

Being the Subject of Education – Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Experiences of Students With Disabilities, Their Teachers and Parents

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ABSTRACT:

Educational changes resulting from sanitary orders during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the personal freedom and sense of subjectivity among participants in educational processes. The aim of the study was to identify the personal experiences of the sense of being the subject of education of three groups: students with special educational needs, including disabled students, their teachers and parents, during and after the pandemic. The article applies the concept of a sense of subjectivity, which includes 4 dimensions: a sense of: 1) freedom of choice, 2) agency, 3) responsibility for one's actions, and 4) interpersonal contacts based on equality and partnership. Reconstructions of the experience of being a subject of education were carried out within the framework of qualitative study (focus group interviews), which was a part of the Polish national *Psychological and Pedagogical Support Programme for Students and Teachers*, conducted by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw and partners. The article discusses 4 dimensions of the sense of subjectivity in three groups of respondents. The study revealed a diversity of experiences. It was found that students with special educational needs experienced a low sense of subjectivity in education; however, the determinants of this condition were not only the result of the peculiarities of education in times of the pandemic, but above all to the specificity of the educational system itself. Among teachers and parents, the sense of subjectivity was higher and characterised by other qualitative indicators (mainly in the area of the sense of responsibility and agency).

Keywords: sense of subjectivity, subject, special education, COVID-19, special educational needs (SEN) students, disability, parents, teachers

INTRODUCTION

The concepts present in special education regarding a multidimensional perspective on disability emphasise the context of the subjectivity¹ of the person experiencing the disability or developmental disorder (and related aspects such as dignity, autonomy, identity) (Goldan et al., 2022; Niemi & Mietola, 2017; Podgórska-Jachnik, 2009; Rozek & Stobäus, 2017; Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2011; Szczupał, 2008). The subjectivist view of the human being includes humanistic thinking about one's autonomy, inner independence and responsibility for one's own behaviour, as well as the right to shape one's own destiny (Głodkowska, 2014; Kosakowski, 2009). Subjectivity, in the present model, constitutes one of the basic attributes of a human being, while support, care, rehabilitation or education are an absolute imperative for the subjective treatment of people with disabilities (Żółkowska, 2008). All educational and therapeutic activities should create a supportive environment that activates the person, his or her need of participation and self-fulfilment, making him or her aware of his or her potential for agency, for influencing and taking responsibility for his or her own life. One of the key roles in this concept is played by the family of the person with a disability. In addition, it is important to support each person in his or her development process through a variety of educational offers tailored to his or her needs and real capabilities, as well as the existence of relationships between different actors in the sphere of education based on the principles of equal status and rights, acceptance and understanding, respect and tolerance (children, parents, teachers, therapists, headmasters). From the point of view of special education, the idea of subjectivity is therefore expressed, among other things, through the possibility of receiving education in all types of schools, according to individual developmental and educational needs and predispositions, through the adaptation of the content, methods and organisation of education to the psychophysical

characteristics of the students, as well as the possibility of benefiting from pedagogical, psychological and therapeutic care and special forms of teaching (Krause, 2010). In Poland, education and support for students with diverse educational and developmental needs takes place in segregationist (special institutions and schools) as well as mainstream educational institutions. The predominant form of education is inclusive education. In the school year 2021/2022, a total of 162122 students with disabilities and social maladjustment were educated in primary and secondary schools, of whom 112145 in mainstream schools² (Statistics Poland, 2022).

The turn towards a humanistic approach revealed the need to ask questions about, among other things, the essence of subjectivity and what it means to be a subject. *Teacher subjectivity* is understood as freedom of the teacher to act, which is expressed, for example, in setting goals, taking initiatives and making decisions that improve the quality of the work of students, the class or the school as a whole. *Student subjectivity*, on the other hand, means that the student is able to make choices about roles, tasks, methods and partners for school activity. The student makes his or her own decisions, influencing the course of his or her actions and experiences the consequences, having a sense of responsibility for his or her actions (Borawska, 2009). *The subjectivity of the parent*, which is important, especially in the context of building partnerships between the family home and the (pre-)school environment, is expressed, among other things, in the parent having equal rights to teachers in decision-making, the freedom to form assessments and present their views and positions on the education process and its effects, in the sense of common goals and relative equality of partners, as well as in the possibility to participate in shared dialogue on curriculum content and the directions, principles and methods of work within the scope of education and upbringing (Szempruch, 2009).

One operational model of sense of subjectivity that can be used in study practices is that of Maria Nowicka-Kozioł (2000). It captures the following components of the sense of subjectivity:

¹ In Anglo-Saxon terminology, the concept of "subjectivity" and "subject" has a slightly different meaning than in Central European cultures. For this reason it is difficult to find a suitable equivalent for the construct "podmiotowość", "podmiot" developed in Poland. The latter is most similar to the English "personhood" understood as "status of a conscious, rational and independent partner" with a strong emphasis on the aspect of causality or agency. However, taking into account the multidimensional approach to "subjectivity" and "subject" contained in Donald E. Hall's publication "Subjectivity" (2004), in the present text these lexemes are applied. For better understanding of the phenomenon in question, the first part of the article explains how to understand it, along with an operational model of the concept of "sense of subjectivity" (Nowicka-Kozioł 2000).

² According to the Regulation of 9 August 2017 *on the conditions of organizing education, upbringing and care for children and young people with disabilities, social maladjustment and at risk of social maladjustment* (Journal of Laws of 2020, item. 1309; Journal of Law, 2020), students with disabilities in Poland include: children and young people who are: deaf, hard of hearing, blind, visually impaired, with motor disabilities, including aphasia, with mild, moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, with autism, including Asperger's syndrome, and with multiple disabilities.

1. sense of freedom of choice – conscious decision-making and purposeful management of one's behaviour;
2. sense of agency – i.e. influence on the occurrence or non-occurrence of external situations;
3. sense of responsibility for one's actions;
4. a sense of equal partner interpersonal contacts.

