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Experiencing studying in a phenomenographic analysis of the utterances of young adults from Z-Generation

Doświadczanie studiowania w fenomenograficznej analizie wypowiedzi młodych dorosłych z pokolenia Z

Summary. The aim of this article is to present the results of an analysis of in-depth phenomenographic interviews conducted with young adults studying the humanities and social sciences in the Polish higher education system. The authors conducted twenty interviews in 2022 and 2023 with individuals who represented the next generation of university students in their families, focusing on their experiences of studying. The authors conceptualise these experiences from the perspective of representatives of Generation Z in the following ways: (a) as a transition to the next stage in the formal education system, leading to the acquisition of higher qualifications; (b) as a learning process for acquiring and deepening knowledge; (c) as a life stage characterised by the absence of parental care; (d) as the assumption of the student role associated with belonging to an institution such as a university; and (e) as building relationships within and outside university. The authors interpret the identified categories of description as follows: as a consequence of the popularisation of the educational process and its normalisation in everyday life; as a result of students' intrinsic motivation, derived from cultural capital and aligned with the perception of knowledge acquisition as a developmental process; as an outcome of limited opportunities to practice social competencies in earlier stages of schooling; and as an effect of rapid civilisa-

tional and technological acceleration as well as an individual need to empower the learning process. These identified educational issues highlight the need for further studies and cultural interpretations of the project's findings, as is customary in phenomenographic research.

Keywords: experience of studying, Z-Generation, phenomenography, formal education, empowerment in learning

Streszczenie. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie wyników analizy pogłębionych wywiadów fenomenograficznych przeprowadzonych wśród młodych dorosłych studiujących w polskim systemie edukacyjnym na wyższych uczelniach humanistykę i nauki społeczne. Autorzy przeprowadzili w latach 2022 i 2023 dwadzieścia wywiadów na temat doświadczania studiowania z osobami, które są kolejnym pokoleniem studiującym w swoich rodzinach. Konceptualizacje owego doświadczenia w ujęciu reprezentantów pokolenia Z autorzy widzą w następujących formach: (a) jako wejście na kolejny etap w systemie kształcenia formalnego prowadzący do zdobycia wyższych kwalifikacji, (b) jako proces uczenia się prowadzący do zdobycia nowej wiedzy i jej pogłębiania, (c) jako etap w życiu bez rodzicielskiej opieki, (d) jako wchodzenie w rolę studenta związaną z przynależnością do instytucji, jaką jest uczelnia, (e) jako budowanie relacji na uczelni i poza nią. Wyodrębnione kategorie opisu autorzy widzą kolejno jako: konsekwencję upowszechnienia procesu kształcenia, a tym samym jego naturalizację w codzienności; rezultat wewnętrznej motywacji studentów wynikający z kapitału kulturowego, rezonujący z postrzeganiem zdobywania wiedzy jako procesu rozwojowego; skutek deficytu w praktykowaniu społecznych kompetencji na wcześniejszych etapach szkolnej edukacji; następstwo cywilizacyjnego i technologicznego przyspieszenia oraz pokłósie indywidualnej potrzeby upodmiotowienia procesu uczenia się. Ujawnione w ten sposób kwestie edukacyjne stanowią zapowiedź dalszych studiów i interpretacji wyników tego projektu, jak przystało na fenomenografię, w kulturowym kontekście.

Słowa kluczowe: doświadczenie studiowania, pokolenie Z, fenomenografia, edukacja formalna, upełnomocnienie uczenia się

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a small-scale research project focused on identifying conceptualisations of studying, based on responses from students at selected higher education institutions. In individual interviews with students, the starting point was the question: “What does it mean that you study and what does studying mean to you?” The concepts of studying that emerged from the phenomenographic analysis are not intended to reflect the didactic quality of any specific higher education institution or university, nor to assess the quality of studying within any particular unit. From the outset, our goal was to identify key issues essential for describing the experience of studying from the perspective of young adults, helping to deepen our understanding of the contemporary adult as a learning individual. The adults in this study belong to Generation Z. This generation, as described by experts (see Suchecka, 2023; Twenge, 2023), was born and raised in a culture of digital and advanced technologies, values mental well-being, cares for personal development, views work as a means to live rather than as life’s primary goal, and perceives the world as diverse in lifestyles and identities. How do representatives of this generation perceive their own studying and the process in which they are currently engaged? What educational issues do they identify as significant, what is the nature of these issues, and what perspectives from their individual experiences must we consider as we seek to re-recognise the adult as a learning individual? These questions accompanied us throughout this educational project.

