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**חינוך מיוחד במהלך המלחמה בישראל בשנת 2023: תפיסות  
נשות חינוך לגבי השפעות המלחמה וצרכי תמיכה**

**Special Education During the 2023 War in Israel: Educators'  
Perceptions of Impact and Support Needs**

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## תקציר

מלחמות משבשות מערכות חינוך ומשפיעות על מורים ותלמידים בחינוך המיוחד. פינוי מגורים, טראומה ואתגרים מערכתיים פוגעים הן בתלמידים והן מורים. מחקר זה משתמש בגישה משולבת (mixed-methods) לבחינת חוויותיהן של 41 מורות וגננות לחינוך מיוחד במהלך המלחמה בשנת 2023. הנתונים נאספו באמצעות שאלון אנונימי שכלל שאלות דמוגרפיות, שאלות סגורות על השפעות המלחמה על ההוראה, רווחת המורים והתלמידים, ושאלון תשישות-חמלה (Compassion Fatigue Questionnaire). בנוסף, נאספו נתונים איכותניים באמצעות שאלות פתוחות שנוטחו בשיטת ניתוח תמטי. הממצאים מצביעים על פגיעה בהוראה, עלייה בחרדה ובהתנהגויות מאתגרות בקרב תלמידים והחמרה בתשישות-חמלה בקרב מורים. כמו כן, תמיכה מערכתית מוגבלת החריפה את הקשיים והובילה למתח רגשי ולשחיקה מקצועית. המחקר מדגיש את הצורך בהכשרה להתמודדות עם טראומה למורים בחינוך המיוחד, בחיזוק התמיכה המערכתית ובהשקעה בתשתיות חינוכיות לחיזוק החוסן בסביבות חינוך המושפעות מעימותים. הממצאים מספקים תובנות לתמיכה במורים במצבי חירום ברחבי העולם. מילות מפתח: התמודדות עם טראומה בהוראה בחינוך מיוחד; חוסן נפשי של מורים באזורי סכסוך; חינוך מיוחד באזורי סכסוך; תשישות חמלה; שחיקה; לחץ טראומטי משני.

## Abstract

Wars disrupt education systems, impacting both special education teachers and students. Displacement, trauma, and systemic challenges affect both students and educators. This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the experiences of 41 special education teachers and kindergarten educators during the 2023 war. Data were collected through an online questionnaire, which included demographic questions, closed-ended items measuring the impact of war on teaching, teacher and student well-being, and the Compassion Fatigue Questionnaire. Additionally, qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate disruptions in teaching, increased student anxiety and challenging behaviours, and increased compassion fatigue among teachers. Limited systemic support exacerbated these difficulties, contributing to emotional strain and professional burnout. The study highlights the need for trauma-informed training for special education teachers, enhanced systemic support, and investment in educational infrastructure to strengthen resilience in conflict-affected settings. Findings provide insights into supporting teachers in emergency contexts worldwide.

Keywords: burnout; compassion fatigue; secondary traumatic stress; special education in conflict zones; teacher well-being in conflict zones; trauma-informed teaching in special education.



## 1. Theoretical Background

Teaching is widely recognised as one of the most emotionally demanding professions, frequently associated with high levels of stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion (Agyapong et al., 2023). Among educators, special education teachers are particularly vulnerable to elevated stress levels and burnout due to the demanding nature of their work. They are often required to manage complex behavioural and emotional needs, navigate role ambiguity, and operate with insufficient institutional support, all of which contribute to chronic emotional fatigue and decreased job satisfaction (Pavlidou et al., 2022).

Wars significantly impact education systems, particularly in conflict zones where educational institutions face severe disruptions. Schools may become military targets or be repurposed as emergency shelters for displaced families, undermining the delivery of quality education (O'Malley, 2010). Additionally, conflicts place immense pressure on infrastructure and resources, leading to inadequate educational services and limited access for many students (Ali, 2021; Dar & Deb, 2021; Sharifian & Kennedy, 2019). Governmental budgets are frequently redirected to address urgent wartime needs, further straining education systems (Poirier, 2012).

Both children and educators in conflict zones are vulnerable to significant psychological and emotional challenges. Exposure to traumatic events such as displacement, violence, and the destruction of communities can lead to heightened stress and trauma (Zavatskyi et al., 2020). These conditions affect students' ability to learn and place substantial emotional and professional demands on educators.

The unique challenges educators face in conflict zones may include insufficient professional support, high student-to-teacher ratios, and limited access to training opportunities (Wambaleka, 2013). For example, a prolonged conflict in Afghanistan disrupted the education system, with violent incidents leading to school closures and reduced attendance, particularly among vulnerable populations like girls (Burde & Linden, 2013). Similarly, in Iraq, an ongoing conflict resulted in widespread fear, emotional challenges for children, and declining academic performance (Al-Bazzaz, 2005). These examples highlight the compounded difficulties educators face, often leading to burnout and reduced professional efficacy (Seyle et al., 2013).

