

“Sharks and Sprats”

“Sharks and Sprats”:

Polish Immigrant Teenage Children in Ireland

By

Beata Sokolowska

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9009-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9009-0

To my uprooted daughters Lidia and Victoria, with love

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FOREWORD

In 2002 the Irish Census reported about 2,000 Poles in Ireland. Nine years later that figure was more than fifty times larger at 123,000 (Central Statistics Office 2012). This mass migration is the context for Beata Sokolowska's study.

Relative to the size of the Irish population, the Polish migration to Ireland was far bigger than the simultaneous migration of Poles to Britain. There were, however, other important differences. Unlike in Britain, there was no meaningful pre-existing Polish community in Ireland, and as Beata Sokolowska notes, most Poles had very little knowledge of contemporary Ireland. Furthermore, compared to those who went to Britain, the Poles who came to Ireland were more likely to have educational qualifications. Nonetheless, just as in Britain, overall migrants from the new member states of the EU have experienced occupational downgrading—they tend to work in less-skilled jobs than could be expected on the basis of their educational qualifications (Voitchovsky 2014).

Many Poles had come to Ireland to work in the construction industry. Just after Poland's accession to the EU, the long-running Irish boom turned into a credit and property bubble. In his report on the European countries hit by the financial crisis, the American journalist Michael Lewis describes the origins of the Irish boom: "Left alone in a dark room with a pile of money, the Irish decided what they really wanted to do with it was to buy Ireland. From each other" (2011, 84). This meant a massive building boom—at the end of 2007 employment in construction reached fully 13.4% of total employment (Central Statistics Office 2008, 18). It also meant massive and unprecedented labour immigration on a scale without any parallels elsewhere in Europe. In our study of Polish migration to Ireland, my colleagues and I termed this a "goldrush labour market" (Krings et al. 2013, 38).

Then, in 2008, the Celtic Tiger collapsed. Europe's biggest boom turned into Europe's biggest slump. Unemployment soared. Many Poles went home. But many did not. As this book shows, one reason why so many stayed was because of the people whom nobody ever asked where they wanted to be—the children.

As these children grow towards adulthood they comprise an increasing proportion of the Polish population of Ireland. They were originally

unwilling migrants, not wanting to leave their home and friends. Indeed, as Sokolowska shows, some describe themselves as forced migrants. For these young people, growing up in Ireland has posed challenges never faced by their parents. With few resources, they have had to make new friends and new acquaintances, master a new language, and navigate a different educational system. Their failures and their successes represent are the topic of this path-breaking book.

Professor James Wickham DPhil (Sussex) FTCD
Lead Researcher, TASC Working Conditions in Ireland Project

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to a large number of colleagues and friends. First and foremost, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my supervisor Dr Peter Mühlau, whose assistance was indispensable throughout my PhD research project on which this book is based. Warm thanks to all my Polish and Irish friends, to my colleagues from Trinity College Dublin and from Quality and Qualifications Ireland for their advice, support and recommendations—thank you, each and every one of you. Thank you to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for providing direction and publishing.

I am immensely grateful to the Polish immigrant families who volunteered their time and shared their incredible migratory encounters with me. I would also like to pay a special tribute to Ania, who participated during two waves of interviews, before passing away from cancer. Ania wanted to be a doctor. This brave girl, during her illness, patiently went through all the painful procedures with the hope that it would make her a better, more understanding physician in the future. Ania is no longer with us, but she is in our hearts and in our thoughts.

Finally, I would especially like to thank my loving family for their patience and ongoing practical and emotional support during the process of completing this book. In particular, a heartfelt thanks to my husband for supporting me all the way through my initial doctoral research and now this book, and my twins—Lidia for designing a cover for this book, and Victoria for your critical eye and reflexivity. You are the reason for all this!

—Beata Sokolowska
December 2015

INTRODUCTION

Poland and the Republic of Ireland (Ireland) have a lot in common. Both countries are, by and large: “White and Catholic.” Both countries were subjected to various invasions, partitions, and an emigration exodus. Whilst historically, Ireland was characterised for a long time by waves of emigration, during the economic boom known as the “Celtic Tiger” Ireland became a country of inward immigration. The increase of immigrants was very evident among some national groups, particularly Poles.

