

PART III: EDUCATION

Psychological vulnerability in higher arts education: A preventive 3P model for sustainable artistic development

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ABSTRACT: Artistic training in higher education involves intense emotional and identity investment that may expose students to structural vulnerability. Anxiety, burnout, and creative blocks are frequently reported among young artists, while institutional responses remain largely reactive. This article argues for a preventive approach based on an integrated pedagogical framework that views vulnerability as inherent to artistic formation rather than as an individual deficit. It proposes a 3P preventive model structured around three interdependent dimensions: Person, Pedagogical Process, and Artistic Pathway, shifting the focus from individual resilience to educational conditions that support sustainable development.

KEYWORDS: artistic higher education; psychological vulnerability; preventive pedagogy; safe environment; sustainable artistic development.

Introduction

University art education operates within a distinct framework compared to other academic fields, as the student is simultaneously performer, instrument, and source of artistic expression. In the visual arts, music, theatre, and choreography, education extends beyond the transmission of technical skills to include profound expressive and identity-

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related dimensions. Learning entails personal exposure, emotional engagement, and the use of one's own subjectivity as artistic material. This specificity amplifies the psychological vulnerability of student artists, consistently documented in the scholarly literature (McNiff, 2018; Hallam & Gaunt, 2012).

In higher arts education in Romania, as in other European contexts, a paradox persists: aesthetic and performative excellence is demanded, yet insufficient attention is paid to the psychological structure of the creator—the primary ground on which artistic practice unfolds. Without pedagogical reflection on the vulnerability inherent in the creative process, students' emotional difficulties are frequently individualized and treated as personal problems rather than as effects of a demanding educational environment.

Contemporary research supports the idea of heightened psychological sensitivity among artists and offers a conceptual framework for understanding the creative profile. Fragility is not conceptualized as pathology but as a constellation of traits associated with creativity: high emotional sensitivity, affective permeability, intensity of experience, increased reactivity to feedback, and an identity closely linked to the artistic product. The psychology of creativity describes this structure through the trait of openness to experience. Feist's (1998) meta-analysis shows that artists exhibit high levels of openness, associated with intense imagination, receptivity to subtle stimuli, and deep introspection.

In artistic fields, these characteristics constitute essential resources for creation while also relating to increased vulnerability to anxiety, hypersensitivity to criticism, rumination, and excessive self-criticism. Higher levels of neuroticism observed among artists do not indicate pathology but reflect heightened emotional reactivity (Kaufman, 2014). In moderate forms, this reactivity supports sensitivity to feedback, depth of experience, and the capacity to transform affective tension into expressive material. Together, these traits help explain both artistic depth and the psychological fragility associated with the creative process, shaped further by educational and socio-professional contexts.

The Psychological Structure of Artistic Formation

Research on performance anxiety (Osborne & Franklin, 2002; Kenny, 2011), maladaptive perfectionism (Stoeber & Eismann, 2007), and intense emotional exposure indicates that artistic training constitutes a distinct psychological context with specific educational demands (Ascenso et al., 2017). Maladaptive perfectionism, frequently observed among artists, is associated with fear of failure, anticipated shame, and the tendency to base personal worth exclusively on performance (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). These mechanisms are intensified by the public nature of evaluation, aesthetic pressure, and the demand for originality. Meta-analyses confirm that arts students display heightened evaluative sensitivity and more intense affective responses in performative contexts compared with non-arts academic populations (Fernholz et al., 2019).

Social comparison is inherent to arts education, unfolding within an ecosystem of visibility: exhibitions, auditions, public examinations, and recitals. The studio, stage, and rehearsal room function as liminal spaces marked by experimentation and identity risk—conditions essential for creation yet difficult to sustain without an adequate pedagogical framework (Turner, 1988). Without explicit pedagogical integration, vulnerability as a creative resource may interfere with or block creativity, while emotional overload, performance anxiety, and identity fragility emerge as predictable educational risks.

University arts education, largely centered on technical competence and performance, rarely offers explicit guidance on managing sensitivity, establishing emotional boundaries, and developing affective self-regulation. The implicit idea that suffering may constitute a condition of artistic authenticity thus persists (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). In the absence of a pedagogical approach to vulnerability, the creative process risks becoming a space of intense emotional exposure without sufficient support or structures of safety, affecting psychological balance, vocational continuity, and the long-term sustainability of artistic development.

Vulnerability in artistic formation should be understood not as a deviation from normative development but as a structural feature of the creative process shaped by pedagogical, institutional, and socio-professional contexts. Understanding the psychological profile of the student artist therefore remains insufficient without examining the educational and cultural environments that can contain or amplify this sensitivity. The following section examines the pedagogical, institutional, and generational factors influencing the transformation of vulnerability from a creative resource into a potential educational risk.

