IV. CHILDREN AND PARENTS. MIGRANTS' FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

Joanna Kosmalska
University of Łódź, Poland

Immigration and Primary Education in Ireland

Abstract

The structure of this paper could be compared to a camera with a zoom as it proceeds from the description of general issues to individual problems. It begins with a short section that introduces the context of the study. Then the paper illuminates recent demographic shifts in Ireland and traces some major implications that the immigration has had on primary schools. Next a description of the Irish primary education system is provided to highlight key concepts of the primary school structure and operation. From there, the paper proceeds to an investigation of elements of recent legislation that has shaped the present situation of non--national pupils in primary schools. Finally, the advantages and challenges of a multicultural classroom are presented from the teachers' perspective by quoting their own words. The overall aim of this paper is to paint a 'bigger picture' of the world into which a newly-arrived, non-English speaking child is thrown. It is worth noting that Polish children are the vast majority within this group in Ireland.

Key words: primary education, multicultural classroom, non-national pupils, migrant children, school policy

Context of the Research

The immediate motivation for the conduct of this study arose when I volunteered with St. Mary's Boys National School in Dublin as a language support teacher in September 2005. That year, I was also delegated by the principal to attend the in--service training on the English language support programme (ELS) organised by Integrate Ireland Language and Training Ltd. The discussion that took place during the workshops aroused my interest in language support and became a starting point for this study.

Terminology Used

Home language (minority language, native language) is used throughout the paper to refer to the mother tongue or first language of the pupil.

Newcomer (non-national, immigrant) refers to those parents and children whose mother tongue is not English.

English language support (ELS) is a national programme providing newcomer children with assistance in learning English as the language of instruction in Irish schools.

Intercultural education is education that helps children develop the ability to recognise inequality, injustice, racism, prejudice and bias and to equip them to

challenge and to try to change these manifestations when they encounter them. It encourages pupils to appreciate the advantages of cultural diversity.

Data Collection and Analysis

From a methodological perspective an ethnographic approach was adopted as the most effective means of presenting and analysing the elements of the ELS programme and investigating how the theory is put into practice.

Purposive sampling was used in order to make sure that all kinds of schools in the greater Dublin area were included in the study. The illustration 1 depicts the distribution of the schools around the city and its suburbs.

Three of the most common patron bodies are represented within the group of eighteen schools. There are fourteen Catholic parish or parochial schools, two Church of Ireland and two multi-denominational. Eleven of the schools are coeducational, three are boys only schools, three girls only schools and two senior girls combined with mixed Infants schools. Additionally, two schools are a part of the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). Although it is a small sample, it is meant to represent the variety of primary educational settings in Ireland. A complete list of schools participating in the research is provided in Table 1.
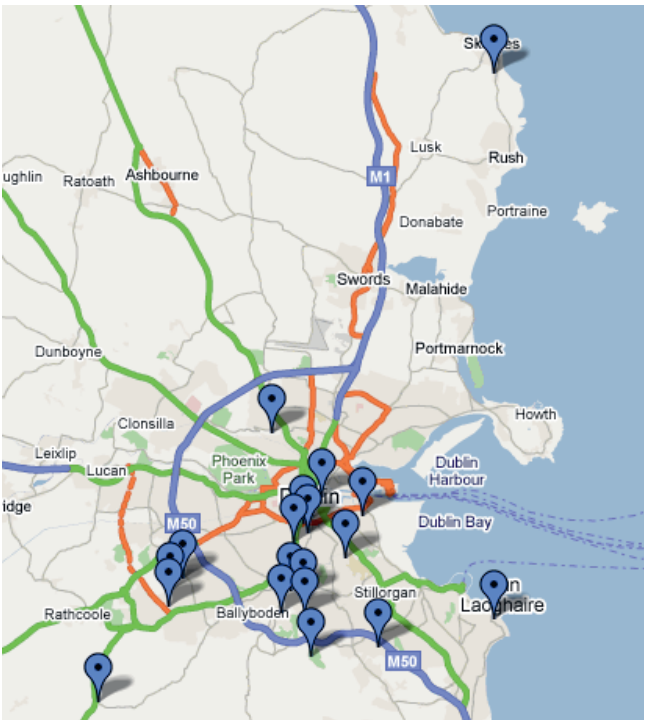
Il. 1. Distribution of the schools participating in the research

Tab. 1. A list of schools participating in the study

School	Number of ELS Teachers	Number of children in the school	Denomination	Gender
01	1	246	Catholic	Boys
02	3	336	Catholic/DEIS	Mixed
03	1	89	Catholic	Mixed
04	1	83	Church of Ireland	Mixed
05	1	225	Multi-denominational	Mixed
06	3	528	Catholic	Girls
07	1	423	Catholic	Boys
08	1	208	Church of Ireland	Mixed
09	2	309	Catholic	Mixed Infants/Senior Girls
10	1	69	Catholic	Mixed
11	5	282	Catholic	Mixed Infants/Senior Girls
12	1	457	Catholic/DEIS	Mixed
13	4	116	Catholic	Mixed
14	2	145	Catholic	Boys
15	1	240	Multi-denominational	Mixed
16	6	340	Catholic	Mixed
17	4	304	Catholic	Mixed
18	2	133	Catholic	Girls

Every effort has been made to protect the privacy and anonymity of the teachers participating in the study by ensuring that none of the quotations have been attributed to specific individuals. Additionally, the names of the schools have been replaced with numbers to make it impossible to trace any links. As for the pupils who participated in class observations, their assent was sought and none of the children's data have been revealed in the paper.

The study was conducted in the summer semester of the school year 2007–2008. The phases of the research were as follows:

– Content analysis was used to formulate patterns in ELS classes by analysing teachers' timetables, teaching materials and students' reports. This provided empirical base for further evaluation.

