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LGBT STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS. STEREOTYPES VERSUS REALITY

Abstract

The aim of the study is to gain knowledge about the perception of the situation of LGBT students in schools. The analysis was broadened by incorporating the research question of whether there is a significant relationship between demographic variables and the beliefs and attitudes about the situation of LGBT students in schools. The study highlights the low level of common education in the field of anti-discrimination policy. An analysis of an online survey was carried out, the data were analyzed through chi-square test of independence, allowing to determine the connection of the variables. The results show a clear association between sexual orientation, belief systems, and the perception of the situation of LGBT students in the school environment. It was concluded that in order to improve the situation of LGBT students it is necessary to instruct the teaching staff in the methods of engaging in conversation with students about sexual orientation, as well as in ways of recognizing and reacting to manifestations of school homophobia.

Keywords: LGBT students, discrimination, school, sexual orientation

Streszczenie
Uczniowie LGBT w szkołach. Stereotypy a rzeczywistość

Celem badania jest zdobycie wiedzy na temat postrzegania sytuacji uczniów LGBT w szkołach. Analizę poszerzono o pytanie badawcze: czy istnieje istotny związek między zmiennymi demograficznymi a przekonaniami i postawami dotyczącymi sytuacji uczniów LGBT w szkołach? Badanie zwraca uwagę na niski poziom powszechnej edukacji w zakresie polityki antydyskryminacyjnej. Przeprowadzono analizę ankiety internetowej, dane poddano testom niezależności chi-kwadrat, pozwalającym na określenie związku zmiennych. Wyniki wskazują na wyraźny związek między orientacją seksualną, systemem przekonań a postrzeganiem sytuacji uczniów

LGBT w środowisku szkolnym. Stwierdzono, że dla poprawy sytuacji osób LGBT w szkołach konieczne jest przygotowanie kadry nauczycielskiej do prowadzenia rozmów z uczniami na temat orientacji seksualnej oraz rozpoznawania i reagowania na przejawy szkolnej homofobii.

Słowa kluczowe: uczniowie LGBT, dyskryminacja, szkoła, orientacja seksualna

Introduction

Stereotypes are "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups" [Hilton, Hippel, 1996: 240]. These beliefs have an important role in understanding "how and why certain attributes go together" [Hilton, Hippel, 1996: 240]. The key element that makes up a stereotype is that it is a ubiquitous, oversimplified image with a varying degree of accuracy [Bordalo et al., 2016]. An often overlooked trait is that stereotypes are subjected to change with time [Bordalo et al., 2016]. In their article Hilton and Hippel [1996] state that there are many purposes as to why stereotypes exist. The most common of which is simplifying the world around us by using the data that we have previously obtained rather than analyzing every element that we encounter. This saves time and resources. Stereotypes are context-dependent, meaning that they serve a specific function that is related to a specific situation [Bordalo et al., 2016: 238]. Depending on the group a person is being compared to, in what situation they are in, or even the sort of motivation that resulted in the formation of the stereotype; in the eyes of the beholder the stereotypes one might be associated with can be drastically different. Stereotypes are formed in two ways: by being a mental representation of different groups, that are based on reality, or at least as Rothbart states, "the local reality of a person" [1984, as cited in Hilton, Hippel, 1996: 240]. These types of stereotypes are usually focused mostly on more characteristic features allowing for best distinction. The second way is when stereotypes are formed about different groups "independent of real group differences" [Hilton, Hippel, 1996: 241], even if there are little to no group differences [Hilton, Hippel, 1996]. Stereotypes aren't necessarily negative, however, stereotypes about out-group members typically have more of a negative valence than those revolving about in-group members [Esses et al., 1997, as cited in Hilton, Hippel, 1996: 240]. Over 20 years ago the consequences of stereotyping and being stereotyped were not well explored. These days we have a multitude of studies showing the effects on a vast number of agents, such as the individual, their performance, or place in society [Hilton, Hippel, 1996; McKown, Weinstein, 2003; Shapiro, Neuberg, 2007; Woodcock et al., 2012]. One of the immediate consequences of being stereotyped is disengagement and distancing from the activity in question. This results in lower aspirations and performance in the domain [Woodcock et al., 2012].

