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**Alina Awramiuk**

Institute of Socio-Economic Geography  
and Spatial Management  
Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies  
University of Warsaw  
alina.awramiuk@uw.edu.pl

**CURRICULUM REFORM AND THE EDUCATIONAL CONTENT  
IN GEOGRAPHY WITHIN POLISH CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to examine whether the reform of the curriculum introduced in 1999 altered the extent and manner of presenting some selected geography topics, especially the problem of cultural diversity in Poland. On the basis of official documents on education and selected geography textbooks existing before and after 1999, the author sought to assess whether there have been any changes (both quantitative and qualitative) in the content and in the way they are presented in textbooks. The comparison has shown that the curriculum reform has not led to significant changes in school curricula, as regards the scope of the content. The analysis of textbooks has confirmed the hypothesis that the selection and scope of the content depends largely on the subjective assessment of its importance in geography teaching done by the author(s). Some authors consider these issues as important and worthy of wider discussion, while others only indicate or even ignore them, which in turn results in a great diversity of school textbooks.

**Key words:** curriculum reform, political transformation, educational content in geography, Polish cultural diversity

**INTRODUCTION**

In Poland by 1989, there had been a centralized system of government force, including management of education. The existence of the national curriculum was the only way for central control over the education system. The curriculum was outlining specific topics and teaching objectives in all subjects. There was one curriculum which applied to all schools and all teachers. The

political transition in the early 1980s and 1990s, triggered changes in education which began to gradually move towards decentralization of education management and to provide schools and teachers with greater freedom and control over the education process. One of the key elements of the reform of Polish education system in 1999 was the curriculum reform which covered all stages of education and all subjects. The reform led to curricular pluralism. Teachers could develop self-written curricula and had freedom to choose a curriculum and the accompanying handbook from the wide offer available in the publishing market. General Education Core Curriculum<sup>1</sup> became a document which featured objectives common to all curricula (the self-written and commercial), and content of particular subjects, interdisciplinary subjects and educational paths.

Changes in organizational structure of education, the creation of new school types (the three-grade middle schools and upper secondary schools) and the introduction of new subjects and forms of teaching (e.g. interdisciplinary subjects and educational paths) also forced the reorganization of the educational content<sup>2</sup> and changes in this field. After the reform, geography appears as a separate subject only in the middle school, but some geography topics have already been included in the course of natural science in the primary school. In addition, a new teaching form, called educational path<sup>3</sup>, has emerged and should be realised in various subjects.

According to the objectives of general didactics, educational content should reflect both current and future projected needs of people's social, professional and cultural life. Educational content constitutes the main stimulus of teaching and has educational impact on students, therefore it should take into account not only the knowledge and skills for a particular discipline, but also the appropriate attitudes, behavior or moral norms. Educators dealing with this issue emphasise the need to modify all plans and curricula due to the constantly changing conditions of teaching and educating (Achtenhagen,

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<sup>1</sup> In the first phase of implementation of education reform the *General Education Curriculum Act of Ministry of National Education, 15 February 1999* was in force; and when the reform was extended to secondary schools (high schools), the *Act by Ministry of National Education and Sport of 26 February 2002 on pre-school curriculum and general education in particular types of schools* came into force [Act 51, § 458, as amended later].

<sup>2</sup> In this study the term is understood as "the whole basic knowledge and all skills in science, technology, culture, art and social practice to master as provided to the students during their school education" (Kupisiewicz, 2000, p. 75). The term "teaching content" will also be used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> A set of topics and skills which are essential as educational material. The content of all educational paths was focused on one topic that did not fit entirely in any of the school subjects therefore, in line with the reform, it should be discussed in various subjects, and also should appear in the curricula and textbooks (*Ścieżki edukacyjne... Educational paths...*, 2001).

1990, after Kupisiewicz 2000). Undoubtedly, the transformation of the country's political system affects the fundamental change of teaching conditions, and thus causes changes in the educational process.

### **PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF WORK**

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the transformation of the education system caused a considerable change in the selected educational content in geography. Analysing this issue, the author drew attention to Polish cultural diversity. The choice of this topic was dictated, on the one hand, by the high interest of many researchers, including geographers, in broader regionalism, which involves the issue of cultural identity, ethnicity, etc. Moreover, the political transformation has brought an increase in freedom to express cultural identity of different groups of the society, including national and ethnic minorities living in Poland. This led to a marked increase in cultural and political activity of minorities in the 1990s, which manifested itself by, for example a dynamic development of schools offering mother-tongue education. That was evident especially in the case of German, Ukrainian, Kashubian or Lemko minorities (Awramiuk 2007).

