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**FROM FASCINATION TO INDIFFERENCE – CHANGES  
IN STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS GEOGRAPHY  
AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT IN 1989–2009**

**Abstract:** The objective of the paper is to answer the following questions:

- How was the role of Geography among other school subjects was changing during education system transformation in Poland?
- How were the students' attitudes towards Geography as a school subject were changing at that time?

In order to meet the above objectives, a three-stage survey was conducted: in 1989, in 2002 and in 2010. Questionnaire containing 22 questions was a basic research tool. The questionnaire concerned students' attitudes toward Geography as a school subject. It was observed that the students had been interested in Geography before the education system reform. It was perceived as a useful subject, both in further education and day-to-day life. Unfortunately, in the following years of transformation, after the introduction of education system reform, students' attitudes towards Geography changed. The students did no longer appreciate this subject. They more and more often suggest that Geography is a subject which does not arouse interest.

**Key words:** education system reform, students' attitudes towards geography

**INTRODUCTION**

Not only do changes initiated in Poland as a result of systemic transformation concern the economy, but also administration, society, culture and education. Evolutionary transformation of education system in Poland started in 1989. General, major and subject teaching objectives, therein Geography teaching objectives have been modified.

Education system reform was supposed to cause that knowledge gained during the lessons, therein Geography lessons, served developing skills. Comprehensive development of the students, not limited to growth of information resources only, but involving also students' attitudes towards phenomena, objects and processes surrounding them became to be the objectives of the reform. Physical development was neither forgotten.

It was underlined at every stage of the reform that encyclopaedic contents should be exchanged for the sake of developing, in the case of Geography, such abilities as:

- critical application of various sources of information,
- explaining phenomena and processes,
- defining relations and interdependences between the nature, human life and economy,
- resolving social, economic and nature-related problems of the contemporary world.

Education system undergoing reforms, also in the field of Geography, provided teachers with freedom of selecting teaching contents, which according to the reformers should depend on:

- importance and topicality of issues, which occur in the contemporary world,
- capacity of the students with whom he/she is going to work,
- cooperation with teachers of related subjects,
- current events in the region or in the closest neighbourhood.

Necessity for developing ability to think scientifically, especially ability to use ones knowledge to perform tasks and to resolve problems single-handedly, as well as drawing conclusions based on empirical observations concerning nature or society was underlined at both stages of the reform.

While preparing them for work in a reformed school, the teachers were reminded that it is necessary to apply frequently investigating techniques in teaching such as problem-based teaching and discussion. The teachers were also reminded about a necessity of arousing appropriate attitudes among the students which would favour their further individual development. It was suggested that, among others, project and valorisation techniques in teaching should be applied. Execution of the described assumptions along with civilisation growth leads to changes in interests and attitudes of the students towards school education and particular school subjects. Interests and attitudes account for important elements influencing effectiveness of teaching. Students' attitudes towards school subjects are important element influencing effectiveness of teaching-learning process. Execution of systemic and programmatic assumptions of the reform was supposed to lead to, among others, transformation of students' attitudes towards school, learning and school subjects, therein Geography, to positive.

An attitude is a relatively constant structure of cognitive and emotional processes, behaviour or dispositions referring to a particular “subject” or “subject” classes which can be found in the surrounding of the attitude’s carrier (Mika 1998).

R. Łapińska and M. Żebrowska (1992) are of the opinion that attitudes get stable at the age of 15–19 years. This is the time of forming interests which begin to influence students’ future: their future occupation, job. Young people start to steer their lives thanks to the knowledge which they have gained. Whereas, characteristic features of the attitudes of the young between 10 and 14 years old are instability and inconstancy. Children of this age are often guided by their parents’ caregivers’ attitudes. Secondary junior school (in Poland: gimnazjum) students (from 13 to 16 years old) include people from both age groups, that is why formation of their attitudes is extremely important from the point of view of their future.

An issue of description and characteristics of changes of students’ attitudes towards Geography as a school subject was brought up in this paper:

- How did the role of Geography change in comparison to other school subjects during education system transformation between 1989–2009?
- How did the students’ attitudes towards Geography as a school subject change in the time of education system reform?

Taking into consideration the described assumptions of the both conducted stages of the programmic and systemic reform in relation to Geography teaching, one can assume that role of Geography among other school subjects should gain in importance, whereas students’ attitudes should become more and more positive.

