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An Evaluation of Polish supplementary schools in Ireland

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Abstract

Since 2004, in response to the growth of the Polish community in Ireland, a number of Polish schools and organizations have been opened across the country. Some of them have become centres of cultural life and language transmission for the members of local Polish communities. This article provides an overview of Polish supplementary education in Ireland. Questionnaires were administered to teachers, parents and students of Polish supplementary schools in an effort to gain insight into the operation of Polish schools in Ireland. The findings highlight positive attitudes towards the Polish culture, willingness participate in the local community and an awareness of the significance of bilingualism for the younger generation. The paper also draws on the potential benefits of attending supplementary schools for children of migrant background.

Keywords: *Polish supplementary schools, Polish complementary schools, Polish community in Ireland*

1. Introduction

Currently, there are about 50 Polish supplementary (weekend) schools in the Republic of Ireland: about 45 Polish community schools and five School Consultation Points operate under the auspices of the Polish Embassy in Dublin. Among various types of supplementary schools in Ireland, Polish schools represent the group that was described by many researchers as being set up by members of a minority community to transmit and maintain the language and customs of their country of origin, in order to preserve their cultural/ethnic identities (Creese et al. 2006; Pillas 1992; Strand 2007; Creese et al. 2007; Kenner and Hickey 2008).

Such access to linguistic and cultural heritage offers a number of benefits, as identified in the literature. These include improved linguistic skills in the minority language and increased self-confidence (Creese et al. 2007), greater motivation for learning (Pillas 1992), positive identity reinforcement (Creese and Martin 2006), better understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity and increased confidence in speaking aloud and socialising with others. Moreover, supplementary schools provide an opportunity for more positive teacher-parent-pupil relationships as there is no language or cultural barrier. This paper discusses ways in which Polish supplementary schools operate and provide heritage language education to children of Polish background. Some suggestions are made on possible areas of further research on Polish supplementary schools in Ireland.

This paper is based on research completed for a MA thesis in 2015. In 2015, I prepared and administered questionnaires to Polish children, their parents and teachers in Great Britain and Ireland. A total of 96 questionnaires were completed in Ireland by 22 parents, 4 teachers and 70 students from four Polish supplementary schools (44 children aged 6 – 9 years, 16 children aged 10-13 years and 10 children aged 14 years).

Participants were selected using the snowball approach, 'friend-of-a-friend' approach, email advertising and through contacting Polish organisations and schools in Ireland. Based on the analysis of the questionnaires results, I hoped to gain further insight into the operation and running of Polish supplementary schools in Ireland.

2. Possible benefits of attending supplementary schools

The process involved in children's identity formation is connected to the child's group/community identity and social inclusion/exclusion processes. That is the reason why supporting children in building awareness of diversity in society has implications for the child's development of positive identity and respecting differences in others (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2016, p. 22). Researchers across the world (e.g. Maylor et al. 2010; Tomlinson 1984; Pillas 1992; Strand 2007; Creese et al. 2007; Kenner and Hickey 2008) agree that transmitting and maintaining the cultural and linguistic identities of communities is a key role of supplementary schools.

As indicated in the literature, supplementary schools improve pupils' linguistic skills in the minority language and increase their self-confidence. Children attending supplementary

language schools have been observed as competent in speaking their mother tongue but often experiencing difficulties with the skills of reading and writing. Through providing a culturally specific and appropriate context in a secure environment where they can feel part of a minority community, children can develop their linguistic skills in their mother tongue and increase their self-esteem as a result of attending supplementary schools. It may give them greater motivation for learning (Irish National Teachers Organisation 2004).

