



Relation between University Geographies and Syllabuses for Geography Instruction in General Secondary Schools in Slovenia

Hochschulgeographien und Geographielehrpläne für die Sekundarstufe in Slowenien

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Relation between University Geographies and Syllabuses for Geography Instruction in General Secondary Schools in Slovenia

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Summary

In this empirically based study the syllabuses of geography instruction are evaluated by academics at the university level. They had to evaluate the objectives and terminology of physical geography, human geography and regional geography in the syllabus of geography instruction in secondary schools in Slovenia. The terminology as well as the objectives for human geography and in a lesser way for physical geography was quite criticized. The evaluation of the regional geography was ambiguous.

Keywords: evaluation, teaching geography, Slovenia, university geography

Povzetek

V pričujoči empirično utemeljeni študiji predstavljamo rezultate evalvacije učnega načrta za geografijo v splošni gimnaziji v Sloveniji z vidikov akademikov na univerzitetni ravni. Evalvirali so učne cilje in terminologijo fizične geografije, družbene geografije in regionalne geografije. Terminologija in učni cilji družbene geografije ter v manjši meri fizične geografije so bili precej kritizirani. Evalvacija regionalne geografije je bila dualistična.

Gljučne besede: evalvacija, šolska geografija, Slovenija, univerzitetna geografija

Zusammenfassung

In einer empirisch angelegten Studie wurden Lehrende an den Universitäten Sloweniens nach der inhaltlichen und terminologischen Bewertung aktueller Lehrpläne für Geographie an Sekundarschulen befragt. Themen und Begriffskataloge der Humangeographie entsprachen am wenigsten dem wissenschaftlichen universitären Standard. Für Themen aus dem Bereich der Physischen Geographie wurden auch erhebliche Diskrepanzen zwischen Schulcurriculum und Inhalten universitärer Lehrerbildung konstatiert. Die Bewertung regionalgeographischer Inhalte schwankte zwischen Ablehnung, Gleichgültigkeit und Bejahung.

Keywords: Evaluation, Schulgeographie, Slowenien, universitäre Lehrerbildung

1 Introduction

Syllabuses for geography instructions at various levels in the field of education reflect the developmental stage of geography as a science, the developmental stage of the educational system, and the condition of society by which we imply social needs

as a result of the actual socio-political situations and life patterns. All of the above mentioned factors are intertwined and interdependent (IVANUŠ GRMEK 2007). In this paper we present the opinions of university professors on specific parts of the syllabuses for geography instruction in

general secondary schools (1998) in the Republic of Slovenia.

The current objectives of geographical education in Slovenia define geography as a school subject that „educates and trains with natural as well as with social contents with an interdisciplinary intention. This combined knowledge presents a valuable guideline for the students in managing and coping with future developments on local, national or global levels as well as in transferring the knowledge from educational-theoretical to real life spheres. Geography in school takes on the challenge by researching and searching answers for responsible spatial planning, for the preservation of the earth and a responsible sustainable development of nature and society. Geographical teaching for the future is based on knowledge acquisition and its methods of research. Both aspects are important for the present (learning about space) and the future (managing space). Geography is a subject that enables students to acquire knowledge and develop capabilities and skills, which help them to better understand the close and distant living spaces. Moreover, it encourages them to evaluate and respect local (domestic landscapes), regional (domestic natural and geographic units), national (Slovenia) and global (Europe, Earth) environments accurately“ (KOLENC KOLNIK, RESNIK PLANINC 2006, 76-77).

In spite of clear general guidelines for geographical education and schooling there repeatedly appear to be dilemmas about the formation of syllabuses and geography instruction in Slovenia regarding how (above all in what manner and with what content) to put the above mentioned general guidelines of the subject into effect.

Taking into consideration the last curriculum reform of the primary and secondary school system in the Republic of Slovenia these dilemmas are paralleled by

questions of the scientific community of Slovene geographers referring particularly to the sphere of methodological approaches to (scientific) treatments of geographic spaces as well as time-space processes. In her PhD thesis, S. POPIT (2002, p. 189-193) claims that there is a discrepancy between geographical education in schools and contemporary trends in geography as a science in Slovenia, which needs to be overcome and conformed to present social and educational demands.

