

Policy brief: Polish LGBTQIA+ students at risk: How can schools protect them?

Jared Prentis
The University of Melbourne
jaredprentis@gmail.com

Abstract

Recognising and meeting the social and emotional wellbeing needs of LGBTQIA+ students is an essential education policy issue globally. Yet, research suggests that this vulnerable group continues to face challenges to their ability to feel culturally safe at school. Negative experiences include verbal and physical abuse, and this often results in poor outcomes for students. Certain European countries such as Malta and The Netherlands have demonstrated positive progress towards enacting inclusive policy, while others, including Poland, are known to have made little or no development in this area. This paper provides a policy issue analysis on the current situation in Polish schools while considering the added threat of LGBT+ free zones that have plagued the political landscape and exist as a further barrier to tolerance and empowerment. Following this discourse, recommendations for school communities have been provided for the purpose of establishing safe learning environments for LGBTQIA+ students.

Introduction

The human right to personal physical and psychological safety should be guaranteed to all students regardless of their sex, sexuality, or gender expression. Yet, the Council of Europe (2018) reports that LGBTQIA+ students, across all member states, face violence or feel unsafe in schools at a rate substantially higher than their cis-heteronormative peers. This is also supported by academic literature (Cardinal, 2015; Ioverno, 2023).

There is international concern over the increase in public anti-LGBTQIA+ resolutions, informally known as LGBT-free zones, witnessed in many Polish municipalities that seek to deny recognition or the dignity of queer people. Undoubtedly, the influence of such rhetoric adds further risk to the safety and wellbeing of students in schools. Individual institutions may not be able to significantly influence political change overnight, however, they do have the ability to challenge homophobia through inclusive policies and practice. This report is designed to be an actionable guideline for Polish school communities to curb the discrimination and violence experienced by LGBTQIA+ learners in schools.

Note: This paper uses the acronym LGBTQIA+ to refer to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, asexual, queer, non-binary, and gender non-conforming.

The issue explained

Bullying and discrimination towards LGBTQIA+ learners in schools

Bullying and discrimination towards LGBTQIA+ students is a global issue and a growing area of research (Snapp et al., 2015). Decades of research have proved that LGBTQIA+ students are more likely to experience conflict and reduced well-being and safety compared to their peers in schools. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Youth & Student Organisation found in their pivotal research from 14,000 respondents that 42% of global queer youth reported experiencing verbal abuse at school. 37% admitted that they seldom feel safe at school, if ever (IGLYO, 2021). Bullying was reported higher in Europe at 54% and the vast majority (83%) had witnessed negative remarks based on LGBTQIA+ identity. This negative trend continues with 44% of European 15- to 17-year-old LGBTQIA+ students reporting their rights ignored frequently and 47% reported that LGBTQIA+ issues had never been addressed. Shockingly, 90% of trans women reported bullying based on gender identity.

