



Marzanna Pogorzelska

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7346-4023>

Opole University, Poland; e-mail: mpogorzelska@uni.opole.pl

Paweł Rudnicki

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2495-8104>

University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland; e-mail: pawel.rudnicki@dsw.edu.pl

Between the Holy Cross and Free Market. Addressing the Issue of Homosexuality in the Narratives of Former Students in Polish Schools

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Abstract

In the article the authors present the results of the research based on in-depth interviews with 22 young gays and lesbians, graduates of different types schools in Poland. The main goal of the research was to indicate how, in the opinions of the respondents, the issue of homosexuality was addressed in schools they attended and how these particular ways of treating homosexuality might be related to the wider socio-cultural context. The qualitative analysis of the narratives with the application of thematic analysis of the data let the authors identify four main categories comprising the ways of dealing with the issue of homosexuality (*silence, pathologising attitude, the language of sin, pogrom and alternativeless heterosexuality*). The authors associate these ways of treating homosexuality with the socio-political context, particularly with the impact of the conservative Catholic church and neo-liberal turn, both of which triggered an ideological backlash in education, resulting in marginalisation of a range of issues in school curricula and permission to use homophobic language in public sphere, including educational settings.

Keywords: homosexuality, Polish schools, teachers' attitudes, socio-political context.

Introduction

In a centrally located European democracy, a state that has been a member of the European Union since 2004, a country which has experienced long periods of violence and exclusion of various social groups in its turbulent history, ‘LGBT-free zones’ are being established today. In multiple districts and communes across Poland, the resolutions issued by local self-government bodies to declare the establishment of such zones are essentially similar: they include provisions which proclaim a strong protest against (alleged) attempts at imposing what they call ‘the LGBT ideology’ and the urgency to protect the traditional Polish family values and the Christian cultural heritage against the liberal circles promoting that LGBT ideology, ‘homo-propaganda,’ the cultural revolution, political correctness and tolerance (Santora & Berendt, 2019; Staszewska, 2019; Ambroziak & Pacewicz, 2020; Korolczuk, 2020). In our view, such practices, which flout the standards of human rights and the EU legislation purportedly adopted by Poland, result, among other things, from years-long negligence in the field of education. Therefore, in our paper we first outline the socio-cultural setting in which Polish schools operate and then report the findings of a research study on the ways in which homosexuality-related themes are addressed in and by Polish schools. We believe that this approach will help better understand the factors which may contribute to various forms of discrimination in Poland and elsewhere and thus make it clearer how to prevent such detrimental developments.

Between the holy cross...

The history of Poland has been marked by wars, insurrections, partitions by powerful neighbour-countries and finally an extended period of living in the oppressive shadow of the “Big Brother,” that is, the Soviet Union. Amidst these historical vicissitudes, the Roman Catholic Church, representing the religion endorsed today by nearly 85% of the Polish population (GUS, 2019, p. 197), was perceived as the defender and the depositary of Polishness, with its culture, history and tradition. The teachings of the church, an institution boasting a powerful social influence even (if not particularly) under the communism, were endorsed by a considerable portion of Polish society as the only reliable interpretation of moral norms and the central guidepost in making choices in life (Eberts, 1998; Leszczyńska, 2017; O’Dwyer, 2018). At the same time, these teachings were informed by and expressive of utterly conservative notions