During the preparation of the curriculum reform in the 1970s, S. Ilešič, a prominent Slovene geographer and the author of several geography textbooks, emphasized that „the science which is listed among educational subjects under its name should not depart from its essence“ (ILEŠIČ 1974, p. 20). It is in this sense interesting to identify the opinions of university geographers on selected sections of the syllabuses for geography instruction in general secondary schools in Slovenia. The purpose of this paper is to present a part of the research »Evaluation of syllabuses for geography instruction in general secondary schools in Slovenia from the university's geography perspective«, which was conducted in 2008. The context was a research frame, which included also viewpoints of social needs, educational guidelines and geographic science in 2008. The paper presents opinions of university geographers, regarding two sections of the syllabuses for geography in general secondary schools in Slovenia: general geography which is covered in the first year of education at general secondary schools, and regional geography of the World, which is covered in the second year. General secondary school in Slovenia is a secondary school with a general-educational emphasis that does not provide vocational education, but prepares students aged 15 to 19 for further education at universities.

2 Goals of the research project »Evaluation of syllabuses for geography instruction in general secondary schools from geographic science perspective«

The research sets out to achieve the following goals:

- analyse opinions of university geographers on behalf of content-related characteristics of the existing teaching objectives in selected sections of the syllabuses;
- describe new teaching objectives within the selected sections of the syllabus proposed by university geographers.

The results of this research should promote a more scientifically and didactically based and justified school syllabus.

3 Description of research instruments and research procedure

The evaluation protocol, which was used in this qualitative research, was based on definitions of the International Charter on Geographical Education (1992) for global guidelines for geography teaching and on main points of several books on geography education in Slovenia, Germany and Great Britain. Furthermore, the evaluation protocol comprised a collection of teaching instructions, methods of operations and a list of research procedural steps. The basic research method used was the descriptive and causal-non-experimental method of empirical pedagogical research (SAGADIN 1993) and the qualitative analysis of the examples of evaluation protocols (LINCOLN, GUBA 1985; MESEC 1998; GOLDBLATT, SMITH 2003; FREEBODY 2004). In the research, qualitative as well as quantitative research methods were used; a combination of traditional empirical-analytical research and interpretive research (mixed methods research: JOHNSON, ONWUEGBUZIE 2004). Taking into account the views of researchers (SAGADIN

1991a; MILES, HUBERMAN 1994; DENZIN, LINCOLN 2000), this kind of approach seems sensible, since quantitative and qualitative research methods complement each other and – as stressed by SECHRES and SIDANA (1995) – this approach overcomes the deficiencies of using only one form of pedagogical research. Furthermore, while during the last decade important shifts in the direction of qualitative research occurred worldwide, so much so that many even spoke of a movement, this type of research remained peripheral in Slovenia, and became established to a lesser extent. In order to achieve the research objectives, an extensive approach (evaluation protocols) in combination with the intensive approach was used. The principal characteristic of the intensive approach is the open and independent expression of the participants' perspectives. In case a university evaluator had questions related to the filling out of the evaluation protocol, additional interviews were conducted. Five of these interviews were carried out. The questions were mainly related to the evaluation of learning objectives in the light of educational guidelines, and were predominantly of an organisational nature (where to write something down; in how much detail to consider the definitions of global directions), and were to a lesser extent content related. The information collected in the empirical part of the research was reviewed by the researcher; the collected material was analysed, assessed and evaluated (JUŽNIČ 1984).

Researchers and professors from the department of Geography at the faculty of arts in Ljubljana and the department of Geography at the faculty of arts in Maribor, who are engaged in teacher-training, were asked to evaluate teaching syllabuses for geography instruction in general secondary schools in Slovenia, which was proposed by the curriculum commission for Geography in secondary general schools of the Repu-

blic of Slovenia and accepted in 1998 by the Authority of the Republic of Slovenia for general education. The qualitative research included 78,5% of all university professors in Slovenia. Their pedagogical and scientific research is directly related to teaching objectives and contents of the current school syllabuses. The results presented in the paper are a synthesis of opinions of all reviewers and not a unanimous one. The analysis of the evaluation protocols reveals quite different opinions about the teaching objectives.