Starting point and methodological remarks

Our research centres on the broadly defined experience of learning within the context of cultural change. This change encompasses young adults adopting educational practices, communication methods, and values distinct from those familiar to and established by previous generations. In our view, and in line with perspectives from other scholars (see Bauman, 2005; Bruner, 2009), studying itself represents one of these practices. Exploring how Generation Z adults conceptualise the experience of studying offers a chance to reveal the characteristics of their approach to learning here and now, within a limited microworld. This exploration also helps to

identify challenges that we, an older generation, may overlook and which are essential for social and intergenerational dialogue (see Aleksander, 2010, 2015).

Our interest in analysing the experience began with the formulation of a simple question: “What does it mean that you study and what does studying mean to you?” This formulation guided our methodological approach to the phenomenographic investigation. In Poland, the phenomenographic method has been applied in educational research for twenty-five years.* However, it is often adapted in various ways across different projects.** Let us recall that in the classical understanding put forth by the creator of the method, Ferenc Marton (1997), phenomenography is an empirical study of a limited number of qualitatively different ways of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and conceptualising the phenomena in the surrounding world. Emphasis on individual interpretations and the deepening of experiential descriptions from the subject’s perspective are integral to the nature of phenomenography. This dense description, which forms the text, serves as the foundation for a researcher’s analysis, enabling the emergence of various concepts regarding the described experience based on the contexts in which the authors of statements have situated the phenomenon. And this context serves as the criterion for creating what is known as a category of description of the phenomenon. The resulting category is distinct from other categories identified in research material, but it holds equal importance. There is no hierarchy of significance among them. In practice, this means that a segment of a statement must be classified into a given category of description only once, while a statement from one participant can be divided into fragments that belong to qualitatively different groups of statements. In this way, we somewhat “lose” the authors of the statements because they appear in various places on the map of interpreted meanings due to differing explanations of issues. This is why, in phenomenographic terminology, we say that a category of description possesses both individual and collective characteris-

* The essence of the research process conducted within the phenomenographic approach was presented and published in *The Andragogy Yearbook*, vol. 23, in 2016 (see Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2016). Therefore, in this description, we focus more on the practical implications arising from the procedure, rather than on the epistemological foundations of the method and its critiques.

** We refer to projects authored by researchers such as L. Kopciwicz (2005) and P. Stańczyk (2008).

tics. In simpler terms, this means that it can be derived technically from a statement of a single author or even just a fragment of it, or it may be constructed from fragments of statements by multiple authors.

By employing phenomenography, we examine the world as it appears in direct experience through its description, rather than focusing on a world that exists objectively. This secondary perspective requires researchers to continuously refer to the context, which could be said to make the context the central character of the analysis. This is why, in naming categories, we use everyday language, reserving theoretical concepts, perspectives from other researchers, and theories that help us understand their meaning for the discussion of their significance, as is typically done in qualitative research strategies. It is important to note that phenomenography does not examine narratives in a way that is typically applied during their analysis when tracing the flow, breakdowns, critical points, and modifications in the thinking of the subject being studied. This approach assumes merely that people think about the same phenomenon in diverse ways because they experience reality differently, and we, as researchers, attempt to reconstruct those points of view. There is no single essence (or centre) that represents the most accurate understanding of the phenomenon; instead, there are various concepts expressed in the form of categories of description. Each of these categories results from individual perceptions, understandings, and experiences of the given phenomenon, all of which are regarded here as equivalent processes.

In this paper, we present the categories of description of the experience of studying, derived from the statements of twenty individuals (10 male students and 10 female students) collected during 2022 and 2023. The authors of these statements are students aged 19 to 24 who expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews and are enrolled in full-time studies. All of them belong to the next generation of students in their families and are pursuing disciplines within the broadly understood fields of social sciences and humanities, such as philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, foreign languages, history, social geography, and psychology.^{*} The number of analysed statements is not arbitrary but stems from the procedures of

* It should be noted that the created list of categories does not exhaust the topic; it would also be interesting to study representatives from the natural sciences, medical sciences, or legal studies, using comparison as a cognitive potential of the phenomenographic method. However, this remains a topic for a separate article.

phenomenography itself. Swedish researchers have noted, based on their own research practice, that after the twentieth statement, no new ideas emerge in the explanations provided by the participants. However, the focus is not on the number of cases, but rather on the issues raised by these young students.