The analysis highlights both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the educational content in question. The author tried to verify whether the issues related to Polish cultural diversity are at all included in the curricula and textbooks, if so, how they are presented by their authors.

This problem was investigated in the course of analysing official documents on education (i.e. the curriculum and the core curriculum) and selected geography textbooks, existing before and after 1999. Taking into account the fact that educational content is inextricably linked with the initial objectives of teaching and students' achievements, the study investigated geography core curriculum for primary and secondary schools (existing prior to the reform of education), and the core curriculum for middle and high schools (after the reform). In addition, it also examined the assumptions of an educational path called "Regional education – cultural heritage in the region."

### **EDUCATIONAL CONTENT AND GEOGRAPHY CURRICULA BEFORE AND AFTER THE EDUCATION REFORM**

During the political transition in 1990, the Ministry of Education introduced the first modifications in the nationwide curriculum. However, there were no radical changes in the structure and teaching content. As the authors

wrote in the introduction to the curriculum, the main objective of the modifications was to “limit the scope of the existing curriculum (...) for the pupil’s effort to become rational and creative” (*Program szkoły podstawowej*, Primary school curriculum, 1990, p. 3). As a result, the changes were merely cosmetic, corrective, and the main tool used by the authors were “scissors.”

**Polish cultural diversity in the curriculum of 1990.** Although the curriculum for primary school shows no direct references to cultural diversity in Poland, one of the key objectives of geographical education was “understanding the nature and dynamics of transformation taking place today in the economic, social and political life” (p. 5), while in connection to geography of Poland the following phrasing appears “learning (...) the main problems of economic, social and political life” (*Program szkoły podstawowej*, Primary school curriculum, 1990). The wording used by the authors, that is “transformation and social problems”, may have been interpreted very broadly by teachers and authors of textbooks, which gave a possibility to consider also issues of regional communities, including ethnic and religious minorities.

Topics concerning Poland have been incorporated into geography curricula of Grade 4 in primary school (sample topics: The Polish landscape, The landscape of the nearest area, Selected Polish landscapes) and Grade 8, where the whole material concerns geography of Poland, that is the issues of natural diversity and socio-economic problems. As for Polish cultural diversity, the problem was mentioned in the section, “The Nation and the Polish territory” (Grade 8), where the term of “national minorities” appears (*Program szkoły podstawowej*, Primary school curriculum, 1990). Furthermore, in the discussion of Polish geographical regions, especially the Polish Lowlands, cultural aspects were taken into account, and these are referred to as “folk culture centers” (*Program szkoły podstawowej*, Primary school curriculum, 1990). References to Polish cultural diversity were not found in other places.

At secondary level, one of the teaching objectives is to emphasise attitudes related to “the system of values, analysis of objects of study, phenomena and situations in moral aspects, aesthetic, social, patriotic, and other” and “an impact on the proper attitude towards yourself, school, society (...)” (*Program nauczania liceum ogólnokształcącego*, Secondary school curriculum, 1990). It also seems that in this case, shaping students’ attitudes may have different dimensions, and in everyday life it may be associated with different situations, such as contact with representatives of other ethnic or religious groups, and nationalities. In the discussion of geography of Poland, as provided for Grade 3 in high school, references to Polish cultural diversity were not found.

**Polish cultural diversity in the core curriculum of 1999.** Following the introduction of the education reform, the abovementioned *Podstawa pro-*

*gramowa kształcenia ogólnego* (General Education Core Curriculum)<sup>4</sup> has become the major document specifying teaching objectives and the scope of teaching content for different subjects.

At primary school, the authors of the curriculum found “teaching respect for other nationalities, values and lifestyles” (*Podstawa programowa*, Core curriculum, 2002) to be one of the key objectives in geography teaching. Thus, these are the attitudes that relate directly to cultural diversity. Although without any indication of spatial reference (world, country, region), they give the possibility to include different aspects of multiculturalism in geography curricula. In the description of the teaching content there is a very general wording – “the cultural potential of Poland” (*Podstawa programowa*, Core curriculum, 2002). One can only guess what the authors had in mind. That clause is so vague that teachers and authors of textbooks could interpret it in many different ways. Its effects are visible in the textbooks which will be discussed further below. In the curricula of regional geography education there are numerous topics related to the cultural peculiarity of a region, for example, “the origin of the regional community, the language and regional dialect, traditions, customs, habits”, etc. (*Podstawa programowa*, Core curriculum, 2002), which in the case of border regions (e.g. Podlasie, Silesia) can be expressed by a great diversity resulting from different cultural groups living in these areas.

