

# **POPULATION BACKGROUND: BILINGUALISM, POLISH LANGUAGE SCHOOLS, AND POLONIA IN THE UNITED STATES**

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This article presents information on the bilingual population living in the United States with a focus on Polish population, known as Polonia, including the history of Polish language schools, Polish initiatives and attitudes towards being a Polish-American.

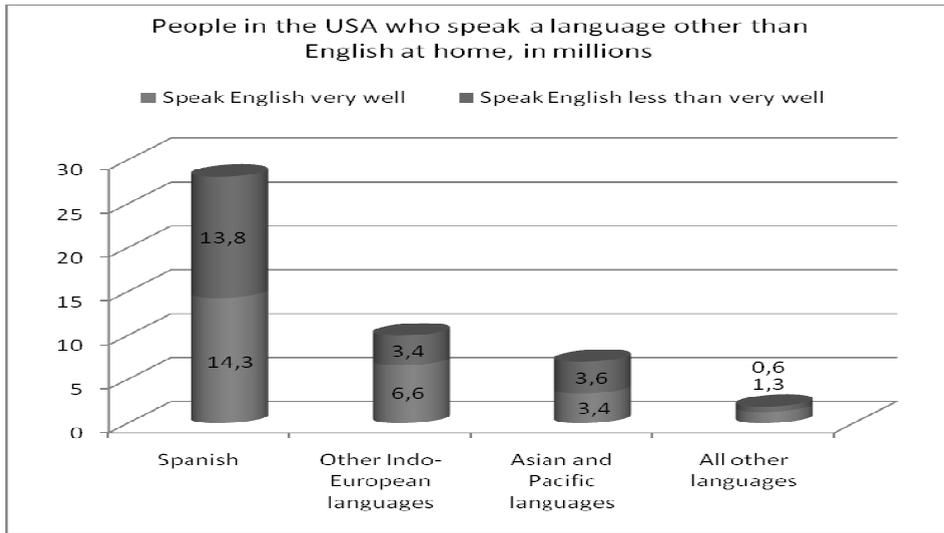
## **Introduction**

According to David Crystal (1997), two thirds of children world-wide are born into bilingual families. Following Crystal's data, over 41 percent out of 570 million people who speak English are bilingual in English and some other language.

In the United States (Fig. 1), 18 percent of the population aged 5 and over (i.e. 47 million people) speak a language other than English at home and the majority of them can speak English very well, too (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>). Out of those 18 percent who speak a language other than English at home, 60 percent (i.e. 28.1 million people) speak Spanish, which is the second language in the United States.

## **American attitudes towards other cultures and languages**

The United States has always been known for its “melting pot” policy, i.e. the strategy to integrate different nationalities and races in the mainstream American culture. During the interwar years and after World War II there was an



Adapted from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>

**Fig. 1.** People in the USA who speak a language other than English at home

even greater pressure from the American government and American Catholic Church to assimilate new immigrants and their offspring into the American society (Nir, 1989). In 1918, Theodore Roosevelt wrote the following words: “There is no place for the hyphen in our citizenship. We are not a polyglot boarding house”. This harsh statement was implemented through a rigid policy that led to closing all ethnic schools, making the English language mandatory in all schools (Nir, 1989) and instituting the educational policy that emphasized the superiority of American culture, values, and the English language (Portes and Lingin, 1998).

Until the late 1990s, the American school continued the policy of cultural assimilation and americanization putting immigrants’ children under pressure by questioning the values of their heritage culture, forbidding the use of ancestral language at school (Portes and Lingin, 1998), and sometimes even discouraging parents from speaking their native language with children at home (Saunders, 1982).

However, as the minority groups continued to gain in importance, especially Mexican and other Latin American minorities, the “melting pot” policy has been severely criticized. The adversaries pointed out that cultural assimilation involves deserting one’s cultural identity, language, traditions, and beliefs, in order to conform to the values of the dominant American culture. As the result of the minority groups drive, the “melting pot” policy was replaced with a model of multiculturalism (Brewster, 1995). Unlike assimilation, multiculturalism values cultural diversity, respects other nations’ beliefs and traditions, and encourages the use of minority languages.