4 (General) Physical Geography

In the syllabuses for geography instruction in general secondary schools in Slovenia, (general) physical geography comprises six smaller thematic units: formation and structure of the earth, surface of the earth, weather and climate, soil, vegetation and waters. In the first year of secondary school (general) physical geography takes up approximately two thirds of the teaching time allotted to geography whereas the remaining third is allotted to (general) human geography.

The university geographers submitted most corrections regarding teaching objectives for the formation and structure of the earth, soil and vegetation units. The least corrections were suggested for the weather and climate unit. The major criticism was directed to the sequence of the teaching objectives. University geographers think that in some instances the sequence of the teaching objectives meets neither the didactical principles (gradual steps, systematic approach, clearness) nor the logical concept of the science. Through methodical reformulations of existing teaching objectives, an important shift was made also from describing and knowing geographical processes to understanding of the latter and their systemic presence in the geosphere. For the discussed thematic units, an increased emphasis was placed on having the

real locations and/or examples in Slovenia and the world written down in syllabuses. Examples from Slovenia should be accentuated to enable the more evident exercise of the principle 'from the imminent in space to the faraway in space'. This has always been one of the most important principles in Slovene geography education even if in the contemporary world of technology and globalisation several didactical research state that „imminent in space” does not necessarily mean „imminent mentally” (KOLENC KOLNIK 1996; KOLENC KOLNIK 2002; KOLENC KOLNIK 2004). Participating university geographers advised the transition from quite an anthropocentric treatment of (for example) vegetation, soil and water to an eco-systemic understanding of them. The formation of teaching objectives should bring about different understanding of vegetation and soil (e.g. soil as living matter, living space). The next most frequent correction type was the reduction of teaching objectives (e.g. simplification of the climate types' classification). Standardisation of climate types and the simplification of terms are in urgent need of correction and also harmonisation of terminology along the educational vertical between syllabuses and teaching material by various publishers and authors as well as atlases for schools. The review of the above mentioned materials reveals a lack of basic national network due to inconsistent national terminology in the syllabuses.

5 (General) Human Geography

The syllabuses for (general) human geography in general secondary schools in Slovenia consist of three thematic units: population, settlements and economic activities. The population and economic activities units are very extensive. The latter is subdivided into chapters according to single economic activities (e.g. agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, etc.). These

chapters represent a factual orientated geography without theoretical foundations. Settlements and urban geography are the smallest thematic units.

In the case of the economic activities unit the results were the most critical. One reviewer expressed his opinion on the unit as a whole: „I judge the syllabus for economic geography as out-of-date and not current enough. It has to be taken into consideration that Slovenia has carried out its socio-political transition; it has assumed market economy, accepted a European economic strategy and conditions of operation in the Euro area. The understanding of economy has changed. In view of that it is impossible only to supplement the existing syllabus, it has to be modified conceptually and structured in the way for it to be internationally comparative ...” (KONEČNIK KOTNIK 2009, p. 205). The reviewer consequently ascertained likewise that „in the current syllabuses attention is focused on the classical division of economic activities and the comprehension of basic terms which does not give students the understanding and evaluation of current economic processes. Each economic activity is presented as an independent, complete unit without interaction, reciprocal correlation and multiplicative economic effects in space. The knowledge acquired by students in this manner falls short of the desired knowledge and basic goal of geographical education – to comprehend the complexity and causality of processes and phenomena in space” (KONEČNIK KOTNIK 2009, p. 205). The reviewer finds that „the current syllabus, teaching objectives and geographic terms do not allow for the new paradigm of economic geography that asserted itself in the 1990s. Fast economic growth and the resulting structural modifications of individual economic activities make understanding of reasons for economic processes and swift economic changes necessary. Global inte-

gration of economic markets affects rapid changes in development of individual regions of the world, which are also dictated by the socio-political changes. Economic activities ought to be discussed and apprehended in local, regional and global contexts, which are neglected in the current syllabuses” (KONEČNIK KOTNIK 2009, p.206).

