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“One of us” – “different” – “stranger” in educational practice. The school environment in the face of national and religious diversity and the sense of security

**"Swój" - "inny" - "obcy" w praktyce edukacyjnej.
Środowisko szkolne wobec odmienności narodowej i religijnej
a poczucie bezpieczeństwa**

Abstract: The article analyses the functioning of the school environment in terms of perceiving students in the categories of “one of us”, “different”, “stranger”, which is related to their national and religious affiliation, citizenship and foreign civil status. Assigning to a particular category on the “one of us” - “stranger” axis is based on various premises and does not apply to all minority communities to the same extent. Romani people, Muslims and foreigners, especially refugees, are particularly susceptible to being categorized as “strangers” or “different”. Currently, foreign students in Poland constitute 6.71% of the total and their number is constantly increasing. The threat to the sense of security carries a number of negative consequences in terms of education, upbringing and development. Therefore, various initiatives should be undertaken in the school environment to promote mutual cognitivity, diversity understanding and community integration.

Keywords: one of us-different-stranger, students, national and religious minorities, foreigners, refugees, security.

Introduction

Schools are one of the basic elements of the system including not only education, but also upbringing and socialization. In these institutions, the most important information about the surrounding world is acquired, thus preparing young people for fulfilling various social and professional roles in the future. One of the important factors influencing this process are peer relations and attitudes towards national and religious diversity taken by both young people and the teaching staff. This also affects the sense of security, and, consequently, the process of identity formation, the scope of integration, the degree of knowledge acquisition, the scale of values and the perception of participants of the social world within the categories of “one of us”, “different”, “stranger”. This is also a potential source of cultural conflicts. It is therefore important to direct the processes of education, upbringing and socialization in such a way as to shape attitudes that are open to learning about otherness, understanding and showing tolerance towards diversity.

There is a number of premises for categorizing participants of social life into the categories of “one of us”, “different”, “stranger”. The analyses presented in the article take into account such variables as nationality, religion, citizenship, and the civil status of foreigners residing in Poland. During the period of several post-war decades, the Polish society was quite homogeneous. The share of national minorities in the demographic structure of the country was insignificant and was marginalized in public communications. Only in areas of dense minority residence were they noticed in the perspective of folklore or a limited scope of meeting their educational needs (Mironowicz, 2000). The socio-political changes in Poland initiated in 1989 also contributed to opening up to the needs of minorities, recognizing their presence in public discourse and removing administrative restrictions on group activity. This also enabled the development of education in the native language (Bobryk and Kalita, 2015, pp. 74-78). At the same time, the introduction of religious education to schools in 1990 revealed the confessional affiliation of students in educational institutions (Iwański, 1998). Moreover, during this period, the influx of immigrants increased significantly, including refugees from areas affected by armed conflicts and humanitarian crises. Some of them attended or are currently attending various educational institutions, which significantly affects the formation of the educational environment and the sense of security.

In the social space, some of the basic categories of identification are nationality, religion and gender. Andrzej Zajączkowski rightly noted that “There is no chance of conscious self-definition in cultural categories,

of identifying oneself with a certain system of values as long as we are ‘our folks’. Only the presence of a stranger allows us to define ourselves, and this occurs as a result of critical observation of the stranger, perceiving him or her within the categories of our own cultural values, and thus evaluating him, i.e. creating his ethnic stereotype” (Zajączkowski, 1973, p. 283). This is aptly shown by the processes and phenomena taking place in the school environment after the socio-political transformations at the turn of the eighties and nineties. As a consequence of opening borders, migrant communities from the regions geographically distant from Poland and significantly different in appearance, language and cultural practices began to form.

Between concerns and sympathy

In public discourse, especially after the Arab Spring, many concerns regarding the settlement of foreigners in Poland began to emerge, particularly of immigrants from Asian and African countries. The way they were perceived by Polish people was emotionally conditioned and was based on many stereotypes and even fears. The issue of relocating several thousand refugees from other EU countries was particularly opposed to, which was often identified in terms of threats to cultural security (Bobryk, 2017, pp. 46-66). The refugees were mainly identified with Muslims. This religion is not widely known in Poland in terms of the truths of faith it proclaims, but after the attacks on the World Trade Center, the subsequent terrorist acts in Europe as well as the Arab Spring, its followers were increasingly perceived through the prism of threats and concerns regarding the formation of enclaves with their domination (Górska, 2013, p. 188). It should be noted that according to the CBOS (Polish Public Opinion Research Centre) survey of April 2016 concerning attitudes towards other nations, the highest level of antipathy, i.e. 67%, was shown towards Arabs and Romani people. At the same time, sympathy was declared by 8% and 11% of respondents respectively (CBOS, 2016). Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite numerous concerns appearing in the public sphere, the attitude towards these groups in public opinion has slightly improved. According to the study conducted in March 2023 (in 2024 and 2025 Arabs were not included in the survey), 59% of respondents declared dislike for the Arab community (it was the second nation on the scale of dislike). The Roma were third with an indicator of 50%. Positive attitude, on the other hand, was declared by 15% and 16%, respectively. The worst rated nation were the Russians, with 82% of declared aversion and 6% liking (CBOS, 2023). In 2025, the highest levels of dislike were expressed towards Russians - 72% (liking - 8%), Belarusians - 48%