Supplementary schools provide minority language communities with an opportunity to get involved in the community life, to socialise and to build networks. In supplementary schools, the goal of maintaining culture and heritage is primarily achieved through social events. For many immigrant families, supplementary schools are a space where members of a particular community can experience cultural exchange. They are also centres for religious or national celebrations. Parents, children and teachers are becoming increasingly more involved in their community life and this may aid in reducing the feeling of isolation (Maylor et al. 2010; Pillas 1992; Sanders 2002; Creese 2007). Attending a supplementary school may even be considered as a socialisation process (Creese et al. 2007). Through socialisation, people acquire culture – they gain all the information and skills that allow them to be part of a society, such as societal norms, values and beliefs (Little 2013).

Another advantage indicated in research on supplementary language schools is the opportunity for a positive teacher-parent-pupil relationship, as there is no language or cultural barrier. Kenner and Helot's (2008, p. 103) studies of bilingual supplementary schools in Sheffield showed that parents were 'directly involved in their children's education in an academic setting whose cultural values they share'. For instance, Polish schools in the Netherlands are considered to bridge a gap between mainstream education and the home environment (Piqueray et al. 2016). By organizing various public events and celebrating national and/or religious traditions, supplementary schools offer the opportunity for both immigrant and second generation children to get involved in community life, to socialise and build networks (Creese et al. 2007, p. 9).

Language schools are often seen by parents as an additional layer to the mainstream curriculum, given that regular schools cannot cater to their specific needs. This was salient for parents who expressed an intention for their children to become multilingual. Parents were especially eager to enable their children to learn more about their own country, its

culture and history, when the children were already attending schools with a general focus on Irish culture. It was observed that their intention was to develop a sense of original cultural identity and an understanding of where they themselves and/or their parents originated. In some cases only one of the children's parents came from a non-Irish background. For these parents in particular, attending a supplementary school enabled their child to build a deeper connection with, and learn more about, a different part of their heritage.

3. Polish supplementary schools in Ireland

In the process of writing this paper, I have identified 52 supplementary schools that operate in the Republic of Ireland: 47 Polish community schools and 5 School Consultation Points that operate under the auspices of the Polish Embassy in Dublin and ORPEG in Poland (the Centre of Development of Polish Education Abroad – ORPEG) and are located in: Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, Cork and Cavan. Most of supplementary schools work in partnership with local mainstream schools and rent classes on their premises. Supplementary schools are usually open in the evenings or at weekends and generally for approximately a few hours at a time. Most of them are concerned with teaching the Polish language and developing pupils' sense of cultural heritage through teaching of the history of Poland, Polish literature, regional music, traditions and the religion of the Polish community. In addition, many Polish supplementary schools run courses preparing students for the Irish Leaving Certificate examination in Polish.

After Poland's accession to the European Union, the Polish community in Ireland started to grow rapidly and, consequently, Polish social and cultural life has developed. Numerous Polish associations and organizations of various types have emerged, including: Together - Razem, Polish Business Club, My Cork Association, Polonia Forum, Polish Educational Society (Płachecki 2012). The increase in the number of Polish nationals residing in Ireland resulted in the establishment of Polish supplementary schools and School Consultation Points under the auspices of the Polish Embassy in Dublin.

The first Polish supplementary school in Ireland was set up in 2004 by two teachers from Poland, Mariola Izycka and Witold Izycki, as a response to the demand of the growing Polish community in Ireland. Since the beginning, the school was supposed to be incorporated in the organizational structure of ORPEG. On the 15th of October 2005, the school started

operating as the School Consultation Point under the auspices of the Polish Embassy in Dublin (SPK) and was based in Newpark Comprehensive School in Blackrock (Iżycki 2017).

Since Poland's accession to the EU the number of Polish citizens residing in Ireland increased in great amounts - according to the 2006 census results almost 90 percent of 63,276 Polish immigrants came to Ireland in 2004 or after (www.cso.ie). In response to the rapid growth of the Polish community in Ireland, Polish schools and organizations were opened and some of them became centres of cultural life, language transmission and networks for Polish immigrants' exchange of experiences. Most of the schools collaborate with various Polish and Irish organizations, institutions and newspapers, politicians and other cultural and art bodies.

