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Poetry therapy for strengthening the resilience of educational leaders in crisis: a pilot training case study from Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore poetry therapy and narrative-based training as a resource for supporting the resilience of educational leaders in prolonged crisis. A virtual pilot training session based on the RES poetry therapy model was delivered to Ukrainian educational administrators and faculty members during the ongoing war (March, 2026). Content analysis of participants' anonymously written responses suggests that poetic and narrative practices may serve as accessible tools for emotional articulation, meaning-making, reflective distancing, restoration of agency, and professional identity support. Participants reported emotional relief, enhanced self-understanding, and renewed awareness of inner resources. The findings indicate that poetry therapy may represent a valuable humanities-oriented component of professional development and psychosocial support for educational leaders in war-affected and high-stress contexts.

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Introduction

Severe and protracted crises, such as wartime or pandemics, have significantly intensified stress, burnout, uncertainty, responsibility, and emotional strain across the educational sector (Christopoulou et al., 2026). Research conducted in Ukraine during the full-scale war has documented a severe and progressive deterioration of psycho-emotional well-being among educational professionals. A longitudinal study of Ukrainian academic staff found that high emotional exhaustion levels rose from approximately 59% to over 71% across three measurement waves between July 2022 and January 2024, with depersonalization nearly doubling in the same period (Tsybuliak et al., 2023). Among primary school teachers working near active combat zones, around 33% reported high stress levels and 36% showed symptoms of burnout, including disengagement and emotional exhaustion (Velykodna et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings point to an urgent need for accessible, institutionally feasible forms of psychosocial support for educational professionals working under conditions of continuous threat and instability.

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Findings from the project *At-Risk Mental Health Support for Ukrainian Teachers & Students ("Education Without Stress")* revealed deterioration in psycho-emotional well-being among participants in the educational process, perceptual gaps between different groups, low use of psychological support services, and a growing need for institutional approaches to resilience and psychological safety (Bratko & Romanova, 2025). On the other hand, recent research has shown that teachers and administrative staff of Ukrainian educational institutions (high schools, colleges and universities) were among the most vulnerable groups of all participants in the educational process, with their psycho-emotional state deteriorating after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 in 86.5% of teachers and 70.3% of administrators (Romanova et al., 2026).

Review of literature

In global contemporary contexts of growing uncertainty, crisis, and emotional overload, educational leaders are expected to demonstrate not only managerial competence, but also psychological endurance, inner coherence, and the capacity to support others. Recent research on crisis educational leadership suggests that the role of the leader extends beyond institutional management to include communication, relational support, community coordination, and care for one's own well-being (Doyle Fosco, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020; Urick et al., 2021; Williams & Liou, 2024). In this regard, the resilience and well-being of educational leaders should be viewed not as secondary attributes, but as essential conditions for the sustainable functioning of educational environments.

At the same time, the dominant literature on educational leadership continues to privilege organizational, managerial, and competency-based dimensions, while leaders' emotional experience, internal stress, reflective practices, and mechanisms of self-support remain less integrated into mainstream frameworks. Recent scholarship indicates that educational leaders face multilayered stressors whose effects extend beyond the professional sphere, making well-being, self-regulation, and self-care increasingly important dimensions of leadership development (Doyle Fosco et al., 2025; Dubynska et al., 2026; Ertem, 2024).

On the other hand, interdisciplinary scholarship across psychology, the humanities, and helping professions has shown growing interest in writing, narrative, and poetry as means of emotional processing, self-understanding, and meaning-making. Expressive writing has been associated with improvements in emotional well-being and positive affect, while poetry-based and narrative approaches are increasingly recognized as accessible reflective tools that support resilience and psychological integration (Hoult et al., 2025; Korkmaz, 2021; Loy & Kowalsky, 2024; Romanova, 2026). Yet despite these developments, the potential of poetic and narrative practices in the specific context of educational leadership remains underexplored.

Conceptual base: resilience, narrative, and poetic practices

Resilience is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic, multidimensional process involving adaptation, meaning-making, and the preservation of inner coherence under

conditions of adversity (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2012). In educational leadership, resilience extends beyond coping capacity and includes emotional regulation, agency, relational responsibility, and professional identity (Day & Gu, 2014; Gu & Day, 2007; Urick et al., 2021).