The situation is similar in high-school education. Cultural diversity of Poland has not been taken into account in geography curriculum, whereas in the regional geography we can find a lot of references to the multiculturalism of a region and Poland. One of the main objectives of the regional studies is to “develop respect for other regional, ethnic and national communities” (*Podstawa programowa*, Core curriculum, 2002), whereas among the students’ achievements, there is “appreciation for national culture in its regional diversity, compared to cultures of other ethnic and national communities” and “formation of Vnational solidarity and openness to other communities and cultures” (*Podstawa programowa*, Core curriculum, 2002).

The foregoing analysis, therefore, makes it clear that in the official documents giving the foundation of geography education, existing before and after the education reform, there are only a few general references to cultural issues,

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<sup>4</sup> In its assumption, the core curriculum was to set educational tasks in general terms, leaving room for autonomy for curriculum writers and teachers, however, that triggered criticism, especially among teachers. The negative opinions concerned above all, very general terms, referring to objectives and educational content. In recent years, there were several attempts to change the core curriculum. In 2004–2005, a team led by professor K. Konarzewski developed a project of the core which ultimately was not approved by the Ministry of Education. Further changes were made in the spring of 2008. Prepared in haste, a new core curriculum, was both approved and again criticised, and despite that, in December 2008, the document won approval of the Ministry of Education.

including Polish cultural diversity, such as “cultural potential of Poland” or “national minorities”. However, the authors of the core curricula consider teaching tolerance, respect and openness to other cultures to be an important goal of teaching and learning geography. The further analysis of selected geography textbooks will show how their authors interpreted the official curriculum.

### EDUCATIONAL CONTENT IN SELECTED GEOGRAPHY TEXTBOOKS BEFORE AND AFTER THE EDUCATION REFORM

Changes which took place in the 1990s led to the emergence of several sets of textbooks for various subjects. This analysis includes four geography textbooks published between 1994–1997. After the education reform there was a great demand for teaching materials, including textbooks. Many publishing houses which appeared at that time developed and published as many as several curricula for one subject. Currently there are 59 authorized geography textbooks for school use at middle school, whereas at high-school level there are 41 (geography standard level) and 18 (geography higher level)<sup>5</sup>.

**Polish cultural diversity in geography textbooks before the education reform.** Analysis of geography textbooks available before 1999 shows that despite the fact that there was one, a very detailed curriculum, the scope and way of presentation of particular topics differ considerably. On the basis of the analysed issue of Polish cultural diversity it may be said that some authors included it in the teaching plan (e.g. Plit, Makowski et al. 1997; Zając 1995), while others ignored it (e.g. Batorowicz, Nalewajko et al. 1994; Harasymowicz 1996).

Differences are also evident in the presentation of the analysed topics and the scope of problems. For example, the handbook by F. Plit, J. Makowski and J. Plit (1997) devotes two topics to these issues: “The structure of nationalities” and “Religious structure” (pp. 98–102). In the handbook by S. Zając (1995), we find one, but quite a wide topic entitled “Features of the Polish population” (pp. 31–36), in which the author puts particular emphasis on the issues of ethnographic and ethnic diversity in Poland.

It is worth to take a closer look at how these authors present Polish cultural diversity. In the first case the author<sup>6</sup> adopts a thematic approach to the discussed issues. Analysing the structure of Polish nationalities he takes historical changes into account (he refers to the times before and after World

<sup>5</sup> Directory of geography textbooks is on the official website of Ministry of Education, as of September 2010/11 school year <http://www.reformaprogramowa.men.gov.pl/podreczniki/58>.

<sup>6</sup> The author uses the singular form, as F. Plit. is the author of the entire third chapter, entitled “Society.”