Educational changes resulting from sanitary orders during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly encroached upon the personal freedom and sense of subjectivity of participants in educational processes. In Poland, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020. One of the first decisions to counteract the spread of coronavirus was to suspend teaching and upbringing as well as childcare activities in schools and educational institutions from 12 to 24 March 2020. Subsequently, it was made compulsory to perform educational tasks by means of distance education methods and techniques. School principals (including in special schools), in cooperation with teachers, decided how to organise remote learning, choosing appropriate solutions and tools. A flexible system of distance learning was created, adapted to the needs of almost 5 million students from approximately 24,500 schools (Report of the Minister of National Education; MEN, 2020). Taking into account public expectations, from 4 May, the process of gradual reopening of selected types of schools and educational institutions began, with the appropriate sanitary regime, especially those providing classes with a child/student with a certified need for early development support and special education (special institutions were ones with the relatively shortest time of obligatory remote education). Starting in September of the 2020/2021 school year, schools were given the opportunity to implement different educational options: a) functioning in the conditions of traditional education in the institution's building (providing this type of education for the youngest children, from grades I-III and SEN students) – these solutions were most often preferred in special schools, b) education in the remote mode (learning with the use of modern technologies at home, offered to students in the higher grades of primary schools: 4-8 and secondary schools), c) hybrid mode education (mixed mode, giving the possibility to quickly switch from in-school to remote learning or to combine them at the same time), which was dedicated to students with an individual learning status, those in quarantine and those with chronic illnesses. Students with a statement of special educational needs were given the opportunity to be safely educated in all educational activities in a traditional way, using distance learning

methods and techniques or in a mixed manner, depending on the needs and preferences of the child and their parents. From the 2021/2022 school year, all children and young people (including those with special developmental and educational needs) attended full in-school education. Students without symptoms of infection or infectious disease and where quarantine or home isolation was not imposed were allowed to attend school. On 28 March 2022, the obligation to wear masks was lifted and the state of epidemic emergency caused by SARS-CoV-2 infections was lifted in Poland on 1 July 2023.

In the study dedicated to the functioning of schools and students with special educational needs during that period, the focus is on organisational forms of education, including technological aspects, cooperation between school and family, teachers' practices, including those of special education teachers in the field of education and rehabilitation, assessments of the effectiveness of introduced teaching and support strategies in remote form, changes in students' functioning from the perspective of teachers and parents, and parents' experiences (study review after: Dycht, 2022, Śmiechowska-Petrovskij et al., 2022). Little space is devoted to reconstructing the personal experiences of the respondents, including the category of subjectivity. Therefore, the aim of the research presented in this article was to identify how students with special educational needs, including disabled students, their teachers and parents, reconstruct their personal experiences of being a subject of education during the pandemic (isolation, remote and hybrid education) and after the pandemic period.

METHODS

The study was conducted within the framework of the *Psychological and Pedagogical Support Programme for Students and Teachers* (MEiN/2021/DPI/76; MEiN, 2021)), funded by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science. The aim of the programme was to help combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by subjects in the educational system. The programme was implemented by the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and its partners, from 01.06.2021 till 30.11.2022. One of its components – in addition to psychological and pedagogical counselling, training, scientific and educational materials and the activity of support coordinators in the regions – was the implementation of scientific study (Śmiechowska-Petrovskij et al., 2022). The study results presented in the present article are a part of a broader quantitative and qualitative study.

The present study was carried out in a qualitative paradigm, using a focus group interview (FGI) technique. The aim of the study was to identify the personal experiences of the sense of being a subject of education of three groups: students with special educational needs, including students with disabilities, their teachers and parents, during the pandemic period (lockdown, remote and hybrid education) and after the pandemic. The study was conducted by means of distance communication (video interviews on the Cisco Webex platform) with groups of 2 to 6 people. Interviews lasted up to 120 minutes. The study was conducted among: students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities from primary (3 interviews, 16 people) and secondary special schools (3 interviews, 13 people), and students with disabilities and other special educational needs (autistic spectrum disorders, hearing impairment, motor impairment, social maladjustment) from mainstream primary schools (3 interviews 15 people), and secondary schools (2 interviews, 12 people). The study was also conducted among the teachers of the students under study: special education teachers, working in special education centres and special schools (3 interviews, 13 participants), as well as special education teachers, co-organizing the educational process of students with special educational needs (SEN) in inclusive education, working with students with autistic spectrum disorders, hearing dysfunction, motor dysfunction, intellectual disability and social maladjustment), participating in the study (4 interviews, 20 participants). Parents of the aforementioned students were also interviewed (5 interviews, 20 participants). The respondents came from 4 regions. The article contains excerpts from statements made by people representing particular study groups. The code symbols placed next to them denote in the following order: type of institution /type of study group (SP – primary school, SPP – secondary school, SOSW – special educational centres, U-student, NI – student with intellectual disability, N-teacher, NW – inclusive education teacher, R-Parent) / region (1-lubuskie, 2- lubelskie, 3-warمیński-mazurskie, 4 - małopolskie) / number of the examined person.

The study was conducted between March and June 2022. The interviews were focused on the following topics: 1. experiences from the beginning of the pandemic; 2. relationships with other participants in the educational process during and after the pandemic; 3. current post-pandemic experiences in relation to school; 4. vision of the school of the future.

The interviews were recorded observing the principles of ethics. All respondents consented to participate and

to be recorded (underage participants took part in the study with their parents' consent), in addition, they were allowed not to reveal their faces and not to speak when they did not want to. The next step was to transcribe the recordings. The verbal data were coded based on the concept of sense of subjectivity and its 4 dimensions (Nowicka-Kozioł, 2000).

RESULTS

Subjectivity: sense of freedom of choice – conscious decision-making and purposeful management of one's behaviour

Freedom is the ability to choose and not being subject to coercion. A person is free when and insofar as he can choose. The spread of the pandemic and the isolation measures during COVID-19 have significantly reduced said freedom.