What does it mean that you study and what does studying mean to you? A description of the experience of studying in statements from Generation Z students

The analysis of the statements, following the procedure described above, has led to the establishment of five categories of description (labelled A to E). The order of their presentation in this article is based on the sequence in which themes emerged in the interviews and does not reflect a hierarchy of importance.

A. Studying as a transition to the next stage in the formal education system, leading to higher qualifications

This category has emerged from fragments of statements that reflect a change in the educational status of the learner as they mature. Previously, I was a student in high school, and today I am a student at a university or another higher education institution:

*It's great **to no longer be a high school student but to be a university student**. My parents talked about studying and said it would be quite different. The only difference now is that it's easier to gain admission. Of course, there are popular majors, but I chose philosophy, which didn't have much competition. (w.2/K/19')*

*I have always dreamt of getting into university, and [...] here I am. **I'm thinking about a doctorate in the future. I would like more than just to obtain my master's degree.** (w.4/K/20)*

* This notation refers to the quoted fragments of the participants' statements, indicating the interview number, the declared gender of the participant (based on the question, "How should I address you?"), and their age.

The moment of transition to the next educational institution is emphasised here, as being a student signifies entering a new stage in the educational life that leads to the acquisition of higher qualifications. However, in the context of the participants' family histories and immediate environments, the transition to university and the pursuit of higher education do not seem particularly remarkable:

*My parents studied, and I can't imagine it being any other way, although I understand that it's not necessary for everyone. Not everyone from my high school class went on to university, and I can understand that. They had different plans for their lives. **But education is important to me, which is why I've chosen this major. Studying doesn't have to be linked to future employment. Rather, it's about gaining general knowledge and education.*** (w.12/M/22)

Graduating from university also helps in pursuing a career, if that is the path one envisions:

*That's just how it is: if you want to be a driver, you don't need a degree, but if you aim to work in a corporation or hold a higher position, especially in politics, **having a degree from a prestigious or at least a well-ranked university is essential.*** That's just how the world is structured. (w.14/M/21)

*I have always wanted to be a therapist. **But I see my studies as a foundation for further education.*** To be a therapist involves further stages, courses, and postgraduate studies if you want to be seen as qualified in the job market. (w.15/M/23)

This reflects the naturalisation of education itself, reducing it to just one of many activities we engage in, with this particular activity aimed at acquiring higher qualifications. The description of studying in this context is supported by a bureaucratic language that emphasises the naming of educational stages, academic degrees, procedures, and professional career patterns. Their attainment is an element of a lifestyle and this lifestyle is increasingly shared by a growing number of young adults. As Z. Kwieciński (2007) points out, easy access to higher education in Poland has been a persistent phenomenon since 2004. University education is no longer as unattainable as it once was. On the contrary, partly due to its integration into the market economy, it generates educational demand and promises to meet it by offering more study places, particularly in the social sciences

and humanities, than there are applicants. Generation Z is the beneficiary of this expanded access. In a context where cultural capital is reproduced in the next generation, the decision to pursue higher education is not surprising.*

B. Studying as a learning process for acquiring and deepening knowledge

In this category of description, knowledge related to the chosen major is viewed as valuable, and its acquisition, expansion, and refinement are seen as necessities. The individual choice of a major and the freedom to make that choice define the meaning of studying. Similarly, the updating of the curriculum by academic teachers in their courses is essential for fostering motivation to study.

Studying means specialised knowledge that I have chosen. (w.15/M/23)

I am learning what interests me, and that is the best part. (w.1/K/20)

I am not sure yet if I will stay in this programme. For now, it's fine. We have interesting lectures. I have learnt a lot about myself in this programme, about behaviours, motivations, and illnesses. (w.20/M/20)

After all, you can always withdraw. *I did it a few times – first philosophy, then sociology, and now journalism, which is finally what I want to study.* (w.18/M/20)

*My grandmother was a geography teacher. My mother studied geography, but now she works in a corporate job. **I have also chosen this major, but it involves different knowledge and subjects than before.** The amount of information about climate change is incredible! We go on many field trips to gain a better understanding, though we also have to draw maps and memorise some lesser-known places. But that doesn't discourage me. Every major has its challenges.* (w.5/K/22)

* As highlighted by the authors of the report *Poza horyzont. Kurs na edukację* [Beyond the Horizon: A Course Towards Education], including the volume's editor, Professor Jerzy Hausner (2020), the challenge facing contemporary societies is not the massification of education, including higher education, but rather the gap between those who are educated and continue to develop and those who do not engage in such developmental endeavours. Addressing this issue presents a significant civilisational and social challenge today.