When Poland joined the European Union (EU) in May 2004, Polish nationals were instantaneously granted the right to live and work in the UK, Ireland, and Sweden. While the larger percentage of Polish post-accession immigrants chose the UK (Sweden was the least popular new migratory destination, mainly because of the language barrier), the attractiveness of Ireland remained quite competitive due to its more favourable labour market conditions during the “Celtic Tiger” period. Between 2005 and 2008, the highest allocation of Personal Public Service Numbers (PPS Numbers) in Ireland was to Polish citizens (CSO 2011), who had quickly formed a large immigrant population there.

It has been over a decade since Poland’s accession to the European Union. This period has been marked by a plethora of post-EU enlargement migration research. Empirical findings have become important sources of information in the field of political and socio-economic research. New migratory movement has gained a lot of academic interest in Ireland, yet very little research has been conducted with immigrant children there.

Despite an excess of literature on the migration of Poles following the EU enlargement, the presence of Polish immigrant children and the issues faced by them in Ireland have somehow been neglected by contemporary scholars. It is hoped that this book partially fills this gap, even if its research findings pertaining to acculturation are inclusive of transnational family reunification, but are exclusively confined to the Polish respondents interviewed during the course of my doctoral research.

Undeniably, for Poles who considered migration during the “Celtic Tiger” era, the “Emerald Isle”¹ had become a land of opportunity, offering an abundance of jobs with generous wages, leaving immigrants better off in comparison to their Polish counterparts who stayed at home. When I arrived in Ireland in the summer of 2006, at the peak of the “Celtic Tiger” period, apart from hearing Irish-accented English, I could easily distinguish the characteristic soft sound of the Polish language on almost every street. Besides this, Polish shops (*Polski sklep*), Polish newspapers (*Polska Gazeta Irlandia*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*), and, of course, Polish barbers (*Polski fryzjer*) were noticeable almost everywhere in the Greater Dublin Area.

The majority of entrants to Ireland tended to be inexperienced migrants, often unfamiliar with Irish culture. It is not commonly known that, before the 2004 EU enlargement, many prospective Polish immigrants had very vague ideas of the geographical location of Ireland, and very little knowledge of its political and historical context (Bell 2012; Burrell 2009; Kempny 2010). Nevertheless, over time a considerable number of Poles with their school-age children, of whom many were teenaged, arrived in Ireland in a chain-migration mode.

I was one of those parents who availed of the EU enlargement opportunity. My husband and my two teenage daughters followed me to Ireland, where we soon realised that adjusting to our new life was going to be a long and stressful process. Apart from family reunification, Polish émigré parents had to face a new reality, namely their own and their children’s acculturation, which in a nutshell can be described as “second-culture acquisition” (Rudmin 2009).

Given my own personal experience, if I had known how difficult it would be for my children to adapt I probably would never have decided to migrate. With basic English and a lack of host-society culture knowledge, my twins started their acculturation journey quite abruptly one afternoon in July 2006. Disillusioned, angry, and lonely for a long time, they nagged me to change my mind and return to Poland. The disappointment was mutual. My strong parental belief that children will open their “hearts and souls” to Western opportunities “went up in smoke” within weeks. I was reminded almost every day that they had been uprooted, taken from their homeland, deprived of valuable friendships, stripped of the ability to communicate effectively, and, more importantly, they did not ask for that change.

¹ “Emerald Isle” is the poetic metaphor for Ireland, which is known as a green island.

Admittedly, the majority of Polish immigrant teenage children involuntarily followed their émigré parents. Upon arrival in the receiving society they had to learn how to navigate in a linguistically and culturally different arena, which meant moving through physical geographical space and the symbolic notion of social space characterised by the clear distinction of “before” and “after,” and “now and then” (Saldana 2003).

