

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the role of international schools in creating safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ youth, particularly in light of the challenging political climate of the current prevailing authoritarian education policy in Poland. Drawing upon Merton's concept of "educational functions" influenced by socio-political and economic factors, we investigate how international schools navigate and subvert authoritarian policies to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion. Through a multi-faceted approach analyzing curricula, media discourse, and school law documents, we examine the potential of international schools as agents of change in fostering educational inclusivity for marginalized groups. By examining the interplay between planned educational functions and implemented, the study sheds light on the potential of international schools to serve as inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals in politically charged environments. Our findings highlight the positive impact of international education programmes in supporting LGBTQ+ students and contributing valuable insights to ongoing discussions on promoting diversity and acceptance in educational settings. Ultimately, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions about the challenges and possibilities of fostering educational inclusivity for marginalized groups in such politically charged environments like authoritarian systems of education.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply 6-10 keywords for your Chapter to help with depository and online searches)

1. International schools
2. LGBTQ+ in Poland
3. LGBTQ+ youth
4. LGBTQ+ in schools
5. Educational policy
6. Marginalized groups
7. Education in Poland

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International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

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Introduction

While existing studies consistently demonstrate the positive impact of inclusive school environments on educational outcomes, retention, mental health, and overall well-being of lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) ¹ students (Kosciw et al., 2013; Shannon, 2016), unfortunately, schools continue to be settings where physical and verbal abuse, discrimination, and social exclusion against these young people are prevalent. (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017; Hill et al., 2021; MacAulay et al., 2021; McBride & Neary, 2021). LGBTQ+ students are subject to victimization based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. As a result, these students more often report negative physical and mental health outcomes and negative emotions than their peers. In recent years, as documented by research literature and through observation of educational practices, many strategies and approaches have emerged that aim to prevent or minimize the oppression that faces the LGBTQ community. In our article, we have used the example of Polish international schools to argue that international education programmes can play a positive role that is vital in this respect. Poland's post-communist transition once heralded as a beacon of democratic progress, has taken a concerning turn towards authoritarianism. This resurgence has had a profound impact on marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals, who face increasing discrimination and social exclusion. Within the education system, conservative policies implemented by the current government have perpetuated a climate of insecurity and neglect, further jeopardizing the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ students (Ploszka, 2023).

This study delves into the precarious situation of LGBTQ+ youth in Polish education, exacerbated by discriminatory policies toward LGBTQ+ (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). Against this backdrop, the research explores the potential of international schools to act as "islands of resistance" (Leek, 2020) against the prevailing authoritarian tide. We examine how these schools, which in many cases, have chosen to adopt international programmes, promote educational inclusivity for LGBTQ+ individuals through internal school law.

The paper was inspired by the ranking of LGBTQ+-friendly schools in Poland and the very high positions in the ranking of schools that have implemented international educational programmes. Conducted between 2021 and 2023, during a period marked by oppressive educational policies, the study investigates the role of international schools in fostering a more inclusive learning environment for LGBTQ+ youth. Using media discourse, and analysis of school documents, our analysis focuses on the aspect of international schools as agents of change, how international schools in Poland utilize their own legal frameworks to promote inclusivity for LGBTQ+ youth. We build upon Leek's (2020) work on international schools as agents of educational resistance against the authoritarian education policy by focusing on the specific "educational functions" of these schools toward LGBTQ+ inclusion, as defined by Merton (1968) understood as "the results of socio-political and economic influences on education" (p.68). By exploring these themes, this research endeavours to provide valuable

¹ We acknowledge the dynamic nature of terminology concerning this demographic and the continuing discourse on the most suitable terms (Monro, 2020). In line with contemporary research in sexuality education (Helmer, 2016), we employ the acronym LGBTQ to encompass the array of identities and sexual orientations they represent. Additionally, we incorporate "queer" to acknowledge individuals who embrace identities divergent from societal norms, understanding the complexities and potential controversies associated with this term.

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

insights into the potential of international schools to serve as safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ youth, especially in challenging political climates. We also aspire to inform policies and practices that foster greater inclusivity and support for LGBTQ+ individuals within the educational landscape of international schools in general. Ultimately, this research seeks to shed light on the complex interplay between authoritarian policies, international school frameworks, and the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in Polish education. By employing a multi-faceted approach, analyzing both planned and implemented curricula and drawing upon media discourse and school law document analysis, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how international schools navigate and sometimes subvert the prevailing authoritarian context. This knowledge will contribute to ongoing discussions about the challenges and possibilities of fostering educational inclusivity for marginalized groups in politically charged environments like authoritarian systems of education.

The situation in Poland briefly illustrated here also provides a detailed exemplification of the almost universal situation in schools in other countries that has been reported among others by Russell et al., 2021, McDermott et al., 2023, and Marshal et al., 2011). School students have a higher prevalence of depression, self-harm, suicidal tendencies, and problematic substance use than cis-hetero young people. They are more likely to suffer discrimination in schools compared with cisgender youth (Mackie G., Lambert K., Patlamazoglou, 2021; Martín-Castillo et al., 2020). Recent studies that have compared suicidality in youth have shown that trans youth were six times more likely to report a history of attempted suicide than cis-hetero youth, bisexual youth were five times more likely, and lesbian and gay youth were four times more likely (Di Giacomo et al., 2018).