*I am learning new theories and have many hours of practical language learning. **It's quite evident which teachers are well-prepared to impart this new knowledge to us.** I really value those... those who are aware of current trends or which research, for example on the brain, helps improve language learning. (w.6/K/24)*

*You learn a lot when you go on Erasmus. **New lecturers and a new approach to your major.** I was in Greece, and while the lecturers weren't necessarily better, but how they conducted classes! It was great. I was really eager to attend ancient history classes. I learnt a lot. (w.17/M/22)*

***I have many reservations about how classes are conducted in my programme. In many subjects, I hear the same information, but I can now point out that someone else has already discussed it, after which the lecturer expands on that topic.** I'm studying a major with a wealth of research and knowledge available. You just need to look for it. (w.15/M/23)*

In this context, studying resembles the “consumption” of knowledge in its most modern and advanced forms, as well as its “utilisation.” Whether we refer to “internalising,” “acquiring,” “reproducing,” or “reflecting,” the most crucial aspect appears to be the quality of that knowledge. This quality is understood as the relevance of the knowledge itself and the perspectives from which it is presented by the teacher. If I decide from the very beginning what I want to learn by choosing a programme (or programmes) of study, then the subject of my studies inherently contributes to the development of intrinsic motivation. It does not matter whether the programme is very general or practical, that is, activating knowledge for “immediate consumption.” What matters most is what we learn. The more viewpoints, schools, and theories within the studied programme, or the more diverse the knowledge, the better it is for the student. This creates high expectations for academic teacher, whose value is measured by the scope of their knowledge and the resources they use. This language of describing **learning in terms of being both a user and a consumer of knowledge** ties the teacher’s role to the responsibility of selecting educational content and methods. In this sense, one might argue that as academic teachers, we remain essential as the quality of a study programme depends on how the content is presented, how it is delivered, its intellectual “processing,” and the ways it is applied (cognitive, applied, or practical activities). The long-standing academic debate over whether university education should pri-

oritise theoretical knowledge or emphasise practical methods that provide ready-made solutions does not apply here. Instead, it likely involves both aspects, as the ultimate responsibility lies with the learner and how they use, process, and adapt this knowledge, as well as how they “consume” it. Referring to a fragment of one of the statements examined, it suggests that “sometimes I want to try a new taste, and other times I want to learn how to use chopsticks” (w.5/K/22). The core idea of this category of description is the expectation that knowledge contributes to individual development (cf. Malewski, 1988, 2002).

C. Studying as a life stage characterised by the absence of parental care

This category has been derived from fragments of statements that emphasise independence as a skill to be learnt. The students’ comments on this matter suggest that studying represents a new **developmental task**, where one must manage their own basic needs, “learn how to shop, fight for a place in a dormitory or a room in the city,” and realise that “there is no longer a mum waiting with dinner.” Additionally, “sometimes one has to look for a job.” An important issue here is **social competence**, which students identify as a key measure of personal responsibility. Examples of this responsibility include pride in successfully adapting to a new study environment in a large city, as well as criticism of peers who continue to rely on parental support. Here are examples of such statements:

*I’m from a small town, and I had to learn how to navigate the Tri-City area. **It wasn’t easy. Now you have GPS, and you can get where you need to go, but you don’t know the people, and that’s hard.** The ladies at the dean’s office are also a misunderstanding, by the way... Now I know what to do to solve an issue, who to approach, and which people in administration to avoid... (w.17/M/22)*

***Sometimes I observe how my friends’ parents still handle things for them.** I saw how my friend’s mum went to the library to get books and made notes for him. Or someone’s mum handled things during the recruitment process, while the guy stood aside and didn’t know what was going on. It’s not some weird exception, it happens quite often... And supposedly, we graduated from high school earlier, supposedly passed the maturity exam??? (w.18/M/20)*

In this category, the description of studying is framed in terms of social behaviours. The experience of these behaviours not only helps individu-

als adapt to new circumstances but also enables them to develop their own strategies for “settling into” the new environment. This process of settling in holds potential for independence, as it is characterised by a positive evaluation of behaviours that involve breaking free from parental control, exploring new surroundings, and learning the rules that govern them, but without the support of “family advocacy” (see Rutkowiak, 2000, p. 23).