War II), and indicates how current political situation in the country, that is the political transformation, affects national minorities: “before 1989, minorities were not willingly talked about, and the activity of their cultural associations was restricted. Only in recent years, their activity has developed freely, and organizations of political character have also been founded” (Plit et al. 1997, p. 98). The author also draws attention to the issues of shaping the identity of people who belong to minorities, “the centuries of coexistence with Poles, many mixed marriages have made it difficult for the people in question to determine what nationality they are. They gladly declare to belong to both; they feel Poles, but also for example, Belarusians. Some of the declarations of belonging to national minorities were cyclical in nature, such as in the 1970s and 1980s, when people whose one goal was leaving for the West pretended to be Germans and also sought German ancestors” (Plit et al. 1997, p. 98–99). It is noteworthy how the size and distribution of various national minorities in Poland are discussed. The author uses the results of parliamentary elections (the number of votes for the parties representing national minorities), giving the names of the elected minority committees which took part in the elections in 1991. However, that information is not left without a commentary. He explains that thanks to this data we can, in an indirect way, infer about the abundance and distribution of the selected national minorities in Poland. Furthermore, he encourages students to pay attention to the cultural features of their region by formulating the following questions: “Representatives of which minorities live in your region? Can you name the characteristics of their culture? Which of them deserve wider popularization in the Polish society?” (Plit et al. 1997, p. 100). It is unfortunate to use “which” in the first question as it is not precise and could be misunderstood by students. The responses might be for example, a few, different, interesting or, on the contrary, dull, irrelevant, etc. It is worth noting that in later editions of the geography textbook by F. Plit we can find properly formulated questions, that is “Which minorities live in your district? What are the characteristic elements of national culture?” (Plit, Osuch et al. 2003, p. 39)

As for the other handbook by S. Zając (1995), the author in the first place discusses Polish ethnographic diversity, and then proceeds to national and ethnic minorities. As in the previous case, S. Zając indicates that cultural diversity has its origins in the historical past. Giving the post-war migrations as an example, he discusses problems in defining (naming) all ethnographic groups in Poland, especially those living in the western part of the country. Analysing ethnic diversity in Poland the author mentions only those minorities which live in Poland, giving their estimated numbers and information about the general percentage of minorities in the Polish ethnic structure. He does not present where, in which regions, the minorities live and why it is

there. He draws attention to the issue of tolerance and respect for other nationalities, and emphasizes that the minorities have their rights but also responsibilities, just like all Polish people: "Each citizen shall have duties and responsibilities and, among others, none of them can harm the interests of their own country. Citizens of national minorities have the same obligations" (Zajac 1995, p. 36). Photographs of folk culture presenting regional costumes, rural and sacral wooden architecture enrich the chapter.

**Polish cultural diversity in geography textbooks after the education reform.** Preliminary analysis of textbooks which became effective after the introduction of education reform confirmed the findings related to textbooks published before 1999. Some authors ignore issues of cultural diversity (e.g. Domachowski, Wilczyńska-Wołoszyn 2001), while others include them in varying degrees, going into this issue in a more or less detailed way.

At middle-school level, the authors of geography textbooks discuss different Polish regions (mainly in terms of physical geography) with the tendency to ignore issues of cultural diversity of the presented areas. Only occasionally is there any information about religious or national minorities living in a given region. This information is presented superficially, for example in the form of geographical curiosities, not always decently developed (see Awramiuk 2008).

Generally, the presentation of Polish cultural diversity in geography textbooks for middle schools takes the following pattern: it appears in topics relating to the administrative division and the structure of Polish population, and the most numerous ethnic minority groups, such as German, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, or Kashubian are characterized, albeit in a rather general way. For example, in "The nationality structure" (p. 1992–1999), J. Mordawski (2000) begins a comprehensive characterisation of different ethnic groups, then goes on to national minorities. The author characterises the distribution of these communities, their characteristics, as well as issues of religious diversity and religious minorities (e.g. Belarusians – Orthodox, Lemkos – Greek Catholics, Tatars – Muslims). The author mentions the scattered character of Ukrainian and Lemko minorities, emphasising that, with the latter, this is a result of resettlement after World War II, but the topic is not elaborated on in a further detail. The chapter is enriched with numerous photographs presenting elements of folk culture and rural architecture, including sacred elements (wooden churches and Orthodox churches). M. Schubert (2004) presents these issues in a similar way. The chapter "Administrative division and population structure" discusses a topic entitled "The nationality structure. Ethnic groups" (p. 1978–1982). In this case, the author starts with ethnic diversity, presenting the changes in the ethnic structure in Poland over the years and the reasons for the current structure of Polish nationality. The population and areas of the largest national minorities (Germans, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Lemkos)



are discussed. Characterizing the Ukrainian and Lemko minorities the author explains the reasons for the dispersion of ethnic groups, resulting from forced displacement in 1947. After a discussion of national minorities, the author goes on to present the main ethnographic groups and places of their occurrence in Poland, also marked on the attached map.

