

# Teachers' and pupils' perspectives on homosexuality and LGBT: A comparative analysis across European countries

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## Abstract

This article aims to analyze students' and teachers' perspectives on LGBT topics using data from 2021 gathered through questionnaires issued in eight European countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, Poland, Hungary, and Greece. This article differs from earlier literature by including the effect of parental influences on students' perspectives, as well as by analyzing issues related to transgender individuals. For this purpose, ordinal linear regression and a mediation analysis are used. Furthermore, by taking data collected in 2017, this paper examines to what extent cross-country differences prevail and how the situation has changed over time. On the one hand, the results for 2021 suggest significant differences between countries, with the Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Poland, tending to be less inclusive and accepting towards LGBT communities than Western European countries, such as Belgium or Germany. The results indicate that parental acceptance plays a significant role in shaping these views. On the other hand, the comparative analysis points out that, although Eastern European countries are currently lagging behind, their attitudes have become more open over time. The latter stands in contrast to many of the Western European nations studied, which are regressing in terms of equal treatment of homosexuals and transgender people.

## Keywords

Erasmus, comparative study, homosexuality, pupil level, secondary education, teacher level

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## 1 Introduction

Last year, the European commission launched the new Erasmus+ programme from 2021 to 2027.

This programme continues with initiatives and actions of the earlier umbrella programmes Socrates and Socrates II (1996–1999 and 2000–2006); Lifelong Learning (2007–2013) and Erasmus+ (2014–2020). In more than 25 years of strategic cooperation, the European Commission funded a lot of projects in the field of education, to make the European dimension in education visible and touchable for all generations, but especially for children and young people across the European continent.

Beside digital transformation, sustainability, the environment and the fight against climate change, participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement, inclusion became an important pillar in European projects and became one of the priorities of the European Union. “European Union [...] programmes should provide opportunities that are accessible for all. However, some people cannot benefit equally from these opportunities because they face various barriers. Inclusion of people facing access barriers or having fewer opportunities in education, training and youth work is a key objective of several policy initiatives” (European Commission, 2021, p. 6).

Therefore the Erasmus+ programme “seeks to promote equal opportunities and access, inclusion, diversity and fairness across all its actions” and asks potential applicants to design their projects and activities with an inclusive approach to make “them accessible to a diverse range of participants” (European Commission, 2022, p. 7).

In this article we address inclusion by presenting and discussing the results of different studies from strategic partnerships running between 2011 and 2014 (Education and Gender – ‘EDGE’), between 2016 and 2019 (Homo’poly) and between 2020 and 2023 (All Inc!). EDGE was a multilateral Comenius project (within the Lifelong Learning programme) that started in autumn 2011 and finished at the end of 2014. With this project the partner institutions designed a curriculum for gender-sensitive education, which easily can be integrated in teacher training institutions across Europe. The core pillars of the curriculum are gender & identity; gender & sexuality, gender & interculturality and gender & lifestyle. In this project 12 institutions from 12 countries across Europe collaborated (Holz & Shelton, 2013).

From 2016 to 2019, most of the partner institutions from the EDGE project took part in the strategic partnership “Homo’poly”. Homo’poly aimed to contribute towards a better understanding of homosexuality in secondary and tertiary education. Taking a cross-sectoral approach, the project was active in Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Poland and Turkey, working closely with a participating university and secondary school in each. Homo’poly targeted students and lecturers at teach-

ing colleges and universities, teachers in secondary education, and students at secondary schools.

The project aimed to help establish an intercultural dialogue on gender equality, with the aim of strengthening acceptance and a better understanding of homosexuality. Each of the participating countries had its own set of approaches towards gender-specific education and upbringing, as well as distinct attitudes towards tolerance, diversity, and homosexuality. By offering and integrating their traditions and experiences, the partner countries shaped a diverse set of products and activities. That way the partners developed a set of resources, a learning platform, teaching modules for higher education and didactical materials for secondary schools (De Witte et al., 2018).

In 2020 the partners started with a new LGBT+ project called All Inc! Building LGBT+ friendly schools across Europe. All Inc! promotes inclusive education by bringing together pupils, (trainee) teachers and the wider school community to build LGBT+ friendly schools. The project is active in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom. In each country, a university and secondary school will partner with pupils to co-create visions for LGBT+ friendly schools and supporting “tools for schools”. A virtual “human library” will be built to share LGBT+ stories with the wider school community, and with young people across Europe (De Witte et al., 2022).

In all these projects a questionnaire was distributed to pupils and teachers in all participating countries. Based on the fact that many of the asked questions are the same in both questionnaires, a comparison of the results from (2012,) 2017 and from 2022 will be part of this analysis. The following chapters will introduce the approach, findings and conclusions of these studies.

Over the past few decades, the world has witnessed a large increase in advocacy and debate around the issue of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights (Michelson, 2019). As of 2022, marriage between homosexuals has been legalized in 30 countries, mostly in Europe and America, with the latest country to join being Switzerland as of July 2022. Of the countries that support same-sex marriage, 56% are in Europe. In addition, 13 other European nations have legalized civil unions or other forms of more limited recognition for same-sex couples (Statista, 2021).

Various research papers agree that attitudes towards homosexuality are improving over time (Altmeyer, 2001; Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Halman & Van Ingen, 2015; Smith, Son & Kim, 2014). In a report conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013, LGBT adults claim to feel more accepted by society now than in the past (Pew Research Center, 2013). Nevertheless, without denying the progress made so far, homonegativity remains a problem in Western societies (De Witte, Iterbeke, & Holz, 2019). Despite all the laws introduced in recent years granting family rights to homosexuals, negative attitudes towards

them prevail among different groups of society, even in countries that have fully legalized same-sex unions (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2022). Several papers address discrimination against homosexuals and how individual characteristics shape views and attitudes toward homosexuality. Overall, the evidence suggests that age (Treas, 2002), gender (De Witte, Iterbeke, & Holz, 2019), religion (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015; Sherkat, et al., 2011), education (Irwin & Thompson, 1978; Kolozsli, 2010; Ohlander, Batalova & Treas, 2005), moral values (Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis & Van Der Slik, 2002), country (Geunis & Holz, 2020; Mazrekaj, De Witte & Cabus, 2020) and others factors affect individuals' perspectives regarding these issues.

