REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY IN A REFORMED PRIMARY SCHOOL IN POLAND: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Following the reform of the educational system in Poland in 2017, the current system of education is being radically changed. These changes include elimination of three-year lower secondary school,\(^1\) extension of primary school education from six to eight years as well as extension of upper secondary education from three to four years. The subject of the paper is the analysis and evaluation of the core curriculum for teaching Geography at “new” primary school in the aspect of teaching regional Geography. The important task of the subject matter seems to be an assessment of not only the assumptions of the reform of the educational system but rather the possibility of another presentation of geographic content, especially at primary school. As far as the proposed new solutions are concerned, development of the general aims of geographic education, in particular geographic knowledge, and the skills and application of knowledge in practice, important objectives have been identified in the field of shaping attitudes which seem to foster the process of teaching Geography in its regional terms.

Keywords: Geography core curriculum, regional Geography, reform of Polish educational system

Introduction

These systemic changes – implemented from 2017 – likewise cause an alteration in the performance of all school subjects at different levels of education, including Geography. The former rank of Geography as a subject of school education is also being changed, and even seems to improve. At “new” primary school,\(^2\) Geography will be taught five hours in grades 5\(^{th}\) to 8\(^{th}\), as well as other natural subjects (Biology, Physics and Chemistry). This fact may be beneficial as far as shaping and developing geographic skills are concerned, it might also broaden the horizons and develop geographic passions, as well as change the established opinions of rather low significance of Geography at school.

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1 gimnazjum - a three-year comprehensive school, obligatory for 13 to 16 years old students (lower secondary school), beginning from 2017 it is being gradually extinguished so as to expand primary school education.

2 “New” primary school – an obligatory primary school that beginning from 2017 has been expanded from six to eight years.
The assumptions about formation of positive, emotional and spiritual bonds with the home country, with the closest social and natural environment ("Little Homeland," one’s own region) are clearly exemplified, which is a novelty and at the same time it is an opportunity for development of regional Geography not only of Poland, but also its neighbours and other countries and their regions.

**Geographic content within “Nature” subject at hitherto primary school**

Following the reform of the education system in Poland in 1999, teaching of Geography, Biology, Physics and Chemistry at six-year primary school was abandoned. Instead of these subjects, “Nature” was introduced as a new subject (3 hours per week) integrating the content of these four subjects. Since this proved to be one of the deepest educational reforms of the previous reform, it undoubtedly raised a lot of controversy especially among teachers of Geography, Biology, Physics and Chemistry who were forced to go to a lower secondary school or to attend postgraduate “Nature” subject studies. Although at the beginning teachers of these four subjects were treated “leniently” and had the right to teach Nature subject, they consequently undertook postgraduate studies, as there emerged a large group of teachers of other subjects who had likewise acquired at 2-3 term postgraduate studies the right to teach Nature. Geographic content was therefore divided. The biggest criticism of those changes was channelled by biologists and geographers who had sadly “lost” most (both in teaching hours and in curricular content); physicists and chemists, on the other hand, saw in this situation a chance for extra hours at primary school. A detailed plan for teaching Geography in the Polish educational system (both before and after the reform) is presented in Table 1.

The criticism likewise pointed to the low level of teaching geographic content in Nature. The misunderstanding of basic geographic concepts, such as scale, maps, latitude and longitude, as well as the subject of Earth in the Universe, has been widely criticised. These examples of geographic content and concepts, despite teaching only at primary school level, were problematic for a nongeographic teacher of Nature. This difficulty was probably not due to a teacher’s ignorance, but rather to lack of didactic competence in the field of geography didactics, how to explain, repeat and practice specific concepts, content or issues. The author of this publication has had the opportunity to conduct teaching activities among biology students preparing for teaching Nature. From this experience one can observe some shortcomings of biologists in geography-related competences and lack of didactic competence in Geography didactics. Unfortunately, it would not be an easy task to find a genuinely versed teacher as far as teaching biological, geographic, physics and chemistry content among teachers of Nature.
In addition, research conducted by Szczęsny (2011) upon geographic achievements of students before a lower secondary school has revealed that the integration of science content at school contributed to lowering the level of nature sciences competencies among students, including Geography. In addition, “Natural science” poorly prepared students for further geographic education at lower secondary school, due to an insufficient training of cognitive and practical skills.

