



## Educational landscape and possibilities – Geography education (in the light of a survey)

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### Abstract

The teaching of geography in Hungary has gone through a significant transformation recently regarding its structure and content. The questionnaire survey, which was carried out in the spring of 2009, examines the effects thereof. This study summarises the responses to the situation of geography education and teacher training. The answers suggest that in recent years there has been no improvement in geography education and the professional well-being of geography teachers. The biggest problems today are the low number of hours and the inappropriate consideration for the subject. This is contrary to the importance and usefulness of geographical knowledge and the role of the subject in the final exam. It can be observed that the changing needs arising from external circumstances do not always go hand in hand with the need for methodological transformation.

**Keywords:** Geography Education, Geography Teachers, Transformation, Importance of Geographical Knowledge

### 1. Introduction

Geography teaching in Hungary has gone through a significant transformation regarding its structure and content during the reforms of the national curriculum of the past period. This procedure demanded constant adjustment, the expansion and re-consideration of geographical knowledge as well as the transformation of educational methods by geography teachers.

One of the factors triggering these changes was the significant reduction of the number of classes designated for geography teaching, which meant not only a drop in the number of weekly lessons, but also a decrease in the

number of the years in which geography was taught. This loss of ground was detectable in every school type (Probáld, 1999; Ütőné Visi, 2007) (Table 1).

The reduction in the number of lessons entailed changes in the content as well. Though the tradition that primary school students should receive a general overview of the geography of the Earth still exists, it is not possible to teach them details about individual countries or regions. Therefore teachers have to restrict it to introducing typical landscapes and significant countries and to teaching how to highlight the core content and how to think in models.

The year the reform was introduced	The number of geography lessons taught in the primary school per week				The number of geography lessons in the grammar school per week				The complete number of geography lessons
	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	
1978	E	2	2	2	3	2	-	-	11
1995	N	N	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-2	-	-	4-8
1998	N	N	1,5	1,5	2	2	-	-	7
2003	N/1	N/1	1-2	1-2	1-2	1-2	-	-	4-10
2013	N	N	2	1	2	2	-	-	7

Table 1. Changes in the amount of time designated for teaching geography (E: environmental studies, N: natural sciences).

Globalisation, sustainability and introducing geography related processes in the monetary and financial world are new elements in secondary education. Determining whether changes in the content are necessary has divided geography teachers. Similarly to other foreign examples, Hungarian geography education has been seeking the possibilities of both content and conceptual reforms. (Lipovšek, 2003; Stimpson, 2005).

Parallel to that, the social environment and the context of educational policies underwent a significant transformation as well (Imre, 2003). The results of educational policy analyses and surveys conducted among teachers and parents clearly show that there was a change in the social demand regarding the knowledge to be acquired in public education, which, of course, had an impact on the mentality and expectations of the students taking part in education (Csapó, 2002). The process of transformation was also influenced by the modernisation of the structure and content of the final school leaving exam closing the phase of state education.

In this rapidly changing educational context full of constant challenges for geography teaching, there was a growing need to expose the real situation of the teaching of the subject. This

took shape in the form of a questionnaire survey in the spring of 2009 upon the initiative and with the professional assistance of the Educational Subcommittee of the Committee on Geography of Section No. X (of Earth Sciences) of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The questionnaire examined the situation and the characteristics of geography teaching from several aspects. Part of the questions were aimed at the situation of the subject and its general consideration in schools. The drafters of the questionnaire wanted to find out more about the methodological culture of geography teaching, and about the implementation of the competence-development oriented approach in class. There were several questions concerning the general opinion on coursebook and teaching aid supply. The investigation set out to gain information about the needs and the opinion of geography teachers with respect to further teacher training as well as the geographical aspects of the new type of final exam.

The questionnaire used in the survey contained 26 questions which were of three main types. There were open questions that required the expression of personal opinions, there were multiple choice questions and there were questions where personal opinions could be expressed by choosing a number on a 5-grade scale. The answers were recorded and processed with the aid of excel spreadsheets. When choosing the target institutes regional coverage and the proportional representation of various types of schools were taken into consideration.

