

International focus

Geography teacher training in Poland

Charzynski Przemyslaw¹ & Jolanta Rodzos²

(1) Didactical Laboratory, Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, and (2) Didactical Laboratory, Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

Abstract

In the light of the Bologna Declaration many universities and educational systems across Europe are realigning their curricula. This article describes the wholesale educational reform that has been happening in Poland in recent years. Teacher training in Geography, which takes place within special units in Geography Departments in universities has also been part of this change in focus and emphasis.

Introduction

The 1999/2000 school academic year saw the beginning of the Polish educational system reform. Unlike other reforms of the last 40 years, this reform was comprehensive and all-embracing as the changes affected organization, curriculum, and all tiers of education. There are five tiers in the new school educational system. These are:

- kindergarten,
- elementary school,
- middle school,
- post – middle schools (high school, program high school, vocational school),
- tertiary-level institutions (undergraduate (Bachelor's) studies, Masters studies, and Ph.D. studies).

One major change from the previous system is a shortening of the elementary school period and an extension of the high school period, which is now divided into two stages, i.e. middle school being the lower tier and high school being the higher one. Middle school, like elementary school, is compulsory. At tertiary-level, the introduction of Ph.D. studies to the universal education system is innovative.

The curriculum reform

The curriculum reform aimed to overcome major weaknesses in the former school system, which encompassed:

- lack of correlation between the contents of particular school subjects,
- overloading of school curricula,
- failure to adjust the contents to the needs and potential of students,
- a focus on factual material with insufficient comprehension of phenomena and processes,
- failure to develop skills, and
- lack of correspondence between knowledge taught at school and students' life experience.

Hence, the following solutions have been adopted:

At lower levels of education, subjects which are related were integrated. Moreover, in all types of schools, so-called 'interdisciplinary paths' were introduced, to enable the teaching and learning of issues requiring a multifaceted and versatile approach. Alternative curricula and course books were allowed; it is the teacher's role to select a particular course book in relation to the needs and potential of students at a given school.

Each of the three-year long education stages now end with final examinations designed to check students' achievements, with an emphasis on skills. Starting in 2005, high school final examinations will be external, and uniform throughout Poland, i.e.

both the selection of assignments and the checking of results will take place outside the students' school. The objectivity and comparability of marks gained in this way can then be the basis of university enrollment.

Geography after reform

In the reformed and reorganized system, as a result of combining related subjects, the positions they occupy in the curricula have been altered. The most significant changes have occurred in the so called 'borderline subjects', geography being one of these. At elementary level, along with biology, physics, and chemistry, geography has become part of another subject, i.e. natural science. In middle school and high school, geography remains a separate subject. Geographical content is present also in 'interdisciplinary paths' such as ecological, regional, or European education. Within geography, however, the shift from physical geography to social and economic geography has become visible. As a result of perceived students' needs - to prepare the younger generation to participate in socioeconomic life – geography's main task is to explain the economic mechanisms and social processes typical of the contemporary world. In this way, the demand to prepare the younger generation to participate in the country's social life is realized. Moreover, most issues are analyzed at local, regional, national, European, and global levels; both regional and European perspectives, in particular, have gained in importance. Recognition of the former is a result of the renaissance of regional ideas, and the high priority given to the European level is related to Poland's accession to the European Union.

The image of geography differs significantly, then, from the pre-1999 model. Regardless of any subjective assessment of the changes, it can be impartially pointed out that contemporary geography is taking on a more practical form. Geography can now teach an understanding of the world, explain its complex structures, and so reduce the distance between students and reality. The learning and research value of the subject is increasing and the application of knowledge is more feasible.

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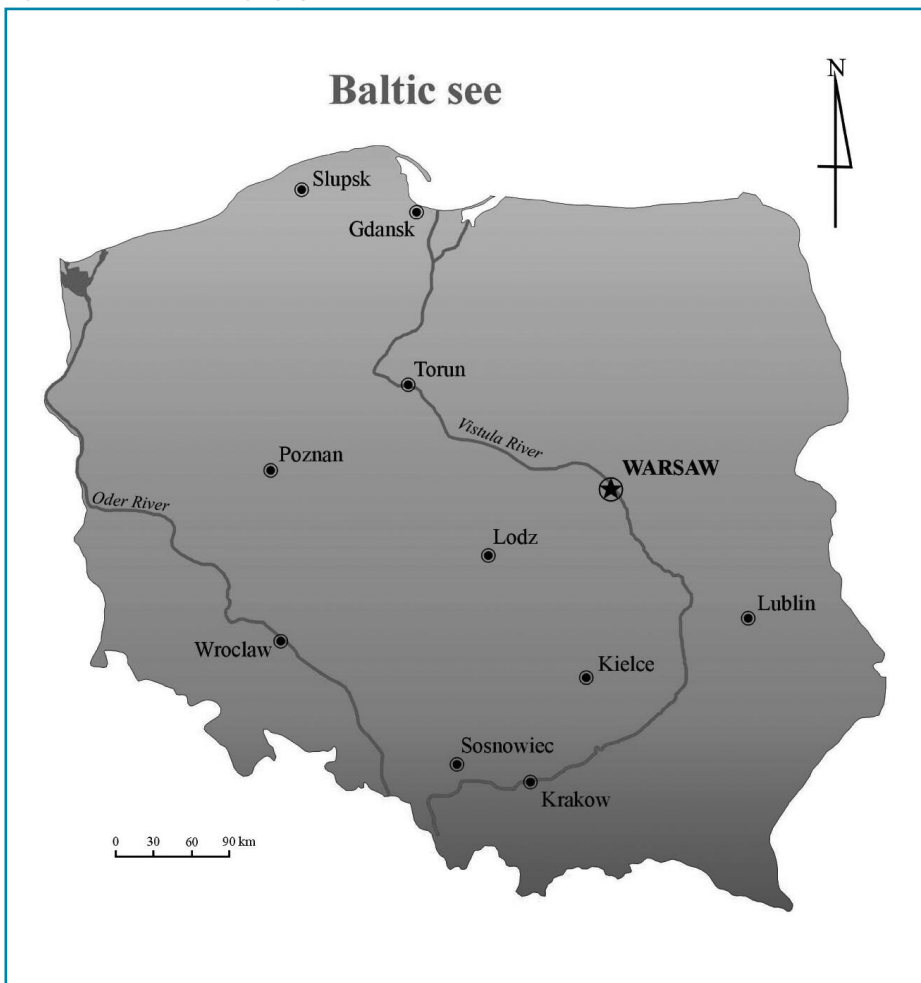
Geography teachers are taught in 12 tertiary-level institutions in Poland. In all of them there are independent units, i.e. Geography Didactics Departments or Laboratories, that professionally prepare students to teach geography in various types of school.