Our research is in line with the trend of pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2017), according to which specific population groups can be pushed to the margins of society. "Oppressed" groups are denied the right to vote and the right to decide freely about themselves and the world in which they live. Paul Fereiro, in the early stages of developing a pedagogy of the oppressed, paid particular attention to what he considered the two most important criteria for social exclusion, namely social class and race. At a later stage, he wrote about further criteria that can lead to social exclusion, or marginalization, such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These are criteria that serve to control the lives of some groups in society by restricting their freedom of self-determination. According to Fereiro, education should aim to nurture the capacity for critical consciousness in students that allows them to ask questions related to important aspects of the environment (Nweke & Owoh, 2020) and take action to bring about change. In Poland, an example of this can be found in international schools, where despite the discrimination-based policies that dominated in previous years, they were welcoming places for various minorities including LGBTQ+.

LGBTQ+ in Poland

According to the research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (Feliksiak, 2013) Poles' attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people have changed positively over the last 25 years. Despite this, Poland is still included on the list of countries with the lowest acceptance of homosexual people in the European Union and a high level of prejudice (van den Akker, van der Ploeg, Scheepers, 2013; Štulhofer, Rimac, 2009; Górska, Mikołajczak, 2015).

Every year in Poland, there are relatively high numbers of extremely homophobic incidents. The exact numbers are difficult to estimate because not all of them are reported. Particularly significant was the establishment of over a hundred "LGBT-free zones" in cities and municipalities that together constitute one-third of the territory of Poland. Paradoxically,

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

this was a response to support the LGBTQ+ community by the Mayor of Warsaw. Some political and religious leaders and conservative media are even fueling hate speech against LGBTQ+ people, counting on political support and viewership. Aggression against LGBTQ+ people also occurs during equality marches, which manifests in burning rainbow flags and throwing smoke flares, bottles and eggs at participants. It happens that protests by LGBTQ+ activists will also be met with increased police brutality when arrested. These actions trigger negative psychological consequences among LGBT+ people who still struggle to deal with strong stigmatization, and are exposed to high levels of stress, depression and overt homophobic behavior, which especially applies to people living in small towns and villages. In research on social distance, 25% of Polish respondents declared that they would not accept a homosexual person in their neighborhood or be willing to work with such a person. (Stefaniak, Witkowska, 2015). As claims Feliksiak (2010), 44% of respondents believe that there are professions that should not allow gays, while 36% have a similar opinion about lesbians, with the greatest opposition to such people working with children and young people. According to CBOS research, 87% of Poles are also against the adoption of children by homosexual couples (Feliksiak, 2013). These social attitudes of Poles towards homosexuality are not just private declarations of a worldview, but they constitute a real base for shaping attitudes and developing experiences for students. In 2017, the first judgment in Poland was passed according to which one person from a school in Warsaw had to apologize to her former student for violating his rights personal: bodily integrity, dignity and honour, due to the information disclosed by his homosexual orientation. These examples raise questions about the practical implementation of the assumed functions of Polish education in LGBTQ+ inclusion and their practical implementation.

School as an educational institution influences children's adaptation to life in society and promotes social and cultural inclusion. The study (*Sytuacja osób LGBTQIA... 2020*) commissioned by the authorities in Krakow shows that counteracting LGBTQ+ discrimination in post-primary education is insufficient. Schools most often do not respond sufficiently to cases of homophobia or transphobia. Most of the students that were surveyed are aware of the presence of LGBTQ+ people and same-sex couples in their schools. A significant number of students completing the study survey declared that they had observed symbols associated with the LGBTQ+ community in schools. The study showed that the reactions of the teaching staff to the presence of these types of symbols were mostly described as neutral. There was little awareness among the teaching staff about respectful ways to address transgender people. Most pupils do not know if students are allowed to choose which changing room to use for physical education classes. At the same time, there are still many cases of symbols of hate speech against LGBTQ+ people. This issue is presented in open statements as one of the primary areas in which LGBTQ+ people are met with a lack of acceptance and understanding. Despite growing recognition of sexual and gender diversity (SGD) identities, significant disparities persist in Poland, where schools remain a breeding ground for discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. ILGA-Europe's 2023 report highlights Poland's status as having the lowest LGBTQ+ rights among European Union countries. The rationale for implementing anti-discrimination education in schools is bolstered by the widespread support for such initiatives, as evidenced by the findings of the Ombudsman for Citizen Rights (RPO). Over two-thirds of Polish citizens (70%) surveyed as part of the RPO's study on "Legal Awareness in the Context of Equal Treatment" in 2020, alongside 81% of students included in the same study, advocate the integration of anti-discrimination education within school curricula. Furthermore, the findings from the European Commission's report titled "Legal gender recognition in the EU: The journeys of trans people towards full equality" (2020) indicate that 69% of Polish students

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

surveyed reported "always" or "often" experiencing or witnessing negative comments or actions towards LGBTQ+ individuals in school settings. Despite the growing interest in this issue, the situation of LGBTQ+ people in Polish schools is still largely uncharted territory. The Polish situation outlined here is a detailed exemplification of the European situation of students. According to Arjan Van Der Star and Danielle Jansen:

“the situation for sexual and gender minorities varies greatly within Europe. Stigma towards these groups is often deeply rooted in culture and history. Variations in discriminatory legislation and attitudes towards sexual and gender minorities create very different settings for youth growing up across countries in Europe. Many of these differences between European countries remain unexplored” (Van Der Star & Jansen, 2018, pp. 22–23).