It is argued that while immigrants move from one socio-cultural space to another, they carry with them their shared cultural repertoire of meanings that creates their distinctive cultural intimacy (see Bourdieu 1996; Lefebvre 1991). Immigrants entering a new social space have neither the knowledge nor competences that are represented by natives, who as social actors are already familiar with the construct of their social context. On top of this, immigrants who enter their new social space are positioned on the existing hierarchy, which is occupied by other migrants’ cultures (Reed-Danahay and Brettell 2008). Therefore, the moment one opts for transnational migration, the challenging issues of new language, cultural behaviour, and lack of familiarity with culture symbols and local traditions cannot be ignored, as all of them form part of the culture shock. This draws our attention to the dynamic aspects of migration and brings about questions about social capital and the whole process of adjustment to the new socio-cultural arena.

It is argued that the acquisition and enhancement of social capital are continuous processes of negotiation and interaction between an individual and social context (Darmody et al. 2012b). Given the rapid socio-cultural change confronting immigrants, it is inevitable that familiarity and skills associated with the heritage culture are not easily transferable into the new culture in which immigrants are expected to socialise and participate (Brislin 2000; Dhruvarajan 1993). Moreover, regardless of cultural capital, migrants have to learn how to find their way in the new social arena and societal hierarchy (Fanning 2011). This has profound implications, indicating that the negotiation of social standing triggers change through time. Such a reality has repercussions for immigrants. Polish immigrant families and their teenage children were no exception to this, and acquisition of the above-mentioned knowledge with time enabled them to understand the Irish culture and its symbols, allowing them to navigate freely within Irish social structures.

In the case of our family, nothing went as expected; neither for us as parents, or for our children. The transition period lasted for over six months, adversely affecting every member of our reunited family and influencing every aspect of our transnational family life. Subsequently, an idea to find out how other Polish families with teenage children overcame

acculturation challenges had been formulated, initially leading to the doctoral research project entitled Longitudinal Acculturation Study with Polish Immigrant Teenagers (LASPIT).

The LASPIT examined transnational practices of Polish immigrant families. It incorporated issues around acculturation and migration in social spaces constructed at the intersection of immigrants' narratives, biographies, and geographical mobilities. It described the acculturation experiences of Polish immigrant teenage children in Ireland (based on the accessed sample of 34 Polish immigrant teenagers) longitudinally, from both time and context perspectives. Why, however, is the acculturation of immigrant children so important?

Immigrant children represent a growing percentage of the contemporary globalised migratory movement. A recent OECD Report indicates that in 2012 about 12.5% of all 15-year-old children had two foreign-born parents. This represents a 50% increase on the same figure from a decade earlier. On top of this, the integration of immigrant children, particularly of those with parents with low levels of education and fluency in the host-country language, is a growing concern (OECD 2014).² For example, the LASPIT shows that Polish uprooted immigrant children, over time, became cultural brokers, enabling their Polish parents to navigate between Polish and Irish cultures.

However, before I share the LASPIT findings in detail, I would like to emphasise that, so far, few studies have explored children's perspectives and, from a sociological view, there is a scarcity of research about immigrant children's experiences in Ireland. Transnational family practices and challenges are largely ignored (Ataca et al. 2005; Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Orellana et al. 2001; Phalet and Kosic 2006). Accordingly, there is a gap in understanding children's transnational incorporation, focusing on the formation of social relationships and the construction of identity and belonging that emerges out of cross-border contacts (Haikkola 2011).

From a societal point of view, the future of society lies in the hands of children, and it should not be forgotten that children help to constitute and reconfigure transnational social fields and transnational practices, which shape the contours of particular childhoods (Orellana et al. 2001). Lastly, immigrant children experience a particular constellation of changes that have lasting effects upon their development (see Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001), because they grow up between two cultures, their

² International Migration Outlook 2014, OECD Publishing.
DOI:10.1787/d5a8dce8-en. <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org>

heritage culture and the culture of the host country, in the process of second-culture acquisition called acculturation (Rudmin 2009).

