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Ontological (In)Security – Art Students' Experience of Agency in the Educational Reality During the Pandemic (pp. 203–221)

Abstract

Objectives of the study: The purpose of the study is to reconstruct the experiences of art students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research question is as follows: What image of the everyday life of remote education emerges from the reconstruction of the experiences of students who were previously assigned to extreme groups in terms of their perceived proficiency?

Research methods: Due to the different objectives' for specific questions – involving nomothetic explanation in some areas (basic descriptive statistics, comparison of selected subfields, logistic regression) and idiographic explanation in others (qualitative content analysis) – the research used a quantitative and qualitative strategy.

Brief description of the context of the issue: Art schools provide unique educational opportunities as teachers-artists have a personal influence on students through face-to-face interaction. The pandemic has presented these schools with an unprecedented challenge, on a scale that had not been seen before. In the research presented here, voice was given to the students, who were considered experts in their own cause. Their experiences, as a multidimensional construct, were located theoretically in the

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context of the threefold framework of temporal order, space and relationship, and Bruner's concept of the role of support in child development.
Research findings: The results show a link between perceived levels of ontological security and the way students functioned at school during the pandemic. Psychological well-being was affected more strongly in those with a low sense of agency, who often balanced on the verge of ontological security and experienced reality in a traumatic way, while students with a high sense of agency tended to focus on the benefits rather than losses.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Locating students on the continuum of a sense of agency brought a fresh perspective on the different ways in which young artists with and without a disturbed sense of ontological security experienced school during the pandemic. Important recommendations include continuing multidirectional support measures of a pedagogical and psychological nature undertaken by many institutions, which should be aimed at art students, their parents and teachers.

*Keywords***:** ontological security, sense of agency, art school, Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

The experience of the global COVID-19 pandemic resulting in the introduction of obligatory remote education continues to be an interesting source of research and reflection. This is particularly true of art schools, where education involves direct contact between a teacher and a young student of music, visual arts or ballet. Were it not for the emergency situation necessitated by public health concerns, no one would probably not have come up with the idea of teaching art remotely. However, more than 700 schools with more than 85,000 students started such an experiment in March 2020.

The global and unprecedented event that was and is the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic puts us all on a trajectory of suffering (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2021, p. 132) and even creates a new perspective: "it is not the pandemic that is unreal – the time before the pandemic was fiction" (Yu, 2020).

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My reconstruction of the pandemic (non-)everyday life as experienced by art school principals revealed a picture that is not entirely clear. It highlights the process of adaptation and maturation to better and better solutions and shows the difficulties and failures, the mistakes made, as well as the sense of impact and success (Weiner, 2021). In this article, I give the floor to art school students, whom I treat as experts in their own cause. I am interested in their experience at the remote education stage in the context of their perceived agency and ontological security.

Experiencing agency in everyday school life from the perspective of ontological security

Daily life, including daily life at school, is based on experience or knowledge in action, born out of direct contact and time spent together. Some researchers believe that there is no need to construct a definition of it (Sulima, 2003), while others (Sztompka & Bogunia-Borawska, 2008, p. 25) consider reality to be "the most obvious, most real form of existence present in direct experience, emphatically imposing itself on our perception."

The reality of the pandemic, especially its initial phase, can be interpreted in the context of a crisis in which previous ways of achieving goals became ineffective (Pergel & Psychogios, 2013, pp. 179–205) and caused an unprecedented increase in problems in education (Tempczyk-Nagórka et al., pp. 100–119). The nature of the crisis and its potentially destructive power in particular (Zybertowicz & Zybertowicz 2017, p. 521–538) focus our attention on the human condition in crisis. As Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991) and Zygmunt Bauman (2006) stress, every person must constantly reconstruct his/her social position because he/she is no longer surrounded by anything certain. This issue is the subject of the contemporary concept of ontological security, which, according to Giddens, is primarily concerned with uncertainty about one's own identity, and according to Brent Steele (2008, pp. 2–3) with the subject's sense of the meaning of existence in a particular space and time. The above theses correspond with the position of Dominique Moisi (2012, pp. 19–25), who

distinguishes three basic social emotions in the process of identity formation: hope, humiliation and fear. In a nutshell, ontological security can be described as an individual's sense that they retain an area of responsibility for the course of events which they perceive as significant for them. If the scope or pace of change exceeds the individual's adaptive capacity, their ontological security becomes compromised (Zybertowicz & Zybertowicz, 2017).

