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## **HE, SHE, IT, THEY – the school experience of queer adolescents**

**ON, ONA, ONO, ONI – szkolne doświadczenia nastolatków queer**

**Abstract:** This paper is the result of empirical qualitative research on the non-normative gender identification of adolescents attending secondary schools in one of the largest cities in Poland. The presented study based on queer categories is embedded in an interpretive paradigm. The phenomenological method allowed to collect first-person accounts of transgender people's daily experiences at school. Discourse analysis identified linguistic patterns and allowed to understand how respondents construct their identities

**Keywords:** adolescents, identity, secondary school, transgender, gender role, qualitative research.

### **Introduction**

Owing to Simone De Beauvoir's famous statement „one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir, 2014), feminists developed the gender concept emphasising that female and male features are culture-formed. The feminist theory attempted to differentiate between sex and gender. Judith Butler (Butler, 2008) was among the critics of such an approach. She claimed that the division into sex (biology) and gender (culture) tends are also developed socially. Moreover, she declared that the language and names we use to call one another affect what identities society considers normal. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann added that gender identities and sexuality result from individuals' relationships with other people through primary and secondary socialisation and depend on social interactions and social recognition

(Berger and Luckmann, 1966, in: Cederved, Glasdam and Stjernward, 2021, p. 17). According to Butler, there are various identities that cannot be determined or categorised as traditional gender roles (Elliot, 2011, pp. 249-263). According to queer theory, sexuality can be understood in different ways. It includes individuals who declare gender other than their sex (transgender), individuals whose gender is fluid and varies throughout their lifetime (gender fluid), but also individuals who do not identify themselves with any gender (agender). The broad term „queer” is used in the text for the subjects who do not identify themselves as cis males or cis females.

The theory of discourse is another theoretical reference next to queer theory. It is based on Michel Foucault’s concept, who wrote that a tendency to classify, sort and diagnose people. Sorting and categorising led to the creation of new identities. This way, Foucault explains that the language and names we assign to various phenomena and one another are pivotal for individuals’ approach to themselves and reality. Furthermore, Foucault claims that power and knowledge blend in speech (Foucault, 1995, p. 110). Classification is a control system. Some individuals started being perceived as more normal and desired than others. The sense of being under constant observation makes people behave as expected and voluntarily follow the norm. That is why the concept of normality becomes significant in queer theory. The discourse analysis adopted in the paper enables studying how language is used in social contexts.

### **Research sample**

Research participants were six queer adolescents, a group of people friends with a member of the researcher’s family. The research sample was selected based on the snowball method (Babbie, 2005, pp. 205-206). It is important to emphasize that it was as a form of advocacy that was inspired by the research first participant. The first person came to the researcher alone, voluntarily, motivated by the need to talk privately and confide the problems they faced at home and at school. It was only this first meeting that initiated the researcher’s scientific interest in the problem of queer youth in secondary school and ended with the question whether this conversation could be conducted again in an orderly manner, and the answers could be used in research. After obtaining consent, a question was asked about people who have a similar need for confessions. It turned out that from a larger social group, interlocutors were indicated one by one, who formed a research group that met the following criteria: identifying oneself as a transgender

or non-binary person; age: 15 to 19 years at the time of the interview; being a secondary school student and willing to share one's school experiences.

All research participants attended secondary schools in one city in central Poland. The participants were aged 16 to 19 years, whereby the mean age was 17.1.

Research population's sample:

1. a transgender boy, 18 years old – female sex, male gender, preferred pronoun „he”, identifying himself as heterosexual (in a relationship with a cis girl);
2. a transgender boy, 19 years old – female sex, male gender, preferred pronoun „he”, identifying himself as bisexual (in a relationship with a cis boy);
3. a transgender boy, 17 years old – female sex, male gender, preferred pronoun „he”, identifying himself as bisexual (in a relationship with a transgender boy);
4. a transgender boy, 16 years old – female sex, male gender, preferred pronoun „he”; identifying himself as aromantic and asexual;
5. a non-binary person, 16 years old – female sex, gender fluid, preferred pronouns „she/he”, identifying oneself as aromantic;
6. a non-binary person, 17 years old – female sex, agender, preferred pronouns „she/they”, identifying oneself as pansexual.