D. Studying as the assumption of the student (learner) role associated with belonging to an institution such as a university

This category has been derived from statements that describe the student as someone who must adapt to the rules of a new organisation. What is important here is the connection between the student and other members of this community. This connection is shaped by the experiences arising from the demands placed on the student, including internalising the rituals typical of the institution where they study and adopting behaviours characteristic of the academic teaching culture. The description of students’ behaviours here is twofold. One type relates to organisational matters that students must manage independently to meet their obligations since, as they say, “no one is holding your hand any more”:

*We have our own ways and we learn what it’s like at other universities. We have friends in other cities or sometimes just at other schools. **We compare, and there really aren’t major differences in what it’s like to be a student.** Sometimes, on forums, we help each other figure out how to handle things because we’ve done it already, and someone else hasn’t yet. These are various matters, such as arranging individual study plans, understanding our entitlements... applying for scholarships, or figuring out how to pass an exam with a particular professor... These are various things. The world is getting smaller and smaller... When it comes to the main issues, there are no big differences. (w.19/M/20)*

You feel like you’re just like everyone else because you take exams, pass midterms, give presentations, wait in line at the dean’s office, join the same academic clubs, and that’s also part of studying. (w.11/M/20)

The other type relates to learning methods, such as using new tools and technologies, including participating in discussions via modern communication platforms, using on-line resources, preparing presentations, reading from digital media, combining text and images, recording and playing videos, and utilising ready-made applications. Students view these

approaches as natural learning methods, familiar from earlier stages of schooling, which they continue to develop further.

*Studying? Well, it's about attending lectures, which are longer than in school, and you take notes. You listen, **look at presentations, take photos, make videos**, ask questions, and sometimes engage in discussions... But mainly, you're focused on receiving the information. (w.13/M/22)*

The most important thing is knowing how to use all those databases; it's a sea of possibilities. There's a lot of junk, so you have to check the sources. But then, there's Google – always helpful. (w.19/M/20)

*I mostly skip readings that aren't available on-line. **Fortunately, professors know that if we're going to study effectively, they need to send us the material.** (w.9/K/21)*

What represents a manifestation of the new teaching culture here is the responsibility for planning one's own work, along with individual assessment of learning outcomes and self-control. This contrasts with the systematic checking of knowledge and constant teacher supervision that characterised the traditional school setting:

*You have a new status, you are a student, sitting in the library making notes, scanning, and searching the Internet and databases more often... Or, **you study for exams only during the exam session, not every day like in school. And professors don't hold your hand. You have to get used to it.** (w.19/M/20)*

What is new here is the strengthening of the "I" element in how students manifest their own proposals regarding the way they perform their roles. This includes expectations about how classes should be conducted, the scope of content, the choice of methods for completing tasks, and the sources of knowledge they wish to use, such as reading only texts available in digital formats. In other words, studying becomes a process of co-decision about what you want to learn and how you want to learn it:

***In my opinion, lectures should be much shorter.** But professors still prolong them and don't understand that we also need a break. In the past, no one would have dared to say anything, like my parents say, but today, we do. (w.13/M/22)*

[...] *Back then, students probably couldn't say everything; **now, we don't feel any special limitations**... We also have a lot of young professors, who it's easier to get along with. (w.18/M/20)*

***There should be ready information packages** sent to us by email, because I often feel lost in the overload of everything. (w.9/K/21)*

Students' statements are here characterised by the comparison of today's university to that of their parents regarding the demands of the educational process and the time required to meet them. Unlike their parents' schooling, which they perceive as having operated at a slower pace, today's students often multitask and find themselves in a state of constant **acceleration** as they learn new technological tools for acquiring knowledge.