Questionnaire containing of 17 close-end questions was a basic research tool applied in order to verify the formulated hypothesis. The questionnaire concerned students’ attitudes towards Geography as a school subject. Rating of school subjects was prepared and attitudes scales were built on its basis. The scales involve values from the least favourable, through neutral to the most favourable towards Geography. Particular number of points was assigned to every answer to the questions from the questionnaire: 3 – to the positive answers, 2 – to the neutral ones, 1 – to the negative ones. Values of the scales describing attitudes, depending on number of questions concerning the assessed issue related with Geography fall into the bracket between 2 and 18 points. The attitudes scales concerned:

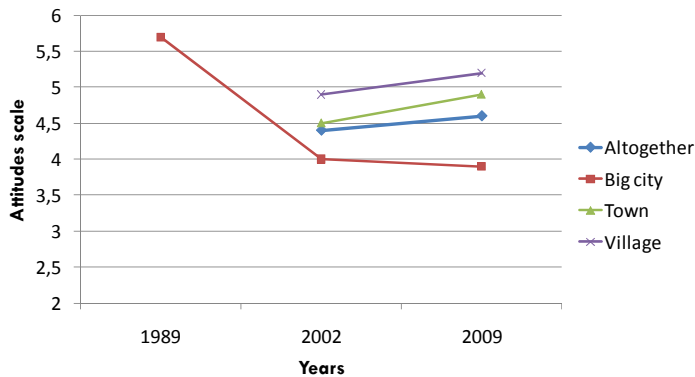
- role of the Geography in a school (scale adopts values from 2 to 6 points)
- usefulness of the Geography in an everyday life and learning (scale adopts values from 6 to 18 point)
- aspects of Geography which are favourable for the society (scale adopts values from 2 to 6 point)

- simplicity of Geography (scale adopts values from 4 to 12 points)
- interesting carrier related with Geography (scale adopts values from 3 to 9 points).

The research was conducted in three stages. 200 students from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> year of three primary schools in Kielce were surveyed in the first stage, conducted in 1989. 211 students from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of secondary junior school, three of which were located in Łódź, three in Piotrków Trybunalski and three in the rural areas of Łódzkie Voivodeship took part in the research in 2002. 231 students of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year of secondary junior schools, three of which were located in Białystok, three in Mińsk Mazowiecki and three in the rural areas of Podlaskie Voivodeship filled in the questionnaires in 2009.

### ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY IN A SCHOOL

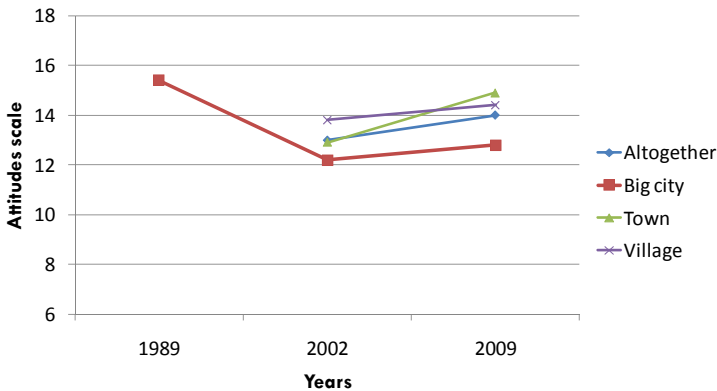
Students were supposed to choose two subjects which interested them most. A rating of the most interesting subjects was created in this way. On the basis of its analysis one can observe that Geography was significant for the students in 1989. It ranked third (14.3% of choices) just behind Physical Education (24.3%) and lessons of Polish (19.2%). Similar research was conducted in 2002 and Geography ranked low – it took 10<sup>th</sup> place (3.6%) in a rating of 14 positions. IT (29.1%) and PE (23.9%) classes were considered the most interesting ones and dominated other subjects. Polish lessons (5.9%) and Art lessons (5.7%) were next. Position of Geography in school subject rating did not change in 2009. Compared with the results from 1989, students appraised Geography less among other school subjects. Students from rural schools and small towns appreciated Geography more. Scale of attitudes towards Geography's role in a school adopted values from 2 to 6 (fig.1). In 1989 average for all the respondents amounted to 5.7 which showed positive attitude of the students towards Geography as a school subject. More and more opinions such as: "Geography as a school subject does not play an important role in the process of getting to know the world" or "Studying Geography is a waste of time" were voiced in the following years. The values on the attitudes scale were much smaller: 4.4 for 2002 and 4.6 for 2009. These results justify a statement that the students' attitudes towards Geography are close to neutral with a little positive orientation. Students of junior secondary schools from big cities gave Geography the lowest rates, whereas those from villages the highest (fig.1).