### **Data collection**

A qualitative interview method was applied (Babbie, 2005, pp. 327-330). The previously prepared questionnaire with the interview guidelines contained essential questions but the interviewees were allowed to answer freely to reveal some complementary side issues. Justyna Ratkowska-Pasikowska and Katarzyna Okólska point out the interview as the typical data collection method in research on transgender. The scientists claim that stories, narratives and interviews help trace the interviewees' biographies, including but not limited to turning points in their lives, and identify the boundary situations. This helps understand a broader context (Pasikowska and Okólska, 2022, p. 107). The interviews were carried out from September to November 2021. All meetings were face-to-face. The interviews contained questions on the teenagers' experiences in secondary schools, the school's ambience in reference to queer issues and contacts with peers, teachers and other adults that could become potential confidantes. The interviews lasted from 80 to 130 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed.

### **Research strategy**

This text discusses a part of the Author's broader research investigations on the everyday experiences of persons who identify themselves as queer. The purpose of the research was to describe their school reality. Considering the fact that queer students in Polish schools are particularly exposed to discrimination, stigmatisation and prejudice-motivated abuse (Mazurczak, Mrowicki and Adamczewska-Stachura, 2019; Makuchowska, 2021) the point was to learn and understand their experiences. Since all aspects of the multi-thread discussion cannot be presented exhaustively, the Author focuses on one of the vital issues – the interviewees' opinions on how they were treated by teachers and classmates, though the answers in the interviews applied to various aspects. They included the research subjects' family situation, support or a lack of support from the „significant others”, psychological search for one's identity and the interviewees' disorders (ADHD, affective disorders, eating disorders, affective mood disorders), which they mentioned during the interviews and which were not analysed in the article due to a lack of the researcher's adequate competence. Identified, repeating topics concerning only the school environment and the language used for shaping one's identity were the base of the developed empirical material. The focal point was the experiences of young people, based on the interpretative paradigm. Researchers who rely on this paradigm emphasize the dominance of understanding over the explanation of individual experience, which allows understanding the process of creating meanings and interpretations and the context in which these experiences take place. The phenomenological method used in this study allowed the researcher to explore the essence of transgender people's experiences. In phenomenological research, the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, not to create theories or generalize data (Hays and Singh, 2012). In addition, the researcher used discourse and narrative analysis, which allowed her to understand how the subjects construct their identities. These assumptions guided the research effort, from the construction of the free-form interview protocol questions to the interpretation of the data.

### **Research ethics**

The interviewees were informed about the research and learnt its objective and structure. The participants expressed their consent in advance and could read the questions before the interviews. After acceptance, convenient interview dates were arranged. Information anonymity was guaranteed. The researcher keeps the transcripts, rendering the exact wording of the spoken

language. In order to ensure the interviewees' safety, a decision was made to carry out the interviews in spaces where the subjects felt comfortable and which they proposed. During the interviews, the adolescents were informed about the possibility of having psychological assistance, if necessary. Telephone numbers of fellow psychologists ready to support the interviewees and adolescent helpline telephone numbers were shared. Nobody took the opportunity. Written and oral consent to participate in the research was expressed by all participants (Silverman, 2007, pp. 292-294). Three participants had revealed their gender identity and/or sexuality sometime before, consequently, their caregivers knew about the research and expressed their consent. The other interviewees kept their gender identity and/or sexuality secret from their parents. At the time of the research, one subject (Person 1) was during the transition – taking testosterone for three months (and consequently had more distinctive facial features, lowered voice timbre and fine facial hair occurring). A few days after the interview, the person was supposed to file a suit against their parents to determine the person's gender. Such a procedure offers the future possibility of changing the sex/name in official documents. Three other transgender males declared their will to be subject to transition in the near future. All research participants were a sensitive group because four of them were underage and belonged to a minority group. The quotations from the interviews were anonymised to prevent recognising the participants' identities during the presentation of the results.

### **Analysis**

Stories shared by six young people with non-normative gender identification were analysed. The studied adolescents declared transgender and non-binary identities. It means they do not identify with their sex (transgender) and want to be called using pronouns other than those assigned to their sex. Optionally, they do not identify with traditional genders and their assigned roles and want to be called using pronouns and they would rather not be perceived as representatives of the two categories (gender fluid and agender). A more generic term „queer” was used for all these individuals.

