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Education for transgression¹: Narratives of “barrier-free” individuals on family and school determinants of exceeding one’s own limitations

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Abstract

Research objectives and problem: The aim of this article is to analyze determinants related to family and school that foster exceeding one’s own limitations (transgression) in the narratives of “barrier-free” individuals. The research question is formulated as follows: Which factors that contribute to readiness for transgressive action and are associated with the family and educational environment emerge in autobiographical reconstructions? The analysis identifies conditions that are conducive to transgression. Reflection on these factors may support the educational process and, through biography-based learning, be used in formative practice.

Research methods: Empirically, the article draws on the authors’ qualitative study of people with disabilities who were finalists or laureates of the nationwide competition called “Person Without Barriers.” The study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm using the biographical method and procedures of grounded theory.

Process of argumentation: Amid multiple contemporary crises, young people increasingly face isolation, loss of trust, diminished sense of meaning, and difficulties in setting life goals. The incidence of mood disorders, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior among children and

¹ Although the English term “transgression” generally carries a negative moral connotation, in Polish-language research on psychotransgresjonizm, the concept refers to positive acts of exceeding or transcending one’s own limitations.

adolescents is rising. This results in the need for effective forms of educational support. One possible form of action is education grounded in the life stories of "barrier-free" individuals. Theoretically, the article refers to psychotransgressionism and the notion of *homo transgressivus*, which were developed by the Polish psychologist Józef Koźielecki.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The analysis indicates that family and school conditions are crucial for the development of transgressive action. The identified family factors were acceptance, granting age-appropriate autonomy and decision-making, cultivating a belief in one's capabilities rather than focusing on deficits, fostering resourcefulness, and building optimism. School-related factors included treating the student as a subject/agent, setting demanding expectations, and simultaneously adopting individualized and flexible responses to the student's needs and abilities.

Conclusions and recommendations: The narratives of "barrier-free" individuals show that the identified features of the family and school environment support transgression. This knowledge should be disseminated among parents and teachers/educators, as a particular approach to upbringing can create opportunities for young people to move beyond various constraints and to formulate and attain ambitious life goals.

Introduction

Contemporary social and educational reality is marked by a deepening, multidimensional crisis: growing existential insecurity, axiological breakdown, and eroding trust in the institutions of education, state, religion, and even the family. We are witnessing global climatic, military, humanitarian, and (in consequence) migration crises. These phenomena particularly affect young people, who increasingly experience loneliness, alienation, loss of meaning, and difficulty in setting a satisfying direction for their personal development (CBOS, 2023). The recent SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and remote schooling further exacerbated these problems (Poleszak & Pyżalski, 2020; Pyżalski, 2021). Epidemiological data indicate rising diagnoses of mental health problems among children and adolescents, including anxiety, self-harm, depression, and other psychiatric disorders (CBOS, 2023).

At the same time, the formative roles of the family and school are weakening. There are deficits in parents' emotional presence and a decline

in the authority of teachers and other significant adults. Many young people enter adulthood without stable role models that would support the development of their subjectivity and agency.

In response, new models of education are needed: approaches that do not focus solely on adapting to existing conditions, but enable individuals to shape their lives actively and creatively. One such model is "education for transgression," inspired by Józef Koźielecki's psychology of transgression (2007). In this perspective, education supports individuals in surpassing their own limitations and continuously redefining their own identity, i.e., continuously "being in the process" of *becoming* and constructing the meaning of their life under uncertain and changing conditions.

In this context, the biographical narratives of "barrier-free" people—i.e., individuals with disabilities who, despite objectively significant constraints, have achieved transgression in their own lives—can be particularly valuable. They can serve as constructive role models for adolescents seeking meaning and valuable axiological guidance. Education based on such biographies not only challenges stereotypes, but also cultivates a reflective approach to one's own identity, strengthens one's sense of agency, and develops one's existential competencies.

Transgression as a psycho-pedagogical category

The notion of transgression (from the Latin *transgression*, to cross or pass beyond) has gained prominence in the social sciences—psychology and pedagogy in particular—where it refers to overcoming one's own limitations. This concept has been most fully developed by Józef Koźielecki (1983), who defines transgression as "the intentional going beyond what one has and who one is" (p. 505). Transgressive actions are creative and innovative; they stand in contrast to homeostasis-oriented, conservative behavior and are driven by the heterostatic motivation of growth and development.