The scientific world has officially accepted the diversity of psychosexual orientations in the 1970s, stating that it is not a disorder [Iniewicz, 2009a]. This resulted in a wide range of open discussions that all people should be treated equally and have the same right to live and to be respected by others. However in most cases as professor Iniewicz [2009b] reveals, it often reaches a dead end because the arguments

are dominated by prejudices and emotions. This is in alliance with the findings of stereotypes that suggest "that motivational factors can lead to rapid confirmation yet slow or begrudging disconfirmation of a negative expectancy, even when the stereotype concerns a dimension that is irrelevant to the root of the disfavor" [Hilton, Hippel, 1996: 239]. In recent years, however, bans or administrative impediments have become less common, or at least the more flagrant means have been reduced, which in the past have stopped the organization of peaceful public LGBT demonstrations [Jabłońska, Knut, 2012]. We can also see that recently this topic has been frequently brought up by political warfare. Former superintendent of education Grzegorz Wierzchowski said that the LGBT virus is much more dangerous than the Coronavirus [F., 2020]. Polish people are in a tumultuous time of change – taboo issues are increasingly being raised not just locally but also nationwide.

Literature review

Qualitative research has shown that non-heteronormative individuals are often isolated and shunned by their schoolmates, who use physical and psychological violence against them [Świder, Winiewski, 2017]. They also declare a lack of support from school officials, which only increases the chance of repetition of peer violence towards them [Świder, Winiewski, 2017]. The school staff frequently declare feeling incompetent to deal with behaviors of homo- and transphobic individuals [Świder, Winiewski, 2017; Lekcja Równości, 2013].

The social learning theory suggests that people learn by observing others [Bandura, 1969]. According to Bandura a determining factor in adopting a new behavior stems from experiencing the consequences of using that skill. Moreover, this theory can to some degree explain cultural differences in behavior, indicating that the cause of variation is linked to the environment in which the individuals grew up [Bandura, 1969]. Therefore it is crucial to keep in mind that the acquisition of certain traits and/or mindsets are through the prism of culture, if only in terms of subsequent prejudices. People will subconsciously act through these ingrained values [Bandura, 1969]. This indicates the tremendous role that schools and local communities have in instilling just and equitable principles. Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly [1998] have built their findings, *inter alia* on Bandura's theory, illustrated the pervasiveness of antisocial behaviors through its contagious nature. When groups exhibit antisocial practices, individuals are more likely to adopt those actions themselves. Teachers exhibiting prosocial behaviors and intervening in cases of bullying, particularly in cases addressing LGBT harassment, positively influenced the probability of students intervening, furthermore, the chances grew when witnessing other students intervene [Wernick et al., 2013].

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights up to 69% of Polish students have experienced or witnessed a varying degree of negative comments and actions toward people identifying as LGBT+ in the school environment [Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, 2021]. Other studies have found that

30% of homophobia-motivated aggression takes place on school grounds, and in nearly 50% of instances of homophobic violence, the perpetrators are the subjects' schoolmates [Makuchowska, 2011]. LGBT students who have come out may be subjected to bullying and violence, as a result, self-destructive behaviors, depression, and isolation may occur [Andrusiewicz, 2014]. Nearly 70% of LGBT teens have had suicidal thoughts and around 73% had symptoms of depression [Świder, Winiewski, 2017]. On the other hand, in a study where students were surveyed, it turned out that more than three-quarters didn't react to homophobic violence at school [Makuchowska, 2011].

Research has shown that mere knowledge about ones' sexual orientation can alter the way a superior perceives how competent the individual is [Błaszczyk et al., 2021]. What is more, in Błaszczyk and colleagues' [2021] study there was a significant link between gender and preference for a candidate who is applying for a supervisor position. Male participants exhibited a preference towards superiors that were heterosexual, whereas females showed no preference depending on sexual orientation. This can be translated over to the school setting, where teachers are to assess the student's knowledge as unbiasedly as possible. A noticeable problem regarding LGBT students is that they perform lower in their educational realm and have higher absenteeism [Świder, Winiewski, 2017]. Undoubtedly, this directly impacts their self-esteem and motivation to learn. According to studies, LGBT students are more often affected by psychological problems and emotional disorders, which in many cases result in self-harm, suicide attempts, or suicides [Świder, Winiewski, 2017, Lekcja Równości, 2013].