The discursive approach to ontological security (Pawłuszko, 2018) that considers the tenets of the constructivist approach and points to the key role of ideational factors in explaining social phenomena, fits into the theoretical foundations of this article. I consider school everyday life, following Thiersch (2000; Schugurensky, 2014) in the triple framework of temporal order, space and relationships and situate it in Bruner's concept of education supporting the development of students. Along these lines, I assume that the way students experience school determines the types of meanings they construct and that school is a space for experiencing oneself and the social world (Bruner, 2006, pp. 48–61).

Students can act with a sense of agency and autonomy when they experience everyday life as a challenge, a problem and a task that they are willing and able to solve. However, "the loss of a sense of agency, the passive submission to fate, the helpless surrender to foreign forces" can also appear as a specific form of exclusion from actively experiencing everyday life, especially in extraordinary situations that arouse strong and overwhelming emotions (Krzychała & Zamorska, 2008, pp. 17–19). The loss of a sense of agency corresponds to the loss of ontological security, which occurs only when the individual wants and is able to act, and the surrounding reality allows it, which links the category of agency to the sense of freedom (Nowicka-Kozioł, 2000; Zybertowicz & Zybertowicz, 2017). In this article, the sense of agency is closest to the intersubjective perspective that takes account of social relations in a contextual manner (Nowakowski & Komedziński, 2014, pp. 251–261).

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Research issues

The main purpose of the research project was to reconstruct the experiences of art students (of music and visual arts) during the Covid-19 pandemic by outlining a picture of their everyday life in remote schooling. Due to the different objectives for specific questions, involving nomothetic explanation in some aspects and idiographic explanation in others, the research relied on quantitative and qualitative strategies (Rubacha, 2012, p. 22).

The survey (anonymous online questionnaire) was conducted from March to June 2020 and covered students of all types of art schools at the second and third educational stages in the Lublin Voivodeship (exhaustive study, target sampling). Out of the 464 respondents who completed the survey, 59% (n = 275) attended schools combining art education with general education (schools with a general education curriculum, e.g., a general music school, a secondary school of visual arts) while the remainder (41%, n = 189) were receiving art education in evening schools (music schools which do not cover obligatory general curricula). The link to the questionnaire was sent by the principals of the art schools after the students' parents consented to the survey. The results were sent directly to the researcher (without the intermediation of educational institutions).

The first stage consisted of describing the students' self-image (sense of agency) and the image of education in an art school during the pandemic. The relationship between these images was analyzed with the use of basic descriptive statistics, by comparing selected subpopulations using the Mann-Whitney test (Wiktorowicz, Grzelak, Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska, 2020). Logistic regression (Hosmer et al., 2013) was used to find determinants of the sense of agency (Weiner, in press). The above analysis referred only to the quantitative part of the study (diagnostic-relational study based on the material including questions with a scale).

In the second stage of the research, which is the focus of this text, the agency criterion was expanded by the framework of ontological security. Using statistical analysis, students with the highest and lowest sense of agency/ontological security were identified. The narratives of

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students from the emerging extreme groups were subjected to qualitative content analysis (Szczepaniak, 2012) in order for the researcher to reconstruct their authors' experiences with remote education. I take the position that describing experience as a multidimensional construct requiring detailed insight is not possible with the use of quantitative categories only (Silverman 2012, pp. 149–150). In line with the demands of quantitative researchers and the essence of the method (Fiske 2009, p. 182; Goban-Klas 2009, pp. 131–132), I draw conclusions not only from what is recorded in the questionnaires, but also from what is left unrecorded (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2004, pp. 14–15; Rapley 2010, pp. 194–196). In this way, not only individual words determine the results, but also the overall meaning of the statements and their context (Szczepaniak, 2012).

The collected material allowed me to construct a categorization key, which was used to show the thematic distribution of the set of narratives and to arrange them according to an opposing relationship: a student with a sense of agency vs. a student whose ontological security is threatened – according to their membership in one of the strongly polarized group. When constructing the key, I took into account the frequency of the subject and the conditions of the key construction (Nowicka, 2021, pp. 105–121; Szczepaniak 2012). In accordance with the method, the key emerged at the analysis stage by grouping specific categories into more general ones, with a single respondent's statement considered the unit of analysis.