In October 2023, war broke out in Israel, leading to the declaration of a "special state of emergency on the home front." Over 250,000 civilians were evacuated from high-risk areas, especially in the south (near Gaza) and the north (near the Lebanese border). Schools in these regions either shut down or were repurposed as emergency shelters. The initial response was marked by chaos and inconsistency, as local authorities struggled to maintain educational services amid the displacement (Knesset Research and Information Centre, 2023a). To address these disruptions, the Ministry of Education implemented differentiated emergency learning models based on regional security levels. In safer areas, schools gradually reopened for in-



person learning, while in high-risk zones, hybrid or remote learning models were adopted. However, stark disparities emerged: by late October 2023, only 29% of schools in the southern districts had reopened, compared to over 90% in central Israel (Knesset Research and Information Centre, 2023a). Children with disabilities faced additional barriers. Many were evacuated from their homes and lost access to routine educational and therapeutic services. For these students, the Ministry of Education issued three emergency learning alternatives: (1) in-person learning at their regular school if possible; (2) placement in temporary educational centres established near evacuation sites; or (3) home-based instruction and support provided upon request (Knesset Research and Information Centre, 2023b). Yet the implementation of these models was uneven across regions. While 89.9% of special education kindergartens and 92.9% of special education schools were open by mid-November, only 71.7% of special education classrooms in mainstream schools were active, and many operated in rotation due to limited shelters or staff. In some host communities, students with disabilities were not fully integrated into receiving institutions, and shortages in transportation and personnel further limited access. These conditions placed significant strain on educators, who were expected to support evacuated students with complex needs, while coping with their own personal and emotional challenges.

Compassion fatigue, a phenomenon affecting caregivers and educators in high-stress environments, became a critical issue during this period. Characterised by burnout and secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue arises from prolonged exposure to the emotional burdens of supporting trauma-affected individuals (Figley, 2013; Stamm, 2009). In the context of special education, during times of armed conflict and in conflict-affected zones, these effects are often amplified by systemic challenges such as resource shortages, high student-to-teacher ratios, and inadequate access to professional training (Bozgeyikli, 2012; Ormiston et al., 2022).

Conversely, compassion satisfaction, the fulfillment derived from helping others, may serve as a protective factor, buffering against the adverse effects of compassion fatigue and sustaining educators' professional efficacy (Stamm, 2009; Zerach, 2013). However, the interplay between compassion fatigue and systemic barriers presents a complex dynamic, as educators often struggle to maintain their emotional resilience, while navigating heightened demands. Research emphasises the need for organisational support and trauma-informed interventions to address these dual challenges effectively (Stamm, 2009; Figley, 2013).

The current study examines the experiences of special education teachers during the 2023 war in Israel, focusing on the impact of displacement on their students, the teachers' well-being, and the systemic support provided. Furthermore, it explores practical implications for teacher training programmes and systemic support mechanisms aimed at enhancing educators' preparedness and resilience in similar contexts globally. By addressing this critical gap in the literature, the study aims to inform the development of teacher preparation programmes and policies that enhance resilience and professional capacity during emergencies.



This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

(1) What challenges did special education teachers face during the 2023 war, (2) What recommendations did they propose for teaching and supporting students with disabilities in times of armed conflict?; and (3) What are special education teachers' perspectives on how systemic support mechanisms and teacher training programmes could better prepare educators to cope with similar crises in the future?

## 2. Method

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

### 2.1 Participants

This study was approved by Israel's Ministry of Education and the Ethics Committee of David Yellin Academic College of Education. The study included 41 participants (1 man and 40 women), all of whom are special education teachers or kindergarten educators. The participants' mean age was 39.56 years ( $SD = 9.06$ ), and their mean work experience was 11.66 years ( $SD = 8.31$ ). Table 1 provides detailed background characteristics. Recruitment was conducted through social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp groups) and collaboration with schools and kindergartens.

For the purpose of analysis, participants were also categorised into two subgroups, based on their experiences during the war: (1) educators who were themselves evacuated and continued to teach displaced students; and (2) educators who were not evacuated but who worked with evacuated students in their classrooms.

Importantly, all the educators who were themselves evacuated also taught displaced students, thereby experiencing dual challenges of personal disruption and professional responsibility.