– Nonparticipant observations of ELS classes were carried out in nine primary schools (02, 03, 04, 06, 07, 08, 11, 12, 14 on the list presented in Table 1) for the period of four months. They were recorded by field jottings and documented with photographs which later served as the stimulus for completing lesson observation sheets. The observations were preceded and followed by interviews with the teachers.

– In-depth interviews were carried out with fifteen ELS teachers, Rory McDaid (a lecturer in St. Patrick's College) and David Little (the Head of IILT). The interviews followed the interview guide approach (Fraenkel, Wallen 2008), which means that the topics were specified in advance in an outline form to increase the comprehensiveness of the data and make the collection somewhat systematic for each respondent. The interviews with Rory McDaid, David Little and six teachers were recorded and transcribed. Otherwise, notes were taken.

– Finally, a detailed questionnaire was completed by twenty-seven teachers in eighteen schools. The results were entered into SPSS files and analysed. A series of descriptive statistics and graphic representations of evidence were generated. The answers to open questions were grouped to formulate themes.

Triangulation was used in order to establish the validity of the study. This involved comparing the content of publications, interviews, observations and the results of the questionnaire. This paper is based on the generated data.

Impact of Immigration on Primary Schools

Historically known for its high emigration rates, Ireland turned from being the 'sick man' of Europe into the 'Celtic Tiger', the success story of the EU and the destination for a great number of immigrants. In the last ten years the state has witnessed a greater rise in the percentage of inhabitants than Britain has experienced over the past half century (CSO 2008). The population on the isle increased from 3.8 to 4.3 million with newcomers from 150 different countries (Chart 1).

According to the Census Report 2007 published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), 55% of immigrants are aged 25–44, which means that they either already have children of school-going age or they soon will. Hence the further estimation of the research that one in ten of the newcomers is under the age of 15 seems logical and anticipated. The report also states that nearly half of the immigrants came from the twelve new EU accession countries that joined the union in 2004 and 2007[1], and Poles constitute the great majority within this group. As for non-European countries, there is a significant Asian and African minority in Ireland.
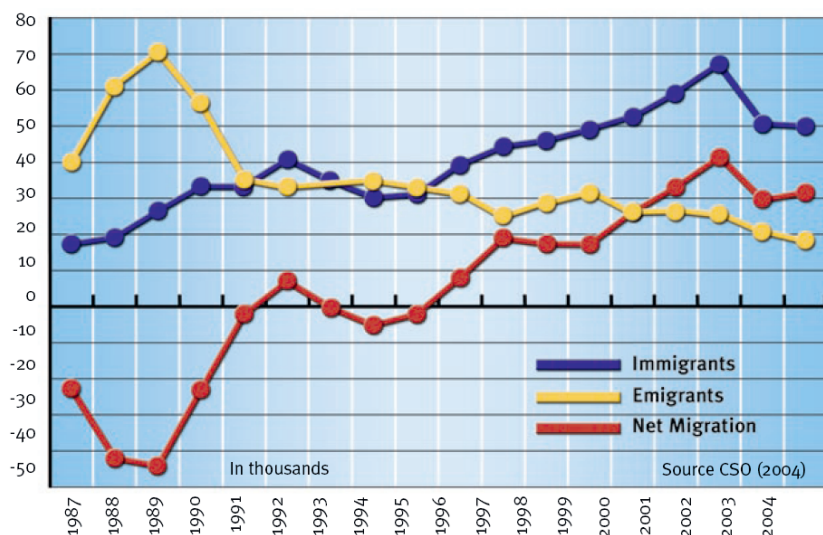
Chart 1. Immigration, emigration and net-migration in Ireland, 1987–2004
Source: CSO (2004)

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[1] Ten accession countries who joined the EU on 1 May 2004: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and two new accession states who joined the EU on 1 January 2007: Bulgaria and Romania.

Another report by the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment (2005) shows that three quarters of all newcomers perform low-paid and low-skilled jobs, mainly in the service and catering sectors. They often work overtime or have more than one job, which leaves them with little time and limited financial resources to spend on their children's education. This diminishes the chances of immigrant pupils in achieving the same degree of success as their Irish peers.

The majority of non-nationals find it also difficult to integrate into Irish society although they all agree that Irish people are friendly and welcoming. Some explanation for this paradox was provided in one of the episodes of *Spectrum,* the RTÉ radio programme that investigates how Ireland is responding to its changing ethnic and cultural makeup. On the 3rd June 2007, Melanie Verwoerd invited representatives from France, Nigeria, China, Poland and Ireland to share their experiences of making friends in the new multicultural society of the isle. The guests unanimously concurred that the Irish society is hospitable for newcomers, however, they noticed that deeper relationships with the island's citizens are hard to enter into.

Making friends in Ireland… For me it's been pretty very hard. (Yomi, Nigeria)

I have friends you can go to a pub with and you can go for a game with, but I wouldn't be able to sleep over at a friend's place here, and I don't have friends that I could speak to if I was in any trouble, apart maybe from one French friend, that's about it. But I don't want to be too negative about it because it was pretty easy to find people to go to a pub with and I was welcomed very well when I arrived here. (Sophie, France)

The discussion led to conclusions that immigrants generally become friendly with other immigrants rather than with those native to the isle. One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon might be that the Irish are family-oriented and they tend to cultivate their friendships from youth.

The weak relationship between the Irish and immigrants has been further supported by the survey conducted by Peter O'Mahony (2005, p. 3), a member of the National Committee on Racism and Interculturalism in Ireland. The results of his research show that 66% of Irish people have no immigrant friends.

My own experience suggests that the level of contact between immigrant and indigenous communities may be even less. I recall speaking to groups of third level students where 80%–90% of the students have never had a substantial conversation with any recent immigrant, much less with somebody who has sought asylum in Ireland.