Therefore the interviewed establishments were located in different parts of the country and concerned all three types of schools: primary schools, secondary schools and schools that provided both primary and secondary education.

Via the Internet and personal contacts, the questionnaires were forwarded to 200 schools in the country, but they were returned by only 87 establishments. The answers given to the questions reflect the opinion of about altogether 200 geography teachers. Although the sample cannot be considered representative, based on the summary and the evaluation of the answers, certain conclusions can be drawn regarding the situation and the characteristics of geography education in Hungary.

In this study, I will briefly summarise the most important lessons learnt from the answers given to the questions about the situation of geography teaching and further teacher training.

## **2. The personal and material conditions of geography teaching**

In the course of our investigation, our aim was to shed light on the personal conditions of geography education, i.e. whether the subject is taught by duly qualified colleagues. In the light of the responses, it can be declared that in the vast majority of the schools, geography is taught by teachers who have the appropriate qualification for teaching this subject.

The proportion of those who teach without a degree in geography or any degree at all is negligible. In the case of secondary schools, the designation "teaching without a degree" referred to university students in their final year, who were still looking forward to defending their thesis and passing their final exams. At the same time, it was also revealed that there are numerous colleagues teaching in secondary schools with a college degree. This may cause a problem in the organisation of final exams in geography, as these teachers cannot participate in the school leaving exam as examiners (entitled to ask questions). As for those who teach the subject with a different qualification (although, fortunately, their number is insignificant), the question of professional credibility may also arise. The evolution of the

geography teacher supply allows us to conclude that by now, the lack of geography teachers, which was a problem at the time of the introduction of the national curriculum and the general curriculum in vocational and technical schools, has been resolved. Formerly, geography had not been taught in technical schools at all, and only a small minority of vocational schools had offered geography as a subject.

However, the situation is not as bright if we look at the material conditions of education. In this question, respondents had to rate the material conditions of geography teaching on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = inadequate; 5 = fully adequate) from the given aspects.

It can be observed that those who teach in primary schools are the most satisfied. The biggest inadequacy is the lack of specialised classrooms, which presents a problem especially in secondary schools. May we add that this is related to the planning and organisation as well as to the possibilities of the regular and efficient use of visual aids. Geography is a subject that demands a lot of visual aids, and if these aids have to be transported to the classroom every time, then, sooner or later, this inconvenience will backfire on demonstration. Among the material tools, the supply of geographical books is deemed to be relatively good. However, teachers are less satisfied with the supply of pedagogical materials. In the latter case as well, there is a significant difference between primary schools and secondary schools.

Among the other factors influencing the quality of geography teaching, the possibilities of dealing with the subject outside the lessons (study circles, preparatory courses for higher education and competitions, catch-up courses) are considered to be mediocre. At the same time, teachers are relatively satisfied with the recognition of their professional work. This is especially true in the case of those teaching in primary schools, where the average value was 4.1. This means that geography teachers do not feel disadvantaged compared to their colleagues teaching subjects of higher prestige, when it comes to the recognition of quality pedagogical work.

The opportunities and the standard of the teaching of a subject, and even the realistic

assessment of its importance can be influenced by the number of years it is taught as an independent subject. The modification of 2003 of the National Curriculum made it possible for geography to appear as an independent subject from the 6<sup>th</sup> year. We were curious to know whether schools seized this opportunity or not. It can be stated that in a smaller proportion of primary schools, geography is taught as an independent subject in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> years already. This means that geography is taught independently, receiving a special focus within natural sciences or even above the latter. However, it can also be noted that despite this option, the teaching of geography as an independent subject did not become widespread in the 6<sup>th</sup> year. This might also be due to the fact that although there is a curriculum for that year, there is no coursebook. In accordance with the generally applied curricula, geography is an independent subject in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> years. In secondary schools, the educational organisation is more varied. In the bulk of the schools, geography is taught in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> years. Wherever geography appeared in higher years in secondary schools, it was partly due to an individual educational organisation differing from the general practice, and partly to the appearance of preparatory classes for the school leaving exam as an obligation undertaken in the pedagogical programme. It should be noted that the idea of “shifting” geography teaching up to the 11th year has been suggested by experts several times. Older students, aged 16-17, are much more interested in certain social geographical and economic knowledge than students who are 1 or 2 years younger. Moreover, the ability to recognise connections would require a closer subject concentration of geography with modern history. In those schools that provide an opportunity for that, this practice must contribute to the success of the teaching of social geography.