In their geography textbook for secondary schools, T. Krynicka-Tarnacka, G. Wnuk and Z. Wojtkowicz (2005) presented a completely different, compared to the discussed above, perception of cultural issues. In the chapter entitled, "The cultural potential of Poland", which in its wording sounds the same as one of topics in the core curriculum, the authors focus on issues concerning the development of high culture in Poland. They present, among others, the main cultural centers in Poland and the sites listed by the UNESCO World Heritage. They also discuss how Poles influenced the development of the world civilization. Issues concerning Polish cultural diversity have been practically ignored. Although the authors mention that Christianity has played an important role in European and Polish culture, in the very first sentence they indicate that Poland has for centuries been under the influence of two cultures, Roman and Byzantine (these concepts are explained), but they do not develop this issue more broadly. There is a brief mention of the fact that the Catholic Church takes first place in Europe in terms of number of followers, but this is where the discussion of religious issues ends.

On the other hand, in their handbook for high schools, F. Plit, W. Osuch, et al. (2003) have included the issue of Polish cultural diversity. There is a reference to the cultural borderlands regarded as areas offering the greatest ethnic and national diversity in Poland. The authors try to present characteristic elements of these areas and try to explain what is involved in being a man of the border "in borderlands there is almost always crisscrossing of the settlement of various ethnic groups, there are frequent contacts between them and mixed marriages. (...)". Many people feel obliged to belong to two groups simultaneously, for example, they feel both Belarusians and Poles" (Plit, Osuch et al. 2003, p. 39). The authors are aware of various problems existing in the borderlands, including those associated with the evolution of their inhabitants' identity, which they relatively broadly discuss. They draw attention to the fact that these communities avoid unambiguous declarations of belonging to an ethnic group (nationality), and instead of that they prefer describing themselves in terms of "local", that is residents of their village, town, or region. It is worth noting that this problem is currently the subject of many studies (often interdisciplinary), carried out mainly by sociologists, but also geographers.

The above examples drawn from various geography textbooks which were issued before and after 1999, show how authors' approaches to the issues of Polish cultural diversity differ. The examples confirm the initial assumption

that these problems are interpreted and presented in various ways in school textbooks.

## CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of official documents, that is the curriculum that was in force before and after the transformation of the education system, has shown that the problem of Polish cultural diversity has not been emphasised in the teaching of geography. At the same time, the curriculum reform has not led to decisive changes in the content under discussion. Rarely do slogans such as “national minorities” or “Polish cultural potential (...)” appear in official documents on education. It should be noted, however, that educational aspects associated with the development of tolerance, respect for other cultures and value systems have repeatedly appeared within the aims of geography teaching. It appears, therefore, that it is in the discussion of Polish cultural diversity, including the student’s own region, where these attitudes can be developed.

It must be stressed that the official documents on education only outline the scope of issues that should be included in the curricula and school textbooks. Especially, the core curriculum introduced after the education reform sets educational tasks in a very general way, giving greater freedom in the selection and the content scope to the authors of curricula and the teachers. The analysis of selected school textbooks indicates that the selection of the subject content, both before and after the education reform, is mainly dependent on an individual approach of the author (or group of authors) of a textbook, their vision of geography teaching and the system of values which they have.

On the basis of the issues relating to multiculturalism in Poland, it is clear that the manner and scope of the material taken into account in the geography textbooks is very diverse. Some authors consider these issues as important and worthy of wider discussion, while others only indicate or even ignore them. The approach represented by the authors of the analysed textbooks can therefore be divided into three categories:

1. refraining from the issues of multiculturalism in teaching geography of Poland;
2. analysing this problem, by only signalling the issues of Polish cultural diversity, presenting “dry” facts, often in a schematic and rather superficial way;
3. admitting the importance of these issues in the teaching of geography and preference for the thematic approach to a problem in its presentation; in

addition, issues relating to cultural diversity of Poland occupy much space in the textbooks.

For the last of the categories, it is worth noting that the authors saw, among others, the impact of political transformation on the social situation of ethnic groups and on cultural identity of not only ethnic minorities, but also some ethnographic groups. What is more, they are aware that students who use their textbooks may come into contact with cultural otherness in their own region, or may derive from a non-Polish cultural group.

In conclusion, the transformation of the education system has not significantly affected the scope of the educational content in geography, while its selection in the curricula and textbooks continues to heavily depend on the decision of the textbook author (authors) or publisher's suggestions. However, lack of specific topics relating to Polish cultural diversity in geography curriculum of 2002 does not mean that this issue has been completely neglected. The analysis has shown that this issue was signalled in the teaching aims and largely reflected in the regional path, which should also be reflected in curricula and geography textbooks.

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