of human sexuality, family, interpersonal relationships and hostility against LGBT people (Einhorn, 1993; Mikulak, 2017; 2019). Under communist rule (1945-1989), these instructions dovetailed with another official narrative whose position on the repression of sexuality was astonishingly consistent with the message spread by the Church (Einhorn, 1993; Kliszczyński, 2001; Zabłocki, 2007; Pogorzelska, 2016). In the wake of the political transition of 1989, the church only consolidated its influential status, which was legally sanctioned by Poland regained sovereignty and democracy in 1989, nationalist tendencies and movements, which had previously lain dormant under the communist unification, were revived and proved to be perfectly in league with the teaching of the church, especially in their perceptions of gender roles, family and intimate relationships (Derleth, 2000; Keinz, 2011; O'Dwyer, 2018). Symptomatically and characteristically, the wave of antifeminism which surged up at the time has continued to soar till the present day (Watson, 1997a; 1997b), resulting in negative attitudes to women's rights and in social acquiescence to the discrimination of sexual minorities. Particularly heated debates on national identity, which formed a peculiar nexus with disputes around the rights of non-heteronormative people, unfolded shortly before Poland's accession to the European Union. The fears that same-sex relationships would be legalised, as they had been in a number of other European countries before, were widely articulated in the form of publicly voiced homophobic views (Graff, 2006; 2007; Selinger, 2008; Shields, 2013). These developments naturally made inroads into education, as evinced by the first post-communist school law, which made respect for Christian values mandatory in teaching and education, introduced Roman-Catholic religious instruction as a school subject and removed sexual education from schools. Consequently, education came to be regulated by mechanisms underpinned by so-called traditional values both in terms of formal stipulations (laws on education, core curricula, textbooks, etc.) and in terms of the hidden curriculum, which caused LGBT-related issues either to be entirely aborted or to be addressed with unambiguously condemnatory overtones. These processes peaked between 2005 and 2007, when homophobia in education took institutionalised forms as the Ministry of Education officially referred to same-sex relationships as deviations and sicknesses and labelled homosexual people as 'perverts'. This relatively short period triggered fears, instilled phobias and effectively discouraged schools from tackling LGBT-related themes, as reported by teachers who were explicitly asked about the problem (Pogorzelska, 2016). LGBT issues were not the only ones to be considered risky and controversial, as gender came to share the same lot with them. The very term 'gender' is as-

sociated with a number of deprecatory expressions, ranging from an assault on traditional family, values and the being of the nation to ideology, genderism and totalitarianism (Korolczuk, 2014; 2020). With sexual and anti-discriminatory education missing from schools (Gawlicz et al., 2015), right-wing organisations (Ordo Iuris) resort to a variety of ways to influence school administrations and parents, admonishing them against implementing equality and human-rights education at schools (Staszewska, 2019; Korolczuk, 2020). Another related problem consists in failing to register the scale of homophobic violence, a failure which is caused, among other factors, by the fact that hardly any research into homophobic violence is commissioned or carried out by state institutions. This gap is partly redressed by the pursuits of NGOs and individual scholars. Their studies imply that the school is one of the major sites where LGBT people experience harassment and that, among various triggers of discrimination, sexual orientation generates an especially broad catalogue of violent responses (Makuchowska & Pawłęga, 2012). One of the broadest-ranging studies so far has shown that both physical and mental violence crested in the going-to-school period, with over 20% of the respondents aged 14-17 years old reporting experiencing physical violence and almost 60% of the same age group being exposed to mental violence (Abramowicz, 2017, pp. 124–139).

...and the free market

Post-1989, the pronounced conservatism of teaching and curricula in Polish schools was concurrent with the implementation of neoliberalism as another dominant ideology. The pre-eminence of the market, the state's abdication of its welfare functions, the commodification of all social spaces and the shift from the role of citizens (whose determination had actually contributed to the dismantling of the authoritarian system) to the role of permanent consumers of goods, services and ideas became a reality (Kowalik, 2011; Cervinkova & Rudnicki, 2019). Neoliberalism penetrated into schools at various levels and in various manners. The commodification of education combined with the introduction of neoliberal modes into the operations of schools caused the marginalisation of a range of issues, such as social sensitivity, minority rights and stratification. This meant that problems which had already been experienced in other countries and described by critical educators (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 2005; Shor, 2012; Giroux, 2014) began to be reproduced in Poland's educational realities. As the focus was placed on competition, mechanisms and consequences of social and cultural transformations never became important topics

