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University studies in the adjacent tab: dimensions of students' agency and everyday life in the rural north of Finland

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University studies in the adjacent tab: dimensions of students' agency and everyday life in the rural north of Finland

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the everyday life and agency of university students. The study aims to deepen the understanding of university students' agency in the age of modern technology, especially in a rural context where studying mostly happens at home. Agency and everyday life are explored from a cultural-historical perspective. Technology and remote teaching have made it possible to study far from universities and to combine work, family and studies. Yet, everyday life and agency processes are complex and multidimensional. The research material consists of written descriptions by 39 university students of their everyday lives when studying at home. The students wrote about their lives as a part of their early childhood education studies. This article focuses on recognizing dimensions of agency in the lives of 17 students studying in northern rural Finland, far from their university. The article presents three ways in which agency is pursued: 1) by articulating participation and engagement, 2) by organizing the conditions and dealing with the possibilities and restrictions, and 3) by mapping meanings, aims and grounds. All three dimensions of agency have specific content relating to life in the rural north.

Keywords: everyday life; early childhood education; northern Finland; remote studies; university studies

Introduction

In northern rural Finland and the Arctic areas, the nearest university can be several hundred kilometres away. The desire for education or a university degree has long prompted people to move from rural to urban areas. However, gradual changes in education and the advent of accessible technologies have created possibilities for modifying these trajectories and more equal opportunities for learning. In relation to teacher education, remote learning creates a stronger possibility that rural schools and early childhood education centres will have qualified teachers, further improving the possibility of equal education. Distance learning also meets other needs: lifelong learning solutions make it possible to reconcile work, studies and home life.

So far, research has focused on effective learning methods (Sun and Chen, 2016), identifying necessary student qualities, such as self-regulation, self-direction and self-efficacy (Wang, Shannon and Ross, 2013) or recognizing the effect of socially shared processes on motivation and regulation (Järvenoja, Järvelä and Malmberg, 2015). Knowing all this helps educators create fluent learning experiences, and the development of technology makes it possible for students to study regardless of time and place – in their different life situations. Yet, the increase in remote studying challenges the balance between different aspects of life, and the aim of continuous and lifelong learning places increased demands on the individual (Romero, 2011). Teachers have become designers of learning processes and learning environments, but the most important environment, the student's everyday life, remains impossible to control (Kauppi, Muukkonen, Suorsa and Takala, 2020). This calls for a deeper understanding of the student's agency.

Aim and research question

This study introduces an everyday-life perspective on remote university studies and reaches for a better understanding of the student's agency within everyday study-related practices in the rural north. With this study, we highlight the embeddedness and groundedness of students' actions (Højholt and Kousholt, 2019). Exploring everyday life with university students led us to our research question:

What is agency like in the everyday life of students in the rural north?

Our aim is to understand agency not only by asking students about their experiences but also by helping them to study their own lives, actions and grounds within their current circumstances. The university students (N = 39) included in this research studied in the early childhood education teacher programme in northern Finland. Half the students lived near the university, and the rest (N = 17) were scattered around northern rural Finland. In this article, we focus on the agency of those 17 students living in northern rural Finland, far from the university. The research material consists of the students' written descriptions of their everyday lives when studying at home.

Theoretical background

We approach agency from the perspective of cultural-historical psychology and take our theoretical influence from the conceptual-analytical framework of *Psychology from the Standpoint of the Subject* (Schraube and Højholt, 2016). When studying human life, here agency, from the standpoint of the

subject, we must focus on the subject's experiences embedded and intertwined into the social, material and cultural environment (Busch-Jensen and Schraube, 2019; Højholt and Schraube, 2016). This leads us to explore the subject's everyday life structures, life scenes, trajectories, routines and areas of participation – *the personal conduct of everyday life* (Dreier, 1999; Højholt and Kousholt, 2019; Holzkamp, 2013). The first part of the theoretical background, the conduct of everyday life, was the starting point with the research participants, the university students. We used the second part of the theory for analysing agency.