SEN students reacted to the closure of schools and the transition to remote education with an amplitude of emotions (ranging from pleasant, such as joy at not going to school, to difficult ones: fear, apprehension, anxiety). A difference emerged between students without intellectual disabilities, educated in mainstream schools, and students with intellectual disabilities, educated in special schools. The latter mentioned difficult emotions more frequently and associated them primarily with imposed social isolation – restricted contact with peers and teachers.

Positive emotions: joy, enthusiasm were associated by some students from mainstream schools with the opportunity to decide on their own time. Paradoxically, the injunction to stay at home and study remotely loosened the discipline of daily routine and students were happy not to have to get up in the morning, to be able to stay in their pyjamas, to eat meals at different times, to play online games, to communicate with their peers through social media and communicators – these were the activities they undertook on their own (their parents controlled them less due to work). In the first stage of remote education, lessons took place in asynchronous form (uploading materials and assignments, sending them back by the students), only later – in the form of online lessons synchronously on various platforms such as Google Meet, MS Teams and others. These two forms also differentiated the range of student choices. They saw asynchronous education as more convenient, enabling them to get better grades with less effort. They pointed to working collaboratively while completing individual assignments, using online resources rather than completing assignments on their own. This type of work also freed up time, with

some respondents mentioning that they could choose to do things that they usually did not have time for (e.g. playing games, reading), as one respondent mentioned:

I had more time for my own activities. I was especially involved in drawing, playing games, and talking to my friends. (SP/SPE/U/3/B3)

There was also a small number of respondents who used this time for additional learning. Synchronous education, on the other hand, although perceived as more effective from the point of view of real learning outcomes rather than grades (appreciation of the fact that teachers could explain learning content, tasks), was potentially a greater constraint on their freedom. Thus, some students chose not to turn on the cameras (officially with the excuse of technical difficulties), not to take notes, not to do physical exercises during PE classes

To be honest, most of the time I didn't take notes. 70% of my notebook is drawings. It's like that a lot, a lot, a lot, but not what you need. And so it was nothing interesting at the time. (...) I either listened to the teachers or I didn't. I either took notes or I didn't. (SP/SPE-NI/U/1/B5)

Students consciously opted for resistance strategies (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006; McLaren, 1991). They clearly revealed their feeling of the oppressiveness of the educational system (which was already present before the pandemic). Students indicated a sense of pressure related to educational results, the vision of external examinations, and some also noted that their experiences of relationships with teachers had oppressive features (the teacher as a holder of power over the student, controlling the latter by giving grades – not always perceived as fair ones). Remote education, as a suspension of the previous order of things, therefore acted liberatingly. It enabled arbitrariness, devoid of a long-term perspective (anticipation of consequences).

Resistance strategies – consciously deciding with regard to one's behaviour – are also evident in the treatment of masks as a restriction of their freedom, and not complying with the obligation to cover the face (not wearing masks). The abolition of the order to wear masks was seen by the majority of respondents as a practical end to the pandemic

of course we didn't want to wear them from the beginning, so yes, that's why I said that 28 March is then the end of the pandemic. (SP/SPE/U/3/B2)

In the case of students with intellectual disabilities, educated in special schools, a different experience was

observed. They perceive school as a friendly place where they form bonds with teachers, students, have the opportunity to experience new situations, learn about nature, art – school situations are dynamic for them. They rarely mentioned their decisions, instead they reported their emotions. Although the pattern of their daily life had also changed, the change in routines had a negative trait. They often suspended their activities, lay in bed, did nothing without external motivation. This is particularly evident in the accounts of their parents: they emphasise their children's inertia, apathy, lack of initiative. In the case of this group of respondents, it is difficult to find indicators of conscious decision-making and management of their behaviour.

The analyses carried out show that the feeling of subjectivity in the aspect of feeling free to choose – conscious decision-making and purposeful management of one's behaviour concerned only a part of the students surveyed and referred to the freedom to decide about one's body, its location and the freedom to manage one's attention. A significant proportion of the students surveyed revealed resistance strategies to the perceived power from the educational system (oppressiveness of the grading system, the education programme and the teachers).

As far as teachers – special education teachers – were concerned, a nagging sensation in the initial period of the pandemic was the feeling of impotence and limitation as well as the inability to make choices – as to where to stay (isolation), as to the form and way of implementing the educational process (limitation of institutional and didactic resources). Teachers from special schools pointed out the difficulty in establishing communication with students with more profound disabilities, which, due to their characteristics, very much limit social contact and project distraction:

(...) even afterwards, when we were able to connect, the deaf children still preferred to function based on worksheets; they thought that for them an online lesson was a lost lesson, they preferred to work through something themselves. (SOSW/N/FGI/2/B1)

When learning remotely, students were more uncomfortable. They did not want to join Meet. They preferred us to send them materials by email. Our students with autism are non-speaking – here the teachers had more of a problem. (SOSW/N/1/B3)

The educational situation did not improve with the lack of or poor access to the Internet in rural areas, insufficient competence, lack of time among the students' parents to handle the multimedia used in online education,

which made it difficult or impossible to establish remote contact or transfer classroom materials. Teachers from mainstream schools emphasised difficult accommodation and material conditions of their students, especially in large families.

In spite of the significant organisational challenges and constraints on the functioning of the students and the first negative personal emotional experiences related to the pandemic, the teachers consciously made decisions to intensify their efforts to adapt the content, methods and organisation of education to the predispositions and educational needs of their students. They deliberately guided their pedagogical behaviour in such a way that, even at the expense of their own well-being, they would even more fully enable their students to pursue their education despite the pandemic. They decided to record lessons and instructional videos for students and their parents instead of sending teaching materials, translating learning content and solving problems over the phone or via a variety of apps (Classroom, Meet, Ms Teams, Zoom, Messenger, Wordwall, Learning Apps). They also worked in asynchronous mode (Librus, Vulcan, email). Distribution of learning materials proved to be quite a challenge. So all possible means were used – including directly reaching the child's home with a packet of prepared worksheets. For teachers, these conscious and deliberate actions had a positive impact on their sense of personal freedom of choice and professional satisfaction.