(liking - 20%), Roma - 43% (liking - 18%), Palestinians - 34% (liking - 22%), and Jews - 32% (liking - 26%) (CBOS, 2025). Thus, they were undoubtedly perceived as “strangers”. At the same time, the highest levels of positive attitude were expressed towards Italians - 60% (dislike - 7%), Americans - 58% (dislike - 10%), Spanish people - 55% (dislike - 7%), Czechs - 54% (dislike - 10%), and English people - 50% (dislike - 13%) (CBOS, 2025). These communities were therefore perceived more in terms of “one of us”.

Foreigners in Polish schools

In school year 2023-24, 5.2 million people attended Polish schools (of which 99,326 attended adult education institutions). This constituted 13.8% of the total population (Auksztola et al., 2024, p. 16; GUS (Central Statistical Office of Poland), 2024). According to GUS, in school year 2023-2024, there were 348,393 foreigners among the students (GUS, 2024a), which constituted 6.71% of the total. 161 countries that are currently functioning and 5 countries that no longer exist were indicated as their country of origin. In addition, there were stateless individuals (2) and those with an unspecified country (11). The largest groups of students, consisting of at least 100 people, came from: Ukraine (289,450 - including 188,018 people with a legal stay, which applies to individuals who joined the education system after February 24, 2022), Belarus (29,267), Russia (4,147), Vietnam (2,158), India (1,555), Georgia (1,267), Moldova (945), Kazakhstan (837), Bulgaria (724), China (710), Turkey (676), Armenia (665), Germany (607), South Korea (599), Azerbaijan (503), Great Britain (429), Romania (407), USA (380), Afghanistan (239), Uzbekistan (234), Italy (226), Czech Republic (218), Bangladesh (215), Tajikistan (205), Lithuania (203), Egypt (175), France (155), Spain (150), Pakistan (144), Brazil (141), Slovakia (139), Ireland (136), Hungary (130), Kyrgyzstan (128), Nigeria (118), Nepal (106). It should be noted that many countries are represented by only one or a few students (gov.pl, 2024). The above data were published on December 9, 2024, but according to the estimates for the 2024/2025 school year, the number of foreigners was expected to increase even more significantly. This was a consequence of making the 800 plus and Good Start benefits dependent on the child's education in the Polish education system. As a result, it was estimated that the number of students from Ukraine would increase by 80 thousand (Masłowska, 2024).

According to the data, the largest group of foreigners are Ukrainian citizens, who make up at least 83% (5.6% of all students). The next group is represented by Belarusians - 8.4% (0.6% of all students), and Russians - 1.2% (0.08% of all students). There are about 21 thousand schools in Poland. Students from Ukraine attend over 57% of them. Only 3% of them study in preparatory classes. The rest participate in the education system together

with their Polish peers. At the same time, 60% take advantage of additional free Polish language lessons at school. It was also noticed that in secondary schools many Ukrainian students decide not to continue their education in the next grade. Comparing the data between school years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the highest rate of Ukrainian citizens that dropped out of school was recorded in comprehensive secondary schools. In year 2, there were 19% fewer of them, in year 3 - 29%, and in year 4 - 54% (Chrostowska, 2024). As Jędrzej Witkowski and Elżbieta Świdrowska suggest, this is caused by language problems, tensions in a peer environment, relations with teaching staff, high levels of stress and the influence of individual factors, such as moving to another country. They also state that this is a worrying trend which “carries a high risk of an increasing group of young people being unable to adapt to social life and enter the labour market, both Polish and Ukrainian. Special attention should be paid to this group of students and conditions should be created in order to enable young people to complete secondary school education” (Witkowski and Świdrowska, 2024).