The reason behind the prevalence of harmful behaviors toward LGBT+ students is mainly because psychosexual education in Poland is still at an inferior level. LGBT+ topics are not addressed in the curricula [Lekcja Równości, 2013]. The aforementioned issue is repeatedly downplayed in Polish society. In regard to the situation of the LGBT+ group in Poland, we hear voices such as "even politicians who consider themselves tolerant talk about equality being an 'exaggeration' or 'radicalism'" [Witczak, 2021]. It is important to shed light on the situation of members in the LGBT community in schools since such institutions not only mirror the dominant discourses in society but also construct the very pillars responsible for such perspectives [Ferfolja, Robinson, 2004]. Previous research has shown the significant influence that school staffs' perception and stance have on perpetuating homophobic behaviors [Ferfolja, Robinson, 2004; Hansen, 2015]. LGBT+ students in schools frequently feel misunderstood, ridiculed, and even harassed [Wycisk, 2018]. In addition, teachers are less likely to react in situations involving LGBT+ students, not intervening as often as with heteronormative individuals [Lekcja Równości, 2013].

One of the most critical social developmental stages happens during the school-age of children and adolescents. As proposed by Erik Erikson, during this time adolescents develop their identity, which also encaptures their sexual identity [Stangor, 2014]. The presence of negative stereotypes, that lead to discrimination towards LGBT+ individuals, can cause difficulties for individuals, especially in accepting their sexuality [NZOZ Centrum Terapii DIALOG, 2019]. Case in point,

that as many as 72% of students that identify with the LGBT+ movement declare that they were in at least some situations in which they had to hide their sexual orientation at school [Świder, Winiewski, 2017].

Method

Aim of the study: to gain knowledge about the perception of the situation of LGBT students in schools. Research question: Is there a significant relationship between demographic variables and beliefs and attitudes about the situation of LGBT students in schools?

Participants

The study was conducted on a group of 494 participants who met the required criteria – being a student or employee of an elementary or secondary school, answering all the questions in the survey. 295 of these people are women, 147 men, and 52 did not identify with the above-mentioned genders. The median age (range from 12 to 53 years) was 17. Among the respondents: 64 Catholics, 303 atheists, 69 Christians, and 58 people whose beliefs did not exceed 10 people were qualified as "other". 179 (36.2%) of the respondents live in the countryside, the rest are city dwellers. 14 people declared themselves asexual. 139 people replied, when asked about their sexual orientation, that they were homosexual, 206 were bisexual, 71 were heterosexual, and 64 people chose the answer: "other".

Procedure

The study was carried out using Google Forms from November 5 to December 19, 2020. The participants were informed that they were taking part in a study on the perception of LGBT students in schools. Filling out the study took about 15 min.

Material

In the conducted study, we relied on the Polish version of the Prejudice Survey by Paulina Górska and Małgorzata Mikołajczak [2014]. The questionnaire consists of 9 items. The first three (1–3) relate to the perceived threat from homosexuals. The next three questions (4–6) explored traditional homophobia, that is, hostile attitudes towards homosexual people that stem from moral and religious beliefs and norms [Morrison, Morrison, 2003 as cited in Górska, Mikołajczak, 2014]. Modern homophobia [Morrison, Morrison, 2003 as cited in Górska, Mikołajczak, 2014] was measured using the last three questions. It differs from traditional homophobia in

that hostile attitudes stem from a sense that the political demands of homosexuals are unjustified and that this social group is not discriminated against. We asked respondents to respond to these questions on a 7-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). The fourth part – aims to provide information about the situation of LGBT people at school. Items 8 and 9 are reversed questions, in which the higher the value, the greater the prejudice. We supplemented our survey with a qualitative study in the form of interviews with homosexual individuals.

Results

Gender. Chi-square test of independence showed that there was no significant association between gender and the belief that:
- LGBT students feel safe at school, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 4.87, $p = .087$;
- LGBT students receive help and support, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 2.38, $p = .304$;
- A form of support for LGBT students is talking to a psychologist, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 0.70, $p = .706$;
- A form of support for LGBT students are anti-descrimination actions, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 0.88, $p = .255$;
- A form of support for LGBT students are educational campaigns, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 2.78, $p = .249$;
- LGBT students experience negativity at school, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 3.63, $p = .163$;
- LGBT students experience positive things at school, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 1.34, $p = .513$;
- Curriculum changes could make a difference for LGBT students in schools, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 4.53, $p = .104$;
- Increasing the knowledge of teachers and the school environment about LGBT student is not possible, X^2 (2, $N = 494$) = 4.96, $p = .084$.

