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COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF GEOGRAPHICAL CONTENTS IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULA OF SOME EU COUNTRIES AND SERBIA AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION

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Abstract: *A comparative overview of geographical contents in the first cycle of compulsory primary education in Serbia and the European Union countries provides an insight into the current state of affairs, and the developmental tendencies characteristic of European educational systems. The results gained will be immediately applicable in practice provided they are taken into consideration in the very process of the reform of the overall educational system in the Republic of Serbia, and especially of the Primary National Curriculum and its segment related to geographical contents. In particular, we emphasize the comparative approach, which this research has been based on and which we expect to contribute to further improvement of the educational system in Serbia and its harmonization with the educational systems of European countries. The findings resulting from the mentioned comparison of geographical syllabi will be a useful step forward towards European standards, which Serbia is expected to reach.*

Key words: *geographical contents, primary education, comparative overview*

Introduction

Starting from the aspiration to reach the overall standards of the countries comprising the European Union, this paper gives a comparative overview of geographical contents in the first cycle of primary education, as well as their analysis, based on which it is possible to make improvements in the Educational system of Serbia. This has been done on the grounds that, more or less intensively, the EU countries have already been included in the process of educational system reforms. "By analyzing European educational systems, i.e. their national curricula, educational objectives, teacher and student roles in them, as well as the role of education itself, we can see that Europe has already gone deep into the process of innovation and reformation of its educational system, in compliance with its great social, political, economic and technological changes. The countries which comprise it strive to achieve ever greater unity and to erase the barriers which separate them" (Danilović, 2002: 32).

The national curricula in Serbia and EU are not easy to compare, since there is no unique approach to a comparative analysis, because children do not start education at the same age, compulsory education does not last the same amount of time in different countries, and the school systems themselves are rather different. European countries have been or are still undergoing reforms aimed at improving education, in the first place compulsory education (which, in many countries, includes junior high school education apart from primary education), as the basic and most important segment of every system.

Today, the differences in the national curricula within compulsory education are evident. Some countries have specifically defined curricula: strictly prescribed contents (with a defined number of teaching hours), objectives and tasks. Other countries prescribe only the general curriculum (60–70% of contents), while schools have the freedom to define certain parts of the

curricular and syllabus contents (school curriculum) in cooperation with the local educational authorities and parents.

During the last century, the educational system of Serbia was much centralized. Everything related to education was uniform for all students. Meanwhile, educational systems of developed European countries were carrying out reforms in the opposite direction: they were seeking opportunities to include local communities, schools, students and parents in the school curriculum. School modernization, which has already started in most EU countries, is characterized by striving to thoroughly change the position of the student in the teaching process, to show better appreciation of their personality, needs and capacities, as well as the background experience that they gained out of school.

The research (which lasted from 2011 to 2012 and was aimed at then valid curricula) includes: the analysis of geographical contents, the way in which Geography teaching objectives are defined for the lower primary school grades and the students' achievements. The comparative overview included a sample of the following five countries (Table 1): Slovenia, Finland, England (the analysis was done for England rather than for the whole of United Kingdom as the curricula in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland differ), France and Serbia. The differences among the mentioned countries in this respect are evident, which can be seen in the name of the subject, the total number of hours allocated to teaching geographical contents and the organization of the teaching process. Nevertheless, there are certain similarities, especially regarding the contents taught.

Table 1. A comparative overview of the geographical contents taught in Serbia and EU countries at the primary level of compulsory education

State	Serbia	Slovenia	Finland	England	France
Name of the teaching subject or teaching area, primary level of compulsory education which includes geographical contents	1.The World around Us 2.Social, Environmental and Scientific Education	Environmental education (Spoznavanje okolja)	1. Environmental and natural studies	Geography (Geography, Key Stage 2)	1.Discovering the World (Découverte du monde) 2.Areas: History – Geography – Civic and Moral Education (Histoire-géographie-instruction civique et morale)
Grade	1. Grades I and II 2. Grades III and IV	Grades I, II and III	Grades I to IV	Independent and obligatory subject throughout compulsory education	1. Grades I and II 2. Grades III to V

Integrated group of subjects, areas, teaching area	Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Geography and History	Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, History and Health Education	Biology, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Health Education and Sustainable development	Geography	Cycle of fundamental knowledge (cycle des apprentissages fondamentaux) and Cycle of expanding knowledge (cycle des approfondissements), where geographical contents are studied within the areas of History – Geography – Civic and Moral Education

Scientific research methods

Given that the subject under study is Geography teaching and Geography syllabus, apart from the methodological requirements of geography as a science, the study included general methods pertaining to social sciences, in particular those methods that lend themselves to pedagogy.