Undoubtedly, the large Ukrainian community of war migrants arouses a significant social interest. It is also the subject of many public policies (Żołędowski, 2025, p. 227). The attitude of public opinion towards them is quite variable, and there is a lack of a coherent strategy in terms of education that would include a broad range of support taking into account both the wide availability of mechanisms improving education and increasing the level of security. A broad spectrum of micropolicies towards Ukrainians as well as different local conditions are being outlined and which can be described as the space between integration and assimilation (Bobryk and Kochan, 2022, pp. 291-304). Many manifestations of both institutional and individual support can be seen in attitudes towards students from Ukraine. However, cases of discrimination, harassment or bullying are also observed in peer relations. This is often intensified by the experiences and tensions connected with the war and the emotions resulting from functioning in a culturally different environment and as well as language barriers. This has a significant impact on safety issues. There is therefore a need for broader psychological support, which is currently considered insufficient. Similarly, there is a shortage of intercultural assistants and support staff. At the same time it should be emphasized that, according to the research conducted by the International Rescue Committee in 2024, among Ukrainian refugees in Poland, 91.6% of respondents declared that they felt safe and very safe, and only 6% of them reported lack of sense of security. However, it should also be noted that they perceived security through the prism of physical threats

(International, 2024 a). At the same time, two problems in the school environment were revealed in terms of security. The first one concerns 23.5% of the surveyed students from Ukraine who declared that they had encountered acts of discrimination from their peers or teachers. The second one concerns the quality of relationships between students and parents, because only 1% of them stated that their children had experienced acts of violence from peers. It was also found that many parents advised their children not to speak Ukrainian at school, which, as it was assumed, would increase the level of their acceptance in the environment and reduce the scope of unfavourable reactions (International, 2024b). Other researchers also pointed to schools as places where conflicts between Polish and Ukrainian children take place (Długosz and Izdebska-Długosz, 2024, pp. 38-39).

The qualitative research conducted by IRC among Ukrainian students confirmed that language differences were the main source of conflicts and, consequently, threats to security. This concerned both the Ukrainian and Russian languages. Deficiencies in the knowledge of Polish shaped the premises for strengthening the sense of otherness and even isolation. This was exacerbated by certain cultural differences or differences in social status. It should be noted that conflicts were observed not only in relations between Poles and Ukrainians, but also among Ukrainians themselves. There were also certain tendencies among young people from Ukraine to establish contacts with Belarusians, as they were culturally closer and did not express critical comments regarding the privileges enjoyed by war refugees. One should also take into account the fact that due to migration, both external and internal (leaving Ukraine, changing the place of residence in Poland or going to other countries), children lost or loosened their previous social ties, which significantly affected their emotional state and increased the sense of loneliness. With the advancement of military operations, the significant and prolonged presence of refugees as well as the unresolved issues in mutual relations, such as the massacre in Volhynia or food imports, there has been a clear decline in the level of acceptance for the Ukrainian community in Poland. Nevertheless, in terms of schools, there are still protective factors which include the noticeable support from the teaching staff and the openness of Polish society (International, 2024c).

Robert Szwed rightly states that “Cognitive classification of an individual as objectively different from us, i.e. separated from social reality on the basis of a specific feature (e.g. skin colour, habits or nationality), implies only the statement of difference, otherness. Only effective engagement makes it possible to attach an assessment to the observed fact or the indicated

feature” (Szwed, 2000-2021, p. 236). Ukrainians are the largest minority community in Polish schools. They differ from Polish students not only in terms of citizenship and nationality, but very often in terms of religion, cultural experience and perception of the historical past regarding the mutual relations of the nations. Despite this, as well as the tensions and disputes that sometimes occur, they are not generally perceived as “strangers”, but are rather categorized as “different”. Someone who is different is accepted and understood to some extent. Nor is he or she negatively assessed. Such a person is perceived differently from our own group, which is based on the search for similarities, closeness or acceptable diversity. Certain conflicts may occur, where the side is not the entire community, but its individual members. This is therefore connected with some threats to security of both the minority and majority groups, but on an individual, not collective level.

“One of us” versus “different” and “stranger”

“Different” is the category between “one of us” and “stranger”. The boundary in this case is quite fluid. It results primarily from the definition of the situation and the emotional attitude. “Different” can easily become “one of us” or a “stranger”. The “stranger” category has a clear boundary. It is not only about the lack of sense of loyalty towards them. First of all, there is a negative attitude towards them, disregard, conviction of superiority in a certain sense, and there may appear a fear of a potential threat to security. The feeling of hostility defines the boundary between “one of us” and “stranger” particularly strongly. Strangers can be a source of many fears. They can be based on factual premises (an attempt to take over some resources), potential (premises that indicate the possibility of taking unfavourable actions), resulting from lack of knowledge or stereotypes (a wrong interpretation of the situation based on fragmentary and questionable premises) or postulated (the enemy as the cause of group mobilisation or justification for actions undertaken).