A resolution by the Minister of Education and Sports means that obtaining teaching qualifications requires the completion of subject-based courses, as well as 480 hours of a 'pedagogical block'. Table I specifies both the list of the subjects and the number of hours within this for prospective geography teachers.

Table I General Characteristics of the Pedagogical Block

Subject	Number of Hours
Psychology and Pedagogy	150
Geography Didactics	120
Pedagogical Training	150
Electives	60

Fig 1 Location of Geography Didactics Units in Poland



The latest standard requirements for teaching also include IT skills and advanced level competence in a foreign language.

The requirements of the Minister of Education and Sports for the educating and training of teachers are general in scope, and there is a fairly large degree of autonomy as far as the organization of teacher training is concerned. Electives can include a wide range of subjects related to teaching tasks, as well as the those related to teachers' duties - such as ethics, voice production, regional education, education law, or artistic subjects. Each tertiary-level institution sets its own list of these subjects, although there have been steps taken to make voice production courses compulsory as these can facilitate effective work by the teacher.

The detailed curriculum for teacher training is drawn up by each academic centre according to local personnel resources and students' interests. Hence, there are significant differences between tertiary-level institutions in both course content and organization. Most importantly, pedagogical courses are introduced during different semesters of studies: for two-layer higher institutions (offering three-year long undergraduate studies and two-year long Masters studies) they can start as early as the first year, making it possible for students to complete the course before graduation. In academic centres offering five-year long, uniform, studies the pedagogical course can start as late as the third year (for example in Lublin or Kraków). There are also variations in the balance between tutorials or lectures: Kielce and Lublin have the least favorable proportion of 1:1; in Gdansk, however, there are three times as many tutorials as there are

lectures. Pedagogical training programs also differ in both organization and syllabus. Although the number of lessons is the same across the board (150 hours), the time assigned for students to fulfill the requirements varies from 8 to 10 weeks. In selected centres, teaching training encompasses not only middle school and high school, where they teach geography *per se*, but also elementary school where geography is taught within the wider subject of natural science.

Organization and curriculum differentiation of the pedagogical block in various centres is, by and large, a result of searching for an optimal model of educating and training teachers adjusted to the needs of a contemporary, ever-changing school. Each tertiary-level institution organizes its own course, based on specific personnel resources, so as to provide its students with appropriate competencies. The Committee of Geographical Education of the Polish Geographical Society is the coordinator of these activities. The Committee includes geography didactics specialists responsible for the teaching and professional development of geography teachers, and as well as geography teachers themselves. Members of the Committee meet several times a year and discuss the most important issues for teaching in various types of schools, the professional development of teachers, and the academic work of geography didactics specialists. Participants share their experiences and take on particular tasks in

order to prepare practical solutions to current problems.

Apart from such meetings of representatives from all the centres, regular meetings for those interested in a particular theme are held; regional education is among the topics discussed at present, an issue for Polish schools only since 1999. There have been attempts, then, to develop approaches and techniques that can be applied in education, alongside the research and development of curricula, course books, and the effectiveness of various forms of pedagogy.

The continual training and professional development of teachers is also within the remit of the Committee of Geographical Education, and this takes the form of academic and didactic conferences, seminars and workshops. Field courses enjoy the highest popularity, as teachers on these learn how to gather information on the world not just from textbooks but on the basis of direct observation. The scope of the Committee's work is fairly extensive then, and it has increased significantly. Never before has the Polish educational system undergone such rapid and wide-ranging changes.

Przemysław Charzynski, assistant lecturer, Department of Didactics, Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences, Nicholas Copernicus University in Torun, Danielewskiego str. 6, 87-100 Torun, Poland. Tel.: +4856 6113173. Fax: +4856 6113144. E-mail: pecha@geo.uni.torun.pl

Jolanta Rodzios, Didactical Laboratory, Faculty of Biology and Earth Sciences, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin; Krasnicka Ave. 2cd, 20-718 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: jrodzios@biotop.umcs.lublin.pl