Conduct of everyday life

Because people are always rooted in their social, cultural, discursive and material worlds, it is important to do the research with the participants, rather than on them, and focus on their worldly relations and connections. The conduct of everyday life refers to the subject's multiple actions, through which they organize and arrange their everyday life and make sense of all the socio-material relations within it (Holzkamp, 2016; Schraube, 2020). Everyday life includes daily activities and rhythms, routines and habits (Dreier, 2011; Højholt and Schraube, 2016).

The conduct of everyday life is made up of personal ways of participating in different life scenes (Dreier, 2011; Suorsa, 2015). A life scene can be home, work or studies. By participations, we mean that an individual is always in relation to certain social practices in every situation of their life and inevitably maintains, modifies and negotiates his or her practices in various ways (Dreier, 1999). The conduct of everyday life is a process that is produced in cooperation with others and in relation to the areas and scenes of life of which the individual is a part. Participation includes multiple ways of seeing meaning and producing grounds for action. People always have reasons for their actions or non-actions and grounds for seeing some things as possible and others as impossible (Suorsa, 2019). Some choices may seem irrational, and some actions may be carried out automatically or thoughtlessly. However, in principle, it is always possible to identify the subjective sense and functionality of a given action or experience (Tolman, 1994).

Agency from the standpoint of the subject

Here, agency is introduced through three dimensions, which are presented in Figure 1. First (1), as an ongoing process, agency is tightly entwined with participations in life, social relations and place, with all its cultural and historical elements (Dreier, 1999; Højholt and Kousholt, 2019; Holzkamp, 2013). Second (2), from this perspective, agency refers to a subject's ability to handle their own life scenes and practices both in relation to the objects and in relation to others (Silvonen, 2015). In practice, agency means not only the subject's actions and the obvious roles they play but also their choices not to act. It also means taking stances, influencing, making choices and affecting their own life issues in other ways (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä and Paloniemi, 2013).

Structures of everyday life direct actions, and subjects reproduce, modify, change and articulate these structures, relations and conditions (Silvonen, 2015). Part of their agency stems from the subject's need to improve their own action possibilities (Holzkamp, 2013). Here, as a third (3) dimension of agency, subjects articulate these action possibilities. They have discursive, practical and embodied relations to

the world (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013). Discursive relations can be described as taking a personal stance in a historically formed situation (Suorsa, 2015). Agency is always exercised for particular purposes, and subjects produce grounds and meanings for their actions.

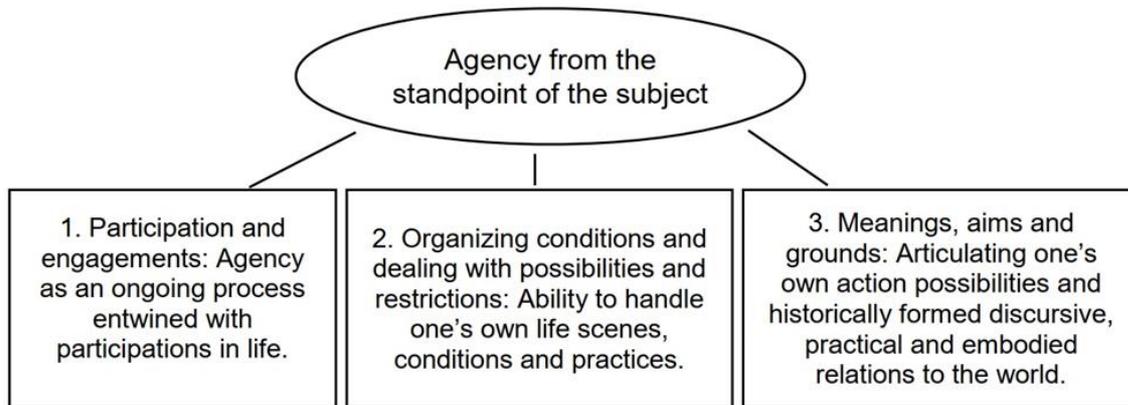


Figure 1. Agency from the standpoint of the subject presented through three dimensions.