One of the examples of perceiving foreigners in schools as “strangers” was, among others, the survey sent out by the Education Board to schools in the Silesian Voivodeship in 2016, which was supposed to examine the situation of foreign students and children of returnees. One of the questions concerned the “negative aspects of the presence of a foreign student at school”. It was a closed question, without the possibility of choosing the answer “does not apply” or a similar one. It contained the following options: “occurrence of conflicts”, “lowering exam results”, “fear and aversion to strangers”, “exclusion” (Warchala, 2016). In 2015, in a school in Białystok, during a physics lesson, a teacher dictated the following task: “4 refugees from Syria are trying

to sail to Greece on a raft whose dimensions are 1m/2m/20cm and 800kg/m³. Calculate how many refugees need to be pushed off the raft to be able to reach their destination if each of them weighs 60 kg?” This was met with a decisive attitude of parents who, informed by their children, considered it as an inappropriate way of education which could shape indifference to dramatic experiences and potentially form racist attitudes (Klimowicz, 2015).

The attitude towards Polish citizens belonging to various minority groups could also be classified in terms of the “strangers” category many times. This was especially true for the Roma minority. Studies conducted among young people after the social transformations in Poland showed a tendency for a high rate of unfavourable attitudes towards Roma people, which was a consequence of perceiving them as “strangers” (Smolik-Wyczalkowska, 2009). This type of attitude was often reinforced by the behaviour of parents. For example, in 2013, in one of the primary schools in Poznan, parents did not allow for the implementation of a project aimed at creating a Roma class in this institution (Anannikova, 2013). The Roma community has various problems connected with fulfilling the educational obligation, absences from classes, finishing a given type of school and continuing education in a higher institution. This intensifies the process of stigmatization of this community. In order to prevent this, various government projects have been implemented since 2001, which are currently carried out as part of the “Programme of Social and Civic Integration of the Roma Community in Poland for 2021-2030”. Local actions have also been taken in this field, such as in Ziebice in 1998, when teachers and priests carried out a joint campaign in schools and churches aimed at reconciling and expressing mutual kindness between Poles and Roma people (PAP, 1998).

Undoubtedly, the presence of foreigners and also, to some extent, representatives of national and religious minorities who are Polish citizens, is not only an element of cultural contact, but is often a state that can be described as ‘culture shock’. This may in turn cause fear, frustration, and need for protective mechanisms, one of the elements of which is sharpening the boundaries of belonging to a group through the division “one of us” – “stranger”, where the aspect of “different” also appears. These may be both actual and imaginary states; resulting from oversensitive assessment and correlating with the actual state to a varying extent. For example, Daniel Votienko from High School No 7 in Torun recalled the beginnings of his education in Poland in 2020: “I thought someone would eventually kill me because I was supposedly a ‘Banderite’, a ‘terrorist’ or someone else. But I survived the whole year thanks to the support of my parents, teachers and

new friends, with whom I still stick together.” He described the conditions of education in Poland as “shock” compared to his previous Ukrainian experiences. This meant a much more partnership-oriented and open approach of educators to the teaching process in Poland (Votienko, 2020).

According to the NIK (Supreme Audit Office) report of 12 December 2023, the increased number of foreigners in Polish schools due to the influx of thousands of students from Ukraine “did not negatively affect the teaching and educational processes carried out at school”. Nevertheless, cases of certain problems connected with the language barrier and cultural differences were observed. It was found that the source of irritation was also the application of milder criteria in assessments of foreigners, which was conditioned by the assessment individualization as a consequence of problems related to adaptation, among others. It was also noticed that the implementation of integration programs brought positive effects, especially under the public task “Supporting educational initiatives in a multicultural school environment”. It was indicated that in 2022 the number of foreigners in Polish schools almost doubled, which was associated with many challenges (NIK, 2023). In this context, it is worth paying attention to the pyramid of needs of students with refugee experience, and this is the largest group of foreigners in Polish schools. Researchers indicate that the most important thing for them is safety, followed by relationships with peers, language communication, education, and finally grades (Żmijewska, 2022, p. 103).