While the vast majority of the literature has focused on homosexuality, limited research has been done regarding transgender issues. In particular, insufficient attention has been paid to understanding how trans people come to experience marginalization and how it differs from that experienced by homosexuals in different countries and educational frameworks. Therefore, this study adds to the existing literature by not only examining the situation of homosexual individuals in schools, but also that of transgender and how this varies across different European nations. Additionally, this paper explores how attitudes are changing over time and what influence parents have on their children's attitudes toward LGBT communities.

Most European countries today grant transgender people the right to change their first name, and the majority of them also offer the possibility to change birth certificates recognizing the new gender status (European Commission, 2020). In addition, many European countries recognize the right of transgender persons to marry according to their post-operative sex (European Parliament, 2010). Some nations have gone further and allowed the right to marry to be gender-blind. However, trans people are still among the most marginalized groups in today's society (Bauer et al., 2009). Most of the work done consistently indicates that trans people experience difficulties in their daily lives (Bradford et al., 2013; Haas et al., 2010; Kenagy, 2005). For instance, transgender people face extensive discrimination in health care, employment and housing (Stotzer, 2009). Other types of discrimination have been studied based on the race, color and ethnicity of the transgender person (Erich et al., 2010). A Survey of LGBT Americans (Pew Research Center, 2013) reports that when it comes to community approval, gay and bisexual people feel that there is a high level of social acceptance of them. However, 80 % of transgender respondents state there is little or no support and tolerance for their group. The degree of harassment faced by transgender people in society has a significant impact with suicide rates for transgender individuals varying between 30 % and 50 % depending on the nation (Virupaksha, Muralidhar & Ramakrishna, 2016).

In addition to the relatively large body of literature focusing on LGBT individuals in a general setting, there exists a much smaller body of literature that concentrates on examining this issue particularly in an educational context. Evidence suggests that sexual

minority youths (SMYs) continue to suffer from multiple levels of discrimination and marginalization within the school system (Kosciw, Diaz & Greytak, 2008). The 2011 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2012) shows that many LGBT students would rather avoid attending classes or miss entire days of school than face a hostile school climate. A reason for this is, for instance, the fact that homosexual students are more often excluded among younger students. This is due to the latter being less willing to remain friends and attend school with gay and lesbian peers than students in higher grades (Hoover & Fischbein, 1999; Horn, 2006; Poteat, Espelage & Koenig, 2009). Also, male students appear to be more reluctant to remain friends with homosexual peers than girls, for fear of being perceived as homosexual by other heterosexual male peers (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Poteat, 2007). The situation of transgender people is similar. In fact, transgender youth may not necessarily benefit from interventions aimed to support Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) youth (McGuire et al., 2010). Indeed, harassment toward them has been reported to be at higher levels than the one targeting other sexual minorities. This does not only include peers but also school staff (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2005; Kosciw et al., 2005). The investigation of Sausa (2005) provides evidence that transgender students suffer harassment by teachers, such as being trained to "act like their birth gender" and being blamed for the harassment because their behavior is labeled by teachers as "not normal". Further research supports these results with complaints from transgender pupils about gestures (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006) and being mocked by the teachers at school (Grossman et al., 2009). On the same note, in a study of bullying in schools in the United Kingdom, 30 % of lesbian and gay pupils stated that adults were at fault for homophobic events in their schools. While 60 % felt that there was no adult with whom to discuss their homosexuality (Hunt & Nelson, 2007).

Another major influence in most young people's lives, apart from school, is their parents. A small body of literature covers the effects of parents on their children's perspective regarding LGBT topics. For example, evidence shows that families that have a strong emphasis on traditional values are less likely to be accepting of sexual minorities than non-traditional families (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Nevertheless, the literature on family support is sparse even when research has shown that LGBT adults (Cochran, Sullivan & Mays, 2003; D'Augelli, 2002; Hatzenbuehler, 2009) and youth homosexuals (Lebson, 2002; Russell & Joyner, 2001) are at greater risk of having their physical and emotional health compromised. Nayak and Kehily (1997) attempt to explain why young boys have stronger tendencies to engage in homophobic behaviors. Their findings indicate that strict adherence to the traditional male gender role is associated with strong homophobic tendencies resulting in the fear or rejection of homosexual individuals. A number of studies have associated these traditional stereotypes and prejudices (Whitley, 2001; Witt, 1997) as attitudes and behaviors that are often first learned at home and are later reinforced by the youth's peers, school experience, and media viewing. The strongest influence on the development of gender roles appearing to be the family environment

(Witt, 1997). Related studies support these findings, and have provided evidence that if parents are not accepting of sexual minorities, or consider gender variations as “deviant,” it is very difficult for their children not to internalize these value systems during their development (Kaufman, 2008).

Using data from a survey conducted in 2021, this study aims to fill the gaps identified in the literature on the situation of homosexuals and transgender people in different countries, all within an educational framework. In addition, exploiting data collected in 2017, this paper attempts to explain how opinions regarding these issues have changed over time. Finally, this paper seeks to understand how parents influence their children’s views on LGBT issues. For the latter, mediation analysis is conducted using Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Jonker & Verwaart, 2008). These dimensions are used to distinguish the different countries considered in the present paper, and help to compare the cultural differences between them. Therefore, this paper will open the door to future research in this field, by contributing to the examination of the following research questions: (1) *To what extent do differences prevail between European countries in the teachers’ and pupils’ perspectives on homosexuality and transgender as of 2021?*, (2) *How do the perspectives across countries regarding homosexuality change over time?* Thereafter, the final question that will be investigated using OLS and the mediation analysis is: (3) *Does parental acceptance of homosexuality influence pupils’ perceptions of LGBT issues?* It can be said that the contribution of this paper to the existing body of academic research in the context of LGBT issues in education will be threefold.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows, first a closer look will be taken at the current social and political standing of LGBT communities in the different nations of study. Hereafter, the data collection and methodology will be elaborated upon. Finally, the results of both the OLS as well as the mediation analysis will be portrayed and discussed.