Factors that amplify artistic vulnerability

The quality of the pedagogical relationship and feedback style are central in shaping artistic vulnerability. Educational feedback significantly influences motivation, academic self-esteem, and persistence, particularly where performance is highly personalized (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In artistic fields, where creative output is closely linked to personal identity, performative evaluation is often internalized as an assessment of personal worth (O'Neill, 2002; Dobson, 2010). Without supportive practices, predominantly evaluative or comparative feedback may intensify self-criticism, performance anxiety, and identity fragility.

Self-determination theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential for sustaining intrinsic engagement in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When pedagogical environments become overly controlling or exclusively performance-oriented, the vulnerability inherent in the creative process may be experienced as a threat rather than a developmental opportunity, leading to creative risk avoidance and reduced authentic engagement. Similarly, growth mindset research shows that an exclusive focus

on performance and talent may transform creative exposure into an identity-validating or invalidating experience, whereas process-oriented climates support resilience and artistic experimentation (Dweck, 2006).

At the institutional level, arts education is often shaped by performative traditions, high standards of excellence, and intense public evaluation. Artistic identity develops within a field of social recognition and symbolic competition, amplifying identity pressure on students (Barnett, 2007). Institutions that prioritize performance and competitive selection without psycho-pedagogical support risk transforming creative vulnerability into an educational risk. The absence of explicit frameworks for socio-emotional development frequently leads to the individualization of difficulties and their interpretation as personal failure rather than as part of the formative process. Research on well-being in arts education highlights the need to integrate psychological and identity dimensions into curricula and institutional practices to prevent vulnerability from contributing to dropout or burnout (Bennett, 2008).

The contemporary art market is marked by structural instability, income unpredictability, and intense competition. Research on creative labour links professional precarity to heightened anxiety, identity insecurity, and depressive risk, particularly in the absence of strong self-regulation and emotional adaptation skills (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Higher arts education therefore has the responsibility to prepare students not only for technical excellence but also for the psychological realities of artistic careers, including uncertainty management and the sustainability of vocational pathways (Throsby & Zednik, 2011).

Generational shifts add a further dimension. Contemporary students display heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, a strong need for meaning and authenticity, and lower tolerance for environments perceived as invalidating or excessively competitive (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). At the same time, Generation Z values constructive feedback, authentic pedagogical relationships, and psychological safety. Without adaptation of educational practices, a gap may emerge between traditional institutional cultures and student expectations, intensifying experiences of insecurity and vulnerability. Pedagogical environments that integrate dialogue, reflection, and relational support can transform vulnerability into a catalyst for creativity and identity development.

Taken together, these factors show that university arts education unfolds at the intersection of psychological, pedagogical, institutional, socio-professional, and generational dynamics that may amplify student vulnerability. When contained within reflective and supportive educational frameworks, vulnerability can instead become a central resource for sustainable artistic and personal development.

The function of pedagogical containing and supporting

In contemporary pedagogical literature, the idea of containing students' emotional

experiences is rarely formulated explicitly in the psychoanalytic terms proposed by Bion (2023). However, a range of convergent concepts—emotional containment, holding environment, relational safety, and psychological safety—describe the capacity of teachers and institutions to provide stable, predictable, and supportive frameworks in which students can tolerate the uncertainty, exposure, and risk inherent in artistic formation (Edmondson, 1999; Youell, 2016).

Research on learning in contexts marked by uncertainty and performative pressure highlights the importance of educational environments capable of containing the epistemic and identity-related anxiety associated with professional development, thereby facilitating the integration of intense affective experiences and sustaining engagement in learning (Barnett, 2007). Despite terminological differences, these perspectives converge in describing the role of the educational environment in transforming vulnerability into a tolerable and formative experience rather than a source of withdrawal or disorganization. Winnicottian theory provides a particularly relevant framework through the concept of the holding environment—a sufficiently safe and containing space that enables the emergence of the authentic self and creativity (Winnicott, 1960; Winnicott, 1984). In the absence of such a framework, vulnerability cannot be transformed into a symbolic resource, and students may develop defensive adaptation strategies associated with a false self oriented toward conformity and survival rather than authentic expression.

Within contemporary pedagogy, this supportive function is further conceptualized through the notion of psychological safety, defined as the perception of an educational climate in which errors, experimentation, and vulnerability are constructively integrated into learning. Empirical studies indicate that psychological safety is a strong predictor of creativity, intrinsic motivation, perseverance, and artistic performance (Byron et. al., 2010; Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2011).