6 Regional Geographies

Regional geographies of the world are covered in the second year of general secondary schools in Slovenia. They consist of several smaller units, i.e. individual continents with the exception of Europe, which is covered in the third year of general secondary schools. Students get to know the following thematic units: Asia, Africa, South America, North America, Australia and Oceania and Polar regions.

The results of the evaluation reveal different opinions of the concept of regional geography. The current concept for conceptualization of regional geographies was judged as suitable by 50 % of the reviewers. The concept mainly follows the traditional regional geography that is identified above all with Hettner's model. It conceptualizes the treatment of continents and their smaller regional units according to a schematic sequence: position, relief, climate, vegetation, population and economy. 50% of the reviewers thought the series of existing teaching objectives in the context of descriptive ‚classic Hettner's regional approach' mainly suitable. Their corrections of teaching objectives are directed towards assuring in the syllabuses a greater role for human geography, which is supposedly subordinated to physical geography as well as towards emphasizing the current socio-political processes and phenomena.

The remaining 50% of the reviewers of regional geographies suggested modifications of fundamental methodical concepts of regional geographies. They advocate

the integral approach based on historic-genetic viewpoints (understanding of the present founded on past developments) that would enable to get to know the real problems of continents and at the same time offer less generalised insights into the regions discussed.

Distinctive dualism regarding the advocacy for particular concepts of continents discussion in teaching reflects conditions that have been typical in Slovenia for some decades, whereas discussions about regional geographies in the area of geographic science as well as in the area of geography instruction are periodically taken up. After the Second World War in Western Europe scientific regional geographies moved more and more away from traditional regional geography. The classical regionalist paradigm was in the long run replaced mainly with space paradigms. In some western countries (e.g. Great Britain, Germany) the ascendancy of a new geography in the sphere of scientific geography was followed by omission of classical regional approaches in geography instruction (RINSCHÉDE 2003; RAWLING, DAUGHERTY 1996; UNWIN 1992). Slovene regional geography witnessed extensive controversies in the 1970s and 1980s. Within the realm of teaching geography instruction the transition from traditional regional geographic scheme towards the so-called thematic approach has been made in the framework of planned education. After Slovenia attained independence the traditional concept of regional geography partly recovered again, but with some modern elements. This regional orientation is currently often under attack and criticized (SENEGAČNIK 2006).

7 Conclusions

From the presented findings we can conclude that the concepts, theories and methods in human geography are changing in the Republic of Slovenia with the fastest

dynamics. Human geography is trying to explain the social changes in the world which should in turn be integrated as fast as possible into the syllabuses of geography teaching. Vivid conceptual changes have an impact on research and teaching in physical geography. The demands for modifications of content in the syllabuses are less intensive as in human geography. Systemic approaches to develop an understanding of the interdependence of physical geographical processes and human actions are strongly pronounced in order to be aware of the necessity of sustained developments. All these movements are already integrated in the new syllabus for Geography in general secondary schools in Slovenia which were accepted in 2008 by authority of the Republic of Slovenia for general education. It could appear that according to reviewers the slowest development dynamics can be observed in the field of regional geography. It appears that half of the reviewers found it hard to take sides concerning the suitability of individual teaching objectives because they considered the whole approach to teaching of single thematic units in regional geography as unsuitable. This is mainly true for the younger generation of reviewers. Whereas the latest survey on the popularity of the two methodological approaches conducted among Slovene students in the general secondary schools and their geography teachers revealed a distinctive tendency to maintain the regional framework of geography instruction (SENEGAČNIK 2005).

A final conclusion might be to link geography education and the determining of school syllabuses closely to the research agendas of their university discipline, and to integrate and apply the findings of geographical research into educational and wider social and individual demands of each student. At the same time all geographers (pedagogically and otherwise ori-

ented) should be aware „that only through constant research, struggle for improvement of the existing situation, through the search for new ways and methods of work, permanent verifications and evaluations

of geography the proposed teaching objectives can be achieved, and the wish for a high quality geographical education be given sense” (KOLENC KOLNIK, RESNIK PLANINC 2006, p. 81).

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