National-Patriotic Upbringing in Ukrainian Education: Principles and Practice

What Does National-Patriotic Upbringing Mean Today?

A few years ago, I sat in on a civics lesson at a small school in western Ukraine. The teacher, a woman in her fifties, had brought in old family photographs: her grandfather in a traditional embroidered shirt, her uncle standing beside a wooden church that no longer stands. She asked the students to bring their own photos the next week. That simple act of sharing stories, of connecting a child's family history to the larger national story, is a small example of what **національно-патріотичне виховання** looks like in practice.

This concept, often translated as "national-patriotic upbringing," is not about slogans or mandatory ceremonies. It is a deliberate, ongoing effort to help young people develop a sense of belonging to their country, an understanding of its history and culture, and a willingness to contribute to its future. In Ukraine, this approach has deep roots but has gained new urgency in recent years. The challenge for educators is to make it meaningful, not mechanical. національно-патріотичне виховання

Moving Beyond Memorisation

One common mistake in patriotic education is treating it as a list of facts to memorise: dates of battles, names of heroes, verses of the national anthem. While those are important, they rarely stick unless they connect to a student's own life. I have seen classrooms where students recite patriotic poems by heart but cannot explain why those poems matter today. That is not education. That is recitation.

Effective **національно-патріотичне виховання** starts with relevance. A teacher in Kyiv once told me about a project where students interviewed elderly neighbours about their experiences during the Holodomor. The students did not just learn about a historical tragedy. They heard it in voices they trusted, from people they saw at the local market. That personal connection turned a distant event into something real. The students later wrote essays and created a small exhibit for the school hall. That is the kind of work that builds genuine understanding.

Integrating into Everyday Subjects

National-patriotic upbringing does not need its own separate class. It can, and should, weave into existing subjects. In literature class, students can read Ukrainian authors and discuss how the characters reflect national identity. In geography, they can explore the diversity of Ukraine's

regions and the people who live there. Even in mathematics, a teacher might use data about population trends or economic indicators to spark conversation about national challenges.

One school I visited in Lviv runs a yearly project where students in grades 8 through 11 research the history of their own street. They find out who lived there a hundred years ago, what businesses operated, how the street changed after wars and independence. The result is a set of posters and a public presentation. The students learn research skills, yes. But they also develop a sense of place and pride that no textbook can provide.

This approach has practical limits, of course. Not every teacher has the time or training to design such projects. And not every subject lends itself easily to patriotic themes. A physics lesson on thermodynamics, for example, does not need a forced connection to national identity. The key is to offer opportunities without making every lesson a lecture on patriotism. Students can sense when a message is forced, and they tend to tune out.

Balancing Pride and Honesty

A healthy national-patriotic upbringing does not gloss over difficult history. Ukraine's past includes periods of occupation, internal conflict, and tragedy. Teaching only the glorious parts creates a brittle patriotism that shatters when students later discover uncomfortable truths. Better to acknowledge complexity early, so students learn to hold pride and critique together.

For example, when discussing the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917-1921, a teacher might note both the struggle for independence and the internal divisions that weakened the effort. That honest approach helps students understand that building a nation is hard, messy work. It also prepares them to engage with contemporary issues without falling into cynicism or blind loyalty.

I once observed a discussion in a high school history class about the Soviet period. The teacher did not shy away from the fact that some Ukrainians collaborated with the Soviet regime, while others resisted. Students asked sharp questions. The teacher let the conversation breathe, only stepping in to correct factual errors. By the end, the students had not reached a single conclusion. But they had practiced thinking critically about their own national story. That is far more valuable than a uniform answer.

Practical Tools for Schools

Schools that want to strengthen their approach to **національно-патріотичне виховання** can start with small, concrete steps:

- Create a school museum corner with student-curated exhibits on local history or notable alumni.

- Organise optional after-school clubs focused on Ukrainian folk crafts, music, or language games.
- Invite community members such as veterans, artists, or local historians to speak in class, not just on holidays.
- Incorporate Ukrainian-language media, like news articles or short films, into language and social studies lessons.
- Encourage student-led projects that connect classroom learning to a real community need, like a clean-up campaign or a cultural festival.

These ideas work best when they are voluntary and student-driven. Mandatory participation in patriotic activities often breeds resentment. The goal is to create an environment where students want to engage, not one where they have to.

Challenges and Trade-Offs

No approach is perfect. Some parents worry that too much emphasis on patriotism can crowd out other important subjects, like critical thinking or global awareness. Others fear that patriotic education can become a tool for political propaganda, especially in times of conflict. These are legitimate concerns. The answer is not to abandon the idea but to implement it with transparency and professional judgment.

Teachers need clear guidelines and ongoing training. They need to know that their job is not to indoctrinate but to educate. And they need the freedom to adapt national frameworks to their local context. A school in a predominantly Russian-speaking region may face different challenges than one in a western Ukrainian city. The principles of national-patriotic upbringing should be flexible enough to accommodate those differences.

Ultimately, the success of this work depends on the people doing it. A teacher who genuinely cares about her students and her country will find ways to make patriotism feel personal and real. A curriculum that trusts teachers and gives them room to experiment will produce better results than one that dictates every move. The best classrooms I have visited are the ones where the teacher treats patriotism as a conversation, not a command.