

EXPERIENCING THE NEW GEOGRAPHY IN EAST GERMANY

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ABSTRACT. Following reunification in 1989, East German schools underwent a complete reorganization based on the West German model. This dramatically affected curriculum guidelines and teaching materials. According to a series of structured interviews with geography teachers in several East Saxony schools, it was found that reaction to these far-reaching changes has been mixed. Classroom management has become more difficult. More importantly the study reveals a wide discrepancy between East and West schools in the emphasis given to geography – the East focusing on physical geography and the West on social issues and values problem-solving. Although making considerable efforts to adjust, East German geography teachers face an understandable disorientation and express irritation at some of the changes they have been forced to make.

RÉSUMÉ. À la suite de la réunification des deux Allemagnes en 1989, les écoles de l'Allemagne de l'Est ont été intégralement réorganisées selon le modèle ouest-allemand. Cette réorganisation a profondément modifié les lignes directrices visant les programmes d'études et les matériels didactiques. Grâce à une série d'entrevues structurées avec des professeurs de géographie de plusieurs écoles de Saxe orientale, on a constaté que ces modifications profondes ont suscité des réactions mitigées. La gestion de la classe est devenue plus difficile. Fait plus important, l'étude a fait ressortir une différence profonde entre les écoles de l'Est et de l'Ouest en ce qui a trait à l'importance accordée à la géographie, l'Est privilégiant la géographie physique, l'Ouest les questions sociales et la résolution de problèmes faisant intervenir des valeurs. Malgré de grands efforts d'adaptation, les professeurs de géographie est-allemands sont naturellement désorientés et se disent contrariés par certaines modifications qui leur ont été imposées.

In 1990, education in East Germany underwent swift reorganization resulting from centralized socialist to decentralized federal government. Virtually all aspects of the school system, including school hierarchy, administration, and curriculum underwent revision and reorganization to remake the educational system in the mould of West Germany. The revision of curriculum guidelines by the individual re-established *Länder*

(provinces) in itself affords a unique opportunity to study the attitudes and reactions of geography teachers to the changes relating to the new curriculum and the new conditions for teaching and learning after 1990.

In order to understand how geography teachers perceive these changes, we will first briefly characterize teaching during the socialist period, i.e., prior to unification, to shed light on the difficulties of getting adjusted to the now thoroughly new type of teacher role. The focus will then be how geography teachers view and react to current working conditions, how they judge the quality of the new guidelines and working material, and how they cope with the new challenge of more "open" didactic concepts in geography. To our knowledge there has been no published research yet on the subject. Related studies include an interview with an East German teacher (*Social Education*, 1993) and changes that have affected other school subjects such as the teaching of modern languages (Klapper, 1992), history (Borries, 1992), and physics (Jonas, 1992).

The data were collected in July 1993 in semi-structured interviews with teachers from rural and small-town secondary schools (grades 5 - 10) in East Saxony. The interviews, which each took up to two hours, were conducted by both authors in collaboration with six geography teachers, all of whom had several years of classroom experience, both prior and after unification. Due to the size of the sample, the research results are exploratory in character; more empirical research will be necessary on the issue. It should be noted that qualitative interviews seemed more appropriate for this type of issue, that is, one which emphasizes the subjectivity of individual perception. Indeed, many of our results on geography-teaching accord well with findings from other more general research on changing teaching and learning conditions in East Germany (e. g., Reh & Tillmann, 1994; Kuban, 1991).

TEACHING IN EAST GERMANY: CHANGING ROLES AND SCHOOLS

Prior to unification, schools played an important role in the socialist state ideology. Not only were teachers expected to influence their students in the sense of establishing communist values through virtually all subjects, including, of course, geography. The principles of Marxism-Leninism were also transmitted in situations that reached far beyond classes. Schools and teachers played their role in propaganda for and activities in communist youth organizations and premilitary training, as well as selecting school graduates to become officers or teachers,

not to speak of *Staatsbürgerkunde*. This school subject was primarily ideological in character in that it focused on the ideas of Marxism-Leninism, the leading role of the Soviet Union inside the communist bloc, and, of course, the "capitalist threat" from West Germany as the realm of fascism, unemployment, poverty, and crime, to counterbalance the glittering (West) television messages of a better life in the West.

