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Lessons for activities in geography and economics in the lower secondary school in the context of the new programs of study

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Abstract: *This article briefly reveals the main goals and functions of the lessons for activities in geography and economics and their place in the educational process in the lower secondary stage of the Bulgarian school as a tool for achieving the knowledge, skills and competences in the context of the educational programs on the subject.*

Keywords: *lessons for activities, lower secondary school, geography and economics, curricula, knowledge, skills, competencies, system-building (integrative) construct.*

Introduction

The student and his development as a full person who has the necessary competencies to develop his/ her potential and to be successful in society is placed in the focus of modern educational policy and the related educational reforms.

In this respect, the curricula of individual subjects, including geography and economics at the lower secondary level, are designed to emphasize not only the learning of certain learning content and the accumulation of specific scientific knowledge but also the acquisition of key competences, skills and attitudes through which science can be put into practice.

Materials and methods

In this connection, a comparative analysis of the current Geography and economics curricula in the lower secondary level of Bulgarian school is made. It regulates the place of lessons for activities in the education of students.

The goals set, tasks and expected results, the recommended percentage distribution of compulsory school lessons, specific methods and forms for assessing students' achievements, active verbs, and classroom concepts have been analyzed.

Results and discussion

The focus of achieving this educational objective falls on lessons for activities that occupy an important part of the learning process in geography and economics, as they relate to „the formation and development of certain skills - practical and intellectual, competences and models of behavior and their improvement“ [1]. In practice, they overcome the passive behavior of trainees, increase their motivation and interest in active participation in the learning process, their curiosity and the pursuit of independent learning activity.

On the other hand, lessons for activities are the linking construct that combines individual geographic courses into a unified system. Through them, the knowledge, key competences, skills and relationships already established in the curricula of the subject are consolidated and built up. They „connect the information-content, organizational-activity and emotionally-motivating aspect of the training in an organic way“ and „overcome the dissonance between the ever-increasing information flow and the reconstructed requirements towards the knowledge, skills and competencies of the students towards their potential cognitive opportunities“ [2]. Activity lessons enable learners to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, learn geographic methods of exploring nature, society and economy, acquire habits for independent work, and learn to build effective interactions with peers through teamwork. That is why it can be said that this type of lessons are „the most creative, the least typical element in the system of didactic opportunities“ [3] to achieve the expected results in geographic and economics curricula and thus form a „model for sustainable formation of learning skills and competences“ [4].

- ✓ Activity lessons set different goals, which also stem from the regulated lower secondary school curricula. In general, they can be represented as follows;
- ✓ Formation of learners' ideas for the geographical trinity: nature-society-economy;
- ✓ Building the students' ideas about the diversity of nature and the interrelationships between its processes;
- ✓ Developing the students' practical skills for extracting, interpreting, analyzing and comparing geographic information from different sources;
- ✓ Forming learners' skills to interpret geographic information to solve different learning and practical tasks;
- ✓ Developing learners' competences to distinguish individual geographic objects, processes and phenomena, comparing them on the basis of certain characteristics and their juxtaposition;
- ✓ Development of cartographic competencies for students to determine geographic location and spatial relationships of geographic objects;
- ✓ Developing trainees' competences for the application of geographic methods of research and forecasting of the change of different natural and economic objects and phenomena.

The objectives set out in this way are achieved in the entire geography and economics course and are specified in the subject curriculum in each class.

Lessons for activities can be realized at different stages of geographic and economics learning: studying new curriculum, exercising the new material, and controlling and evaluating student achievements. They are based on the personal pedagogical experience and competence of the teacher. In this regard, the teacher has the opportunity to realize his creative potential, taking into account the specifics of the school environment, the individual characteristics of the students and the state educational standards in the subject. On the other hand, lessons for activities make the learning process in geography and economics diverse, significantly increase pupils' interest in the subject and allow teachers to carry out activities and practice-applied approach to learning.

Lessons for activities develop in the learning habits of research, teamwork and collaboration skills, autonomy and responsibility for the results of the activity, which is in the context of civic education and entrepreneurship, regarding the realization of the students as complete personalities in the contemporary society.

In the course of activity lessons, an increase in unintentional memory is achieved through a system of activities designed in specific tasks. The relevance of specific lessons for activities is determined by criteria such as:

- ✓ Conformity with the age characteristics of the students;
- ✓ Degree of complexity of tasks;

- ✓ Compliance of tasks with the curriculum;
- ✓ Degree of purposefulness of tasks;
- ✓ Creating conditions for teamwork;
- ✓ Accordance of the volume of tasks.