Since the age of coming out has lowered and nowadays it typically occurs at the age of fourteen (Baams, Grossman and Russell, 2015, pp. 688-695), the selected research subjects were older than that. Adolescents spend most of their time at school so most questions concerned school relations. A school is a place of peer-to-peer interactions, satisfying the need

to belong, finding one's identity, copying and imitating others' behaviour, social norms and patterns.

Four research participants introduced themselves with the pronouns related to the gender they identified with (he), and two participants introduced themselves with non-binary pronouns (he/she/they) (compare the research population's structure). This way, the adolescents challenged the common understanding of the standard that males are called „he” and females are called „she”. The adolescents were in the course of seeking their identity and defining their sexuality. The interviews revealed a long way towards understanding who they are and what they feel. In many cases, the research subjects suggested they were unsure if the process of changing their identity had been completed or would continue to evolve.

„I felt I was a lesbian because I started to be attracted to girls. Sometime later, I discovered I liked girls because I was a male. That is so simple. I am a heterosexual boy. It's going to stay like this, I think”. (Person 1)

The culture of most Polish schools is still homophobic and heterosexist. According to the International Ranking of LGBTQ+ Friendly Schools, 30% of adolescents think that not everybody can feel safe at school. Considering the fact that school is mandatory for ca. 1.5 M students, it means nearly half a million persons who learn and grow up feeling endangered. Moreover, it is not only about the LGBTQ+ youth but about every person who, in the common opinion, deviates from the standard (Ranking szkół przyjaznych LGBT, 2022, in: <https://queer.pl/>). The interviewees described many actions which contributed to their sense of threat in everyday school life, from minor acts of maliciousness through to direct slurs, bullying and harassment by peers and their parents. They mentioned omnipresent hate, including Internet hate. Many counterparts commonly used such words as „poof” or „dyke” and told homophobic jokes in the subjects' presence. Nonetheless, the interviewees did not have only negative experiences at school. Some experienced little homophobic bullying, while others described the support and positive approach demonstrated by teachers and peers. The studied adolescents were aware of the risk of being excluded from their secondary school counterparts' groups because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Four persons who had had adaptation problems in primary school attached high hopes to the change in their peer environment. At the beginning of their secondary school education, most research participants tried to behave in a manner promoting group inclusion. Four persons attempted not to attract attention so as not to come under fire from their counterparts. Masking and adaptation attempts were the strategies most often mentioned by the interviewees.

Two participants demonstrated their identity immediately, wearing outfits and behaving differently than their counterparts. It was a need to emphasise one's individuality rather than demonstrating a non-heteronormative identification. These individuals cut their hair significantly. Sometimes they dyed their hair unnatural colours, such as green or blue. They avoided clothes assigned to the gender they did not identify with (transgender boys did not wear skirts or dresses) or preferred wearing gender-neutral clothes, typically trousers and shirts (non-binary persons). The gender-fluid persons used to wear clothes reflecting their current sense of identity (sometimes female and sometimes male). The research participants had an inner sense of not matching their groups. They called it a sense of being „detached” which they had felt back in primary school. The form of creation they adopted was astounding. The interviewed biological girls having a sense of male sexual identity polished their nails, dyed their hair, and wore earrings and rings. It verified the way of understanding masculinity and femininity and the social and cultural gender manifestations. The subjects pointed out the separation of the sense of gender identity and the inclination to wear accessories and jewellery. Most of them emphasised that wearing make-up, earrings or nail polishing was not reserved only for females. If transgender boys like such a style, there are no obstacles against them wearing jewellery, nail polish etc. Nonetheless, each transgender boy emphasised their inner imperative to conceal the attributes of a female body. Breast flattening binders, slender or skinny silhouettes that resemble feminine ones as little as possible are standard among the research participants. They all had a compelling need to define, name and assign themselves to a specific group. It applied not only to gender identity and/or sexual orientation but, e.g. to clothing style. Each interviewee could name their style (fairy grunge, emo, alternative, dark academia, and cottage core). They imposed frameworks and patterns on themselves. They felt the need to label their identity. There was no room for freedom, nuances and understatements.