The growing multicultural approach can be observed in the presence of Spanish translations below formerly English only signs (e.g. at the airport, on bus and train stations, in grocery stores), availability of interpreters' services in most public institutions (e.g. Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston offers interpreters' services in 32 languages, [www.massgeneral.org/interpreters](http://www.massgeneral.org/interpreters)) and introduction of Spanish and other ethnic minorities' languages in many elementary schools' curricula across the United States.

Polish population living in the United States also tries to seize the opportunity to promote Polish culture and language. A good example of such initiatives was the recent formation of a new Polish district in Boston, Massachusetts, named the Polish Triangle after its geographical shape, formed in November 2008. This initiative was taken by a bilingual Polish-English newspaper *White Eagle/Biały Orzeł* following the example of other ethnic districts in many cities of the United States. The new Polish district was recognized by the Mayor of Boston, Thomas M. Menino, as well as by other local authorities.

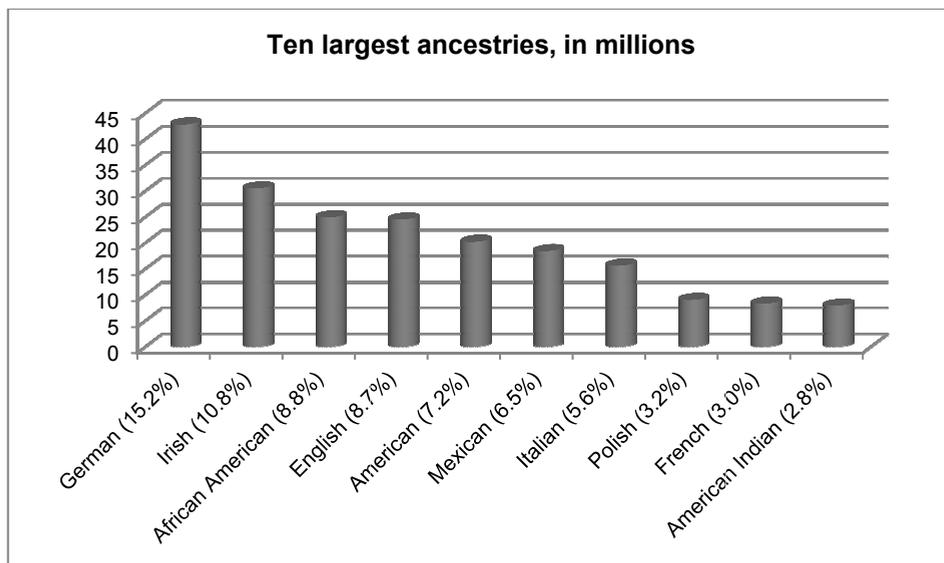
## Polonia in the United States

Polonia can be defined as people of Polish ancestry who maintain Polish traditions and interest in Polish culture, but at the same time they identify themselves with the country where they live permanently regardless of the language spoken and the place of birth (Brożek, 1990; Dubisz, 1989).

According to Census 2002 (available from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-35.pdf>), 3.2% of all Americans, i.e. 8,977,235 people, report Polish ancestry. How many of those people identify themselves with Polonia has not been recorded, but Polish people constitute the eighth largest ancestry group in the United States (Fig. 2).

Polonia is distinct from the Poles living abroad temporarily, who were born in Poland, hold Polish ethnicity, and feel distinct from the mainstream culture. Poles living abroad are able to speak Polish in contrast to Polonia, who in spite of interest in the Polish culture, may have lost the ability to speak Polish and may solely use the language of the country where they live (Dubisz, 1989).