The lack of contact between nationals and newcomers has initiated the process of social segregation. Newcomers move to locations where there are similar concentrations of immigrants, which results in the appearance of districts where houses in a cul-de-sac are rented or purchased by people from only one nation: Nigerian, Latvian, Chinese and the like.

Moreover, there has emerged a trend of *white flight* where the Irish move out from 'immigrant areas' and non-nationals move in (McGorman 2007). An example of a district where the white flight has become apparent is Dublin 15 which is

currently the fastest developing part of the capital with a number of construction-
-sites. The property boom in Dublin 15 has resulted in high availability of rental
accommodation in the region, which has contributed to immigrants moving in. At
the same time, it has been noticed that Irish families have started to move to less
ethnically diversified areas of Dublin.

The tendency for segregation is mirrored in the population of local primary
schools. For example, after the opening of school in Balbriggan in September 2007,
it has turned out that almost all pupils were black (McKay 2008). Moreover, in the
'immigrant districts' the percentage of pupils who do not speak English exceeds
60% in many schools. The figures are supported by Yarr's independent survey of
primary schools carried out in December 2004 in the western suburbs of Dublin.
The results of her research show that in a typical school there are approximately
representatives of twenty countries. Yarr indicates all the nationalities that she
encountered in schools and notes that the list is by no means exhaustive (Table 2).

Tab. 2. Nationalities represented in Irish schools

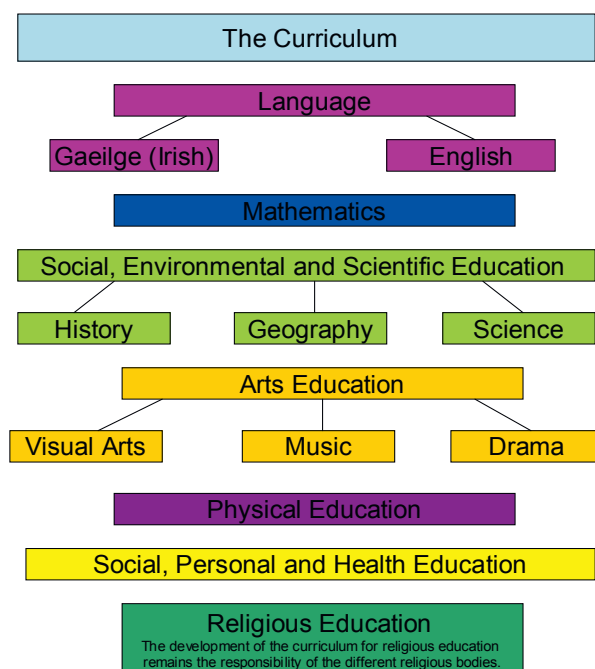| Afghanistan	Croatia	Japan	Philippines	Sudan
Albania	Czech Republic	Kosovo	Poland	Syria
Algeria	Egypt	Latvia	Romania	Tajikistan
Angola	Estonia	Libya	Russia	Uganda
Azerbaijan	Georgia	Lithuania	Serbia	Ukraine
Bangladesh	Germany	Macedonia	Sierra Leone	USA
Belarus	Ghana	Malaysia	Slovakia	Uzbekistan
Bosnia	India	Moldova	Slovenia	Vietnam
Burundi	Iran	Nigeria	Somalia	Zaire
Cameroon	Iraq	Norway	South Africa	Zambia
Congo	Italy	Pakistan	Spain	Zimbabwe

The growing numbers of immigrant pupils and their ethnic diversity posed
serious problems for the Irish education system, especially at primary level. These
issues will be described later in this paper but first a brief outline of the structure
of the Irish primary education system will be presented to serve as a backdrop for
the analysis.

Primary Education in Ireland

The Department of Education and Science, under the control of the Minister
for Education and Science, is responsible for policy and the founding of education
in Ireland. According to the present regulations, all children are entitled to enter the
formal education system, regardless of their parents' legal status as Irish citizens,
refugees, asylum seekers or migrant workers. They are obliged to attend school
from the age of six to sixteen, which means that like in Poland, they are expected to
complete at least two out of three levels of education, that is primary and secondary,

which might be followed by optional higher, commonly known as third-level or tertiary education (Gilsenan 2005). This paper, however, will address only the primary sector with its specific issues and challenges.

By the end of the primary school, pupils are supposed to master knowledge and skills defined by the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), a document prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)*.* The curriculum stresses the uniqueness of each child and the aim of fostering individual development of pupils (NCCA 2003). It is laid out in seven curriculum areas – some areas consist of just one subject, others contain more than one subject. There are twelve subjects in all (Diagram 1).

The Curriculum

Language

Gaeilge (Irish) — English

Mathematics

Social, Environmental and Scientific Education

History — Geography — Science

Arts Education

Visual Arts — Music — Drama

Physical Education

Social, Personal and Health Education

Religious Education
The development of the curriculum for religious education remains the responsibility of the different religious bodies.

Diagram 1. The primary school curriculum

Source: INTO 2001, p. 11

One of the key elements of the new curriculum is subject integration, which means that pupils investigate a topic from a number of perspectives (Gilsenan 2005). For example when children learn about the local environment, they might explore how the area has changed throughout years (history), they can make a map of the streets (geography) and investigate the names of the places (Irish). This way children's interest is stimulated and their learning is supposed to advance without them even noticing it. Teachers are seen as guides and facilitators of children's learning. They must select the methodologies and approaches to suit the learning styles and levels of ability of the children and make sure that all curriculum requirements are covered.

Additionally, children who have difficulty in mastering basic academic skills such as reading or maths and fall below the 10 percentile level (meaning that 90 out of 100 children will perform better than that child) receive help from Special Education Needs (SEN) teachers, also called Learning Support teachers. The SEN teachers either withdraw small groups of children from their classrooms and work with them on their specific difficulties or stay with the child in the classroom to provide him or her with remedial support.

