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## Educational passivity – from theory to practice

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### Abstract

The article offers a review of *Passivity at school* by Pierzchała (2013) in terms of the implications for theory and practice of transactional analysis. The main findings from the research project were summarised and compared to other studies concerning passivity. Pierzchała's contribution to theory lies in providing an evidence base for the concepts of passive behaviours by integrating qualitative and quantitative research methods. The practical implications underline the necessity to confront passivity both in teachers and learners, taking account especially of overadaptation that is reinforced systemically. Relevant short case studies illustrate how theoretical discussions can be translated into educational practice.

**Keywords:** passivity, educational transactional analysis, applied research.

### Introduction

Research is an important aspect for many schools of psychology, however there are considerable differences in the ways they lend themselves to evidence – based study. Transactional Analysis is a mixture of cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic approaches (Schlegel, 1998, p. 269–287) and some of its concepts are more measurable than others. For instance, passive behaviours (Schiff and Schiff, 1971, p. 71–78) can be more easily observed and quantified than intrapsychic dynamics, such as discounting (Mellor, Schiff, 1975, p. 295–302). Nonetheless, it is important to integrate various epistemological perspectives to en-

hance the processes of teaching and learning. If TA is to genuinely make an impact in educational practice, it is vital that educators are fully aware of “the potential for passivity and symbiosis that is typical of schooling models of learning” (Barrow, 2009, p. 301). There are many ways of confronting symbiotic invitations (Wayne, 1976, p. 253–254) to consistently promote students’ full awareness of their Adult capacities. Choosing the right one may be challenging. Therefore, this paper will discuss studies of educational passivity (Pierzchała, 2013) in terms of the theoretical and practical implications for TA.

### The research project

The aim of the research project entitled “Passivity at school” (Pierzchała, 2013) was to broadly describe passive behaviours within the context of the Polish education system. Pierzchała set out to identify the factors conducive to passivity, both in students and teachers. She investigated a number of variables such as gender, ego states, tendencies to form symbiotic relationships, life positions, satisfaction of psycho-biological hungers, student learning outcomes, and the length of teacher classroom experience to name a few. These were examined thoroughly, using statistical tests in order to ascertain the correlation between the frequency of passive behaviours and the aforementioned variables. The data gathered included 211 teacher and 333 student responses. Pierzchała devised and verified a questionnaire measuring passive behaviours on a scale of 1–120. The generic results of the study are shown in table 1.

Table 1  
*Results of the study of school passive behaviours in Poland*

| <b>PASSIVE BEHAVIOUR</b>                      | <b>STUDENTS</b> | <b>TEACHERS</b> |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Mean values of passive behaviours</b>      | 58,33           | 50,04           |
| <b>Mean values for each passive behaviour</b> |                 |                 |
| <b>Doing nothing</b>                          | 12,46           | 7,42            |
| <b>Overadaptation</b>                         | 12,81           | 11,04           |
| <b>Agitation</b>                              | 10,83           | 9,45            |
| <b>Violence</b>                               | 6,82            | 7,96            |
| <b>Incapacitation</b>                         | 8,01            | 9,42            |

Source: Pierzchała, 2013.

Additionally, the quantitative data was complemented with qualitative research consisting of 34 student and 10 in-depth teacher interviews. The main findings emphasised that overadaptation was the most common passive behaviour,

both for teachers and students, as it appeared to be socially acceptable. Pierzchała pointed out that passivity in both groups was highly correlated. Teachers and students reinforced each other's passivity through positive feedback loops. The main recommendations included awareness building for teachers and students to uncover their Adult motivators for the tasks relevant to their corresponding roles (Schmid, 1994, p. 31)

### Theoretical implications

First of all, Pierzchała's research validates the TA concept of passive behaviours by integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods. She used a range of statistical tools (e.g.  $\alpha$  - Cronbach and semantic differential coefficients) that enabled to assess the measurable aspects of passive behaviours with scientific precision. The research contains detailed descriptions of the process of validating the questionnaires and thus contributes to the evidence base aspects of TA theory. Therefore, Pierzchała shows that TA has also potential for being a precise science that measures observable behaviours.

