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CREATING SPACE FOR TRANSGENDER YOUTH IN THE POLISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

“TRANSITIONS OF YOUTH IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT” RESEARCH REPORT

Translated by Wiktor Dynarski

*„I can't deal with it. I just can't.
I shove it away and that's it...”*
[quote from one of the interviewees]

General overview of the research

The question of how transgender people function within the Polish educational system is a matter not previously researched within contemporary social and political situation. A satisfying, multi-faced or even descriptive approach to this particular issue is scarce. In 2013, the Office of the Polish Commissioner for Human Rights announced that a first study on the topic was being developed, it was never, however, conducted.¹

It is without a doubt, that transgender students exist in the Polish educational system, however no one is capable to estimate how many there are, what types of schools do they go to and what kind of issues and problems they face when confronting their school environment.

Research carried out during the “Transitions of Youth in School Environment” project focused on a multi-dimensional analysis of transgender children and youth in that setting. Research design took into consideration the question of how principals of educational institutions view this particular issue. This is especially important to the Polish context, since the conditions created for a transgender student to thrive in an educational environment are without a doubt the responsibility of those who manage these kinds of institutions. principals are expected to influence the social reality and general atmosphere around transgender students, as they have the much needed authority. The quality of how well a transgender student functions in that environment relies heavily on the knowledge, skills and will, as well as a personal approach to transgender people, their issues and aspirations.

¹ Information in Polish available at:

http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,14063032,Pierwsze_badania_o_transseksualnosci_w_polskiej_szkole_.html
[accessed: 25.08.2015] (author's note). Up to this day, there has been no official information that would explain why this study was not conducted. Anecdotal information takes into the account a possible political problem, as the question of transgender youth has been and still is seen as controversial. [translator's note].

The research team decided to conduct a qualitative study and base it on structured interviews, conducted among principals in previously identified and approached educational institutions. A non-probabilistic method of sample selection was used, based on information coming from Trans-Fuzja Foundation that during the study, each of the schools had a transgender student attending classes.

Five schools were chosen and approached, out of which one refused to contribute to the study². Ultimately, four principals have been interviewed.

- School A

A public primary school with around 500 students and almost 60 teachers. The research team interviewed its principal who has been working there for 25 years as a teacher and has already had 6 years of experience as the principal.

- School B

A private high school with around 80 students and 30 teachers. The research team interviewed its principal (5 years experience in this role and 3 years of experiences as a teacher) and a class teacher who has been working with a group that included a transgender student.

- School C

A general high school. The research team interviewed its principal who has had 18 years of experience as an educator and 10 years in his current role.

- School D

Continuing Education Center. The research team interviewed its principal – 22 years of teaching experience, including 2 years as the vice principal and 10 years in his current role.

All interviews were audio recorded after a consent from the interviewees has been received. Any information that could have been used to identify any of the institutions were carefully omitted in the final report, including different names that were being mentioned. The interviews were conducted between February and May 2015.

² Even though anonymity was one of the bases of the research, the aforementioned institution still declined to have its principal interviewed. [Translator's note].

Thematic areas

The study focused on four main topics:

1. Knowledge of principals on transgender issues
2. Functioning of transgender students at school from the principals' perspective, based on their observations
3. Acceptance of a transgender person's functioning at school by the management staff, teachers, other students and their parents, as well as superior authorities
4. The quality of principal's work in relation to transgender issues.

The knowledge that one possess is gained by various means, it is reflected in our attitudes, perceptions of others and behaviors. Having adequate knowledge is the key to interpret what is happening around us and affects our understanding of various issues and that includes the question of transgender students in the eyes of their principals. Having that in mind, the research team based the first module on these particular topics:

- participation of management and teaching staff in various trainings regarding their capacities, including trainings on transgender issues,
- sources of knowledge on transgender issues,
- know-how of teachers to work with transgender students,
- organization of any educational activities concerning the situation of transgender people in Poland,
- forming attitudes and behaviors of other students towards transgender people,
- diagnosis of needs and educational possibilities of transgender students.