The Constitution of Ireland allows for primary education to be provided at home but very few families choose this alternative. On the contrary, parents enrol their children in schools as soon as they turn four although they are not formally obliged to attend school until the age of six. Thence for most children primary education lasts for eight years. They begin with Junior and Senior Infants (junior classes) that correspond to Polish kindergarten, and then they progress from the First Class up to the Sixth Class (senior classes).

All primary schools in Ireland follow the same organisational model regardless of their religious denomination. The structure of this model is illustrated in the diagram below (INTO 2001, p. 28).
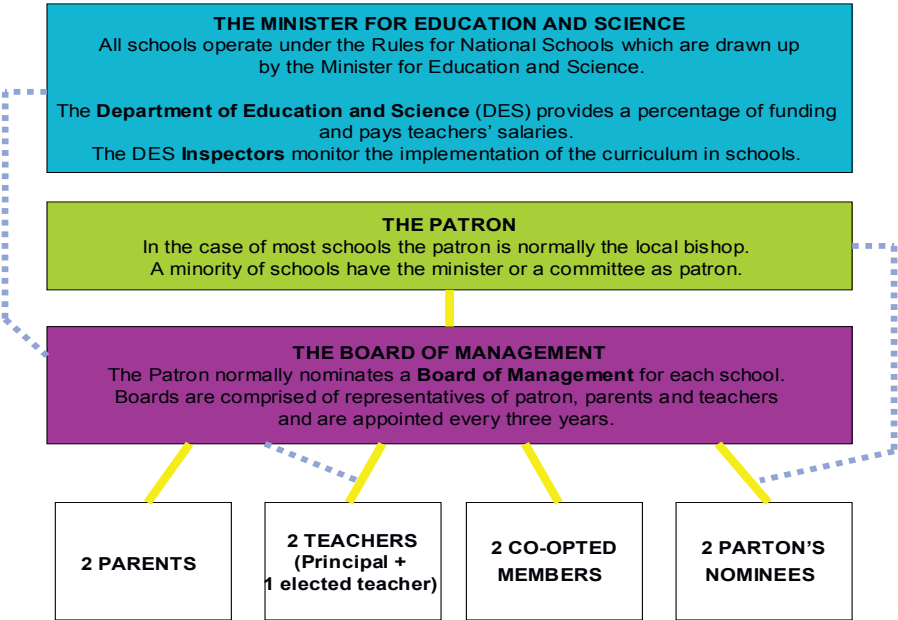

Diagram 2. The structure of the primary school management

First level education is provided in Ireland by three kinds of schools: national schools, gaelscoileanna and multi-denominational schools (Coolahan 1981). The schools differ in denomination and the emphasis placed on teaching Irish.

National schools were established in the mid-19th century. They have been controlled by a board of management under the patronage of a local church. Thus the most prominent feature of these schools is their religious ethos. They diffuse not only general knowledge but also faith awareness.

In the late 20th century, some voluntary organizations, like *Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán-Ghaeilge,* decided to start schools that focused on revitalisation of the Irish language and culture. Therefore, in gaelscoileanna Irish has been introduced as the language of instruction and Irish literature, sport and music are intensively promoted.

The opening of Gaelic schools in conjunction with the increase in immigration led to a movement in the 1970s to establish multi-denominational schools for pupils from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. In the last two years, this type of school has become increasingly popular across the state due to the demand for non-religious education among immigrants and a growing secular Irish native population. Many of the establishments have been run by voluntary organizations or local committees.

One of such organisations is *Educate Together*, which in the late 1970s and early 1980s opened three schools. The schools were 'parent initiated', this meant that they were set up by a group of families who wished to have this type of school in their locality, which resulted in a high level of parental involvement in the educational life of children. They had no religious patrons, but were operated by the member associations of Educate Together and, like other schools, they worked under the regulations and funding of the Department of Education and Science.

When a great number of parents failed to find places for their children in September 2006, Educate Together took the initiative to establish emergency primary schools. Today, it runs forty schools, twenty-two of which are in the greater Dublin area. On the 29th of March 2007, the organization launched its new business plan, *New Schools for 21st Century Ireland,* which aims at opening four hundred primary education places across the state so that children will commute no more than half an hour to the nearest school. Other major goals of the plan are to establish second-level schools, complimentary pre-schools and after-school care, and to introduce new quality assurance plans in the education places.

The main objective of Educate Together is to develop culturally inclusive and democratic ethos. Therefore, the organisation has been promoting the concepts of child-centeredness, co-educationalism and multi-denominationalism as a means of introducing egalitarianism and gender equality.

Child-centeredness means that teaching is conducted according to the physical and mental development of a child. The teacher should address the individual needs of each pupil, ascertain his assets and stimulate his progress. However, this noble idea is at present hard to put into practice because classes comprise 28–32 pupils and frequently over half of them do not speak English.

Co-educationalism is closely related to child-centred teaching since it is not confined to creating classrooms where boys and girls study together, but it aims at developing programmes to counter gender stereotyping and inequity in all aspects of life. It endeavours to build respectful relationships between boys and girls that will be rendered in their social relationships in the future.

Multi-denominationalism, in turn, guarantees that all children have equal rights of access to education, regardless of their religion. Educate Together has stressed this mission by introducing into schools *Ethical Education Curriculum* which familiarises pupils with the main faiths in the world, including non-theistic and humanistic viewpoints. It informs children about the general characteristics of religions rather than instructs them that any particular one is true. Furthermore, during the year, Educate Together schools mark festivals such as the Chinese New Year, Easter, Bealtaine, the Hindu Festival of Lights (Diwali), Harvest Festivals, Samhain (Halloween), Ramadan and Eid, Hannuka and Christmas. The idea is to provide an environment in which the social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds of all pupils are respected, and as a result, to achieve the inclusion of minorities within the Irish system. This commitment is reflected in the organization's motto: 'Learn Together to Live Together – No Child an Outsider.'