Polonia around the world usually gathers around Polish churches. Polonia in the United States is very active, especially in bigger cities where there is a constant flow of new immigrants and where it is easier to gather many people to celebrate Polish holidays. The examples of events organized by Polonia include Polish music concerts, theater performances, Polish movie shows, painting or photography exhibitions, occasional balls, like Carnival Balls, Halloween Balls, also occasional fairs, parades, and festivals, such as *Dożynki*, *Pałaski Parades*, Polish Constitution Day Parades, spring picnics (*biwaki*), and many more. There



Adapted from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-35.pdf>

**Fig. 2.** Ten largest ancestries in the USA

are also Polish dance groups, such as *Krakowiak* for adults and *Lajkonik* for children, which popularize Polish folk dances and traditional costumes.

The young generation and new immigrants also want to experience the same cultural events that are available in Poland. One recent trend is to organize the Great Finale of the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (*Final Wielkiej Orkiestry Świątecznej Pomocy*). Such initiatives were undertaken in several locations across the United States, including Boston, Massachusetts; Pomona, New York; Chicago, Illinois; Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; and New Britain, Connecticut ([www.wielkaorkiestra.com](http://www.wielkaorkiestra.com)).

Moreover, there are many Polish-American organizations popularizing the Polish language and science, such as the Kosciuszko Foundation that give scholarships to Americans of Polish descent who want to study the Polish language as well as to Polish scientists who want to conduct research in the United States ([www.kosciuszkofoundation.org](http://www.kosciuszkofoundation.org)).

Furthermore, there are several Polish radio channels broadcasting from Chicago like *Wietrzne Radio* and *Radio Panorama*. In addition, there are some bilingual newspapers (with two names, one in Polish and the other in English), for example, White Eagle/Biały Orzeł ([www.whiteeaglenews.com](http://www.whiteeaglenews.com)), Nowy Dziennik Polish Daily News ([www.dziennik.com](http://www.dziennik.com)).

All abovementioned Polish initiatives, celebrations, associations, radio channels and bilingual newspapers play a crucial role in popularizing Polish

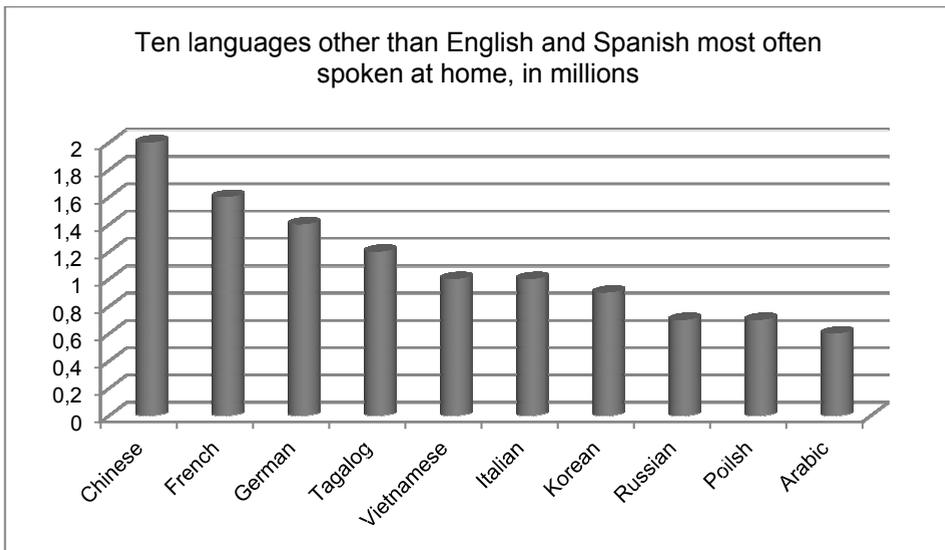
culture, preserving Polish traditions, teaching Polish history, and maintaining Polish language among new generations of Polonia. They also provide participants with a feeling of community that offers support and provides ethnical background increasing the status of Polish language and Polish community.

