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Social-Emotional Competencies as a Tool for Educational Safety: A Transactional Analysis Perspective

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of social-emotional competencies (SEC) as a key resource determining the educational safety of adolescents, situating the results of a pedagogical experiment within the conceptual framework of Educational Transactional Analysis (ETA). The experiment involved 48 students aged 13–14 who were active participants in computer gaming culture; the experimental group (N = 24) completed 20 hours of Aggression Replacement Training (ART). Analysis of data from the Social Skills Questionnaires (SSQ and OSSQ) demonstrated an increase in competencies in the experimental group, with no analogous changes observed in the control group. The interpretative lens adopted in this article is Transactional Analysis, and specifically the ego-state model: participation in ART appears to strengthen the Adult ego-state function, manifested in greater reflectiveness, self-control, and capacity for emotional regulation. The article argues for the systemic integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes into national curriculum frameworks as a component of universal prevention.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, educational transactional analysis, Aggression Replacement Training, educational safety.

1. Introduction: When the School Cannot Keep Up with the Student

On the one hand, the question of when schools should support the development of social-emotional (SE) competencies seems to have an obvious answer: before difficulties arise. Likewise, the conviction that the young generation today requires systemic support in developing social-emotional competencies may seem a banal statement. It is difficult to ignore the fact that contemporary children and adolescents function in a social reality marked by rapid change, performance pressure, information

overload, and the increasing presence of digital media in everyday life. In this context, the development of SE competencies ceases to be merely an additional element of education and becomes one of the key conditions for psychological well-being, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and effective learning. The importance of social-emotional competencies as a protective factor for mental health and as a support for school, professional, and social functioning is confirmed both by international educational policy recommendations (OECD, 2024) and by numerous research studies. The literature indicates that developing SE competencies is associated with a reduction in risky behaviours (CASEL, 2020), an increased capacity for self-regulation and building social relationships (Goleman, 1997), as well as a reduction in various forms of aggression, both traditional and those carried out using new information technologies (Pyżalski et al., 2026; WHO/Europe, 2024; Machackova et al., 2023). On the other hand, despite the fact that developing and equipping students with social-emotional skills is perceived as the foundation of prevention and an integral element of the young generation's development, in Polish legislation and educational practice these issues are still not distinguished as a separate, systemically supported area of education. Their development is only embedded within broader activities supporting the student, carried out as part of classes with a school psychologist or pedagogue, or as part of the implementation of educational and preventive programmes. Both the Education Law Act (Journal of Laws 2016, item 35) and the relevant Regulation on Psychological and Pedagogical Support (Ministry of National Education Regulation, 2017, Journal of Laws item 1591) refer only to general developmental support for the student, considering their educational and psychophysical needs, but do so in a vague manner and without providing systemic funding for activities that develop social-emotional skills. In practice, this means that classes developing these skills are implemented sporadically, as part of additional grants or projects, often depending on the school's financial resources and the ability of teaching staff to secure funding. Consequently, preventive activities, which are intended to prevent the emergence of difficulties, function sporadically in the school reality and are dependent on funding sources. Meanwhile, integrating the development of social-emotional competencies (SEC), including social skills training (SST), into systemic educational programmes with appropriate financial support should be considered essential to ensure their sustainable and universal implementation. This article begins by presenting the results of a pedagogical experiment conducted with adolescents actively participating in computer gaming culture and reinterprets them from the perspective of Educational Transactional Analysis (ETA). The choice of this theoretical framework is not accidental: ETA offers a precise conceptual apparatus for describing both internal regulatory processes (the ego-state model) and communication patterns (transaction analysis) that underlie social interactions, at school, at home, and in virtual space. The article has a two fold aim: empirical to present the results of the experiment; and theoretical, to indicate how ETA can enrich the interpretation of data from SEL research and serve as an argument for systemic changes in Polish education.