### **3. The characteristics of geography education**

A separate set of questions was dedicated to the importance and the structural and content-related characteristics of geography education. We wanted to find out geography teachers'

opinions about the value attached to the subject by students and through them, indirectly, by parents. The subject of geography had to be rated on a scale of 1 to 5 in this case as well (1: not important – 5: very important). If we take a look at the responses, we can see that there is a difference in the opinion of teachers regarding the importance of geography with respect to parents and students and also to secondary school and primary school. Geography teachers believe that the parents of secondary school students attach less importance to this subject than their primary school counterparts. Among the answers pertaining to secondary school students, the proportion of “not important” and “a little bit important” is higher in both groups. In general, it can be concluded that in the opinion of geography teachers, both parents and students consider geography as studies of medium importance. It is sad that according to geography teachers, geography education is not deemed to be very important by the students or the parents in either type of school. It is alarming that these colleagues have the impression that the subject taught by them does not belong to the subjects transferring important knowledge! Unfortunately, this is not a novel claim, as previous surveys have also shown that geography teachers are more pessimistic about the attitude towards their own subject than their students (Ütőné Visi, 2002, 2007).

We asked geography teachers to list the most important values of geography education. The values mentioned in the first place as the most important ones are presented in Figure 1. It is somewhat contradictory to the previous answers that geography teachers believe that their subject conveys values of key importance. They attach an extraordinary importance to the role of geography in presenting the characteristics of our immediate and broader environment as well as in orientating ourselves with respect to the Earth. Moreover, they think that geographical knowledge constitutes an essential part of the general culture. At the same time, there are significant differences between the views of those teaching in primary and secondary schools. While primary school teachers consider that geography plays a major role in shaping national identity, this role does not appear in the case of secondary schools. However, the

opposite is true concerning the shaping of mentality: this factor was only mentioned by secondary school teachers. This divergence of opinion is, of course, also related to the subject material taught in the different types of schools.

The opinion concerning the role of geography in the shaping of national affiliation also reflects the effect of the organisation of the subject material, which has limited the teaching of the geography of Hungary almost entirely to the realm of primary school while also cutting down on the time frame available for this purpose.

It is interesting to note that there was relatively little mention of the role of the subject in environmental education, and the forming of environmentally conscious behaviour, even though there had been a significant shift in that direction in the course of the curriculum reforms pertaining to geography education.

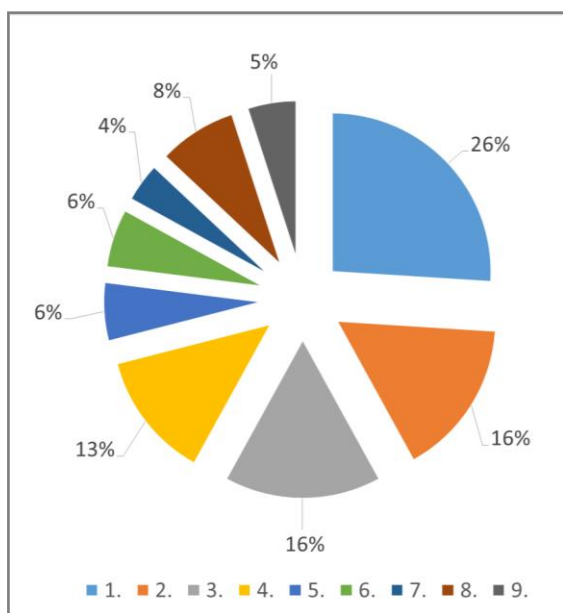


Figure 1. The most important values conveyed by the subject of geography. Key: 1 – presenting the environment, 2 – orientation, 3 – part of the general culture, 4 – national identity, 5 – getting to know other countries, 6 – integrative approach, 7 – environmental consciousness, 8 – shaping mentality, 9 – no response.

