the same time something good is stirring inside me. So many feelings coming at once". This pattern highlights the role of shared reading in supporting emotional expression within a safe pedagogical framework.

Discussion

The pilot findings indicate that shared reading can function as a peace-oriented pedagogical practice within wartime educational and youth work settings, without implying broader societal or political impact. These findings should be understood as indicating pedagogical affordances rather than demonstrable outcomes, and as observations situated within a specific educational setting rather than evidence of

transferable effects. Participants experienced literature as a mediated pedagogical setting for non-violent dialogue, attentive listening, and mutual recognition of emotions. These observations align with existing research on shared reading, which conceptualises group reading as a practice that supports empathy, social connectedness, and emotional regulation in educational contexts.

The pilot results also support earlier studies that emphasise the importance of psychological safety, skilled facilitation, and culturally relevant texts. Ukrainian children's and youth literature related to the ongoing war offered participants an indirect entry point into reflection, allowing them to engage with difficult realities without direct confrontation or pressure to disclose personal experiences. Rather than focusing on aggression or hostility, participants oriented their discussions toward anticipation, loss, resilience, and hope. Such orientations correspond with key aims of peace-oriented education, which prioritise understanding, dialogue, and relational awareness over polarisation.

Importantly, the adult professionals who participated in the pilot modelled dialogic practices grounded in respect, emotional restraint, and openness to multiple interpretations. This modelling highlights the pedagogical value of shared reading as a structured social practice through which peaceful forms of communication can be learned and rehearsed, even under conditions of extreme social stress. In this sense, shared reading may serve as potentially transferable practice under specific conditions that supports peace-oriented interaction in youth work and educational settings affected by war.

At the same time, the pilot findings require careful interpretation. Shared reading does not resolve war-related trauma, nor does it address the structural causes of violence or conflict. Its pedagogical value transpires in supporting micro-level processes of dialogue, emotional articulation, and relational stability within educational and youth work settings. Framing shared reading as a peace-oriented practice should therefore not be understood as suggesting broader social or political transformation.

Moreover, the effectiveness of shared reading appears to depend strongly on contextual conditions. The pilot involved voluntary participation, skilled facilitation, and culturally relevant texts, as well as

adult participants with professional experience in education and youth work. In the absence of these conditions, shared reading may fail to sustain a productive dialogic setting or may risk superficial engagement with complex wartime realities. Literature can also function as a protective filter that softens or symbolically displaces violence, which may limit opportunities for critical engagement with power, responsibility, and injustice.

Finally, the pilot study was exploratory and involved adult professionals rather than children or adolescents. While this design was ethically necessary, it limits the generalisability of the findings. Further research is needed to examine how shared reading functions with younger participants, how it interacts with diverse war experiences, and how it can be integrated responsibly into long-term pedagogical and psychosocial support practices.

Conclusions

The pilot study indicates that shared reading of Ukrainian children's and youth literature related to war can support peace-oriented learning practices within wartime educational and youth work contexts. In the pilot setting, shared reading enabled participants to practise attentive listening, moderated emotional expression, symbolic interpretation, and respectful dialogue in relation to difficult social realities.

The findings suggest that shared reading may function as a context-sensitive and culturally grounded pedagogical tool for fostering dialogic interaction under conditions of war, rather than as a means of addressing conflict or violence directly. The pilot phase provides an empirical and methodological basis for the subsequent main study with young people, in which shared reading will be examined more systematically as a dialogic pedagogical practice within wartime youth work and educational settings.

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