These political commitments to which all teachers were subject accorded with a centralized school system, in which pupils as well as teachers found themselves as controlled objects in a tight hierarchy rather than as active and creative subjects in a process of mutual understanding, teaching, and learning. As may be expected in a society in which the one unitary political party claimed leadership, the relationship between teacher and student was, generally speaking, authoritarian in character. This quality was mirrored and supported by the central role teachers took in learning processes. Learning methods that allowed for more student activity, such as group work or practical work outside the classroom, were rare.

Prior to unification there was only one central curriculum per school subject and grade for the whole country, and along with it was only one state-licensed textbook accompanied by teaching material. The content of curricula, textbooks, and teaching material (with often clear instructions for individual classes) seemed to convey the idea of clear-cut pedagogic principles. Indeed, public discourse upon didactic concepts, as far as what was published in journals, tended to focus on the issue of how to implement the one existing "true" concept in order to reach an even higher standard of "effectivity" of learning. No wonder that teaching was very much centered on primarily cognitive objectives that made it easy for teachers to mark student learning, which, in turn, provided data to be used to prove the school's standard as a socialist institution.

Unification brought about drastic changes in virtually all aspects of the school system, and teaching and learning in it. This paper will be restricted to the more common impact before the focus is shifted to specific conditions in geography classes at secondary schools in East Germany. The transformation process has in fact gone so far as to cause individual crises among many teachers in the sense of insecure professional roles, if not identity crises. The reasons for this situation are manifold and complex (Reh & Tillman, 1994). Like a wide proportion of East Germans in general, teachers frequently have the feeling of having been made victims of an anonymous political process, particularly when there is a latent threat of dismissal. But also teachers who

enjoy renewed contracts as civil servants find it difficult to become adjusted to dramatically new conditions. To conform with the West German school system, the administration of schools has now been reorganized by *Länder* (federal provinces) which has meant the very rapid introduction of new curricula, textbooks, and instructional material.

As well, at the secondary school level, the former unitary (one-for-all) polytechnic school (grades 4-10) has now been succeeded by two parallel varieties of schools (*Gymnasium* for better students and *Mittelschule* for the remainder) that are thought to suit different gifts and abilities best, and each type of school has its own curriculum or guidelines.

What however, above all, contributes to the above adjustment problems is the unprecedented openness of the new guidelines (Reh & Tillman, 1994). In contrast to times prior to unification, teachers now have to make their own thematic and methodological decisions on the basis of new didactic principles, such as self-reliability, creativity, ability to express criticism, and tolerance, and, what is more, to orient themselves in terms of topicality and students' interests. All this has called for a new quality profile on the part of the teacher to cope with openness in school education (Schmidt & Schmidt, 1991).

It is, in fact, the new lack of clear instructions and guidelines that teachers in East Germany complain about most since unification. Another matter of concern has been the lack of discipline on the part of the students which, at least to some extent, may well be considered to reflect a new characteristic of the relationship between teacher and student, one that leaves less room for the old authoritarian teacher role in favour of more student participation (Reh & Tillmann, 1994).

EXPERIENCING THE NEW GEOGRAPHY

Acceptance of the new guidelines

In general, the interviewed teachers seemed comfortable with the revision process and with the guidelines themselves, although there were some critical comments about the emphasis on human geography, as will be shown later. The general assent, however, was remarkable since there was a virtual lack of consultation, and the teachers seemed to have been uninformed about the committee's composition. Under the German Democratic Republic (GDR) regime, teachers were accustomed to a consultation stage for the draft guidelines and were individually surveyed for their opinion. In contrast, obviously due to time

pressure, the revision committee was only able to solicit opinion for the draft guidelines at workshops and other meetings, and therefore it effectively canvassed the viewpoints of only a small sample of geography teachers. The teachers assumed that the committee's composition included curriculum experts from Saxony, as well as from Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, the two West German provinces that assisted during the transition period after unification. Notwithstanding the lack of organized consultation, the interviewed teachers appeared to accept the revision process with equanimity.

After unification, and especially after introduction of the new guidelines, the degree of cooperation and collaboration among teachers was high. For example, the *Gymnasium* teachers had organized several internal meetings during the previous year to discuss the guidelines, how to implement them, and to decide what teaching material might be needed. However, as teachers throughout the region were left to interpret the guidelines as best they might, teachers at the *Gymnasium* admitted to feelings of insecurity about the process of adapting to change, especially in this early stage. Repeatedly they expressed uncertainty about their ability and role in exercising their responsibilities adequately and in meeting the expectations of their educational authorities. At different times they expressed their preference for a greater degree of prescription which, together with the provision of concrete examples, would help them more clearly identify the main focal points of the guidelines.