Sense of agency vs. risk of ontological insecurity – extreme groups

As ontological security exists when an individual is willing and able to act (Zybertowicz & Zybertowicz, 2017) and the pace and scope of change do not exceed the adaptive capacity of individuals (including human minds), a student with a high sense of agency and ontological security was assumed to be one who selected the "appropriate" highest option indicated on the scale in each of the three questions referring

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to independent learning, activity during remote lessons and well-being in mediated education. This condition was met for only 26 respondents (5.6% of respondents).

Table 1. Students with high sense of agency (HSA) – condition met for all 3 questions n = 26

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Important	.00	77	16.6	16.6	16.6
	1.00	208	44.8	44.8	61.4
	2.00	153	33.0	33.0	94.4
	3.00	26	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	464	100.0	100.0	

In the same way, by selecting answers that are extremely different from those described above (I never learn independently, I am hardly active /or not at all/ during remote lessons, my well-being in mediated education is always worse than during in-school learning), a group of students most at risk of losing ontological security emerged: only 27 people (5.8% of respondents) gave this answer. Thus, the polarized extreme groups are consistent with theoretical assumptions and numerically equivalent.

Table 2. Students at risk of ontological insecurity – condition met for all 3 questions n = 27

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Important	.00	124	26.7	26.7	26.7
	1.00	228	49.1	49.1	75.9
	2.00	85	18.3	18.3	94.2
	3.00	27	5.8	5.8	100.0
	Total	464	100.0	100.0	

I subjected the narratives of the two extreme groups to textual analysis and searched the material for recurring and relatively constant sets

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and configurations of elements, ideological structures describing various aspects of the students' functioning in the reality of the pandemic. In my analysis, I considered the tenets of the constructivist perspective, which points to the key role of ideational factors in explaining social phenomena (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006, pp. 131–152; Hopf 1998, pp. 171–200).

The image of school daily life of young art students

The narratives of art school students referred to various areas of pandemic reality. They were both descriptive and evaluative. The selection of extreme groups made it possible to reconstruct the experiences of young artists in an attractive perspective and create a picture of their functioning during the period of social isolation. According to the respondents' statements, I reconstructed the following areas: school during the pandemic, vision of future art education, and family life. In order to overview the source material, I decided to include tables containing thematically grouped quotes (the most representative ones) on the basis of which key categories were created.

Table 3. School during the pandemic – students with a high sense of agency (SP-HSA)

School during the pandemic	
Difficulty level of remote classes (DL)	"Generally speaking, learning online was the same as at school." "Choir lessons are the worst, the microphone distorts the voice."
Homework/art assignments (HW)	"I believe that homework is necessary, because otherwise there would be no grades." "Sometimes it is difficult, but usually I am able to understand everything." "It is necessary to gain skills." "It is the same as in the normal course of teaching." "It is okay, manageable." "It is nice and interesting, sometimes even very funny."
Negatives of remote education (NE)	"I can't see the blackboard, the teacher or my friends like in real life." "The teacher did not explain everything to me, there is interference on the phone." "I miss live examples." "I don't miss anything."

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Positives of remote education (PE)	"I don't have to leave the house, I'm in touch online." "I don't waste my time commuting." "I have more time for myself."
Emotions during remote classes (EU)	"I was surprised that the choir is no longer just about singing, but rather about getting sheet music for independent work." "I am worried that we may not return to school this year." "I am annoyed by Internet issues." "I am annoyed that I have to learn on my own and record the tracks." "I am concerned about the lack of IT training among teachers."