of either general public or specifically educational debates. At the same time, the neoliberal takeover of the Polish school triggered an ideological backlash in education, which involved social approval for conservative curricula and the restriction of liberalism exclusively to economic thinking, which could coexist with the conservative moral system (Frank, 2008; Healey & O'Brien, 2014). All this produced an educational setup which avoided the themes of otherness, diversity, and alterity in whatever field or dimension. The erasure of these crucial questions was accompanied by the consolidation of traditional values, which left no room for any departures from the normative definitions of family, social roles and lifestyles. With schools pervasively relying on the transmissive teaching model (including the promulgation of ready-made patterns of human relationships), education was characterised by withdrawal from practical fostering of critical competences, neglect for individual and communal differences, the deprecation of minorities and the re-assertion of the privilege of dominant groups (Abramowicz, 2011; Sadura, 2012; Branka et al., 2013). The Polish iteration of conservatism also entailed the acceptance of homophobic narratives (Gruszczynska, 2009; Binnie, 2014; Cervinkova, 2016), with all objections to the discriminatory curricula countered by the conservatives' ideological rebuttals (Świerszcz, 2012; Nowak, 2019; Korolczuk, 2020).

The context presented above influenced the research significantly – both in designing the methodology and interpretation of findings (see below) the authors constantly referred to the outlined above socio-cultural conditions in which Polish schools function.

Research methodology

Our study was based on in-depth interviews with respondents who defined themselves as homosexual – gays or lesbians. The respondents were recruited through collaboration with Polish NGOs committed to LGBT rights (the Campaign Against Homophobia and Lambda Warsaw) and queer.pl (an LGBT community web portal) and through our own personal contacts. In sampling the respondents, all effort was made to ensure that the group should be as diversified as possible, regarding the respondents' backgrounds and the types of school they (had) attended. Ultimately, interviews were administered to twenty-two individuals (eleven males and eleven females) aged 18-27 years old (mean respondent age was 23 years) and coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds. They hailed from twelve out of Poland's sixteen administrative regions and (had) attended schools of different profiles and locations. Specifi-

cally, three respondents had attended rural schools at some point; six, schools in small towns; seven, schools in mid-sized towns; and ten, in big cities; following primary and junior secondary schooling common to all respondents, some of them continued education at various senior secondary schools, either vocational or offering preparation for university education¹. The respondents also had different economic statuses, with some of them describing the situation of the families in which they had been growing up as very good, and others stemming from families relying on social welfare. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The mean interview duration was seventy-one minutes, but the differences between actual interview times were considerable, ranging from under an hour to over three hours. Each interview used a set of questions concerning the respondent's experiences at school. The collected findings of the whole study (a selection of which is reported below) were published in a book exploring experiences of homosexual young adults in Poland (Pogorzelska & Rudnicki, 2020).

The main research questions organizing interviews (Was the topic of homosexuality raised at school? If yes, in what ways?) were followed by more specific ones related to the teachers' and other students' attitudes towards the issue of homosexuality. After all the interviews had been transcribed in full, their thematic analysis was performed. First, the transcripts were comparatively read several times to identify main issues appearing and recurring in the compiled narratives. Subsequently, the interviews were coded using ATLAS.ti (7.5.18 version). The analysis reported herein is based on these codes which refer to addressing the issue of homosexuality on different school subjects. The coded material was further analysed in search of repeating patterns to structure the coded data (Saldana, 2013; Erhard & Ben-Ami, 2016) within major categories. This process resulted in identifying the categories described below as ways of addressing the issue of homosexuality at schools the interviewees attended.

At some point, interpreting the data (see *Discussion* section), the authors applied elements of Critical Discourse Analysis. CDA as the scientific approach examines how the relations of domination, discrimination and/or control are reproduced through language in a given social and political context (Reisigl, 2009; Van Dijk, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2010). In this article, CDA as the form of critical

¹ During the school education of the respondents the school system consisted of a six-year primary school and a three-year junior high school. Following this stage of education, at the age of 16, students chose between a two-year vocational school, a three-year high school and a four-year technical school.

social research (Fairclough, 2012), helped the authors show the obtained results against wider background of power relations woven into a social order.

Research findings

Before describing our categories, we offer a special form of data representation, specifically, a poem-like structure which encapsulates the final stage of data interpretation (Phillips & Larson, 2012). All the verses in the passage below are exact literal quotations from our respondents' interviews. We only selected the phrases and, without adding any words or expressions, arranged them so as to provide a quintessential illustration of the theme under discussion.