As in the case of educators, parents of SEN students perceived the sudden and unexpected onset of the pandemic mainly in catastrophic terms, as evidenced by the terms such as: shock, trauma, horror or punishment in their narratives. It is difficult to find sentences in their statements that attest to the sense of freedom of choice they felt at the time. Solutions to many issues related to the education and rehabilitation of children were developed and implemented without prior public consultation. Particularly in the early days of the pandemic, parents were therefore faced with numerous challenges in supporting their children's development at home, often creating therapeutic aids on their own and organising their child's rehabilitation process based solely on instructions, tasks and worksheets provided electronically by specialists. Thus, they almost automatically had to become overnight their children's teachers and therapists. However, the pandemic turned out to be a period changing over time, with a gradual stabilisation, hence, as the weeks of the pandemic progressed, parents of children with special educational needs were progressively more able to make autonomous decisions being the result of

a profit and loss balance related to their child's education and rehabilitation. Consequently, due to time constraints, among other reasons, many parents consciously opted out of having their children fill out the electronic worksheets they received, while others intensified their efforts towards a more flexible form of work (e.g. *home office*), enabling them to become more involved in their child's education and rehabilitation. In turn, for some parents who were able to do so due to their socio-economic status, the pandemic proved to be an impulse to give up work altogether and devote themselves to raising and caring for their child. Moreover, many parents of children attending special institutions, which worked without major changes to the sanitary regime, also made the decision, due to the perceived fear for their children's health, to leave them at home and pursue educational activities in a hybrid mode, among others

I was afraid to send Patryk to school, he stayed practically until the end of the school year with me.
(R/SPE/2/B3)

Sense of agency – i.e., influence on the occurrence or non-existence of external situations

In their accounts of the onset of the pandemic, its duration and the return to post-pandemic school reality, SEN students manifested virtually no sense of agency.

The most distinct area of agency that could be identified in the statements of some of the respondents was that concerning the immediate future: related to preparing for the matura exam [final high school examination; transl. note] and/or obtaining a professional certificate (in the case of students from vocational schools):

Right now I am living my matura exam preparation. But, well I think I am able to embrace one of these things so that I don't mess it up (...). So I try to focus on just preparing for the matura exam (...). And maybe some personal development as well.
(SPP/SPE/U/3/B3)

In a few statements, there appeared motifs indicating rather a lack of belief in their ability to influence external situations, mainly because they had repeatedly experienced the ineffectiveness of the support system (e.g. in a few statements on peer violence, they noted that aggressive students were not removed from schools and that the measures taken were not sufficient to protect the victims, resulting in a fear to report abuse, the consequence of which could be revenge from the perpetrators). In contrast, when experiencing violation of school rules (e.g. not exceeding the number of tests in one day), they in-

licated that teachers did not bother to comply with the regulations. One student expressed this suggestively:

All we can do is complain. Complaining did not help, even legal knowledge did not help.
(SP/SPE/U/3/B2)

There were also opinions that some changes have to be systemic – they are not on the side of the students or even the teachers or the management.

Even when students were asked about their vision of the school of the future, to determine the scope of change, they were very cautious in their statements. Again, there appeared a difference between students with intellectual disabilities, educated in special schools, and students without intellectual disabilities from mainstream schools. The former had great difficulty in indicating the modifications needed, most often stating that they would not change anything. A single comment was made about increasing the time of outdoor activities. Mainstream students, on the other hand, made some suggestions, but these were mostly reactive rather than creative. Students experience a great deal of overload at school. In their statements about it, they focus on the reduction of the core curriculum, the change/abolition of the grading system, the rearrangement of the school space, the change of teaching methods and school communication. They unequivocally see the grading system as harmful, creating pressure, unhealthy competition. However, the students surveyed do not feel that they could be initiators or creators of change in the educational environment.

In the case of teachers, the sense of agency as a component of the sense of being a subject of education can be observed mainly in the area of proactive measures in response to the difficulties manifested during the pandemic period. This required teachers to assess the pedagogical situations that occurred and respond adequately in the context of: recognising, understanding, structuring and prioritising the events triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibly using the resources available to meet the challenges of remote education and, above all, realising that any demands, limitations of education in the era of coronavirus infection are worth the effort and commitment for the sake of the SEN student. The teachers' sense of controllability and resourcefulness was manifested in the effective creation of teaching and therapeutic activities using IT in face-to-face and asynchronous contact, through differentiated applications, or in a stationary form – convenient for students with more profound developmental disorders:

I have such (experience) that the teacher can cope with everything. (...). In hindsight, you can say that

we really managed this pandemic problem well. (...). These different regulations that systematised (the work) and the aids that finally started to appear were very necessary to perform this work with children at an increasingly better level. (SP/NW/2/B1)

They are also aware of the internal and external resources acquired, which positively influenced their level of resourcefulness and agency in their teaching work, such as increased IT competences, innovative skills, the use of new technologies to make traditional lessons more attractive:

we enriched ourselves with the ability to quickly find various additional aids, videos, games that would enrich our lessons, attract the attention of the students and this paid off, these skills simply stayed with us. (NSOSW/1/B3)

On the other hand, the focus interviews revealed limited spheres of influence for special education teachers: reduced psychological and digital well-being under conditions of social isolation and increased use of IT, variability in interpersonal relationships taking place using new technologies. Teachers also showed little causal competence in terms of their ability to separate their private and professional lives: most special education teachers experienced a lack of time for themselves and their families. Therefore, the vision of the future school, in the opinion of many of them, is mainly based on compensating for deficits: in the narratives, they voiced requests focused on: systemic changes in the area of educational development management, organisation of learning, special needs didactics and enriching the forms of necessary support.