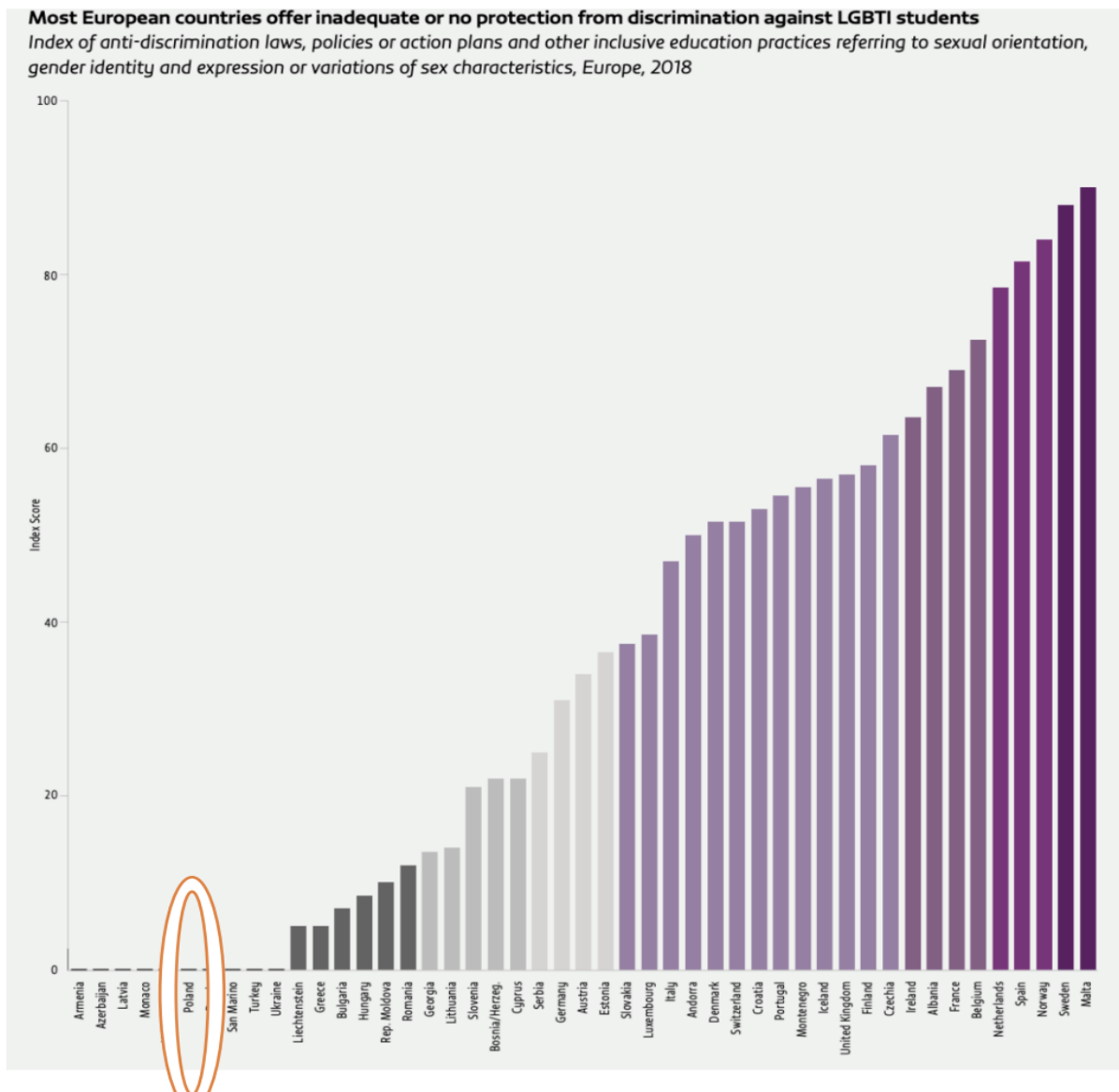
These correlations provide useful evidence that even in countries that are considered supportive of LGBTQIA+ rights, bullying and harassment are an issue. A limitation of this study is that the information gathered requires students to self-report, which may not allow school leadership to grasp the extent of the issue. Also, Snapp et al. (2015) provide important insight that most research focuses on the individual without accounting for differences between schools. Yet, one can only imagine the dire situation queer learners face in Poland which has a reputation for being the lowest in the EU for LGBTQIA+ equality for the fourth year in a row (Camut, 2023).

The consequences of bullying are severe. In addition to lower academic performance, academic literature reveals LGBTQIA+ victimization leads to higher rates of absenteeism, drug and alcohol abuse, poorer mental health outcomes (Ioverno, 2023), chronic stress (Cardinal, 2015) and attempted suicide (Snapp et al., 2015; Kolbe, 2020). Schools may argue that their existing anti-bullying policies are sufficient without the need to identify LGBTQIA+ students. Conversely, important research from Robinson and Espelage (2012) across 30 schools in Wisconsin noted that explicit language around sexual and gender identity provided lower levels of victimization. Furthermore, Perez, Schanding and Dao (2013) revealed in their study of American teachers that many of them lacked specific knowledge about addressing LGBTQIA+ specific bullying. These studies are useful to justify the need for school policy change.