Undoubtedly, social inclusion issues concerning LGBTQ+ people are universal, and researchers from all over the world are keeping a close eye on them to try to explain them and find practical ways to solve them. Therefore, constant and new research is necessary to design empowering bullying interventions and resilience strategies to create safer school and home environments for LGBTQ+ youth across Europe. In turn, a typical educational issue of the LGBTQ+ movement in Poland is organizing an event in schools called Rainbow Friday. KPH (Campaign against Homophobia) is a non-governmental organization, which promotes the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people and started to organize Rainbow Fridays. According to information presented on the website, the KPH organization (2024) supports the LGBTQ+ community at both the national and the international level. They support the LGBTQ+ movement through legal proceedings and political advocacy. Their goal is to make Poland a friendly place for all people, regardless of their declared gender and sexual orientation. KPH was also an organizer of the Rainbow Fridays campaign, which is an annual celebration initiated to show solidarity with LGBTQ+ youth and support them in the school environment. The initiators of this year's Rainbow Friday are the GrowSPACE foundation. The aim of Rainbow Fridays (2024) is to strengthen LGBTQ+ youth of school age. The first event was organized in 2016 and since then it has been held every year in October. In 2018, 216 schools took part. In 2022, there were about 70 due to the ministry's guidelines which limited this type of action in schools. After the parliamentary elections and the change of government in Poland, the number of schools participating in the campaign increased again to 120 in 2023. The Rainbow Friday campaign is an expression of resistance against homophobia and a way to build an inclusive educational environment.

International schools in Poland

In Poland, the first schools to offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme began to emerge in 1993. Before that, since Poland was a closed, communist country, there were no such schools. It was only after the socio-political changes that happened in Poland in the 1990s that the chance for schools to offer international curricula arose. This was also in response to emerging demands from parents and students for this type of institution (Rojek, Leek, Kosiorek, 2023). For example, in 2005, 13 schools were offered the IB curriculum, whereas in 2007, there were 32 schools, and in 2014, this number rose to 55 (Leek, 2022). In 2024, according to the International Baccalaureate Organization, 67 schools were offering IB programme curricula at various levels (see Table 1), including 33 public schools (49%) and 34 (51%) non-public schools. Public schools offer the opportunity to study the Diploma Programme (DP), which is a two-year programme that prepares students to pass the International Baccalaureate. This programme can be preceded by studying in bilingual classes. These are classes that follow the Polish core curriculum while introducing bilingualism in selected or all lessons. In addition to preparation for the International Baccalaureate, some non-

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

public schools also offer learning at the Primary Years Programme (PYP) level for children aged 3 – 12; in 2024, there are 9 schools. In the Middle Years Programme (MYP) level for children aged 11 - 16, in 2024, there are 16 schools. State schools at this point in time, i.e. the end of 2023, do not offer learning opportunities at the PYP level. The exception is Primary School No. 108 in Wroclaw, which has candidate school status for the Primary Years Programme. The school is on its way to being the first publicly authorized IB World School.

Table 1. IB schools in Poland (as of 01.2024)

Level	Number of Schools in total	Public Schools	Non-Public Schools
Primary Years Programme (PYP)	9	-	9
Middle Years Programme (MYP)	16	9	7
Diploma Programme (DP)	42	24	18
Career-Related Programme (CP)	-	-	-

Source: own study

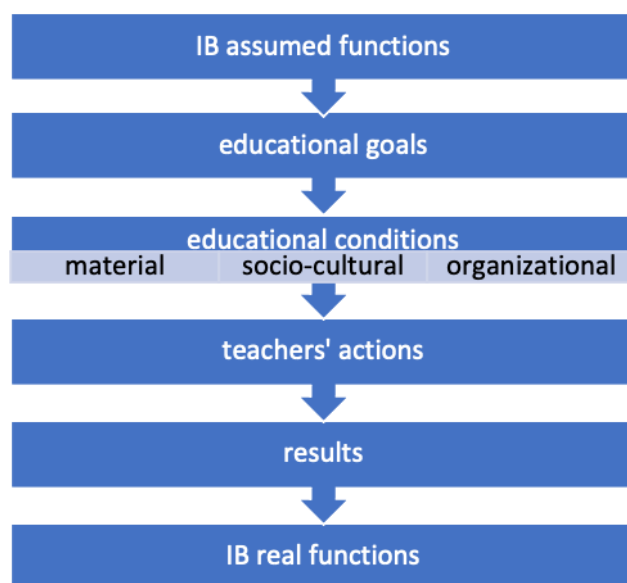
Research design

The purpose of the research was to identify the function of the International Baccalaureate programme in international schools in Poland. The method used to conduct the study was the grounded theory method according to Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2015). Following this method, the collection of research material began, to gather rich data. To begin with, sensitizing concepts were identified and used to collect research material. These were: international schools, the International Baccalaureate (IB), Diploma Programme (DP), Middle Years Programme (MYP), Primary Years Programme (PYP), and the Cambridge International Curriculum.