Koźielecki (1987, 2001) distinguished four principal forms of transgression, constituting a "four-dimensional space":

- towards things – material and territorial expansion, often ambivalent in axiological terms
- towards people – social actions, including help and community-building, but also dominance and power
- towards symbols – intellectual and artistic activity that redefines cognitive structures and creates new cultural products
- towards the self – self-transgression, associated with self-development, self-creation, and strengthening one's own efficacy.

Transgression appears as a requirement of authentic humanity, an indicator of mental health, and a condition for development and life satisfaction (Szewczyk, 2014). In this context, Kozielecki (1996) asserted that "the human species will be transgressive, or it will not be at all" (p. 12), which should constitute a kind of imperative for contemporary society.

Building on the work of Kozielecki and other authors (Nosal, 2006; Obuchowski, 1993; Studenski, 2006; Tański, 2015; Zimbardo & Boyd, 2009), *homo transgressivus* can be characterized as *multidimensional man* with the following attributes:

- striving to exceed personal limitations, in both everyday coping and exceptional achievements
- an internal locus of control and mental independence grounded in a subject-centered value standard
- the agency to actively shape his world rather than merely be susceptible to influence
- the intentionality to consciously formulate and pursue goals
- self-knowledge, particularly from liminal situations
- the courage and strength of spirit to enable risk-taking and persistence in achieving goals
- hope and "sail heuristic," a mechanism that supports belief in one's success
- the temporal anticipation and orientation to foresee the future and use time constructively.

Metaphorically, *homo transgressivus* is the “hero of his own life path” and is characterized by perseverance, the courage to take risks, responsibility for his choices, and a belief in the meaning of his own effort (Tokarska, 2010).

In this context, *education for transgression* becomes a key challenge. One form of such education is biography-based learning from individuals who have undertaken transgressive acts—especially people with disabilities who, due to their determination and activeness, transcend personal and social barriers.

Methods

This qualitative study follows the interpretive paradigm, which focuses on understanding the subjective meaning that individuals attribute to their own experiences. We employed the biographical method (Urbanik-Zajac, 2011; Włodarek & Ziolkowski, 1990), which allowed us to analyze identity processes in a dynamic, processual, and social perspective.

The empirical material was comprised of narratives of people with disabilities who made significant achievements in life. They were finalists and laureates of the nationwide competition called “Person Without Barriers.”² These people were identified as transgressive individuals who surpass limitations stemming from their own physical condition as well as sociocultural barriers.

In total, 25 individual narrative interviews were collected and analyzed (Rokuszewska-Pawełek, 2006). The interviews were partly conducted in the “life story” format of Dan P. McAdams (2001) and partly as narrative interviews with elements of a “comprehending conversation”

² The competition was initiated in 2003 by the magazine Integracja [Integration]. Its aim is to challenge stereotypes about disability, promote pro-social attitudes, and demonstrate that physical, sensory, or mental limitations do not have to constitute obstacles to the pursuit of meaningful life goals. In addition to their significant personal achievements, the winners of the competition are also actively involved in work for the benefit of others.

(Kaufmann, 2010), based on Fritz Schütze's procedure (Konecki, 2000; Schütze, 1997). The first-hand narrative material was supplemented with analyses of existing data (Angrosino, 2010; Bednarowska, 2015), including articles (in print and online), documentaries, and radio programs. This article presents a small excerpt of a larger body of studies and analyses.³

The aim of this work is to outline the family- and school-related conditions that facilitate one's transgression. The research question was, "Which factors that contribute to readiness for transgressive action and are linked to the family and school environments can be identified in the autobiographical reconstructions of 'barrier-free people?'" The data was collected and analyzed according to the methodology of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009; Konecki, 2000). The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of social research ethics. All participants provided informed consent and were fully informed about the aims of the project and the use of the data being collected. Anonymity was ensured throughout the research process, and a communicative validation procedure was applied to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Family and school determinants of transgression

The analysis of the narrative material collected during the study indicates that interpersonal relationships, starting from the earliest years of childhood, are of fundamental importance for developing a readiness for transgressive action. It is precisely the quality and character of these interactions—with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers—that constitute the foundation of an individual's identity, influence their position within the social structure, and determine their sense of agency.

The family, as the primary educational environment, plays a crucial role in the process of shaping the child's personality, particularly when

³ A comprehensive analysis – whose main objective was the processual (re)construction of the conditions, mechanisms, and outcomes in the process of transcending limitations and becoming a "person without barriers" – has been presented elsewhere (Cierpiałowska, 2019).

an additional factor is present, e.g., a disability. In such cases, there is a considerable risk of overprotectiveness, understood as a parental attitude characterized by the desire to protect the child at the expense of their autonomy. Such an attitude may effectively hinder the development of independence and a sense of competence. However, in the narratives of the respondents, these situations were rare.