Research in expressive writing demonstrates that verbalizing emotionally significant experience supports emotional processing (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Wright & Chung, 2001). Narrative psychology further emphasizes meaning-making through personal storytelling (McAdams, 2001; Stanley et al., 2026). Poetry therapy, as a concentrated symbolic form, enables articulation of complex emotional states (Bolton et al., 2004; Mazza, 2003, 2017, 2022). Together, these approaches suggest that poetic and narrative practices can function as mechanisms supporting resilience.

The gaps and need for research

Previous studies are associated with the fact that, during a crisis, educators bear a dual responsibility as leaders – not only to preserve and protect their own lives, but also the lives of their colleagues and students. Accordingly, these findings point to the need for creating forms of support for educators that are humane, accessible, and feasible within the everyday realities of educational leadership. Against this backdrop, poetic and narrative practices may be understood not merely as forms of creative self-expression but as reflective and meaning-oriented modes of strengthening resilience among educational administrators amidst ongoing weaponized conflict, working with their experience, emotion, identity, and agency.

A growing body of research, particularly in crisis-affected context, highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms to integrate mental health interventions, including strengthening resilience through art and other expressive forms, into educational environments (Gorbunova et al., 2025; Kyianovskiy & Pozdniakova, 2026). Furthermore, existing research on resilience within educational contexts has predominantly focused on students, while considerably less attention has been given to administrators of educational institutions.

The current study addresses this gap by examining a poetry therapy and narrative-based training grounded in the RES model and exploring its potential as a resource for fostering resilience among Ukrainian educational leaders.

Method

Participants were recruited using a cluster sampling approach aimed at capturing a socio-demographic profile representative of Ukrainian educational professionals combining pedagogical and administrative roles. Recruitment was conducted through an open call published on professional social media platforms, including Facebook pages of educational communities and the project “Education Without Stress”. Participation in the training was voluntary and free of charge; however, applicants were required to meet pre-defined inclusion criteria corresponding to the target cluster, namely active engagement in educational practice and/or leadership roles within the Ukrainian education system. This approach enabled the formation of a contextually relevant sample reflecting the

realities of educational professionals operating under conditions of war and prolonged uncertainty.

The sample consisted of 17 Ukrainian educational professionals, including administrators and faculty members representing multiple levels of the education system. In terms of gender distribution, 76% of participants were women and 24% were men. Regarding geographic status, 76% were residing in Ukraine at the time of the study, while 24% were living abroad in conditions of forced displacement. Participants represented diverse institutional contexts: 29% from higher education, 29% from professional pre-higher education, 24% from general secondary education, and 18% from other sectors (including vocational education, private practice, and educational governance). In terms of professional roles, 47% of participants combined teaching and administrative responsibilities, 41% identified as teaching staff, and 12% held exclusively administrative positions.

All data, including written texts, questionnaire responses, and reflections, were collected anonymously. Participants were explicitly informed of the study's anonymous nature prior to participation, which aimed to reduce social desirability bias and support open and authentic self-expression. Data were collected using online survey instruments (Google Forms) configured without the collection of identifying information. All data, questionnaires and texts were generated and collected in the Ukrainian language, native for the participants.

The empirical dataset consisted of various poetic and artistic artifacts (17 poems "Resilience", 17 acrostics "Leader", 17 reflective essays, 17 symbolic/ritual components) and post-training feedback responses generated during the interaction. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved iterative reading of the data, initial coding, and the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to participants' experiences and conceptualizations of resilience.

Creation and delivery of the RES-based interaction module

The training was designed based on the RES (Receptive–Expressive–Symbolic) model (Mazza, 2003, 2017, 2022). The session was conducted online on 26 March 2026, with 17 Ukrainian educational professionals.

The session began with an introduction to poetry therapy, principles, and features. Across all exercises, emphasis was placed on expressive freedom rather than adherence to literary conventions. Participants were explicitly informed that poetic and narrative expression did not require conformity to traditional structures such as rhyme or meter, and that meaningful writing could emerge from everyday language. This approach aimed to reduce performance anxiety and increase accessibility, reinforcing the idea that expressive writing is not limited to professional writers or individuals with formal literary training.