The second module of the study focused on the characterization of transgender students and their school life from the perspective of their principals. Its primary goal was to describe the quality of day-to-day functioning of transgender students in their school environment. Questions on that topic centered around:

- attitudes of teachers, students and parents towards trans people,
- multi-dimensional safety of transgender students at school,
- horizontal and vertical conflicts triggered by the fact that a transgender student was present at a certain institution.

The focus of the third module was built upon principals' motivation to accept social transition of a transgender child or young person at the school. These questions mostly concerned:

- including a transgender student's preferred name in official documentation,
- informing supervising authorities about social transition of a student,
- cooperation with the parents of a transgender student.

Lastly, the fourth module was helpful to describe the functioning of management staff in relation to working with a transgender student. These questions focused on:

- quality of cooperation with supervising authorities,
- cooperation with non-governmental organizations,
- internal cooperation with the school counselor.

Research results

Answers to the questions have been aligned to reflect the modules and participating institutions. This particular format is not only transparent, but can also be helpful in exploring various problematic aspects, clearly stated during the interviews. A positive response by the interviewee is represented by a (Y) symbol and a negative one by (N).

School A	School B	School C	School D
Module I			
Being offered any kind of training concerning issues connected to current workplace/post:			
(Y)	(Y) <i>„[...] the education office invites us regularly to a number of trainings. [...] I've never participated in any of them.”</i>	(Y)	(Y)
Participation in a training around educational law:			
(Y)	(Y)	(Y)	(Y)
Have any of these trainings been centered about transgender issues?			
(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
If none of these trainings concerned transgender issues, should such a training be organized?			

(Y) <i>"Because people have no knowledge on this"</i>	No answer	(Y) <i>"[...] trainings for management staff and the school in general should be more diverse [...]."</i>	(N) <i>"[...] I don't know. I think that not at this moment."</i>
Asking for information/guidance on transgender issues or a transgender student:			
(Y) A talk with representatives of Trans-Fuzja Foundation	(N)	(N) <i>"[...] I didn't know where to look for anyone to help [...]."</i>	(N)
Is your teaching staff prepared to work with transgender students?			
(N)	<i>"[...]I don't know. [...] the vast majority of our teaching staff is just very vigilant."</i>	<i>"I don't know how to answer this question[...]."</i>	(Y)
Are there any difficulties in accessing knowledge on transgender issues?			
(Y) <i>"There isn't much of it out there"</i>	<i>"I don't know [...] if we wanted to gain more knowledge, we would access it without an issue"</i>	(N) <i>"[...] today's access to various sources of knowledge makes it easy. It is someone's internal block that may be the reason why someone doesn't want to read about it"</i>	(N) <i>"The internet is full of these types of articles"</i>
How educated is your teaching staff about transgender people?			
<i>"[...] not that much"</i>	<i>"[...] generally [...] quite well."</i>	<i>"A lot better today [...]."</i>	<i>"[...] I would give them a B for that."</i>
Module II			
Did your school organize or is organizing any type of educational activities concerning transgender issues?			
(Y) in one class	(N)	(Y)	(N)
What is your teaching staff's attitude towards transgender people?			
<i>"It's hard to assess [...] the teacher who works with our transgender students is very positive"</i>	<i>"[...] Even the most conservative member of the staff, the latin teacher, said to me on the phone – although I was scared of his reaction – "oh yeah, sure, I have a friend like this, no problem"</i>	<i>"[...] the teachers are [...] being used to various different situations, so they treat this as work experience [...]."</i>	<i>"Some [...] teachers who, for private reasons, [...] do not accept this decision, but of course they leave it to the person [...] who actually takes this decision [...]."</i>
Does the teaching staff conducted or is conducting any type of educational activities on transgender issues?			
(N)	(N)	(Y)	(Y)
Do the teachers talk to students (in class or in other context) about transgender issues?			
<i>"I think the school counselor does that"</i>	(Y)	(Y)	(N)
Who can be approached by a transgender student experiencing difficulties?			

