

DEVELOPMENT OF (GEOGRAPHY) LESSONS AFTER THE AUTONOMY OF SLOVAKIA

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The political changes at the end of the 20th century led to a completely new situation in Europe. Political liberalisation and democratisation initiated integrating and excluding processes on the national as well as the international level. This new situation also had an influence on Slovakia which became an independent state after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. The foundation of Slovakia was a unique chance to create an independent state without any external political influences. Thus, opportunities and challenges for democracy in public life, as well as questions regarding the national identity, or isolation or orientation towards East or West were emerging. In order to prepare its citizens for the new demands, this evolving state needed a modified education which mainly oriented towards the principles of the educational policies of democratic countries. The resulting long lasting transformational process in education continues till today and affects all subjects – hence also geography.

The new educational goals of Slovakia have been verbalised in the project 'Millenium' in 2001. The main idea of the programme is the assimilation to the educational policy of the European Union and other more sophisticated countries.

Regarding the general goals of education, the Maastricht Treaty¹, signed in 1992, was relevant for geography lessons in so far that an orientation towards EU-citizenship and thus knowledge concerning EU-countries derived from it. In terms of geography lessons, Slovakia also referred to the International Charter on Geographical Education, which includes education for humanism and the discussion about globalisation. Thus, with the help of this orientation, geography

1 Treaty on European Union (TEU) - 7/2/1992.

lessons had the potential to become an important element in helping to achieve the aims of the ‘new society’.

In the context of geography, the most important demands of the project ‘Millennium’ can be summarised in eight key points.

1. *The openness towards Europe and the world is one of the basic ideas of the educational reform. The geography curriculum does, therefore, include the project Europe as well as the European Union. The teaching of knowledge concerning the social, cultural, economic and political relationships of Slovakia with other European states enables students to get a deeper understanding of current trends and helps to question undesirable prejudices, stereotypes and factoids.*
2. *With the help of the professionalization of teachers and the decentralisation of the structure of the educational system the state loses its supremacy in education, which is supposed to lead to a change in the demand for textbooks. The number of publishing houses of textbooks will be increased. This competition will be helpful in order to implement new ideas in textbooks. However, the most recent geography textbooks (years of publication 2010, 2011, 2012) were still published by VKÚ Harmanec, a.s. publishing house².*
3. *Teachers are especially informed about new teaching methods, media and alternative approaches to teaching generally. The most significant innovation is that teachers should not only know ‘what’ they are teaching but also ‘how’ and ‘why’. The ‘why’ is of greatest importance for planning geography lessons, because the curriculum does not restrict the selection of topics or methods. Teacher education in geography responded to these modified demands.*
4. *Accordingly, the introduction of modern forms of geography lessons is the aim. In the context of geography lessons innovative concepts were implemented, for example project work, which is designed first of all to lead to a promotion of critical thinking. Furthermore, the students’ imagination as well as a development of original solutions will be supported.*
5. *The introduction of a humanistic education is also aimed at. Humanistic ideas are very important for the solution of current problems in the world like human rights, growth of the global population, hunger in developing countries as well as nutrition security of the human race, the increasing*

2 The history of the publishing house is connected to the military-cartographic institute in Harmanec.

gap between poor and rich countries, ethnic, religious and racist intolerance and environmental problems. Geography can make an enormous contribution to all of these issues talking about the problems implied in them, finding answers to pressing questions and thinking about possible solutions. The selection of topics according to the relevance for everyday life is another challenge for teachers.

6. *This is linked to the necessary reduction of the curriculum content. The four so called ‘competences of geography’ (the position and distribution of objects, the spatial relations, the relations between humans and environment as well as the region) should focus on what is important and thus, insignificant information can be omitted.*
7. *The expansion of education with the help of interdisciplinary topics (personal and social development, environmental education, media education, multicultural education, traffic education – road safety training, protection of the human life, development of projects and presentation skills) is strived for. Almost all the aspects mentioned can and should be dealt with in geography lessons.*
8. *The improvement of the school equipment is necessary. In order to guarantee adequate geography lessons, new media (PC, Internet, GPS etc.) are essential. The use of them in the context of geography lessons helps students to develop media competence. This does not only imply practice in the use of new media, but also to develop a critical distance towards their possibilities.*

In the course of geography lessons all of these aims can be aspired to. However, geography lessons are particularly suitable for the development of the social and political awareness of students. Geographical education may help students to take part in public life actively and responsibly. Furthermore, it should lead to a consideration of problems not only from a personal or national perspective, but also from a global and international one. In order to acquire the ability to think geographically, it is sometimes helpful to deal with the problem on the local level first. Thus, students will acquire the ability to understand more complex relations and connections on bigger scales, e.g. in the European context. The development of geographical thinking, the constituents of which are values like honesty, fairness, mutual support and collaboration, contributes to the implementation of the main idea of a humanistic and productive education. In addition, it gave answers to the questions which the new state was confronted with right after the political turn and thus helped to achieve the educational goals of Slovakia.