Poland's ranking on the LGBTQI Inclusion Index

Unsurprisingly, the LGBTQI Education Inclusion Index, developed by IGLYO in 2018 (IGLYO, 2021), outlines that Polish schools rank as one of the worst for inclusion for queer learners. The 10 domains that comprise the index include antidiscrimination law concerning educational settings; compulsory national curriculum on inclusion; teacher training on LGBTQIA+ inclusion; accessible guidelines and information; data collection on bullying; systems to support learners; and partnerships with government and other NGOs and international commitments (IGLYO, 2021). Out of the 49 countries reviewed, only Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden demonstrated proficient inclusive measures. Conversely, Poland currently has no implements to meet any of the outlined domains (see Figure 1)

Fig 1. Poland’s ranking on the LGBTQI Education Inclusion Index



Source: IGLYO (2018; cited in Global Education Monitoring Report Team International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Youth & Student Organisation, 2021)

This suggests that schools in Poland are ill-equipped to address LGBTQIA+ victimisation and, perhaps, do not address it effectively at all. Ioverno (2023) raises the question of whether inclusive policies, especially at a state or national level, are proven effective in improving the school experience for queer learners. On the contrary, their unprecedented cross-national European study of 66,851 participants correlated documented inclusive policies with higher life satisfaction and sense of safety. The key takeaway is that specific well-being strategies must be put in place.

Social hostility and LGBT-free zones

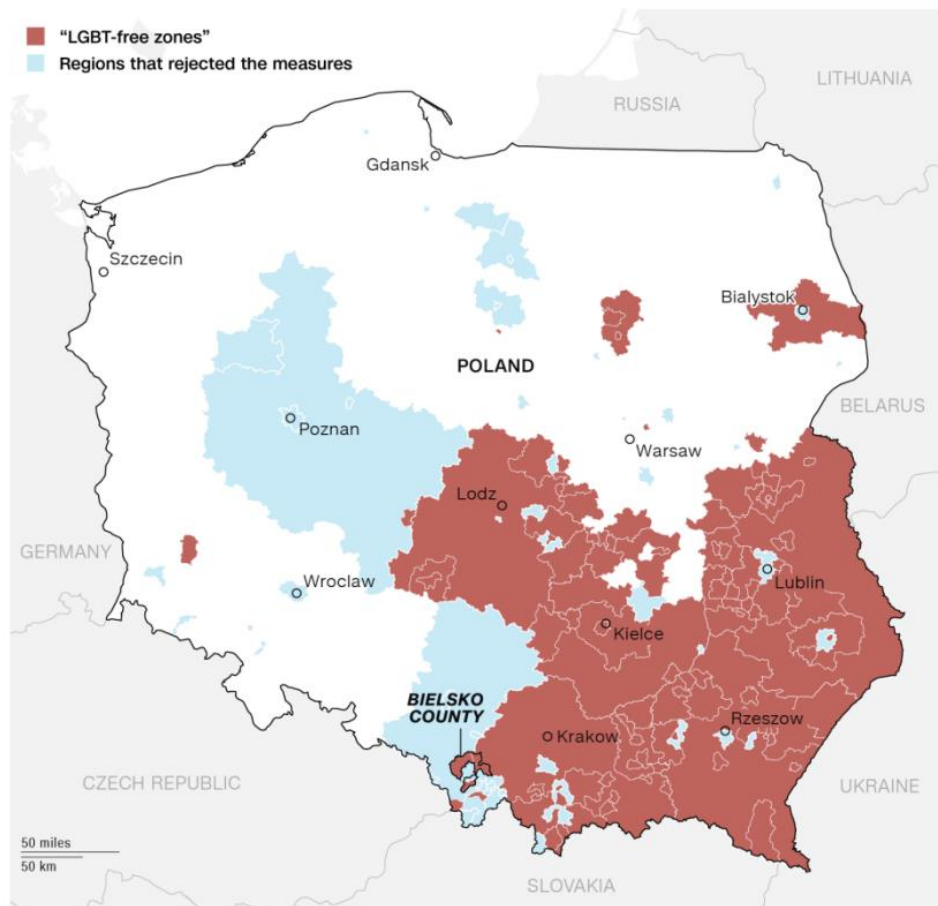
Social hostility towards LGBTQIA+ people in Poland is a threat towards inclusivity initiatives in schools. Ploszka (2023) provides the salient context on the so-called ‘culture war’, backed by the right-wing political Law and Justice party, against the LGBT community. Public anti-LGBTQIA+ rallies that involve vitriolic rhetoric have