**Table 1.**

*Background characteristics of the participants*

Variable	n (%)
Training	
Special Education School Teacher	
Special Education Kindergarten Educator	30 (73.2%)
	11 (26.8%)
Type of Educational Framework	
Inclusive class within a general education framework	
Dedicated special education framework	18 (43.9%)
General education framework	19 (46.3%)
	4 (9.8%)
Type of Disabilities in the Classroom*	
Autism	
Learning Disability	25 (61.0%)
Sensory Disability	14 (34.1%)
Emotional Difficulties	8 (19.5%)
Intellectual Disability	9 (22.0%)
Physical Disability	11 (26.8%)
	11 (26.8%)
Geographical Area of Residence	
North Region	
South Region	21 (51.2%)
Central Region	9 (22.0%)
	11 (26.8%)
Relocation of the Educator Due to the War**	
Yes	
No	16 (39.0%)
	25 (61.0%)
Relocation of the Pupils Due to the War	
Yes	41 (100.0%)
No	0 (0.0%)

*Note:* \* In the classroom, there may be more than one type of disability.



## 2.2 Measures

The online questionnaire included four sections:

1. Demographic Information: Age, gender, teaching experience, and geographical location.
2. Impact of the War: The questionnaire used in this study was self-developed by the authors, based on an extensive review of the literature on teacher well-being and educational disruptions during crisis situations, as well as practical insights from the field of special education. While the questionnaire was not adapted from a pre-existing validated tool, content validity was supported through expert review: two senior academics in the fields of education and psychology examined the alignment between items and thematic domains.

The items were organised into four sub-themes: teaching and learning, pupil behaviour, resources and support, and personal well-being. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very often"). The internal consistency reliability of the items was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability for the sub-theme related to the impact on teaching and learning yielded  $\alpha = 0.72$ , indicating acceptable reliability with a moderate-to-high level of internal consistency. For the sub-theme examining the impact on pupil behaviour, the Cronbach's alpha was  $\alpha = 0.91$ , reflecting excellent reliability. The sub-theme on the impact of the war on resources and support produced  $\alpha = 0.82$ , indicating good reliability. Lastly, the sub-theme addressing the impact on personal well-being showed  $\alpha = 0.77$ , suggesting acceptable reliability. The full list of items, organised by sub-themes, is presented in Table 2.

3. Compassion Fatigue Questionnaire (Stamm, 2009): The questionnaire consists of 30 items divided into three subscales: Compassion Satisfaction, Burnout, and Secondary Traumatic Stress. The psychometric properties of the instrument are well established. Reported internal consistency coefficients are  $\alpha = .88$  for Compassion Satisfaction,  $\alpha = .75$  for Burnout, and  $\alpha = .81$  for Secondary Traumatic Stress (Stamm, 2009). While the tool is not diagnostic, higher scores may indicate a need for further professional reflection or support.

(a) Compassion Satisfaction: Calculated by summing the scores of items 3, 6, 12, 16, 20, 22, 24, 27, and 30. Example item: "I get satisfaction from being able to help people". A score of 43 or higher indicated high satisfaction.

(b) Burnout: Scores for items 1, 15, and 29 were reversed and then summed with the scores of items 4, 8, 10, 11, 13, 19, 21, and 26. Example item: "I feel trapped by my job as a helper". A score of 56 or higher indicated a potential for burnout.

(c) Secondary Traumatic Stress: Calculated by summing the scores of items 2, 5, 7, 9, 14, 17, 23, 25, and 28. Example item: "I think that I might have been affected by the traumatic stress of those I help". A score of 56 or higher indicated a potential for secondary traumatic stress.

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each subscale. While the questionnaire is not diagnostic, high scores indicated a possible need for additional professional support.



### Open-Ended Questions:

Seven open-ended questions were developed to explore teachers' lived experiences during the war. These questions addressed changes observed in students (e.g., "How did you experience the impact of the war on your students?"), classroom-based coping strategies (e.g., "What coping strategies did you use in the classroom?"), and perceived long-term effects (e.g., "What do you think are the long-term consequences of the war for students with special needs?"). Additional questions explored teachers' personal challenges and significant moments, as well as their suggestions for improving the education system during crises. The questions were informed by the literature on teacher well-being in crisis settings and were designed to elicit rich, reflective responses beyond the scope of closed-ended items.

## 2.3 Procedure

Participants were provided with a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and data anonymity. Data collection occurred over six months between December 2023 to July 2024, with participants completing the questionnaire online in approximately 15 minutes.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

**Quantitative Analysis:** Closed-ended data were analysed using IBM SPSS v.23. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) summarised participant responses. To explore subgroup differences, participants were categorised based on their demographic responses, specifically focusing on the comparison between non-evacuated educators and evacuated educators. **Qualitative Analysis:** Open-ended responses underwent reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). This approach involves an active and iterative process of familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme development, refinement, definition, and reporting. An inductive, data-driven strategy was applied, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being pre-determined.