The process of coming out in the school environment was complex and lengthy in all subjects and entailed various reactions. One of the interviewees informed the school guidance counsellor first, which gave him the strength and motivation to come out to other people. Another one first opened to a teacher he liked and trusted. In two other cases, the closest classmate (friend) was the first to know. One friend, followed by others. The status quo had lasted from several to a dozen or so weeks until the information reached all students in the class. Two persons informed nobody directly but set a new name and preferred pronouns in their Instagram descriptions. It was

unequivocal for the followers and the message sent this way spread quickly among the classmates. The responses were either neutral or neutral and scornful. „I expected it to be much worse, but it ended up with meaningful glances and lulz, there were slurs and stupid comments, such as „what have you got in your pants”, etc. but generally it was not so bad” (Person 3). After disclosing their identity, non-binary persons found it hard to discover that being in-between is more difficult for people to understand than identification with another gender. „Teasing by the boys who kept asking if I was changing in the female or male changing room for our PE classes was really stupid. I was a weirdo” (Person 5). Most interviewees experienced a profound sense of maladjustment, maladaptation and mismatching. The experience of rejection aggravated the lack of self-acceptance and low self-esteem. In addition to low mood, sadness and a sense of rejection, the interviewees experienced typical psychosomatic symptoms such as anxiety attacks, depression episodes and insomnia. Four were or have been under psychiatric care and used/have used pharmacotherapy. They have attended psychotherapy. Three subjects had a history of self-injuring, two of whom experienced – after coming out - a decrease in the emotional tension and relief sufficient to quit coping with difficult emotions this way. The interviewees had few colleagues in their classes. Sometimes they had only two or three colleagues at school, for instance, in equivalent courses. The subjects did not think much of their classmates. „All my classmates were straight. Ugh!” (Person 3). The interviewees were convinced that if you are not queer, you do not understand what it is like to be „different”. Finding acquaintances who are queer was perceived as the easiest way to establish social contacts and gain a sense of belonging. Experiencing the sense of membership seemed not to depend on having acquaintances as such but on having acquaintances who really understand you and share similar experiences (cf. Cederved, Glasdam, Stjernsward, 2021, p. 14). „When I met my gays, I felt I finally belonged to somebody, that there was somebody there for me; I started going out and spending my free time with them. It is great to find people who understand me and who are like me”. (Person 5)

All interviewees emphasised they tried to surround themselves with understanding and open people. For adolescents, having friends was a manifestation of belonging to a group where they felt accepted and safe. It also provided a sense of being in a relationship when their school counterparts rejected them. The subjects mentioned specific Facebook and Instagram groups (e.g. spotted\_lgbt\_) where one can make acquaintances with people who describe themselves as non-normative. Moreover, they indicated



LGBTQ+ community meeting places in the real urban space. In city where the respondents lived, it is for instance the "chessboard", i.e. stone chess tables in the Park. Many persons with non-normative identification attend various conventions, meaning fantasy, anime, comic and game events/festivals. Four interviewees are cosplayers and use such events for creative expression demonstrated by dressing up as their favourite universe character. The characters often derive from Japanese manga and anime culture.

Social rejection at school had both physical and mental dimensions, manifested by exclusion strategies involving peers' permanently ignoring the requests to use the right pronouns and not to call the person by their old name (i.e. dead name). Even if the colleagues no longer called the teenager by their dead name, they mispronounced the new one. They were mocking, sneering and invented unpleasant rhymes. From the interviewed youths' perspective, some teachers did not notice the schoolmates' excluding behaviour. A lack of teachers' response was interpreted as a silent approval of such actions. Still, supporting teachers were often mentioned in the interviews; they intervened whenever informed about reprehensible behaviour towards a queer student. Only in the case of one out of six persons, all teachers' attitudes were highly negatively evaluated.