One of the clearest manifestations of supportive parental attitudes identified in the study was encouraging the child's independence. As a deaf and blind man—a father, husband, NGO leader, and professionally active individual—recalled, "My parents involved me in various activities as much as possible; my mother wasn't afraid to let me, say, grind meat in a mincer, knead dough, or clean something. Of course, she tried to be cautious, warning me that something might be sharp [...], but, at the same time, she didn't take everything out of my hands because 'you'll hurt yourself,' 'you'll fall,' or something." Another narrator—a woman who lost her hands in childhood, a Paralympic medalist, mother, and socially active professional supporting others—emphasized the importance of fully participating in family life, including everyday household chores. As she recounted: "And that was really how it was in our home: if we planted potatoes, then we all planted potatoes [...]. My parents didn't make me plant them at all; on the contrary, they often said, 'Kasia, step aside, it's uncomfortable for you.' But of course, I fought and stubbornly insisted that I wanted to. I wanted to do things like everyone else, so I was always part of it." Her narrative also clearly highlights the psychological aspect related to identity and the desire to be part of the family.

Some memories might be interpreted from an external perspective as signs of the parents' emotional distance, but in the long term turn out to be effective educational strategies, serving to eliminate demanding attitudes and to strengthen independence. The woman who lost both arms as a child recalled life in a farming family as crucial for developing her everyday coping skills. "My parents ran a farm, and that largely determined the absence or presence of what might be called protectiveness or overprotectiveness. They simply had no time for it [...]. I remember an incident when I was hungry and, of course, irritated. I wanted my mother to slice

me some bread. She said that the piglets wouldn't understand if she told them to wait, so she first had to feed the piglets and only later would she come and slice the bread for me." The child, confronted with the reality of farm life, did not hold a privileged position and had to adjust to the rhythm of the day imposed by adult responsibilities.

In these narratives, another important component of the family environment was clearly articulated: the conviction developed by the parents that a disability does not mean lesser worth or a need to abandon aspirations. The respondents' accounts suggest that it was thanks to their parents that they were able to internalize an image of themselves as competent and fully valuable people. One narrator recalled that "in childhood, I felt a great sense of security and my parents always told me, 'you can do anything.' And that gave me a strong foundation."

Memories of intuitive, ahead-of-their-time parenting practices, which are now part of standard therapeutic work, are also significant. The deaf and blind man recalls his childhood, in which his father—despite having no formal training—acted as a therapist at home. "When I was losing my hearing and couldn't see, my dad would put me on his lap and describe films to me, or, in other words, he would provide audio description, as it is called today [...]. He constantly stimulated my hearing and my ability to understand [...] so I was constantly bombarded with speech and encouraged to develop my speech."

The value of emotional support and full acceptance is particularly visible in the reflection of a woman with a physical disability, who is now professionally and socially active: "I was accepted. I didn't feel different. I simply wasn't afraid to reach out to people. To go and fight for myself. To live normally. Finishing elementary school and going to high school, and then going to university was obvious for me. There weren't any inhibitions like, 'What's the point? I don't have arms, maybe I won't manage,' or something like that."

The narratives also consistently highlight parental modelling of positive attitudes, where parents' beliefs, optimism, and agency became a natural source of learning. A woman with a physical disability, who is engaged in helping others, explained: "Well, maybe I inherited most [traits]

from my mother, because she was like that. She took everyone in, smiled at everyone, and helped everyone. I think she embodied the idea that you simply need to act, to help, to do things... And that has stayed with me—I get involved in various matters."

Significant emotional and existential support was also provided by the fathers of most respondents: "My dad... well, thanks to my father, I didn't give up. I mean, you have to fight. Not give in. Not worry. He always supported me. That was incredible."

In the narratives of "barrier-free" individuals, particular importance was attributed to parental attitudes which, despite the passage of time, remained relevant and worthy of emulation. It is striking that although those parents raised their children decades ago, they demonstrated an approach that today would be described as very consistent with developmental and emancipatory pedagogy. Instead of focusing solely on the medical aspects and the search for "miraculous healing," they focused on preparing their child for life. As one narrator recalls, "my parents also focused on preparing me for life, not on curing me at all costs [...]. They considered it more important to prepare me for life."

The collected accounts portray the parents as educators whose attitudes—often spontaneous and intuitive—were of fundamental importance for building their children's identities as independent people. The parents created an environment in which disability did not signify exclusion or dependency, but could serve as a framework for self-definition and activity.