Other authors also set out to quantify aspects of TA in the context of education. For instance Fine, Covell and Tracy (1978, p. 236–239) carried out research on the effects of TA training on teacher attitudes by using three questionnaires:

- the 28 item self-reported Personal Orientation Scale for Teachers (Fine, 1975) measuring scores representing the four Life Positions;
- the 20 item self-reported Pupil Control Ideology Questionnaire (Hoy & Blankenship, 1972) measuring the teachers' tendency to employ controlling versus non-controlling practices of student education;
- the 18 item self-reported Social Climate Inventory measuring the educational environment as either open and accepting or closed and negative.

Throughout the training the researchers introduced the experimental teachers to TA concepts such as structural and transactional analysis, life positions, stroking, time structuring, games, rackets, discounting, passivity, and briefly scripts. They found that TA training resulted in significant increase in the I'm OK – You're OK position and contributed to teacher self-awareness. Furthermore, in TA terms, the following outcomes were reported: "(a) greater awareness of own behaviour and greater ability to change it. (Includes awareness of their ego state transactions with children.); (b) more listening to children and awareness of their needs. (Includes awareness of what strokes children need and were inviting.); (c) more awareness of how they had been hooked into games and how to stay out of them; (d) greater responsibility given to students" (Fine, Covell and Tracy, 1978, p. 238). This shows that providing teachers with a basic working knowledge of TA concepts reduced the potential for the occurrence of educational passivity. These findings are consistent with Pierzchała's (2013) recommen-

dations for teacher training, such as building awareness of Ego States, openness to form professionally intimate relationships with pupils, identifying ulterior messages and acting from a position resourcefulness on the part of the educator.

However, this research by Fine, Covell and Tracy yielded data for only 18 teachers both in the experimental and control group and thus the contribution of the aforementioned study to validating TA theory is limited. Apart from the studies mentioned here, there is little research carried out in the area of educational passivity and further work is required to construct a quantitative evidence base for TA concepts applied in education.

In terms of qualitative data, Pierzchała analysed teacher and student interviews, which provided a psychodynamic rationale for the observed passive behaviours. For example, in the student interviews some stated:

If the teacher teaches me something, then well, this is his job, this is his task, and I can't blame him. And the others will not teach and still pick on us during the lesson. But I still have half a year until I graduate... (Pierzchała, 2013, p. 196).

Because the teacher always screams when someone chats in the lesson, and when you defy her... she screams so much. So we keep quiet but the class is so boring that I ... I can't stand it, so I have to hold my eyes to stay awake (Pierzchała, 2013, p. 197).

These quotes demonstrate that students respond to teachers' passivity (verbal violence in this case) with passivity (doing nothing and overadaptation), which creates interrelated positive feedback loops. These findings suggest that, generally, most educators are not particularly interested in the pupil's world and tend to avoid more intimate contact.

Montuschi (1984, p. 29) underscored that the schooling experience is often reduced to mechanical procedures that neglect the quality and meaning of the process, which results in the impoverishment of the student-teacher relationship. Barrow (2009, p. 300) echoes these findings by stating "in school and other educational institutions there is the potential for the recreation of early symbiotic relationships and the potential for corresponding transference and countertransference experiences". Thus, the classroom becomes a space for the potential enactment of an "unresolved symbiotic relationship" (Schiff & Schiff, 1971, p. 71), which comes in the way of teaching and learning. Furthermore, Campos (1975, p. 60) points out that institutions are resistant to change due to cultural scripting for passivity. The root cause of this scripting lies in "the politics of family life in which the child learns early to abdicate his problem-solving capacity for adaptation to parental power". Therefore, in order to tackle educational passivity effectively, teachers need to take account of the underlying dynamics that perpetuate the status quo.

Additionally, it is interesting to consider these transference phenomena across different cultures. "*Passivity at school*" provides a base for further research that can potentially validate TA interculturally. Currently, there are three researchers working on a study aiming to compare the frequency of teacher passive behavio-

urs in Poland, Ukraine, the UK and Guatemala. Similar research has been carried out by Zerlin, Zerlin and Cuiran (1997, p. 241–255) who compared stress responses of Chinese and American high school students. They used an 18 item instrument, with some questions addressing passive behaviours. However, their methodology was less elaborate than Pierzchała's and they concentrated solely on the pupils.