*There was silence, as if a taboo theme
You don't pitch into hard themes
Somewhere at the end of the book, homosexuality, some venereal diseases
Weird talk from teachers
Father gave no love, mother gave too much, hocus-pocus!, and here's a gay
Two girls are no family
The Bible condemns
It's a sin
It's deviance
It's unhealthy
It should be eradicated
There are clinics
Such people are to be pitied
An inconvenient theme, we don't teach children*

The poem above concisely captures the pivotal moments of the respondents' stories and can be viewed as foreshadowing the categories which are singled out and discussed below.

Silence around homosexuality²

'Sexuality was not brought up as a theme whatsoever' (R. 16). This is how one respondent summed up the approach to issues related to non-heteronormative

² The categories listed below and some pieces of narration were used in the book published in Polish: Pogorzelska, M., & Rudnicki, P. (2020). *Przecież jesteśmy! Homofobiczna przemoc w polskich szkołach – narracje gejów i lesbijek* [We're Here! Homophobic Violence in Polish Schools - Gay and Lesbian Narratives]. Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls".

sexual orientations and sexuality as such. This was by no means a separate or exceptional voice. Most respondents talked about the silence enveloping these matters:

Teachers simply didn't go into this. Basically, scores count, because scores must be good for the high school to be the best one, and as to other things, do as you please, but make sure that scores are ok. (R. 9)

Although incomprehensible to many respondents, the silence was explained by them in various ways. Some attributed it to the teachers' focus on teaching, their ignorance or lack of empathy. Another cause of silence, as conjectured by the respondents, was that because the theme was controversial, the teachers were afraid to be accused of 'spreading propaganda,' which appears to be a direct offshoot of political disputes rife in Poland, in which advocates of LGBT rights are accused of practising 'homosexual propaganda':

My impression was that they really didn't know anything about it, didn't know how to talk about it, didn't know what to say not to send a wrong message or not to be accused of sowing propaganda, or something like that. So this theme was a taboo theme, and if it popped up, it was only as a joke or was immediately shoved aside. (R. 8)

Well, they [teachers] certainly lack empathy. This is the basic thing. They lack tolerance, and they lack courage, teachers do. To address the issue in the first place, because they're scared. They're scared to...start a war with parents, if they start talking about such issues. (R. 1)

Pathologising sexuality

The second most frequent approach to non-heteronormative sexual orientations involved what we called the pathologisation of homosexuality. This category includes teachers' responses and comments in which homosexuality was equated with a range of diseases:

It sometimes happened that some themes popped up in the classroom, in Polish lessons, or biology, and some strange theories were heard, that it's a disease, that it's not to be tolerated... well, such weird... talk from teachers. (R. 3)

We had a civil defence instructor, (...) we talked about giving blood, about blood donation, and he said that gays and HIV patients couldn't donate blood. He made it sound as if these two notions were identical, as if being gay meant that one had AIDS or were an HIV carrier. (R. 2)

Homosexuality was sometimes framed as a specific kind of mental distortion, a deviance or a practice against nature:

Such ones 'Should be locked up in a loony bin and treated, who do they think they are in the first place?' and 'How can you hang around outside, holding hands with a boy, or kiss him, or whatever.' (R. 14)

The only thing regarding homosexual people I remember from junior high is that talk, somewhere behind the scenes, about 'warm brothers,' 'warm sisters,' that it's unacceptable, something against nature, and the like. (R. 9)

I remember one teacher saying that she was religious and believed that homosexuality was a deviance and that it was unnatural. (R. 17)

The tendency to pathologise homosexuality sometimes made teachers explain homosexuality as originating in disturbed family relationships ('*Father gave no love, mother gave too much, hocus-pocus!, and here's a gay*', R. 13) and recommend 'normalcy'-restoring therapies:

The priest kept feeding it to us that it was a disease, a curable one, but that all the media would do their best to trick us into believing it wasn't. He [a high-school lay catechist³] played us films which kind of combated homosexuality, showing, say, a boy in Sweden singing a song about having two daddies. Saying that it was sick, that it was abnormal. (R. 13)

The language of sin and the language of pogrom

Comments and statements included in this category appeared in religious instruction classrooms. In Poland, religious instruction is synonymous with lessons of the Catholic religion and is characteristically devotional. The impact of religious instruction on the beliefs and attitudes of adolescents is not to be underestimated, given that the lessons are attended by a very high proportion of students of public schools (in 1994-2013 the percentage stood at 88-93% of the entire student population) (Nowotny et al., 2016, p. 206). Although the Polish education system offers the subject called Ethics, in practice these lessons are

³ In Polish schools, religious instruction is provided either by priests or by lay people who have been trained and authorised as religion teachers by the church.

attended only by 1% of students. A major reason for such a low number is their unavailability – they are organized in about 8% of educational institutions (Sa-
 dłoń & Organek, 2020, p. 4).