*We send each other completed parts of the project and discuss them on Zoom or Teams. Right now, AI is a big deal. We work together on reports. There are so many options to meet online in task groups. When my mum saw how my friends and I work and **how much time we save this way**, she was really surprised that this is what studying looks like today. (w.3/K/22)*

*We read and read. It's great that more and more sources are accessible on-line, such as photos, files, or ready-made videos. They're often there to help you create something on your own afterwards. We have lectures and practical classes. We have to prepare for classes just like our parents had to in the past. I can't imagine sitting in a library reading on-site when you need to prepare **so much and so quickly** for so many classes. (w.9/K/21)*

Paradoxically, the new educational culture feels "new" to them not because of the various ways it activates the learning process, but rather because of the **opportunities it offers to slow down** the processes of processing, reorganising, and structuring knowledge. As one of the respondents explains:

I'm a restless spirit, always looking for new experiences. This year, I'm working with an association for refugees (name mentioned here), and it was only in class that I realised how important this experience is. We were discussing some research on migration, and we have tons of information about it on-line; every organisation and politician uses it for their own purposes. It was only in the lecture that we tried to understand, evaluate, and discuss it together with our Professor. There's a lot of distortion, fake news, and false information – now try and organise it

*somehow... **And that's what studying is for... slower, calmer, and without the race.*** (w.20/M/24)

*My studies are all about arguing and discussing in various classes. **I'm sure it's always been like this for years.*** (w.18/M/20)

The central concept across the analysed fragments in this category of description of studying is the **method**. The method is understood instrumentally as a way of performing tasks through the application of tools (new technologies), engaging in specific types of activities (activating learning), or following a prescribed behaviour pattern that ensures the desired outcome (acting according to a set scenario). However, it is also viewed as a form of educational dialogue* with the teacher regarding co-deciding what I want to learn and how we, together with the teacher, calmly reach knowledge (“we need to talk this through”). The university, as an institution, legitimises this process.

E. Studying as building relationships within and outside university

In this group of statements, we find those that reduce the essence of studying to the formation of bonds between students, as well as between students and academic teachers, viewing it as an instrument of educational success or failure:

Some classmates don't complete their tasks, and that's problematic because you not only lose points on the project, but you also lose trust in that person. (w.3/K/22)

*It's important to be able to count on a group of friends at university, especially when you're not able to attend class. We have a student in our year who has a serious mental illness. **When she's absent, we know we need to send her notes, and I try to help.** I've also learnt a great deal about her condition. The fact that she has shared it with us is already a significant step... but that's another issue.* (w.9/K/21)

* J. Rutkowiak (1992) introduced into educational literature the distinction between educational dialogue (with an arbitrator) and dialogue without an arbitrator. In this category of description, our respondents refer to dialogue as a method that leads to resolution.

The way relationships are formed impacts the effectiveness of fulfilling various educational tasks, but equally important, it is also crucial for maintaining good mental health:

*Some lecturers understand that it's not just about here and now, and that we may have gaps or haven't managed to complete everything. They extend deadlines and help us get things done. You can tell that they care about us. Yet, some don't understand that you're unwell and still expect you to attend classes. **For me, what's important in studying is having a teacher who understands that I might need to catch up on sleep, may have difficult days due to several exams in one week, or could be seriously ill or dealing with personal problems.*** (w.1/K/20)

At times, the relationship itself becomes the potential from which learning grows, such as when institutionally created requirements are transformed into individually shaped responsibilities:

*I expect the teacher to dedicate time to me and assess my work not just as an essay for credit, but as my own effort, so that I can develop and move forward. **I really enjoy our meetings, such as seminars, because that's when we have the opportunity to work independently and ask questions without fear of being judged.** It's a great stage of learning. **It's not about the teacher telling me to attend the seminar, but about my belief that I should.*** (w.6/K/24)

*When the war in Ukraine broke out, we had a few students from there, and we also collected essential items to support them. At that time, it became clear **who we could rely on and what we could accomplish together**, regardless of our differing views on history. **That was when I learnt more about people than I have in my studies, which, after all, are in pedagogy.*** (w.1/K/20)

***I have a few friends here, but they're real friends I can rely on.** In fact, I never had friends like them before. **We also meet outside of university**, which I think is an additional benefit of studying. Together, we volunteer at an animal shelter, and it does us good.* (w.3/K/22)