All national, Gaelic and multi-denominational schools can acquire the status of a 'disadvantaged school' if the principal can document a high population of children from an underprivileged social and economic background (DES 2005). The school becomes then a part of the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion – Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools (DEIS). This action plan focuses on addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years of age). The aim of the DEIS programme is to ensure that all children have an equal chance to access, participate in and benefit from education regardless of their social and economic background. The long-term goal is to give all children the opportunity to enter higher education and develop their full potential. Mary Hanafin, the ex-Minister for Education and Science summarised the objectives of the action plan as follows (DES 2005):

> We all know that educational disadvantage is complex and multi-faceted and that we need to design our response accordingly. And yet, despite this complexity, our objectives are clear. We want all our young people to derive maximum personal benefit from the education system. We want the needs of the learner and a culture of high expectations to be at the centre of all our actions. These actions must include a concentration on literacy and numeracy from an early stage; strong links between the home, school and community; strong links between schools working co-operatively; and added value from links between education and other services. And we want supports, and second--chance provision, for the minority of our young people who, for various reasons, leave education early without the knowledge and skills they need to support them in later life.

Participation in the DEIS programme secures additional funding for teaching materials, support teachers, psychologists and other educational specialists. Therefore, disadvantaged schools are often well-equipped and they employ the best and the most experienced teachers. It also happens that DEIS schools currently have the highest numbers of non-national pupils.

School Policies

Due to the lack of planning for school provision by the DES, there appeared a serious problem of a shortage of school places. Consequently, 'parents struggling for school places' has become an annual event that takes place in September. It is especially difficult to find space in junior classes as the vast majority of immigrant children are aged 4–7. The results of my research show that 60% of all immigrant children attending English language support classes are in Junior or Senior Infants (Chart 2).
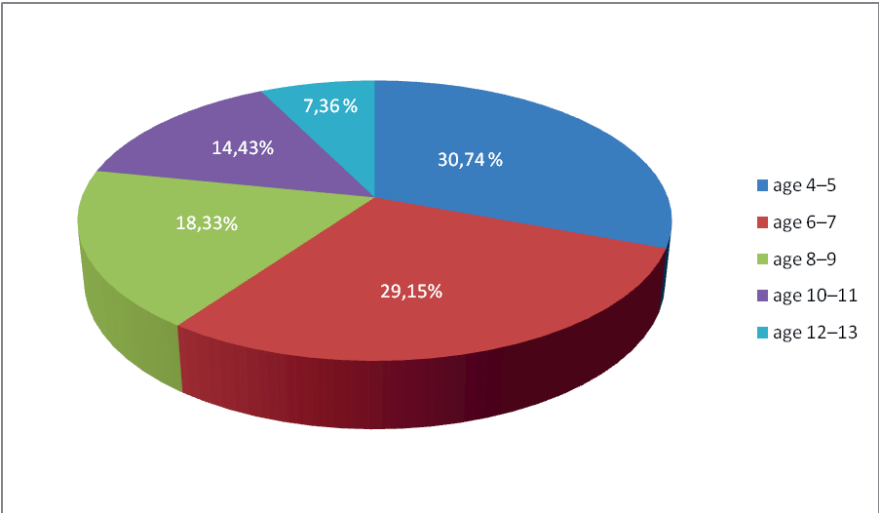

Chart 2. Age of ELS pupils

Every September the national media cover new stories of schools being overcrowded and children being turned away. Parents who are unable to enrol their child in the local school are forced to seek places in adjacent schools and when a place becomes available, they transfer their children to the local school. This has led to a high rate of movement of pupils in and out of schools during the school year.

Pupil attrition has a great impact on schools (McGorman 2007). On the one hand, it disrupts class dynamics and teaching coherence. Changing schools is often a traumatic experience for young children and they take a long time to adjust to the new environment and make new friends. On entry to the new school, they are required to go through a cycle of assessment tests so that curriculum differences are recognised. This adds to the workload of Special Education Needs teachers who have to assess new arrivals and then help them cover the differences.

On the other hand, principals are unable to plan accurately staffing, teachers allocation and special needs requirements. While traditionally schools would enrol children at Junior Infants and maintain the same group over the eight years of primary education, presently the high rate of movement of pupils has disrupted this pattern of stability and predictability. If a high number of pupils leave the school

during the school year, principals have to replace them with children from waiting-
-lists because funding from the DES is dependent on the number of pupils and to
exist at all, a class must consist of minimum 20 pupils.

Apart from the lack of school places and pupil attrition, there is yet another
problem of religious discrimination in schools. The vast majority of schools in
Ireland are under the patronage of the Catholic Church due to the large Catholic
congregation in the past. They constitute 92% of all first level education places in
the state.

Tab. 3. Distribution of Irish primary schools according to religious ethos

Catholic	3032	92%
Church of Ireland	183	5.6%
Multi-denominational	40	1.25%
Presbyterian	14	0.4%
Inter-denominational	5	0.2%
Muslim	2	0.06%
Methodist	1	0.03%
Jewish	1	0.03%
Other	1	0.03%
Total	3279	100%

Source: DES 2007b

Whilst the arrival of non-nationals in Ireland has induced the emergence of
faith heterogeneity, a huge majority of schools still follow 'a Catholic first' policy in
the enrolment of pupils, which has resulted in segregation and a great number of
immigrant children left without a school. The issue has been broadly covered by the
media. Rosita Boland (2007, p. 1) in her article 'Faith before Fairness' in *The Irish
Times* depicts the appalling stories of parents whose children were turned away on
the 1st September 2007. One of her interviewees, Kenyan-born Philip Njorge, the
father of five-year-old Natasha, said: 'We are not Catholic, and your religion is one
of the questions that appear most prominently on the application form. They should
not be so tight on what your religion is, because the country is opening up, and we
should embrace everybody.'