Acculturation does not end abruptly. Immigrants continuously encounter multifarious acculturation experiences, which are relatable and more understandable as acculturation progresses in time. Subsequently, “social and psychological forces” (Kosic 2006), culture clash, and societal expectations of “fitting in” culturally, along with the parental responsibility of ensuring continuity of the heritage culture, make life as an immigrant quite challenging.

On top of this, our understanding of first-generation children’s transnationalism in comparison to their émigré parents is rarely present in the academic literature. More importantly, the impact of family migration on children’s relationships with their family and peers has received relatively little attention (Sime and Fox 2014). The existing literature is only beginning to give a voice to uprooted and misplaced children, and very little research has concentrated on the socio-psychological experiences of immigrant teenagers. Therefore, I would like to share these lived experiences of Polish immigrant teenage children in Ireland with a wider audience, along with the ups and downs of becoming an immigrant, a stranger, a foreigner. In doing this, I hope that this book will not only widen our knowledge of migratory perspectives of youth, but will also address many gaps in our understanding of migratory teenagers’ *modus operandi* in their ways of adapting to cultural diversity.

In a nutshell, this book paints a bigger picture of the immigrants’ world into which Polish teenage children have been thrown. It describes how young people articulate and negotiate their identities and pathways through peer hierarchies during the acculturation process. It draws on the LASPIT data, on the diverse experiences of the sampled group comprising Polish immigrant families, and the collective expertise of the key informants, namely Polish and Irish teachers. It is aimed at professionals working with immigrant youths, parents, academics, and educators interested in an inclusive approach that would help all children to adapt to cultural diversity. At the same time, this book examines the impact of globalisation and the implications of technological advancements on the lives of contemporary transnational families in general and children in particular. It centres on Polish immigrant children, and therefore parental narratives are cut to a minimum. It is my intention to publish comprehensive narratives regarding parental migratory decisions and their acculturation experiences in a separate publication in the near future.

The structure of this book reflects the approach of studying acculturation within its dimensionality and domain specificity, using diverse research

techniques. Subsequently, it starts with an introduction to sociological inquiry into the acculturation of Polish immigrant teenagers in Ireland, which outlines the rationale of this book.

Chapter one introduces the longitudinal acculturation study with Polish immigrant teenagers (LASPIT), and situates the study within the economic context of contemporary global migration. Through the exploration of the historical context of the transnational migration of Polish nationals, this chapter sketches the sociological context of new migration, driven mainly by free movement, legal access to employment and the post-2004 EU enlargement, which was a watershed moment in the history of contemporary migratory patterns in Europe. This chapter also explains why so many Polish families uprooted their children to settle in Ireland.

Chapter two scrutinises acculturation phenomenology in a broad literature in the context of immigrant adolescents. Through investigation of the psychology of acculturation with a particular focus on the acculturation process, this chapter provides the conceptualisation of interculturalism as a useful framework for researching culture. At the same time, the insider/outsider dichotomy and the notion of reflexivity through the prism of ethical quandary of research with underage participants are briefly outlined.

Chapter three presents the LASPIT findings chronologically and topically, starting from migratory decision-making, through the experiences of separation, uprooting and arrival in Ireland.

Chapter four provides an overview of secondary education in Ireland, offering a dual comparative perspective, on these two, so-different educational systems. It focuses on a very interesting moment in the acculturation process—the transition period. It is followed by chapter five, which offers insights into the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, Polish immigrant teenagers' acculturation strategies, and bullying experiences.

Chapter six summarises patterns of social interactions and networking with peers. It outlines the acculturation attitudes from gender and age perspectives, explaining the difference between being perceived a “Shark” or a “Sprat.”

Chapter seven provides a short description of Polish Saturday Schools in the context of Polish immigrant teenagers' perceptions of sacrifices and expectations. It also examines how the socio-cultural context profoundly shapes each newcomer's identity, affecting future trajectories of the “1.5 generation” of Polish immigrant teenagers.

The final chapter concludes by reflecting on the fascinating and surprising insights into the acculturation process and re-acculturation

experiences of Polish immigrant teenagers, and points towards implications arising from this research project.