<i>"[...] anyone"</i>	<i>"[...] anyone"</i>	<i>"Always their class teacher, always the school counselor, always me"</i>	<i>"[...] first of all, to the class teacher. There is also the counselor and the school psychologist"</i>
Do the people who can be approached by a transgender student have sufficient knowledge and qualifications to help them?			
(Y)	(Y)	(Y)	(Y)
Is your school safe for a transgender student?			
(N) <i>"[...] the toilet, [...] the changing room for PE. It is very difficult."</i>	(N)	(Y) <i>"[...] it's safe for everyone [...]."</i>	(Y)
Do other students know that there is a transgender student at their school?			
(N)	(Y)	(Y)	(Y)
Has this student had any unpleasant experiences in class or coming from any other students?			
(N) <i>"[...] because no one knows"</i>	(N)	(N)	(N)
Does the class accept them?			
(Y) <i>"[...] they like him very much. He's very popular, a cheerful child. [...] has a lot of friends [...], plays with everyone, is a good student. He is accepted and liked."</i>	(Y) <i>"[...] he is accepted as much as other are or are not [...] Some students like each other, some don't, but I didn't notice that he would be an object of antipathy"</i>	(Y) <i>"[...] I always see him with others talking and laughing [...]."</i>	(Y) <i>"He was accepted"</i>
How does the class teacher react or did react during a conflict situation related to a transgender student?			
<i>"There were no conflicts, because I chose the class teacher carefully"</i>	No recorded conflicts	No recorded conflicts	No recorded conflicts
What is the atmosphere in class?			
<i>"Normal, like in class"</i>	<i>"[...] they treat him normally [...]."</i>	<i>"[...] it seems that the class became more socially open [...]."</i>	<i>"I think the atmosphere is ok, but this information had no influence, positive or negative, on it"</i>
Can a transgender student count on their classmates to help them?			
(Y) <i>"I know that they meet and play after class"</i>	(Y)	(Y) <i>"I think yes, unconditionally"</i>	(Y)
Transgender student's attendance in PE class:			

<i>“PE and swimming [...] are possible to safely execute. It will be a problem once secondary sex characteristics start to show”</i>	<i>“[...] just like everyone else”</i>	The student does not attend PE class (excused)	The student does not attend PE class (excused)
What about toilets?			
<i>“He uses the boys' toilet. [...] usually during class, because there are fewer people then”</i>	School has gender neutral toilets	The student uses the boys' toilet.	<i>“I don't know if he used the boys' or the girls' toilet”</i>
Module III			
Does the attendance sheet use the student's preferred name?			
<i>“His mother changed his name to a gender neutral one”</i>	(Y)	(Y)	(N) <i>“We couldn't put a non-existing name in official documentation [...]”</i>
How did the teachers and classmates react to change of name?			
<i>“[...]the children accepted it, as did the teachers. There was no comment about it”</i>	<i>„[...] I was absolutely surprised, how quickly it happened that everyone started calling him Karol³”</i>	<i>“There were no [...] expressions of lack of acceptance”</i>	<i>“[...] everyone, except one teacher, my friend, the vice principal, called him Mateusz [...]”</i>
Do parents of other students know, that there is a transgender student in class?			
(Y)	(Y)	(Y)	(Y)
Were there any talks with the parents on transgender issues?			
(N) <i>“His mother [of the trans student] didn't want this”</i>	(N)	(N)	<i>“[...] I don't know if the class teacher held such a discussion”</i>
Was anyone informed that there is a transgender student at school?			
(N)	(N)	(N)	(Y)
Have you encountered any unpleasant situations linked to the fact that a transgender student can live in their preferred gender at your school?			
<i>“[...] it was unpleasant to talk to his [the student's] mother.”</i>	(N)	<i>“[...] in the hall of [...] our district authority office [...] the chef said, as I heard: I heard that there's a kid at your school who changed sex, ha, ha, ha [...]”</i>	(N)
How did the supervising authorities react to the name change on the attendance sheet?			

³ In Polish, Karol is gendered as male, whereas the female equivalent is Karolina [translator's note].