For the study, a particular meaning is attributed to structural functionalism, with its assumption that the functions of education can be perceived from manifest or latent perspectives. These functions arise from the logic of modern society, influencing its organization through rational planning and as a result of education policy, the expectations of students and their parents (Merton, 1968). Educational functions concerning the educational functions of international schools in fostering LGBTQ+ inclusion can be considered from the perspective of plans, meaning the written expectations of education (Merton, 1969). Plans or intentions, as in any area of social life, can deviate from the final results. The ways a planned programme (sometimes also called curriculum) is introduced in schools are called the implemented programme, and the curriculum outcomes are called the attained programme (Morris, 1998). In the study of educational functions, we understand after Merton (1968) as results of activities performed by an educational institution in the form of activities that are intended and unintended, anticipated and desired, unforeseen and undesirable.

In everyday educational practice, planned functions and assumed educational goals most often do not fully translate into attained functions and results. This happens mainly because schools and teachers do not function in a material and axiological vacuum, but their functioning is complicatedly conditioned. The conditions that cause difficulties in translating planned functions into attained ones can be divided into three parts (see Figure 1): material (e.g. school architecture and equipment), socio-cultural (e.g. social relationships between teachers, students, parents, local, national and global communities, value system, teachers' personal beliefs and their "private educational theories") and organizational (e.g. school organizational culture, educational law).

FIG 1. Planned vs. attained IB functions. Deviation condition



Source: own study

These three groups of conditions not only make it impossible to achieve attained functions but also bring into existence functions that were not planned at all. The latest proof of this thesis is the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the conditions for these three groups of conditions changed significantly, which caused many problems and challenges in achieving the assumed educational goals. Additionally, there were also results not intended by the school programme (Campbell & Harris, 2021; Ismail, Pawero & Umar, 2021).

In this context, what is interesting for us and important for educational practice is the relationship between IB planned and attained functions.

To study the educational functions of international schools in fostering LGBTQ+ inclusion in Poland, we formulated the following main research questions:

To what extent do the educational practices of international schools in Poland contribute to a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals?

Our specific questions were:

- How do international schools in Poland encourage the development of talent and nurture social inclusion, particularly concerning the LGBTQ+ community?
- How do international schools in Poland shape a safe and inclusive school environment?
- In what ways do international schools in Poland contribute to building a more tolerant and accepting society toward LGBTQ+ individuals?

Document analysis

In the study, we analyzed school law documents of international schools in Poland and press articles. For studying in-school law, we used document analysis as a research method. Documents exist within social 'fields of action,' a term used to designate the environments within which individuals and groups interact. Documents are therefore not mere records of social life, but integral parts of it—and indeed can become agents in their own right (Prior, 2003). In line with the views of Mogalakwe (2009) and Prior (2003), we found that documents are a source of knowledge not only about the past but also about the present.

Document analysis can be used as a standalone method to analyze the contents of specific types of social practices as they evolve over time and differ across geographies, however, document analysis can also be powerfully combined with other types of methods to cross-validate (i.e.

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

triangulate) and deepen the value of concurrent methods. Bardach and Patashnik suggest alternating between documents and interviews as sources of knowledge, as one tends to lead to the other (Bardach and Patashnik, 2015). Depending on our research questions, document analysis was used in combination with different types of interviews (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018), observation (Harvey, 2018), and quantitative analyses.

As documents, we analyzed in-school-law documents, so-called School Statutes of 10 international schools in the year 2023 that were mentioned as being LGBT-friendly schools according to NGO LGBTPlusMe (<https://lgbtplusme.com/en>). All of the schools were secondary schools. Out of 10 schools, 6 were public schools and 4 – non-public schools. The School Statute is a legal act regulating tasks, the organizational structure and the method of operation of the school (Paragraph 60 section 1 of the Act of September 7, 1991, Law on Education System). In the analysis of school statutes, data analysis was conducted utilizing a document analysis technique. The process comprised several sequential steps. Firstly, content identification was conducted, involving meticulous examination of each document to isolate passages germane to the benefits of the IB curriculum and the distinct characteristics of the constructivist approach in curriculum development and implementation. Following content identification, a Case Study Development ensued. In this phase, case study narratives were meticulously constructed for each school. These narratives were crafted to delve into how schools, through their institutional policies (in-school law), incorporate inclusive practices. Subsequently, a cross-analysis was performed employing thematic analysis techniques. This entailed condensing voluminous document data into smaller analytical units, aligned with similar themes identified in the previous phase. These units were subsequently coded to facilitate systematic analysis. Lastly, the data underwent categorization and coding. Instances denoting "inclusive school spaces" were discerned through references to school activities reflective of concepts such as celebrating and representing diversity, utilizing inclusive language and communication, fostering student voice and empowerment, implementing anti-bullying policies and procedures, and providing opportunities for students to explore and express their gender identities.

Media discourse

In addition to document analysis, we used media discourse. According to O’Keeffe (2013) media discourse refers to interactions that take place via a broadcast platform, in the case of our study of written texts, where the message is directed at an absent reader. The discourse itself is audience-oriented. That is, media discourse is a public, produced and at the same time registered form of interaction (O’Keeffe, 2013). We made the assumption that publicly available press materials would be analyzed. Searching for press materials in both print and online media, terms related to international schools were used. 103 articles were collected in the first stage. After the initial analysis, the research material was supplemented by theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2015; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021), i.e. looking for additional sources of research material that served to fill in the categories and enabled the creation of new ones. The research work consisted of constantly comparing the collected material, codes, and research notes to formulate a grounded theory on the media discourse on international schools. The following table shows the number of articles in the given years, with a breakdown between national and regional texts.