**Fig. 1.** Changes in students' attitudes towards role of Geography as a school subject; source: own calculations

### USEFULNESS OF GEOGRAPHY IN EVERYDAY LIFE AND SCHOOL EDUCATION

The attitudes scale of students towards the usefulness of Geography in everyday life and school education consisted of 6 questions and adopted values from 6 to 18. The average rate for the year 1989 was 15.4 (fig.2). It proves the positive attitude of students towards usefulness of Geography in everyday life and school education. Situation changed in the following analysed years. The average of attitudes scale fell to 13 in 2002 and to 14 in 2009 (fig. 2). These numbers prove neutral attitude with a small positive orientation. Such a small value of the scale means that students have no longer considered Geography useful in their everyday life and school education. More and more students

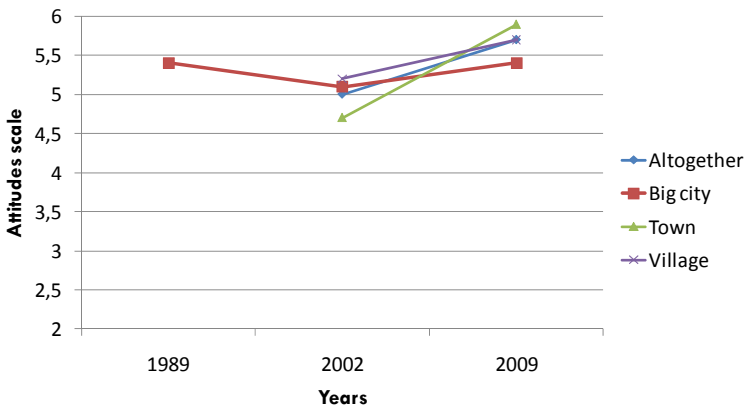


**Fig. 2.** Changes of students' attitudes towards the usefulness of Geography in everyday life and school education; source: own calculations

claimed that “one can cope well in life without Geography knowledge”, but also “they are not able to use it”. The usefulness of Geography was most appreciated in rural environment and less appreciated in big cities (fig. 2).

### ASPECTS OF GEOGRAPHY POSITIVE FOR THE SOCIETY

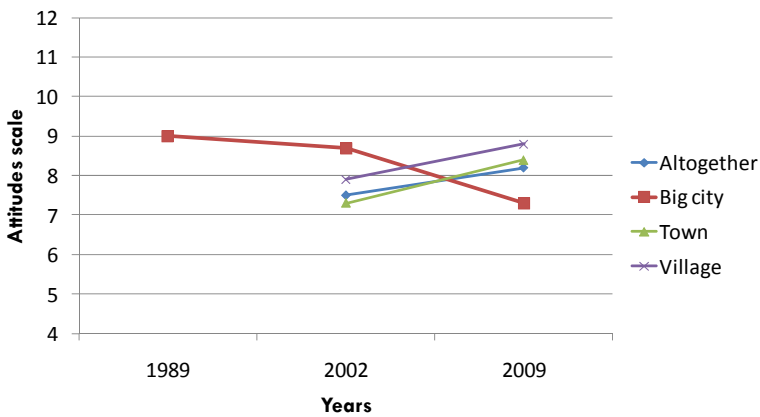
Scale of grades which concerned aspects of Geography positive for the society ranged from 2 to 6 points. Quite high average indicator (above 5), in each analysed period (fig. 3), indicates that students, despite their neutral attitudes towards Geography, considered it a field which improves living standard and is important for development of the country. Students of secondary junior schools from towns and rural areas perceived the biggest number of aspects of Geography positive for the society (fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Changes of attitudes towards aspects of Geography positive for the society  
source: own calculations

### SIMPLICITY OF GEOGRAPHY

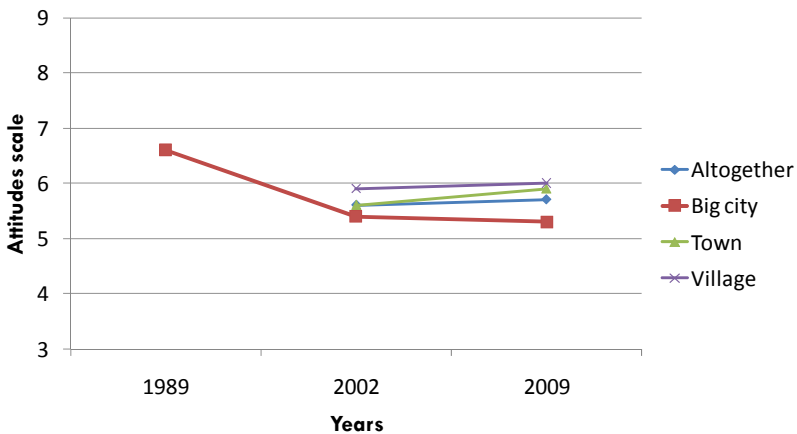
Scale concerning simplicity of Geography consists of four questions and involves values from 4 to 12 points. In 1989 it got 9 points. Students decided that this is a difficult subject (fig. 4). In 2002 this opinion gained in popularity. Junior secondary school students from towns and rural areas perceived Geography as particularly difficult. In 2009 situation changed only slightly. Students still did not number Geography among simple subjects. It turned out to be more difficult for students from big cities in that time. The respondents often claimed that learning Geography is neither pleasant nor interesting, mainly due to necessity of memorizing many facts and geographic names.