<i>"This isn't anything you report about. [...] we just attach a new birth certificate and that's it"</i>	No information	<i>"I don't know"</i>	The principal did not inform anyone, because <i>"[...] there is no such obligation [...] I didn't feel a need to do it [...]."</i>
Do parents of the transgender student cooperate with the school?			
(N) <i>"[...] his mother is very active in the class"</i>	(N)	(Y) The parents <i>"are in constant contact with the class teacher"</i> .	(N) <i>"[...] the parents[...] didn't exactly accept Mateusz' choice."</i>
Did the management staff or the class teacher ever tried to talk to parents of the other children in class about transgender people?			
(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Module IV			
What is the position of supervising authorities on the question of social transition in school?			
<i>"I have no idea, there was no conversation about it"</i>	No information	<i>"[...] I don't know [...] their position, because I am not interested in it."</i>	<i>"[...] this is a student's decision and I was not authorized by him to communicate this to anyone [...]."</i>
Does the school cooperate with any non-governmental organizations which can conduct workshops, trainings, activities for children and young people about communication and acceptance?			
(Y)	(Y)	(Y)	(Y)
Does the school counselor or psychologist had or planned meetings in classes on transgender issues?			
(N) <i>"We are constantly working around the subject, indirectly "</i>	<i>"Our school doesn't have one [counselor]. And neither do we have a psychologist."</i>	(Y)	(Y)

Thoughts on results

There are interesting remarks to make based on statements coming from the management staff of the schools participating in the project.

In one instance, the principal noted that they did not take part in any training that would enhance their competence in general management of an educational institution, even though they had been regularly receiving information about such trainings taking place.

"[...] the education office invites us regularly to a number of trainings. [...] I've never participated in any of them."

Other principals have participated in such trainings.

"[...] numerous times throughout the year. There are different trainings concerning [...] administration, financial management [...]. There is a lot of

those [...] at least a several dozen, counting from early 1990s”, including those concerning educational law – “you get these types of trainings at least 2-3 times a year. I either apply on my own or I am delegated by the supervising authorities, most of the time [...] I apply on my own”

It is important to underline that none of the trainings concerned transgender issues. One of the principals stated that “[...] trainings for the management and school staff should be more comprehensive, when it comes to issues that school counselors and class teachers face every day”. These observations are very valuable when one considers the principal's experience:

“[...] I was a methodical advisor for 16 years [...]. In methodical centers we had a group of advisors and consultants, who were only focused on the management staff [...] since then, which was about 10-11 years ago, as I stopped working as a methodical advisor in 2004 [...] these structures had dissolved in the whole country. For 11 years we were slaves to our own initiative. No one organizes these types of environments to train advisors. I'll tell you something better, the supervising authorities are not especially interested in creating these educational opportunities, because financial means are required. [...] I don't think that the supervising authorities would be happy, if I let them know that I took part in or found a training on transgender issues, they would probably say that this is some kind of fad.”

Lack of knowledge on trans people's experiences cannot be fixed by reaching out to other experts, institutions or organizations, because

“[...] I didn't know, whom I can turn to [...]. I didn't have the courage or even the possibility to turn to someone external. You cannot count on the supervising authorities to help you with that [...] when it comes to them, I wouldn't have the courage to ask for such help, because it was the supervising authorities that were unpleasant [...] to me.

[...] when I found myself in the hall of our district authority office, can you imagine, in the hall of one of the floors, where our educational department is located, the then-in-office chief said loudly [...] so I heard that there's a kid at your school who changed sex, ha, ha, ha, yes? I say: 'Indeed, we have such a situation, but we surely won't discuss it in the hallway'. We never got to finish that conversation, we never came back to it. [...]. With this kind of attitude, how could I have gone there and said: listen, this is the situation, I need support or help. No way. He doesn't work there anymore, but it doesn't mean that... He doesn't work there, because he won the elections and became the head of one of the neighboring communes. This is what the attitudes are.”