The comments and statements classified in this category were coded in the narratives of half of the respondents. Both lay and clerical teachers of religion most frequently relied on the Bible as the source of their opinions on and evaluations of the homosexual orientation:

At high school, this was a topic (...) in religion lessons, that it's a sin, that it's something that mustn't be done, that if one's homosexual, one must cultivate continence... It's a sin, it's a deviance, such people are to be pitied. (R. 8)

At junior high, I was going through a stage, often having fears that my sexual orientation was different, and we had religion lessons, obviously with constant discussions about homosexuality being a sin. (R. 17)

Sinfulness, which is inextricable from homosexuality as viewed by a portion of religion teachers, also deserves condemnation in their opinion:

It was clearly stated in a religion lesson that the Bible condemned gays and lesbians, and that it was unhealthy and should be eradicated. (R. 11)

Especially in religion lessons... comments about homosexuals were just aggressive: 'Anti, kill them, shoot'em all dead, send them to an island and shoot'em all dead, or send them to another island and let them die there.' (R. 13)

We had a priest who was a downright homophobe. 'To the gas with homos' and so on, literally, that was said in the classroom. Precisely such terms were used, 'To the gas with homos' and the like. (R. 14)

It is not by coincidence that the language-of-pogrom moniker given to such comments and statements refers to the diction known from anti-Semitic attacks, as phrases such as 'send them to another island' and 'To the gas with homos' are accurate copies of slurs against Jews. The similarities between anti-Semitic and homophobic languages have been studied in Poland (Ostolski, 2006; Graff, 2010). As observed by A. Graff, in the Polish national imaginary, the Jew is pictured 'as scheming, dishonest, and demonic, while Jews as a group are a powerful, omnipresent threat. Polish patriotism as constructed within this scenario is

an endless struggle to keep the Jews at bay, unmask their plots and machinations, and warn others of danger' (Graff, 2010, pp. 592-593). Homosexual people are very similarly represented in public discourse, including educational one. Such a narrative results in social acquiescence to the language of pogrom which is as an extreme form of hate speech and is used in relation to homosexual people.

The language of 'alternativeless' heterosexuality

Listed above, the ways of addressing homosexuality unambiguously and directly refer to sexual orientation. We identified one more category in the narratives of our respondents to comprise comments and statements which dichotomously define gender roles together with the acceptable and desirable relations based on these roles, as circumscribed by the heterosexual framework. The exemplary statements and comments are found in the following interview excerpts:

A boyfriend, later a husband, children and the home. Such very heteronormative cultural models. (R. 10)

I remember a moment when a [female] teacher asked us whether we wanted to have a husband, for girls; and boys, whether they wanted to have a wife. Obviously, husband-children and wife-children. I remember that the whole class answered they did, except myself and a [female] classmate of mine. The teacher was surprised, enormously surprised... I believe that it was the underlying assumption, that everybody around was heterosexual. (R. 12)

Our school counsellor, whom they told me to see after all that happened, because of my effeminacy, was a PE teacher... And the conversations generally looked like this: 'Well, you know, the thing is that men behave in such ways, and women behave in such ways...' And on the whole, all this Catholic talk, I remember the discussions I had about the roles of women and men being such and such, that men can also be sensitive, but they must this and that. All that shitty-ass patriarchy. (R. 13)