2. Educational Transactional Analysis as an Interpretive Lens

Respecting international and national recommendations regarding the effectiveness of developing social-emotional competencies, activities were undertaken aimed at verifying whether similar effects could be observed among Polish adolescents actively participating in computer gaming culture. The presented reflections are based on the results of a pedagogical experiment (which formed the basis of earlier research by one of the Authors), situated within the perspective of Educational Transactional Analysis . Addressing the gap in existing analyses, the conclusions presented in a new light may contribute to the inclusion of SE competency development as an integral element of Polish education. Transactional Analysis itself, developed by Eric Berne (1961, 1964) as a theory of personality and psychotherapy, over time gained a distinct branch of pedagogical applications. This current, developed by ETA researchers (see Barrow & Newton, 2016) and the community centred around the Transactional Analysis Journal, focuses on the teacher–student relationship, classroom climate, and learning processes understood as a complex network of interpersonal transactions. Berne, distinguishing three ego

states: Parent, Adult, and Child, treated them not as metaphors but as real, observable patterns of responding to the world. The Parent stores internalized norms, injunctions, and behaviour patterns taken from significant others; the Adult processes current information in a balanced and situationally appropriate manner; the Child contains early strategies for coping with needs and emotions, both creative (Free Child) and maladaptive (Adapted Child). In this approach, the key question becomes: how do everyday school experiences, including curriculum-based educational and preventive activities, modulate the flexibility of these structures? From an ETA perspective, the learning process is most effective when the student functions in the Adult or Free Child ego state, which are characterised by cognitive openness, spontaneity, and natural engagement (Barrow & Newton, 2016). School and relational difficulties, on the other hand, often result from the dominance of patterns associated with the Adapted Child, manifested in passiveness, withdrawal, or rebellion, or with the Critical Parent, associated with excessive self-criticism, perfectionism, and anxiety. Consequently, life scripts, unconscious action plans established in early childhood, can limit an individual's flexibility of response and their ability to build healthy peer relationships (Berne, 1961; Steiner, 1974).

3. Computer Gamers in the Light of Media Pedagogy and Educational Transactional Analysis (ETA)

The selection of computer gamers as the research sample was purposive and stemmed from assumptions embedded in the paradigm of media pedagogy and Educational Transactional Analysis (ETA). Media pedagogy, analysing the influence of mass media on the individual and society, seeks effective methods for their use in the didactic and educational process (McLuhan, 1994; Tanaś & Galanciak, 2018). The underlying concept of Marshall McLuhan, including his famous statement “the medium is the message” (1994, p. 7), provides a framework for analysing how different forms of technology affect individuals, shaping their cognitive, social, and emotional competencies. According to this thesis, the very form of communication and the medium used have at least as significant an impact on an individual's perception and behaviour as the content conveyed through them. In the context of the adolescent population studied, this perspective helps to understand how the digital environment models peer interactions and generates specific risks of conflict. Contemporary online gamers, after all, function in a so-called hybrid space, where traditional boundaries between the real (offline) and virtual (online) worlds become blurred. Empirical research demonstrates that school bullying and cyberbullying are not independent phenomena. As Knauf and Eschenbeck (2025) indicate, up to 95% of cyberbullying victims simultaneously experience bullying in direct school relationships (Modecki et al., 2014; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). Disputes initiated during multiplayer games or social media activities are transferred to school corridors, taking the form of physical or verbal aggression, and conversely, classroom conflicts find their continuation in the virtual world. This hybridity of experience generates exceptionally complex challenges in the area of emotion regulation and conflict resolution, which makes SEL interventions potentially particularly beneficial for this group of adolescents. From an ETA perspective, activity in online games can be described as a specific ecosystem of transactional exchange. Under normative conditions, games primarily provide complementary transactions (e.g., a player initiates contact: “Will you play with me?”, and another responds: “Yes”), making the exchange simple, predictable, and safe. However, the emergence of conflict, such as name-calling in a chat, cheating, trolling, or exclusion from the game, introduces crossed or ulterior transactions, which disrupt communication and provoke automatic, often aggressive, scripted reactions. The environment of computer games also redefines the process of obtaining so-called “strokes”, i.e., units of social recognition introduced by Berne (1964), a deficit of which can lead to disturbances in psychological balance. In the virtual world, “strokes” take on a highly attractive, immediate form: points, rankings, rewards, or digital evidence of group belonging. In a situation where the traditional school does not provide a young person with a sufficient number of positive conditional and unconditional “strokes”, the gamer begins to seek them online, sometimes at the expense of offline relationships.

4. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Aggression Replacement Training (ART): An Educational Transactional Analysis (ETA) Perspective

Aggression Replacement Training (ART) was chosen as the method for developing social-emotional competencies due to its documented effectiveness in enhancing social skills, emotion regulation, and the ability to make mature moral decisions (Ensafdaran et al., 2019; Goldstein & Glick, 1997; Wołk, 2024). This method, through systematic training in small groups, enables the practical implementation of strategies for coping with difficult situations, both in the school environment and in virtual space. ART consists of three interconnected components, each of which, from the perspective of Transactional Analysis, corresponds to a different dimension of a young person's personality functioning. Social skills training, which constitutes the behavioural aspect of the method, provides the adolescent's life script with new, constructive behaviour patterns to replace previous, automated reactions. Anger control training, the emotional component, strengthens the structure of the Adult ego state. It equips the young person with tools to identify signals of anger, recognize and replace automatic thoughts (with alternative "cues"), and then consciously reduce impulsive, anxious, or aggressive reactions whose source is the Child ego state. Finally, moral reasoning training stimulates cognitive development by confronting internalized, often rigid messages from the Parent ego state with independent, mature ethical reflection. In this structural and procedural approach, the perspective of the contract, which Transactional Analysis strongly emphasizes as a tool for setting goals and conditions for cooperation, becomes particularly interesting. Each ART session begins with an explicitly formulated, shared goal, which is essentially a miniature educational contract. This transforms the training participant from a passive recipient of preventive interventions into an active co-creator of the process. This leads to a crucial shift: the adolescent moves from the position of the Adapted Child (waiting for instructions or manifesting rebellion) towards the position of the Adult, who is able to negotiate and take responsibility for their own behaviour. Consequently, the skills acquired during ART begin to function as a psychosocial "decoder" of online transactions. They allow the adolescent to identify which ego state they are reacting from during critical moments in a game and to consciously choose a different, non-aggressive response. The use of this type of preventive intervention can not only support the interpersonal development of young people but also serve a preventive function, limiting the risk of conflict escalation in both interconnected spaces: the real and the virtual.

5. Research Methodology and Procedure

The starting point for planning the research was the formulation of problem questions aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the Aggression Replacement Training (ART) method in developing students' social skills. Consequently, two main research questions were defined:

RQ1. To what extent does participation in Aggression Replacement Training promote the development of social skills among experiment participants, as measured by the results obtained from the Social Skills Questionnaires?

RQ2. To what extent does participation in Aggression Replacement Training promote the development of social skills among experiment participants, as measured by the results obtained from the Observational Social Skills Questionnaires?

In order to verify the formulated research problems, the method of a pedagogical experiment was used, complemented by a diagnostic survey. The diagnostic survey served to select the research sample. Thanks to it, a group of school adolescents (aged 13–14) meeting criteria important from the perspective of the research aims was selected for the experiment. All participants were students of existing school classes and active computer gamers. The selection was purposive, allowing for a homogeneous sample and thus limiting the influence of potential confounding variables. The experiment involved a total of 48 participants, divided into two equal groups: experimental (N = 24) and control (N = 24). In the experimental group, an experimental factor was introduced in the form of Aggression

Replacement Training (ART) sessions totalling 20 instructional hours, implemented over three months. The ART sessions, conducted in two experimental subgroups (each of 12 participants), were aimed at developing social, emotional, and moral reasoning competencies. The control group, not participating in the training, functioned under unchanged conditions (without the introduction of the experimental factor). Before the experiment began and after its completion, participants in both groups completed a pre-test and post-test of the Social Skills Questionnaire, designed to assess the level of development of social and emotional skills. In parallel, analogous OSSQ questionnaires were completed by the teachers/guardians of students in both groups, enabling a comparison of student self-assessment with external assessment. This research design allowed for the verification of the role of ART sessions in the development of social-emotional competencies among students actively participating in computer games. In connection with the research subject, aimed at finding answers to the research questions, a statistical analysis was conducted for all experiment participants (N=48) based on the first and second measurements using the SSQ and OSSQ.