Any knowledge on trans issues gained by the principal as well as the teachers, comes from such sources as: websites, articles in printed press and tv shows. One of the interviewees

described the level of that knowledge perfectly: *“I have a certain opinion about it. This is not scientific nor psychological research, but I have some general knowledge about it”*. When asked about whether the teachers were prepared to work with trans people, the responses tended to be less specific:

- *“I just think that in general the vast majority of our teaching staff is just very vigilant and has a vision that portrays how social processes could have looked like or they know how to react in such a situation, where – I don't know – there is some kind of otherness, whatever this otherness may manifest itself as.”*
- *“I think that this is some kind of, let's say, general psychological knowledge and that it's somewhat enough to sometimes help these persons get through the stage of sex change. It is of course important to have knowledge on that issue, since some teachers have prejudices related to sex change in general, to transgender people. It may sometimes be a result of not being educated enough, sometimes it is clearly grounded in religious beliefs [...].”*
- *“I think that this is a matter of readiness to face any difficult problem. Whether it's an issue with a transgender student or an anorexic one, or any kind of issue for that matter, I don't know, psychological disorders, any type, I think it is a matter of individual work with this person and an ability to be able to diagnose whether such an issue occurs in class. Or being able to gain this young person's trust, so that they would approach their class teacher, school counselor or psychologist to talk about it. This is the first step. And then to try to work together with other teachers to deal with the issues that need to be faced, whether someone is transgender or has any other problem.”*

Two schools didn't organize any educational activities around the situation of trans people in Poland, in one of the schools such activity took place with one unidentified class and in one of them this matter was raised during the “Upbringing for family life” class⁴. When asked whether the school is engaged in forming attitudes and behaviors towards transgender people, principals replied:

- *“I think we're forming broadly understood tolerance”*
- *“We do not have a separate subject nor program, neither in prevention programs [...] There is a subject on [...] tolerance [...] for sexual minorities and for [...] the sick”*

⁴ The “upbringing” class is usually described as the sex-ed class, although numerous experts, including non-governmental organizations (also LGBTI-specific) have expressed their concerns about the curricula of these classes, which have been criticized for portraying non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative identities and experiences from a stereotypical and misleading point of view. [translator's note].

- *“The school [...] supports [...] a universal upbringing that is open, objective and linked to [...] shaping a perspective that acknowledges that we are different from each other, but similar at the same time”*
- *“[...] we organize different activities that deconstruct the notion of gender and sex⁵ [...]. From a philosophical and social point of view [...]. We have many subjects like these here, we talk during the Knowledge on Society⁶ class, there's a seminar on contemporary society, which also incorporates modern philosophy and... one whole trimester focused on the notion of gender and sex as well as sexuality [...].”*

In one of the schools an exchange of thoughts led to this particular conversation:

principal: *Yes, I think we engage very strongly, I mean...*

Class teacher: *We're not a hundred percent successful, but we always...*

principal: *...but we push for something. I have to say more: our school is trying very hard to form non-normative and non-judgmental attitudes in many ways.*

Upon receiving information, that a transgender student will or is already attending their school, three institutions did not engage with supervising authorities, one of them stated the following:

“[...] after [...] our initial conversation [...] with the child's mother, I informed my supervisors that we may have such a child at our school, but nobody understood or even cared, which is why I decided to not engage with them any further”.

None of the institutions noted any direct issues with regards to the transgender student's presence:

- *“None, because no one knows.”*
- *“No one reported anything. I don't think it was super easy for them, so I think they had a conversation between them and there were some kind of reactions [...] They didn't believe it at first. [...].”*
- *“[...] I didn't encounter anything here at the school nor coming from persons cooperating with us, no issues, no negative reaction except for one incident, but that happened outside of school [...].”*

⁵ Since the word “pleć” could mean both sex and gender, when relevant to the context, both are used [translator's note].

⁶ Pol. Wiedza o społeczeństwie – WOS [translator's note].

Transgender students are not in need of special attention either:

- “[...] he is part of a normal educational process and all the necessary requirements are undertaken and diagnosed”.