Parents' experience of their sense of agency, on the other hand, concerns areas related to their involvement in their children's education, heightened by worry about the possibility of later gaps in their children's knowledge and skills, as well as their determination to overcome the numerous obstacles that arise during this time. Most of the parents interviewed felt the need to respond to both the observed and anticipated effects of the pandemic. Although the actions taken, according to the parents' statements, were not related to their ability to design and implement systemic changes (macro scale) and were limited to the home environment (micro scale), including organisation of learning spaces, providing equipment and teaching resources and ongoing assistance with tasks and exercises, they undoubtedly made a significant contribution to creating optimal conditions for children's development and education.

Mum was demanding and enforced certain things (...) Mum had to become a teacher, and there were no crayons at home, no plasticine – and all the shops in the pandemic were closed at the beginning and you had to search and live by your wits and it was actually us – the parents – who organised these children's work. (R/SPE/4/B4)

An expression of the parents' perceived need for agency, as well as the need for freedom of choice and partnership in deciding on the goals, principles, methods and shape of the education system, is also found in a number of postulates they formulated with respect to the vision of possible changes in the Polish post-pandemic school. In them, parents expressed, among other things, the need for teachers to be more reflective in terms of understanding the diverse needs of children, to intensify social integration activities, to increase the range and size of specialised classes or to reduce class size and make groups of children with disabilities in integrated classes more homogeneous.

I would like a school where they will look at children's needs. They will notice them and not treat children in such a way that if my son is not able to sit at his desk, then he is naughty. (R/SPE/3/B1)

It should be added, however, that to a large extent the parents' sense of agency seems to be determined by factors which significantly influence the whole family system, such as: the type of disability of the child, the number of children, the family's place of residence, the parents' occupational activity and the type of educational institution attended by the child. In this context, parents raising children with a relatively high level of psychosocial functioning, living in places with better access to treatment and rehabilitation infrastructure, being able to reconcile home and work duties due to the nature of their work, as well as parents of children attending kindergartens and special schools, where remote education was present for significantly shorter time than for children from mainstream schools, were in a much more favourable situation.

Sense of responsibility for one's actions

SEN students – participants in the research – feel a responsibility for their performance mainly in the educational area – school record. They know that effort is necessary to achieve certain results.

Some respondents did not take responsibility for their actions during lockdowns, suffering the consequences when they returned to school (unlearned material, worse

grades, gaps in knowledge and skills). A lack of responsibility for the process and a passive responsibility for the results (responsibility borne – passive state³) can be identified here. For this group of students, the physical return to school was associated with anxiety, stress and the impostor syndrome.

Other students, on the other hand, both during lockdowns and when they returned to school, did put effort into the process (took responsibility for the activity – active state), but at the same time it was a fairly common experience for them that their effort did not result in the expected outcome in terms of grades, school performance. They felt that it was the school situations that significantly affected their grades, not their state of preparation (e.g. too many tests in one day, stress resulting from oral exams, getting lower grades due to minor mistakes resulting from carelessness; they indicated that at home or when working on their own in class they did well with the material in question, and during formal tests they did worse). This could be described as a feeling of being held accountable, although the source of the situation was beyond them.

The students' statements suggest that they have a narrow scope of freedom to decide on their own actions and a low sense of agency. They depend on external instances (teachers, parents), which lowers their feeling of being responsible for their own actions.

As far as the teachers surveyed were concerned, responsibility was mainly expressed in the efforts to implement differentiated education to the fullest extent possible in the era of the coronavirus pandemic. This required providing each developmentally different student with the best possible conditions for functioning. In the first and later waves of the pandemic, the student support in mainstream and special schools took a variety of forms, depending on the organisational capacity of the institution, the communication and technological competence of the teachers, and the preferences, abilities and needs of SEN students. The degree to which they were integrated, but also the level of responsible teacher involvement, often determined the quality of special education in COVID conditions:

³ Responsibility, following Ingarden (1987), is understood as: 1. bearing responsibility for something (responsibility borne - passive state); 2. taking responsibility for something (responsibility taken - active state); 3. being held responsible (the source of the situation is outside the agent and is aimed at causing changes in his or her personal structure); 4. acting responsibly occurring with the individual's full understanding of the situation and awareness of the motives and values underlying the action (active state).

We supported each other, we talked to each other, we consulted certain behaviours of the children (...). There was commitment from all sides and cooperation. (SP/NW/3/B3)

With a high sense of responsibility for the student (responsibility actively undertaken) and for the continuation of education under stressful conditions (responsibility borne), they consciously undertook the arduous task of preparing packets of teaching materials (individually tailored to the needs of each student, resulting in their own overwork) and often spontaneously, personally distributed them to parents or forwarded them by traditional mail or the institution's online platform. They worked patiently and for a long time to overcome difficulties of information and communication nature when working with students who experienced problems in the communication process and deprivation of rehabilitation needs (deaf, autistic, non-speaking, with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities).

A feature of accountability is the voluntariness and awareness of the task commitments undertaken. From the narratives presented, there emerges a picture of committed, caring teachers, often performing their time-consuming professional commitments with dedication at the expense of their private lives (constant availability). This type of behaviour is an expression of the teachers' concern and conscious responsibility for the SEN student and his or her family environment. It indicates active, responsible action that takes place with a full understanding of the situation on the part of the individual and with an awareness of the motives and values underlying the action. The parents' responsibility for the actions taken during the pandemic becomes apparent not so much in terms of taking responsibility for specific events (passive state), but rather in terms of a series of initiated responsible actions in response to difficult situations (active state). As in the case of teachers, the involvement in the process of creating a learning environment adapted to the varying psychophysical capacities of students with special educational needs is here one example among many of the conscious, mature and thoughtful actions taken by their parents aimed at creating a scaffolding for their children's development, especially during the unpredictable period of the pandemic. In the narratives of the parents interviewed, there are many statements regarding, among other things, the efforts they made to minimise their children's fear and to explain to them the context of the changes they were experiencing, the limitations and restrictions resulting from the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

I was at first looking for information on how to start a conversation about the pandemic so that it would not frighten him and so that it would have some effect and so that the right information would be communicated (R/SPE/2/B1)

An expression of the parents' sense of responsibility for activities related to the educational process is also their high degree of reflectiveness and insightfulness in analysing the currently observed consequences of pandemic education and designing possible solutions. Indeed, parents pointed out a number of both negative and positive consequences of the restrictions introduced over many months, and also recognised the need for changes in the organisation of psychological and pedagogical support in kindergartens, schools and institutions.