Preventive Approaches and the Need for an Integrated Model

Recent literature on university arts education highlights the need for preventive strategies that address not only technical training but also the psychological sustainability of artistic development. Prevention is increasingly understood as a function of the educational framework rather than solely as clinical intervention, involving the adaptation of pedagogical practices, access to counseling, and the early recognition of emotional overload (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Neihart, 1999). Contemporary perspectives emphasize valuing the creative process alongside the final product, thereby reducing rigid performative pressure and supporting self-regulation, competence, and identity continuity in emerging artists (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Pekrun, 2006). Within this framework, prevention becomes a constitutive dimension of university artistic training.

Despite this growing body of research, existing approaches to psychological wellbeing in arts education remain largely fragmented across pedagogical, institutional,

and professional domains. Some studies highlight the role of intrinsic motivation and educational climate in reducing stress (Evans & Bonneville-Roussy, 2016), while others emphasize institutional responsibility for supporting wellbeing through systemic strategies (Mikszta et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2014). Research on job insecurity and cultural discourses of artistic passion points to identity vulnerabilities and risks of self-sacrifice (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Hennekam & Bennett, 2016), whereas collaborative educational environments are described as protective factors (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013).

Although these contributions are significant, psychological vulnerability in artistic training is rarely conceptualized as a systemic phenomenon emerging from the interaction between personal development, pedagogical processes, and the sustainability of vocational pathways. Preventive strategies are often implemented in isolation—at curricular, institutional, or individual levels—without an integrative framework linking these dimensions. This fragmentation limits the coherence and effectiveness of preventive interventions in higher arts education. In response to this gap, the present study proposes the 3P Model as an integrative framework articulating the relationship between the person, the pedagogical process, and the vocational-artistic path, positioning prevention as a systemic function of university artistic training.

The 3P model: theoretical contribution and applicability

The 3P Model proposed in this article is an integrative conceptual framework for understanding and preventing maladaptive vulnerability in university arts education. It does not measure individual variables directly but articulates the relationship between personal development, pedagogical processes, and the vocational-artistic pathway. Rather than a therapeutic intervention, the model functions as a pedagogical-preventive framework that supports educational conditions fostering sustainable identity and vocational development.

The 3P Model (*as shown Figure 1*) is proposed as both an explanatory and heuristic framework for analysing and designing preventive strategies in higher arts education.

Drawing on research in creativity, psychological safety, and vocational development, it integrates these dimensions into a unified preventive perspective. Structured around three interdependent axes—Person, Process, and Vocational-Artistic Path—the model explains how the psychological vulnerability of the student artist can be supported and transformed into a creative resource within development-oriented educational environments.

The **Person** dimension addresses the student's psychological structure, including emotional sensitivity, emerging artistic identity, and self-regulation. In contexts of evaluative exposure and insecurity, the absence of a containing educational framework may encourage defensive adaptations oriented toward conformity rather than authentic

expression.

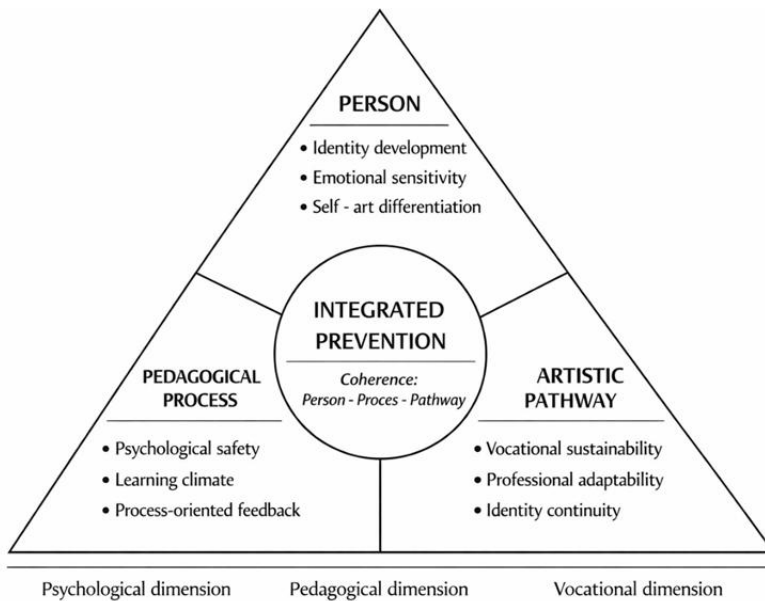


Figure 1.

Integrated prevention model: coherence between person, pedagogical process and artistic pathway

Note: The figure was created with the assistance of AI based on the author's instructions.