Table 1: Geography as a teaching subject in the Polish educational system

| Education level            | Before reform 2017                                                                 | After reform 2017                                                                 |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “new” primary school       | No Geography as a subject, some geographical contents only at natural science lessons | The 5th The 6th The 7th The 8th grade                                             |
| “new” primary school       | The 4th, 5th and 6th grades                                                        | 1 hour 1 hour 2 hours                                                           |
| Lower secondary school     | The 1st grade The 2nd grade The 3rd grade                                           | Cancelled lower secondary school                                                  |
| (gimnazjum)                | 1 hour 1 hour 2 hours                                                              |----------                                                                       |
| Upper secondary school     | Basic level The 1st The 2nd The 3rd grade                                           | Basic level The 1st The 2nd The 3rd The 4th                                     |
| (liceum)                   | 1 hour 4 hours                                                                     | 1 hour 2 hours 4 hours                                                          |
|                            |----------                                                                           |----------                                                                       |
| Source: elaborated by author according to the core curriculum for geography, 2017

A very optimistic example has been (and happily enough will be until 2019) the implementation of “regional Geography” within the framework of Nature subject. According to the core curriculum of Nature subject, the section entitled “My Neighbourhood” implemented in the 4th grade proves to be an introduction to the vision of Geography known to a pupil the most. The 5th grade includes its extension called “Landscapes of Poland,” whereas the 6th – “Landscapes of the World” (Dziedzic, 2012, the core curriculum for Nature subject by “Nowa Era” Publishing House). In total, it forms a dozen or so class hours developing the competences of exploring selected regions (the nearest area, one’s own country, as well as selected, more distant regions) in a comprehensive way, not only
geographically. This content (beginning from 2017) is being currently incorporated into a slightly expanded version of a “specific” geographic education at “new primary school.”

**The concept of geographic education at “new primary school”**

According to the core curriculum for geography primary school, the distribution of the main topics of the core curriculum for each class is as follows:

- **the 5th grade**: Map of Poland, Polish landscapes, lands and oceans on the Earth, landscapes of the world - total of 26 hours;
- **the 6th grade**: Earth movements, geographic coordinates, Geography of Europe, neighbours of Poland - total of 26 hours;
- **the 7th grade**: Poland’s natural environment in Europe, society and economy of Poland in Europe, relations between elements of the geographical environment in the selected areas of Poland, my own region: “Little Homeland” - total of 60 hours;
- **the 8th grade**: Regional Geography of Asia, regional Geography of Africa, regional Geography of North and South America, regional Geography of Australia, regional Geography of the Antarctic - total of 26 hours.

Due to the subject matter and the main objective of the article, the author’s intention is to limit his study to analyses and reflections on the proposed solutions in the field of regional Geography. For instance, as far as the important section **Neighbours of Poland** (the 6th grade) is concerned, the final version of the issues, after heated discussions, was proposed: the transformation of industry in Germany; the cultural heritage of Lithuania and Belarus; the natural environment and tourist attractions of the Czech Republic and Slovakia; the political, social and economic problems of Ukraine; the natural and socio-economic diversification of Russia; Poland’s relations with its neighbours.