In short, these works contribute to creating a coherent theoretical base of educational passivity while considering crucial psychodynamic mechanisms. The aforementioned authors (Pierzchała, 2013; Fine, Covell and Tracy, 1978, p. 236–239; Montuschi, 1984, p. 29; Barrow 2009, p. 300; Campos, 1975, p. 60) describe the underlying symbiosis by characterising the psychological processes of teachers and students.

### **Practical implications**

Pierzchała's research identifies the necessity to confront passivity in teachers and students, as well as in the very nature of educational processes. For example, she recommends that teachers gain sufficient awareness so that they can effectively pinpoint transactions containing discounts as to reduce the frequency of passive behaviours.

Babcock (1975, p. 392–395) studied passivity amongst caregivers and provided a systemic overview, which underscored the importance of awareness building for carers. She also put forward some valuable suggestions for tackling systemic issues, e.g. "The revolter takes small steps to test the solidarity of his group, gets commitments in writing" (p. 394). Babcock instils a sense of hope by offering a set of steps necessary to confront systemic passivity in the public health system. She does it playfully and invites TA practitioners to identify resources that can support them in facilitating change.

Furthermore, Edwards (1979, p. 60–62) notes that overadaptation is, indeed, the most frequent passive behaviour at school as it is likely to be unnoticed. These remarks are consistent with Pierzchała's findings. Edwards argues that the longer a particular problem is discounted, the more severe the deficits in the students' social and emotional development. This shows that TA practitioners working in education need to be particularly vigilant towards overadaptation if they are truly to support growth and development of young people. This requires a high level of professional integration because it takes away the certainty of a rigid Parent – Child relationship and opens the doors for authentic and more intimate Adult – Adult relating that comes with some vulnerability for the practitioner.

Equally, Pickett (1986, p. 241–246) shows that the process of inviting student's full Adult capacities does not have to be unstructured by translating Berne's operations (1966, p. 233–234) into classroom practice:

**Interrogation** – asking a series of questions, e.g. “What would you like to learn?”

**Specification** – highlighting specific and relevant information for future reference, e.g. making a vocabulary list, separating causes from effects, summarising etc.

**Confrontation** – pointing out an incongruence related to either the teaching material or to the students behaviour, e.g. challenging students with problems not seen before or assertive messages “When you call out during the lesson, I feel frustrated. Please get back to work”.

**Explanation** – providing clear guidance to students to increase their understanding or eliciting explanations from students via differentiated questions, e.g. providing model answers.

**Illustration** – this is an anecdote, a story, a metaphor, a comparison that reinforces the teaching material, e.g. comparing negative numbers to a dive to the bottom of the sea.

**Confirmation** – reaching an agreement that the material has been understood and accepted as valid through students’ committed actions such as homework or tests.

**Interpretation** – forming individual opinions and drawing conclusions concerning the material taught, e.g. evaluating the actions of a historical figure or expressing students’ point of view.

**Crystallisation** – teacher statements that recognise the students’ awareness, understanding and capability as a result of the teaching and learning process; crystallisation statements are made from the teacher’s Adult and received by the student’s Adult, which subsequently reinforces the student’s decision to move in a new direction with crystal clear awareness.

Pickett, based on Erskine (Erskine, 1982, p. 26), also adds

**Direction** – guiding students into new behaviours that they would not initiate on their own, such as supervising, providing written guidelines, designing learning experiences e.g. providing differentiated guidelines for science experiments.

Table 2. provides a summary of Berne’s operations, translated into classroom practice.

The context of these interventions is the distinction between obedience and cooperation. In traditional education models students are expected to comply with the requirements of the teacher, whereas cooperative practices enable students to grow through enquiry based learning, open discussions and peer editing with the educator acting as a facilitator, supervising for a successful outcome. This perspective helps to decrease student overadaptation and complements Pierzchała’s recommendations.