What else... children after the pandemic needed to talk to a teacher, to a psychologist – this was missing... I personally think that one psychologist per school is not enough. There should be more. There should be conversations with such kids, because the pandemic didn't affect them well. (R/SPE/3/B2)

Sense of equal partner interpersonal contacts

In the interviews conducted, statements concerning the relationship between students and their peers, teachers and parents occupy a lot of space. Apart from a few cases of pupils (at risk of social maladjustment and with the spectrum of autistic disorders) who indicated an imbalance in their relationships with teachers, perceived as unfair, most of the pupils interviewed indicated that their interpersonal contacts, especially with adults, were satisfying and they experienced support and felt that they could count on them. They did not raise the issue of asymmetrical relationships. At the same time, interpersonal contacts were the area of functioning in the pandemic and post-pandemic period that evoked a great deal of contrasting emotion among the respondents.

Remote education resulted in students with intellectual disabilities educated in special schools suffering a decrease in well-being, experiencing isolation and a lack of meaningful interaction with both peers and teachers. The majority of students were unable (infrastructural barriers), unwilling (due to fatigue and low computer efficiency) or incapable (technical problems) of using online activities, if offered, and thus lost their connection with teachers and therapists. The return to the institutions by this group of students was associated with joy, enthusiasm resulting from meetings with teachers and peers. In small-sized classes in special schools, the opportunity for strong

bonds is greater, and individual work in rehabilitation sessions provides a feeling of greater personal support.

Students without intellectual disabilities from mainstream schools reported a change in their relationship with teachers. Most of the respondents experienced greater interest on their part, and the forms of contact had changed: students dared to communicate by email and messaging apps (the times of contact and the degree to which it was formalised had changed). In addition, many of them indicated that online lessons had made it possible to talk to teachers about more than just school topics.

In terms of peer experience, for many of the students surveyed, the period of isolation translated to reduced interpersonal contact, a change in the form of this contact (to online). Some respondents created a kind of online schoolyard with their peers, where they would meet, play games, exchange GIFs or memes. However, in the majority of statements, it can be noted that the students limited the number of people they interacted with (in relation to school situations) and indicated 'closing in on themselves', less willingness to share their experiences. The majority of respondents felt happy to physically return to school and appreciated the opportunity to meet friends in person, as well as spoke of improved relationships. Unfortunately, for some respondents (particularly those with autistic spectrum disorders), the bonds lost during lockdowns were not rebuilt when they returned to schools. The pattern of social relationships in classrooms had changed. Some respondents recalled feeling lonely.

A large proportion of respondents indicated a change in their relationship with their parents. Students from both mainstream and special schools noted and appreciated their parents' help with remote education. Many students were positive about their relationship with their parents, noting no significant change, despite being forced to spend more time together during isolation. Some, however, observed a deterioration in their relationship with their parents as a result of the demands placed on students – demands on learning and grades, but also on household responsibilities.

The qualitative analysis of the focus interviews established that, in the opinion of the majority of special educators, the quality of interaction with the parents of students was dependent on their interest and involvement in the teaching and learning process of their child. Parents were for the most part active, mobilised their children to participate in online and in-class activities, and not infrequently took initiatives to diversify and adapt remote lessons. In the teachers' narratives, mutual relationships were dominated by respect, understanding, educational

partnership and common goals. Refusal to cooperate occurred in isolated, individual cases.

With regard to pupils, in the first phase of the pandemic, teachers quite often reported forms of active cooperation: pupils willingly complied with requests and instructions, showed great interest in IT, diligently filled in their work sheets, did their homework, maintained convenient e-mail and telephone contact with their tutors, not infrequently establishing genuine interpersonal contacts in the educational dialogue. Over time, the commitment, school activity of SEN pupils weakened considerably and the pandemic time highlighted negative behaviours (resistive reactions, aggression, rebellion, school passivity, cheating).

For almost all teachers from special and mainstream schools, the relationship with their principals meant active interactions. The educators value the principals' commitment to solving technical difficulties and complex situations in their relations with parents and students, their high organisational competence, the emotional and financial support received. The principals are praised for their good organisation of remote work, their understanding of the special needs of students.

In contrast, cooperation between teachers was multi-layered and varied with a predominance of committed, authentic interpersonal relationships. According to the majority of special education teachers, their mutual interactions were good and partner-like. What prevailed was a shared experience, mutual kindness and helpfulness:

My relationship with the therapists and teachers was very positive. It was actually a very difficult time for us, but we all supported each other. (NSOSW/2/B4)

In contrast, in the case of teachers from mainstream schools, the research revealed a range of interactions and a diversity of attitudes resulting from teachers' positive or negative attitudes towards inclusive education. At the early stages of education, this interaction was positive, with a sense of mutual respect and equality, whereas in the higher grades, understanding the pupils' specific needs by teachers of specific subjects proved problematic.