### Polish language in the United States

The American Census Bureau estimates that Polish belongs to the first ten languages other than English that are spoken at home (Fig. 3). There are 667,414 people who speak Polish at home, i.e. 0.2 percent of the whole population, and 83 percent of them can speak English well or very well (ibid.).

However, when compared to the statistics on ancestry reported earlier, a considerably higher number of people admit to have Polish origins than the number of people who can speak Polish. The ratio is drastically different: 8,977,235 people living in the USA report Polish ancestry, but only 667,414 people use Polish at home. In other words, only 7 percent of Americans of Polish ancestry are able to speak the language of their forebears.

This pattern is representative for the majority of immigrants who come to the United States. It is known as the “three-generation-rule”, where the first generation (i.e. the adults that came to the USA) usually remains monolingual in



Adapted from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>

**Fig. 3.** Ten languages other than English and Spanish most often spoken at home

their native language, the second generation (i.e. their children) becomes bilingual, but the third generation (i.e. the grandchildren of the immigrants) is monolingual in English only (Eilers et al., 2006). It is plausible that the three-generation-rule can account for the fact that out of 3 percent of all Americans that are of Polish ancestry as many as 93 percent cannot speak Polish.

### **Problems faced by a second generation bilingual child**

The second generation is frequently faced with a series of problems that may include academic difficulties, intergenerational conflicts, and lowered self-esteem. These may result from a situation in which immigrant parents and American-born children may not share the same values and attitudes towards life in the United States (Zhou, 1997).

According to Fuligni and Yoshikawa (2004), immigrant parents coming to the United States made a great investment on their part in their children's future. Therefore, those parents "put a particular emphasis on education as a way to develop their children's potential in order to realize that investment" (Fuligni and Yoshikawa, 2004: 151). However, immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education is frequently insufficient to provide enough support for their children. This may be a result of parents' limited English abilities, different cultural conceptions of teachers' and parents' role, and a lack of familiarity with the American school system (Brisk et al., 2004).

Thus immigrants' children are often faced, on the one hand, with high parental expectations for academic success and, on the other, with lack of support from their parents (Zhou, 1997). Due to language barriers and the nature of interactions in school activities, parents' contact with the school may be very limited (Brisk et al., 2004: 130).

This lack of school involvement on the parents' part further restricts their knowledge about the American educational system. Consequently, children are left alone to figure out for themselves how to navigate through different paths of the educational system (Razynska, 2004). Teachers become the only authority for the child, but since they are American they may popularize different values than those of immigrant parents.

This in turn can bolster the intergenerational conflicts where parents feel that the child is trying to reject the roots and the cultural values of the mother country. Losing the heritage language on the part of the child can further aggravate the intergenerational conflict by creating communication problems (Rumbaut, 1994). Concurrently, the child becomes apprehensive about not being able to fully become American because of his/her family ties with immigrant parents

(Zhou, 1997). This can be illustrated by the following account from a Polish-American woman commenting on her childhood (Razynska, 2004: 20):

*It made me mad. Why couldn't my parents be like everyone else? Because of my parents I didn't really fit in with the other kids at school. I wasn't American, but I wasn't really Polish either. I remember me and my sister used to always imagine that there was an island just for Polish-Americans, where we would fit in.*

Such a situation may “have significant negative effects on children’s self-esteem, psychological well-being and academic aspirations” (Zhou, 1997: 84).

This can be further aggravated when the parents’ English language skills are insufficient to communicate on everyday basis and they have to rely on their child for translation. The child realizes that he/she can say more and better than his/her parents, which may lead to questioning parents’ authority (Miodunka, 1990). Ruben Rumbaut (2000: 1) describes the intergenerational conflict as follows:

*conflict, embarrassment, marginality and role reversal prevail in the relationship between immigrant parents and their uncultured, US-raised children – a dynamic that undermines parental authority and gives the children a degree of leverage over their parents.*

## **Resolving the intergenerational conflict**

The intergenerational conflict between immigrant parents and their children may be ameliorated when children and parents belong to a strong co-ethnic community. By providing minority language schools, celebrating historical, religious, and traditional holidays, co-ethnic community helps promote parental values and impose certain social norm (Pong et al., 2005). In such a community, children are exposed to and interact with other adults who share similar values to those of their parents, which often legitimizes the parental culture (Zhou, 1997).