Collectively, the expressive stage functioned as a transitional process, moving participants from perception and symbolic activation toward articulation, reflection, and the construction of personally meaningful narratives. It supported key resilience-related processes, including emotional articulation, meaning-making, reflective distancing, and the identification of internal and external resources.

- reflective writing prompts, group discussion, symbolic/ritual practices, and general training feedback.

Receptive stage

Participants engaged with selected contemporary Ukrainian poetic and narrative texts intentionally chosen to challenge persistent post-Soviet assumptions that poetry must strictly adhere to formal literary conventions (e.g. rhyme, meter, prescribed themes) and be produced only by sanctioned or professional authors. The texts demonstrated that poetic and expressive writing can be accessible to anyone, emphasizing authenticity of emotion and personal meaning over formal constraints.

The poetic and narrative texts also reflect themes of narrative writing along with resilience, war in Ukraine, identity, and human experience. These included:

- Viktoria Amelina, *"Not a Poem"* (2022), a text reflecting the disruption of language and narrative under conditions of war;
- an excerpt from Lina Kostenko's poem *"Life Goes On Without Corrections ..."* (1977), emphasizing acceptance, truth, and emotional courage;
- reflections and poetic texts by Ukrainian veteran and poet Artur Dron, including the poem *"Kiriukha"* (2025), representing lived wartime experience and memory.

Participants were invited not to analyze the texts in a literary sense, but to respond to them subjectively through guided questions such as: – *What does this text evoke for you?* – *Which lines resonate with your personal or professional experience?* – *What emotions or images emerge?*

This approach shifted the focus from interpretation of the text to personal meaning-making, facilitating emotional engagement, symbolic activation, and initial reflection.

Expressive stage

The expressive stage focused on facilitating participants' active engagement in meaning-making through structured creative writing exercises. Building on the receptive phase, participants were invited to translate sensory impressions, emotional responses, and symbolic associations into written form.

The expressive component consisted of three interrelated exercises designed to support different dimensions of reflection and articulation.

In Exercise 1 (up to 15 min), participants completed a sensory-based poetic exercise centered on the concept of their own "Resilience." They were invited to describe resilience through multiple modalities, including visual imagery, bodily sensations, sound, color, taste, and smell. This task encouraged metaphorical thinking and the externalization of internal experience, allowing participants to move beyond abstract definitions toward embodied and personally meaningful representations.

In Exercise 2 (up to 15 min), participants created an acrostic poem based on the word "LEADER" (or its equivalent in their native language). Each line began with a corresponding letter and reflected associations related to their leadership identity. This structured format provided both constraint and creative freedom, supporting reflection on

professional roles, values, and self-perception while reducing the cognitive load often associated with open-ended writing tasks.

In Exercise 3 (up to 15 min), participants engaged in guided reflective writing through a series of sentence-completion prompts. These prompts were designed to elicit spontaneous responses related to emotional experience, leadership under pressure, personal resources, and sources of support. Participants were encouraged to write without self-censorship, prioritizing authenticity and immediacy over grammatical correctness or stylistic form.

The prompts included reflective questions: (A) *What do I remain silent about when I am expected to stay strong?*, – participants were invited to revisit their earlier reflections on “resilience” and explore unspoken emotional experiences, tensions, or internal conflicts. (B) *My leadership today looks like ...* - participants were asked to reflect on their previously created acrostic (“LEADER”) and consider why specific words, images, or metaphors emerged in relation to their leadership identity. (C) *I will cope because I am ...* – participants recalled a challenging situation they had successfully navigated and identified personal qualities or internal resources that supported them. (D) *What supports me in times of uncertainty is ...* – participants reflected on external and internal sources of support, including relationships, values, beliefs, and coping strategies.

These prompts were designed to facilitate the transition from metaphorical and symbolic expression toward deeper reflective awareness, supporting processes of emotional articulation, meaning-making, and the identification of personal resilience resources.

Symbolic (ritual) stage

The symbolic stage focused on the integration and externalization of participants’ written material through embodied and tangible forms.