## 2 Setting and institutional framework

Since this study will take into consideration eight different European countries, this section will take a closer look at their respective current opinion and political environment surrounding the LGBT community. Although steps have been taken in many European countries to adequately include these minorities, significant national differences remain not only in terms of legislation, but also in terms of their position within society.

The Netherlands has been known for defending the rights of LGBT people since 1946. It is therefore not surprising that the Netherlands is one of the most progressive countries in this regard (ILGA-Europe, 2022). The Dutch government invests significantly in research, policies and projects aimed to combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (COC Nederland, 2014). From the implementation of anti-discrimination laws in employment in 1994, to the legalization of marriage in

2001, as well as the creation of anti-discrimination laws covering sexual characteristics in 2019 (Equaldex, 2021), The Netherlands has continuously demonstrated its commitment to the pursuit of equality for LGBT people. In 2019, a survey by Pew Research Center reveals that 92 % of Dutch citizens agree with homosexuality being accepted by society (Pew Research Center, 2019). However, although the Netherlands is known for its liberal and accepting culture, some research calls this into question. Some studies indicate that the Dutch are less progressive than the pro-gay cultural identity with which they are generally associated (Buijs, Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011; Keuzenkamp, 2010; Keuzenkamp et al., 2006; Van der Klein et al., 2009). On the same line, in the educational context, a study conducted by the Dutch social and cultural planning office in 2020 reports that lesbians, gays and bisexuals experienced an increase in discrimination in schools from 13 % in 2013, to 25 % in 2018 (Planbureau, 2020).

Belgium is considered a fairly liberal nation when it comes to LGBT concerns and views. Same-sex couples obtained the right to get married in 2003 as well as the right to adopt children in 2006 (Passani & Debicki, 2016). As a matter of fact, Belgium was ranked number two in terms of protection of LGBT rights by ILGA-Europe in 2021 (ILGA-Europe, 2022). Moreover, Belgium is known for the diversity of its government, as several members are openly part of the LGBT community. For example, one of the ministers of education at the regional level who identifies as gay (Di Rupo), and the current national minister of the Civil Service who identifies as a transgender woman (Petra De Sutter). In the educational context, sexual education in Belgium is endorsed by law, however, the responsibility for its implementation lies in the hands of the regional administrations. Nevertheless, the legal equalities and perceived tolerance within the population do not imply that LGB people are fully embraced in Belgian society. Schools in the Flanders region of Belgium remain highly heteronormative (Cox et al., 2010; Dewaele et al., 2009; Pelleriaux, 2003), and homophobic behaviors are still very prevalent among Belgian teenagers, despite the numerous legal reforms that have been carried out to fight discrimination towards homosexuals (Hooghe, 2011).

Germany was one of the last countries in Western Europe to legalize gay marriage in 2017 despite the fact that 88 % of German respondents were partially or fully in favor of same-sex marriage months before the bill was passed by the senate (Küpper et al., 2017). Since then, on May 2020, Germany became the second nation in Europe after Malta to introduce a national ban on conversion therapy for minors. Nevertheless, homonegativity remains a problem in German society. The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) reported that 44 % of LGBT respondents in Germany were victims of discrimination during 2019 due to their sexual identity or orientation, higher than the EU average of 42 %. Furthermore, in relation to the educational context, a 2017 national study conducted by the German Parliament revealed that suicide attempts by LGBT youths in Germany was still six times higher than for heterosexual youths (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017). Können (2018) indicates that the acceptance of homosexuality in the educational system

in Germany is largely influenced by regional governments, with Christian conservative lead regions being more likely to use wording such as “abnormal behavior” to describe homosexuality in schools. More left-leaning governments, such as the social democrats, would in turn use a more neutral phraseology such as “sexual minority” in their educational program. Nowadays, homosexuality is still not part of regular school material in Germany in many places, however, views in the population have shifted and 75 % of all citizens are in favor of teaching pupils about sexual diversity, while only 6 % oppose this notion (Könne, 2018).

In recent years, Spain has experienced major changes in the field of gender and sexual rights of LGBT individuals. Many of them as a result of legislative developments, such as the introduction of same-sex marriage legalization in 2005 (Enguix, 2017). One of the country’s latest advances in LGBT rights is the expansion of free in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment for LGBT individuals approved in 2021. Nonetheless, traces of discrimination are still latent in certain regions and among certain groups of society (Calvo & Trujillo, 2011). Regarding sexual education in Spain, a study conducted by Martínez, Vicario-Molina, González and Ilabaca in 2014 indicate that teachers show favourable views towards sex education, but that 43.3 % are not formed on this subject, while 48.6 % do not teach it at school (Martínez et al., 2014). Other research indicates that the greatest barriers to the implementation of sex education in the school curriculum in Spain are: the failure to incorporate sex education as a transversal subject, the insufficient monitoring, lack of commitment to the matter in many schools, and finally, the lack of appropriate preparation of teachers on these issues (Martínez et al., 2012).