Furthermore, a strong ethnic community is one of the main forces supporting the preservation of parents’ language (Lambert and Taylor, 1998). The ability to speak the heritage language may alleviate communication problems between immigrant parents and their American-born children, thus creating closer bonds between the two generations. Moreover, enrollment in a minority language school may help reestablish immigrant parents’ authority as finally they “feel qualified and comfortable” to become actively involved in their children’s education (Fuligni and Yoshikawa, 2004: 151). This can be illustrated by the following comments from Polish immigrant parents (Razynska, 2004: 30):

*My English will never be good enough to teach my daughter all I think she should know. However, if I teach her something in Polish, she then knows it, and can ask her English teachers how to express it in English.*

*I see my son's progress in his Polish writing and I can immediately judge concepts and ideas that he doesn't understand. I can explain those things to him, and I know they are things he will be able to use in American school. Many literary concepts such as a metaphor or a rhyme are simply universal.*

Minority language schools within the co-ethnic community also have some other benefits. According to Jan Kozak, the principal of the John Paul II Polish Saturday School in Massachusetts (quoted in Razynska, 2004), supplementary schools are designed to create an environment, in which children can feel comfortable about speaking their heritage language and where they can meet other children, who like them, are of foreign descent. Thus one of the goals of Polish supplementary schools is to create a co-ethnic community for the bilingual children, "an island just for Polish-Americans", where children can feel that they belong to a bigger community (Ronowicz, 1990).

Moreover, as Jan Kozak explains, by familiarizing students with their heritage literature, history, national heroes, and rich cultural heritage, the supplementary school aims at instilling the feeling of pride of their parents' culture.

Enrollment in both ethnic minority supplementary school and American school may lead to fluent bilingualism, thus giving the child a chance to function successfully in two different societies. In addition, learning about cultural differences may help children function in the multicultural society of the United States (Razynska, 2004).

Finally, according to Shmid (2001), children of immigrants who retain their parents' heritage culture and remain close to it fare better academically than those who acculturate more rapidly and lose their parents' ethnicity.

In sum, being a part of a community helps children create a sense of ethnic self-identity, which in turn helps them relate with their immigrant parents and may raise children's confidence and pride of their cultural heritage (Rumbaut, 1994).

In order to create such a co-ethnic community and preserve the Polish language among new generations born in America Polish language schools were established in the areas of highest Polish population. Initially, the schools offered full-time instruction in Polish, while at present the Polish language schools have a supplementary character.

## **The history of Polish language schools in the United States**

Despite the fact that first Polish settlers came to Jamestown, Virginia, as early as 1608, the first Polish language school was not established until 1868 (Mikoś, 1990). Mass Polish immigration to the United States started after the

year 1848 and it can be divided into two main waves: the so-called “old immigration”, settled in the USA before 1880, and the so-called “new immigration” that came between the years 1880 and 1914 (ibid.).

There were substantial differences between the old and new waves of immigration: the former group comprised Polish intelligentsia and political exiles fighting against the occupation and partition of Poland, while the latter group consisted of uneducated, unqualified, and poverty-stricken peasants (Miąso, 1970), of which, only in the year 1910, about 2.9 million people (i.e. 97% of Polish immigrants in 1910) had less than \$50 at the time of arrival and over 1 million people (35%) were illiterate (Lieberson, 1980).