The unit of analysis was the full response to each open-ended question, enabling a holistic understanding of participants' narratives. Coding was conducted manually by the first author in multiple rounds, allowing for deeper engagement with the data and consistency in theme development. A reflexive journal was maintained to document analytic decisions and reflections throughout the process. This interpretive process aligns with Braun and Clarke's emphasis on reflexivity and transparency as key markers of rigour in single-researcher qualitative analysis.

Emerging themes were iteratively refined to ensure alignment with the research aims and the data complexity. Representative quotes were selected based on their ability to clearly illustrate key themes, capture the emotional and professional depth of participants' experiences, and reflect both shared and divergent perspectives across the dataset.



## 3. Results

### 3.1 Quantitative Results

Descriptive statistics for the closed-ended questions revealed that the war impacted teaching and learning, pupil behaviour, resources and support, and the personal well-being of teachers (Table 2). For teaching and learning, participants reported that the war disrupted pupils' ability to actively participate in lessons ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and had a strong impact on teachers' ability to provide students with the support and teaching they needed ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). Teachers also noted that the war hindered their ability to create meaningful connections with students ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ).

For pupil behaviour, teachers reported that the war was associated with increased oppositional or disruptive behaviours ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ), and that it exacerbated emotional difficulties such as depression and anxiety ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ).

Regarding resources and support, mean responses indicated a perceived lack of sufficient resources and collaboration. Teachers reported low ratings for receiving professional guidance and support ( $M = 2.37$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), collaboration between the school, parents, and community ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ), support from parents ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), and specific suggestions to address emotional challenges caused by the war ( $M = 2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ).

Lastly, regarding personal well-being, teachers reported strong perceived negative impacts on their mental health ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ), family and personal life ( $M = 4.46$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), and ability to cope with workload demands ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ). They also noted challenges in maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal life ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) and staying optimistic about the future ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ).

The compassion fatigue questionnaire evaluated three subscales: compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress. For the total sample ( $N = 41$ ), descriptive statistics revealed the following mean scores: compassion satisfaction ( $M = 36.93$ ,  $SD = 3.72$ ), burnout ( $M = 29.71$ ,  $SD = 4.35$ ), and secondary traumatic stress ( $M = 25.49$ ,  $SD = 3.39$ ). These scores highlighted a moderate level of compassion satisfaction alongside moderate levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress within the overall participant group.

A subgroup analysis was conducted for non-evacuated educators with pupils who were evacuated during the war ( $N = 25$ ). The results indicated a moderate level of compassion satisfaction ( $M = 37.60$ ,  $SD = 3.50$ ), alongside moderate levels of burnout ( $M = 28.48$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ ) and secondary traumatic stress ( $M = 25.24$ ,  $SD = 3.02$ ). This subgroup demonstrated similar patterns of compassion fatigue to the overall sample, with slight variations in mean scores. A subgroup analysis was also conducted for evacuated educators who reported having pupils who were evacuated during the war ( $N = 16$ ). The results indicated a moderate level of compassion satisfaction ( $M = 38.81$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ), alongside slightly elevated levels of burnout ( $M = 40.88$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ) and secondary traumatic stress ( $M = 41.19$ ,  $SD = 2.48$ ). These subgroup results are also summarised in Table 3.

Due to the small and unequal sample sizes in the two subgroups (N = 16 vs. N = 25), no inferential statistical tests were conducted. Instead, descriptive trends were reported to provide preliminary insight into potential differences between evacuated and non-evacuated educators. This limitation is addressed further in the discussion. This decision aligns with recommendations from small-sample research literature, which emphasise the interpretive value of effect estimates and descriptive patterns when inferential power is limited (Cumming, 2014; Maxwell, Delaney & Kelley, 2017).

**Table 2.**

*Descriptive statistics for the impact of the war on teaching and learning, pupil behaviour, resources and support, and teachers' personal well-being*

Question	M (SD)
<b>Impact on Teaching and Learning</b>	
Did the war significantly affect your ability to provide students with the support and teaching they needed?	4 . 3 4 (1.15)
Did the war disrupt your students' ability to actively participate in lessons?	4 . 4 1 (1.02)
Did you feel the war hindered your ability to create meaningful connections with students?	3 . 2 7 (1.38)
<b>Impact on Pupil Behaviour</b>	
Did you notice an increase in oppositional or disruptive behaviours among your students during the war?	4 . 1 (1.2)
Did the war exacerbate your students' emotional difficulties (e.g., depression, anxiety)?	4 . 3 2 (1.01)
<b>Impact on Resources and Support</b>	
Did you feel you received adequate guidance and professional support from your school to address the war's impact on students?	2 . 3 7 (1.07)
Did you feel there was sufficient collaboration between the school, parents, and community in supporting students during the war?	2 . 7 6 (1.16)
Did you feel there was sufficient support from parents to address the war's impact on students?	2 . 1 7 (1.07)
Did you receive specific suggestions to cope with emotional challenges caused by the war?	2.49 (1)
<b>Impact on Personal Well-being</b>	
Did the war significantly affect your mental well-being?	4 . 6 6 (0.57)
Did the war affect your ability to cope with workload demands?	4 . 1 7 (1.09)
Did the war affect your family life and personal life?	4 . 4 6 (0.84)

Did the war affect your ability to maintain clear boundaries between work and personal life?	4 (1.26)
Did the war affect your ability to remain optimistic about the future?	3 . 5 6 (1.3)

Note: Responses measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "very often".

