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YOUNG ARTISTS CONFRONTING WARTIME – AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPATION IN AN ART COMPETITION

ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of the research is to try to broaden understanding of the meanings that young artists attribute to their experience of participating in an art competition.

Material and methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with young artists awarded in a competition. Transcriptions of the interviews were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. This approach was deemed the most appropriate to look at the personal experiences of the young artists and examine the way they give meaning to their lives and the world around them.

Results: The results indicate that participation in the competition was meaningful for the young artists in many dimensions. It provided an opportunity for exploration, experimentation, making choices and taking responsibility for them, both in the realm of artistic craftsmanship and in the formation of identity, and building the world of one's life. Participation in the competition provided an opportunity for active and reflective action and an intense experience of community, collaboration and agency.

Conclusions: The conceptual framework, which enables, at the stage of interpretation, the disclosure and ordering of meanings and the rendering of the individual and the universal, was Bruner's concept of development-supporting education, which was placed in the context of a pedagogy of peace. The analysis of a fragment of school praxis revealed the everyday life we would expect from an educational institution. This micro-image of an alternative vision of the school where the individual can have a learning experience is a viable example. Important recommendations include the suggestion of promoting student tasks that break stereotypes and release the joy of working on oneself, in the context of using the resources and potential of the wider culture.

KEYWORDS: *artistic education, school experience, peace pedagogy, experience of participating in a competition, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)*

INTRODUCTION

Exploring the world and assigning meaning to it takes place through and thanks to experience. Despite this obvious idea, the concept itself is difficult to systematise, elusive and ambiguous (cf. Geertz, 2011; Jay, 2006; Wolska, 2006). H. G. Gadamer (2004, p. 427) describes it as *one of the least explained concepts we have*, and J. Rutkowiak (1995, p.14-15) includes it in the *pulsating category* depending on the context. Considering the phenomenological, hermeneutic and pragmatic conception of experience, it is worth emphasising that it is not limited to passive perception; it is an inner experience involving consciousness

and reflection. The meaning we give it depends on individual needs, abilities, predispositions, previous knowledge and prior experience. An extensive part of every biography is devoted to school experiences (Koterwas, 2020, p.11-12).

Artistic education in Poland is a system of education separate from general education, consisting of more than a dozen types of art schools. It is made up of almost 1,000 schools and artistic institutions and nearly 15,000 teachers educating around 95,000 students. Art schools, with their range of numerous specialities and specialisations, are sometimes described by researchers as a *pedagogical and artistic phenomenon* (Lewińska, 2018, p. 9). During their school education, young people have the opportunity to participate in contests, tournaments, and competitions in a variety of subjects, including artistic subjects, testing their skills and having them assessed by professionals (Regulation of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Dz.U. z 2023 r. poz. 1139).

Participation in a competition is most often associated with rivalry, which can be defined as *competition, the simultaneous striving for priority or to win something or someone* (Dubisz, 2006, p. 1449). This phenomenon can be looked at in an interdisciplinary way from the point of view of psychology, sociology, literary studies, history, political science or international relations studies (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2012, p.103-115). It can also be seen as a manifestation of human existence in the social sphere of human nature, recognising the need for competition as one of the most important psychological motivations underlying progress (Campo, 1974). This article will present an intercultural educational perspective.

The profession of artist includes an element of subjecting one's work to external evaluation, which *can give a picture of one's real abilities and skills* (Szumigala, 2013, p.62-74). Participation in competitive events increases students' emotional engagement and cognitive interest (Pyłka-Gutowska, 2014, p.156-167), releases positive energy and enthusiasm, mobilises participants to work harder, and enhances creativity (Tomusiak et al, 2013; Napierała et al, 2020; Derlicka, Szczygielska, 2013; Czechowska, 2017). Satisfaction with the awards received influences in the validity of further artistic decisions (Szumigala, 2013, p.62-74).

The tradition of competitions with significant educational and artistic value in art education is very long in Poland. Among these, the International 'Family Portrait' Competition occupies a special place. The exceptional level of the works submitted for the event by young visual artists was recognised

by the chairman of the jury, J. Tutaj: *Interesting, often accurate, eloquent insights into the everyday life of one's own family or locating oneself in a family's generational community can and should be the subject not only of artistic evaluation of the form, but also of sociological and social analyses* (Dąbek, 2023, p. 205). In response to the richness of the participants' artistic expression, research was undertaken with the aim of exploring the personal experiences of the winners of the 'Family Portrait. A time of war' competition.

Research method

The aim of the study was to understand the meanings that young artists attribute to their experience of participating in a prestigious art competition. Preparation for participation required participants to face current events as a set of community experiences and attributed meanings, in a particularly difficult context of human suffering.

The idea of giving voice to young artists who were considered experts in their field (Tylor, 1985, p.45-76), resulted in the choice of the in-depth individual interview as the method of data collection and a method based on phenomenology and hermeneutics for their subsequent analysis (Pietkiewicz, Smith, 2012, p.361-369). In accordance with the principles of the method adopted (Smith, Osborn, 2008, p.53-80), a small, homogeneous group of five participants was selected, awarded by becoming winners of prestigious qualifiers. The interviews were conducted during a ceremony in May 2023 to announce the competition results.

