



Andrzej Murzyn, Bogusław Śliwerski, *Irlandia. Zielona Wyspa międzykulturowej oraz egalitarnej edukacji i opieki*, Kraków 2020, Impuls

Polish pedagogical comparative studies, have been enriched by a volume by Andrzej Murzyn and Bogusław Śliwerski, dedicated to Ireland. The authors were right to assume that it is “imperative [...] to introduce the peculiarity of the educational, social and educational policies in this country, as it is particularly close to our society in cultural terms” (p. 16).

Recent studies have demonstrated, that the Irish society is facing increasing inequalities in different areas. Racial, ethnic, cultural, social status, or other differences generate prejudice and discriminatory attitudes, that cause unrest among persons responsible for education, and these negative phenomena have actual impact on the life of children and their families. A 2001 report dedicated to early education (as it is the primary scope of analysis within the monograph) in the country, states that all children have the right for equal access, participation and results. The aforementioned means that giving them ability to learn in an inclusive, stimulating, culturally adequate environment free of discrimination. However – according to the Authors – the official 2011 European Commission statement, includes a constatation, that European countries, there is lack of interest regarding other aspects of diversity, apart from working with high risk children. There are later reports regarding early education. The 2017 OECD report was the first attempt to collect all key indicators regarding early education, and turned attention to the increasing diversity of societies. In relation with the aforementioned, integration of immigrant’s children will be a key issue for years, however, the participation of their children in early education is low. On the other hand, the 2015 report by experts within this field of education recommended, in working with early childhood students, considering the shaping of their own identity as an issue equally important as cognitive and communication skills.

In the Republic of Ireland, education without prejudice was considered to be one of the most important challenges in early education, as children may be understood well only if we consider their relation to the family, community, and direct caretaker. The country is focusing on making the level of education equal, already while working with the youngest children, so that they have no larger difficulties in achieving scholarly success.

The foundation of the monograph Author’s analyses is the theory by Murray and Urban, regarding social and educational determinants affecting the development of the youngest children in Ireland, not known in our country. Moreover, the Authors decided to “link their own analysis to the change of paradigm regarding comparative pedagogy, which consists on the transfer of the school system knowledge systematisation process, towards a contextual, interpretative and issue-oriented knowledge, that would consider the historical, political, social and cultural background” (p. 19).

Chapter I is dedicated to the history of the Emerald Isle. Ireland is a Catholic country. It suffered drastic consequences due to the banishment of an unpopular king Diarmaid Mac Murchadha, who turned for assistance to Henry II the king of England. The aforementioned led to Ireland losing its sovereignty, and becoming one of the first English colonies. Fierce struggle for the freedom of the Emerald Isle have lasted from the 12th century until 1921. The northern province – Ulster – caused most issues. In order to reinforce control over the rebellious province, the Catholic Irish were uprooted, and protestant Scots and Englishmen settled in. In 1921, when the free Irish Republic was established, Ulster remained a part of the British Commonwealth.

Chapter II includes the analysis of educational policies of the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. The 1937 Republic's constitution states, that the state must not harm the liberties of parents to send children to any schools. They have the right of exclusiveness in educating their children in compliance with their conscience. Ireland is the only EU country that retains the religious character of educational system, with the decisive role played by churches, however, the system being governed by the Department of Education. Its role consists of controlling education and the organisation of state exams. Therefore, the system is decentralised, focused on socialisation and autonomy of schools. It is worth emphasising on the state budget financing training for parents who cooperate with schools, as well as, for regional associates. However, strengthening the role of school boards and local societies in managing educational institutions yields much controversy. Teachers are complaining that institutions which exclude their representatives have privileges such as: the selection of school principal, appointing and promoting staff, as well as, disciplining and firing them. The opinion of the school board determines the teachers' salaries. However, it is the core principle of neoliberalism in education, that exploits the slogans of communising school for the aims of satisfying interests that have little to do with it.

In the latest (2020) report by *The Economist* dedicated to the state of democracy in 167 countries in the world, Ireland was included to the "full democracy" countries category, in high 6th place. The following categories are as follows: *flawed democracy*, *hybrid regimes* and *authoritarian regimes* (p. 71). According to the categories mentioned, to the Longman dictionary and the democracy models by David Held (2010), as well as, counter-democracy by Pierre Rosanvallon, I wouldn't treat *flawed democracy* as "erroneous democracies", but as imperfect democracies, particularly, as the following categories include hybrid regimes, e.g. corporatism, and authoritarian regimes. Poland was included among imperfect democracies – in 57th position – however, not among hybrid or authoritarian regimes. It would be worth for the accusers of our democracy from Poland and from the European Union to realise the fact.

The first 1999 White Paper dedicated to early education, appealed for its holistic model, focused on a child until primary education included. The 1936 act introduced compulsory education from age 5, so that the child would spend the first two years in a school for early childhood education, preparing for primary education lasting from 7 to 11 years of age. The Authors are rightly highlighting, that the low age threshold of compulsory education in Great Britain was introduced at the end of the 19th century, and it have been improved since then. However, the flaw of the analysed chapter is the lack of a clear description and analysis of solutions in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, and adding to that – there is information regarding Great Britain as well (example above). It is not always clear to which country the data is related. Ulster has a ministry of education parallel to the English ministry. Since 2007, educational content is

modified in Ulster, similar to England. Emphasis is placed on key knowledge and skills, and the methodology of teaching is of highly pragmatic character.

Only within the half of the 19th century, Irish language teaching previously replaced by English was restored, while in 2006, the ministry was obligated to support the development of Irish language in the Irish Republic, and Scottish, in Northern Ireland. Until that time, no university would prepare the staff to teach Irish language.