Table 2. Number of articles in 2002-2023

Year of publication	National coverage	Regional coverage	Total
2002	1	2	3
2003	-	1	1

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

2004	-	-	-
2005	-	2	2
2006	-	1	1
2007	-	-	-
2008	-	-	-
2009	-	2	2
2010	1	-	1
2011	2	2	4
2012	3	1	4
2013	1	1	2
2014	-	3	3
2015	3	1	4
2016	4	5	9
2017	1	4	5
2018	2	6	8
2019	4	6	10
2020	5	4	9
2021	5	4	9
2022	8	7	15
2023	13	16	29
Total	53	68	121

Source: own study

As a result, 121 newspaper articles were collected on the subject of international schools in Poland. The first publication appeared in 2002, and the last articles are from the end of 2023 (see Table 2). In the initial period, there was little media interest in the topic of international schools, with only a few articles published annually. It can be seen that over time, this interest increased to 29 articles in 2023. Of the 121 articles, 53 (43.8%) went nationwide, and 68 (56.2%) were regional. Most of the articles were published in regional media, but available to all readers. We assigned identification codes (DW, DGP) to individual media and subsequent numbers (DW1, DGP4) to articles.

The collected research material was subjected to content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which is used to study written material, in this case, newspaper articles (Rubin and Babbie, 2008). This method is used to study various forms of communication and involves coding and collating the types of content conveyed that appear. The units of analysis were individual articles. During repeated readings, codes were extracted to construct categories. In the study, we were interested in the qualitative, that is, we were not concerned with counting individual words or the frequency of their occurrence, but with the topics covered in the media discourse on international schools in Poland.

The codes we found related to the issues discussed in the articles are:

CODE – promoting multiculturalism,

CODE – following the values of tolerance and respect,

CODE – preventing homophobia,

CODE – organizing Rainbow Fridays at international schools on the initiative of students,

CODE – schools bearing consequences for organizing Rainbow Fridays,

CODE – emphasizing awareness of discrimination issues.

The above codes were combined into a category we called caring for students' school welfare. The criterion for selection was the topics covered in newspaper articles. If a section of an article dealt with issues related to tolerance, safety, and/or equality, it was categorized as related to students' welfare. Due to the variety of topics covered related to building a safe and tolerant environment, subcategories concerning shaping a safe and friendly school environment, caring

for minorities and creating a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ people were distinguished. The category we are interested in, which concerns caring for the well-being of students, including LGBTQ+ topics, was described in 20% of the articles collected, those with a nationwide reach, as well as those with a local reach. For each category we created subcategories, for example, the category we identified was what we called Caring for Students' School Welfare with the following sub-categories: "Shaping a Safe and Friendly School Environment", "Caring for Minorities", and "Creating a Welcoming Environment for LGBTQ+ People". The analysis of this category called "Caring for Students' Welfare" is what we want to focus on in this article. As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, welfare means "physical and mental health and happiness, especially of a person" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). That is, we understand the category called "Caring for Students' School Welfare" as providing the best possible conditions for students' learning and development, regardless of biological and declared gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, or skin color.

Results

Shaping a safe and friendly school environment

Media discourse accentuates that the international programme emphasizes values such as freedom, tolerance, respect for human rights, and openness. Students are expected to develop these values in themselves so that they can live and work freely in a multicultural society. However, a balance is maintained between multiculturalism and the preservation of national identity and culture. Students participate in traditional school events, an example being the prom, the traditional ball held before high school graduation. Young people prepare costumes and learn to dance the Polonaise, a dance traditionally performed at proms.

"If anyone thought that with the end of the winter holidays, the prom season in Lublin also ended, they are mistaken. The fun of future high school graduates continues. This time, on Friday, the solemn countdown to the matriculation exam began with the students of Paderewski International High School." (DW3)

Classes working according to the international programme emphasize the importance attached to learning and expect students to be involved in the learning process. Care is taken to foster climate-friendly knowledge acquisition and to emphasize that learning is important. Students are expected to take responsibility for their progress, be self-reliant in their actions and be involved in the process of acquiring knowledge. Being a student in a class with an international profile is shown as a source of pride. Schools and classes are seen as prestigious. Moreover, students who achieve the best results and get into prestigious universities are role models worthy of emulation. A cult of learning and development is created. Students in the articles are portrayed as ambitious young people with crystallized plans for the future. They are supposed to be characterized by courage in achieving their goals.

"Our IB graduates most often choose (and get in): in the UK: University College London, Imperial College, King's College London, London School of Economics, Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews in Scotland, Warwick, Edinburgh, Bristol and others. In the U.S.: New York University (or more recently,

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

its Shanghai branch), they are applying to Harvard (one of this year's graduates, but not from the IB but from the Polish programme just got an offer as the only Pole), Yale (we have one graduate there), Stanford (there is also an offer this year) and others from the Ivy League and beyond. There was also interest in Denmark this year - I guess mainly because of the finances. In Poland, our graduates choose among others: UW, WUM, SGH, PW, SGGW and UJ," says the director (DGP4)

Creating a learning community in schools and classrooms with an international programme concerns both the students and teachers, and each is expected to appreciate the importance of development and education, which in the case of students allows them to continue their education at prestigious universities. Teachers, on the other hand, see working in an international programme as developing and prompting them to prepare interesting, innovative activities for their students. The content of the articles combines the sphere of science, acquiring a prestigious education with multicultural education, and preparing students to study and work in international teams. Sensitization to otherness and diversity within the school environment is in progress. Safety and a good school atmosphere are being singled out in articles as factors associated with good academic performance.