In Exercise 4. Participants were invited to transform their texts into personally meaningful artifacts, without predefined constraints, selecting formats that most authentically reflected their emotional and reflective experience. Suggested modalities included, but were not limited to:

- audio recordings of the text, optionally accompanied by music;
- printed or handwritten versions displayed in visible, everyday spaces (e.g. framed or placed in frequently accessed locations);
- visual or artistic representations;
- video interpretations based on the created text.

This process extended the reflective experience beyond writing into sensory and material engagement, reinforcing the internalization of meaning through ongoing interaction with the created artifact.

Final stage – group reflection

The session concluded with a facilitated group reflection, during which participants shared insights and responses. This collective phase contributed to a deeper awareness of individual patterns of resilience, previously unrecognized internal resources, and the evolving understanding of their leadership identity.

Findings

Analysis of participants’ written texts revealed four major thematic trends reflecting how educational leaders conceptualize and experience resilience under conditions of prolonged uncertainty and crisis. These themes represent not isolated categories but interconnected patterns that collectively illustrate resilience as a multidimensional process. Table 1 presents an overview of the identified thematic trends.

Theme 1. Resilience as sensory-symbolic representation

All participants described resilience through rich sensory and metaphorical imagery. Rather than defining resilience abstractly, they expressed it through visual, tactile, emotional, and symbolic associations.

Resilience was represented as:

- natural and organic forms (“a tree,” “a seed growing through apocalypse,” “the ocean,” “a flower breaking through asphalt”);
- protective or stable structures (“a wall,” “a fortress,” “a rock in the storm”);
- human or embodied figures (“a tired soldier,” “a woman in the mirror,” “a mother figure”).

Participants also engaged multiple sensory modalities:

“Resilience smells like childhood ... tastes like chocolate ... sounds like my mother’s lullaby.”

Such representations suggest that resilience is experienced as an embodied and sensory phenomenon rather than a purely cognitive construct. The use of metaphor appears to enable participants to access complex internal states and express them in a structured yet flexible form.

Theme 2. Hidden vulnerability beneath expected strength

A significant proportion of participants (n = 14) articulated a discrepancy between external expectations of strength and internal emotional experience.

In response to the prompt “What do I remain silent about when strength is expected of me?”, participants expressed:

- emotional exhaustion and overload;
- fear of not coping;
- loneliness and lack of support;
- the pressure to remain “strong” for others.

Table 1. Major thematic trends in participants’ representations of resilience (N = 17).

No.	Thematic trend	%	Description
1	Sensory-symbolic representations of resilience	100%	Metaphors, imagery, sensory experience
2	Hidden vulnerability beneath expected strength	82%	Emotional tension and pressure
3	Agency, values, and relational sources	88%	Responsibility, identity, relationships
4	Symbolic embodiment and integration	100%	Tangible transformation of texts

For example:

"I am silent about my fatigue ... about the fear that I may not cope."

"I am silent about wanting someone to support me too."

"Sometimes I want to stop being strong."

These responses reveal that resilience is not experienced as constant strength, but rather as the capacity to continue despite the vulnerability of Ukrainian educational leaders. The findings highlight the emotional cost of leadership roles in crisis contexts and the need for spaces where such experiences can be articulated.

Theme 3. Agency, values, and relational sources of personal resilience

Most Ukrainian educators (83%) described resilience as rooted not only in internal strength but also in values, relationships, and responsibility toward others.

Participants identified key sources of their personal resilience as:

- family members (children, partners);
- professional roles and responsibility toward students;
- personal values and principles;
- faith, meaning, and future orientation;
- responsibilities toward pets.

Examples include:

"Because of it, I move forward."

"I do not retreat from my principles."

"My resilience is my child ... my family ... my responsibility."

In addition, participants frequently linked resilience to action and continuity:

"Thanks to it, I act."

"Because of it, I continue."

These responses suggest that resilience is experienced by Ukrainian educators as relational and value-driven, closely connected to identity and purpose rather than solely individual coping capacity (Table 2).

Theme 4. Symbolic embodiment and integration of experience

All participants engaged in the symbolic dimension of the training, transforming their written texts into tangible or sensory forms. This included audio recordings, handwritten or printed texts, text's visualization, and, in some cases, AI-generated video representations.

This process extended the reflective experience beyond writing into embodied and material forms:

Table 2. Resilience dimensions and their representation (N = 17).