The *general method* that was used was the *descriptive method*. The specific procedures applied in the study include a *comparative study of literature and documentation (theoretical research)*. The *comparative method* was used to consider how scientific geographical contents were transformed in the teaching syllabi of a range of European countries, including the National Curriculum of the Republic of Serbia, based on which conclusions were drawn.

An overview of Geography Syllabus for grades I to IV of primary education in Serbia

Compulsory education in the EU countries lasts from the age of 9 to 12, and consists of primary and junior secondary education. As opposed to most countries under study, Serbia is characterized by eight-year long compulsory education, exclusive of junior high education, and primary education itself lasting four years.

In the primary cycle of compulsory education in Serbia, geographical contents are taught within interdisciplinary subjects The World around Us, in the I and II grade of primary education, and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in grade III (*Pravilnik o izmenama i dopunama pravilnika o nastavnom planu za prvi, drugi, treći i četvrti razred osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanja i nastavnom programu za treći razred osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanja* (2010), and grade IV (*Pravilnik o nastavnom programu za četvrti razred osnovnog obrazovanja i vaspitanja,* 2006), making compulsory teaching subjects with 2 lessons per week or 72 lessons per year.

The current syllabus for the subjects The World around Us and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education stipulates the following: general objectives and tasks within the subject, specific tasks per grades, contents of the subject, and forms of programme implementation (including student activities). As opposed to the National Curriculum from 1991, in which operational tasks and syllabus contents (by which we mean geographical contents under study) were explicitly stipulated, in the currently valid Syllabus, both tasks and geographical contents are unspecified.

The contents of the subject The World around Us for grades I and II define the teaching topics and teaching units; in addition, the teaching topics include the allocation of teaching hours, tasks and forms of programme implementation. In grades III and IV, the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education is given the same amount of lessons as in the first two grades and represents an extension to the subject The World around Us taught in the first two grades. Teachers are recommended, depending on their pupils' background knowledge and class structure, to individually determine the number of lessons devoted to the teaching, practising,

consolidation or testing of the contents stipulated in the syllabus. Apart from syllabus contents, the document offers recommendations regarding the forms of programme implementation, and in particular those related to student activities. The teaching contents are thematically structured, while there is no specific allocation of teaching hours per teaching topics listed. Teachers are given the freedom to individually plan and determine the type of lesson, teaching methods and didactic resources to be used in the teaching process.

Geographical contents are related to the immediate neighbourhood in the I grade – "My neighbourhood"; in the II grade to – "The place where I live and its surroundings"; in the III grade to – "My hometown"; and in the IV grade – "My country". This concept is devised on the grounds of a homeland principle. The primary school syllabus is based on the model of spiral circles. Geographical contents of Social, Environmental and Scientific Education are closely related to the teaching contents of a whole range of sciences and scientific disciplines that are similar or mutually horizontally or vertically overlap (biology, history, physics, chemistry, etc.).

In senior primary school grades, Geography is an independent and compulsory subject, with one lesson per week in grade V and two lessons per week in grades VI to VIII.

Slovenia

Compulsory education in Slovenia lasts 9 years. "EU required from Slovenia, as a candidate for joining the Union, to implement several reforms of the educational system, in order to adjust its educational system to that of other European countries. The reform began in 1999 and still lasts" (Resnik-Planinc, 2005: 189).

In Slovenia, geographical contents are studies within several compulsory subjects (http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/podrocje/os/devetletka/predmetniki/Predmetnik_splosni.pdf): Environmental education (grades I to III), Natural, Technical and Social Education (grades IV and V), and as an individual subject, i.e. Geography, in grades VI to IX. The subject Environmental education (http://www.mss.gov.si/fileadmin/mss.gov.si/pageuploads/podrocje/os/devetletka/predmeti_obvezni/Spoznavanje_okolja_obvezni.pdf) includes contents from different scientific areas: natural, social and technical, and is most similar to the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in Serbia (which is why it was included in the study).

Table 2. General objectives of the Environmental education subjects in Slovenian curriculum which include geographical contents (grades I to III) and the General objective of the subjects The World around Us and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in the National Curriculum of Serbia

Slovenia		*Serbia*	
General objectives of the subject	General objectives of the subject referring to geographical contents: training for correct and safe conduct in traffic: developing orientation skills in the environment and inhabited areas; developing a positive attitude towards our surroundings; introduction to maps in support of immediate neighbourhood orientation; basics in spatial orientation; Sun, Moon and Earth movement; learning more about time measurement; measuring of time (use of watch).	*General objectives of the subject*	The general objective of the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education is for pupils to get to know themselves and their neighbourhood and to develop skills for a responsible way of life within it.