**Table 3.**

*Descriptive Statistics for Compassion Fatigue Subscales by Educator Subgroup*

	Compassion Satisfaction M (SD)	Burnout M (SD)	Secondary Traumatic Stress M (SD)
Total Sample N=41	36.93 (3.72)	29.71 (4.35)	25.49 (3.39)
Non-evacuated Educators N=25	37.60 (3.5)	28.48 (2.73)	25.24 (3.02)
Evacuated Educators N=16	38.81 (1.94)	40.88 (2.7)	41.19 (2.48)

### 3.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of the open-ended questions revealed several recurring themes across participants' responses. The analysis was conducted using an inductive coding approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data themselves. The findings are structured around three primary themes:

(1) the impact of the war on students; (2) the personal well-being of educators; and (3) recommendations for improving the education system during wartime.

While this section presents representative quotes for each sub-theme, the categories discussed below reflect patterns that were observed consistently across a substantial portion of the sample. The qualitative findings aim not only to deepen understanding of the quantitative trends, but also to capture the lived experiences of educators in their own words. A visual overview of the themes and sub-themes identified in the qualitative analysis is presented in Figure 1.



### 3.2.1 Impact of the War on Pupils

Thematic analysis revealed that educators perceived the war to have a multifaceted impact on their pupils, especially on those with disabilities. Participants described changes across several domains, including motivation, behaviour, emotional expression, and sensory processing. These observations reflect educators' interpretations of students' functioning during this period of instability.

(a) **Decreased Motivation and Engagement in Learning:** Educators described a notable reduction in pupils' motivation and in their ability to engage with classroom activities. For example, "Low motivation, difficulty with discipline and task execution, increased anxiety, and lack of focus" (Roni, Special Education teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Central Region). This quote illustrates how the emotional toll of the war manifested in disengagement and reduced task persistence, which undermined both behavioural and cognitive participation in learning.

(b) **Emotional and Behavioural Deterioration:**

Teachers identified the development of new behavioural issues and emotional expressions of distress that were previously unobserved. For example, "Children returned to the kindergarten with behavioural problems they never had before. They expressed very difficult issues related to worries and anxieties" (Dana, Special Education Kindergarten teacher, Evacuated educator, Northern Region).

This quote reflects the emergence of anxiety-related behaviours as a reaction to the instability caused by the war, particularly among young children whose behavioural baseline had been previously stable.

"More frequent absences and tardiness. Greater and more frequent expressions of anxiety" (Hila, Special Education teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Southern Region).

This response highlights not only the psychological impact of anxiety, but also its behavioural consequences in terms of school attendance and routine disruption.

(c) **Sensory Sensitivity Triggered by Trauma:**

A recurrent theme involved heightened sensitivity to sound, closely associated with exposure to alarms and explosions. For example, "Increased sensitivity to sounds, related to anxiety from alarms" (Noa, Special Education Kindergarten teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Southern Region).

This quote was selected as it captures the link between trauma and sensory processing difficulties, especially among those with pre-existing sensory vulnerabilities.

(d) **Exacerbated Impact on Pupils with Disabilities:**

Educators working with pupils on the autism spectrum described particular impacts, including regression and symptoms consistent with trauma. For example, "Regression.



Trauma and post-trauma, especially in my class, where students need stability, routine, and familiarity. Most of them are autistic” (Yael, Special Education teacher, Evacuated educator, Southern Region).

This quote exemplifies the compounding effect of war on students with developmental disabilities who rely on routine and predictability, and for whom sudden changes are particularly destabilising.

### 3.2.2 Impact on the Personal Well-being of Educators

Educators described the war as deeply affecting their emotional and psychological well-being. Thematic analysis revealed four sub-themes: feelings of helplessness and abandonment, emotional strain within the family context, disruption of professional roles, and the psychological burden of loss and ongoing fear for loved ones.

#### (a) Feelings of Helplessness and Abandonment:

Several teachers expressed profound feelings of being left unsupported by the system. For example, “Helplessness, lack of protection. Realising that if I don’t help myself, no one will. It has never been like this in the north before. The evacuation caused damage. We were abandoned” (Lea, Special Education teacher, Evacuated educator, Northern Region).