„The school guidance counsellor told me during our conversation that teachers could call me by a male name because it was against the school rules. According to the documents, they could only call me by the dead name I hate”. (Person 2)

The interviewee did not find anyone in the whole school to support them. The stories shared by other subjects often mentioned conflicts with teachers. The clashes were caused by the reluctance to call students by their new names or to use the pronouns they identified with. „A teacher told me that over their dead body. I was and will be Ania. That is the name in the school register. And that was it” (Person 2). Some teachers did not respect the subjects' choices in a more or less conscious way, for instance, by saying „Come here, girls” to a transgender boy and his female colleague. An interviewee identifying themselves as gender fluid told about a situation when the teacher divided the class into groups of boys and girls: „When I approached them, he loudly asked which group I was going to join that day” (Person 5). Even though, as our interlocutor emphasises, the question was not offensive, the form of the question was painful, especially because it was asked in front of all students. The most humiliating messages from teachers were those undermining the right to own identity and the consciousness of choice. „Many teachers appear to treat us kind-heartedly, but

it is not serious. I have tantrums hearing that I am young and will get over it. I think this proves they do not understand what it is all about. I am not an error” (Person 6). Such an attitude evokes anger, disappointment and resignation. The interviewees appreciated being called by the right name and pronouns. All six participants indicated in different ways that they felt respected as individuals in such cases. „Teachers in my school accepted my identity and my choice. They included my tutor, English teacher and physics teacher. When they accepted my request to call me by my male name, I burst into tears” (Person 3). Still, they felt rejected when teachers used their dead names, incorrect pronouns or wrongly classified their gender. According to queer theory, language creates our image of reality, our identities and the image of self. Every time the interviewees were not called according to their image of self, their preferred identity was denied. In this context, it is evident that language is an empowering and strengthening instrument. The power between a teacher and student leads to a situation in which the teacher who does not accept their students’ identities can challenge the right to their own identity. The subjects emphasised that some teachers did not use correct names and pronouns or called them in an unsatisfactory way, as a result of a lack of knowledge or understanding rather than mischievousness. The subjects explained teachers’ behaviour as partly resulting from the teachers’ personalities but mainly from a lack of knowledge of transgender and non-binary persons’ issues. All interviewees wish that topics related to gender identities and sexual minorities were discussed more at schools. Only in one teenager’s case the school guidance counsellor proposed an hour discussion about acceptance and tolerance when the student revealed their transgender identification. „She said nobody should point at me, mentioned diversity and equality, but it was more about tolerance, nothing substantive about transgender issues.” (Person 1) „All teachers in our school are said to have completed training in this area and that is why there were no meetings or workshops devoted to the subject matter.” (Person 4)

Despite a small research sample, the collected data set was broad and multi-dimensional. The interviewees’ openness and the will or even compelling need to share their reflections on their secondary school experiences from the perspective of persons who do not identify with the dominant gender and/or sexual orientation norms. The research results cannot be treated as generic or exhaustive for all young transgender and non-binary persons. First and foremost, a group of six does not represent all possible non-normative identities. Secondly, except for two non-binary persons, the research population consisted only of transgender boys (it seems

that there is higher social acceptance for girls who wear male-style outfits and use male pronouns rather than for boys who dress and feel like girls). Thirdly, the research participants were students from secondary schools (no technical or vocational secondary schools were represented). Fourthly, there was no previous research on the functioning conditions of non-normative persons in Polish schools (comp. Piekarski, 2014), so it is hard to say what a representative sample would mean because the number of experiences is unlimited. Globally, similar research has been carried out for many years (com. Journals: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *International Journal of Transgenderism*) in reference to the situation of LGBTQ adolescents in secondary schools and colleges (Madireddy and Madireddy, 2020, pp. 659–667). Surprisingly enough, the results of research carried out among secondary school students did not confirm the phenomenon's scale as negative as shown in UNESCO's report. The report indicated that in the research carried out in Poland between 2010 and 2011 on a population of 11,144 subjects, 48.2% of whom were aged 18-25 years, seven out of ten (69%) young LGPT persons hid their identity in school (Mazurczak, et. all, 2019; UNESCO Report, 2018, pp. 20, 22, 62). In this research, each participant came out in their school environment. In some cases, it happened at school earlier than at home (Makuchowska, 2021, p. 58-62). Furthermore, the report mentions that three out of four (75%) LGBT students testified witnessing homophobic insults at school, while one in four (26%) reported cases of physical abuse. 45.9% stated that boys behaving in a „feminine” and „non-masculine” way fell victim of abuse more often (Mazurczak, et. all, 2019, pp. 20, 22, 62). The interviewees mentioned experiencing verbal abuse (including anonymous cyberbullying) but nobody mentioned physical abuse. The research above did not include transgender girls so it is hard to refer to the last of the quoted statistics. It should be noted that two subjects attended secondary schools listed among the five LGBT-friendly secondary schools, which could have contributed to the status quo. The differences can be assumed to be attributed to the fact that the UNESCO Report applied to the 2010-2011 period. A decade is a milestone for the social and cultural environment. On the one hand, the positive thing is that contemporary teenagers are much more aware of their rights, more knowledgeable of foreign language literature on sexual minorities. They can easily enumerate a dozen or so types of gender identities and sexual orientations. On the other hand, the negative phenomenon is that for the last three years, Poland was ranked in the penultimate position among the European Union countries (scoring 18 out of 100 points) in a report developed by the ILGA Europe organisation on the legislation concerning equal rights of the