"We focus first and foremost on being a student-friendly school because the student is the centre of our interest. Of course, it's all about didactics and good teaching results, but they don't exist when students feel bad. You have to look broadly. The important thing is that everyone feels safe here," the director stresses." (TVN1)

Teachers are obliged to take care of the „*psychophysical development of students*” (S2), and “*adjust educational requirements to suit the special developmental needs of the student, creating conditions that support the student, providing conditions for the student's development and their preparation for life with others.*” (S2)

Fostering multicultural awareness and social openness

There is a substantial amount of information reported in the press about how international schools in Poland promote multiculturalism, are open to otherness, and teach sensitivity to people from other cultures. One international school is attended by children from about 50 different nationalities, and it is through this international environment that young people can learn how diverse the world is.

"This school has been breathing diversity and multiculturalism for years. (...) Because of the diversity, the level of tolerance and understanding is very high. There is also a very high awareness of issues of discrimination or racism," says the director of the International School of Bydgoszcz (ISOB) in an interview." (RC1)

Surprisingly, references to multicultural school environments do not appear that often, and when they do, these mainly refer to non-public schools. In doing so, references to adapting to life in a multicultural environment focus on the school curriculum, for example:

“The school implements the goals and tasks set out by the International Baccalaureate Organization and those included in the Education Act that in particular, support and direct the development of children and youth in accordance with their potential in the context of multicultural social and axiological space” (S7) “The school creates a "Discussion Club" within which students have the opportunity to organize various activities related to the implementation of the exchange programme with international students and establishing contacts with them within the programme promoting global and European multiculturalism.” (S5)

Children who stay in such a group develop sensitivity and empathy toward each other, as well as an understanding of otherness. This prepares them for life in a multicultural society and teaches them openness to the world. Awareness of discrimination issues is emphasized by the management and teachers.

"This institution was established for the families of foreigners who settled in Krakow. In recent years, more and more Poles have been sending their children here. I think people come to our school because they care about a multicultural, international educational experience for their children," says the new director of the institution, in an interview with our newspaper." (GK1)

Mixing students from different cultures is a practical opportunity for students to get to know each other, cooperate on a daily basis and learn to work together in an international setting. Schools with fewer foreign students also focus on acceptance of otherness, tolerance, and learning about other cultures. Building students' social openness can be seen as contributing to building a worthwhile society. Students are expected to develop in themselves an openness to the needs of others.

"It is the promotion in education of the European values of respect for the human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons who belong to minority groups." (GW28)

In contrast to press releases, school documents on this subject do not emphasize high degrees of tolerance for multicultural environments to such an extent. Instead when referring to tolerance, they refer to interpersonal relations, for example:

"Students show tolerance towards different views and attitudes; students need to be polite and respectful towards other people. Schools prohibit all aggressive actions and the use of vulgar words, phrases and gestures." (S06)

Creating an unwritten support for LGBTQ+

Surprisingly, in school law documents there are no direct references to LGBTQ+. Only in one school were references that indicated respect for a student's 'sexual identity' found.

"The school allows students to maintain their national, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sexual identity" (S10)

Information about schools that follow an international programme is associated with the discourse on tolerance and acceptance that includes LGBTQ+ people. These schools rank highly in the ranking of LGBTQ+² Friendly Schools. They promote values such as equality and tolerance to emphasize human rights. As a result, LGBTQ+ youth can find a safe place for them to learn in these institutions.

The ranking of LGBTQ+ Friendly Schools is organized in Poland within the framework of the projects "LGBTQ+ Friendly Schools" (10.2021-07.2022) and "LGBTQ+ Friendly Schools 2.0" (10.2022-07.2023) funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway from the EEA and Norwegian Funds under the Active Citizens - Regional Fund Programme. The ranking aims to help students choose a high school by identifying schools that are most open to diversity. <https://lgbtplusme.com/pl/ranking/pl>

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

"The action's website reads: As much as 30% of physical violence takes place at school, with as many as 70% of LGBT youth experiencing violence. Curricula do not explicitly indicate equality, anti-discrimination content or even reliable information about sexual orientations and gender identities. Misrepresentation of sexuality still occurs in textbooks. Rainbow Friday provides an opportunity to respond to the inadequacies of the Polish education system." (QUI)

Schools with an international programme are portrayed as safe for students and stress that this does not just refer to physical, but also mental safety. The school is supposed to care not only about learning, but also the educational aspect is equally important, which in the international programme refers to tolerance and respect for others.