While the United Kingdom has made legislative strides towards a more inclusive environment for LGBT individuals with acts such as the Civil Partnership Act in 2004 and the Equality Act in 2010, there are still considerable hurdles in the acceptance of homo- and bisexual individuals by wider society. The 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey shows that only 68 % of respondents believe that same-sex relationships were “not wrong at all” and just about 49 % of participants considered prejudice against transgender people to be “always wrong” (National Center for Social Research, 2018). Especially in the context of schools, a large amount of LGBT youth still experience significant amounts of bullying and homo- and transphobia. A study conducted by Stonewall (2017) found that nearly half of LGBT students had experienced bullying ranging from verbal abuse (42 %) to being isolated (24 %), and even death threats or sexual assault (4 %). This behavior differs depending on regions, with pupils in the South-East of England experiencing the lowest amount of harassment (36 % experience bullying at school) and the Midlands (51 %) and Wales (54 %) the highest (Stonewall, 2017).

Regarding Greece, in 2009 surveys conducted across Europe indicated that Greek public opinion was the most negative among all European countries with respect to same-sex couple rights. Sexual orientation seemed to be the most prevalent reason for discrimi-



nation in the country (Pavlou, 2009). However, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights in Greece have evolved significantly in recent years, establishing itself as one of the most liberal countries in Southern Europe. Some of the laws that have been passed since 2009 have been: the prohibition of hate speech based on sexual orientation/gender identity and sexual characteristics in 2014, legal/recognized same-sex civil unions since 2015, sex education in schools covering sexual orientation and gender identity in 2017, and the inclusion of gender-neutral names on birth certificates in 2018 among others (Equaldex, 2021). Nevertheless, according to the report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance on Greece (ECRI, 2015), discrimination against homosexuals in schools remains an issue. A survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) shows that 25% of respondents felt discriminated by school personnel on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Further research shows that the four predictors of attitudes toward homosexuals at the educational level in Greece are gender, religiosity, political inclination, and socialization with a non-heterosexual (Papadaki, 2016).

In Hungary, homosexual activity was decriminalized in 1961 and same-sex couples have been allowed to register partnerships since 2009. Nevertheless, a survey by Pew Research Center shows that in 2019, only 49% of respondents agree with the statement "Should society accept homosexuality?" (Pew Research Center, 2019). In the last two years, laws regarding LGBT topics have been tightened in Hungary. On 2020 the Hungarian parliament filed a bill to modify the definition of sex, to match the sex at birth, making it impossible for transgender individuals to change their legal gender (Equaldex, 2021). Further, in June 2021, a new law regarding LGBT censorship came into force prohibiting the sharing of content about homosexuality or gender reassignment to children under the age of 18 whether in school education programs, films or advertisements. In addition, changes to the Hungarian Constitution altered the definition of family, thereby excluding transgender and other LGBT people, by defining the basis of the family as "the mother is a woman and the father is a man" (France24, 2021).

Whilst many of the countries mentioned above have taken steps to improve the legal and social standing of homosexuals and transgender, Poland has been somewhat stagnant when it comes to their inclusion, while still portraying high levels of homophobia (Mole et al., 2021). Several authors point towards the new government instrumentalizing LGBTQ communities to push forth national pride and identity by otherising and stigmatizing homosexuals and transgender people (Mole et al., 2021; Törnquist-Plewa & Malmgren, 2007). Attacks on gay parades and general aversion towards the LGBTQ community highlight this aversion amongst the population (Mole et al., 2021). In the educational system, it has been difficult to quantify the exact amount and types of problems LGBTQ students face in Poland's schools, as a report by Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii (2012) explains. The authors argue that this is due to the fact that many teachers did not want to acknowledge the existence of homosexual students and therefore, also failed to identify

when violence or bullying occurred because of a student's sexual orientation. However, the report also indicates that few of the students surveyed answered that they would be willing to openly proclaim themselves as homosexuals (12.6%). Meanwhile, 44% stated that they only told their closest friends about their sexual orientation, implying that there is still significant pressure from the outside on LGBT pupils to hide their sexual orientation. The reason for this becomes clear when looking at individual examples as examined by Gawlicz and Starnawski (2013), who encountered sentiments such as homosexuality being a disease when asking students about their teacher opinion on the subject.

From the results it becomes salient that there is a large divide between Eastern and Western European countries, as portrayed by the question whether LGBT should have the same rights as heterosexual people. While in the western European nations close 90% agree with this sentiment, in Poland and Hungary only under half of the participants favored equal rights. Similar numbers can be observed in the two following questions, with same sex marriages seeming to be the most controversial as it has the overall lowest agreement. Furthermore, Poland and Hungary are also below the average European Union acceptance scores for all three questions by a significant margin. In column 4 it is further possible to observe how with time the stance towards homosexual marriage has changed. All countries except Hungary have increased in acceptance towards same sex marriage, with Poland and Germany experiencing the most significant rise. These results are not surprising considering the history of the countries with respect to LGBT issues, and the way homosexuals and transgender people are treated in each of these respective nations.

### **3 Data collection and descriptive statistics**

For this study, data was collected through surveys conducted in eight European countries. Each country had a questionnaire in its own language. There were two different forms, one addressing teachers and another directed to students within each school that was surveyed. The 2021 survey resulted in 3272 pupil respondents and 449 teacher respondents. While this yields a large enough sample for the pupil population to conduct reliable regression analysis, the number of teachers in any given nation can be considered low, especially in Belgium and Hungary where less than 30 teacher's answers were recorded. Therefore, for this last group, the power of the regressions may be weak.

The questionnaire in the above-mentioned year is combined with a wave of surveys conducted in a similar manner in 2017, in which more teachers were questioned, resulting in a more representative sample. Similar information was collected in both waves, which allows to conduct an intertemporal analysis. For this purpose, the results were limited to questions that were asked identically in both surveys. Whereas for the 2021 analysis only, the questionnaire included new questions on transgender issues. Thus, allowing for expanded knowledge and research in this area.