It is surprising that the role of geography in getting to know other countries was mentioned only to a lesser extent. This might be explained by the fact that recently the subject has focused

more on the comprehensive geographical approach rather than on the regional one. This is especially true for the teaching of geography in secondary schools.

At the same time, it is worrying that 5 per cent of the respondents did not name any values transmitted by geography and geography teaching.

One of the key questions of the survey, possibly the most important one regarding the general opinion about the situation of geography teaching, inquired about the most serious problem of present day geography teaching as seen by geography teachers. The difficulties mentioned in the first place are summarised in Figure 2.

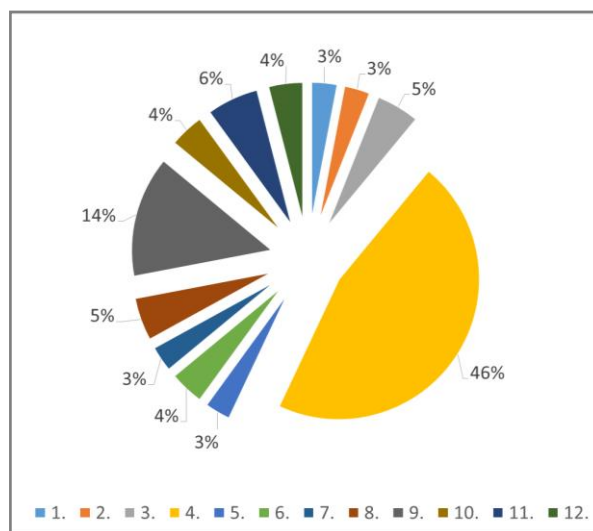


Figure 2. The most serious problems of geography education. Key: 1 – too much subject material, 2 – poorly organised subject material, 3 – the subject material only presents facts and figures, 4 – low number of lessons, 5 – the introduction of natural science, 6 – inappropriate coursebooks, 7 – too little topography, 8 – not needed for higher education, 9 – low prestige, 10 – undermotivated students, 11 – outdated subject material, 12 – no response.

If we look at the figure, there is a serious problem factor that stands out immediately: the low number of lessons. It is a fact that as a result of the curriculum reforms of the past 30 years, the time frame available for geography teaching decreased by more than half. (Probáld, 2004; Ütőné Visi, 2007). At the same time, our knowledge accumulated about the Earth

significantly expanded. Being acquainted with the natural and socio-economic characteristics and relations of our planet is indispensable if we want to understand our world and preserve our planet as a living place for posterity. This tension affects geography teachers as well. Possibly as a result of this tension, it is not the quantity of the subject material that teachers object to, but the time frame available for geography teaching. When asked about the topics that could be omitted from the material owing to lack of time, they usually cannot point out such an element of content. (Ütőné Visi, 2002, 2007).

The second most frequently mentioned problem is the inadequate recognition of the subject. Many teachers believe that the low prestige of geography is related to the small number of lessons. However, most of them put down the low prestige of the subject mainly to the fact that geography is only part of the entrance exam to get into higher education for geographers and geography teachers, while it is not required in such popular and acclaimed educational areas as economy or tourism. This holds true despite the fact that in the course of the latter training, many students take subjects related to geography.

Dissatisfaction was expressed with regards to the arrangement and the content of the subject material from several aspects. It is interesting that teachers mention the preponderance of facts and figures and outdated material even though the modernisation of the curriculum brought about a tremendous transformation: for instance, the ratio of traditional objectives and descriptive geography shrank, and the focus shifted to a modern economic approach. Nowadays, this change of mentality can be detected in most of the coursebooks. The poor arrangement of the subject material is mentioned in relation to the teaching of Hungary's geography as well to the suggestion that we have already touched upon, i.e. that it is too early to discuss the topics of global economy and financial world in 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Compared to the previous studies, the lack of student motivation is mentioned as a new element. This complaint was especially frequent

among secondary school teachers.

Since teachers could indicate three reasons in order of importance, we also examined the factors in the second and the third place. However, there were barely any novel elements among them that would have been mentioned frequently. In the third place, several colleagues enumerated the outdated teaching materials and the lack of practical field work. It is interesting to point out that a few colleagues classified the foregrounding of competence-based education, and the obligation to meet the quick-changing methodological expectations as problems.

