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**EXAMINING AND DEVELOPING SOCIAL PROBLEM-SOLVING, ASSERTIVE
COMMUNICATION AND COPING STRATEGIES THROUGH DRAMA
PEDAGOGICAL METHODS**

Summary of the PhD dissertation

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Over the last decade, substantial research has shown that an increasing number of children and adolescents experience communication difficulties, use less effective problem-solving strategies, and struggle to address problems in various context, facing a myriad of challenges at school, among their peers, and in other communities (Denham et al., 2012; Ibabe, 2016; Kasik, 2015; Reid et al., 2007; Zsolnai, 2013). Research also highlights the need for school interventions that develop multiple areas in a complex way, taking advantage of the interconnections between the areas to be developed (Webster-Stratton, 2011). Additionally, a growing body of research emphasizes the importance of accurately identifying gender differences and mapping age-specific characteristics before initiating a development program (Perzow et al., 2021). In Hungary, there are few comprehensive studies and school-based interventions, but both national and international research (Webster-Stratton, 2011) confirm that the consciously and systematically developing components of social competence is essential at an earlier age.

The aim of the doctoral research was to examine the characteristics of social problem-solving, coping strategies and assertive communication and their relationship among students aged 10-11 and 12-13 years. Additionally, it sought to identify any gender differences in these areas. Based on the research findings, the research also aimed to develop a drama-based, communication-focused school intervention that promotes growth in these areas.

The first part of the thesis provides the theoretical background of the research, covering three specific areas (social problem-solving, communication and coping strategies) of study, the development opportunities identified, and an overview of drama pedagogy as a methodological approach. The second part outlines the research background, including details about the sample, the sampling process, research tools and methods used. It also presents findings related to the characteristics and the control group development with 10 to 11-year-olds. The communication-focused development program was designed to enhance social problem-solving skills, coping strategies, and assertive communication through drama pedagogy methods, which have been shown to be effective in promoting growth of social competence (DICE, 2010).

The one-year development program led to significant changes in three areas within the experimental group. The impulsive, emotion-focused problem-solving style and avoidant coping strategy were significantly reduced, while the use of confrontation as a coping strategy increased. Assertive communication has significant explanatory power in all three areas. Research findings suggests that this development can be an effective method for altering certain problem-solving styles and coping strategies. In case these strategies dysfunction, they can lead to life management difficulties or less effective coping overall.

Keywords: adolescence; assertive communication; coping strategies; development; drama methods; social problem-solving