For instance, the 16th section (in the 8th grade) includes: selected problems and geographic regions of North and South America: meridian extents and surface formation; the northern border of crops and forests in Canada; cyclones and floods in North America; development problems of the Amazon; a situation of indigenous peoples; slums in big cities; megalopolis; Silicon Valley as an example of technology; an economic importance of the United States in the world. Such a form of distribution of particular subjects point to the use of the dominant content design and the particular problems that may occur during a typical Geography lesson. The authors of the core curriculum propose a transition from a passive process of teaching methods to “searching” mode of education. The truth is that teaching-learning methods will certainly be the most beneficial as far as activation students is concerned. They are very likely to monitor, analyse, compare, reason, evaluate, design, and take action so as to solve problems independently during a lesson.
The fundamental undertaking of geographic education in the 6th and 7th grades, relating to regional Geography of Europe and the world, is to get to know about the regional diversity of the world and the relation between nature and man. Moreover, in the 7th grade a student studies Geography of Poland. Particular issues in the field of physical Geography and socio-economic Geography are dealt with against the background of Geography of Europe. The process of teaching and studying Geography takes recourse to, among others, application of the model of examples and case study as a detailed study of the unit (a region, an administrative unit, a city, a village, a farm, other geographical objects) which discloses representative features, phenomena, processes and relations of nature-man very well. This formulation is not new and was being used successfully at upper secondary school but it was more about examples and case studies rather than the exemplary content, which is probably what the authors of the new core curriculum plan to accomplish nowadays. Using the method of project so as to create conditions for students to attempt an independent field research is a definite innovation introduced in this stage of education. It is indeed important since it concerns the knowledge of one’s own region. This seems to be a superior chance to return to regional Geography of one’s our country.

One of the innovations, apart from formulating the general aims of geographic education, is to determine important objectives for shaping attitudes – upbringing. Below the author of the paper shows examples of geographic education objectives in education in the context of the policy pursued by actual authorities of Poland:

- shaping the sense of satisfaction with the beauty of nature of one’s own country and heritage of our people by means of studying a variety of natural and cultural heritage objects of our own region and Poland; Polish landscapes, natural, cultural and tourist beauty and accomplishments of Poles in various spheres of life; successes of Polish companies at the arena international politics;
- developing positive, emotional and spiritual bonds with the motherland, with the closest social and natural surroundings (“Little Homeland”, one’s own region), and, to some extent, with the whole planet Earth;
- shaping the sense of individuality, patriotism as well as community and civic attitudes (The core curriculum 2017, p. 4-5).

Despite the fact that those assumptions are correct, they have not so far been sufficiently striking in geographic education. Nevertheless, their meaning has been signalled. “Geography fits in with the foundations of patriotic education which requires both historical and geographic knowledge” (The core curriculum 2017, p. 5).

At this stage, it is exceptionally difficult to clearly define what the effect of the “novel” geographical education at primary school will be on account of the fact that in September 2017 only the 7th grade started education according to assumptions of the reform. The textbook exclusively to this grade has just been
published. On the other hand, this “transition” (removal of lower secondary school, extension of primary school education, structural and program changes at upper secondary school) can cause mounting anxiety. Primary school students upon completion of the 6th grade of primary school (in the hitherto 6th grade of primary school there was no Geography, there was only Nature subject) passed into the 7th grade and started an entirely new program for the 7th grade. In consequence of such a procedure, they did not acquire content and competence for the 5th and the 6th grades; they did not acquire needed information and did not develop competence in implementation of many important issues, e.g. Map of Poland, Earth Movements, Geographic Coordinates. It is true, however, that some parts of the content should be fulfilled at Nature subject in a hitherto primary school, but one does not have any certainty if it was done properly.

**Own region and “little homeland” in geography teaching**

It is a challenging task to talk about regional Geography without a detailed analysis of the region that is known to a child the most, the one where a child was born in, lives, attends school, and with whom a child is most emotionally connected. This is often also the region of a child’s parents, grandparents, and perhaps even great-grandparents, with whom he meets on a daily basis. In the core curriculum but also in the textbooks designed for the 7th grade, there are ideas for classes – also in the form of field workshops – which will certainly meet learners’ cognitive, as well as emotional and motivational spheres. The entries in the core curriculum are short and formulated as follows:

- **one’s own region**: sources of data about the region; dominant features of the natural environment, demographic structure and economy; tourist attractions; international cooperation.
- **“Little Homeland”**: area, geographic environment, attractiveness, identity (The core curriculum ...).