As far as the parents of SEN pupils are concerned, the pandemic period turned out to be a testing time for the interaction within the framework of educational partnership assuming a friendly, co-responsible and goal-oriented relationship. The qualitative analysis of the collected material, however, does not provide for any clear summary of the parents' assessment of their own relationships with other participants in the educational process. On a global scale, in order to provide parents with a sense of equal

contact in a multi-stakeholder educational partnership, there was certainly a lack of public consultations during which they would have the opportunity to express their observations, concerns and ideas in relation to the need for changes in the educational system resulting from the pandemic situation. At the level of the school-family home relationship, on the other hand, many parents emphasised that during the pandemic period they maintained regular and satisfactory contact with teachers initiated by both parties. In this relationship, they felt they were equal actors, as evidenced by their declared ability to report emerging needs related to their child's education and rehabilitation on an ongoing basis and to participate in the search for optimal solutions to meet them. This is confirmed, among other things, by the parents' statements in which they testify to their appreciation of the teachers' concern and efforts to provide quality education in difficult pandemic conditions.

The teacher has five of them, she sent the presentation every day, prepared the materials and contacted us on a daily basis. So much so that when Nina had a crisis of some kind and we were in contact on WhatsApp, the teacher pretended to call Nina spontaneously because she felt that 'Nineczka' (that's a pet name she calls her) needed it. The teacher did her job in 100% and even more than that, she earned great respect from me. I don't know if, if I had been healthy (and I was ill), I would have been able to do equally well as a teacher, honestly – a revelation! (R/SPE/4/B2)

On the other hand, negative evaluations also feature in the parents' narratives. Some of the parents interviewed perceive the pandemic period as a time of marked weakening of the relationship with teachers, resulting above all from the lack of regular face-to-face contacts, which are conducive to building dialogue.

Regarding those contacts before, especially that contact between parents and teachers – two or three words every day with the teacher are important and this daily contact makes it easier for us to handle our own child. And that hasn't returned – that's not there yet – at least in my school. And that's what I miss. (R/SPE/4/B1)

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The analyses conducted offered, on the one hand, new knowledge about the experience of the self as a subject of education by students with special educational needs,

including disabilities, their teachers and parents, but, on the other hand, allowed a deeper understanding of the quantitative data, provided in other studies, about the functioning of participants in educational processes in the area of special educational needs during and after the pandemic. Previous research have revealed difficulties in the implementation and course of remote education, due to the change in the form of education and the limited opportunities for accessing education and health services especially in groups of students with special educational needs (ALLFIE, 2020; Daniels et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; Oster et al., 2021; Special Needs Jungle, 2020; Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021), especially students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Al-Mamari et al., 2021; Jeste et al., 2020; Zamkowska, 2022). Increased difficulties in daily functioning have been reported in individuals on the autism spectrum as a result of the break with schema therapy (Fong et al., 2020; Lugo-Marín et al., 2021). In addition, previous studies have also highlighted the challenges posed by digital learning tools, mental health issues and the needs of students with additional complex disabilities (Rosenblum et al., 2021). They highlighted problems that have been exacerbated by the pandemic shift to virtual learning platforms that are unsuitable in terms of accessibility and usability for users with visual and hearing impairments (Battistin et al., 2021; Rosenblum, 2021). They revealed the difficult experiences of remote education, the place and role of students, their parents and teachers (Domagała-Zyśk, 2021). The results of the qualitative data presented in this article proved to triangulate with the quantitative data and provide insights into the causes of the presented states of affairs. When it comes to the experience of being a subject in education, there is a clear difference between the non-adult research participants – students – and the significant adults – teachers and parents. Pupils – although treated as subjects, as the results of the research conducted in the teacher and parent groups indicate – have little sense of subjectivity in school situations. The pandemic has highlighted the problems of schooling that existed before the pandemic period. The analyses conducted show that the feeling of subjectivity in the aspect of freedom of choice – conscious decision-making and purposeful directing of one's behaviour – was only observable in the sample surveyed in the case of students without intellectual disabilities, educated in mainstream schools. In their case, it referred to the freedom to decide about their body, its location and to the freedom to manage their attention. It was in the nature of their choices with regard to space and habits (evident in the

changed pattern of daily life – oriented towards obtaining pleasure and avoiding punishment) and recreational activity choices (oriented towards obtaining pleasure and benefits). A significant proportion of them revealed strategies of resistance to perceived power from the educational system (the oppressiveness of the grading system, the educational programme and the teachers). Students have a remarkably low sense of agency, of influencing external situations. They do not see themselves as initiators or creators of change. With a narrow scope of freedom to decide on their own actions (the direction of actions in the school area is perceived as external – curriculum, teachers' requirements, examinations) and a low sense of agency, they have no sense of personal control limits. They depend on external instances (teachers, parents), which lowers their feeling of being responsible for their own actions (they tend to be held responsible or held accountable rather than acting responsibly). In spite of this, most of the students surveyed indicated that their interpersonal relationships, especially with adults, were satisfying and they experienced support and felt that they could count on them. The aspect of asymmetrical relationships was not raised by them.

The experience of being a subject of education for teachers and parents is outlined differently. The analyses showed that teachers' sense of subjectivity, in terms of freedom of choice, in relation to the tasks arising from the implementation of remote education was significantly reduced by the necessity to respect the constraints imposed by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, with the gradual adaptation and positive assimilation and optimisation of the newly developed educational solutions, the space for conscious autonomous decision-making consisting in differentiating the availability of education for SEN students during the pandemic also increased – translating into an increasingly perceptible sense of freedom of choice. The pandemic experience of special educators (difficulties in implementing education under pandemic conditions resulting in a temporary deterioration of their psychological well-being) did not permanently impair their sense of agency and resourcefulness. Thanks to support from students and parents, appreciation of their social role, and a sense of professional solidarity, some teachers even experienced satisfaction with the new type of remote working and tangible pedagogical successes, and had a sense of controllability and decision-making through the introduction of diverse educational and rehabilitation solutions. Ultimately, teachers mostly perceived themselves as change-makers, having a causal influ-

ence on activities relevant to the educational process and creating a support network for students and their parents within a changed education system in difficult post-COVID conditions. In view of the rapid changes taking place nowadays in the surrounding reality caused by the pandemic, the arrival of new threats, challenges and educational tasks had to go hand in hand with the emergence of teachers as subjects who recognise these tasks and include them in their scope of responsibility – for themselves and others, for the student and for the continuation of education under stressful conditions. The vast majority of teachers surveyed identified this category in a similar layer of meaning – as a sense of obligation or even necessity to behave in a certain way, as active, responsible behaviour, with an understanding of the situation that was the pandemic, as well as an awareness of the motives and values underpinning their committed action. Special educators assessed that they provided remote education in an educational dialogue with students with disabilities, based on mutual respect, with a sense of equal, authentic and partner-like interpersonal relations with parents and other co-creators of the educational process (less evident in inclusive education).