Resilience dimension	Evidence in findings	Example
Emotional articulation	Expression of emotions	"I am silent about my exhaustion ... "
Meaning-making	Reflection on identity	"Because of it, I move forward"
Reflective distancing	Use of metaphor	"... a seed growing through apocalypse"
Restoration of agency	Statements of action	"I do not retreat from my principles"
Professional identity	Leadership responsibility	"... because of my students ... "
Integration of experience	Symbolic transformation	recording, framing, hand-writing, video-clips ...

"I recorded my poem with music and listened to it again and again ... This helped me believe in myself."

"I printed it and placed it where I can see it every day."

Participants reported that this stage allowed them to revisit their reflections, maintain ongoing connection with their internal resources, and/or perceive their resilience as something concrete and accessible.

The final group reflection further reinforced this process, as participants recognized their own uniqueness, previously hidden resources, and personal patterns of resilience.

This suggests that symbolic externalization may function as a mechanism of integration, allowing participants to consolidate emotional and cognitive insights into lived experience.

Participant general feedback

71% Ukrainian educators had no prior experience with poetry therapy, indicating that the interaction was accessible even to those unfamiliar with such practices. Participant feedback revealed consistently positive outcomes, underscoring the effectiveness of the training in promoting self-awareness, emotional relief, and practical skill development, and supporting its future application as a meaningful approach to strengthening resilience among educational professionals in war-affected contexts; detailed results are presented in Figure 1.

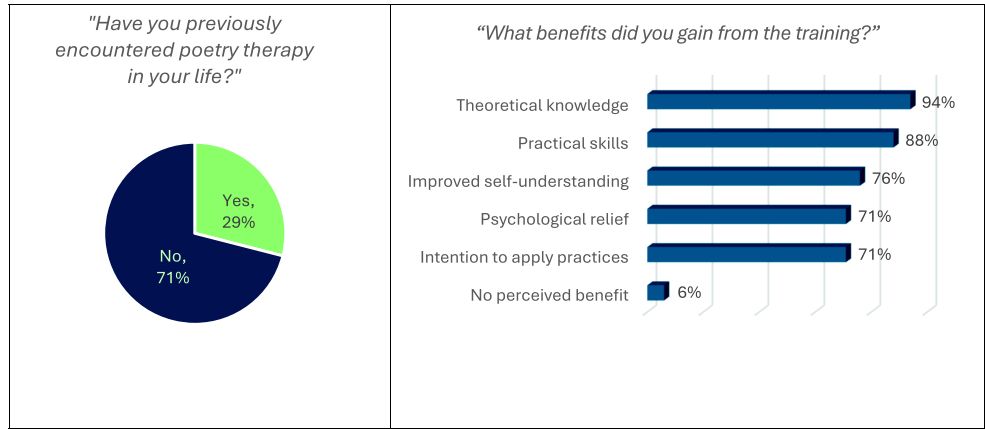


Figure 1. Reported outcomes of the training.

Qualitative feedback emphasized emotional relief, clarity, and relevance:

“important practice,” “helpful in coping with uncertainty,” “a way to better understand myself.”

Together, these findings indicate that the training was experienced as both emotionally supportive and practically applicable, reinforcing its potential as a resilience-building intervention.

Discussion

The findings of this pilot study suggest that a single structured session drawing on the RES model – combining receptive engagement with texts, expressive writing, and symbolic embodiment – may function as a resource for fostering resilience among educational leaders operating in conditions of prolonged uncertainty and crisis. The findings provide evidence that resilience, in this context, is not experienced as a static trait or purely individual capacity, but rather as a dynamic, relational, and meaning-centered process.

First, the findings highlight the central role of language and symbolic expression in emotional articulation and processing. Participants consistently relied on metaphor, imagery, and sensory associations to describe resilience, suggesting that poetic language provides access to layers of experience that may remain inaccessible through conventional discourse. This aligns with research in expressive writing, which demonstrates that verbalizing emotionally significant experiences supports emotional regulation and cognitive integration (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011), as well as with poetry therapy frameworks emphasizing metaphor as a medium for articulating complex internal states (Bolton, 1999; Mazza, 2003, 2017, 2022).