The lack of specific guidelines for the most senior *Gymnasium* years (11th and 12th grades) seriously worried the teachers who prepared students for the *Arbitur* (12th grade school leaving examination), since they faced the uncertainty about what exactly to teach their classes before publication of these guidelines. Specific mention was made of the guidelines for some of the major topics in the *Kurssystem* of grades 11 and 12 (specialized courses). One of these was landscape ecology which especially worried the *Gymnasium* teachers. They felt that in a complex interdisciplinary subject such as this, the topics were presented in so abstract a manner that preparation for this subject would require substantial study and work on their part. They conveyed the impression that the topic would overtax teachers in terms of their own training and preparation.

Textbooks and instruction materials

Of all the new teaching conditions after unification teachers seemed most enthusiastic about textbooks and instruction materials. Right after unification, textbooks of the various West German publishers

entered the schools in different quantities provided through private and individual channels as gifts from the publishers, from West German partner schools, and as official purchase orders. Lacking funds, parents had been persuaded to help schools purchase West German atlases.

In every case, the main problem was a shortage of textbooks caused by restricted budgets. School authorities were making a valiant effort to purchase new textbooks, but with so many competing requests, budgets permitted only single class sets, and in one case, a half-class set. Logistically this meant that along with other instructional materials, 15 to 30 textbooks had to be transported to each class since, as another change in school structure, teachers had lost the timetabling of classes held in a central geography classroom.

A second problem was the complaint that West German publishers resisted requests to modify existing textbooks to include major exemplars taken from East Germany. One frequently mentioned example concerned the importance of brown coal mining in Saxony, in fact only a few kilometres away, while the textbook elaborated on brown coal mining in West Germany (near Cologne) (Heimat & Welt, 1993). This point of irritation evidently stemmed from hurt regional pride which has come up in some areas of East Germany (Mai, 1993). The protest becomes more plausible, however, if one considers that brown coal mining is a major economic feature in this area and should form part of the students' regional experience when studying geography.

Teachers strongly supported the use of audio-visual materials to help their students develop a more accurate mental understanding of geographic concepts and unfamiliar landscapes. Indeed, as soon as unification was announced, schools rushed to order a wide range of audio-visual instructional materials which had been previously unavailable to them. Teachers particularly appreciate videotapes that are now available for classroom use through the community education resource centre located in a nearby town. Also, schools have their own video recorders to facilitate the use of TV programmes for geography education.

Due to budget limitations schools could not normally afford standing orders of geography magazines, such as *Geographische Rundschau*, *Praxis Geographie*, and *Geographie Heute*, but a few teachers subscribed to them privately and circulated copies among their colleagues. The articles that seem to be most popular are those with clear-cut suggestions as to how to operationalize didactic concepts in teaching units, including statistics, graphs, copies of exercises, crossword puzzles, and simulation games.

Continuity and new concepts

Prior to unification, geography guidelines followed a concept of combined regional and physical geography with some selected chapters on economic geography which focused on the Soviet Union (grade 7), the Comecon and capitalist countries of Western Europe, and the United States (Barth, 1990). The new guidelines resemble the old ones in that the contents of geography classes over the years gradually moved away from Germany to more distant countries and continents while becoming conceptually more complex. Apart from this, although physical geography is still relevant, the new guidelines follow the concept of new geography by aiming at objectives such as the competence of problem-solving with respect to geographic issues, responsibility for the quality of the environment, peaceful understanding, and tolerance towards other cultures and values (*Sächsisches Staatsministerium für Kultus*, 1992).

In our interviews teachers repeatedly complained about the "political message" of the new guidelines, and some recognized similarities to the old ones in this regard. They referred to unpopular socialist undertones, especially in teaching economic geography, prior to unification and felt there was more or less no difference with only a shift in regional emphasis from the GDR, the USSR, and the Comecon to the united Germany, Western Europe, and the United States. In other words, some of the interviewees, despite the drastic changes in the political system, observed a continuation of the teachers' old political mission in the sense of propagating state ideology. During the socialist period, geography teachers indicated, they evaded political issues by escaping into physical and descriptive regional geography. In this way they avoided the interest that would have been manifest by the political authorities had they taught economic or social geography. Since unification they continue to feel that their subject should be free from any political content or mission. Generally speaking, geography is perceived to be a politically "neutral" subject.