Table 2  
*Therapeutic operations applied to teaching*

| OPERATIONS             | DEFINITIONS  | EXAMPLE   |
|------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Interrogation</b>   | Questions to document important points of information  | When did the Medieval Period begin?   |
| <b>Specification</b>   | Statements that categorize certain information for later reference                           | The Magna Carta formalized trial by jury in 1215.   |
| <b>Confrontation</b>   | Using information to point out a discrepancy or inconsistency in order to increase awareness | Read this. Your second paragraph or- contradicts the first.   |
| <b>Explanation</b>     | Supplying information to orient thinking and to make ideas clear                             | In 1066, the Battle of Hastings ended the Anglo-Saxon Period.   |
| <b>Illustration</b>    | An anecdote, simile, or comparison to reinforce information                                  | Acts of political terrorism in 1985 are like what Grendel did in <i>Beowulf</i> .   |
| <b>Confirmation</b>    | To identify corroboration of an understanding or a skill                                     | Reviewing for, taking, and grading tests.   |
| <b>Interpretation</b>  | A decoding of information in a way that helps students regroup learning to make sense        | Rewrite act I of Macbeth using modern language.   |
| <b>Crystallization</b> | To take on a definite new form of commitment   | A teacher statement acknowledging a student's readiness to move in a new direction that results in the student deciding to stop getting high and to start doing homework. |
| <b>Direction</b>       | A statement that guides behavior that the individual is not initiating on his/her own        | Rewrite this and use topic sentences in each paragraph.   |

Source: Pickett, 1986, p. 244.

## Confronting passivity in educational practice

At this point the question arises: How do TA practitioners can translate these ideas into impactful interventions? The following examples are drawn from the author's experience and represent an attempt of transforming theory into practice: as such these are not evidence based and enter the realm of human subjectivities. Each type of passive behaviours (doing nothing, overadaptation, agitation, incapacitation and violence) can be confronted in many ways and the short case studies illustrate some options available, but are not, by any means, exhaustive.

### Example 1: Activating Physis via the Child when learners are doing nothing

The author was involved in running a professional development course for teachers (Transactional Analysis Proficiency Awards for Teachers and Educa-

tors) in Guatemala. Then the Covid-19 pandemic wrought havoc around the world. As a result, the training had to move online via Zoom. In the Guatemalan context where Internet access is inconsistent and IT skills of teachers require enhancement, the training process became ineffective. The computer screen became a barrier that caused the teachers to lose their interest, not attend and avoid the necessary tasks, such as reading or participating in group discussions. The following steps were taken:

- 1) Teachers were asked to do something pleasurable and fun for their Child Ego State, e.g. spend an afternoon listening to music, go for a walk, play with their children, watch a hilarious comedy, cook or paint, to name a few.
- 2) Each participant was supposed to send a photo of the activity they were involved in.
- 3) During the next training session on Zoom, the slide containing all their pictures was shown.



*Photo 1*

Assignment for teachers – do something fun for your Child

Source: author's resources, 2020.

- 4) Each course participant was asked to write one word in the chat in response to the pictures (responses included: freedom, joy, purpose, lightness, creativity, change, flow, connection)
- 5) The idea of Physis (Berne, 1971, p. 98) was explained to the participants with reference to the pictures and the words. The following definition was used: "the force of Nature, which eternally strives to make things grow and to make growing things more perfect" (p. 98). By connecting the experiences of joy, meaning, connection, creativity and freedom with Berne's definition, the teachers had a felt sense of the concept of Physis.



Subsequently, the teachers became more engaged, they spoke more during online discussions, asked questions and demonstrated their active learning by making links between various TA concepts. By injecting playful Child energy into the training, the author created conditions for uncovering and activating Physis.