In two schools the teaching staff held meetings to discuss the transgender student's situation:

- “[...] he approached me so that we could think of doing something together; that it would be better if he took part in the staff meeting. That it shouldn't be me who informs the teachers, but that he would do it on his own. And he did exactly that [...].”
- “You [the interviewer – author's note] were present during one of those meetings, because we had a possibility to gain more information about it. And we also talked one more time, because I wanted to know how the teachers observe his situation in class, with his class mates and in peer groups, because I wanted to hear whether there had been any problematic situations or reactions coming from other students, but nothing like that had occurred.”

Upon receiving information that a transgender student was present at their school, the teachers' reactions were nothing out of the ordinary:

- “This is not about showing emotion or empathizing that you need to support the student etc. No, our teachers are simply used to do different situations and they treat this as a pedagogical experience [...].”
- “[...] this is definitely not a sign of hostility, that's because I think that the teachers, for private reasons, [...] do not accept this decision, but of course they leave it to the person who actually takes this decision, but let's say that they should reflect a neutral attitude. There is also a group that has a positive approach. They're not optimistic or strictly accepting and saying “you did well””, we don't get these kinds of reactions, at least I didn't stumble upon any like this. A teacher like this is friendly towards the student as in “I liked you when you were a girl and it will be the same when you're a boy” [...]

In a hypothetical problematic situation, principals of two schools declared that a transgender student can ask anyone from the teaching staff for help, the other two have clearly stated that the class teacher, school counselor, psychologists and principal should be the one approached.

- “Always the class teacher; always the counselor or me”

⁷ Original version of this statement includes both female and male gendered verbs, suggesting that the teachers were not using the preferred gender right away. [translator's note]

- *“I think that just like every other student who has any problems, he should primarily approach his class teacher. There's also the counselor and school psychologists. These are the two, let's say three, people who are on the front line [...]”*

The interviewees stated that the above mentioned persons have the necessary competence that allow them to aid the student accordingly.

- *“[...] they are able to talk to him, but they surely cannot bear the responsibility for the student's decision or tell him if he did well or is doing something well. It should mostly be based on listening to his arguments and connect him with people, who are more competent in these issues [...]”*
- *“The counselor is usually quite frequently somewhat of a moderator at our school. And it's not just about this [...] but also all other students. It happens very often that they mediate between students and teachers [...]”*

When asked if the school was safe for a transgender student, one interviewee gave a negative response:

- *“Even such technicalities like toilet or changing rooms in PE class. There's no way that in these everyday things like changing clothes or using the toilet. It is very difficult.”⁸*

In other cases, no incidents or possibilities to endanger a transgender student's safety were recalled.

- *“[...] it's safe for everyone to be honest, for a transgender student and a student with any type of dysfunction [...]”*
- *“I didn't execute any activities. It's very hard to say if it's a matter of our good approach to the issue itself or whether our students are not hostile to such persons [...]”*

A transgender student's safety is not affected, as the interviewees state, by their peers knowledge, as in three schools other students have been informed about the situation.

- [His class – author's note] *“They welcomed him. There were no conflicts, no problems [...]. He's very friendly, [...] connects well with other students. There were no complaints regarding his behavior towards others. He's an average student, nothing out of the ordinary whether positive nor negative,”*

⁸ Interviewees original response is also grammatically ungraspable in Polish [translator's note].

- *“He's always part of a peer group, whether it's the boys or the girls. I always see him with others talking and laughing [...] there was never a situation where he would be an outsider [...]”.*
- *He's very popular, a cheerful child and has a lot of friends, plays with everyone, he is a good student. He is really accepted and liked.*

The interviews also explored the question whether a transgender coming out in class affected other students in any way (e.g. changed the overall atmosphere). Below are the answers to this question:

- *“Yes, things changed in a way that it seems that the class became more socially open in the sense of reflecting on their surroundings. They now know that if there's a friend in their group, they can stumble upon various life situations”.*
- *“[...] the group keeps changing, something is going on, but it seems that... it's a kind of process, their relationships changed, more people who were not communicating with others started doing that, they became more... they became more connected [...]”*
- *“[...] I can definitely say that this information had no effect on the atmosphere in a good or bad sense. It definitely wasn't processed in a way that this information would have changed the whole class”.*