## 4 Methodology

In order to examine the initially stated research questions concerning the national and temporal differences as well as the parents influence, a two part analysis was conducted. In the first part, the results obtained from the 2021 surveys for students and teachers are examined. In the second part, taking into account a survey conducted in 2017 allows for a close inspection on how the perspectives have changed over time for students and teachers for all questions that are identical between the two years.

### 4.1 Student and pupil level analysis

#### 4.1.1 Pupil's Analysis

For the student analysis of 2021, eight model specifications are developed. The resulting eight dependent variables serve as indicators on the general sentiments of pupils towards LGBT individuals. Model one called "*Equality Homo*" measures the extent to which respondents think homosexuals should be treated equal to heterosexuals in society and consists of 5 different questions; "*Homosexuality is natural*", "*People should perceive homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality*", "*Homosexual people should have the same rights as heterosexuals*", "*Homosexuals should have the right to get married*" and "*Homosexuals should have the right to adopt children*". Models two ("*Comfohomo*") and three ("*Comfohete*") aim to understand how comfortable students are with observing homosexual and heterosexual behavior in public. Hence, it is comprised of the questions; "*I don't have any problem at all if 2 boys/girls are kissing/holding hands in public*" and "*I don't have any problem at all with a women/men kissing/holding hand in public*". Model four ("*EqualityTrans*") measures the attitudes towards transgender people. This model examines questions to evaluate the extent to which students agree with societal acceptance of transgender individuals. Therefore, four questions are taken into account; "*Transgender individuals should be allowed to be who they are*", "*Transgender individuals should have the same rights as heterosexuals*", "*Transgender individuals should have the right to get married*" and "*Transgender individuals should have the right to adopt children*". Model five ("*Aboutsex*") is the mean score of the questions "*I received reliable sex education at school*", "*I think it is important to learn about sex at school*", "*I can talk openly about sex and relationships with my parents*", "*I know a lot about different kinds of relationships between girls and boys*", "*I agree with the statement that most teenagers are sexually active*", and "*Trust between partners is important*", and has as its objective to study how open students are regarding sex topics. Models six ("*ComoOutasHomo*") and seven ("*ComoOutasTrans*") measure how scared students are to come out as homosexual or transgender respectively. Finally, Model eight ("*SpeakFree*") measures how worried students would be to speak freely about sexuality. In order to study each model, linear regressions are run to estimate the relationship between several independent variables and the respective model serving as the dependent variable.

These eight models serve as dependent variables measuring participant's attitude towards LGBT topics with the independent variables being kept the same through all eight regressions. Consistent with previous literature pointing to the fact that individual characteristics play a fundamental role in views and opinions about homosexuality (De Witte, Iterbeke & Holz, 2019; Donaldson et al., 2017; Steffens & Wagner, 2004; Van den Akker et al., 2013), the independent variables gender, country, location, sexuality, age group, and parental acceptance are added to each of the regressions. These variables are considered most suitable for this analysis as they provide a large amount of information regarding an individual's potential predisposition towards LGBT communities by covering upbringing and cultural background, through the variables region, country and parental acceptance. Gender and sexuality have been shown to impact opinions on LGBT individuals by research such as De Witte, Iterbeke and Holz (2019). Age group will further aid in understanding how students in different age cohorts view homosexuals and transgender as their exposure to the topic might increase with the years. In addition, standard errors are clustered by country and a "neutral" question is added about the degree of openness of the individual. The former captures peer effects, while the latter captures individual heterogeneity. As a "neutral" question on openness, the question "I think it is important to learn about homosexuality at school" is used. The importance of the neutral question stems from the fact that it also serves to control for acquiescence bias (De Witte, Iterbeke & Holz, 2019). That is, the propensity of respondents to agree with the research statements, without the action being a true reflection of their own position (Watson, 1992). These biases may compromise comparisons of attitudes between population groups (Baron-Epel et al., 2010) and therefore, the relevance of controlling especially given the age of this group. This gives rise to the following formulation:

Where  $\beta_0$  indicates the constant and  $\beta_{1-7}$  the coefficients of the respective independent variable. Finally,  $\varepsilon_i$  constitutes the standard errors, which are clustered on a country level.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{gender}_i + \beta_2 \text{country}_i + \beta_3 \text{location}_i + \beta_4 \text{sexuality}_i + \beta_5 \text{age}_i + \beta_6 \text{parents}_i + \beta_7 \text{control}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

#### 4.1.2 Teacher's Analysis

In a similar fashion, the teacher analysis of the 2021 sample is conducted. Once again, eight different models are created. The resulting eight dependent variables serve as indicators of teachers' general feelings toward LGBT subjects. Models one (*"Equality Homo"*) and two (*"ComfoHomo"*) are the same as for the pupil's analysis. As mentioned in the last section, the former measures to which respondents think homosexuals should be treated equal to heterosexuals, while the latter measures how comfortable individuals feel with heterosexual affection in public. Model three (*"Inclusion"*) seeks to explain to which degree teachers' welcome homosexuality in their classrooms and at school. The mean for model three is composed by 5 questions: *"If one of my students were gay/lesbian, I would support him/her"*, *"If there were gay/lesbian students in my class, I would use different approaches"*, *"If there were gay/lesbian students in my class, I would use different examples during class"*, *"If one of my colleagues were gay/lesbian, I would support him/her"* and *"If one of my colleagues were gay/lesbian, I would try to convince my other colleagues at school that this is not an issue."* Furthermore, Model four (*"Privacy"*) aims to assess the extent to which teachers share information about a student's/colleague's sexuality. For this, the mean score of the questions: *"If one of my students were gay/lesbian, I would inform the director of the school"*, *"If one of my students were gay/lesbian, I would inform his/her parents"*, *"If one of my colleagues were gay/lesbian, I would inform the director of the school"*, *"If one of my colleagues were gay/lesbian, I would inform my colleagues of the school"*, *"If one of my colleagues were gay/lesbian, I would tell students"*, and finally, *"If one of my colleagues were gay/lesbian, I would avoid any contact with him/her."* Furthermore, Model five (*"Improvement"*) explores if teachers perceived any changes regarding homosexuality in the last years, by including the questions: *"In my opinion, the general atmosphere towards homosexuality in my country is improving"* and *"In my opinion, the law has been improving towards homosexuality during the last 10 years"*. Model six (*"Trans positive"*) measures the attitudes of teachers towards transgender. For this, the mean score of *"Transgender people should be allowed to be who they are"*, *"Transgender people should have the right to adopt children"*, *"I would have no problem with my best friend coming out as transgender"* are taken into account. Finally, Model 7 (*"Trans negative"*) studies if teachers believe that transgender is an illness, while Model 8 (*"Bullying"*) studies if teachers would intervene in case of bullying by considering the question *"If there is bullying against gay/lesbian pupils I wouldn't interfere"*. The independent variables are once again not changed throughout the eight regressions, while the dependent variables consist of the aforementioned models. The independent variables are once again: gender, country, level of education, type of school, location, sexuality and age group. A similar reasoning as applied to students also applies for the same variables when looking at teachers. However, age might play a more significant role in this subsample, as generational differences in attitude are expected to be large. In addition, given the age group, an acquiescence bias is not generally expected. However, to ensure that the responses accurately reflect the teacher's opinion in trans-