The **Process** dimension refers to the formative experience itself: pedagogical relationships, educational climate, and assessment practices. The creative process is understood as a space of exploration and expressive risk that becomes formative only within sufficiently safe and predictable environments capable of transforming vulnerability into a resource.

The **Vocational-Artistic Path** dimension extends the analysis beyond immediate performance to the sustainability of professional development. It includes the capacity to maintain creativity in unstable contexts, tolerate uncertainty, and preserve the psychological resources required for artistic work, becoming an indicator of training quality.

The 3P Model functions as a dynamic system in which person, process, and pathway interact continuously. Prevention emerges from the coherence of these levels and is redefined not as corrective intervention but as a structural principle of contemporary arts education.

The model makes several theoretical contributions:

proposes an integrative framework linking student vulnerability with pedagogical

and institutional structures;

reconceptualizes prevention as relational and systemic rather than individual;

bridges artistic education, psychology, and creative labour realities;

extends psychological safety literature through a relational perspective informed by educational holding;

reframes the university environment as a psychological infrastructure for creativity;

shifts focus from isolated performance to vocational sustainability;

conceptualizes vulnerability as a constitutive dimension of artistic formation requiring pedagogical and institutional support.

The 3P Model provides a framework for designing preventive strategies at curricular, pedagogical, and institutional levels, orienting interventions toward coherence between personal development, educational processes, and vocational sustainability. Through this multilevel perspective, prevention becomes embedded in the architecture of the learning environment rather than limited to individual interventions.

Operationalization and Limits of the 3P Model

To clarify how the model becomes functional within artistic education, the 3P Model is operationalized across its three constitutive dimensions. At the level of **Person**, the model recognizes the student artist as a subject in identity formation, characterized by emotional sensitivity and personal exposure inherent in the creative process. Operationalization involves maintaining a clear distinction between personal worth and evaluation of artistic output, as well as using pedagogical language that avoids conflating identity with performance. Vulnerability is thus approached as a formative resource requiring educational containment and relational support in order to sustain authentic expressiveness and reduce defensive adaptation.

The **Process** dimension is operationalized through teaching and assessment structured within a climate of psychological safety that supports exploration and creative risk-taking. Pedagogical practices include predictable, process-oriented feedback, gradual exposure to evaluative situations, and structured reflection on artistic experience. The teacher functions as mediator of the educational climate and facilitator of a pedagogical holding environment capable of transforming vulnerability into a coherent expressive resource.

The **Vocational-Artistic Path** dimension orients training toward the sustainability of professional development rather than immediate performance alone. This involves integrating curricular references to continuity of creativity, management of professional uncertainty, and preservation of long-term psychological resources. The university is thus conceived as a formative infrastructure supporting transition into professional life and preventing early depletion of creative resources.

The 3P Model requires empirical validation through applied and longitudinal

research across diverse artistic education contexts. Its applicability may vary according to cultural and institutional specificities and openness to curricular and pedagogical change. The model does not replace clinical interventions or specialized mental-health services but operates at the level of educational prevention and systemic coherence. Its integrative character implies a degree of conceptual generality, requiring further development of assessment tools and applied protocols to enhance operational precision. Moreover, the model does not exhaust the impact of structural economic conditions of the artistic labour market, which may shape professional trajectories beyond university training.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

University arts education involves high levels of emotional exposure and identity investment, making psychological vulnerability a constitutive dimension of the formative process. The present study highlights the need for integrated preventive strategies capable of moving beyond fragmented approaches focused solely on individual self-regulation or isolated pedagogical interventions. The proposed 3P Model offers an integrative conceptual framework linking psychological, pedagogical, and vocational dimensions of artistic formation and conceptualizes prevention as the result of coherence between person, process, and vocational-artistic pathway. From this perspective, the university environment can be understood as a psychological infrastructure of creation, with an active role in supporting identity development and long-term vocational sustainability.

Adopting such a perspective implies a shift from educational cultures centred on selection through resistance toward development-oriented models in which artistic performance becomes inseparable from the protection of the psychological resources involved in creation. Rather than proposing a therapeutic approach to arts education, the 3P Model reconfigures institutional responsibility for creating formative environments capable of transforming vulnerability into creative resource and vocational continuity.

Future research should aim to empirically validate the 3P Model across diverse contexts of higher arts education through longitudinal and mixed-method designs capable of capturing the interaction between personal development, pedagogical processes, and vocational trajectories. Comparative studies across artistic disciplines and institutional cultures may further refine the model's applicability, while the development of operational indicators and assessment tools aligned with its three dimensions would support its use in curriculum design and program evaluation. Extending investigation beyond the university setting to early career stages in the creative sector could also clarify how formative environments influence professional sustainability, wellbeing, and resilience in artistic careers.

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