In response to the accusations that Catholic schools have been segregating
children, the Archbishop of Ireland, Dr Diarmuid Martin admitted on RTÉ
Radio's *Morning Ireland* that the Catholic Church is too dominant in the mana-
gement of schools as far as the new demographics are concerned. However, he
stressed that the obsolete legislation and poor planning by the government and
other state agencies, not the Church, are responsible for the dramatic situation.
'I have no ambition to run the entire education system in Dublin,' he concluded.

Indeed principals are legally obliged to follow the Education Act (1998) and the Equality Act (2000). The problem is that both documents are obscure and contradictory.

Section 9 of the Education Act states that Boards of Management are responsible for developing and publishing the school's admission policy. The document, commonly called the *school's enrolment policy*, sets out rules by which children are admitted to schools and the procedures that schools must follow if the number of applications for admission exceeds the number of places available. Boards of Management are accountable to the Department of Education and Science and parents can file any complaints in relation to the school's enrolment policy to the Secretary General.

The Education Act outlines also the requirements that have to be met by the school's enrolment policy. In the first place, Boards of Management are obliged to develop an admissions policy which provides for maximum accessibility to the school (Section 9. (*m*), 1998 Education Act). The policy must respect 'equality and the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parents' choice, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school and the constitutional rights of all persons concerned'. However, the final word about the form and the content of the admission policy belongs to the patron of the school who is responsible for maintaining the ethos. Therefore, the Board of Management is required to 'uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school' (Section 15. (2) (b)).

In other words, the Education Act recognises the right of parents to send their children to a school of their choice while giving a free hand to patrons to select the pupils who will attend their schools. Consequently, the 'ethos' is privileged over 'equality'. Another key piece of legislation that provides principles in relation to the admission policy is the Equal Status Act, 2000.

Section 7 (2) of the Equal Status Act (2000) clarifies that primary schools should not discriminate in relation to:

> (a) the admission or the terms or conditions of admission of a person as a student to the establishment,
> (b) the access of a student to any course, facility or benefit provided by the establishment,
> (c) any other term or condition of participation in the establishment by a student, or
> (d) the expulsion of a student from the establishment or any other sanction against the student.

Interestingly, Subsection (3) (c) states that, under certain conditions, schools may in fact discriminate in relation to the admission of pupils, namely:

> where the establishment is a school providing primary or post-primary education to students and the objective of the school is to provide education in an environment

which promotes certain religious values, it admits persons of a particular religious denomination in preference to others or it refuses to admit as a student a person who is not of that denomination and, in the case of a refusal, it is proved that the refusal is essential to maintain the ethos of the school.

A rational interpretation of both the Education Act (1998) and the Equality Act (2000) suggests that it is permissible, when developing a school enrolment policy, to favour families who subscribe to the faith and ethos of the school, which in most of cases is Catholic. Furthermore, many schools give priority to children whose siblings already attend the school. For these reasons, in schools where the number of applying pupils exceeds the number of places available, it is nearly impossible for a non-Catholic child to be admitted. Therefore, some parents, who are not themselves Catholics, have their children baptised to raise their chances of a better education.

These incidents highlight the exclusionary and discriminative nature of the Education and Equality Acts that have led to segregation of children and have given rise to sensational front page headlines such as 'Fears of schools turning all--black' or the abovementioned 'Faith before Fairness'. The main problem is that the Irish education policies were developed with a view of a denominational system, promoting equality in an ethnically and religiously homogenous society, but rapidly changing demographics require new legislation that would allow for the present heterogeneity.

The Irish government has realised this and commissioned the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to prepare a set of guidelines on *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (NCCA 2005). This publication, of almost two hundred pages, outlines the extent and nature of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity in contemporary Ireland, paying attention to racism and institutional racism in particular. It presents the elements of an intercultural approach to education, and gives ideas on how to implement them in primary schools in relation to school planning, policy development, and shaping a multicultural environment.

The NCCA's guidelines were distributed to every primary school teacher in the country (McGorman 2007) while in the case of other reports there is usually one copy sent to each school. This shows how much importance the policy-makers have attached to their content. However, the distribution of the guidelines has not been followed by any professional support, which in practice meant that many educators who at the same time were provided with guidelines on Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) and School Development Planning Support (SDPS) have not paid adequate attention to the intercultural problems and simply left the book on the shelf.

Advantages and Challenges of a Multicultural Classroom

As many as 70% of teachers stated in the questionnaire that multicultural classrooms have more advantages than disadvantages. As one teacher pointed out, 'I think that for children (Irish or international) to be able to live in a multicultural society without prejudice, having classmates from a variety of cultures and

backgrounds is hugely beneficial.' Newcomer children are eager to share the stories about their home countries, which increases awareness of other cultures, nationalities and traditions amongst their peers. Teachers indicate that pupils are more motivated to learn the geography or history of a country if they have a classmate who comes from that place. Sharing cultures broadens children's horizons and naturally instils in them tolerance. On the other hand, newcomer children by presenting their heritage gain self-confidence.

Being aware of this, teachers incorporate in their teaching exercises that allow for the cultural exchange to take place. Below are the outcomes of two such projects. The first is a story of a twelve-year-old girl, which was written as a part of the history assignment and later used to illustrate how history is created. This is what she wrote:

> I like my family. I have three sisters. I have two brothers. My mom's name is Nessa and my dad's name is Abdul. We came from Bangladesh in 2004.
> In Bangladesh I went to school. It was different. In Bangladesh the uniform was different. In Bangladesh we liked our uniform. In our school we have boys and girls. In our class we use a pen to write. In Bangladesh we don't take our lunch in school. We go home and eat curry and rice after school. In Bangladesh we read books and play blindman's buff and we play skipping.