This quote highlights a recurring emotional narrative of abandonment and personal vulnerability, particularly among those who experienced evacuation from conflict zones. The perception of systemic failure to provide protection contributed to educators’ distress.

#### (b) Emotional Strain within the Family Context:

The stress experienced by teachers extended beyond the workplace and deeply affected their family lives. For example, “Every alarm caused me stress. My son and grandchildren suffered a direct hit on their house, which broke me. They stayed with me for three months while I worked in a communication kindergarten, under pressure. The system showed no flexibility or understanding.” (Esther, Special Education Kindergarten teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Central Region).

This quote was selected for its illustration of how professional responsibilities were compounded by acute personal trauma. The educator’s narrative reflects the dual emotional burden of caregiving at home and in the classroom, with little institutional accommodation.

#### (c) Disruption of Professional Roles due to Evacuation:

Some educators described the challenges of balancing teaching responsibilities with relocation and instability. For example, “At first, I was evacuated to a distant hotel and could not work in the kindergarten until I found a place to live near the kindergarten and returned to work. I felt out of control and frustrated because the team, especially the substitute teacher, did not adequately address the children’s needs or support the parents” (Maya, Special Education Kindergarten teacher, Evacuated educator, Southern Region).



This response underscores the difficulty of maintaining a sense of professional continuity during displacement. The experience of being physically removed from the teaching context generated feelings of powerlessness and concern for the quality of care provided to students

(d) The Psychological Burden of Loss and Ongoing Fear:

Several educators shared the toll that bereavement and combat-related uncertainty took on their mental state. For example, “The hardest part is dealing with funerals and loss. Also, the anxiety because of family members serving in the military” (Rivka, Special Education Teacher, Evacuated educator, Northern Region).

This quote captures the deep emotional fatigue associated with personal grief and fear for loved ones. It reflects a broader theme of educators’ emotional vulnerability in the face of national trauma, with consequences for their ability to remain emotionally present for their students.

### 3.2.3 Recommendations for Improving the Education System During Wartime

Educators offered a variety of recommendations to enhance the education system’s capacity to respond effectively in times of national emergency. The thematic analysis revealed five key sub-themes: emotional and therapeutic support for pupils, infrastructure and physical safety, support for families with complex needs, systemic flexibility and staff autonomy, and technological solutions for continuity of learning.

(a) Emotional and Therapeutic Support for Pupils:

A central recommendation was the expansion of emotional and behavioural support services within schools. For example, “More hours with therapists... support and more resources for emotional and behavioural aspects” (Tamar, Special Education teacher, Evacuated educator, Northern Region).

This quote reflects a widely shared belief that emotional well-being must be a central component of educational response during crises. Teachers identified therapy as essential, not only for students’ recovery, but also for maintaining classroom stability.

“Bringing in therapists, enriching the classroom with games that can provide therapeutic expression through play, and adding hours for sports, dance, and movement lessons in the curriculum” (Shani, Special Education teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Central Region).

This quote was selected as it exemplifies a proactive and integrative approach to psychosocial support, connecting therapeutic intervention with curriculum enrichment.

(b) Infrastructure and Physical Safety:

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of ensuring safe and protected physical environments for learning. For example, “First and foremost, building protected spaces for everyone, accessible to all, and sufficiently large to accommodate everyone” (Nurit, Special Education Kindergarten teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Southern Region).



This quote demonstrates the perception that physical safety is a prerequisite for emotional and educational stability, particularly in schools located in high-risk areas.

(c) Support for Families with Complex Needs:

Some educators highlighted the necessity of supporting not only pupils but also their caregivers, particularly when parents themselves are vulnerable. For example, “Emotional support for children and parents, especially in families where the parents also have special needs” (Miriam, Special Education Kindergarten teacher, Non-evacuated educator, Central Region).

This recommendation expands the scope of intervention beyond the classroom, recognising the interdependence of student and family well-being.

(d) Systemic Flexibility and Staff Autonomy:

Another recurrent theme involved calls for greater professional autonomy and reduced bureaucratic constraints. For example, “Autonomy for the school educational staff, expanding professional support from the local educational support centre, and reducing bureaucratic procedures” (Rina, Special Education Teacher, Evacuated educator, Northern Region).