LGBTQ persons in Europe (*Tęczowa mapa Europy: Polska stoi w miejscu*. (2018) in: <https://queer.pl/>). Gay pride marches and rainbow parades juxtaposed the aggravating homophobic attitudes in Poland.

## Conclusions

The contemporary school does not follow instant changes in customs and sexuality and consolidates the non-heteronormative discourse. Despite a number of non-fiction publications appearing recently (com. Jacoń, 2021; Skrzydłowska-Kalukin, Sokolińska, 2022). Most adult Poles (including teachers) find the dynamism of changes hard to understand. It is a fear of the unknown and something hard to understand, and hence strange and different, rather than homophobia. One should approach teachers' conservatism and traditionalism with understanding as it applies to something having no adequate language structures in Polish; to somebody who does not fit the existing communication system (how to refer to a non-binary pronoun, should we use a neuter or plural pronoun?). An example of non-binary narration can be found in the recently published book „I Wish You All the Best” (Deaver, 2019) in which the protagonist, who describes himself as it, uses verbs without gender-suggestive endings. No doubt, schools and teachers should always actively counteract any types of abuse, violence and exclusion. Even if school values, as Maria Janion argues, extend the heteronormative world (Janion, for Piekarski, 2014. 204-2012), teachers should be critical towards the norm or at least know how to treat non-normative persons professionally (It is not easy for me to understand, or I do not understand it at all, but I respect and accept it). The interviewees suggested several simple and feasible requests, such as not assuming students' gender identity „a priori”; respecting the pronouns they use; providing the opportunity for individual self-identification beyond the binary notions of a „male” and „female”, removing the gender aspect from the school rules related to clothes, e.g. during proms, and accepting single-sex pairs during proms. It has been happening globally, and the process evolves. Some universities in Poland have identified the need to create space for the non-normative identification of their students. Still, it is hard to predict when we will catch up with other countries in this area, since even the inclusive education concepts, known for a long time, have been challenged and negated by the heads of local education authorities and clerks.

To sum up, it should be emphasised that a paper on research in Swedish lower secondary schools provided inspiration for this article (Cederved, et. all, 2021). The article's findings that LGBTQ teenagers are involved in a network of inclusion and exclusion strategies at school, which often results in

their positioning – by others and themselves – as outsiders (Cederved, et. all, 2021, p. 16) correspond to the referenced research findings. According to the Swedish conclusions, teenagers know how to function in these structures but in the Polish reality, they seem confused, lonely and left on their own, despite teachers' and peers' endeavours. Respect and professionalism, attitudes of tolerance and acceptance of unstoppable changes are the only way towards safe relations in school. Teachers' understanding of students' diversity, their identities, attitudes and values shall be complemented by students understanding of the other side, i.e. teachers who sometimes find it hard to cope with the changing reality. Abuse and discrimination in Polish schools in response to sexual orientation or gender identity is a common or even way too common phenomenon. Statistics of depression among children and youth and the increasing number of adolescent suicides are a testimony to this fact (Makuchowska, 2021). Changes can start at schools but should not apply only to them because the interviewees experienced most of the offensive comments and hostile behaviours from random people outside the school, i.e. in the street, residential district, shop or park.

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