### Example 2: Crossing transactions to confront overadaptation to the teacher

The author delivered training concerning vocational orientation for third year psychopedagogy students at a Guatemalan university. The tasks in the workshop were quite open ended and required the participants to formulate their opinions. For example one of the questions was “Discuss the different vocational needs of each Ego State in the context of your work”. The students were working in pairs. It transpired they seemed to think that the facilitator expected particular answers from them. Instead of becoming an all knowing Parent, the author invited the students to examine their thinking and consider its validity. As a white man in the context of an Indigenous Mayan population that suffered persecution during the Civil War from 1960 until 1996, the author was mindful of his White Privilege (Naughton, Tudor, 2006, p. 159–171). By treating the students with respect and affirming their dignity the author suggested that they deserved to be listened to. They no longer had to overadapt to some imaginary standard they had to reach. Instead, they responded by opening up and left the workshop with a calm sense of self-assurance and validation. Figure 1. shows the relevant transactions.

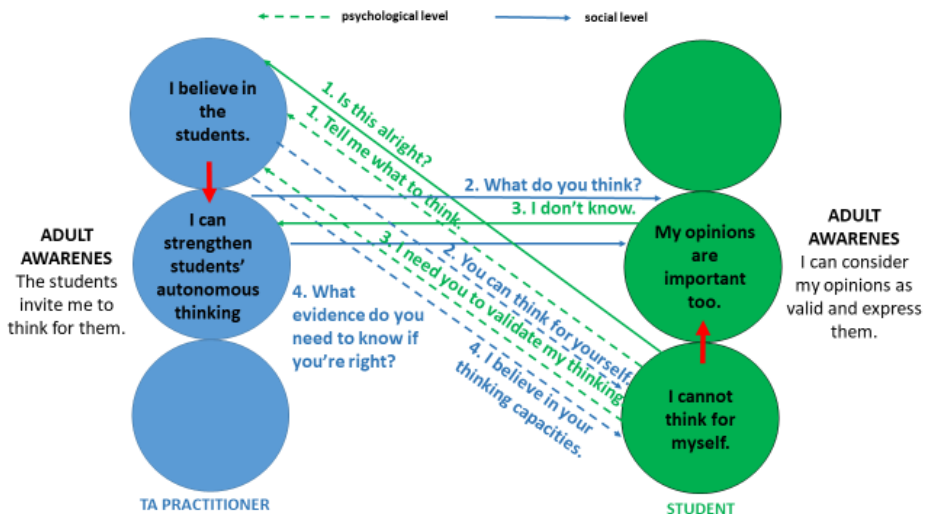


Figure 1  
Crossing a transaction to confront overadaptation

Source: author's construction, 2020.

**Example 3: Naming transactions containing discounts**

During the professional development course for teachers mentioned in example 1 the participants studied the concept of script. They were asked to share with the group their favourite childhood fairy tales. Most of them gave answers containing examples drawn from Occidental culture, such as Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White. One of the participants said in a very apologetic tone “These are some fairy tales from my village”. It became clear that the fairy tales representing the dominant culture (White, Occidental) were seen as more legitimate. The author named the discount that indicated that the participant wanted to overadapt to what they perceived as more valid examples of fairy tales. Following the decontamination, a discussion emerged about internalised racism, while the participant who discounted the significance of their examples (discounted at T<sub>2</sub>) was invited to celebrate their culture. Figure 2. shows these decontaminating transactions.

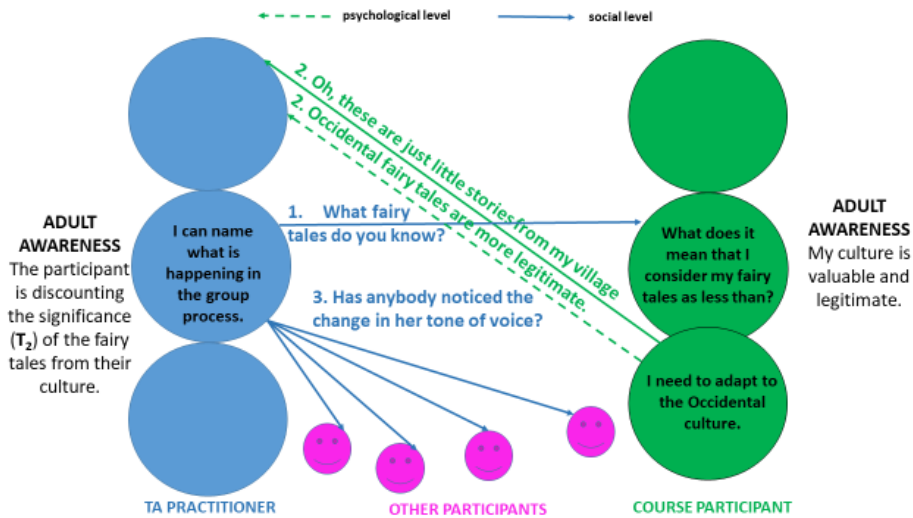


Figure 2  
Naming a transaction containing a discount

Source: author’s construction, 2020.