Discussion

Some ways of addressing homosexuality-related themes which are reported above are by no means exclusively distinctive to Poland. Shrouding these issues in silence and applying the language of alternativeless heterosexuality are

widespread models amply described in the literature (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006; 2010; Wickens & Sandlin, 2010; Phillips & Larson, 2012; Abbott & Ellis, 2015). Moreover, teachers are usually pictured as more or less passive witnesses of homophobic incidents, the ones who often have insufficient knowledge, feel uneasy and consequently fail to offer support to the victims of homophobic harassment (Roberts, 2008; Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; O'Donoghue & Guerin, 2017; Glikman & Elkayam, 2019). These ways of dealing with the topic issue can be discussed within the elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), taking into account Fairclough's four stages of analyzing and interpreting empirical material (focusing on a specific type of social evil, identifying obstacles that stand in the way of eliminating it, considering whether the social order "needs" social evil and identifying possible ways the evil can be overcome/defeated) (Fairclough, 2012, p. 13). In this perspective, silencing or pathologising homosexuality along with other ways of its depreciation can be perceived as the social evil needed and desired by social order, to preserve cultural divisions between 'their' and 'others', 'better' and 'inferior', 'the same' and 'freaks'. In the Polish context, this social order is powerfully affected by the two influences (religious and neoliberal) depicted above. The language which pathologises homosexuality, renders it in terms of sin and/or pogrom-associated sentiments, reverberates across Polish schools as a reproduction of church sermons, but also slogans of Polish informal extreme-right groups and proclamations of right-wing political parties. That such narration, which represents a pernicious example of the brutalisation of language, appears in school classrooms can be seen a testimony to the political elites' permission for such practices where using "moral panic" is a part of the political game aimed at keeping the social order and divisions (McLaren, 1993; Klein, 2017; Krastev & Holmes, 2019). The social order maintenance is also supported by the neoliberal educational standards. In this perspective, addressing the issues of homosexuality in a specific way described above is related to the systemic consolidation of traditional values at schools. Thus, the issues that the authorities regard as inconsistent with the official political doctrine and the dominant ideologies are pathologized (Binnie, 2014; Korolczuk, 2020). It is the case of human rights, anti-discriminatory, sexual and intercultural education whose presence at Polish schools is a result of the efforts and pursuits of informal education-focused groups and NGOs, which support individual schools but stand no chance of offering this kind of knowledge to all students (Hunter-Geboy, 2009; Branka & Cieślukowska, 2010; Józefowska & Konarzewska, 2013; Rudnicki, 2016). Additionally, whatever wider-ranging actions targeting homophobia, anti-Se-

mitism or violence against minorities have been launched at schools and whatever forms of support for abused or marginalised groups have been implemented, they have been ad-hoc ventures, undertaken without any deeper reflection or preparations in direct response to particular events (e.g. homophobia-triggered suicides of young people).

Following partly Fairclough's procedure, the last step would be identifying possible ways the evil can be overcome. In most general terms, these neglects could be redressed by education promoting difference sensitivity, helping comprehend diversity and teaching cooperation, that is, undermining the dogmas of the neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies. Such educational programs should obviously target students, but above all teachers as those who can directly and extensively influence children and adolescents. Schools could be supported here by social organisations and engaged teachers, who are referred to as equality leaders (Gawlicz et al., 2015). Though definitely requiring arduous work, it is a feasible task as has been evinced by the sustained efforts of NGOs and informal groups over several years now.

The problem is very serious as what is at stake in this case is not only violence at school or harm inflicted on individuals because of their personal features but first and foremost a radical shift in the political system, culture and society, all of which have taken turn in a very worrying direction.

Conclusion

The situation of LGBT students in Polish schools is difficult due to both their personal experiences of homophobic violence and a broader context of discrimination in and outside of schools. Given the political, cultural and social authorisation of homophobic discourses, hate speech and the belittling of homophobic violence, research of the type we carried out becomes an intervention. We believe that teachers are capable of changing the biographies of their students, and teaching about minorities and their relationships with the majority forms an important part of conversation on our societies and the world we inhabit. This teaching should be based on developed awareness of socio-political context and its influence on everyday school practice. We hope that our account of the modes of talking about homosexuality will serve as a powerful reminder of the potency and importance of language, particularly the language used by teachers. Symptomatically, in constructing his famous pyramid, G. Allport located language at its foundation and placed violence and extermination at its pinnacle. This vivid and much-revealing symbol should be constantly borne in

mind, particularly by people who are responsible for educating young people on a daily basis.

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