Most interviewed teachers shared the view that they now have to teach too much of a "problem-based geography". This applies to grades 11 and 12 of the *Gymnasium*, which includes topics about the global issues of developing countries and resource exploitation, and also energy policy, industrial geography, urban renewal, urban land-use conflicts, living conditions in slums, and so on. One teacher observed that some topics, such as living conditions in American cities, that focus on urban blight and slums as presented in the new textbooks, actually appeared to recur from the old guidelines with virtually the same critical undertone. She

(the interviewee) thought the chapter on the United States was so amorphous, lacking structure or discernible objectives, that she in fact chose to return to her old textbook used before unification.

Most teachers complained about the general and vague character of the present guidelines, for they say "they permit too much freedom" for teachers, in contrast to the old guidelines which were much clearer about what one had to do: "*Our own (GDR) guidelines were clearer.*" Although the new guidelines indicate general objectives, most teachers miss concrete and especially cognitive objectives for grades and individual teaching units. The outcome of this is that when teachers now have to take over another class they must first check where students are, because one can no longer tell from the guidelines.

What aggravates insecurity on the part of the teacher is the lack of compatibility of guidelines and textbooks. Of course, textbooks are somehow based on the guidelines and do indeed provide potential ways of interpreting them. But the fact is that there is now a number of different books available for the same grade, each with a different approach and set of topics, together with other teaching material, such as overheads, slides, and videos. The choice still confuses teachers, most of whom still prefer unequivocal didactic concepts and prescriptions for each teaching unit.

In our interviews teachers revealed a striking lack of understanding of and for modern concepts of geography teaching on the basis of human or social geography. To most of them, physical and regional geography still represent the "true geography", while problem-oriented geography is widely considered "optional" (Fuhrmann, 1991). In fact, despite all of the motivation among teachers, especially at the *Gymnasium*, to adjust to the new teaching and learning conditions, the elementary features of the new geography reflected in the open (i.e., more democratic) character of the curriculum, and in objectives that are to develop skills and values in the students which help them solve individual and social problems, are not yet well understood and emotionally accepted. This may explain remarks like the one on the alleged lack of a consistent concept for presenting contents in a textbook: "Sometimes one picks out volcanoes, sometimes religion and faith, because there is so wide a range to cover. It used to be dreary [prior to unification], now it is so arbitrary."

Our findings suggested that teachers lack a basic awareness of pedagogical writings about modern concepts of teaching geography as a school

subject. None of them named or described any pedagogical source in the teaching of geography from his or her initial teacher training or from workshops after unification. So, generally speaking, geography teachers in East Germany are facing a situation which necessarily overtaxes many of them. A new form of geography, with concepts that are still basically strange to them, has been introduced into curriculum guidelines, textbooks, and teaching material without the teachers' general appreciation and understanding. Nevertheless, geography teachers are endeavouring to adjust themselves to new conditions. They make use of bits and pieces of a new concept as described in the guidelines and teaching materials, although this may add to their insecurity and confusion since didactic concepts, as with any theoretical concept for that matter, have to be appreciated and fully understood before application. In West Germany it took many years of discussion of the new geography curriculum in order to do away with the old descriptive regional concept of geography teaching (see Schultze, 1979), and, above all, to convince teachers in the classrooms. It will take more years to convince teachers in East Germany of a concept that certainly has to be perceived as their own before it will be accepted. So far there has been virtually no comparable open discussion about modern geography amongst teachers in East Germany. Consequently there will have to be improved conditions that will enable all teachers to attend workshops and other in-service training to learn about the philosophy of the new geography. The new training must go beyond the construction of teaching units, their implementation, and the compilation of available teaching materials. Serious attempts must be made to render the new geography into a didactic concept that is consistent and intelligible so that it becomes alive and acceptable for East German teachers.