At the same time, it should be noted that teachers, almost exclusively, indicated only external reasons as problems (curriculum regulation, subject material, number of lessons, students). The question of the quality of teaching was not raised, and neither was the issue of the potential lack of professional and methodological training of teachers. This is somewhat contradictory to the observations of professional experts made during lesson visits (Szabó, 2009), and the conclusions that could be drawn from the answers to the questions regarding methodological competence and the application of various approaches in class (Makádi, 2010).

Naturally, besides revealing the problems, we were also interested in learning about the opportunities that teachers see for the improvement of the general consideration of the subject and its prestige. Thus, one of the questions inquired about that. The distribution of the changes proposed by teachers in the first place can be seen in Figure 3.

When we look at the figure, two proposals seem to stand out: the increase of lesson numbers and the modification of the role of geography in entrance exam options and school leaving exams. The outstanding proportion of these suggestions is in harmony with the problems mentioned above. Geography teachers think that it is by changing the legal regulations that the prestige of the subject could be improved.

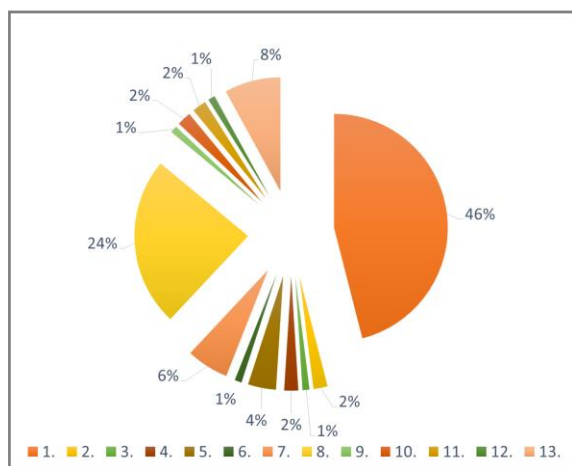


Figure 3. What could improve the perception of geography education's importance? Key: 1 – higher number of lessons, 2 – more motivated geography teachers, 3 – special classroom, better teaching aids, 4 – reflective geography teaching, 5 – better general opinion, 6 – more precise content, 7 – flexible subject material, 8 – making geography an obligatory subject at the school leaving exam and the entrance exam, 9 – pro-active geography teaching, 10 – more up-to-date content, 11 – teaching geography for more years, 12 – teaching fewer facts and figures, 13 – no response.

At the same time, it should be highlighted that whereas the problems mentioned included almost exclusively external factors, when asked about the improvement of the general perception of the subject, teachers named internal (teacher-related) factors in the first place as well, even if to a lesser extent (the teacher's knowledge and personality).

The need for the further modernisation of the content of the subject was suggested from several aspects (flexibility, adapting to changes), but the mention of pro-active and reflective geography teaching also points in that direction. It is unfortunate, however, that 8 per cent of the teachers asked left this question unanswered. At this question also, it holds true that among the suggestions put forward in the second and the third place, there were no novel elements that would have been brought up by a significant number of respondents. Field trips were

mentioned here as well as a way of improving the general attitude towards the subject, and more up-to-date books and visual aids were also thought to have a beneficial effect.

#### 4. What kind of further training would be the most supportive for the work of geography teachers?

Appropriate further training could significantly enhance the professional and methodological renewal of the work of geography teachers and their efficiency. Therefore, we considered it important to find out what kinds of training geography teachers would need the most.

The distribution of the training and educational methods considered to be the most useful is shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5.

With respect to content, there is a significant difference between the responses of primary and secondary school teachers. In primary schools, teachers would prefer to have methodological training in the first place, also covering special areas (e.g. competence development, the use of interactive whiteboards). Due to their situation, it is only in this type of school (or in the case of mixed-age schools, only in these years) that the need appears for courses promoting non geography related training. Those teaching in secondary schools attach less importance to methodological training, the only exception being the use of interactive whiteboards. However, there is a much greater interest in geographical training. The great number of teachers who mentioned training in psychology is also noteworthy.