Religion. There is a significant relationship between the variables. LGBT students feel safe in school, as reported by a higher percentage of participants who identify as Catholic (25%) or Christian (27,5%) than those who are atheists (13,2%) or fell into the category – other (17,2%), X^2 (3, $N = 494$) = 11.31, $p = .01$ (Figure 1).

The proportion of subjects who reported that LGBT students receive help and support, did differ by religion, X^2 (3, $N = 494$) = 15.22, $p = .002$. Catholics (23,4%) and Christians (34,8%) scored higher while atheists (14,9%) and those categorised under other (19%) scored lower (Figure 2).

A chi-square test of independence showed that there was no significant association between religion and the belief that a form of support for LGBT students is talking to a psychologist, X^2 (3, $N = 494$) = 3.19, $p = .363$. The same lack of association between religion and the form of supporting LGBT students can be seen through anti-descrimination actions, X^2 (3, $N = 494$) = 6.74, $p = .081$ and educational cam-paigns, X^2 (3, $N = 494$) = 4.28, $p = .233$ (Figure 2.).
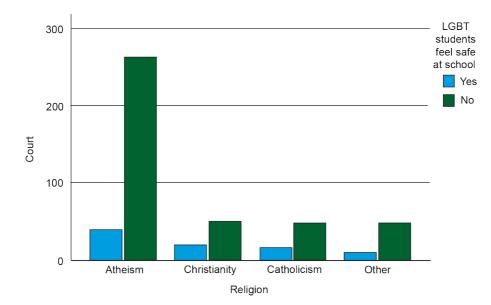
Figure 1. Religion versus the sense of security of LGBT students at school
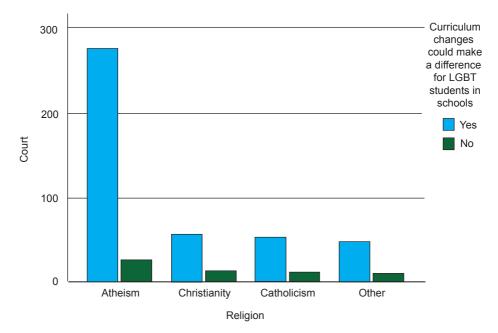
Source: own elaboration.

Figure 2. Religion versus the importance of the curriculum for LGBT students in schools

Source: own elaboration.

There is a significant relationship between religion and the statement that LGBT students experience negativity at school, which is reported by a higher percentage of participants who identify as atheists (94,4%) or Catholics (93,8%) than Christians (82,6%) and those who fell into the category – as other (89,7%)), X^2 (3, N = 494) = 11.45, p = .01. However, this relationship does not translate over into the opposite statement that LGBT students experience positive things at school, where there is no significant association X^2 (3, N = 494) = 2.53, p = .469 (Figure 2).

There is a significant relationship between religion and the belief that increasing the knowledge of teachers and the school environment about LGBT students is not possible, X^2 (3, N = 494) = 11.93, p = .008. Only 1.4% of Christians agreed with this statement, whereas 13.5% of Atheists, 20.3% of Catholics, and 10.3% of people whose beliefs fall under the category other agreed with it (Figure 3).
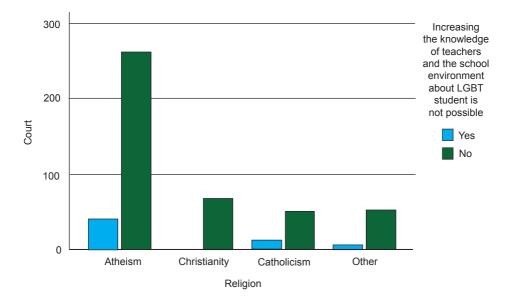

Figure 3. Religion versus increasing the knowledge of teachers and the school environment about the LGBT student

Source: own elaboration.

Place of residence. A chi-square test of independence showed that there was no significant association between the place of residence and the belief that:
- LGBT students feel safe at school, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 0.3, p = .585;
- LGBT students receive help and support, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 0.14, p = .708;
- A form of support for LGBT students is talking to a psychologist, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 0.24, p = .876;
- A form of support for LGBT students are anti-descrimination actions, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 0.03, p = .862;

- LGBT students experience negativity at school, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 0.91, p = .763;
- LGBT students experience positive things at school, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 2.93, p = .087;
- Curriculum changes could make a difference for LGBT students in schools, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 0.001, p = .977;
- Increasing the knowledge of teachers and the school environment about LGBT student is not possible, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 2.82, p = .093.