Sibling relationships also played a crucial role in building psychological resilience and agency. They often emphasized normalization and mutual support, creating a safe developmental space that fostered emotional and social competences. As one respondent said, "my siblings were always my best friends. They always treated me normally, showed me a normal world when I was studying at the educational center. We always helped and supported each other."

Parental influence continues to be important through adolescence. Parents then encourage their children to spread their wings. "What was always striking was that my strengths were emphasized, not my weaknesses, right?! Not what I couldn't achieve, but what I could do. My dad always

told me that I can swim, that I can drive a car, that I can do lots of great things. And he always stressed that."

In summary, the narratives of "barrier-free" individuals show that the family environment—through acceptance, support for independence, a conviction about their capabilities, modelling by example, and close relationships—played a key role in forming transgressive attitudes. Such upbringing did not focus on deficits, but on possibilities and preparation for independent living, providing a basis for the development of an independent, resilient identity capable of exceeding personal and social limitations. The analysis of the narratives of "barrier-free" individuals also identified a range of school-related factors that played an important role in fostering their readiness for transgressive actions. These conditions concern both teachers' and educators' attitudes, as well as specific institutional arrangements.

One of the fundamental factors conducive to transgression was treating the student as a subject and setting high expectations, while simultaneously recognizing, understanding, and accommodating their individual needs. An example of such an approach can be found in the account of a blind man with an additional disability: "In high school, there was an English teacher who was the only one who had learned Braille, and therefore I had to study English properly; he personally checked all my written work. And the result was that I chose English as one of the subjects for my graduation exam. I knew it well, which was very useful in my computer science studies."

Another significant aspect that emerges from the respondents' narratives was being treated at school "without special leniency" while also benefiting from teachers' flexibility and conditions conducive to effective learning. One example of such an approach comes from a deaf-blind man: "For her [the Polish teacher], learning was what mattered [...]. I knew I had to try, that I never knew the day or hour when she would give us a test [...] but, as I say, she approached things very flexibly [...], so outcomes were valued over rigid rules."

Although attending special institutions meant separation and longing, they often provided an educational environment that fostered

responsibility, resourcefulness, and social competences. One example is the account of a narrator recalling the peer-care system: "When I was in Laski,⁴ there was a system (later abandoned) that each younger class had a caretaker class... it was terribly annoying... But it taught responsibility, and I think it taught me a kind of community-oriented approach."

These recollections also illustrate the value of intercultural activities and language education, which were carried out with the help of English-speaking volunteers. As one former student—a woman blind from birth, a traveler, writer, and an activist for people with disabilities—recounted, "one of our educators in the boarding house encouraged and made sure that volunteers from the UK came to our afternoon classes [...]. When I started high school, it turned out that I was the best in the class at English, which strengthened my position from the very beginning."

For those who were educated in special institutions, the community based on shared biographical experiences was of particular significance. In the recollection of one woman, a person with a physical disability and the founder of an NGO providing assistance to those in need worldwide: "In fact, I wasn't really alone. I missed my family, but we were together, right? I grew up among people who had similar problems—we all underwent surgeries, we all had to attend exercises, after exercises we had to do homework, go to school... We had to help each other." These diverse educational experiences—both formal and informal—were a key element of an environment that supported transgression and self-fulfillment despite disability.

To a large extent, a positive outlook on the world and, above all, self-acceptance, was the result of the respondents' upbringing. Even when the situation was not easy, objectively speaking, they generally focused on the positive. Teachers often played a significant role in shaping such attitudes.

I owe this to my educators in those institutions; they were wonderful people [...]. They also instilled in us strength of character, courage,

⁴ Laski is a locality near Warsaw that is home to a boarding school for blind children and adolescents.

responsibility. And above all, we were raised in a way that fostered self-acceptance. Because I have what I have, right? And, of course, I could have cried my whole life, and people could have pitied me and said, "Oh, poor Janina, so unfortunate, crippled, in pain, with problems." But really, what kind of life would that be?

Teachers' personalities and worldviews shaped transgressive attitudes as much as their educational methods. "There were people in Laski, including our choir director, who strongly emphasized that one had to be good in some field, even better than sighted people, in order to manage in life." Strengthening ambition and self-discipline often resulted in lasting character traits: "In high school I had a religion teacher, already deceased, who stressed the need to be ambitious and demanding of oneself, even if others are not demanding of you. That probably contributed to my perseverance and determination being formed."