Table 3. Environmental Education and The World around Us (I grade) – subject contents

Slovenija		*Srbija*	
Teaching topics	Who am I My school Celebration My past Once upon a time We and the nature We and our health When I look around What can I do	*Teqaching topics*	Me and the others Living and non-living things Spatial and time orientation The culture of living

The following are examples of geographical contents related to weather conditions, which can be found in the first-grade syllabi of the subjects Environmental Education and The World around Us in Slovenia and Serbia respectively.

Table 4. From the Operational goals of the first-grade subject Environmental Education

Operational goals	*Examples of activities*	*Suggested content*	*Special didactic recommendations*	*Cross-curricular links*
What can I do				
➢ introduction to weather events; ➢ describing and experiencing weather events	students observe and describe weather conditions; students form a simple weather calendar	Weather conditions: sunny, cloudy, rainy, windy, foggy, warm, cold, etc.; weather events: wind and clouds.	Observing weather in a certain time period, writing results in simple tables, using symbols. Everyday activities are performed for a few minutes in a certain time period.	Slovenian

Table 5. Geographical contents in the first-grade syllabus for the subject The World around Us

Grade I
Living and non-living things Influence of weather events on living beings: day and night changes, change of seasons, weather conditions and their influence on flora, fauna and human beings (2 lessons)

In Slovenia, the programme statements clearly define the minimal and basic knowledge standards required upon completion of the Environmental Education subject course. Accordingly, the statements describe what the pupil knows and can do related to the contents of the respective teaching topic. Contrary to this example, in Serbian General standards of

achievement for the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education – geographical contents (*Pravilnik o obrazovnim standardima za kraj prvog ciklusa obaveznog obrazovanja za predmete srpski jezik, matematika i priroda i društvo*, 2011) there is not a single statement describing what a student should know or be able to do at the elementary, intermediate or advanced level with respect to geographical contents related to weather conditions. This indicates non-compliance between the National curriculum and the general standards of achievement for the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education.

Environmental education as a teaching subject in Slovenia is allocated 3 lessons per week, i.e. 105 lessons per year, in grades I to III, with the total amount of 315 lessons, whereas Serbian subjects The World around Us and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education are given 72 lessons per year, whereby the total of 216 lessons in grades I to III makes a difference by 99 lessons.

The educational goals in Slovenian curriculum are clearly defined and divided into general and operational ones (with stipulated basic contents for each thematic segment). The operational goals of the subject clearly define: examples of activities, suggested (precisely given and chronologically ordered) contents, special didactic recommendation (teachers are suggested to apply active teaching methods, research-based approaches, problem and project-based teaching, and fieldwork), with an emphasis on cross-curricular links with history, Slovenian language, etc. All analyzed documents offer a careful and detailed definition of the aims of geography learning, with crucial dimensions being: knowledge, skills and understanding. In Slovenia, a great importance is given to determining the goals of the subject and the operational goals per grade, unlike the curriculum in Serbia, which only gives the overall objectives and tasks of the subject, whereas specific tasks (related in particular to geographical contents) and the syllabus contents per subject are insufficiently defined.

Finland

Compulsory education in Finland (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, Finnish National Board of Education, 2004a) lasts 9 years. From grade I to IV, geographical contents are studied within an integrated group of subjects Environmental and Natural Studies with 9 lessons per week; in grades V and VI, within the subject Biology and Geography with 3 lessons per week, and from grade VII to grade IX Geography is an individual and compulsory teaching subject which is given 7 lessons per week in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education.

The National Curriculum is defined by the Finnish National Board of Education and provides the contents, subject goals and expected student achievements (three levels), cross-curricular links, including general evaluation guidelines for complete education. Within the National Curriculum, schools and local authorities define their own regulations. Organization of the teaching process and the choice of teaching methods remain the responsibility of teachers.

Environmental and Natural Studies

The following table shows examples of geographical teaching topics and goals included in the National Curriculum for the subject Environmental and Natural Studies (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, Finnish National Board of Education - Environmental and natural studies, 2004b) in Finland and the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in the National Curriculum of Serbia.