In the light of the results obtained, the experience of being a subject of education in the case of the parents surveyed is most evident in the sense of empowerment and responsibility for actions taken. This is because their awareness of freedom of choice proved to be rather variable over time and the sense of equal personal contact was assessed ambiguously. While the onset of the pandemic appeared to be a moment associated with feelings of disorientation and severely limited possibilities to purposefully direct their own actions, during the course of the crisis, parents were increasingly confronted with the need to make many autonomous decisions related to their children's education and, indirectly related to this, their own professional activity. Driven by a sense of parental responsibility and the need for empowerment, depending on a variety of life circumstances and family resources, they have to a greater or lesser extent intensified their efforts to minimise the experienced and anticipated consequences of difficult situations in relation to the child's education and rehabilitation. Often, but not always, in the execution of these undertakings, they could count on the support, care and multifaceted assistance of teachers and professionals, taking care of the high quality of the relationship in the triadic relationship pupil-parent-teacher. Although, as a result of the lack of opportunities to consult top-down implemented solu-

tions concerning the shape and form of education, the parents surveyed did not feel that they had a significant influence on systemic changes, their perceived need for agency, co-determination and building educational partnerships was expressed in a number of postulates related to the prospect of a post-pandemic school. Moreover, at the level of the home environment, their determination and commitment proved to be significant in co-creating, at a difficult time, learning environments adapted to children's diverse abilities.

The reconstruction of personal experiences related to the sense of being a subject of education in the pandemic and post-pandemic period of each study group was possible due to the democratising and emancipatory nature of the research procedure adopted. It made it possible to identify personalised experiences in the tripartite arrangement between the actors: student-parent-teacher important from the perspective of building educational partnerships. Nevertheless, the chosen procedure has its limitations, related to the ability to generalise conclusions. The first is related to the selection of the sample of respondents: among students with special educational needs, a distinction can be seen between students from special schools who experience intellectual disabilities and those without intellectual disabilities from mainstream schools. Although it is true that in the Polish educational system the majority of students with intellectual disabilities attend special schools, a broader perspective would be provided by the inclusion of blind or deaf students from special schools. As far as teachers are concerned, the results may in turn be influenced by the fact that the samples were obtained thanks to the support of school superintendents, so it may well be that teachers who are very active, community-minded and willing to get involved in external projects were selected. A limitation of the parents' sample, on the other hand, is that mainly parents of students from special schools wanted to be involved in the research.

The second limitation is the nature of focus group research, where there exists the possibility that, among other things, participants interact with each other (e.g. the phenomenon of group conformism, suggestion, domination), or the moderator's influence, e.g. on the tendency to make contextualised statements that depend on the conditions of the interview or inhibit discussion (e.g. through inadequate verbal and non-verbal signals).

These factors need to be taken into account when generalising conclusions. Nevertheless, the material obtained is rich and goes beyond the results of previous explorations.

CONCLUSIONS

The research, focused on the experience of being a subject of education in a pandemic and post-pandemic situation in the area of teaching students with special educational needs, highlighted the difficulties faced by participants in educational processes already before the pandemic. In the end, the Polish school managed to cope with the challenge of pandemic education, although this was possible thanks to such dimensions of the sense of subjectivity as the responsibility and empowerment of adults – teachers and parents.

The analysis of verbal material showed that students with special educational needs from mainstream schools perceive school as a predominantly educational space, where they often feel anxiety, stress, pressure to obtain good grades, worries about final examination results, feelings of uselessness of much educational content, its excess, inadequate teaching methods – aspects related to functional limitations resulting from disabilities were not raised in the survey. On the other hand, the vision of school, which is portrayed by the statements of pupils from special schools, is different – for them, school is a friendly place, an area for the formation of meaningful relationships with teachers, pupils, an opportunity to experience new situations, learn about nature, art. It is a good place, which they do not want to change. Perhaps mainstream schools can learn something from special schools.

The research also revealed that although students appreciate the help of parents and teachers during and after the pandemic, they have a low awareness of their great involvement in the education and treatment process.

The image of teachers working with students with disabilities and developmental differences revealed in the narrative research points to them as subjects with a need for co-determination and highly involved in the creation of the educational and therapeutic process for the benefit of the students and their family environment (despite the reduction in personal well-being as a result of the pandemic), with an awareness of social responsibility for the role entrusted to them and with a sense of equal social partnership with the other co-creators of the educational process. The focus research provides arguments for the perceived need for dedicated support for special educators in terms of:

- improving system changes in the field of special education (especially in inclusive education),
- enriching forms of indispensable support within the framework of accessibility of digital technology with

solutions favourable to the organisation of education and special needs teaching, which have proved successful in remote education (modern communication and information technologies in the diversification of methods and forms of work with SEN pupils),

- developing strategies to improve their psychosocial well-being, compromised in COVID settings.

The qualitative analyses conducted indicate that during the pandemic period parents perceived the building of subjective relationships as one of the key tasks for the contemporary post-pandemic educational reality. What emerges from the parents' narratives, is, on the one hand, a clear vision of possible changes related to the functioning of the post-pandemic school, while on the other hand, a strong need for empowerment and co-deciding on the shape of the educational system, as well as a willingness to take responsible action to build educational partnerships. This may contribute to the need

to design solutions (both on a micro and macro scale) to improve the cooperation between home and school environments aimed at supporting the development of SEN children.

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