Table 4. School during the pandemic – students with a low
sense of agency (SP-LSA)

School during the pandemic	
Difficulty level of remote classes (DL)	"awful" "It would be best not to have these classes at all." "I don't understand most of the classes due to remote education." "I can't cope because everything is so cut off from reality that I can't focus and I find myself in this situation all the time."
Homework/art assignments (HW)	"We get too little information on assignments and low grades because it's not what the teacher was expecting." "There is no point in doing homework because it is not even graded." "difficult and a lot of it" "I don't have the energy to do it sitting at home all the time."
Negatives of remote education (NE)	"I need a lot of explanation and motivation." "I miss meeting with people." "I have no room at home, I can't draw." "I miss doing the work under the supervision of a teacher, who comments and corrects me on an ongoing basis." "nothing here is true" "I no longer enjoy anything." "I have problems with the simplest information." "I'm fed up, I can't sleep at night." "I have more free time for doing nothing." "remote classes limit me"
Positives of remote education (PE)	---
Emotions during remote classes (EU)	"I was surprised to find out that learning was so hard." "I was astonished that teachers often do not come to classes." "Difficulties only, it's not possible to learn to play an instrument on your own." "Being at the mercy of the internet connection is frustrating." "I'm worried by too much work and lack of appropriate equipment." "I'm worried about worse grades and high expectations of teachers." "Learning to play an instrument when the Internet connection keeps crashing is a nightmare." "I'm getting more and more stupid."

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To students with a high sense of agency (HSA), obligatory remote education in art schools seems difficult but acceptable. Even though they miss their peers, the classrooms and their teachers' competencies, they are able to accept the changes and treat them as to-do tasks. They are able to find aspects of the new situation that are beneficial to them, and they remain vigilant and critical of the current daily school life.

The second group (LSA) focused almost entirely on the negative aspects: lack of possibilities and abilities to adapt to the new situation, obstacles to doing remote tasks, and lack of influence on the learning process. The element of suffering, exhaustion, sense of insecurity, dissatisfaction and low self-esteem was very prominent in the narratives. Even the deficiencies of the school were formulated as critical remarks about themselves. For this group of respondents, remote education remains unacceptable.

**Table 5. Vision of future education – students with a high
sense of agency (VE-HSA)**

Vision of future art education	
Vision of school (VS)	"Online theory classes and real-life classes with instruments." "The most important thing is to have lessons in school." "The same as it is now, I can't imagine it otherwise." "I have no idea." "There is nothing that need to be changed."
Perfect teachers (VT)	"There are no perfect teachers." "There are perfect teachers in my school." "kind, demanding, respectful of the student" "building a good atmosphere, motivating" "passionate"

**Table 6. Vision of future education – students with a low
sense of agency (VE-LSA)**

Vision of future art education	
Vision of school (VS)	"I don't know." "only in school" "I wouldn't change anything, it's fine." "some teachers"
Perfect teachers (VT)	"I don't know." "There are no perfect teachers." "appreciative but also demanding" "teachers who understand what we are going through" "being competent is enough" "I already have the perfect teacher."

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An attempt to depict the art school of the future during remote learning forced by the pandemic brought very similar results in the two groups. Both students with a low sense of agency (LSA) and those whose ontological security is not at risk (HAS) made very similar statements about the school of the future. Many of them said they had no idea and did not even try to answer the question, while some said that the current model of art education suits them very well. They agreed that the return of face-to-face interaction in education is most important. A similar convergence can be observed when analyzing narratives about the perfect teacher. Students in both groups said that there is no perfect teacher, and many stressed that they were satisfied enough with the teachers they already had at school. Several of the students attempted to describe a perfect teacher with similar traits mentioned in both groups.

Table 7. Pandemic – students with a high sense of agency (PR-HSA)

Pandemic	
Self (IS)	"I don't need to commute, I have more time for myself and I am less stressed." "It's the same as it used to be." "The school taught me to look at the world in a different and positive way." "My self-discipline and sensitivity to the beauty of music has improved." "I feel better, I can play." "I have more time for myself." "It's more interesting."
My loved ones (IR)	"anxiety, sadness, uncertainty about the future." "We talk to each other more, we talk about problems, and at the same time there are quarrels". "Nothing has changed." "The ties have become stronger."

Table 8. Pandemic – students with a low sense of agency (PR-HSA)

Pandemic	
Self (IS)	"I can't do anything." "I get stressed, I've lost weight, my hair is falling out." "I can't get out of bed, I'm slowly dying." "I got lazy, I have no motivation whatsoever." "Things have changed for the worse." "Chaos has entered my life, and when I used to go to school, things were better during the day."
My loved ones (IR)	"I feel needed and responsible for someone." "only bad things" "depressive moods" "problems only" "We have not grown closer to each other, on the contrary, we have moved further apart."