It is difficult to clearly define the language used by the authors of the statements who create this category of description. In this context, we observe a call for acceptance from peers and teachers in situations where students are unable to complete an educational task. This also suggests that, in the respondents' view, the university environment consists of diverse individ-

uals (students and teachers) with varying intellectual, organisational, and health conditions, as well as different levels of empathy and willingness to offer support. Recognising this can be both a source of success and failure in studying. We also find examples of relationships such as forming friendships, mutual time dedication, the teacher's care for the student's development, and social activities both inside and outside the university, which not only help others but also transform individuals personally, socially, emotionally, and cognitively.* They represent what studying is truly about. One could argue that they are the very core embedded in the **empowerment of learning**. This empowerment is fuelled by the hope of encountering various types of human experiences, sensitivities, and expectations. It is more about focusing on what happens in this process between us than on who participates in this process in terms of position, power, or status.

Conclusion

The reconstructed categories of description of the experience of studying articulated by young adults from Generation Z, in our view, reveal several significant aspects related to learning. Let us attempt to outline these aspects:

1. For this successive generation engaged in higher education, studying has become an integral **element of their lifestyle** (Category A). Once individuals commit to it, studying functions as a tool to meet educational needs and is thus perceived by respondents as consistently **developmental** (Category B).
2. Adult education, in its institutionalised form as higher education, becomes a “hostage to youth education” by continuing and expanding learning methods that incorporate modern technologies (Category D), methods that were already introduced in earlier stages of schooling. It also relates to the consequences arising from areas of activity in schools that have been underdeveloped thus far, such as **learning independence and responsibility**.

* A similar perspective on this matter is proposed by K. Illeris (2006), who argues that the specificity of adult learning lies in the presence of three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social.

Learning independence and responsibility emerge in contexts that foster both social* (Category C) and didactic independence. Didactically, this involves planning one's own work, perceiving the fulfilment of institutional requirements as an ethical issue (when respondents express that they not only have to, but want to do it), participating in decisions about what they wish to learn (Category D), and offering support to others (Category E).

3. The orientation towards knowledge in studying, where one acts both as its user and consumer (Category B), within a culture of **continuous acceleration**, as H. Rosa (2020) describes, **does not exclude moments of slowing down in the learning process**. These moments are driven both by the individual's desire for simplification and the organisation of knowledge supported by the authority of institutions and academic teachers (Category D). However, it should be noted that they also arise from the need to build relationships with others and to care for one's own well-being (Category E).
4. In its description, studying sometimes extends beyond its didactic meaning. "Didactic" refers to the typical context of formal education, where methods and tools are employed to acquire knowledge and skills aimed at improving qualifications under the supervision of a teacher and institution, with this process designed to **empower the learning process**. What becomes most important is everything that occurs between participants in the educational setting on cognitive, social, and emotional levels (Category E). J. Hausner (2020) argues that we live in a reality without a blueprint for practising education and without a single model for what constitutes a quality study experience. In this context, all we can do is rely on intergenerational learning processes, collaboratively searching for new models and strategies, fostering cognitive curiosity, and negotiating perspectives. According to Hausner, we can shape and enhance learning through partnership and collaboration, and engage in the "re-institutionalisation" of educational institutions (from

* An excellent example of empirical research illustrating the origins of deficits in social and civic skills in schools is the monograph *Kompetencje społeczne i obywatelskie w podstawach programowych kształcenia ogólnego* [Social and Civic Competences in the Core Curriculum of General Education] (see: Kopińska, V., & Solarczyk-Szwec, H. (Eds.), 2017).

primary schools to universities) by expanding the learning sphere to include resources from cities, associations, organisations, and various communities. In the language of andragogy, as we attempt to capture this idea, it involves the development of competencies understood as dispositions for learning, rather than the acquisition of specific skills.

As stated in the introduction to this article, the aim was to arrive at the identification of these issues. It should be noted that, for now, it takes the form of a provisional map, with intersections and connections marked at the points where categories of description have been formed. Staying within this stylistic framework, it can be said that the emerging pathways have distinct markers: (1) studying as an element of lifestyle; (2) studying as the practice of learning independence and responsibility; (3) studying as existing between the constant acceleration driven by civilisational development and the acceptance of slowing down, motivated by individual well-being and/or care for someone else's well-being; and (4) studying as an attempt to empower the learning process. Where these paths will lead us, we hope to reveal in future works, as we examine them attentively and critically.

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