Table 6. Curriculum contents for subjects Environmental and Natural Studies in Finland and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in Serbia (grade IV)

Finland	*Serbia*

Teaching topics	Immediate surroundings, region and the world as human life environment Organisms and the surroundings Natural phenomena Substances around us Health care Safety	*Teaching topics*	My country – part of the World An encounter with the Nature Exploring natural events Work, energy, production and consumption Looking back - the past

Table 7. The objectives of the Finnish curriculum subject Environmental and Natural Studies related to geographical contents (grades I to IV) and the General objective for the subjects The World around Us and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in Serbia

Finland		*Serbia*	
Subject goals	Students will: learn how to act responsibly in order to protect themselves and their environment, follow instructions given at school and take care of themselves in traffic; learn about the nature and how to protect the environment, observe changes and events in the field and get to know their region as part of Finnish and Nordic countries; learn to gather information about the nature and their environment by observing, exploring and using different resources; learn to observe by using simple research tools, and to describe, compare and classify their findings; learn to conduct simple scientific experiments; learn how to use maps and the world atlas; learn to present information about the environment and its phenomena from different perspectives; learn to protect the nature and natural resources; learn to develop psychological and physical self-cognizance, self-respect, and respect of others, as well as social skills; learn the concepts, vocabulary and procedures relevant for health, illnesses and promotion of a healthy way of life and how to make choices good for their own health;	*General subject objective*	*The objective* of the teaching subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education is for students to get to know themselves and their environment and to develop skills for a responsible life in it.

Conceptual framework of the Finnish curriculum places emphasis on the subject goals and the expected student accomplishments. The teaching aims are clearly outlined, and stipulate that students should get to know the nature and their environment, themselves and the others, including mutual differences. Contrary to this, the objective given for the subject Social, Environmental and Scientific Education in Serbia is overgeneralized and fails to list what it is that students should learn.

The Finnish curriculum emphasizes the research-oriented approach and students' use of experiment-based experience in order to develop a positive attitude towards the nature and a close relationship with it and their environment, with the aim of learning how to protect the nature and natural resources. All countries, including Finland, define as one of the most important objectives in their curricula the following: "[...] gaining knowledge and raising awareness about the importance of the preservation of nature and rational use of energy resources, the importance of sustainable development and cooperation on environmental protection throughout the World, and learning about the dangers and consequences of inappropriate use of technology" (Curić at al., 2007: 464).

England

According to the National Curriculum of England (The school curriculum, Department for Education, 2011), compulsory education is divided into four phases: from age 5 to 7; from age 7 to 11; from 11 to 14, and from 14 to the age of 16.

Schools themselves choose how to organize their curriculum. In England, Geography is an obligatory subject throughout compulsory education. The exact number of teaching hours is not predetermined, either per week or per year, but rather depends on the decision of the school staff. What is important, however, is that the teaching units defined in the National Curriculum be covered by the end of the foreseen phase of education, when students' academic achievement is subject to evaluation.

The following are examples of contents related to the environment that can be found in the National Curriculum for the subject Geography (http://www.education.gov.uk /schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/primary/b00199002/geography/ks2) in England and for the subject The World around Us in Serbia.

Table 8. During the second phase of learning Geography, students should gain the following knowledge and skills:

Learning and understanding of climate and changes	Students should learn to: recognize how people can show appreciation to and improve natural environment or how they can cause damage to it; recognize how and why people can manage sustainable development, and identify the possibilities of their own inclusion in the process.

Table 9. The World around Us (grade II) – syllabus content

Syllabus content	
Grade II	Water, air and earth pollution, (ways of polluting and their consequences) and possibilities of protection.

During the second phase, students should explore the environment, and discover how people influence their own natural surroundings and vice versa. Geography plays an important part in promoting knowledge relevant for sustainable development. During the process of education, English students develop geographical skills by using resources such as maps, atlases, information and communication technologies, etc. The suggested exploratory approach implies methods of active learning. The National Curriculum of Serbia, however, does not lead one to similar conclusions. An important facet of the English syllabus is pragmatism and geographical knowledge usability.

France

A comparative overview shows that compulsory education in France (http://www.education.gouv.fr/) lasts from the age of 6 to 16 and includes primary education, junior high school, senior high school (collège) and grammar school or secondary vocational school (lycée). Primary education lasts five years (age 6 to 11) and is divided into two cycles. The cycle of fundamental knowledge covers the first two years of primary education, during which geographical contents are learned within the area Discovering the World, with 3 – 3.5 hours per week, that is 81 hours per year. The developmental cycle - cycle of expanding knowledge – lasts another three years. During this period geographical contents are learned in

the area of History – Geography – Civic and Moral Education, with 3 – 3.5 hours per week, or 78 hours per year.

Discovering the World

The following are examples of geographical topics included in the syllabus of the subject Discovering the World (http://www2.cndp.fr/ecole/quapprend/pdf/755a0212.pdf, Qu'apprend-on à l'école primaire? Nouveaux programmes, Paris, CNDP/XO Editions, 2002) in the French curriculum and of the subject The World around Us in the Serbian syllabus.