CHAPTER ONE

MIGRATION AND CHILDREN

Over the past few decades, increasing globalisation has resulted in the dramatic rise of mobility. As a consequence, children as social actors become crucial figures of the contemporary globalised era. Sadly, children's voices as social actors in this arena are seldom heard and largely ignored.

In the European context, the recent rapid immigration of a diverse group of immigrants with children was generally triggered by the EU enlargement, posing additional challenges in the receiving countries across Europe (Busch 2012; Devine 2005). At the same time, academics acknowledge that there is a gap in the research around children's transnational incorporation (Haikkola 2011; Orellana et al. 2001).

Despite renewed interest in describing and problematising immigrant children's voices, there is very little research with immigrant children. The multiplication of discourses and research on new waves of post-2004 migration in the European context somehow ignored that transnational migrant children are an assemblage of social, economic, and cultural concerns. Noticeably, the presence of immigrant children, and the issues faced by Polish reunited families in Ireland, were somehow omitted by the contemporary scholars researching new waves of Polish post-accession migration.

This book gives a voice to a particular group of immigrants—Polish teenage children in Ireland. At the same time, it offers a snapshot of migration from Poland to Ireland with a special focus on transnational migratory practices, and is focused on Polish immigrant teenagers and their reunited families for the following reasons.

First, exploring the issues of children as social actors moves children from passive research objects to real and active participants in the contemporary transnational migration. The voice of Polish immigrant teenagers therefore became a powerful tool to elicit acculturation nuances. Secondly, there is a dearth of scholarly data describing how Polish immigrant families with teenage children cope with various acculturative stressors posed by the transnational migratory experience. Thirdly, in

order to gain a fuller picture of the migration impact on children, I felt that there was a need to examine teenage children's experiences in the context of parental views of children, the key informants being teachers from Irish secondary schools and from Polish Saturday Schools in Ireland; but foremost, I felt that we needed to empower immigrant children by giving them a voice.

Therefore, through the portraits embedded in the "ethnographic case study" (Merriam 1988), efforts were made to present prior and post-migration experiences of Polish immigrant teenage children, and outline the acculturation process that unfolded over the course of this longitudinal research. While I do not claim that my sample of 34 Polish immigrant teenagers is representative of all Polish immigrant children in Ireland, it certainly gives a flavour of what it means to be an acculturating Polish teenager in contemporary Ireland.

The Migration of Poles—retrospective and contemporary perspectives

Social transformations that took place in post-Communist Poland (after 1989) have led to high unemployment and the overall pauperisation of Polish society (GUS 2009). As mentioned before, the 2004 EU enlargement triggered unprecedented migratory movement, resulting in a change from about 2,000 Poles in Ireland (CSO 2002) to around 200,000 at the height of the boom, and to about 116,000 (Census 2011) during the recession. Despite this significant decrease, Poles formed a visible community, with the Polish language being currently the second (after English) most spoken language in Ireland (Census 2011).

The contemporary migration of Poles is set in its own context. The lack of perspectives combined with economic vulnerability resulting from precarious labour market conditions—the push factor—was the most common reason for the migratory exodus of Poles, while the attractiveness of the Irish "goldrush labour market" (Wickham et al. 2009) was identified as the pull factor. Finally, Ireland, and particularly the Greater Dublin Area, had become a popular destination for Polish migrants after the 2004 EU accession, setting the specific context of Poland as a sending country, and positioning Ireland as a new destination.

Understandably, in light of the legal mobility within the EU, many view migration as an opportunity to accumulate money, and gain experience and fluency in English (Dzięglewski 2010; Wickham et al. 2009). Others (Burrell 2009; Kaczmarczyk and Okólski 2008; Kempny 2010; Ryan et al. 2009; White 2013) argue that this unprecedented

migratory influx, particularly to Ireland and the UK, was caused by the universal need to avail of a higher standard of living.