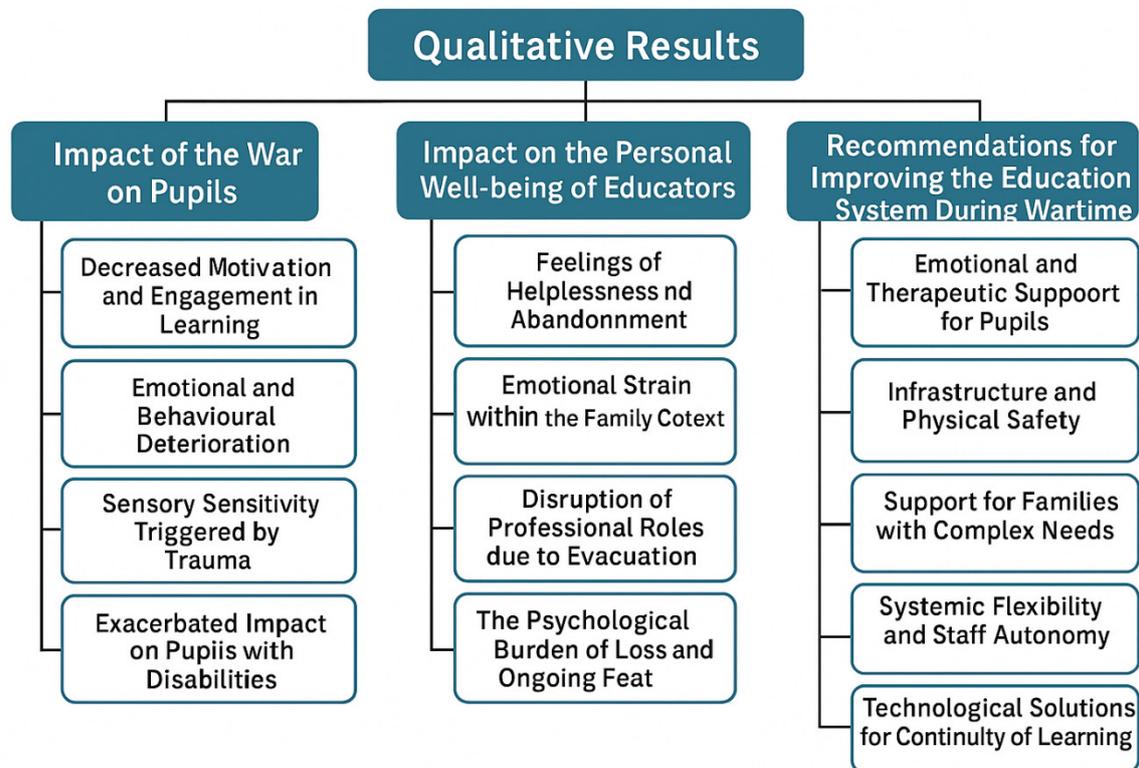
This quote reflects frustration with rigid administrative systems and the desire for more localised and responsive decision-making capabilities among educators during emergencies.

(e) Technological Solutions for Continuity of Learning:

Teachers also proposed concrete technological adaptations to improve access to remote learning in emergency settings. For example, “Ensuring that in remote learning, every student receives an iPad so they can participate in lessons without needing to take their parents’ phones. Additionally, tasks should be preloaded on the tablet with individual usernames and passwords for each student” (Yifat, Special Education teacher, Evacuated educator, Southern Region).

This quote was selected because it illustrates the practical and logistical barriers to inclusive digital learning, and the need for systemic planning to ensure continuity in future crises.

**Figure 1. Thematic Structure of Qualitative Findings: Educators' Perspectives on the Impact of War and Systemic Support Needs**



#### 4. Discussion

The present study sheds light on the multifaceted impact of war as perceived by special education teachers, focusing both on their own experiences and their observations of their students' behaviours and needs. The findings emphasise the challenges and coping strategies reported by educators within this context.

The findings reveal disruptions in student engagement and emotional well-being, as perceived by the participating teachers, with particular concern expressed for pupils with special needs who are known to rely heavily on routine and stability. These teacher-reported experiences are consistent with prior research demonstrating the heightened vulnerability of children with special needs in conflict zones (Kostenko et al., 2022). While the study does not include direct data from pupils, it contributes to a growing understanding of how trauma and displacement may exacerbate behavioural and emotional challenges, highlighting the need for targeted psychological and pedagogical interventions, particularly in special education settings.

From a teacher's perspective, the study highlights the critical issue of compassion fatigue. Quantitative results indicate moderate levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress, alongside



moderate levels of compassion satisfaction. This finding underscores the dual nature of the teaching profession in high-stress environments, balancing emotional resilience with the emotional toll of supporting trauma-exposed students. These results are consistent with existing literature on educators in crisis zones, which emphasises the importance of systemic support and professional development in mitigating these effects (Sharifian & Kennedy, 2019; Stamm, 2009).

#### **4.1 Study Limitations This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.**

First, the sample size was small ( $N = 41$ ) and predominantly female, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other populations or contexts. Future studies should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample to capture broader perspectives and experiences. Second, the study relied on self-reported data collected through an online questionnaire. While this method ensures anonymity and ease of participation, it may introduce response bias, as participants might overstate or understate their experiences. Combining self-reported data with objective measures, such as observational studies or administrative records, could strengthen the validity of future research.