The structure of this research follows the methodological idea of psychology from the standpoint of the subject, according to which the concepts highlight the relevant dimensions of studied phenomena – here, agency. Empirical research seeks to describe how these dimensions are realized in the lives of actual human beings. In general, the research seeks to articulate possible ways of relating to conditions of living; to do this, we need to focus on the individual subject's experience (see Holzkamp, 1983; Valsiner, 2019).

The research process

An important principle when doing research from the standpoint of the subject is that participants should benefit from the research process (Chimirri, 2015). One aim in this process was to support the students' professional development by highlighting issues that are important and topical from their own perspective and by providing possibilities for shared knowledge creation and processing their experiences in groups (see Højholt and Kousholt, 2019). The authors of this article are involved in both teaching and research. The first author worked as a teacher-researcher in this process. The research material, descriptions of students' everyday lives, led us to set the main research question concerning agency. The process is presented in Figure 2 and described in more detail in the following subchapters.

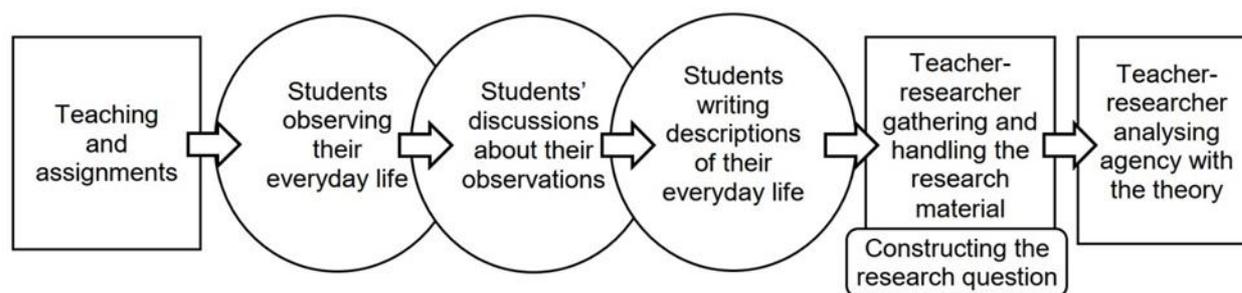


Figure 2. Research process.

Participants and their university studies

The research process was integrated with teaching and learning in the bachelor's degree programme for early childhood teacher education. A total of 39 university students (36 female and 3 male students, aged between 22 and 50 years) participated in the research by sharing their experiences of everyday life when studying at home. This research was carried out through a web-based course that concentrated on psychology. Common to all students was that, at the time of participation in this research and for this particular course, they were all studying at home. Roughly half the students (N = 22) lived near the university and did most of their studies on campus (urban data). However, towards the end of their studies or during the summer, they studied remotely or completed writing their final essays and theses at home. Half the students (N = 17) were living far from the university (rural data) and generally far from each other as well, all around northern rural Finland. During their study years, they had live meetings and live teaching monthly (but not at the university). Most of their studies were conducted through web-based learning activities. Many of the rural students were combining studies and family with self-employment or a traditional livelihood, such as fishing, handicrafts or reindeer herding.

Research material

The research material consists of written descriptions by the 39 university students of their everyday lives when studying at home. The written material includes 39 essays and 54 shorter writings from the online discussion area. Among other course assignments, the teacher-researcher asked the students to observe, discuss and write about their everyday lives. Shared teaching on psychology and everyday life, previous studies and group discussions worked as an inspiration for the students while they observed their lives. The theoretical framework did not direct the content as such, but prompted the students to describe their lives from their own perspectives (standpoint). From our experience, this kind of setting gives more freedom for students to analyse their everyday lives than traditional detailed questions (framed by the researcher) would have done. The teacher-researcher informed the students about the research work, and they were free to choose whether they wanted their writing to be a part of the final research material or just part of their course completion requirements. We also discussed how anonymity was carefully maintained throughout this process.