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The reality of the pandemic as seen through the filter of young people's sensibilities shows its different faces. Students with a high sense of agency (HAS) focus on the gains they achieved and are able to recognize them. Students in the opposite group (LSA) stress losses only and are inclined to underestimate themselves and their actions. Their perception of themselves translates into relationships with their loved ones. Young people who cope with isolation, while recognizing the negative aspects of the pandemic are searching for new patterns of action and do not neglect family relationships. For students with a low sense of agency, every course of events represents another step toward suffering.

Summary

The students' experiences seem consistent with the image of the young artist community emerging from the reconstruction of the narratives of school principals (XXX, 2021, pp. 130–131). In each of the areas, cognitive, relational and emotional, the reality of school during the pandemic could only be captured on a continuum of specific characteristics, dispositions or descriptions. Acknowledging the diversity of the students' world indicated the reflexivity of school leaders, but did not explain the reasons for the discrepancies.

It was only when the student's (non)daily school life was examined through the lens of their sense of agency and ontological security could light be shed on this issue. Embedding the self-image of art school students within the framework defined by the above concepts determined the boundaries of the continuum, locating a similar small group of individuals (less than 6% at each end of the continuum) within them.

The two groups of students have in common only the "horizon of thinking about school" (Klus-Stańska, 2016, pp. 53–69). The school they know is the only one possible for them. The common experience and mental barrier inhibit the prospect of a different everyday school life irrespectively of their sense of agency.

However, its level is relevant to all other areas analyzed. The belief in one's agency, the ability to feel it, changes the outlook on experiencing

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the pandemic. Dealing with suffering and challenges becomes possible by focusing on one's own self and on oneself as a goal achiever (Wojciszke 2010, p. 173), the capability of self-reflection, building more mature relationships with oneself and with loved ones, and ultimately redefining one's identity (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2021, p. 133). The study confirmed reports in the literature that agency is beneficial to the individual: the higher the agency, the greater the happiness, self-esteem, task-based responses to stress, and the significantly lower the propensity for depression and anxiety (Wojciszke 2010, pp. 173–177). High levels of agency are also seen as an important component of the innovative personality construct (Inkeles & Smith, 1984, pp. 432–465; Myszka-Strychalska, 2020).

The sense of agency should be treated as a basic prerequisite of a sense of human subjectivity (Kozielecki, 1988, p. 45; Ratajczak, 1991, p. 147), which is why one cannot remain indifferent to its absence among the remaining art school students (especially in the extreme group). Lack of a sense of agency is linked to a belief in having no influence on events (Łukaszewski, 1984, p. 435), a lack of a sense of freedom, control and competence (Hamer, 2005, 139), and a sense of isolation from peers (Pyżalski, Walter, 2021). Therefore, such people expect poorer results and believe that success is rather unlikely (Kowalczuk-Walędziak, 2012, pp. 64–76), thus presenting an attitude that is not conducive to development (Zysk, 1990, p. 199). Since, according to E. Wysocka and B. Ostafińska-Molik (2014, pp. 233–254), degrees of agency and feelings of helplessness distinguish groups of properly functioning adolescents from socially maladjusted adolescents, appropriate diagnoses should be considered important at each stage of their education.

When the pace and scope of change experienced by an individual exceeds his or her adaptive capacity, another universal human need, i.e. – ontological security – is violated. When reacting to the loss of ontological security, people take actions to simplify the world in an attempt to regain the sense of agency. Because ontological security can be prioritized over physical security, such actions can be destructive (Zybertowicz & Zybertowicz, 2017).

The time of the pandemic posed a unique challenge for art education. The organization of a safe learning environment was not without impact

on the psychosocial functioning of students. In light of the research presented, it appears that psychological well-being was affected more strongly in those with a low sense of agency, who often functioned on the edge of ontological security, traumatized by their experience of reality.

In this context, multidirectional pedagogical and psychological support activities, undertaken by a number of institutions and addressed both to students and to teachers and parents, should be considered necessary and continued. Such projects can not only help combat the effects of isolation, but also develop good practices for a post-pandemic future of schools.

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