Regardless of these views, surely the new post-EU enlargement migration of Polish nationals differs from the great migration of Poles at the beginning of the twentieth century. While historically socio-cultural adjustment was greatly facilitated by the long hiatus in European immigration (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918; Suárez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard 2001), the migratory influx of Poles to Ireland significantly differs from the American experience, especially in the context of migratory discourses.

First of all, this “new migration” (Giddens 2008) is generally characterised by so-called “free movers” (Favell 2003; 2008) with “high aptitude[s] for time and space” (Corcoran 2013), a strong reliance on modern information technology, and cheap means of transport. Whilst, in the past, Polish immigrants could seldom visit their homeland due to the high costs of intercontinental journeys (between Europe and America), Polish immigrants in Ireland have formed visible transnational relationships between Ireland (the host country) and Poland (the home country) (Bobek 2011; Garapich and Osipovič 2007; Salamońska 2013).

Retrospective accounts of migratory experiences of Polish immigrants indicate that the technology advancement has created explicit opportunities that allow for maintaining relationships with extended families, forming transnational ties and creating interesting dynamics between the “Emerald Isle” and Poland. This was an important factor, because Polish immigrant parents often arrived in Ireland alone, particularly in the initial migratory stage (family reunification in Ireland usually took place at a later stage). However, contrary to the old migration, migrants can presently visit or invite their separated families to the host country due to the availability of cheap flights that even allow a return home if necessary, for instance in the case of a family emergency, within less than three hours.

Factoring out geographical distance means that contemporary immigrants can maintain their meaningful relationships with the extended family, in real time, through the latest technologies. This new form of transnational movement brought about by EU enlargement reflects contemporary global economies based on flexibility, mobility, and individualisation (Fitzgerald 2013; Wickham 2013), and has a significant impact on the transnational migrants. Contrary to Poles going to the “new land” in the nineteenth century in the “one-way ticket” mode, immigrants are not presently physically detached from their heritage, culture, and family; therefore, they are not pressurised to acculturate in an accelerated

way. Yet, the ways in which immigrants are able to negotiate multiple identities and cultures are crucial for their success and incorporation into European societies (see Phalet and Kosic 2006).

Economic context matters—why so many Polish families uprooted their children to settle in Ireland

The imagery is suggestive: international migration is a powerful and transformative force, producing profound social changes not only in the sending and receiving countries, but above all, among the immigrants themselves and their descendants.

(Portes and Rumbaut 2004, 1162)

Did you know that Polish teenagers, who followed their parents to Ireland, not only gained a new status of “immigrants” but also, similar to other immigrant children, had to adjust to their new socio-cultural situations. It is argued that this differentiated migrant children from their Irish peers who, particularly during the “Celtic Tiger” era, had no experience of forced migration or unemployment (see Lalor et al. 2007).

Resources to cope with challenging situations, such as established friendship networks and the extended family, have been more difficult to access due to the relocation. Thus, it was quite perplexing why so many Polish families, who had respectable jobs and their own accommodation in Poland, uprooted their teenage children and moved to Ireland to start their new life “from scratch” in linguistically and culturally different settings.

In order to answer this question we need to go back to 2004. At the time, the population of Poland was approximately 38 million people, and Poland in general was struggling with economic restructuring. Strikingly, according to GUS (2009), some locations in Poland reported having an unemployment rate of 20.6% in 2004.

Poland’s accession to the EU and the opening of the labour markets resulted in opportunities to work legally in relatively new migratory destinations (Ireland, UK, and Sweden etc.). Subsequently, a significant number of Polish nationals decided to leave Poland. The new mobility within the EU gained its own impetus. In a relatively short period, a large percentage of Polish nationals arrived in Ireland without having an established community. Instead, arriving migrants relied heavily on the informal networks in finding their first employment and in “learning the ropes” in the Irish settings. With time, their spouses and children followed them and settled in Ireland.

