

Number of Polish weekend schools doubles over the past three years to 24

Demand on the rise as 4,000 students seek to maintain native language skills

Parents want children to be able to communicate with family back home

GENEVIEVE CARBERY

The number of Polish weekend schools in Ireland has doubled in the past three years, according to figures provided by the Polish embassy.

Every Sunday about 70 students travel through the bo-reens of Donegal to one such classroom.

There, the children of all ages learn of a culture and language that will help them read their grandmother's letters, listen to her stories about the Nazi razing of Warsaw, learn about her love of Chopin or under-

stand her admiration for Pope John Paul II.

Elsewhere throughout the country, some 4,000 students attend 24 schools. Five are funded by the Polish embassy but the rest are community funded and they have grown from just one in 2005 and 11 in 2009, according to figures supplied to *The Irish Times*.

So what motivates parents to send their children to such weekend schools?

Some want to keep their children's language skills up in case of a return to Poland but many who have settled in Ireland do

so to help their children keep in touch with their native family.

"When parents go back home for holidays, it is important to them that their child can communicate with their grandparents," Letterkenny Polish school principal Robert Fabisiak explained. "Even if they are thinking of staying in Ireland forever, they want their children to speak and write good Polish."

Like many community schools, it uses the empty weekend premises of the local secondary school (Errigal College where Mr Fabisiak teaches PE).

Points race

The race for points is another major motivation for the many "very ambitious" Polish parents to maintain their children's bilingualism.

"Last year, three of the seven best students in the Leaving Cert [at Errigal College] were Polish," he said.

The school has also become part of the community, holding family fun days and other events which are open to Irish and Polish children.

The number of students taking Polish in the Leaving Cert has grown from 10 in 2005 to

707

The number of students taking Polish in the Leaving Cert last year

120,000

The number of Polish people living in Ireland, according to the 2011 census

707 last year, of whom 91 per cent obtained an A, B or C.

Those being examined in a non-curricular language speak it as a mother tongue.

There are strong hopes in Polish circles that the language will be introduced as a short course in the reformed Junior Cycle programme.

"While children may be able to speak it, unless they learn it in the weekend schools they can't write academically," said Niamh Nestor, a UCD doctoral candidate studying language and identity, who also runs a bilingual forum for parents.

Research shows bilingualism helps with literacy, social and analytical skills, adaptability and self confidence, she said.

School links

She would like to see Polish introduced earlier in the school curriculum, with some State recognition and more links between Irish and Polish schools.

The detailed and extensive curriculum used by the weekend schools is set out by the Polish ministry of education and in-

cludes Polish language, history and geography.

While the Polish foreign ministry operates schools in many countries, Ireland is exceptional in having five funded by the Polish government.

This is mainly because Ireland has the third highest number of Polish migrants in the world and the most per capita. With 120,000 Poles, according to the 2011 census, Polish is the second most widely spoken language in the State.

Among the benefits for this bilingual generation to Ireland is being a hub for European companies which trade in Poland and opening Ireland up to Poland's fast-growing market, according to the Polish embassy.

While some people in Ireland may think that bilingualism was unusual, from a global perspective it was monolingualism which was unusual, Ms Nestor said.



'They wanted their children to be ready to return to Poland'

Case study

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When Agnieszka Matys-Foley moved to Ireland from her home near Poland's Baltic coast seven years ago, she sent her two young children to a Polish weekend school in case the family decided to return.

Now married to an Irish man, with a newborn baby and knowing she will not go back, she continues to speak Polish to her children and raise them as bilinguals, but her motivations have changed.

"When they came over here we did not know how long we were going to stay and I wanted

them to be able to catch up on their education when they got back to Poland," she said.

She wants her son Mateusz (13) to have the option of living with his Polish father some day or studying in Poland. "But without the ability to read or write it's not an option," she said.

'Huge mistake'

Even though her three-month-old daughter Klara is Irish-born and has not yet uttered words in any language, Matys-Foley is also determined to bring her up with two languages: "I will only speak Polish to her and hope one day she will be bilingual," she said. Sometimes parents give up on bilingualism because children are slower to

begin speaking but this is a "huge mistake", she said.

Matys-Foley works as a manager at one of Dublin's fast-growing weekend schools, named Dublinie SEN, which is in Cabra and has over 300 students of all ages and 30 staff.

She first got involved in the Polish schools as a parent when she offered to teach English to other parents while they waited for their children's classes, with many travelling long distances for the schools.

She has noticed a shift in recent years which reflects the change in her own motivations. "At the start the majority of children were born in Poland... the main reason people were sending them over was that

they wanted them to be ready to return to Poland and back into its system of education."

She notes a "big switch" in the last few years. "More and more children are born here [to Polish parents] and often, if they go to creche, their English is far better than their Polish."

The school now has 60 children in the early years course with increasing numbers unable to speak Polish. "Not so many parents are planning to go back but they still want their children to be able to speak [and write] Polish," she says.

Matys-Foley does not think the schools go against the integration of children into Irish society. However, her own children were slow to tell others

about the Polish school.

"I think they were a bit ashamed that when others have a day off they have to be up early going to another school." She notes that this is changing as more mainstream school teachers come to know about them.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism makes it easier for children to learn a third language, helps them to learn faster and results in better memory and concentration. She says the children mix very well and do everything they can to integrate.

She feels there are major benefits to children being bilingual and going to the weekend school. It means they have "no

problem emailing their grandparents and friends", she said.

However she worries about a lack of awareness among Polish parents that the schools exist or that their children could take Polish for their Leaving Cert, with only an eighth of Polish children in Ireland attending the weekend schools.

The children think "it is normal to read and write in Polish". However, "they don't realise how things could have been if they had not gone to the Polish school".

■ Agnieszka Matys-Foley, with two of her children Klara and Martina, runs a weekend school.
PHOTOGRAPH: DARÁ MAC DONAILL