Everything, including the group discussions, happened through a web-based learning environment. The teacher-researcher organized the group discussions so that students were able to share their thoughts and deepen their own understanding. In both phases (the group discussions and the personal writing), the students played an active role in developing the direction of the research process. For example, they told the teacher-researcher which aspects and questions they saw as important or meaningful and what kind of knowledge they found useful in their work, studies or other life issues. Because of the shared conversations, the written analyses contained common elements. This is part of the basics of knowledge creation: our understanding is deeply grounded in our social relationships, the conditions and culture in which we live, our shared conversations and concepts with which we are familiar (Højholt and Røn Larsen, 2015).

We used the constant comparative method to gain an overall understanding of the research material (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Silvonon and Keso, 1999). The first author coded the material sentence by sentence and some of it by paragraph (Straus and Corbin 1990, p. 73), compared the codes and units of analysis and created subcategories and main categories (1–4).

The students' everyday lives and analysis of agency

In the research material, the students described their circumstances (1) – their daily routines and habits, the different parts and conditions of their home life, the current state of their studies and unexpected events and changes in their plans. They described their actions (2) – their specific ways of organising and scheduling, how they set goals, planned and regulated their motivation and needs and managed the demands on them to prioritize the issues in their lives and negotiate with others. They described and evaluated their meanings (3) in relation to the study content, studying and home life. Many of them also analysed (4) the grounds, feelings, wellbeing and purposes and experienced restrictions, limitations and challenges in studying and in completing specific tasks.

When considering the standpoint of the subject in research, first, agency is seen as embedded in everyday life participations. Second, it is evident that it is possible for the subjects to reach a better understanding of their own subjective perspective when they are helped in analysing their own everyday lives. (Busch-Jensen and Schraube, 2019; Dreier, 1999; Højholt and Kousholt, 2019.) We compared the overall picture of the students' lives with the dimensions of agency recognized from previous studies and theories, and asked: What is agency in a student's everyday life in the rural north like? This comparison made for analysing agency is presented in Table 1. We read the research material and theory side by side carefully multiple times to recognize the particular aspect of life in the rural north. When necessary, we compared the rural data with urban data. In presenting the results, we chose samples from the research material that were rich and demonstrative or that collectively presented the issues brought up by many students.

Dimensions of agency in a student's everyday life in the rural north

Agency in a student's everyday life in the rural north is presented here through three dimensions following the theoretical background: 1) articulating participation and engagements, 2) organizing conditions and dealing with possibilities and restrictions, and 3) mapping meanings, aims and grounds

(see figure 1). These three dimensions and the ways in which they occurred in students' everyday lives are presented in table 1 and described in the following three subsections.

Table1. Students' everyday lives and the dimensions of agency in the rural north.

RESEARCH MATERIAL: Students' everyday lives	THEORY: Agency from the standpoint of the subject	FINDINGS: Agency in student's everyday lives in the rural north
Daily routines and habits, different parts and life scenes of everyday life	1) Articulating participation and engagements	1.1 Overlapping of life scenes, engagements and participations 1.2 Paradox of flexibility 1.3 Combining all life issues 1.4 Transformation of transitions: Moving from one tab to the adjacent
Conditions, unexpected events and changes		2.1 Balancing competing demands 2.2 Relating to arctic nature and weather 2.3 Handling unexpected events and the appearance of friends and relatives 2.4 Doing something else at the same time
Personal ways to organize, prioritize, schedule, regulate motivation and negotiate	2) Organizing conditions and dealing with possibilities and restrictions	3.1 Being at home has particular meanings for others 3.2 Uniqueness of the situation increased motivation and pressure 3.3 Highlighting the meaning that the studying had for the community
Meanings in relation to studies and home life Grounds and feelings, experienced restrictions, limitations and challenges	3) Mapping meanings, aims and grounds	

Participations and engagements

In this study, remote learning in a student's everyday life is strongly defined by the fact that almost everything in the student's life happens in one physical place, the home. The starting point when organizing studies and everyday life is the overlapping nature of various life scenes, participations and engagements (1.1). These include studying, family life, taking care of the household, spontaneous visits from relatives, neighbours and friends and either a traditional livelihood or self-employment. The flexibility (1.2) of the studies and technology makes it possible to reconcile work, studies and home life, but this combination is multifaceted when everyday life practices are taken into consideration:

Student 1: "My studying would not go forward if there were too much freedom and flexibility. On the other hand, [studying] would not happen at all, if the only chance would be going to the campus. [-] I enjoy the freedom, but I definitely [need] the deadline."