The illustration 3 delineates an outcome of project work in another school. In the Second Class, a Polish boy gave a presentation on Poland to the rest of the class. At the end of the presentation, he asked eleven questions and his classmates had to write the answers in their exercise books. The pupils who provided correct answers to all of the questions won sweets.
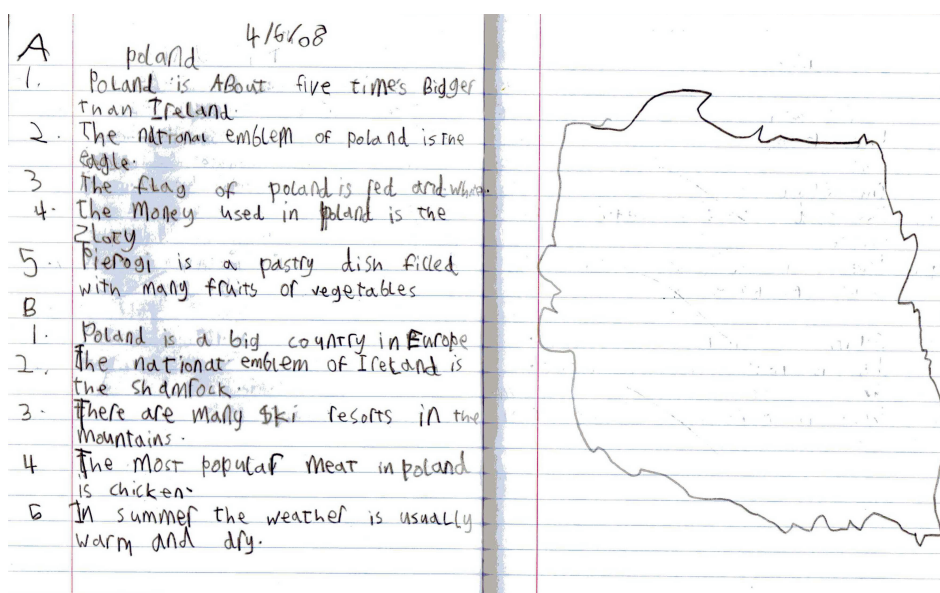
II. 3. A page from one of the winner's exercise book

Interestingly, even children from war torn countries are eager to talk about their rather shocking experiences. One of the schools that participated in the research admitted a twelve-year-old boy from Baghdad during the school year. He used to live in the war zone and his family was forced to flee from Iraq in the middle of the night. They walked all the way to Syria and after crossing the border flew to Hungary and finally to Ireland. At the time when the boy joined the school, the pupils from his class were learning about the Irish War of Independence. The class teacher was unsure whether the boy should take part in history classes, and therefore, consulted a psychologist. Having assessed the boy, the psychologist decided that it would be good for the boy to share his war memories with the classmates. In broken English he told about bombings, his daily life in the war zone and his escape from Iraq. One teacher noted, 'This was a powerful lesson not only for pupils but also for us. We all hugely benefit from an intercultural background.'

However, cultural differences might also turn out to be challenging. A key difference that teachers must remember about is that in Ireland children start school at the age of 4 and in many countries children would not normally begin school until 6 or 7 years of age. The new pupil, therefore, may never have experienced a school environment before, even though he or she is, for example, 8 years of age. As a result, the pupil may require support in understanding the most basic routines of the school day and the classroom. The following remark by an English language support teacher highlights the issue, 'Children arriving in senior classes with no evidence of formal education in their home country (Romania, Bangladesh, in my experience) need total immersion not only in language but also in school routines as they are totally at sea in the mainstream classroom.'

Sometimes, cultural diversity might become a source of misunderstandings and conflicts. Last year there was a national debate in Ireland over wearing headgear and other religious symbols in state schools. Some schools banned headscarves. The Muslim community objected to this disposition and made an appeal to the Minister of Education, Batt O'Keeffe. Batt O'Keeffe asked the Minister of State for Integration, Conor Lenihan, to investigate the problem. Lenihan wrote to the principals of 4000 primary and secondary schools in the country to seek their views on wearing the Islamic *hijab* headscarf by pupils (Breadun 2008). In September 2008, Batt O'Keeffe and Conor Lenihan jointly issued the following recommendations:

> In this context, no school uniform policy should act in such a way that it, in effect, excludes students of a particular religious background from seeking enrolment or continuing their enrolment in a school. However, this statement does not recommend the wearing of clothing in the classroom which obscures a facial view and creates an artificial barrier between pupil and teacher. Such clothing hinders proper communication (Walshe 2008).

Consequently, the *hijab*, a square of fabric, folded into a triangle, placed over the head and fastened under the chin has been allowed to be worn in schools while the *burqa* that covers the entire body and has a grille over the face has been forbidden.

Apart from conflicts that receive governmental attention, there are many issues that teachers have to deal with on their own. The following stories that happened to primary teachers participating in my research illustrate some of the challenges.

One teacher taught a boy from Iran who spoke no English on arrival and to communicate with him, she used a lot of body language. Every time she wanted to praise him for good work, she would smile and give him the thumbs-up. Two weeks later she was called to the principal's office where she had to face the furious father of the Iranian boy. It turned out that in Iran the thumb-up is an obscene gesture, equivalent to the use of the middle finger in the Western world.

Another teacher got into trouble with parents for asking a Muslim boy to play maracas and sing during the Music lesson. She was unaware that Islam prohibits music and playing instruments is 'haram' (unlawful). On that occasion, she was also asked to remove pigs from the child's books.

Teachers have also noticed that some African children are more physical than other pupils and this is rooted in their culture. The following comment is indicative of the problem: 'They are taught at home that if they have a problem, they have to deal with it themselves. This is how they are taught to be independent and self--reliant. The thing is that they solve their problems with a fist and it is hard to explain to them that they should go and ask a teacher for help.'