Polish supplementary schools differ in terms of the legal basis according to which they function:

1. School Consultation Points is a Polish complementary school at diplomatic missions, consular offices and military representations of the Republic of Poland. The activity of School Consultation Points is entirely financed by the Polish Ministry of National Education and supervised by the Center for the Development of Polish Education Abroad. It should be emphasized that SCP operate on the principle of extraterritoriality, that is why their organization, structure, appointment of management, programmes of classes and the selection of textbooks are coordinated and are subject to the Ministry of National Education in Poland and ORPEG. Initially, these institutions were open to educate only children of Polish diplomatic and military representatives. However, after 1991, the children of Polish immigrants residing abroad were accepted. Classes in the SCP are held on weekends (Saturday, Sunday).
2. Community or private Polish Saturday schools are usually non-profit organizations that maintain and operate as a result of contributions paid by parents of students, as well as the support of Polish embassies and other organizations. Community schools organize their own classes and schedules. Classes are held on Saturdays in the morning or on selected days of the week (in the afternoons and/or evenings); often in rooms rented for this time at local Irish schools. The curricula include, above all, Polish language and knowledge about Poland (history, geography, civics). In many schools, two-levels of Polish language education are available; primary and post-

primary school, and sometimes there are also preschool and junior classes available for children between the ages of three and five years old.

In 2005, the basic document on the functioning of Polish schools abroad was the Directive of the Minister of National Education and Sport from 2nd of September, 2004 referring to the education of Polish children temporarily residing abroad. According to that directive, Polish schools abroad would have been free to decide what subjects of Polish education programme they would teach. It stated that ‘selected items of integrated training, (...) geography, (...) history’ did not apply to the Polish Language or Civics (Iżycki 2017).

The situation was altered by the Directive of the Minister of National Education on 31st of August, 2010 on the education of Polish children abroad. That directive introduced a new subject, which is not reflected in the Polish system of teaching – Knowledge of Poland. It was introduced in place of the three subjects that are being taught in Poland: History of Poland, Geography and Civics in order to supplement students’ knowledge of Poland with knowledge of the history, culture and geography of Poland, transmit national beliefs, values and attitudes that are part of the Polish language and culture heritage. The purpose of such supplementary education is to support students’ positive attitudes towards integration and develop their respect for both languages and cultures (majority and heritage). The Directive declares that ‘The task of the school is to teach oral Polish (...). The student acquires basic knowledge about the history, geography and nature of Poland, gets basic information about Polish culture and Polish society, learns to identify with the culture and tradition, while maintaining respect for cultural diversity and traditions of the country of residence’ (Iżycki 2017).

4. Purposes, difficulties and perspectives of supplementary schools

The purpose of Polish supplementary schools is to encourage children of Polish background to learn and use Polish, arouse their interest in Poland, its culture and traditions, and thus build their sense of identity and ties with Poland. An equally important purpose of Polish schools is to support children’s bilingualism and biculturalism and motivate them in continuing to live in respect for both languages and cultures. The activity of Polish supplementary schools is also focused on the integration of Polish local communities by organizing various types of cultural and sport events, such as book markets, sports competitions and Christmas celebrations.

From surveys and interviews conducted among Polish teachers in Ireland and in the UK, it appears that the most serious problems faced by local social and private Polish supplementary schools are organizational and financial issues. Teachers emphasize that there are no well-developed textbooks for teaching Polish in supplementary schools. Another problem is the relationship with parents. The first part is the overall weak involvement in the development of Polish language skills in their children. The surveyed teachers emphasised that parents devoted too little time to teaching Polish to their children at home. At the same time, teachers of many Polish schools met with too high expectations of their students' parents.

The surveyed teachers also highlight problems related to the level of Polish language proficiency among Polish children and the influence of English on their Polish language. Among other things, the related problems which are highlighted are concerned with poor vocabulary and poor knowledge of Polish grammar.