The aforementioned characteristics of the new wave of immigration had significant implications for their life in the United States and the language they used. The new generation settled in industrial areas, mainly in Pennsylvania, New York, and Illinois, forming the so-called Polish Ghettos, which were isolated from the mainstream American culture (ibid.). The substantial majority of immigrants living in those Ghettos were able to communicate only in Polish and had to rely on their American born children for translation, thus “the education of their children assumed a paramount importance” (Krolikowski, 1991: 53). The Polish parochial schools that were erected at that time were established not only to satisfy the need for education in the Polish Ghettos, but also to bridge the gap between the generation of parents and children (Miąso, 1970). The role of such schools was described by Miąso (1970: 105) as follows:

*The parochial schools became the central social-cultural institutions in the territory of the Parish. For the average immigrant the school was not so much a source of knowledge, for his consciousness was not yet developed to that extent, but an institution maintaining bonds between the older generation and the children welding the community of the entire parish into an organism.*

Till 1882 there were 50 Polish parochial schools teaching about 14,500 children (ibid.); in 1914, there were 395 schools with approximately 128,540 children (Kuzniewski, 1975); while in 1930, at the pinnacle of their success, Polish parochial schools were educating 260,000 students (Kucha, 1986). All those schools were owned by Polish Roman Catholic parishes and they provided instruction in literacy and basic mathematical skills as well as religion – all those subjects were taught in the Polish language.

Sadly, the level of Polish parochial schools was rather low due to shortage of well-qualified teachers, paucity of teaching material, too small libraries and overcrowded classrooms (Rylski, 1912, and Kowalski, 1897, quoted in Mikoś, 1990). Despite these drawbacks Polish parochial schools contributed significantly to maintaining the Polish language, Roman Catholic religion, and cultural heritage among new generations born in the United States (Mikoś, 1990).

However, due to several factors, including American policy from 1924 limiting immigration from Slavic countries, decline in new immigration from Poland due to the Great Depression, pressure from American Roman Catholic Church, and decreasing ethnical awareness among Polish-American generations, Polish parochial schools started to americanize and lose their ethnical identity during the interwar period (Mikoś, 1990; Nir, 1989).

By 1946, enrollment in Polish language schools decreased by 40% (Kucha, 1986). Polish Ghettos began to disappear, too, as families started to move away to other areas, leaving Polish parochial schools to search for students among local families, thus increasing their American character. Moreover, the dire situation on the job market during the Great Depression rendered it impossible for parents to afford tuition plus the meager quality of instruction contributed to the demise of Polish parochial schools (*ibid.*).

Some of those were transformed to Polish supplementary schools that, instead of teaching all subjects in Polish, offered instruction only in courses outside the American elementary school curriculum, mainly in the Polish language, Polish literature, Polish history, and geography of Poland (Kucha, 1986). In 1951, there were about 650 Polish supplementary schools in the United States (*ibid.*).

## **Current state of Polish supplementary schools in the USA**

According to the data from the Polish Embassy in Washington, D.C. (Ambasada RP w Waszyngtonie; 2004). Szkoły Polonijne w Stanach Zjednoczonych., there are 131 Polish supplementary schools dispersed across 23 states, employing approximately 1485 teachers and educating about 23,000 children (however, the exact number of children is difficult to estimate due to constant fluctuations in the number of enrolled students caused by frequent withdrawals and new admissions of recently immigrated children).

The biggest Polish supplementary schools in the USA are located in the Chicago area, Illinois, with the total of 30 schools, where only two schools, Tadeusz Kościuszko and St. Ferdinand, account for 2,500 students. The states with the second highest concentration of Polish schools are New York with 29 schools and New Jersey with 21 schools, but the schools in these states are smaller than in Chicago. Schools are named after prominent Polish figures, such as Adam Mickiewicz, Tadeusz Kościuszko, or after Polish saints, like Maximilian Kolbe, with the most popular name after the former Pope, Jan Paweł II.