"Safe, means being open to diversity, teaching empathy and respect, where everyone feels cared for and understood. Where youth from the LGBTQ+ community are accepted, and where the backgrounds, abilities or special educational requirements of people from other minorities are also respectfully considered so that they too will also feel comfortable there," says the coordinator. (GW37)

High spots in the LGBTQ+-Friendly Schools Ranking are held by schools with an international programme. The purpose of conducting the ranking is to raise the level of acceptance and encourage being an "inclusive" school in the region. News articles emphasize the importance of creating a school that is safe for all students.

"We are pleased that we once again ranked high in the ranking of LGBTQ+-Friendly Schools. We would like to see all schools from the Lublin region ranked first at the same time. It is important that every person attending the school feels safe and secure," stressed a teacher at the Paderewski International High School in Lublin." (KLI)

In their statements, the teachers link the school's high ranking in the LGBTQ+-Friendly Schools ranking to students' sense of safety and to building an inclusive school climate. At the same time, pointing out that this should be the case in all schools, not just those that have received awards.

Because acceptance of LGBTQ+ people has stood in contradiction to the policy of the Ministry of Education and Science in Poland in previous years, schools have faced consequences for, for example, agreeing to hold "Rainbow Fridays"³ at school. The consequence, for example, was an inspection by the Board of Education and recommendations handed down after the inspection. In one high school, students expressed support for the management, which allowed the organization of "Rainbow Fridays", thus expressing approval for the organization of such actions at school.

"According to the Olsztyn Board of Education, before any school again allows an action on LGBT tolerance within its walls, it must first ask the opinion of all parents of students. At the First High School, the youngsters in the case stood firmly behind their principal." (GW17)

The articles also described an issue related to the school's barrage of approvals for the International Baccalaureate, despite earlier declarations by the Ministry of Education and Science and obtaining IB accreditation. The following is the opinion of parents, which links

³ Rainbow Friday is a holiday, held in Poland, every October, to support LGBTQ+ youth at school and show that every person is entitled to attend a school that is safe and welcoming regardless of psychosexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics. <https://lgbtplusme.com/teczowy-piatek>

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

the lack of permission to conduct the IB Baccalaureate to the school's organization of the "Rainbow Friday" campaign.

"The Ministry of Education is taking revenge on our children for Rainbow Friday," claim the parents of students of the First High School in Olsztyn. The children were preparing for the International Baccalaureate. The Ministry of Education decided that they could not pass it." (GW22)

Students who learned that they would not be allowed to take the IB Baccalaureate had to change their class profiles at short notice and start preparing to take the National Baccalaureate. Their junior classmates continued preparing to take the IB Baccalaureate, with no guarantee that the school would receive approval from the Ministry of Education at the time. Press materials described the disappointment of students, parents and teachers that accompanied this situation.

Conclusions and discussions

The findings of this study illuminate the diverse roles played by international schools in Poland, with a specific emphasis on their impact on the inclusion and empowerment of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Firstly, talent development for social inclusion is a function that includes critical aspects in understanding the implementation of policies pertaining to the LGBT+ community and lies within the economic sphere, specifically examining the prevailing values within different socioeconomic contexts. Inglehart (1977), who is recognized for pioneering the concept of post-materialist values, proposes that in regions characterized by stable and advanced socio-economic conditions, such as those commonly found in Western societies, there is a notable shift away from prioritizing basic needs and physical security towards prioritizing quality of life. This shift in values is particularly significant when considering countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where there tends to be a higher degree of social and political acceptance of LGBT+ rights compared to other nations (Valfort, 2017). Recent research conducted by Waaldijk, Badgett, and der Meulen Rodgers (2019) further reinforces this idea, indicating a positive correlation between economic development and the social inclusion of the LGBT community. Poland is considered to be the country that benefited the most from European integration after joining the European Union and achieved the greatest success among European Central and Eastern countries. Strengthening industry (especially the ICT), industrial and food sectors, allows it to compete with EU Member States and other countries. However, in the coming years, Poland will face many key in economic developmental challenges. The most important of them is the reduction of the labour force and the loss of competitiveness due to an ageing society. LGBTQ+ inclusion translates into better results economic, business and individual. The data shows that openness, favourable inclusivity and diverse societies are better for economic growth, whereas discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity may negatively impact long-term economic prospects. Enterprise capabilities supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people to attract and retain talent, introduce innovations and build customer loyalty and brand strength translate into better financial results. Moreover, people working in open, diverse and inclusive environments usually perform better. Cultures based on inclusion and diversity may contribute to improving results individually – this applies to everyone, not only LGBTQ+ people (Open For Business, 2021, p. 13). International schools, although initially intended to fulfil an educational function, indirectly, also fulfil an economic function, in the sense that their graduates will be more open to diversity, which will help build a supportive atmosphere in the work environment. Employees working in open, diverse and inclusive environments have a

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

higher level of motivation and are more attached to the values and culture of their workplace. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ people contributes to an increased level of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and cultivates a diverse and creative environment conducive to innovation. People working in diverse, inclusive environments achieve greater productivity rates, are more efficient, perform better, and are more willing to reflect constructively on the need to improve results. Currently, this function is socially very important because it responds to the needs of a growing part of society. People working in open, diverse and inclusive environments are more satisfied with their work, are not exposed to discrimination that causes mental problems and physical violence and are more willing to go beyond their duties and contribute to the well-being and culture of the company. Companies that are more diverse and inclusive create an atmosphere of trust and better communication that is essential for effective teamwork. International schools perform this role well, but there are too few of these schools to significantly change the social position of LGBTQ+ employees in the work environment. As Maji, Yadav & Gupta (2023), claim LGBTQ+ people encounter multiple negative workplace experiences and emotions, especially proximal (hiring discrimination, housing discrimination) and distal workplace discrimination (unsafe work climate, microaggressions, harassment). These aversive experiences lead to work stress while also mandating that people manage their sexual identity and style of dressing. This situation negatively impacts their work and family life, job satisfaction and careers.