5.1. The Educators' Perspective (OSSQ): Findings for RQ1

Data obtained from the OSSQ pre-test and post-test, referring to the level of social skills of students participating in the experiment, indicated an increase in mean scores in all 21 assessed areas in the experimental group. At the same time, no significant differences were observed in the control group. These results suggest that participation in Aggression Replacement Training contributed to the development of social competencies only in the group subjected to the intervention. Confirmation of the ART program's effectiveness was also provided by the feedback from the educators, who, after the completion of the classes, filled out the OSSQ questionnaire and provided the project leader with additional qualitative opinions regarding student functioning. The educators observed positive changes in student behaviour, primarily including greater self-control, the ability to inhibit impulsive reactions, and more frequent avoidance of provocative situations. For this reason, in the OSSQ post-test, they rated the students higher, appreciating their conscious effort and the work they had invested. From the perspective of Transactional Analysis, the behaviours observed by educators correspond to an increased accessibility of the Adult ego state. The Adult does not operate on the basis of automatic, scripted responses; it can gather data from the situation, assess it without excessive emotional burden, and choose a response adequate to the context. The reduction in impulsivity, on the other hand, indicates a weakening of the dominance of the Adapted Child, for whom sudden provocation is a signal of threat requiring an immediate defensive reaction. The educators rated the students higher in the post-test not because expectations had lowered, but because they perceived conscious effort, and it is precisely awareness and intentionality of action that are key characteristics of Adult ego state functioning. In ETA terms, we would say: the students began to 'move out of' scripted automatisms towards more flexible patterns of responding.

5.2. The Students' Perspective (SSQ): Findings for RQ2

The results obtained from the SSQ measurement did not show such clear differences between the experimental and control groups as was the case with the OSSQ. In the experimental group, based on the SSQ, an increase in mean values was noted in six skills, a decrease in thirteen, and no change in two. This indicates that participation in the sessions influenced the change in participants' self-assessment of their social skills, both towards higher and lower ratings. In contrast, in the control group, most SSQ results did not show significant changes compared to the pre-test. At a superficial reading, this result might suggest a deterioration in functioning; however, participant feedback allows it to be interpreted quite differently. Analysis of feedback from participants in the experimental group suggests that participation in ART and the practical implementation of acquired skills in everyday life contributed to an increase in students' self-awareness and reflectiveness. The students realized that applying social skills requires reflection, effort, and conscious engagement, which was reflected in a more critical assessment of individual competencies in the post-test. These results find an explanation in

Kolb's experiential learning model (1984), according to which the acquisition of new skills proceeds cyclically, through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. The lowered self-assessment in selected areas of the SSQ may indicate a transition of participants from a phase of unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence: the students began to perceive the complexity of skills they had previously simply not noticed. In Transactional Analysis terminology, this means that where an automatic, uncritical response from the Child ego state previously dominated, reflection and distance, characteristic of the Adult ego state, have emerged. The lower score in the post-test therefore does not indicate regression; it is a paradoxical proof of deepened reflection, and this is a prerequisite for lasting change.

6. Research Limitations

Although this study makes a significant contribution to the discussion on the role of SEL activities in developing students' social-emotional competencies, it is not without limitations. First and foremost, the lack of a representative research sample prevents the generalization of the obtained results to the entire population. Furthermore, the limited number of hours (20) allocated to the training may have influenced the scope of the observed effects, mainly the first signs of the formation of desired behaviour patterns were noticeable, whereas a more complete assessment of the durability of changes would require long-term follow-up studies. The identified limitations simultaneously point to potential directions for further research. Conducting subsequent projects with larger, randomly selected samples would allow for a more precise capture of the relationships between participation in SEL activities and the specifics of functioning of students with different profiles. Additionally, longitudinal studies would enable the assessment of the durability of effects over a longer time horizon.

7. Discussion: From Experiment to System

The results of the conducted study suggest that participation in activities aimed at developing social-emotional competencies contributes to their growth and supports students in their daily functioning. The skills developed during the activities served as a resource supporting coping with difficult situations both in the real world and in the online space, for example, during computer games requiring cooperation, communication skills, self-regulation, and emotional resilience. Unfortunately, despite existing scientific evidence confirming the importance of systemic support for the development of social competencies as an element strengthening the well-being and sense of educational safety of young people, activities that could systemically support the development of these competencies have not yet taken their rightful place in the Polish education system. Activities of this type are currently implemented mainly within the framework of selective or indicated prevention, only when a student has been diagnosed with deficits and the parent reports the problem to the school or to a psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centre (PPC). Consequently, a student may gain access to SEL activities based on an opinion from a diagnostic team and participate in classes organized by the counselling centre or school, often free of charge, but mainly as part of ad-hoc support. In the case of activities implemented as part of the school's educational and preventive program, their availability depends on the availability of financial resources (e.g., granted as part of obtained grants). The alternative remains private classes, financed by parents, which generates inequalities in access, not every parent can afford such a solution. Therefore, an imperative emerges: to introduce activities developing social-emotional competencies, such as Social Skills Training (SST), into the core curriculum, which would enable ensuring their stable funding from public resources. This would allow all students to have equal access to this type of activity, regardless of their family's economic situation. Similarly to the case of compulsory career counselling classes, which have been included in the core curriculum for grades 7 and 8 since 2017 (Journal of Laws 2018 item 1675), permanently embedding SEL into regulatory acts would make