**Example 4: Agreeing a common frame of reference with agitated learners**

The author worked as a key-teacher in an international school. The role included co-teaching core subjects (English, Maths, Science, Humanities) while supporting students with special educational needs. The author was a consistent figure over a period of two years for a group of multicultural fifteen year olds, acting as an informal counsellor (Jusik, 2017, p. 70) apart from differentiating the teaching material. During the exam period the teenagers became agitated and

inattentive. In a classroom consisting of ten different nationalities, there was no common frame of reference (Schiffs, 1975, p. 290) regarding listening. In order to expand the student's individual frame of reference and establish a group one, the following steps were taken:

1. A survey of the students' preferred ways of learning was conducted and the results (shown in Figure 3.) were presented. The most popular activities were: "Discussing my ideas with someone else"; "Doing something exciting"; "Visuals and diagrams". Following the survey we contracted (Berne, 1966, p. 362) for activities that would maximise their learning.

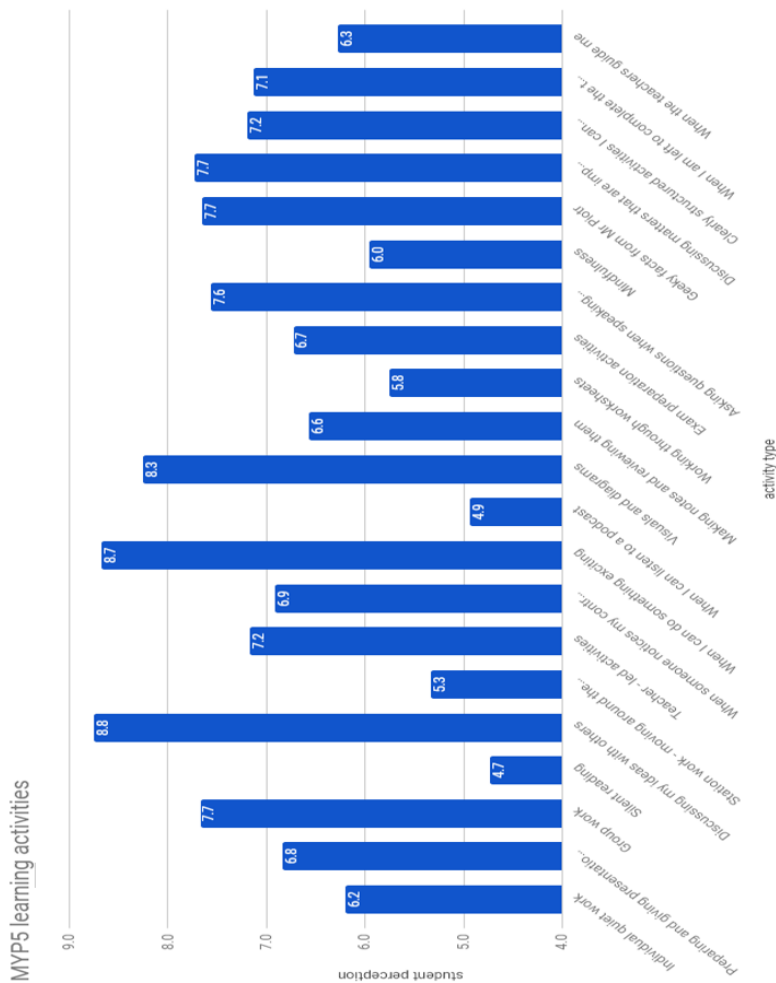


Figure 3  
Results of a student survey concerning preferred learning activities  
Source: author's resources, 2020.