It is also worth noting that all the others in the same physical environment – spouses, children and possibly, other relatives – have their own priorities, aims and issues to deal with. For the comparison, from the urban data, we saw that the students' way of resolving conflicting demands in the home was to move to the university or library for a while. Most of the students in the rural north had no other place to go to do their studies when listening to lectures or writing assignments. Their only chance of

completing their studies was to combine all their life issues and commitments literally under the same roof and to recruit the family to cooperate (1.3).

Student 3: “Many of the students in our group seem to have small children, hobbies, are working, and their spouse is travelling or he is self-employed. Some of us have all of this in addition to our studies. Time is very limited. [-] The family tries to understand: the children are not getting enough attention, and the spouse takes care of everything to give you peace for your studies. [-] It seems difficult for others to fully understand the situation, even though many are trying their best.”

Modern technology also changes the transitions between the different areas or scenes of life (1.4). Transitions from one place to another, such as from the home to the university, are replaced with moving from one tab in the browser to the adjacent tab. Students mentioned “moving between tabs” while studying and opening new tabs at the same time and taking care of other issues “to be more effective” (Student 6). At home, the students can participate in lecture discussions and activities, help their children dress or take part in conversations with their peers about the next deadline or another course. One student describes the overlapping of life scenes, transitions and technology as follows:

Student 2: “The smartphone changes the transition between life scenes in our everyday lives. We would certainly have discussed this a lot in the live implementation. I can be at home and, at the same time, discuss on Facebook for example, something related to my studies. Therefore, I am at the same time at home with my children and also with my peer students. I think it is interesting, although not necessarily surprising, to note that when the phone is in silent mode and in the closet during the workday [in day care], I’m more present for the children. [-] When I come home, the phone is available all the time, and the whole world is just a few swipes away.”

Exploring everyday life raised the question of how to manage engagements without physically transitioning from one place to another. Students noted that seeing their peers in live teaching approximately once a month was very important, although those days were also exhausting. Travelling and being away from the family is not always easy. When you do come back home after an intensive study period, you may be full of inspiration and motivation and ready to continue studying at home, but you find that you are exhausted and tired, and you now have home issues, and maybe work also, to catch up on.

Student 1: “When the scene changes, my engagement is different. For myself, the live-teaching days are perhaps heaviest in the winter. There is darkness, thick snow, and the journey is long and tiring. The road is in a poor condition, so driving is very demanding, and you really need to focus. When you arrive, the lectures are starting and you are in a hurry to get to them, but at the same time, there is already a huge hunger because in the morning you only ate a bite of bread, and so you hurry to eat and drink some coffee. The transition to the classroom already makes the mind alert and the motivation on those days is different, and you become aware that others have

had equally chaotic morning transitions. Often, we talk together before we start, and we share our experiences.”

Holzkamp (2013) defines agency as the human capacity to gain control over life conditions as practiced in cooperation with others (see also Juhl, 2019). The students’ analysis of their everyday lives shows how they aim to reconcile the different parts and commitments in their lives and how this process requires the involvement of both their peer students and family members. Organizing and acting, as a second dimension of agency, shows what it means on a more practical level next.