been a regular occurrence since 2018 and are often unchallenged by Polish authorities (IGLYO 2022). On the contrary, LGBTQIA+ activists have been detained in inhumane conditions by the state or tried in court for ‘insulting religious feelings.’ Not only do prominent religious figures contribute their share of hateful dialogue, even Polish President Andrzej Duda has supported such rhetoric. This report acknowledges that for many conservatives the needs of LGBTQIA+ is a sensitive topic. However, there is no room to ignore overt or covert hostility to anyone at risk of exclusion or discrimination in an educational setting.

LGBT-free zones

A severe problem in Poland is the self-proclaimed “LGBT-free” local municipalities. Central governments require local government support to protect human rights on a local level; however, the reverse is happening. A third of the country has adopted the narrative that they are free from ‘LGBT ideology’ (Ploszka, 2023), despite no such ideology in existence. Moreover, it was reported in 2021 that 92 towns have declarations that they are an “LGBT-free zone” (IGLYO 2022). This is not an official term, but a phrase that appeared in the media. Most resolutions are seen in southeast Poland which comprises poorer and highly religious people who are told a false story that these resolutions are upholding traditional Christian and family values (Ploszka, 2023).

Fig 2. A map of Poland’s LGBT-free zones.



Source: Picheta and Kottasová (n.d.)

In response, the European Parliament adopted a resolution which stated that these zones are direct acts of unjust discrimination and called upon the Polish government to condemn local authorities and dismantle these resolutions (IGLYO, 2021). This call to action remains unanswered.

Yet, school communities should remain hopeful that the situation can improve. Rafał Trzaskowski, city mayor of Warsaw, signed a declaration in 2019 aimed to address LGBT+ discrimination and specifically outlines a vision for schools to be safer and more inclusive spaces (IGLYO 2022) albeit with no legally binding power (Ploszka, 2023) and limited to Warsaw. Furthermore, unlike Russia and Hungary, the Polish Parliament has not passed specific legislation that further reduces protections for LGBTQIA+ people (Ploszka, 2023) but has simply allowed local governments to act unchecked. Additionally, it is noted that the rise of LGBT-free zones has slowed (Ioverno, 2023), perhaps out of fear of reputational damage or that municipalities will lose needed funding from the EU and other international organizations. Twenty authorities have overturned resolutions previously adopted.

Creating safer schools for LGBTQIA+ will likely be challenging within this political climate. However, the political affiliations of stakeholders cannot justify the exclusion (or failure to address exclusions) of LGBTQIA+ learners if they are committed to inclusive education. Polish schools only need to look to neighbouring countries for guidance to rewrite the social narrative that Poland is a dangerous country for queer students.

Recommendations

A comprehensive approach that includes a range of interventions is crucial to promote a safe learning environment. These recommendations complement each other, and research suggests that adopting a whole-of-school approach involving policy change, staff empowerment and mandated curriculum is more effective in achieving inclusivity (Snapp et al., 2015) (Kolbe, 2020) (Cardinal, 2021). The following section provides specific and actionable recommendations.

Strengthen school inclusive policies that explicitly address LGBTQIA+ victimisation

Polish schools must adopt robust documented policies to prevent violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. This includes policies specific to transgender and intersex students to ensure full participation (such as gender-neutral uniform and bathroom policies). These may be included within existing anti-violence or anti-bullying policies in the school, but it is important that ensuring safety for LGBTQIA+ students is explicitly stated (Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Where possible, schools should involve LGBTQIA+ students and families in the development phase. These commitments must be regularly communicated to the school community (such as an annual letter to parents or at school assemblies) and reinforced after incidents of anti-LGBTQIA+ behaviour (Kolbe, 2020).