The large influx of immigrant families came as a surprise to the receiving countries. For example, in Ireland the number of immigrant

children increased by 50% (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012) in comparison to the Census of 2006. In 2011, there were 93,005 immigrant children in Ireland, accounting for 8% of the total child population. The influx of cheap labour migrants, not immigrant families with their teenage children, had been envisaged. Instantaneously, it posed the question of why so many Polish parents uprooted their children and moved to the “unknown,” where their starting positions in the social stratum were significantly lower than in Poland.

The answer is simple—Polish parents, like many other migrants, were lured by the Irish “goldrush labour market” (Wickham et al. 2009) that could offer them and their offspring a better standard of living.

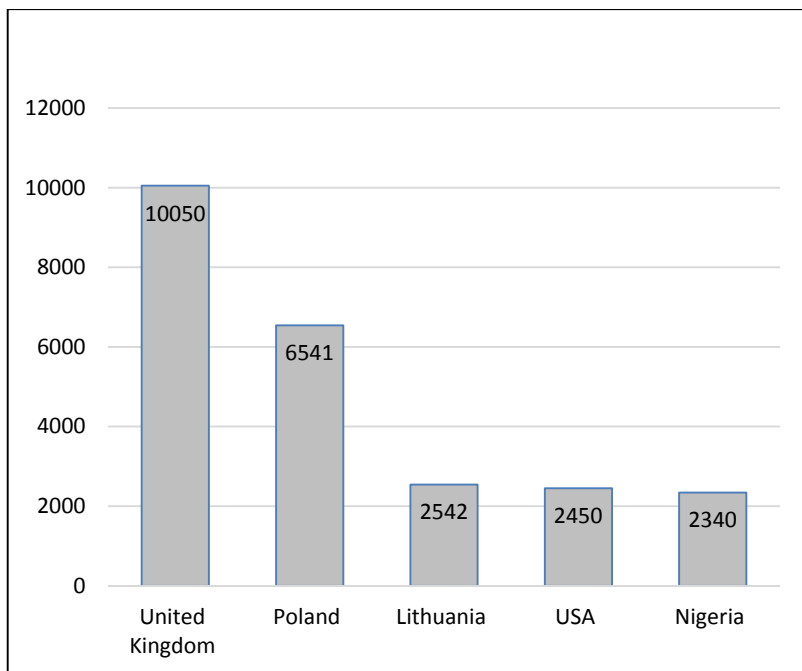
The value of children—reflecting on the relevance of the LASPIT research project

In order to ensure that [all] children [including immigrant children] attain what society wishes for them ... we must have an understanding of children and how they develop, what factors adversely affect their progress and what factors will promote their optimum development. Gaining this understanding is the driving force behind past, present, and future research with children and crosses all professional boundaries.

(Greig et al. 2007, 6)

The 2011 Census indicates that Poles became the largest group of immigrants in Ireland, and Polish immigrant children have formed a visible majority within the Irish secondary education system post-EU enlargement 2004 (Devine 2005; 2011; Darmody et al. 2012a). Furthermore, according to the Department of Education and Skills, the most recent statistical data concerning the presence of immigrant children in Irish secondary schools shows that Polish newcomer students are the second largest group of immigrants, just after students born in the UK (Department of Education and Skills 2014).

Table 1.1 Students born in other countries attending Irish secondary schools (top five)



Source: Department of Education and Skills 2014

The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), in their 2009 report entitled “Adapting to Diversity: Irish Schools and Newcomer Students,” noted that very little was known about the experiences of newcomer pupils in schools in Ireland (Smyth et al. 2009). Noticeably, Polish immigrant students have formed the largest group of newcomers from non-English speaking countries (see Table 1.1. above). What do we know about their experiences? Do Polish teenagers in general experience a warm welcome and acceptance, or neglect and rejection? What strategies do they develop in order to adapt to a new environment, in which “being popular and accepted is very highly valued” (Leadbeater 1996).

The LASPIT research project, which kicked off in autumn 2009, partially filled this gap by gathering retrospective accounts from non-recent Polish immigrant teenage children and by tracking newcomers in real time longitudinally. It described socio-cultural adjustment from the perspective of Polish immigrant teenagers, capturing acculturation

experiences through individual lenses. This approach was based on the understanding that people function as individuals, regardless of being embedded in a group(s) (Bourdieu 1996; Liddy 2013). At the same time, it has been acknowledged that individuals operate within a relational and hierarchical realm that legitimises certain models of behaviour and social practices that encompass complex relationships among identity, ethnicity, and inequality (King-O’Riain 2006).