There is a significant association between the place of residence and the belief that a form of support for LGBT students are educational campaigns, X^2 (1, N = 494) = 6.69, p = .01. Where participants from cities (88.9%) were more likely to agree with this statement than those from villages (80.4%) (Figure 4).
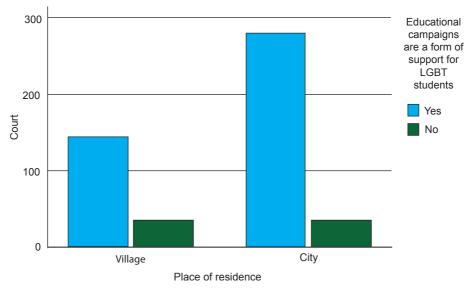

Figure 4. Place of residence versus a form of support for LGBT students

Source: own elaboration.

Sexual orientation. Those surveyed who are in the LGBT+ community (homosexuals 13.7%, bisexuals 15%) felt that LGBT students feel less safe at school, however, asexuals who also belong in this community rated the safety of LGBT students higher (35.7%). Participants who are heterosexual perceived the safety of LGBT students similarly (33.8%). The chi-square test of independence indicated that the difference was significant X^2 (4, N = 494) = 21.74, p < .001.

Participants who are heterosexual perceived the help and support that LGBT students receive higher (32.4%) than those who identify as homosexual (15.8%),

bisexual (18.4%), asexual (21.4%), or other (14.1%). The chi-square test of independence indicated that the difference was significant X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 10.18, $p = .037$.

Sexual orientation does not significantly differentiate that a form of support for LGBT students is talking to a psychologist X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 6.59, $p = .159$, nor that a form of support for LGBT students is anti-discrimination actions X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 6.6, $p = .159$ or that a form of support for LGBT students are educational campaigns X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 2.44, $p = .655$.

The chi-square test of independence indicated that there was a significant relationship between sexual orientation and the extent of agreeing with the statement that LGBT students experience negativity in school X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 19.85, $p < .001$. Asexual participants (71.4%) and heterosexual (83.1%) didn't agree to such a degree as those who are bisexual (93.2%), homosexual 95.7%), and identified as other (95.3%) (Figure 5).
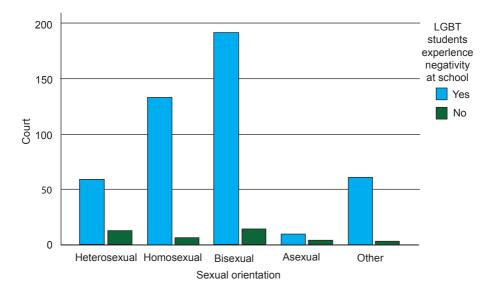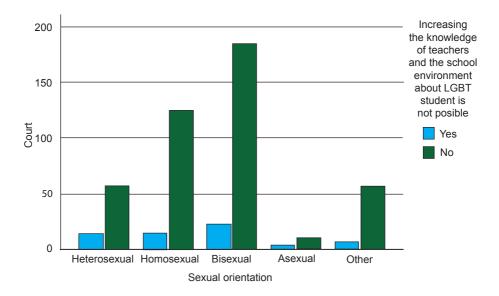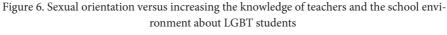

Figure 5. Sexual orientation versus experiencing negativity at school by LGBT students

Source: own elaboration.

The proportion of participants who reported their opinion on the statement that LGBT students experience positive things at school did not differ by sexual orientation X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 8.58, $p = .072$.

There is a significant relationship between sexual orientation and the statement that curriculum changes could make a difference for LGBT students in schools, X^2 (4, $N = 494$) = 37.63, $p < .001$. There is a higher percentage of bisexuals (92.2%), people who identified as other (92.2%), and homosexuals (90.6%) agreeing with this statement, than asexuals (78.6%) and heterosexuals (66.2%).

There is a significant relationship between sexual orientation and the belief that increasing the knowledge of teachers and the school environment about LGBT students is not possible, X^2 (4, N = 494) = 8.28, p = .082. Homosexual participants (10.1%), bisexual (10.7%), and those who identified as other (10.9%) didn't agree to such a degree as those who are heterosexual (19.7%), and asexual (28.6%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Sexual orientation versus increasing the knowledge of teachers and the school environment about LGBT students

Source: own elaboration.