Table 10. Discovering the World and The World around Us, grade II, syllabus contents

France		*Serbia*	
Teaching topics	From familiar to distant space Time passes Matter Living world Things and materials Information-communication technologies	*Teaching topics*	Living and non-living things Where humans live Human activity Movement in space and time

Following the French example, the teaching topic 'From familiar to distant space' could be included in the future syllabi of the subject The World around Us.

Table 11. Syllabus for the geographical contents within the subject Discovering the World in France

	Syllabus
From familiar to distant space	In the kindergarten, children acquired the basic concept of space that surrounds them. In this cycle they learn how to present that space by drawing. Pupils also discover other, more and more distant spaces in town or a nearby village, all the way to unusual landscapes. With teacher's help they use a globe or map to learn orientation in the region, France, Europe, on other continents and in larger geographical areas.
	Also, by using albums, photographs, films and electronic images, they discover the versatility of environments and ways of life (habitat, food, clothes, means of transport, forms of vegetation and animal life) indicating similarities and differences. The teacher helps them understand the influence of the relief, climate and seasons or the societal development status.
	Reading age-adapted texts enriches children's vocabulary and their spoken expression of spatial relationships.

The syllabus also describes the competences that a student should develop related to space (geographical contents) by the end of the first cycle in France. The emphasis is placed on knowledge, use and development of the mother tongue, on acquiring basic geographical contents defined in the syllabus. "History and Geography offer an entry into humanities and the first step in time and spatial orientation. This is also the first encounter with the cultures and characteristics of a civil society and its values" (http://www.eduscol.education.fr/cid46065/comment-l-histoire-et-la-geographie-sont-elles-enseignees-a-l-ecole-primaire%A0-constat-et-evolution-en-cours.html).

Conclusion

There is no such country in the world which is completely satisfied with its educational system. Unfortunately, "what is missing are some concrete and operational proposals; and even if they are given, they are commonly fragmentary and unsystematic 'improvements', 'innovations', 'reforms' and the like" (Nahod, 2001: 83).

We have presented different solutions for teaching geographical contents in the primary stage of compulsory education in a number of European countries with a particular insight into those which could be applied in Serbia, which would help improve the teaching of the subjects The World around Us and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education. We have identified certain differences between the syllabi which include geographical contents in the countries of EU and Serbia.

The aspirations to make the educational system of Serbia closer to that of EU countries includes the harmonization of the mentioned syllabi in the part related to geographical contents that are learned in the first years of primary education. The examples given include Slovenia, Finland, England and France. We have shown similarities and differences between these countries and the contents learned in schools in Serbia. The number of lessons planned for geographical contents varies significantly from country to country, while the contents are most commonly similar (certain differences are of rather terminological nature). However, it is worth noticing that the mentioned foreign countries pay much more attention to geographical contents, regardless of the area within which they are studied - natural or social sciences, or both.

There are elements which could be taken over from the analyzed foreign syllabi. Primarily, this would be placing more emphasis on the application of the acquired knowledge in the life of either every individual or the whole social community (this especially refers to ecological contents). Furhermore, following the model of Slovenia, certain topics, such as "What can I do" and health-related contents, could be introduced. Standards of geographical knowledge, such as the ones in Slovenia, are necessary, though they should rather be defined per grades and not per educational cycles, because they guarantee a much better insight into students' achievement.

Following the example of the Finnish syllabus, subject goals and tasks related to geographical contents could also be better elaborated and defined through practical activities and health-related issues. This syllabus also defines the achievements that should be made on the basis of geographical contents, as well as the indicators of student success. It is not by mere chance that the Finnish National Curriculum, and their overall model of education is considered to be among the best in the world.

The English syllabus is characterized by pragmatism and usability of knowledge gained in the sphere of geography. This kind of knowledge is paid a lot of attention and is included in compulsory subjects. Standards of achievement are also very well defined, and they should similarly be included in the Serbian National Curriculum.

The French teaching subjects Discovering the World, and History, Geography, Civic and Moral Education put to the forefront the pedagogical component, which is highly important. The emphasis is placed on "an entry into humanities", as well as time and spatial orientation, and special importance is given to the mother tongue. These are also examples to follow, which could help improve the educational system in Serbia.

To conclude with, by comparing the objectives, tasks and contents of the teaching subject Geography and the position of geographical contents in the system of subjects in Serbia and a number of European countries at the primary level of compulsory education, we made an overview of different solutions and an evaluation of their positive and negative aspects. We find these useful for further improvement of the teaching of Geography, as well as for the application of geographical contents inside and out of school.

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