it possible to cover the entire school community under universal prevention, rather than, as is currently the case, only students diagnosed within the selective and indicated prevention system. Implementing SEL training sessions totalling approximately 20 hours per semester would allow not only for the development of social and emotional skills but also for their transfer to everyday school and social situations, strengthening both educational safety and students' social functioning. Although the indicated number of hours may seem relatively small, it constitutes a significant starting point for shaping specific social-emotional skills. Thanks to systematic training, such sessions could initiate a process of gradual internalization of desired behaviour patterns among students. In this approach, they would serve not only as ad-hoc support but would also create conditions for lasting change in attitudes and skills, which could then be deepened through school practice and subsequent training cycles. Thus, a fundamental question arises: why does the opportunity to participate in SEL activities appear only when deficits have already been diagnosed, rather than as part of primary prevention – before difficulties even emerge? The lack of systemic preventive action at the universal level means that the school does not fully fulfil its role in supporting the psychosocial development of students, and interventions focus on reacting to existing difficulties. Meanwhile, if universal preventive solutions, such as SEL, were embedded in the school's permanent organisational framework, they could not only reduce the risk of problems arising but also support students in building lasting psychosocial resources. According to the binding provisions of the Education Law in Poland, each school is obliged to develop an educational and preventive program, which should integrate educational and preventive activities, responding both to the developmental needs of students and the specificity of the local environment. However, if this program were covered by a detailed regulation concerning its organization, implementation, and funding, similar to other areas of education, e.g., curricula or career counselling, it could become a real tool for systemic support of students' social-emotional development. On the one hand, it can be argued that the lack of central regulations gives schools broad autonomy in shaping educational and preventive activities. This allows them to be tailored to the needs of a given institution and the local environment, which theoretically increases the adequacy and effectiveness of the initiatives undertaken. However, on the other hand, the lack of systemic financial support significantly limits schools' possibilities. The implementation of the educational and preventive program depends on the creativity of teachers and educators in securing additional funds, most often by applying to local (municipal or *gminna*) commissions for solving alcohol problems (pl. *Miejska Komisja Rozwiązywania Problemów Alkoholowych [MKRPA]* or *Gminna Komisja Rozwiązywania Problemów Alkoholowych [GKRPA]*), grant institutions (national and international), or non-governmental organizations. The organizational and substantive burden usually falls on the school psychologist or pedagogue, serving as the chairperson of the team responsible for the educational and preventive program. Consequently, the activities undertaken are often incidental and limited to short-term forms, for example, student participation in one-time workshops conducted by external specialists. Although valuable, such initiatives are not capable of equipping students with tools enabling the development of social-emotional competencies. The development of such skills requires systematic, long-term intervention, including training in safe conditions (a training room), the opportunity to apply them in everyday situations, and subsequently receiving feedback and behavioural correction. Organizing a cycle of SEL classes amounting to a minimum of 20 hours per semester for a group of approximately 15 students, however, requires securing financial resources with which schools have not been equipped as part of their core funding.

8. Conclusions

The conducted study provides arguments for integrating Aggression Replacement Training into systemic activities supporting the social-emotional development of contemporary youth, especially given that their daily lives unfold in the hybrid space of games and school relationships. Interpreting the data through the lens of Educational Transactional Analysis allows for a description of the mechanism of this change: ART sessions strengthen the accessibility of the Adult ego state and limit the

maladaptive patterns of the Adapted Child. The observed transfer of skills to the online space suggests that the change is characterized by internalisation, rather than merely superficial behavioural learning. ETA makes it possible to ask not only what changes, but also how and why, pointing to internal regulatory processes and transactional patterns as the mechanism underlying the development of social-emotional competencies. This is a perspective that should have a permanent place in the toolkit of the school pedagogue and psychologist. However, the key systemic conclusion remains the necessity to move beyond the logic of selective and indicated prevention. Since effective methods, such as ART, are available, and the evidence for their effectiveness is increasingly strong, the question of "whether?" becomes obsolete. The current question is "when?" when will decision-makers recognize that every student, regardless of whether their life unfolds mainly in the real world or in the hybrid offline and online space, deserves systematic support in shaping the skills that determine the quality of their relationships and their safety in both of these worlds.

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