Discussion

The study sought to assess the association between demographic variables and the attitudes and outlooks on the situation of LGBT+ students in schools in Poland. Counter to previous studies [Błaszczyk et al., 2021] a variable that has shown to be nonsignificant in this line of research was gender. It is important to note that the sample was not representative of the Polish population and the fact that most of the participants were in some way connected to the LGBT+ movement may have distorted the results. This can be explained by Allport's Contact hypothesis [Allport, Clark, Pettigrew, 1979], in which having contact with a member reduces prejudice toward that group. This has been also proven in the Polish setting, where having a friend who is not heteronormative increased positive attitudes toward people identifying as homosexual [Górska, 2021].

Catholics and Christians were more likely to assess the situation of LGBT students in a positive light. Compared to Atheists and participants whose beliefs fell

under the category of others, Catholics and Christians had a higher percentage of reports of LGBT people getting help, support, and feeling safe. What is more, although the number was high, Christians were less likely to agree that LGBT students experience negativity at school and that curriculum changes could make a difference for LGBT students in schools. This contrast of assessing the situation of people in the LGBT community so differently can be a result of downplaying the situation by Christians and Catholics, who in previous studies, conducted on the Polish population, indicated that "the LGBT 'ideology' is a threat to Christian civilization and Polishness" [Górska, 2021: 3].

Participants from cities were more likely to agree that a form of support for LGBT students were educational campaigns, than those residing in villages. This may be because these negative stereotypes may be more prevalent in the country-side [Jabłońska, Knut, 2012]. However, this does not explain why the relationship cannot be seen with anti-discriminatory campaigns.

Respondents who identified as heterosexual and asexual were more likely to agree that LGBT students feel safe at school, receive help and support and that change through increasing teachers' knowledge about LGBT is not possible. Whereas they are less likely to agree that LGBT students experience negativity at school, curriculum changes could make a difference for LGBT students in schools. This is in line with previous research done on students living in Poland [Kołodziej, 2019]. The reason for this may be that school safety does not depend solely on teachers [Taraszkiewicz, 2003]. Raising teachers' knowledge will not guarantee a behavioral change among peers [Zapora et al., 2020]. Interestingly, respondents who identify as heterosexual and asexual believe that LGBT students experience less negative experiences at school, which may be due to the fact that the problem is not so important to them or they do not pay attention to it. Nevertheless, respondents believe that changes in the curriculum may have significant consequences for LGBT students, mainly because content may promote or negate the position of LGBT people.

Overall, the results show that there are clearly unfavorable circumstances for LGBT students in school in Poland, which is demonstrated by the generally ubiquitous answers from respondents. To a large extent, negative stereotypes may be the cause of this phenomenon, which are ingrained in a traditional mindset [Frątczak, 2016]. In order to improve the situation of LGBT students in schools, it is necessary to prepare the teaching staff to engage in conversations with students about sexual orientation, as well as to recognize and react to manifestations of school homophobia [Uliasz, Jąderek, 2017].

Summary

To reduce the scale of negative phenomena, including stigmatization, ridicule, intimidation, universal and compulsory anti-discrimination education could have a significant impact – the necessity to implement these measures results not only from the recommendations of international human rights bodies but from Poland's

legal obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Ombudsman repeatedly approached the Minister of National Education regarding the need to implement anti-discrimination education, supplement the core curriculum with the subject of human rights and equal treatment, and thus adjust the Polish education system to international standards. Unfortunately, in the opinion of the Minister of National Education, the solutions adopted at present are satisfactory, and moreover, the Minister discouraged initiatives aimed at counteracting discrimination in the area of education.

As a result of the analysis, suggestions for alternative solutions to the problem of discrimination against LGBT people were indicated. Among the proposed solutions, the basic aspect is the popularization of LGBT issues, which will contribute to increasing the awareness of young people and thus minimizing homophobia and violence. In addition, it is crucial to introduce educational campaigns on anti-discrimination, which will allow reaching a large number of recipients. The campaign aims to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices. Among the recommended recommendations, workshops on tolerance and acceptance were proposed, which will allow learning about LGBT issues in a practical way. The current situation clearly indicates the need to amend the anti-discrimination law in Poland so that it takes into account the premise of gender identity. The key will be the obligation of public authorities, schools, universities, and employers to issue new documents, taking into account the personal data of the applicant, such as name, surname, and gender, resulting from the new birth certificate (issued during gender correction). It is believed that Poland should take into account good practices applied by other EU countries.

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