The synthesis of concepts from phenomenology and hermeneutics that occurs in IPA *(Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis)* results in both a descriptive method, because we deal with how things appear to us and allow them to speak for themselves, and an interpretative method, because we assume that there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon. Due to idiography as another theoretical foundation, we refer to an in-depth analysis of a single case in a specific context important for the study (Smith, 2007; Smith, Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Hence, it is necessary to move constantly between the themes generated during the analysis of individual narratives and to present the similarities and differences between them.

Results

Engaging in an interpretive relationship with transcription (Smith, Osborn, 2008, p. 66) required capturing and expressing the meanings given to experiences by the young interviewees. The units of meaning gradually identified (Giorgi, Giorgi, 2008, p.26-52) were transformed into emerging thematic threads, which required the involvement of the researcher, as in IPA-type methods the researcher is *the primary tool of the study and its participant* (Hess-Wiktor, 2014, p.196). The extraction of fragments and their labelling triggered a process of shifting between *emic* and *epic* realms to reveal patterns. By grouping the thematic threads according to their content, it was possible to outline a clear structure in the form of the following topics to which all respondents referred.

Table 1. *Themes identified by the analysis*

Aspects of experience
1. Inspiration
2. The creative process
3. Sense of agency

Inspiration – to show the suffering

The experience of participating in the competition began the anchoring stage, seeking inspiration for one's own work. For the interviewees, *the time of war* is a *very serious, very moving topic.* The reference to armed conflict as the most fateful problem for humanity, taking away the sense of security, was a key background to the creative idea. And although the title of the competition itself did not directly refer to the war in Ukraine, the young artists mainly referred to it: *it shook us up a lot, especially as it's next to us, next to our country.* Mateo recalls: *at the very beginning it was definitely fear, I also remember panic, what if this attack happens to us too?* The proximity of the events, the horror of the situation, the tension and the emotions, provided the basis for wider reflections: *We have always heard about these wars in the world,*

but it wasn't something as close as Ukraine, and it was only when something like that happened that we started to realise collectively, so to speak, the seriousness of the situation and it opened our eyes. For Natalia, the experiences of people close to her, who had direct contact with the cruelty of war, turned out to be traumatic: *I have friends from Ukraine who have been affected by the war and had to say goodbye to their families and grow up faster, so to speak.*

The interviewees, initially passive observers of the war, reported through common recording tools and the Internet, were faced with an opportunity they had been waiting for and desired. For Natalia, the message of a girl entering adulthood became important: *I wanted to show it from a young person's perspective.* Iza focused on the emotions of the youngest: *I wanted to depict a child, a little girl, because it is the children who suffer the most in this war.* Mateo went beyond a one-dimensional understanding of war, treating the concept polysemantically and multiculturally: *My main inspiration was to show the suffering of women in Afghanistan who are forced to walk around in burqas; they have no right to show their bodies.* Natalia emphasised that the stage of creative verification was necessary for anchoring: *There were a lot of different concepts and it was difficult for me to make up my mind and choose the right one.* Julia, on the other hand, emphasised her teacher's help at the inspiration stage: *My graphic design teacher came up to me and said that I could make great use of it (the wolf motif – note by AW), and that's where the idea for this work was born.*

THE CREATIVE PROCESS – I RAN OUT A BIT

Giving a title to a work is often a key moment in the creative process. Mateo highlights its direct link ('Burqa' – note by AW) with the content of the work: *The title is very…let's say… representational.* Julia, by placing in her work a toddler girl held by her parents, whose transparent figures symbolise a time gone by, describes it differently: *I touched on the child's perspective in my work; children are such innocent beings, they don't understand what is happening around them and yet they have to deal with it.* The initial stages of the creative process were most often embedded in the school classes, when teachers gave important guidance to the young artists: *We had an assignment*

in graphic design where we had to transfer a photograph onto a sheet of metal and create a graphic from that. The interviewees, however, are already artists who, despite their young age, have implemented their own creative concepts. Mateo remembers it like this: *I stayed with photography, it's strange, I ran out a bit, I actually did the primary task, but I also ran out a bit.* Julia also emphasised her own contribution to the competition entry: *I looked at it at home, thought about what I could do, and an idea came up, very primitive, but still accurate.* Looking at the finished work often means having to face its interpretation once again. Natalia, who made a charcoal drawing depicting a young girl standing behind a bullet-pierced window, speaks very emotionally about this moment: *It (the work – note by AW) was supposed to be interpreted in its own way, but we know that it's a bullet mark, and it was supposed to represent a sort of misunderstanding of what is happening, what is affecting us.*

Sense of agency – opening eyes through art

The sensitivity of the young artists awarded at the competition did not leave them passive; they felt responsible and set themselves specific tasks. They talk about their mission, seeing it in a clear and task-oriented way. Iza emphasised: *It is through images, through art, that we can convey these values and reach more people.* Mateo explains that they are too young to influence the fate of the world in a different way, but the opportunities they already have seem to him to be significant and worth applying: *What can we do as artists…, it seems to me that we don't have the power to end the war, because unfortunately it's not up to us, but we can certainly help open people's eyes through art, through communicating our emotions and what's really happening, either in a very representational way or in a very, so to speak, experimental and understated way.* Active engagement on an artistic level was also important to Julia: *Just to spread the word and publicise it all.* The statements of young artists leave no doubt – according to them, an artist must be involved, live consciously and actively in the contemporary world, and express his or her opinion. None of the interviewees presented an attitude of isolation, which – perhaps – would be easier in the artistic world.