The second question that we posed in the study refers to the issue of how international schools cultivate inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students. Our study showed the transformative role of schools with international programmes in creating safe and welcoming environments for LGBTQ+ students. In authoritarian and oppressive political contexts, LGBTQ+ rights are conspicuously absent, often leading to the criminalization of LGBTQ+ behaviours within the legal framework (Tarrow, 2011). Additionally, under such repressive political regimes, avenues for traditional forms of political activism are severely constrained. In terms of the political aspect, Encarnación (2014, p. 1) underscores the pivotal role played by a nation's political structure in shaping LGBTQ+ rights, contending that 'while gay rights may not be universally present in all democracies, they are notably absent in non-democratic regimes.' Transformative leadership is a style that fosters positive change in individuals and society through a shared vision, motivation, action, and social justice. It is based on Burns's (1978) idea of transforming leadership, which involves a "revolution" - "a complete and pervasive transformation of an entire social system" (p. 202). This is also aligned with Freire's (1970) "critical" or "problem-posing" approach in education, which enables learners to "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in the process of transformation" (p. 84). Transformative leadership aims to create leaders of social justice in education, who can balance academic excellence and social transformation (Shields, 2011, p. 3). Social justice education is defined as "full and equal participation of all groups in a [school]...[through educational practices that are] democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change" (Adams et al., 2007, pp. 1-2). It is also a philosophy and a practice that respects and values all people with fairness, respect, dignity, and generosity (Nieto, 2006, p. 2). Our study revealed the transformative role of international schools in Poland, emerging as havens that foster inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ individuals. Positioned as "islands of resistance" against prevailing authoritarian policies, these schools provide safe spaces where LGBTQ+ students can flourish and receive essential support. Through the adoption of international curricula like IB and Cambridge, these schools actively promote tolerance, acceptance, and human rights, cultivating a culture of

International Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth: A Comparative Case Study of the Educational Function of International Schools in Poland

inclusivity and respect for diversity. Inclusive education refers not only to general acceptance but also specifically to a welcoming and supportive environment in which LGBTQ+ students feel unafraid to express their diverse identities (Sadowski, 2016). Our study showed that this inclusive environment within schools with international programmes in Poland is developed by a supportive physical environment, an international curriculum recognized for its tolerance and openness to diversity and discursive interactions between staff and students. Schools as safe spaces improve not only the well-being and mental health of LGBTQ+ students but also their educational outcomes and levels of retention (Shannon, 2016). The analysis of press materials underscores the significant impact of international schools in challenging discriminatory practices and creating institutional spaces that advance LGBTQ+ inclusion within the educational landscape. International schools not only challenge the existing norms but also actively engage in practices that support LGBTQ+ students. Initiatives such as Rainbow Friday and the establishment of policies that honour students' sexual identities illustrate their commitment to fostering a broader societal shift towards greater acceptance of sexual differences. Thus, the planned functions based on in-school laws that are inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth align with the attained curriculum, as evidenced by press releases highlighting the proactive stance of international schools in promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion and challenging discriminatory practices.

The last research question concerns the contributory role performed by international schools in building a valuable and tolerant society. The functions identified during the research relate to education in tolerance and respect. In international schools, one interacts with diversity and multiculturalism. Therefore, the level of tolerance and understanding is very high. Awareness is built on issues of discrimination or racism among teachers, students and parents. By being in an international environment, students in a school setting have the opportunity to learn to cooperate with people from different cultures daily. In this way, they acquire abilities and prepare themselves to live and work in an open and diverse society. In international schools, students representing different cultures, and nationalities have the opportunity to get to know each other and cooperate also on a daily basis. Schools, stimulate socio-economic changes and development in their local environment (Benneworth & Cunha, 2015; Monteiro et al, 2021). This can be considered a contribution to building a valuable society. International schools secure the opportunity for students to be in a tolerant environment. Because of the values promoted, such as respect for human dignity, equality, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, international schools provide a safe place for students who might fear an unfriendly reception at other schools because of their sexual orientation, for example, (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). As such, schools are arenas for critical understanding and taking action to eliminate inequalities (Apple, 2008). According to Erin B. Godfrey and Justina Kamiel Grayman (2014) critical consciousness is made up of three parts: critical reflection, understood as the ability to critically read social conditions, socio-political effectiveness, i.e. the sense of effectiveness in bringing about changes, and critical action, which is actual participation. This is achieved by combining the promotion of values related to tolerance, recognizing the problems faced by LGBTQ+ youth and actual activities related to organizing actions promoting an understanding of diversity. International schools carry out related tasks to build students' social openness by combining preferred values with actual participation. Because of the values promoted, in these schools, students who are LGBTQ+ can feel comfortable in an accepting and tolerant environment. This can reduce the possibility of victimization (Sterzing et al, 2017) related to sexual orientation or declared gender identity.

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