When it comes to taking part in various social activities, in all cases transgender students are active in this field:

- *“He was present on all our field trips [...]”*
- *“I know that they meet and play after class”*
- *“[...] he always took part in field trips, [...]. He took his girlfriend to the prom [...]. And he was always there at school parties”.*

Living in the preferred gender creates specific formal issues such as putting the correct name on the attendance sheet. This particular aspect was taken care of by parents from one of the students attending primary school:

- *“His mother changed his name to a gender neutral one [...] There's an official document and we were able to change that, but when he was in first grade, I can't deny that we forged documents, because we used his preferred name on the attendance sheet, but his diploma had the name that had to be there”⁹*

⁹ Meaning the formal one [translator's note].

If one looks at this situation just from a formal stand point, it is clear that these kinds of actions should be condemned, since forgery occurred and the management staff didn't hide that fact. On the other, humane, hand it is important to positively underline, that even if the school executed illegal action, it was in the best interest of the child.

In one instance, the school changed the student's name in his documents without informing the parents or even consulting with them.

- *“[...] we didn't consult the parents [...], it turned out that it was quite problematic, yes, it didn't go well. I mean, it didn't go well for him, because they got mad at us, but they just... For example, we changed his name in the online platform, without asking them and not notifying about it [...] we could have done it in a way that, we would actually inform them about all the things that were happening here and what decisions we took, which resulted in the fact that they will change schools this years. [...]. Maybe if we had informed them beforehand and took the same decisions...”*
- *There wouldn't be any difference. They did not agree with our decision [...] I think that it would have been a lot worse, because if they had told us “no”, we would have still changed his name on the attendance sheet.”*

This is where concerns can be raised. Did the school had the right to take decisions that should have been clearly taken only by those who exercise parental rights? The report will not explore this dilemma further, but this particular case can become an additional question to a legal discussion on rights of trans youth in Poland.

In one of the schools interviewed for the study, the student's name was not changed:

- *“[...] we couldn't put a different name in official documentation, but everyone, except one teacher, my friend, the vice principal, called him Mateusz¹⁰ [...] a lot of students do not like the name their parents gave them and they ask us to use a different one and we do it, because it doesn't change anything and they feel a lot better when we do it.”*

Summary

Although the question of trans people's rights is still a matter of critical and prejudiced attitudes in Polish society, educational institutions taking part in the study, seem to not mirror these approaches. It is thanks to the management and teaching staff, who still lack proper

¹⁰ As Mateusz is gendered male, this was the student's preferred name [translator's note].

knowledge on trans students, that these schools were able to create environment that enables trans youth to not only transition socially, but to also thrive in the Polish educational system.

Both the management and teaching staff do not possess vast knowledge on trans issues and needs of their trans students and it is impossible to address them with, as one of the interviewees stated, “the teachers' vigilance” only. No complex, strategically thought-out actions aimed to educate and raise awareness on trans issues among the students are organized. General actions aimed to form pro-social attitudes are preferred to trans-specific trainings,

However, this approach turned out to have a positive effect within the institutions participating in the study, since there was no record of aggressive or hostile behaviors towards trans students neither from their peers, teachers nor parents of other students.

Even if some members of the teaching staff hold negative attitudes towards trans people, they do not manifest this in an insistent or oppressive way. They do not agree with the situation they found themselves in, but they give trans students their space.

Transgender students have therefore a possibility to live in their preferred gender, in a role which they see themselves in and identify with, and schools, understood as a community of teachers, students and parents, accept this fact.

To maintain the students' well-being, sometimes schools decide to perform actions, which are not in line with the Polish law, for example when a student's name is changed on the official attendance sheet. A question arises – should this be condemned, or praised?

Some aspects raised during the interviews generate a wide spectrum of various questions. This particular study is a first attempt to broadly describe the question of social transition and living openly as a trans student within the Polish education system, and it is only an introduction to this particular aspect of trans lives in Poland.