Discussion

Bruner's concept of development-supporting education, which was placed in the context of intercultural artistic education, became the conceptual framework enabling the disclosure and ordering of individual meanings at the stage of interpretation. The meanings that the young participants attributed to their experiences relate to learning in the broadest sense, encompassing all aspects of learning, internal mental processes and processes of social integration with accompanying emotions (Illeris, 2006, p.164). In this view, the competition has become a deliberately structured situation, a means of learning, an opportunity to interact with the real, artistic world (Sartori, 2007, p.80; Wygotski, 2005, 30-64), which arouses keen interest, leading to internal, individually differentiated learning experiences, projected through participation in these activities (Abbott, 2013; Toh, 2014, p.41-66). The actual *clash with the world* (Gehlen, 2001, p.59) builds up an image of the school providing alternative visions, situations in which the individual can have learning experiences. These ideas direct our attention towards progressivist ideology, on the grounds that *education is realised through experience* (Dewey, 2014, p.17), but above all towards Bruner's theory of cognitive development, which values both the role of cultural transmission and the subject's own activity (Stemplewska-Żakowicz, 1996, p.15). In this way, everyday school life becomes a complex process of using the resources and potential of culture in the broadest sense (M. Dudzikowa, R. Wawrzyniak-Beszterda, 2010, p.29-40), which creates hope for building a *cultural school praxis* based on the ideas of agency, collaboration and reflection (Bruner, 2006, p. 126).

The competition activity undertaken by the young people, partly embedded in the school curriculum, can also be seen as an autonomous activity, related to a way of expressing personal, artistic potential. It therefore represented an opportunity to explore, experiment, make choices and take responsibility for them. These elements are particularly important in the process of identity formation (Waterman, 1999, p.591-621), which is the most important task facing every adolescent (Brzezinska, 2017, p.55). In order to understand the world, in the course of preparing for the competition, the young artists had to confront current events as a set of community experiences and meanings

assigned to them. Building the world of one's life *(Lebenswelt)* keeps a person in constant evolution, placing consciousness, reflection and freedom as components of their identity (Karkowska, 2013, p.57). Identity is thus formed in active and reflexive action, and challenges of various kinds represent opportunities for self-development (Giddens, 2004, 76). In this sense, building a school culture that functions on the reciprocity of a community of students involved in solving problems and experiencing cooperation becomes the basis for shaping reflection, encompassing different versions of thinking (Bruner, 2006, p.120-132). The young artists' construction of *stories about the way things are* not only helps them to understand their own world, but leads them to solve problems of particular value concerning cultural change (Bruner,2006, pp. 32–141). The competition becomes an educational encounter, providing an opportunity to experience cooperation and agency.

The latter area appears to be crucial for building a civilisation of peace. Recognising the development of a pedagogy of peace, particularly in an intercultural context, as one of the most important educational commitments of the 21st century (e.g. Wojnar, 2000; Leek, 2017; Błeszyńska, 2017), it is worth recalling the current *UNESCO Recommendations* (2023). The document emphasises that education should be a pathway to building sustainable peace and shaping the way we see the world and treat others. Contemporary understandings of peace accentuate the participatory process of valuing human dignity (Castro, Galace, 2019), which was undoubtedly reflected in the young artists' experiences, becoming a micro-contribution to the global campaign for peace. Equipping young people with conflict-resolution skills, promoting positive attitudes, breaking down stereotypes (Mydłowska, 2020, p.73), and offering them tasks that trigger the joy of working on themselves (Nikitorowicz, 2021, p.103-116; Wesołowska, 2003, p.172), can provide an attractive alternative to war and violence.

Conclusion and recommendations

Assuming, following Bruner (2006, p.48-61), that the way a student experiences school determines the kind of meanings they acquire, participation in a competition whose values are rooted in a tradition of deep humanism is among the characteristics of late modernity, which abolishes sharp divisions between social institutions and cultural spaces (Krzychała, 2010, p.137-160). At the same time, it is an example of a teaching situation in which a combination of causative effectiveness leading to self-esteem becomes possible in the company of a teacher who *becomes a guide to understanding the world, preparing the student for self-discovery* (Bruner, 2006, p.7). It is worth emphasising that these conclusions refer to a very narrow fragment of school *praxis;* proper artistic education. They also touch on the world of meaning of a selected group of students experiencing a kind of *rite of passage* into the elite group of acclaimed artists. Despite these limitations, they show the possibility of constructing a scope for the development of a person – a doer – in the school space (Weiner 2023, p.203-221).

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