In the table below, I present the answers of 11 surveyed teachers of Polish supplementary schools in Great Britain and Ireland to the question: *"Please list the main problems that Polish heritage language teachers and Polish supplementary schools encounter."* The responses are divided into four groups, and each group contains the quoted answers given by the respondents.

Organizational issues:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little access to literature written in Polish; • lack of well-designed textbooks for complementary education through Polish supplementary schools; • lack of adapted textbooks; • funds, staff, textbooks;
Relations with parents:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cooperation with parents; • parents devote too little time to teaching and developing the Polish language on a daily basis; • sometimes parents have too high expectations;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the underlying problem seems to be the lack of tangible support from parents of the children, too high expectations of the parents towards the teachers and at the same time a lack of commitment on the part of parents to teach their mother tongue;
Knowledge of Polish and the impact of English on learning and knowledge of Polish among Polish children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confusing Polish and English letters and sounds (w-ł, j-dż, etc.); • uneven level of knowledge of the Polish language among children of the same age depending on the family situation (usually lower proficiency in Polish, when only one parent speaks Polish), length of stay in England; • limited vocabulary in children; • lack of grammatical forms in speech; • children do not understand the form of courtesy, that is, they turn to "Please, Lady, give me"; • children's use of English in intervals and in conversations with each other; • with time: stronger communication skills and willingness to communicate in English; • unwillingness to read longer texts in Polish (over 4 pages);
Other issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • irregular attendance of classes; • often the obligation to participate in classes is imposed by parents (without a clear "buy-in" on the part of the student); • Approach to learning Polish is sometimes not serious enough; <p>Source: own study based on proprietary</p>

	surveys conducted in May and June 2015 among teachers of Polish diasporas in Great Britain and Ireland.
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Table 1: Problems that teachers of Polish in supplementary schools had with heritage language teachers

5. Conclusions and implications for further research

The future of Polish complementary education is directly related to the number of Polish emigrants and their acculturation/adaptation levels. The results of research on the acculturation of Poles in Great Britain and Ireland show that the Polish communities there have a positive attitude towards both the native culture and the culture of the country of settlement - they willingly participate in the life of the local community, and at the same time embrace their Polish identity and consider the role of bilingualism for the younger generation (Dabaene 2010; Ereciński et al. 2014).

Interest in learning in Polish supplementary schools is also dependent on an individual's sense of belonging to a particular Polish migrant generation. Polish researchers distinguish three generations of Poles abroad: first (immigrant) generation - people born in Poland who emigrated abroad, second generation - children of Polish immigrants (both born in Poland and in the host country); third generation of the Polish generation - grandchildren of Polish immigrants, and so on (Dubisz 1983, pp. 292–301). The first generation is considered as a link with Poland, because they developed their knowledge of the Polish language, culture and traditions while growing up in Poland (Dubisz 1983, p. 295). Representatives of the second generation can usually (although not a rule) become bilingual and represent a bicultural generation, which has knowledge of and use both language on a daily basis (for example: at school - English, at home - Polish). The grandchildren of Polish immigrants brought up abroad usually know the language of the country of residence to a greater extent than the Polish language. Interest in participating in Polish supplementary school activities usually decreases among representatives of subsequent generations. It should be remembered, however, that the attitude to Polish heritage and the desire to cultivate ties with Poland are influenced by various factors. Thus, both bilingualism of young Poles abroad and their interest in Poland can vary even within the representatives of one generation of Poles abroad.

There are a number of possible areas for further research in which researchers could further investigate Polish supplementary education. These include the impact of supplementary schools on children's Polish language knowledge in comparison to children who have not had the opportunity to attend Polish complementary education in Ireland and the increasing countrywide awareness of the benefits of bilingualism and the supportive role of supplementary schools among immigrant parents and local institutions. Further research may also seek to explore ways of collaboration between Irish institutions and Polish supplementary schools in order to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and integration in Ireland.

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