In a subsection dedicated to the school system, the authors describe it according with the international distinction from ESCED 0 to ISCED 5 – higher education. However, they omitted the ISCED 2 phase (p. 47).

Chapter II erroneously presents the distinction of high schools (p. 53) following Dobromir Dziejulak (his book is filled with errors and cannot constitute a good source for the analyses of education in the British Isles). The presented division confuses the indivisible criteria of distinction into: types of schools – grammatical (general education, classic), extended (for all children after 11 years of age) and modern (for those who hadn't passed the 11+ exam), the selectivity level, specialisation and status. *Voluntary schools*, are free religion schools or alternative. Moreover, again it is not clear whether the information is related to the Irish Republic or Northern Ireland, as it is definitely not how the distinction between schools looks in England (Potulicka, 2012). In general, the reading of the book fails to give a clear impression on education in the Irish Republic or in Ulster, as in many cases, it is unknown, which part of the Emerald Isle – or even the United Kingdom – we are talking about.

The Irish Republic Constitution states that all schools are free of charge.

There is a very interesting subsection dedicated to school achievements in both parts of the Emerald Isle within the context of international studies. Highlighting the flaws of PISA/OECD studies: separation from the context of particular countries, the assumption of common knowledge and skills of students, required for the employment market, they fail to give basis for comparison; however, they present the image of the state of knowledge and skills of 15 year old students in a given country. The 2018 PISA tests' results, the Irish Republic is placed high: in 6th place regarding reading comprehension (Poland in 9th place), in 19th in mathematics (Poland in 8th), while in 22nd in natural sciences (Poland in 12th). Furthermore, the Authors analyse the results of curious and broad longitudinal studies regarding European values. These results have shown, i.a. the fall of confidence of the students to the educational school, both in Ireland and in Poland. In 1981 the confidence was declared – respectively – by 71% and 77%, whereas in 2008 – 69% and 71%. The social knowledge and the involvement in social activity of the Irish was estimated highly.

The Irish show respect for the teacher profession, and in Ulster, only the graduates with highest grades can be accepted for preparatory studies. During studies that prepare for teaching in elementary schools, practical classes take 40% of time, while those preparing to teach in secondary schools must complete 200 school practice hours. After completing all the internship requirements, the teacher gains the *Qualified Teacher Status*. I fear, that calling this status the status of a professional (p. 83) is too much. The Ulster educational system is under great influence of England, where following 2010, deprofessionalisation in teacher education is taking place, separating them from universities, research, and transferring them to schools (which may be demonstrated by the large amount of internship hours in preparation for the profession, as shown above) (Potulicka, 2019: 276–319).

Not entirely as a side note, I must add, that the team researching the educational systems of countries that display the best school achievements, under the supervision of prof. Linda Darling-Hammond of the Stanford University in Palo Alto, published monographs of those systems for Australia, China, Finland, Canada, Singapore, and – separately – Shanghai. The Irish system was not considered to be one of the best worldwide (Potulicka, 2019: 388–390).

Chapter III of the monograph is dedicated to the care-educational policies within the context of the complex social and political reality. The Authors of the monograph, being the foundation of the reviewed monograph – Murray and Urban – oppose the theory of a universal child and the universal development phases. However, in Ireland, the approach in compliance with this theory is still practised in relation to *Travellers* (nomads). It is noted, that even after settling they remain *Travellers*, as they retain their values and beliefs, that are the indicators of their culture.

Regarding care over early childhood students, professional qualifications should be displayed by at least 50% of the staff (in the light of the European law – 60%). The curriculum framework for care and education for early childhood up to 6 years of age is constituted by *Aistear* (journey) published in 2009. The framework includes principles and contents for education; main themes: welfare, identity, and allegiance, communication and exploration and thinking, as well as, instructions for best practices. The framework properly understands the evaluation of child development, such as continuous collection, documenting, analysis and using information for creating rich portraits of children as students, and support and promote their further education. According to the title of the monograph, the Authors analyse working with children from varying cultures, actions against racial, ethnic or religious prosecution, and in defence of children's rights, with particular detail. Minimal standards that ensure the dignified life of each children are set: non-discrimination principles, caring for the better interest of a child, guaranteeing the right to live and the right to participation. The 2016 child care act, is the first to guarantee legal base for the protection and control of care and education for early childhood students. Attention is turned towards the increasing scale of deprivation of children's needs and the necessity of protecting them from poverty.

Chapter IV is dedicated to the diversity and cultural and personal identity. The chapter orders the terminology well, being related to emigration, immigration and negative attitudes towards diversity. In chapter V – the pedagogical approach towards diversity – the terminology is equally well ordered, and the title pedagogical approach consists of striving for constructive integration. *The Family Wall Project* and *Persona Dolls* subsections are equally interesting. The subsections contain inspiring examples of well-established relations in working with a child, delicate and empathetic relations. Both photographs of the families, as well as, dolls that have a personality, become the starting point for discovering the diversity of families and speaking of them. Both projects serve the purpose of developing anti-prejudice attitudes, including native languages of children among their peers.

The Authors conclude that Ireland – a country which is “ethnically non-uniform, and religiously divided [...] managed to stop the wave of nationalism and orthodoxy, to open the society towards diversity, the pluralism of the world of virtues, religious beliefs and interpersonal attitudes” (p. 195). The Authors add that: “In Ireland, we have discovered ideas and solutions, that cause much respect and admiration for the thinking about new upbringing and educating young generations in the era of digital domination, during a time of numerous civilization threats such as terrorism, epidemics, populism and totalitarianism” (p. 198).

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