Organizing and acting

Organizing life is intertwined in many ways with all the involvements in the subject's life. Concentrating, prioritising or avoiding multitasking are valid questions in learning (Romero, 2011), but the situation is far more complex when you are responsible for all the issues in your current life and are not able to move away from the home or stop the ongoing lives of others in the family, including the children’s growth. Organizing conditions and dealing with possibilities and restrictions included balancing competing demands (2.1). For example, students discussed how they were participating with headphones on in the group session while trying to listen to their child at the same time and feeling guilty in relation to both. One student described their organization of an ordinary weeknight and how remote studies fitted into it, as follows:

Student 3: “If the dinner has been prepared the day before, I come home from work, eat fast and go to a [online] lecture starting at 5 pm. During the lecture, the children, of course, want their mother's attention and tell her about their homework, school day, spring clothes and friend's visit. Personally, I haven't had time to get familiar with the lecture material, work issues trouble my mind, and my conscience knocks when I listen to children and the lecture at the same time. [-] However, remote learning has been an insanely good solution for me. If I don't have time for the evening lecture, I can listen to the recording when I do have time [-] You need to be able to anticipate and make your own schedule. On Sundays, I look at the calendar for the coming week to roughly memorise what will be happening.”

One particular condition to note was the Arctic weather and nature (2.2). For example, students articulated how a snowfall either made it possible and gave them an excuse to stay inside and study, or it changed their study plans by being forced to remove the snow. Unexpected events like the appearance of guests were mentioned in several descriptions (2.3). Although one student thought it was possible to continue sitting with the headphones on and let the guests make their own coffee, another felt it was impossible and described how different unexpected issues can mess plans as follows:

Student 16: “My plan is that I will study for those three days when the older child is in day care. In reality, there is perhaps one day available for study and the rest is done at night as a result of all the unexpected events. [-] There will always be something unexpected: illness, guests, or something else that prevents my learning. Well, luckily

there are nights, early mornings and grandmothers on the weekends to save the situation.”

In discussing their organizing and acting, students in the rural north often mentioned the importance of “doing something else at the same time” (2.4), such as crafts. They also grounded this carefully. Doing something else at the same time was important, as it enabled them to look more effective and they did not appear to be “just sitting.” After seeing this aspect clearly in the rural data, it became possible to notice the same element also in the urban data. In many descriptions (in rural data), studying was defined as being their “own time.” That raised the question of how the study situation could be made convenient and could support concentration:

Student 2: “To focus better on the lecture, I always need two things: my notes and crafts. It has always been important for me to write notes because it makes it easier to concentrate, and I return to my own notes afterwards rather than to the lecture slides. Crafting, on the other hand, keeps my hands moving and gives me the feeling that even if I am “wasting” my time by just sitting, I am still getting something done all the time.”

Student 6: “I found a new way of studying: I listen to lectures while I clean and cook. [-] As the house gets tidy, the lecture gets listened to, and learning is easier when you don’t just have to sit still and find yourself browsing and clicking those tabs.”

The structures of everyday life direct the organizing and actions (Silvonen, 2015). These practical embodiments of agency keep within the aims, motivation, identities, meanings and purposes (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013). The shared discussions during the research process challenged the students to clarify their actions to the others, and then later to discuss their perspectives and the groundedness of their actions in their written assignments.

Mapping grounds and meanings

Grounds and meanings, as parts of agency (Markard, 2009; Suorsa, 2015), are maintained within multiple dimensions, but we focused only on those that were typical or notable in the rural data. In short, being at home had particular meanings in relation to organizing and participation introduced in the previous subchapter. Being at home (for studies) had particular meanings for others – friends, relatives and family members (3.1):

Student 1: “Others have expectations and hopes for you, and sometimes you get the feeling that you are being selfish when you do not meet these expectations.”

The students emphasized the uniqueness of their situation (3.2) – that it was possible to study for a university degree from the rural north. Highlighting this uniqueness and temporality was one way of self-regulating motivation and encouraging oneself or one’s peers: this stage will not last forever. In the rural context, it has a double meaning. The temporality of the studies also meant emphasising the uniqueness of the teacher education programme, which was organized so that they could participate without moving away from home. This uniqueness also caused pressure for the students:

Student 1: "But I have to complete this now. There may never be a second chance."

Student 15: "I think remote learning is just a great way to study and a great opportunity for many. Personally, I remember thinking in the past that my own opportunities to study for any higher degree, or something interesting, were over, because I wasn't ready to go elsewhere to study when I was younger."