Teachers indicated, in their interviews with us, the type of school geography that will survive as long as this is not achieved. As teacher training in the GDR required either mathematics, biology, or physical training as a second subject in combination with geography, teachers developed a post-war notion of geography as a science which, as such, has impeded the current shift of attention in favour of social or human geography. Following unification, this tendency was definitely enhanced by the viewpoint of many teachers, that is, that problem issues convey a political message of some sort. Thus, after their experience from the socialist period, teachers tend to discredit human geography, preferring instead to choose the allegedly neutral realm of clear cause-and-effect geography, i. e., of physical and regional geography, and along with it a focus on land formation, holistic landscape interpretation, and place

location. The guidelines, open as they are, appear to facilitate this withdrawal into the "true geography". Even so, the influence of the new geography may be difficult to evade since conflicting human interests and values can hardly be sidestepped when teaching about complex subjects such as landscape ecology in grades 11 and 12.

Coping with open teaching and learning

When "the wall" between East and West Germany came down and the borders became permeable, geography almost overnight became more popular among students, since traveling came to be enjoyed as a major asset of liberty after unification. Indeed, geography became, to an unprecedented degree, a matter of one's own experience that way. After holidays students returned to report their impressions from travels to West Germany and abroad, and teachers found it easy to motivate students and stimulate discussion in classes.

The question arises as to what extent the new conditions for teaching and learning have had an impact on the development of new forms of teaching and learning. Right after unification teachers were encouraged to try out more liberal (i.e., student-oriented) forms of teaching and, indeed, most of the teachers we interviewed stated they had experimented with this approach. Teachers were now able to observe West German classes, but found that deviating from teacher-centered learning produced such "chaotic" results in the classroom as to negate any advantages for the students (see Reh & Tillmann, 1994). As one teacher put it: "I would rather retain the reins on the students." However, one has to be careful not to exclusively attribute this preference of teacher-oriented styles of learning to the old socialist authoritarian role of the teacher. One certainly has to take into account that student behaviour changed drastically after unification, and teachers felt they had to react to this trend. Teachers above all complained about effects of family disintegration due to now high unemployment amongst parents, about the consequences of excessive television, and the increase of rudeness, consumerism, and even occasional vandalism.

We also noticed a striking reluctance on the part of teachers to integrate practical elements of out-of-school learning. Most teachers preferred to shun the expense of time and preparation for outdoor activities, such as field trips to a nearby brown coal pit or a factory, although they conceded this would be an effective way of learning. It appears first of all that practical fieldwork was still unpopular among teachers because there was virtually no experience of these methods from socialist

times. This does not mean that field trips and student investigations were not permitted but rather they constituted an object of political suspicion which no one cared to arouse. Apart from this, teachers referred to a general precaution about the use of questionnaire surveys as a method of collecting data about critical issues, such as pollution. The authorities similarly treated large-scale maps as confidential documents, that is, not available for nonmilitary uses like local geographical studies in schools.

CONCLUSION

In our interviews with teachers they generally stated their appreciation for the opportunity for a new type of geography to emerge after the political overthrow of the social government. Nevertheless, despite remarkable motivation to support a new start, there are clear signs of irritation and disorientation among geography teachers in East Germany. Wide discontent was articulated with regard to basic elements of the concept of the new geography such as problem orientation of content, the thematic emphasis on social issues, and practical elements in data collection.

It appears that the introduction of new geography was made too quickly, like so many aspects of the whole social transformation process for that matter, for teachers to become convinced about the values and assets of new approaches to the subject. One might doubt that teachers would be able to cope with the overnight introduction of the market system with all its social and mental side-effects, but in hindsight the reformed geography guidelines themselves were clearly far from understood and accepted by teachers on their day of publication.

What has to be taken most seriously is the striking lack of understanding among teachers towards a modern geography as a pedagogical tool to strengthen the students' autonomy in school and society alike. As long as teachers perceive aspects of the guidelines as a mere replacement of state ideology (Stock & Tiedtke, 1992) and as long as teachers evade social issues by retreating into physical and regional geography as the "true geography", an intensive discourse is needed. This discourse should promote the educational contribution of geography to a democratic society in which geographic competence and skills play a necessary role.

No doubt, like other aspects of the transformation process, becoming adjusted to the new geography will take time not only for the sake of discussing the new concept but also to operationalize its philosophy by

creatively and practically trying out its potential. Indeed, only favourable teaching and learning experience will prove the quality of the new geography, the acceptance of which would, then, in the long run necessarily turn teacher-student relations into a more self-determinant, cooperative, and less authoritarian one.

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Experiencing the New Geography in East Germany

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