The place and significance of lessons for activities in geography and economics training in the lower secondary level is specifically seen and regulated by the subject curricula and is illustrated by the recommended percentage of distribution of compulsory number of lessons and specific methods and forms for assessing the achievements of students as follows:

Table 1. Recommended percentage distribution of compulsory lessons

Recommended percentage distribution of compulsory lessons	5 th grade	6 th grade	7 th grade
For new knowledge	59%	60%	61 %
For activities	19%	18%	20 %
For Review	6%	4 %	5 %
For a summary	6%	8 %	7 %
For control work	10%	10 %	7 %

Table 2. Specific methods and forms for assessment of pupils' achievements

Specific methods and forms for assessment of pupils' achievements				
Term-setting ratio:				
	5. grade	6. grade	7. grade	
Current assessments (oral, written, practical)	40%	40%	40%	
Assessments from control work	30%	30%	30%	
Assessments from other forms of participation in class (class work, homework, group work, etc.)	30%	30%	30%	

Table 1 and **Table 2** show that most of the lessons in geography and economics at the lower secondary level are the lessons for new knowledge (between 59-61%), followed by lessons for activities (between 18 -20%). The proportion of lessons for revision (between 4-6%), for summary (between 6-8%) and control (between 7-10%) is considerably smaller, with a rise from 5th to 7th class in the number of lessons for new knowledge and activities, and lessons for revision and control. This is the recommended percentage ratio between the different types of lessons in geography and economics in the lower secondary level, as set out in the subject curricula, which in practice represent the governmental order for the geographic education of pupils in the Bulgarian secondary school. It should not be forgotten that, at the discretion of the teacher, in the form of a lesson for activities, new content can be taught, reviewed or summarized, and student performance monitored.

The importance given to activity lessons as a means of acquiring knowledge, skills and key competencies is also evidenced by the specific methods and forms for evaluating student achievement and the term assessment. In this connection, the activities are 40% together with the current assessments of oral and written tests, which can also be organized as activity lessons at the discretion of the teacher. The remaining 60% include assessments from control work and other kinds of student participations – classwork, homework, group work, and others.

In the 5th grade, the geography and economics course is general and regional. The learning content is concretized by 22 active verbs 65 new concepts, 60 of which are general and 5 singulars. In activity lessons, students are expected to acquire the following skills:

- ✓ Apply the routes of the seafarers to a contour map;
- ✓ Read the conditional signs on a geographic map;
- ✓ Specify geographic coordinates on the map;
- ✓ Calculate distances using numerical scale;
- ✓ Make a scheme of the internal structure and the outer shells of the Earth;
- ✓ Read climatograms and hydrograms as a rule;

- ✓ Compile a short written text using keywords or accompanying questions;
- ✓ Calculate average population density;
- ✓ Read a column and circular diagram;
- ✓ Put on the contour map the names of the studied geographic objects;
- ✓ Make a route for an imaginary journey.

In the further details of the particular subject of geography and economics, it is stated that „in order to achieve the goals of geography and economics training in grade 5th is the conduct of study trips. During excursions students should be given the opportunity to: observe natural objects, processes and phenomena; to navigate by map and compass; to make measurements; to demonstrate skills for prudent behavior in nature; to protect nature [6].

The geography and economy curriculum in the 6th grade is a regional course aimed at „continuing the formation and development of geographic culture through the acquisition of basic knowledge, skills and the acquisition of key competences for the surrounding area at the regional level by studying selected continents and oceans of the planet” [7]. Competencies are scripted through 9 active verbs. New knowledge includes 23 new concepts, of which 20 are single and 3 are common. Students need to:

- ✓ Put on the contour map the studied geographic objects and the territorial distribution of the mineral resources;
- ✓ Present a natural area in various forms (text, poster, presentation);
- ✓ Develop the political map on the contour map;
- ✓ Analyze a climatogram and a hydrogram;
- ✓ Calculate the average population density;
- ✓ Characterize the population;
- ✓ Evaluate business activities.

In additional clarifications on the particular subject of geography and economics, the accent is again on the activities. It is mentioned as a necessary condition for the achievement of the objectives of the education in geography and economics in 6th grade:

- ✓ Provision of study films;
- ✓ Visit to thematic exhibitions;
- ✓ Use of ICT and the Internet;
- ✓ It is emphasized that students should be given the opportunity to;
- ✓ Discover the specific and unique about continents and oceans;
- ✓ Make comparisons;
- ✓ Conclude about some problems of people in different continents;
- ✓ Use ICT and the Internet to search and present geographic information.