Students from Ukraine are surrounded by a broad system of support, which also facilitates their integration and perception through the prism of otherness towards familiarity. At the same time, it has been noticed that problems with adaptation, and, therefore, a risk of higher probability of being classified as “stranger”, are typical of smaller groups of students, especially from more culturally diverse regions. This also applies to the citizens of bordering countries, such as Russia and Belarus, being a consequence of the war in Ukraine. They are often identified with the politics of their countries, which not only affects their comfort and the attitude to them as “strangers”, but can also threaten their security when postulates for applying collective responsibility become widespread. Negative attitudes and even discrimination can also be caused by religious differences. This particularly concerns Muslims, especially if this is emphasized by their traditional clothing (as well as a different way of dressing in PE lessons), or by the expectation that meals in the canteen should be adapted to their religious requirements. This reveals not “otherness”, but “strangeness” (Warchala-Kopeć and Furtak, 2024). In this context, there were various reports about Chechen students.

These are citizens of Russia, mainly of Muslim faith. It was observed with concern that children often played war, fought with their peers, and boys carried knives as a symbol of adulthood. Their behaviour during Ramadan, when they often spat, also caused strong emotions. This was perceived as an expression of contempt or lack of good manners, without realizing that it resulted from religious restrictions requiring not to swallow saliva during this period (Warchala, 2016). Many conflicts with this community were quite violent, which caused wider security concerns (Wójtowicz, 2007; Suchecka, Brzezińska, 2015). It should be noted that a number of differences between students, which are related to religious practices, are revealed in the school environment. They may concern, for instance, a different liturgical calendar (Orthodox Christians) or restrictions on medical care and products consumed (Jehovah's Witnesses). This contributes to categorization as "strangers." It was observed that students repeat the same stereotypes about "strangers" which are popularized in the media, and insults directed at peers, including those born in Poland, include "refugee" or "immigrant" (Suchecka, 2015; Karpieszuk, 2016).

Conclusion

Without a doubt, an important element of organizing the social world is perceiving other members of the community within the categories of "one of us", "different", "stranger". This is particularly expressed in the emotional sphere and is significantly related to the perspective of security. Therefore, it is not only about the lack of threats or a guarantee of physical survival. These must be conditions that ensure the satisfaction of a number of social needs. Thus, the sense of security, containing a considerable impact of the subjective component, is the effect of perceiving and assessing the surrounding reality together with a forecast of further conditions for the functioning of an individual or group (Cieślarczyk and Wiśniewski, 2011, pp. 14-15). We are afraid of what we do not know. Therefore, fear, aversion or hostility towards "strangers" often appear, not only as different from us, but also as those who may take over some values or create another threat. Robert Szwed rightly states that "strangeness" as a negative feature is not the cause, but rather a correlate of the social situation in which it appears. "Strangers" to each other are not [always] people of different nationality, religion or race. Potentially "strange" can be what stands behind these groups: different interests, goals that are divergent from ours, a worldview that interferes with our system of meanings which, by reducing the sense of security, may trigger defensive actions in response" (Szwed, 2000-2001, p. 236).

In the case of an increase in the influx of immigrants, a number of threats to cultural security may appear. On the one hand, these are the consequences of the host society's concerns about the weakening of its previous dominant position. On the other hand, this is a feeling of a lower social position of the immigrant population resulting from otherness, cultural differences, more limited financial possibilities, a higher probability of encountering discriminatory behaviour, difficulties with integration or assimilation expectations directed towards them (Jagiello-Szostak, Sienko and Szyszlak, 2018, pp. 33-37).

School is an important place for socializing and learning about the world. If the environment in which one functions is perceived within the category “one of us”, a higher level of security is felt, which results from the belief in the loyalty and solidarity of other participants. An essential element of this is to recognize and identify oneself with the dominant values, communication styles, ways of behaving, and be satisfied with the prevailing customs and traditions. This means acceptance of similarity despite existing objective differences. There is also a number of security threats in schools. They are often related to environmental conditions. Especially if there are sharp disputes on the line “one of us” – “stranger”. Their consequences can be physical, psychological, or intellectual. They can manifest themselves in various types of health problems, phobias, social isolation, higher absence from school, lower academic results, interruption or termination of education. Teaching staff can contribute to limiting the negative effects through proper diagnosis, undertaking preventive measures and counteracting. This involves enabling peers to get to know each other better, understanding the conditions of functioning of specific communities, focusing on accepting differences, and limiting the impact of stereotypes. The challenge of the future is a significant change in the national and religious structure of students, which is a consequence of the development of migration processes. At present, schools are no longer homogeneous, where representatives of other nationalities, foreigners, or followers of different religions were noticed rather sporadically. There is a clear trend towards multiculturalism in the school environment. This requires significant changes in the teaching and educational process which would also take into consideration the issue of security.

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