One specific way of increasing their motivation was to highlight the meaning that their personal studying had for their community (3.3), whether it was the rural village or a larger area. We did not see this in the urban data. Most of the students were working and studying in order to save endangered Sámi languages. They also knew the working field of early childhood education very well and found it easy to understand the meaning of their studies in early education in their own area. Seeing themselves as accountable actors in their own community inspired and motivated them and knit them together as a group, but it also put pressure on them:

Student 5: "Undeniably, somewhere there was an absurd anxiety with pressure coming from every direction, and I felt that we should know everything, and that the future of the Sámi children is in our hands, and so on. Now, the thoughts have settled down, and I am feeling a lot more confident in my work. I do my best and use my knowledge and skills in a way that I am basically satisfied with."

Rainio and Hilppö (2017) discuss the central challenges when studying children's agency: Do we see only the agency that is somehow visible, or do we also count the thoughts, dreams and ideas? When converting this into a student's everyday life, we may see that students can be active, feel motivated, handle and control many things in their lives and yet still struggle with completing their studies.

Discussion

In this research, we explored what agency is like in the everyday life of students in the rural north. To that end, we studied the university student's everyday life in the context of remote studies. Agency was presented through three dimensions: 1) Articulating participation and engagement included the overlapping of life scenes, engagements and participations, the paradox of flexibility, combining all the life issues and the transformation of transitions. 2) Organizing the conditions and dealing with the possibilities and restrictions meant balancing with competing demands, relating to the Arctic weather and nature, handling unexpected events and doing something else at the same time. 3) Agency as mapping meanings, aims and grounds first meant that being at home had particular meanings for others. In addition, the uniqueness of the situation increased motivation and pressure. The students also highlighted the meaning that their studying had for their community.

In what way can these results be meaningful for a larger group of people? To answer this and the bigger question of generalization, we return to everyday life structures and conditions. In practice, the dimensions of agency can be recognizable to anyone who seems to embody the same or a similar subjective situation, such as studying or working at home with many competing requirements. Busch-Jensen and Schraube (2019, p. 3) argue that "because we live our everyday life together with others in

a shared world, generalization and the internal relationship between the subjective and objective, the particular and general, are inherent aspects of everyday life: talking, thinking, acting, living.” Also, the researchers must evaluate how they relate to the same or similar circumstances (Silvonen, 2015).

Shared conversations in peer groups produced shared understanding among the students, and it was possible to see the influence of the group in the individual's writing. If one drew attention to something in conversation, the others found themselves discussing the same thing or taking the trouble to articulate and ground their own perspective more carefully. We also highlight that our understanding of the world and our own meanings and grounds are always embedded in our social relations, whether we pay special attention to it in the research process or not. One of our aims was to create a research process and produce knowledge that would be useful for the participants – here, the students. For further evaluation of this particular research, we note that in the process, teaching has primacy over research. This created a situation in which some of the 39 students engaged in the process more than others. While some students were active in sharing their own perspectives and continuing the discussion even after the course completion, others focused on finishing the assignment with an appropriate, or sometimes a minimum, amount of effort. Despite the variations in the students' commitment to and enthusiasm for the process, according to the course feedback, they found the exploration of their everyday life an inspiring and eye-opening experience.

The dynamics of agency include the contradiction between control and freedom (Rainio and Hilppö, 2017). In pursuit of lifelong and continuous learning, studies should be suitable for different life paths and aim for freedom, flexibility and independence from time and place. From an everyday life perspective and from the standpoint of the subject, this freedom is multifaceted and includes many challenges. When planning and organizing studies, we must pay attention to the central contradiction that requires constant attention in planning and evaluating the studies: What are those conditions and actions that generate both the freedom and the control needed for agency? Especially in remote studies, we must also focus on transitions and engagement with studies and with peers when staying at home. We suggest that developing remote teaching and learning should not only concentrate on refining the content and the objects “under one tab.” Rather, we should see studies as one part of the individual's personal conduct of their everyday life and ask how it integrates into life. The challenge is to fit together the flexibility, accessibility and elements that will support engagement with studies and belonging to a peer group.

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