Empower school support systems to monitor and address violence

Schools should be culturally safe spaces even if their external communities are intolerant. From IGLYO's report (2022) there is no evidence to suggest that current LGBTQIA+ learners in Poland have access to psychological support through school psychologists and/or councillors. School heteronormative structures that exclude LGBTQIA+ students contribute to hostility (Cardinal, 2021) and students should have access to professional mental health support and safe spaces (Kolbe, 2020) such as the presence of safe and inclusive clubs.

Polish schools must monitor and maintain a zero-tolerance policy for violence on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. This commitment sets the tone (Cardinal, 2015) that no student or staff member can engage in problematic behaviour. A first step could involve an audit through surveying the presence of SOGIESC-based violence (Council of Europe, 2018) and ensure anonymous ways to report incidents of violence both within and outside schools.

Mandatory teacher training

Staff are required to take action to ensure cultural safety (Cardinal, 2015) but they most likely require professional development. Currently, there are no mandatory educational requirements for teachers in Poland to have an awareness of creating safe learning environments for LGBTQIA+ students (IGLYO, 2022). Teaching and administrative staff play an essential role in maintaining an inclusive environment, especially whether they intervene after witnessing acts of bullying, discrimination or violence (Cardinal, 2015) (IGLYO, 2021). Yet, the IGLYO report found that in Europe 7 in 10 students felt their teachers were not open to discussing issues related to LGBTQIA+ people. Issues including lack of confidence and/or social bias can be addressed by providing suitable mandatory training, time, and space for teachers to critically evaluate their current understanding. One effective example seen in French Belgium is mandatory courses that cover the theory and practice of cultural diversity and gender which includes a teaching guide for extracurricular activities (IGLYO, 2021). Schools may consider appointing a member of staff as a resource specialist to provide support for other colleagues. Ultimately, inclusive teacher training and positive teacher-student relationships build empathy (Cardinal, 2015), awareness, self-efficacy and foster supportive behaviours in students (Ioverno, 2023).

Embed validation of LGBTQIA+ identities into the curriculum

A curriculum that gives attention and recognises the issues queer learners face helps create a supportive and inclusive environment (Snapp et al., 2015). Often it is a trend for schools to omit mentioning any reference to queer identities, but when they are present it was reported that in Europe fewer than 1 in 5 students were provided positive representations (IGLYO, 2021). Schools must mandate the teaching of factual and non-judgmental information about sexual and gender diversity (IGLYO, 2022) and erase negative, stereotypical outdated portrayals of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The goal is to celebrate diversity (Cardinal, 2015) and move towards normalisation to reduce stigma (Kolbe, 2020). The first step is to review educational materials and resources to identify what is available or required (i.e., lesson plans, textbooks, etc.). There have been positive steps in other European countries. In 2015, the Swedish national primary secondary curriculum introduced gender and sexuality identity education in biology,

history, religion, and civics. Flemish schools in 2019 introduced mandatory gender and sexuality education for the first year of secondary education. Additionally, Germany offers tolerance and acceptance of sexual diversity in primary school. Snapp et al.'s (2015) American study of 1311 Californian respondents found that an inclusive curriculum must cover multiple subject areas and target the overall school environment to improve a sense of school safety, rather than simply a tokenistic approach.

Advocate for social change and partner with civil society

Schools are recommended to form relationships with supportive external stakeholders once internal policies are established. Through successful partnerships, school communities can become agents for social change. It is expected that there will be strong resistance to inclusive policy change from students, parents, the wider community and even staff within schools. In addition to clear policy that informs professional code of conduct, schools may find support and useful resources by partnering with organisations such as the Equaveristy Foundation which was established as an umbrella organisation that seeks international fundraising to support the LGBTQIA+ community in Poland.

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