It can be stated that currently, geography teachers do not consider it important to participate in training focusing on the acquisition of up-to-date techniques of measurement and evaluation. Compared to the previous period, there is a drop in the demand for training promoting the use of the Internet in education.



Regarding the forms of training, those involving active participation or pragmatic aspects (demonstration lessons, training) are much more popular among primary school teachers. On the other hand, those teaching in secondary schools prefer training requiring only passive attendance (e.g. courses). Accredited programmes are favoured by primary school teachers, whereas postgraduate training are more popular among secondary school colleagues.

The responses are fully consistent with the findings of experts organising and holding courses and training. Experience also indicates that barely any secondary school teachers participate in methodological training. However, according to the conclusions of a survey exploring methodological culture, it is precisely the teachers working in this sector of education who would need this kind of training the most.

## 5. Summary

The answers to the questionnaire provided useful information about the current situation of geography education. Based on the answers – and compared to the figures of previous surveys – it can be stated that there has been no improvement in recent years regarding the situation and the conditions of geography education and in the professional well-being of geography teachers. Geography teachers are still the most concerned about the low number of lessons and the poor general perception of the subject. With a view to boosting the prestige of the subject, they stress the recognition of the importance and the usefulness of the knowledge transmitted by geography, and the increase of its weight in the school leaving exam and the entrance exam in higher education.

However, the growing unification of the demand to change the external circumstances is not accompanied by the manifestation of efforts aiming to change the traditional educational practice and the methodological and measurement-evaluation related culture.

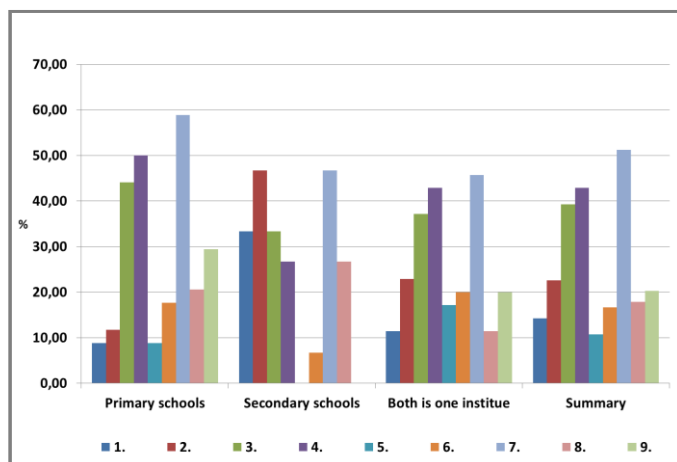


Figure 4. The most useful teacher training topic. Key: 1 – psychology, 2 – science of geography (geographical knowledge), 3 – methodology, 4 – competence development, 5 – measurement and evaluation, 6 – the use of the Internet, 7 – the use of interactive whiteboards, 8 – the development of local curriculum, 9 – preparation for education not divided by branches of science (non subject based education).

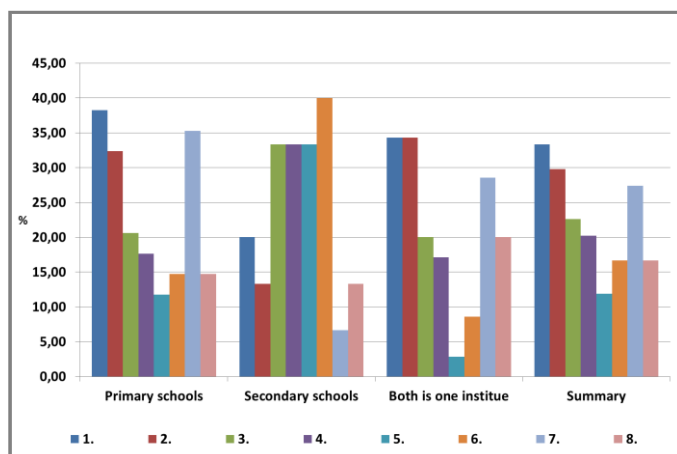


Figure 5. The best form of teacher training. Key: 1 – accredited course, 2 – demonstration lesson, 3 – conference, 4 – postgraduate training, 5 – counselling, consultancy, 6 – course, workshop, 7 – training, 8 – tele-education (distance learning).

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