Many of the existing supplementary schools are remnants of the parochial schools, thus they are located in the vicinity of Polish Roman Catholic parishes in historically Polish neighborhoods. Even when the supplementary schools are not directly run by the priests or nuns, they indirectly depend on the Polish parishes for classroom accommodation (Ambasada RP w Waszyngtonie; 2004).

Most of the current supplementary schools operate on Saturdays offering 3 or 4 hours of instruction in Polish language, Polish literature, Polish history, Polish geography, Roman Catholic religion, and sometimes in computers. The schools are quite inexpensive and they attract mainly elementary and middle-school students of Polish ancestry, usually of Polish born parents.

All instruction is given in the Polish language, but most of the time teachers use the teaching material designed specially for Polish-American students. The course books offer relatively easy readings, glossaries after each text, detailed introduction to Polish literary works, customs, historical events, etc. rendering the teaching material comprehensible and appealing to students with less exposure to Polish culture and language than their monolingual counterparts in Poland (e.g. Pawlusiewicz, 2005). Most of the currently used course book material was written by Polish teachers living in the USA who are familiar with Polish-American students' needs.

Polish course books are mainly published by Polish Teachers Association in America, one of the dominant Polish educational organizations in the United States that offers support and advice to Polish supplementary school teachers. Such organizations have no authoritative power over the rather autonomous supplementary schools, but they play a vital role in providing teachers with guidance as well as adequate and well-structured teaching material drawing on current teaching approaches and methodologies.

The majority of current Polish supplementary schools have a less formal character than regular schools in the United States or Poland as they want to encourage students to speak Polish freely and comfortably (Razynska, 2004).

Moreover, as Ronowicz points out (1990), the Saturday school has to compete with many enjoyable activities performed by monolingual children on Saturdays, such as playing baseball or soccer. In order to encourage Polish-American children to study on Saturdays, the lessons have to be attractive and involving. One of the ways to motivate learners is teaching Polish via computers (in addition to regular classes), introduced in many modern Polish supplementary schools. During such classes children solve Polish rebus puzzles, play various word games, prepare presentations in Polish, access Polish websites, and search for information about Poland online (author's interview with one of the computer teachers in John Paul II School in Boston, MA).

## **Teaching Polish to Polonia's children**

Teaching Polonia's children is distinct from teaching Polish as a first language as well as teaching Polish as a second language (Kowalikowa, 1989). The teacher and the coursebook material have to promote pluralistic values, i.e. they

have to integrate Polish values and foreign principles. Kowalikowa (1989: 133) puts it as follows:

*Nauczanie języka polskiego musi więc pełnić funkcję nieznaną ani dydaktyce języka ojczystego ani języka obcego. Jest to funkcja integrująca. Polega ona na wzmacnianiu tego, co polskie przy jednoczesnym akceptowaniu tego, co niepolskie.*

The reason for such an approach lies in the fact that Polonia's children belong to two ethnically different communities: American and Polish. Therefore, any school should not question either their American or Polish heritage. Additionally, as the data from Razynska's study (2004) indicates, Polish parents themselves recognize this double nationality of their children and therefore they want their children to be a part of both cultures.

Contact with the Polish language aims at enriching the learners, enhancing their self-esteem and showing that their and their parents' differences from the mainstream culture are not a disadvantage but an asset (Kowalikowa, 1989).

## Conclusions

Throughout the years millions of Polish people arrived and settled in the United States. However, the wide-spread "melting pot" policy and the three-generation rule resulted in assimilation of the majority of the Poles into the American culture and in irreversible loss of the Polish language among most of the immigrants' children. Polish language schools were established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but their low quality together with the American assimilation policy led to their closure.

With the recent multicultural approach initiated by the Spanish-speaking Latin Americans Polish culture and language have a chance to resist the three-generation-rule and may attract more immigrants and their offspring. Polish supplementary schools are gaining in popularity. Moreover, there are many social events organized by Polish organizations across the United States. With the help of the Internet, more and more Polish people can relate to each other and promote Polish culture and language.

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