From “boom to bust”

Interestingly, in 2009, at the early stages of the LASPIT research project, the economic situation all over the world had changed, with the recession affecting European countries in particular. The Irish economic downturn started in 2008, and the economic crisis noticeably affected all social structures, the Irish education system, immigrants, and their offspring.

Compared with other countries, the 2008 recession hit Ireland particularly hard (Mühlau 2012). The rapid economic shift from “boom to bust” positioned the cohort of the LASPIT interviewees on a very interesting time scale, given that the majority of Polish immigrant teenagers were enrolled in secondary schools during the “Celtic Tiger” era (between 2004–8), but were about to graduate from and leave their secondary schools during the economic downturn (2008–14). This specific timeline provided thought-provoking insights into the emigration of the first-generation of Polish immigrant families during the time of boom and recession.

Unsurprisingly, many Poles returned to Poland or moved to other destinations when things went from “boom to bust,” but surprisingly, a large percentage of Poles who settled in Ireland with their families has remained here (Census 2011; Darmody et al. 2012a), despite the fact that, following the recession, their employment status has changed or been significantly affected, particularly around the construction sector. Polish émigré parents living in the Greater Dublin Area conveyed the impression that many of them are torn between staying and returning. Qualitative interviews, however, have explicitly shown that practically all Polish interviewed families with teenage children are not returning to Poland. Why, then, do Polish families stay in recessionary Ireland?

A synopsis drawn from the empirical LASPIT data, along with the evidence provided by UK and Irish scholars (Burrell 2009; Krings et al. 2009; White 2011), indicates that, despite the worsening of economic conditions, the majority of Polish immigrant families will remain in the host countries for a while, simply because they do not want to uproot their

offspring again. Jolanta, aged 52, a mother of three, summarised it succinctly: “The current economic climate has changed so much. It affects your whole life ... I don’t know what to do ... It is tough ... I cannot uproot my children again and you need a few thousand euros here.” Overall, the qualitative data clearly indicates that Polish émigré parents preferred to stay in recessionary Ireland than return to Poland, uproot their children and disrupt their offspring’s lives again.

Cultural integration of Polish parents and their children in Ireland – the striking differences

Contemporary literature indicates that the Polish influx to Ireland was viewed extremely positively through the prism of successful integration. Nonetheless, in light of the LASPIT evidence pertaining to Polish reunited families, I argue that this integration, predominantly cultural and social, is superficial, segmented, and far from desirable.

Polish émigré parents, in particular, have proven to be the, “birds of passage haunted by the dreams of return” (Portes 2004). Given the opportunity to integrate, they have not fully embraced “the new” and chosen to stay in their “comfort zones,” which at the practical level means cultivation of Polishness in all its dimensions. For instance, Polish émigré parents watch Polish TV, and read and follow Polish news. They often cook Polish food and observe Polish national holidays. Surprisingly, they often cannot write or read in English, and they do not enjoy nor do they understand the Irish jokes or Irish sense of humour. This poses a big question mark in terms of their capacity for social engagement, and has repercussions for a child’s agency.

The international literature highlights the importance of children’s experiences and educational attainment at school, particularly in the context of positive and rewarding interactions with peers. Peer-based social capital acquired during curricular and extra-curricular activities cannot be undermined as it is associated with the feeling of participation, belonging, and being a “part of” (Darmody et al. 2012b). The early LASPIT findings have already shown that the migratory journey and the transition period were identified as the most stressful experiences, above all for Polish newcomer children who, particularly at the beginning, often felt alienated and “out of place” with no English language and no friends. This was especially true for those underage interviewees who, as indicated in Appendix 1, do not have any siblings, and therefore had nobody of their own age, culture, and language to socialise with during and after school.