Second, the findings reveal a significant discrepancy between external expectations of strength and internal emotional experience. Participants described fatigue, vulnerability, and the pressure to maintain composure in their leadership roles, often accompanied by the absence of spaces where such experiences could be expressed. This tension reflects broader research on leadership in crisis contexts, which emphasizes the emotional burden associated with responsibility for others and the need for internal regulation (Day & Gu, 2014; Doyle Fosco et al., 2025). In this sense, resilience emerges not as the absence of vulnerability, but as the capacity to continue functioning while acknowledging it.

Third, the data suggest that resilience is deeply embedded in relational, ethical, and identity-based dimensions. Participants frequently linked their capacity to endure to relationships (e.g. family, students), values, and a sense of responsibility. This finding supports conceptualizations of resilience as socially situated and value-driven (Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2012), and resonates with narrative approaches to identity, which emphasize the role of meaning-making and self-story in organizing experience (McAdams, 2001). For educational leaders, resilience appears closely tied to professional identity and moral commitment rather than solely to individual coping strategies.

A particularly important contribution of this study lies in the role of the symbolic (ritual) component. While prior research in poetry therapy highlights the importance of sharing and reflection as mechanisms of validation and connection (Bolton et al., 2004; Mazza, 2003, 2017, 2022), the present findings suggest that the transformation of written texts

into tangible, sensory, or performative forms may further support the integration of experience. By materializing their texts (e.g. recording, printing, visualizing), participants extended reflection into everyday life, creating ongoing points of contact with their internal resources. This process may be understood as a form of symbolic externalization that reinforces continuity and accessibility of resilience.

Working with Ukrainian veterans and military families affected by the ongoing war, Shevchuk (Liudnova) (2026) found that poetry therapy and bibliotherapy contributed to decreased anxiety, improved emotional regulation, and greater social connectedness among participants – drawing on the methodological framework established by researcher and therapist Deshpande (2010) through the Recon Mission program, an 18-month poetry therapy intervention with US veterans that demonstrated comparable outcomes in PTSD symptom reduction and restoration of a sense of belonging

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the context of Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS), where individuals in war-affected environments are exposed to ongoing and cumulative stressors rather than discrete events. Unlike PTSD, CTS is characterized by continuous threat and lack of temporal closure (Eagle & Kaminer, 2013; Goral et al., 2021). Evidence from war-affected zones, including Ukraine, shows that such conditions shape emotional regulation and coping processes (Zasiekina et al., 2025). In this context, practices that support ongoing processing, meaning-making, and integration are particularly valuable for sustaining resilience

Limitations

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a relatively small sample ($N = 17$), which is consistent with methodological recommendations for experiential and group-based interventions that emphasize manageable group size to ensure psychological safety, participant engagement, and depth of interaction (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Another limitation concerns the single-session format of the intervention, which limits the generalizability of the findings and precludes assessment of longer-term effects. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the analysis prioritizes depth of insight over breadth, and future research may benefit from integrating qualitative along with quantitative approaches, as well as exploring longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of observed outcomes.

Conclusion and future directions

Despite the mentioned limitations, the study offers several contributions. Theoretically, it advances understanding of resilience as a multidimensional, meaning-centered process in educational leadership. Methodologically, it demonstrates the applicability of the RES model within a training-based format combining receptive, expressive, and symbolic elements. Practically, it highlights the potential of poetry therapy and narrative practices as accessible tools for supporting educators in crisis-affected environments, specifically in post-Soviet countries where poetry was highly censored and a privileged field.

The progression observed across the interaction – from receptive engagement with texts, to expressive writing, to symbolic embodiment – can be interpreted as a structured pathway of resilience activation. This extends the RES model beyond its traditional

therapeutic and educational applications, demonstrating its relevance for leadership development in other sectors and psychosocial support in crisis contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that integrating poetic, narrative, and symbolic practices into leadership development may provide not only reflective space, but also mechanisms for sustaining psychological resilience in contexts where traditional support structures are limited.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Declaration of generative artificial intelligence use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used AI tools solely for technical assistance, including grammar and spelling checks in translations provided by authors (ChatGPT). These tools were not used to generate scientific content, interpret results, formulate conclusions, or make scientific decisions. Full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and originality of the manuscript rests entirely with the author.

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