The situation gets even more complicated when their parents use corporal punishment because the teachers are afraid to report children's misbehaviour and seek parental assistance for fear that the children will experience physical abuse at home. There were instances of children missing school due to corporal punishment. One pupil admitted that he was absent from school because he was beaten for his bad marks.

In the face of corporal punishment, teachers find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea. Physical methods of punishment are illegal in Ireland and have to be reported. This, in turn, often involves Social Workers and results in a breakdown of trust between home and school. Some principals have started to give talks on the issue of corporal punishment at parent meetings to point out alternative ways of disciplining children at home. Furthermore, some schools have organized parenting courses in conjunction with the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, with newcomer families in mind, that incorporate sessions on discipline. They hope that the courses will help build positive relationships between school and home, and deal with the expectations of parents from different cultural backgrounds. Examples of such expectations are that children should be able to start school from the age of two, that the school day should be much longer, or that books and uniforms should be provided free of charge.

Parent meetings and parenting courses would undoubtedly be very effective if all parents in question attended them, however, even here the cultural differences might become a barrier. The following remark by one of the teachers is indicative of the problem:

> We have one parent who does not come at the appointed time because in her culture there is not that kind of concept. If the appointment is at nine o'clock in the morning,

she might come at eleven. And in some countries, there is not such a tradition of parents going into schools. Sometimes it is very hard if parents do not have English. It is very hard for them and for us. We have not really come up with any solutions.

In order to establish communication with newcomer parents some schools have organised English as a second language evening courses for them and one school came up with an idea of turning a classroom into a play room, where parents can stay with their children after school to talk to other parents or teachers while the children play with their friends.

Conclusive Comments

The Irish education system was unprepared for the influx of non-national pupils in many ways. The shortage of school buildings together with obscure legacies have resulted in a paradoxical situation where parents fight for school places. If the situation prolongs, it might induce the emergence of racism in the future. Some newcomer parents have already reported that they felt discriminated against. In response, Irish parents convince one that the cause of their anger is rooted not in prejudice against immigrants but in the lack of proper planning by the government. The following comment by Declan Kettle is indicative of opinions expressed by other Irish parents: 'All intentionally they [government] create the segregation within new communities. If schools had sufficient capacity for everybody, we would have well--educated, multicultural, brilliant communities' (RTÉ 2007). However, there were also more antagonised voices like that of Nicola King: 'If you bring up this subject, people think that you are racist. We are not racist. We are in the minority now in their community and in their schools as far as I can see. The majority of classes consists of foreign national children' (RTÉ 2007).

Delayed reaction from the government might result in conflicts and the appearance of racism which, as in case of all other social phenomena, will be transferred from adults to children. Many newcomer pupils have already experienced oppression from their Irish peers. In one of the schools participating in the research, a Chinese girl was ridiculed by her classmates for dancing the Irish dance. This is how she recalled the incident: 'They said «You can't dance the Irish dance because you're Chinese. Chinese people can't dance the Irish dance». The teacher said that they were jealous because I was a very good dancer.' In another school a girl in Junior Infants refused to sit next to a Nigerian boy for fear of turning black. In yet another school a Romanian boy was laughed at because he could not speak English and his classmates would steal his lunch repeatedly.

Teachers admit that there were cases of racial incidents: 'Unfortunately, I have witnessed and heard of racist behaviours in primary schools. I feel that racism is a potential issue and can never be ignored,' wrote one of the respondents in the questionnaire. Teachers assure that all serious incidents are given immediate attention but they also note that the reported instances of racism have to be always double-checked because some of them might be simple misunderstandings. One English language support teacher recalled a story of her pupil: 'Abdul came very sad

to my class one day. He said that children didn't say back hello to him. I asked, «What do they do when you say hello to them?». «They say 'hiya'».'

Another concern raised during my research by some parents and teachers was that due to the large number of non-English speaking pupils the quality of education may be decreasing as teachers are unable to deliver the primary curriculum in the way it should be delivered. Instead they have to adapt the material to suit non-national pupils. The following comment by a class teacher is indicative of the problem:

> Depends on the number, if there is an imbalance - I have heard about the school in Navan where last year in Junior Infant class there were four Irish children and twenty--four non-national children, none of whom spoke English – there is no way in that classroom that you are going to deliver the Irish primary school curriculum because what you would be doing in that classroom is totally different. In a situation like that you would have to say that it is going to influence the level of education.

It is interesting to note that the issues concerning the situation in schools have been frequently discussed in the Irish media. This indicates that immigration has created a new dynamic context within which new approaches to multicultural education and society are being developed.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł przechodzi od przedstawienia ogólnego obrazu sytuacji do prezentacji poszczególnych jej zagadnień na zasadzie działania zoomu. Otwiera go krótkie wprowadzenie nakreślające kontekst badania. W jego ramach prześledzone są zmiany demograficzne, które zaszły w Irlandii w ciągu ostatnich lat oraz wpływ fali imigracyjnej na sytuację w szkolnictwie. Następnie krótko została opisana struktura i funkcjonowanie szkół podstawowych w Irlandii. Opis ten stanowi tło do analizy istotnych aktów obowiązującego prawa, które kształtują obecną sytuację uczniów-emigrantów w szkołach podstawowych. Na koniec podjęta jest próba zaprezentowania opinii nauczycieli o korzyściach i wyzwaniach związanych z istnieniem klas zróżnicowanych etnicznie; w tym celu zostały przytoczone ich wypowiedzi z wywiadów. Artykuł ma na celu „panoramiczne zobrazowanie" świata, do którego wkracza nowoprzybyłe, nieznające języka angielskiego dziecko – warto zaznaczyć, że Polskie dzieci stanowią znaczącą część tej grupy.