**Fig. 4.** Changes of students' attitudes towards simplicity of Geography; source: own calculations

### INTERESTING CARRIER RELATED TO GEOGRAPHY

Scale concerning interesting carrier related with Geography contained of three questions and adopted values between three and nine points. Index represented neutral attitude in all the presented cases, only in 1989 it showed slight positive orientation – 6.6 points (fig. 5). Average value for 2002 reached 5.6 points, whereas for 2009 – 5.7 points (fig. 5). The highest indexes were noted in rural gimnazjum, while the lowest in gimnazjum in big cities (fig. 5). Values presented in the attitudes scale prove that students did not have high hopes of



**Fig. 5.** Changes in students' attitudes towards interesting professional carrier related to Geography;

source: own calculations

interesting professional carrier related to Geography. They claimed that in the future majority of the occupations would not require too much Geography knowledge. Only 7% of the students were of the opinion that Geography knowledge would be helpful in future job.

## CONCLUSION

1. On the basis of results of the research conducted in 1989 one can observe that despite common in this time opinion about students' negative attitude towards school and school education, students' attitudes towards Geography were, generally speaking, positive. The students considered Geography as one of the most important school subjects, facilitating cognition of the world around them. They did not perceive aspects of Geography harmful for the society. They claimed that the subject is useful in everyday life and further school education. However, they did not see any possibilities for development of their professional carriers related to Geography. They considered this subject as rather difficult. One can assume that lessons of Geography, through transfer, could change students' attitudes towards school and school education to positive.

2. On the basis of the research conducted in 2002 and 2009 one can observe that Geography was not as popular among the surveyed students as it used to be before the reform. It ranked just 10 in the list of school subjects (in 1989 – 3<sup>rd</sup> position). The surveyed students showed neutral attitude towards Geography in that time. They considered number of Geography lessons as sufficient and they did see no need for having additional classes, for example within Geography special interest groups. The surveyed students were of the opinion that Geography is useful in further education and everyday life only to a little extent. However, they have also observed that elements of Geography occur in other subjects. Majority of the respondents found Geography difficult, claiming that it consists of many facts which have to be memorized. The surveyed people, nevertheless, saw aspects of Geography positive for the society. Students of rural schools perceived the biggest number of advantages of this subject. Unfortunately, only few respondents shared the opinion that Geography may facilitate their further professional carrier. Majority expressed a view that future job would not require too much Geography knowledge. Students of rural schools rated Geography the highest from among school subjects, whereas students from big cities – the lowest, regarding it as the least useful subject in everyday life and school education.

3. Comparing results of the researches from 2002 and 2009 with those conducted previously in primary schools of Kielce in the 1989/1990 school year (Mularczyk 1992), one can observe a decrease of interest in Geography and its



role among other school subjects. Gimnazjum students' attitudes towards Geography after introduction of each education system reform changed from positive to neutral. Geography was no longer one of the basic sources of knowledge for the students about the world around them. The Internet and TV replaced it. Students from small towns and villages perceive this subject much better. In their case, knowledge gained during the lessons is considered as more useful in everyday life. Geography is still thought to be a difficult subject, requiring memorizing a lot of facts. Situation did not change even after introduction of new rules, according to which knowledge should be only a mean to develop abilities. It is possible that not all the assumptions of the reformers presented in successive syllabuses were taken into account in everyday school work and work during Geography lessons. Teachers have not made the most of the freedom of selection of teaching contents. Using cliché ideas imposed from the outside, teachers have not adjusted them to the importance and topicality of the issues appearing in particular regions and to their students' capacity. When analysing causes of more and more negative students' attitudes towards Geography as a school subject one should investigate whether the introduced reforms actually resulted in diversification of work during Geography lessons and to more often application of commonly described activating methods.

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