gender issues, given that transgender seems to be less accepted by society (Eurobarometer, 2019a), the neutral question “Homosexuality is a natural thing” is added to models (6) and (7). In addition, standard errors are clustered by country for all models. The linear regression is set as:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{gender}_i + \beta_2 \text{country}_i + \beta_3 \text{location}_i + \beta_4 \text{sexuality}_i + \beta_5 \text{age}_i + \beta_6 \text{schooltype}_i + \beta_7 \text{location}_i + \beta_8 \text{control}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where  $\beta_0$  indicates the constant and  $\beta_0$  shows the coefficients of the respective independent variable. Finally,  $\varepsilon_i$  once more constitutes the standard errors, which are clustered on a country level.

## 4.2 Intertemporal Analysis

Further, the intertemporal analysis will be conducted in order to answer the second research question on how the perspectives on LGBT have changed over time in the different nations. For the intertemporal analysis, the only models to consider are those that remained the same, thus containing the exact identical questions between 2017 and 2021 questionnaires. This implies that in the case of the intertemporal analysis for students it is possible to use only models one, two, four and five. While in the case of teachers, only models one to five can be compared. The models for students and teachers are still the same as those described in Part I respectively, with the difference being that a dummy variable “year” is added to all regressions to measure year fixed effects. In addition, an interaction variable for the year and country effect is explored, enabling a further examination of how sentiments have changed throughout time in the different countries. The results’ standard errors are clustered by country. Once more, an OLS regression is used, described by the formula below for pupils and teachers:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \sum \beta_i X_i + \text{DummyYear}_i * \text{Country}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where  $\beta_0$  indicates the constant and  $\beta_i$  are the respective coefficient for the teachers and students and  $X_i$  denotes the models for both teachers and students. Further,  $\text{DummyYear}_i * \text{Country}_i$  contains the interaction between the Year dummy and the country variable. Finally, once more constitutes the standard errors, which are clustered on a country level.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Pupil level analysis

First, we examine the perspective on homosexuality in the 2021 pupil level analysis. Table 4a (see Appendix) shows that for the first 4 models, girls have a significant positive coefficient. *Ceteris paribus* if in the regression the gender is changed from boy to girl, i. e., for model (1), an increase of 0.271 would be observed on the final score of homosexual's equality. This implies that girls in our sample are in greater agreement with equal rights for homosexuals and transgender, and are more comfortable observing affection between heterosexual and homosexual individuals in public.

Furthermore, the variable country indicates that Belgian respondents have a higher degree of tolerance regarding homosexual rights (Model 1) but the case is not the same for transexual rights (Model 4). In this aspect, respondents in Spain, Germany, The Netherlands and Poland portray more positive attitudes than respondents in Belgium. Further, Greece has a significant negative coefficient for all four models, and the UK for the first three models, showing less tolerance on the part of these two countries regarding LGBT issues. In terms of sexuality, homosexuals and bisexuals agree more strongly with equal rights for homosexuals than heterosexuals, and, at the same time, are more comfortable observing the affection of same-sex couples. Individuals who do not know their sexuality show higher scores in all 4 dimensions when compared to heterosexuals. Finally, it is observed that when the variable "My parents would accept me if I were homosexual" is included in the model, the higher parental agreement leads to a significantly higher level of agreement and tolerance on the part of the students regarding LGBT issues for all four models.

Table 4b also contains 4 different models. The first column measures the level of openness and knowledge with respect to sexual topics. Columns 2 and 3 measure students' fear of coming out as homosexual and transgender respectively, and column 4 indicates how concerned they are about speaking freely when it comes to their sexuality.

No significant differences were found between girls and boys across models 5 to 8. Nevertheless, the differences between countries are surprising. Respondent students in all countries (included in each model respectively) are less concerned about coming out as gay or transgender, and speak freely about their sexuality than in Belgium, which was used as the base. Concerning sexuality, people who do not know or prefer not to mention their sexuality have significantly lower scores in knowledge and interest of sexual topics when compared to heterosexuals. In addition, students under the age of 15 are significantly less likely to come out as transgender and to speak freely about these issues than those older than 15. Lastly, it is noted that when the variable "My parents would accept me if I were homosexual" is included in the models, greater parental agreement implies greater knowl-

edge of sex and openness to these issues, less concern about disclosing their sexuality, and greater freedom to talk about sex. This is observed in the coefficients of the variable high parental acceptance, in which it can be observed that *ceteris paribus* i. e., for model (7), when passing from no parental acceptance to the highest parental acceptance described by level 6, the final score in afraid to “come out as a transgender” is reduced by 0.947.