However, its development in the form of tasks for students getting know one’s “Little Homeland” seems ambitious and should be inspirational.

A student:

1) distinguishes the area identified with “Little Homeland” perceived as a symbolic space in the local dimension (e.g. a municipality-city, a village, a large city district, or a local system with unspecified administrative boundaries);

2) recognizes in the area the main characteristics and determinants of attractiveness of “Little Homeland”;

3) presents in any form (e.g. a multimedia presentation, a poster, a film, a photo exhibition) attractiveness of “Little Homeland” as a place of residence and business based on information found in a variety of sources;
4) designs actions, basing on one’s own field observations, aimed at preserving the values of geographic (natural and cultural) environment and improving the living conditions of the local community;

5) identifies with the “Little Homeland” and feels responsible for shaping a spatial order and its development (Ordinance of the Minister of National Education 2017, p. 123-124).

Very intriguing solutions can already be found in particular textbooks for the 7th grade. Thus, the authors of Nowa Era textbook (Malarz, Szubert, Rachwał, 2017) offer an elaborate process of getting to know the region in which a student lives. They likewise find answers to the following questions – what the region is, what (differentiated) sources of information about the region are, pointing especially to the need for field observations and interviews, use of statistical yearbooks, Internet as well as a geographic atlas. The authors showed the outline of the borders of the historical regions of Poland and referred to the current administrative map. They emphasised the importance of showing and analysing characteristics of the region in terms of natural, socio-cultural and economic attributes. Moreover, workshops have been proposed to develop an action plan to preserve value of the geographical environment and improve the living conditions of the local community. They also offered pieces of advice on how to prepare a presentation about one’s own region and encouraged students to design a trip to their own region. This form of classes comprises the aforementioned workshops and an excursion. Here an interesting section of the historical-cultural region on the border of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship and the Greater Poland Voivodeship, Pałuki in the vicinity of Bydgoszcz and attractive places in this area (Żnin, Wenečja, Biskupin, Gąsawa) has been shown as an example (Malarz, Szubert, Rachwał, 2017). Practical route planning and cost estimates for field workshops or trips have likewise been included.

Slightly more elaborate content concerning studying one’s own region and getting acquainted with “Little Homeland,” also in the form of workshops, has been proposed in WSiP 7th grade textbook by authors Głowacz, Lechowicz and Stankiewicz (2017). The authors point to the “practical” aspect of regional research and propose their program together with a valuable description for a student, encouraging participation in field activities and a project.

The presented examples are definitely novel in Geography education, especially at primary school and even at hitherto lower secondary school level. The truth is that there were some successful attempts at workshop work, but they aimed at upper secondary school, especially at extended level. Those attempts were intended to encourage geographic passions among future secondary school graduates and indicate the methodology of research. This educational innovation at a lower level of teaching is indeed very valuable because it demonstrates the “practical aspect” of Geography and education which should motivate a student not only to know the history of one’s own region but also to distinguish one’s role in shaping the future of one’s own region.
Summary and conclusions

The fundamental changes – planned and quickly introduced in 2017 – in the educational system in Poland are radical and involve practically all levels of education – starting from a kindergarten, a primary school to an upper secondary school, and even universities.

Geography as the subject taught at all stages of education is likewise prone to changes in this process that accentuates a different concept of teaching this subject. It is difficult to foretell what the future holds as far as teaching Geography at Polish schools are concerned.

The proposed changes in geographic education at primary school are hoped to allow students to develop geographic skills from their early years of education, develop geographic interests, contribute to getting to know their own region and heritage, their own geography and that of other countries, as well as extraordinary fascinating communities and cultures in different regions of the world. It is likewise a chance for a slight “improvement” of significance of Geography in the educational system in Poland, as it is the case in many other countries.

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