The research participants' statements reveal that their school education played a key role in developing their transgressive attitudes—especially thanks to the people who shaped it. Teachers and educators who demonstrated professionalism, flexibility, empathy, and commitment were able to create an environment that supported not only learning, but above all the development of agency, resilience, and courage in overcoming barriers.

In mainstream schools of that time, before anyone had heard of meeting the special educational needs of students with disabilities, some respondents found the support of an assistant indispensable. As one narrator recalled, "J. helped me enormously. He was what we would now call a personal assistant for a person with disabilities—someone who introduced me to new environments. With his help, I spent my first weeks in high school and my first weeks at university [...]. He was, so to speak, the prototype of personal assistants for people with disabilities. I can simply say he helped me a great deal."

In mainstream schools, certain situations fostered a readiness for bold, transgressive actions despite limitations—particularly through relationships with able-bodied peers. A man with muscular dystrophy, now

a journalist, shared that “in sixth or seventh grade, when there were truancy escapes, my buddies carried me on their backs, and we escaped together.” Ultimately, it was not the institutional form of the school (special or mainstream), but rather the quality of relationships and the attitudes of teachers, educators, and peers—as well as the overall school climate—that played the most significant role in the development of transgressive attitudes.

As the above analysis shows, school—if it treats the student in an individualized way, accepts and supports them, while also setting requirements—can become an environment for development as well as a space in which the individual learns to redefine their identity, build a sense of meaning, and overcome their limitations.

Conclusions and implications for educational practice

It is possible to draw several conclusions about the environmental conditions that support the development of an autonomous and agential identity from the biographical narratives of persons with disabilities who, despite many barriers, have undertaken transgressive actions. Two core socialization contexts—family and school—can initiate and sustain transgressive behavior when appropriately organized.

In families, supportive parental attitudes consistent with emancipatory pedagogy are pivotal: trust in the child’s competencies and a readiness to support their developmental autonomy. The patterns recurrent in the narratives analyzed herein were as follows:

- enabling decisions and learning from consequences
- internalizing the belief that bodily limitations need not determine quality of life or worth
- consistently strengthening aspirations and the motivation to achieve goals
- modelling proactive stances through personal example: interpersonal openness, engagement, involvement, perseverance, and a positive outlook

- preferring a developmental approach over a medicalized one and focusing on adaptive competencies rather than merely therapeutic procedures.

These elements of the family environment support psychological resilience, self-efficacy, and constructive coping and help internalize the values of agency and self-determination.

In education, the presence of teachers and educators who build relationships characterized by subjectivity, authentic interest, and high expectations acts as a catalyst. Key factors of transgression include an individualized didactic approach, educational demands adequate to the student's potential and abilities, organizational and methodological flexibility, developmental mentoring (supporting meaning-making and existential challenges), and stimulation of actions going beyond standard school routines.

Educational relationships, grounded in trust, demands, and acceptance, foster competence and identity work geared toward reflection, intentional action, and the redefinition of barriers. From the perspective of transgressive pedagogy, school operates as a space of biographical initiation where students craft their identity narratives not as victims of fate, but as active authors of their lives—*the heroes of their own life paths*. Peer relationships—especially with siblings and friends—also provide vital emotional support and social learning, producing experiences of cooperation, responsibility, and mutual engagement that train interpersonal competencies.

These conclusions are consistent with earlier theoretical and empirical findings in special education and developmental psychology (Głodkowska, 2014; Muszyńska, 2008). They confirm the importance of the educational environment as a purposefully organized structure that supports individuals in achieving success in life and subjective self-fulfillment, particularly by providing psychosocial and organizational resources adequate to their current developmental needs.

The above analysis results in the following practical implications:

1. It is necessary to promote a model of education for transgression, whose essence is to support individuals in actively shaping their own narratives, rather than merely adapting to existing conditions.
2. Parents and teachers should be prepared to build relationships based on trust, high expectations, and genuine support, i.e., the factors that determine the development of an active identity.
3. Educational policies and institutional practices must take into account the importance of the relational and cultural dimensions of education and not limit themselves solely to technical or formal aspects.
4. The biographies of transgressive individuals should be widely used as educational tools, in the form of meetings, media narratives, and teaching materials, to strengthen agency and existential reflection among students—not only those with disabilities, but among all students.

In summary, education for transgression is not only about supporting the personal development of the individual, but also about creating a social space for their transgressive development. It is an educational concept rooted in the values of freedom, responsibility, and meaning—axiological orientations that are desirable in the realities of contemporary sociocultural change.

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