## 5.2 *Teachers level analysis*

Moving from Pupils to *Teachers Level*, column one of Table 5a indicates the degree of agreement with respect to equal rights for homosexuals. The results point out that there are significant differences between women and men, with the respondent women agreeing more to equal rights than their male counterparts. This is also true with regard to openness towards homosexual students and co-workers.

When looking at the country variable, using Belgium as the base level, one can observe that respondent teachers in the Netherlands are more in agreement with homosexual rights than respondents in Belgium, while Greece, Poland and Hungary are less tolerant. The largest negative effect is observed in Greece with Poland and Hungary having smaller negative coefficients. Greece also seems to be the country with the highest rejection of public affection among homosexuals and one of the countries with the lowest inclusion of teachers towards LGBT students. With respect to the level of education, it can be observed that teachers who have a master’s degree are more accepting of seeing homosexual affection in public. Also, teachers between 30–39 years of age tend to modify their teaching style to include LGBT pupils while older teachers show no significant coefficient for inclusion.

Similar to Table 4a, Table 5b shows that significant differences exist between males and females. It seems that the latter perceive less progress in LGBT matters and also, have more positive tendencies with respect to transgender students. At the same time, less progress is perceived in Hungary with a coefficient of -1.910 and Poland with -1.380 significant at the 1 % level, in comparison to Belgium.

It can also be observed that teachers in Poland are less willing to interfere in case of bullying, with a significant coefficient of 1.489 at the 1 % level. This means when altering between the base of Belgium and Poland, teachers in Poland have a final score 1,489 higher in this measure of not reporting. Further, teachers in the age cohort from 40–49 years seem to perceive significantly less improvement in LGBT matters than their younger counterparts. Polish, Hungarian and German teachers score significantly higher when it comes to the perception of transgender as an illness when compared to the base of Belgium. Additionally, teachers at professional schools are more likely to view transgender as an illness and express a significantly less perspective towards trans individuals.



### **5.3 Comparison 2017–2021 – Pupil level**

Moving into the intertemporal analysis for Pupils Table 6a shows how the results have changed with time. With the first independent variable being a year dummy set to 1 for the year 2021 and with 2017 as baseline. The year dummy shows that overall, there has been a significant positive effect of time on all four dependent variables. Hence, this implies that in these four years, perspectives have improved on the equal treatment of homosexuals; people are more comfortable with observing homosexual affection in public, and are both more open to talk about LGBT topics as well as feeling more comfortable to come out as homosexual.

However, this effect is not the same across different countries as seen by the interaction between the country and year variable. Poland and Hungary both a significant positive interaction for the first two columns, while for all other the interaction has a significant negative effect. Hence, in Poland and Hungary there is both an increase in the acceptance of equality and a reduction in the consideration of same-sex couples in public as problematic. For the third and fourth column the effects are less clear, while Poland and the Netherlands show a significant positive coefficient regarding their openness to talk about sex matters, there is no significant effect for Hungary and further, there is a negative effect for Germany and the UK. Finally, column four has a significant negative coefficient for the interaction variable across all countries, pointing towards less fear of coming out as homosexual.

### **5.4 Comparison 2017–2021 – Teacher level**

When conducting a similar temporal cross-section for teachers, the results in Table 6b show similar trends. On the same note as to Table 6a, we can observe that the interaction term for year and country in columns 1 and 2 are positive only for Poland and Hungary.

On the contrary, by looking at model 1 one can observe that Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom has negative coefficients on the interaction term which implies that since 2017 there has been a decline in concern about LGBT issues.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the current and past perspectives of teachers and students across Europe on LGBT topics. To do so, this paper adds to the literature by pointing out the current situation of sexual minorities in the school systems of several European countries, a topic that has not been widely covered. In addition, it also highlights that the parents' perspective on LGBT issues plays an important role in shaping children's views. Furthermore, by taking panel data collected in 2017, it was possible to show that opinions of Western European countries regarding the equal treatment of homosexuals and transgenders are regressing. These issues are of great importance, as they highlight the general trend in many developed nations to slowly return to more traditional values. This is portrayed, for instance, by the laws against sex education in Florida with the "Do not say gay" ban.

First, the differences between European countries in their teachers' and pupils' perspectives on homosexuality and transgender as of 2021 were examined. When looking at the findings, there are several conclusions that can be reached. When comparing the different nations considered by this study, there were stark differences in the 2021 attitudes towards LGBT people. Most pronounced is the divide between Western European countries, such as Spain, Germany and the Netherlands, which have high scores for acceptance and equal treatment of homosexuals and transsexuals, and Eastern European countries, which show a trend toward more conservative values. Mole (2016) states that the European Union has been one of the driving forces in equal rights movements for LGBT people in the Western world. This goes in tandem with the much later entry into the Union by Poland and Hungary in 2004 and could explain the differences in attitudes.

Moreover, Mole (2016) points to the fact that, in former members of the Soviet Union, the struggle for national identity is still ongoing, whereas the Western European nations considered in this study have a longer history of governance under democracy and independent statehood. In addition, a study by Nagoshi et al. (2008) showed that there exists a clear connection between transphobia, right-wing authoritarianism, and religious fundamentalism. Hence, Polish and Hungarian attitudes can be partially explained by their more religiously influenced right-wing political system. In a similar note, Sloomackers (2019) argues that nationalism is a system of competing masculinity, and often uses homophobia as a means to hold up existing gender hierarchies. This connection between the concept of traditional masculinity and homosexuality was also part of this study, and could be clearly observed when looking at the scores for the female dummy in teacher and student samples. In both cases females seemed to be significantly more likely to accept equal rights for homosexuals and transgender, as well as being more comfortable with open portrayals of homosexuality in public. This is underlined by Nagoshi et al. (2008), who show that men score significantly higher on both homo- and transphobia, in line to what this present study found.