Third, the study focused on educators working in the Israeli special education system during a specific conflict. As such, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of educators in other regions or during different types of emergencies. Cross-national comparative studies are recommended to explore variations in educational and emotional outcomes across diverse cultural and systemic contexts.

In addition, the Compassion Fatigue Questionnaire, while a valuable tool, is not diagnostic and provides only an indication of potential burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion satisfaction. Future research should consider complementing this tool with clinical assessments to gain a more comprehensive understanding of educators' mental health.

Furthermore, the study reflects only the perspectives of educators; it does not include direct input from pupils or their families, which limits the scope of understanding regarding student experiences and family coping. Future research should seek to triangulate perspectives by incorporating the voices of students with disabilities and their caregivers.

Additionally, while participants were drawn from different regions, the sample may not fully capture the geographical variability in experiences during the conflict. Teachers in northern and southern Israel, for example, faced distinct challenges, and further research should explore regional differences more systematically.

Finally, although subgroup comparisons were of interest, statistical tests were not conducted due to the small and unequal sample sizes in each group. As a result, only descriptive trends were reported. Future research should explore these subgroup differences using larger, balanced samples.



## 4.2 Implications for Teacher Preparation and Policy

The findings have direct implications for teacher education programme programmes and systemic policies aimed at supporting educators during emergencies. Specifically: (1) Teacher preparation programmes must incorporate modules on trauma-informed practices to equip educators with the skills needed to address the behavioural and emotional needs of students during crises; (2) Educational systems should prioritise creating supportive organisational climates, including regular professional development opportunities, mental health support, and peer collaboration frameworks; and (3) Investments in infrastructure, such as protected classrooms and technological tools, are critical to ensuring the continuity of education during emergencies. Policymakers must address the specific needs of special education settings, where resource constraints are often more pronounced.

Beyond emotional and behavioural support, several participants also stressed the importance of technological readiness and continuity of learning in times of crisis. In the qualitative findings, educators highlighted challenges related to remote learning, including lack of access to appropriate devices and the need for personalised, child-friendly platforms. These concerns align with broader lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the systemic vulnerabilities of remote education for students with disabilities (Jangbarwala & Reichert, 2024). Prior research also supports the integration of inclusive disaster preparedness strategies that account for the unique needs of pupils with disabilities (Sheehy et al., 2022). Taken together, the findings suggest that systemic emergency planning must include not only physical safety and emotional support, but also digital infrastructure and teacher preparation for online instruction. In light of the emotional strain described by many participants, it is also recommended that teacher training programmes integrate structured content on stress-reduction techniques and emotion regulation strategies. These should serve a dual purpose: equipping educators with tools for maintaining their own emotional well-being, and enabling them to model and support healthy coping mechanisms for their pupils. Practical strategies could include mindfulness exercises, reflective journalling, self-regulation frameworks, and classroom-based social-emotional learning practices. Developing these capacities is critical for fostering resilience and ensuring that teachers can continue to function effectively under prolonged stress.

Research has shown that equipping teachers with social-emotional competencies can enhance both their well-being and their ability to support students in crisis situations (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). Incorporating structured SEL and stress-management components into teacher education has been shown to reduce teacher burnout and enhance emotional support in the classroom, particularly in challenging school environments (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The findings also suggest that fostering compassion satisfaction through recognition, autonomy, and professional growth opportunities may serve as a protective factor against burnout and secondary traumatic stress. These insights are particularly relevant for teacher preparation programmes, which play a pivotal role in shaping educators' resilience and long-term effectiveness.



While this study focused on special education teachers in one specific context, the implications are applicable to educators in conflict-affected areas worldwide. Cross-national studies and comparative analyses are necessary to refine these recommendations and adapt them to diverse educational and cultural settings.

### 4.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should focus on addressing several key areas to expand the understanding of education in conflict zones, particularly within special education. Longitudinal studies are necessary to track the long-term impacts of war exposure on both educators and pupils, providing insights into the persistence of trauma and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions over time. Additionally, studies examining the efficacy of specific interventions are essential to develop evidence-based practices that address the unique challenges faced in emergency settings. Comparative research could shed light on the differences between the experiences of special education teachers in conflict zones and those in non-conflict settings, revealing unique stressors and protective factors associated with teaching during emergencies. Cross-cultural studies are also important to explore how varying cultural and systemic factors influence the impact of war on educators and pupils, contributing to the development of globally adaptable strategies for education in emergencies. Finally, while this study focused primarily on educators, future research should also examine the direct impact of war on special education pupils, including their academic, social, and emotional outcomes, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in this field.

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