The Geography and Economics Curriculum in 7th grade is again a regional course that takes place as a learning content through 7 active verbs and 37 single concepts. The activities through which pupils have to acquire key competences related to Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and Bulgaria are [8]:

- ✓ Put on the contour map the names of the studied geographic objects;
- ✓ Assess the importance of natural components for the development of economy;
- ✓ Set up an imaginary journey route in the natural areas of Europe;
- ✓ Present natural areas and the mountainous area in Europe in various forms (text, poster, presentation);
- ✓ Provide examples of typical population problems - aging, migration; tolerance and mutual respect among the people;
- ✓ Develop a political map of Europe on a contour map;
- ✓ Present a selected country from the Balkan Peninsula in various forms (text, poster, presentation);
- ✓ Present the specifics of the nature of Bulgaria in different forms (text, poster, presentation);
- ✓ Respond to a geographic question or compose geographic text.

The additional clarifications on the specific subject of geography and economics in grade 7th state that in order to achieve the objectives of the training it is important to conduct study trips during which students have the opportunity to:

- ✓ Observe natural sites, settlements and economic sites;

- ✓ Get orientation on map, compass and other ways;
- ✓ Make measurements;
- ✓ Observe and explore their native place and native settlement;
- ✓ Demonstrate skills for reasonable behavior among nature;
- ✓ Protect nature.

From the mentioned above, it is clear that geography and economics curricula at the lower secondary school level in the Bulgarian secondary school regulate the lessons of activities as an indispensable system-forming (integrative) construct, through which the geographic knowledge is deeply conceived, achieving awareness and sustainability of the competencies formed, which include:

- ✓ Specific geographic skills;
- ✓ Learning skills;
- ✓ Social and civil responsibility;
- ✓ Initiative;
- ✓ Evaluation and self-evaluation [2].

From a purely didactic point of view, the importance of activity lessons is also determined by their specific features: they are a compulsory element of the system of lessons in Sofia University and their place and role is determined by the goal of geographic education, which directly corresponds to the expected results fixed in the curriculum, related to the formation of geographic competence of learners; they are developed in a system and thus increase the functionality of geography and economics training; combine a variety of cognitive activities, such as work with documents, scientific and popular science literature, writing scientific announcements, essays, referrals, study prognoses, graphical images, diagrams, schemes etc. that means in lessons for activities the leading part has the cognitive motivation, with the bulk of the tasks mainly focused on the formation of practical skills and the development of emotional memory [1]. Different types of didactic situations define intellectual emotions such as astonishment, doubt and confidence that motivate learners and increase the effectiveness of the learning process.

From here, a number of their functions can be derived, which find their specific dimension in the curriculum for each subject class. One of the most important is their role in „overcoming the dissonance between the ever-increasing information flow and the reconstructed requirements for pupils' knowledge, skills and competencies against their potential cognitive abilities“, as well as „connecting the different aspects of learning: informative content, organizationally motivating and emotionally motivating aspects“ [2]. Other important functions of the lessons for activities outlined in the curricula are: realization of the inter connections geography–mapping knowledge; the formation of competences as a process, not as a single or passive act; building skills to use different sources of information, among which the geographic map; facilitating the process of rationalizing the learning content; designing the learning process in an active learning environment; realization of variation in the organization of individual, group and general class form of learning activities; concentrically deploying interrelated learning activities of growing complexity that build a system of geographic competences, reflexive self-organization of cognitive and practically applied value [2].

Tasks in the lessons for activities should be structured so as to test small-scale knowledge and require a small number of cognitive tasks to be carried out, thus leading learners to:

- ✓ Achieving a higher degree of learning and durability of knowledge, skills and competencies;
- ✓ Developing a sense of responsibility;
- ✓ Developing of creative abilities;
- ✓ Building and expanding the spatial notions about the world on regional, national and global level;
- ✓ Practical application of knowledge;
- ✓ Detailed and stimulating creativity and teamwork skills.

Conclusions

By teaching the learning content in the form of learning lessons, learners are more easily and unimpededly accepting the new learning material, as the share of unintentional remembering increases in

the process of performing the individual tasks. The positive effect of this type of lesson is also to work with additional geographic materials, to retrieve information from them and analyze it according to the topic. This in turn develops learners' skills for independent decision-making, self-learning and affirmation of an individual position.

Viewed in a global didactic plan, constructed correctly, activity lessons provide a good practical orientation and if age-appropriated to the pupils they are a prerequisite for the formation of long-lasting knowledge, skills and competencies regulated in the respective curricula that allow at the end of the training course their implementation and improvement in the next levels of the educational system.

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