2. The students were asked three questions
  - a) How do you value your own words?
  - b) How do you value the words of others?
  - c) Do you want to change anything?

There was a variety of responses from the students, however most of them said they valued their own words. Question number 2 revealed some incongruences:

- “It’s important to listen to others.”
- “Not much.”
- “I listen to words of others’ if they are important to me.”
- “I want to hear others and believe what they say.”

Based on question 1, it was clear that all students wanted to be listened to, but not all of them were willing to listen to others. The students reacted by quietly pondering this confrontation (Berne, 1966, p. 233–34).

3. Student answers were presented while accounting for different frames of reference and different voices in the class (e.g. “I would like to understand people more”) and a discussion was facilitated.
4. The author modelled listening through positive strokes and by challenging inattention:

I would like to hear what you say because your ideas are valuable.

Subsequently, the students reflected and started listening to each other. Conditions for meaningful transactions (Schiffs, 1975, p. 292) amongst students were created by expanding individual frames for reference and by agreeing a group frame of reference. The teenagers enhanced their Adult awareness by identifying shared values – all students wanted to be heard. Figure 4. presents the transactions that contributed to the shift in the students frame of reference.

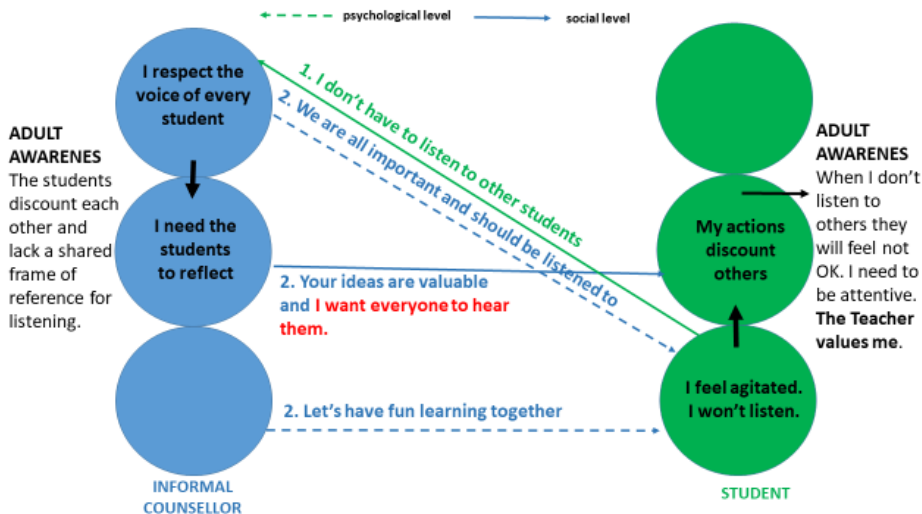


Figure 4  
Confronting inattentive students

Source: author’s construction, 2020.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the studies of educational passivity carried out by Pierzchała and others have significant implications for the theory and practice of transactional analysis. Not only do they contribute to the evidence based aspects of TA, but also pave the way effective teacher training interventions. These works shows that counselling and educational contexts can be studied systematically using psychometric instruments. In a nutshell, combining phenomenological approaches with quantitative ones allows educators and counsellors to gain valuable insight that will inform their practice.

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## Pasywność edukacyjna – od teorii do praktyki

### Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi przegląd *Pasywności w szkole* Pierzchały (2013) pod kątem implikacji dla teorii i praktyki analizy transakcyjnej. Podsumowano główne ustalenia projektu badawczego i porównano je z innymi badaniami dotyczącymi pasywności. Wkład Pierzchały do teorii polega na dostarczeniu bazy dowodowej dla koncepcji zachowań pasywnych poprzez integrację jakościowych i ilościowych metod badawczych. Praktyczne implikacje podkreślają konieczność konfrontacji z pasywnością zarówno nauczycieli, jak i uczniów, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem nadadaptacji, która jest wzmacniana systemowo. Odpowiednie krótkie studia przypadków pokazują, jak dyskusje teoretyczne można przełożyć na praktykę edukacyjną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pasywność, edukacyjna analiza transakcyjna, badania stosowane.