Second, the impact of parental acceptance on pupils' perceptions of LGBT issues was explored. When analyzing the responses on students' perceptions of homosexuality and transsexuality, it was observed that parental acceptance was a strong predictor of the results. More accepting parents positively influence their child's openness to coming out as homosexual or transgender, as well as increasing the child's likelihood to have a more favorable opinion on questions of equal rights and comfortableness with homosexuals in public. This was further underlined by the results of the mediation analysis which pointed towards a significant parental influence. Academic literature on the topic of parents influences on their children's attitude to LGBT communities is sparse, making this an important finding and opening up new avenues of study on origins of homo- and transphobic behavior.

As a third research question, the intertemporal component 2017–2021 of the study provides insight into the progress of inclusion of LGBT individuals in each respective nation. Importantly, the geographical divide portrayed in earlier models can be found once more but showing the reverse picture when studied over time. Compared to the 2017 survey, it became salient that the Western European countries seemed to regress on issues of equal treatment with significant negative interaction variables in many cases. Meanwhile, Poland and Hungary showed progress in the categories of equal treatment of LGBT people, as well as the level of comfortableness with seeing them in public. An explanation for this could be an overall higher level of exposure to the topic through membership in the European Union, and a slow subsiding of national struggle and search for national identity in both nations. On the other hand, homosexuality has become a more tangible topic for most people through the greater inclusion of homosexual and transgender individuals in media (Garretson, 2015). Further, it seems that a contributing factor is the generational divide in opinions, as younger people tend to be more accepting of LGBT people. Thus, over time, homophobic sentiments seem to fade from society (Garretson, 2015). Additionally, Garretson and Ayoub (2016) showed that an increase in acceptance for homosexuals globally had been spearheaded by larger opportunities for homosexual individuals to represent their views in public.

Whilst these explanations can be used to clarify the shift in attitudes in Poland and Hungary, a more difficult question arises to what made the Western European participants regress in their acceptance towards LGBT individuals. An explanation for this could be the fact that the aforementioned dynamics of inclusion in the media, and the increased public presence of homosexuals' exposure, has already reached a certain threshold after which its effects become marginal. While this could lead to a stagnation in attitudes, the negative coefficient of the interaction variable cannot be clarified by this. Hence, a further examination of this effect is necessary. One factor that may have contributed to these results, and which could explain this tendency to some degree is the COVID-19 pandemic, as many students are influenced in their attitudes towards LGBT people by sexual education in their respective schools. With a large number of classes moving online and a general

tightening of educational schedules, this influence could have weakened or even subsided giving way to more homonegative attitudes.

This is closely associated with parent's influence, which, as this study was able to show, has a large impact on children's opinions. Since parents' attitudes influence children's views on LGBT matters, it is possible that schools previously pushed pupils towards a more open point of view, while parents acted in the opposite direction. Hence, a subsiding of the school's influence would lead to children learning homophobic attitudes at home, in turn explaining regressing views in LGBT equality issues in the western European nations. The importance of the parental influence was further underlined by the mediation analysis, confirming that indeed a parent's attitude is partly determining their children's views on the issue of homosexuals and transgender. For all models, partial or complete mediations were observed across all 6 dimensions and 8 models.

The results reported in this study have the potential to open up several branches of future research. First, given the results, it can be said that there seems to be a clear connection when it comes to acceptance of homosexuality between on the one hand, the Eastern and Western European countries and on the other hand, male and female participants. Hence, there seems to be a salient connection between the concept of masculinity and the acceptance of LGBT individuals. Countries and individuals more in tune with a traditional concept of masculinity seem to be less likely to accept sexual minorities, while simultaneously being less in favor of equal rights. This result gives way to further research into the link between concepts of masculinity and national identity with openness towards LGBT individuals.

Additionally, this study made clear that parents' attitudes matter significantly when it comes to their children's views on sexual minorities. These results give room to future studies examining how large the parental influence on children's opinions regarding trans- and homosexual individuals is when compared to the impact school lessons have. Moreover, the parental influence is a largely new discovery made by this study and should be looked into more closely especially under the addition of the cultural, political and religious background of the parents. This could generate insightful perspectives of what drives parent's and children's opinions on LGBT communities. Hereafter, it would also be of interest to investigate whether these beliefs are persistent or if they can be changed in later stages of life.

Finally, it was shown, that in recent times there seems to be a negative trend in the perceived and actual treatment of homosexuals and transgender in countries that had previously scored higher on these metrics. As stated, this also opens avenues for several potential research topics on why this turn around occurs and how it may be connected to schooling and education. Furthermore, there is the option to choose broader samples including schools with students from different social backgrounds.

When looking at ways to improve the standing and situation of LGBT individuals in European societies, there are two possible angles that this paper identified. First, schools were shown to still be problematic environments prone to harassment of LGBT pupils. To counteract this, steps should be taken to educate not only students but also teachers on sexual diversity and gender issues. Since for instance in Poland teachers were shown to be unlikely to interfere in bullying of LGBT pupils. The second discovery this paper made is that the role of parents is impactful in shaping their children's viewpoint on these issues. Hence, the aim should be to increase parent's awareness. However, this might be rather difficult to implement as the mediation analysis showed that much of parental acceptance was steered by the general cultural environment of the nation they inhabited. Nevertheless, it could be useful to offer educational programs on the issues of LGBT students to parents at their children's school to alleviate some of existing negative sentiments. Furthermore, and most importantly, sex education highlighting diversity should play a more prominent role in the curriculum of European schools, given that today's children are tomorrow's parents. Since the results of this study pointed out that a certain level of acceptance is passed on from parents to children, by educating children about LGBT issues today, we can create future generations that are more accepting of sexual minorities.

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## Appendix

All statistics belonging to this article are available at:

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