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Regional Education on the Cultural Borderland. Do Students Need Knowledge about Their Region Today?

Abstract

The article addresses the implementation of regional education, a crucial component of socio-cultural identity. Its goal is to initiate a discussion on the essence of regional education in contemporary schools and present a pilot study on students' knowledge about their region. The research shows that the role of schools in acquiring knowledge about the region is significantly smaller than that of the family environment, the Internet, or learning through social observation. The research indicates the need for broader studies on schools' current curricula and educational offers in regional education. Its results also reveal the urgent need to restore the methodological foundations of regional education in Poland. It will help remind young people of the importance of local cultural heritage values and their own roots in their lives. A modern school also needs to restore the idea of regional education as civic education, which is necessary to shape competencies conducive to integration and openness to others. It is extremely important, especially in the current social situation related to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Keywords:

culture, school, region, curriculum content, regional education

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1. INTRODUCTION

In academic literature, there has been a search for answers to questions about the quality of education for many years. It applies to the goals of education, its essence, and directions of changes and their consequences for human functioning in the contemporary world. The preparation of schools and other educational institutions for implementing tasks related to modern education is one of the most important demands today (Szymański, 2021a). It concerns especially the directions of changes in thinking about education, which have been the basis of pedagogical considerations for years (cf. Lewowicki, 1994). However, education still does not meet the needs and expectations of society. Zbigniew Kwieciński (2018, p. 17) believes that our entire educational system is essentially a „problem of the highest degree of difficulty”, and the future and further development of Poland depends on a thorough review and changes in education. As the author writes, „this is because the current education system is inconsistent, pre-modern, and plagued by many pathologies. An accepted change of the education thinking model is needed – a paradigm shift – which should be accompanied by creating a strategic institution at the highest level. An institution that consistently implements a long-term programme of changes in the education system” (Kwieciński, 2018, p. 17). In scientific literature, reference is often made in this context to the broader category of social change, which characterises our current social life very well. Mirosław Szymański (2021b, p. 24) observes that in our country, „(...) social change has an exceptionally multifaceted and turbulent character, as in recent years we have actually been dealing with the overlap of as many as four types of violent change. These are rapid scientific and technological changes, globalisation, systemic transformation, and European integration”. These changes require reflection on one of the key elements of education, which is the content of education, i.e., the basic knowledge and skills in the field of science, technology, culture, and social reality that are intended to be mastered by students during their education in school, along with changes in their activities, attitudes, and value systems (Kruszewski, 1987; Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000). It is precisely social change that determines new requirements in the knowledge and skills of contemporary young people, especially in the field of preparation for work and social life, as well as relationships with others. It applies especially to the following issues: knowing more, being better skilled, creatively solving problems, and acting more effectively. However, modern times have not been able to keep up with these ever-increasing expectations, as the school still does not meet the standards of an increasingly democratic society and does not respond to the needs of the labour market (Szymański, 2021b). Unfortunately, this

is largely due to neglect of the content of education. On the one hand, this is related to the enormous frequency of introducing new curricula and, therefore, changes in curricula. However, changes in education content still do not sufficiently consider the effects of long-standing scientific research, discussions, and social debates, especially in pedagogy. Unfortunately, it results in the fact that curricula built in this way become the result of „apparent actions” that give the impression of being effective and useful but ultimately do not contribute to the transformation of schools and education. Such educational decisions require „(...) problematisation of the situation, which raises suspicion that apparent actions are taking place” (Dudzikowa, 2013, p. 30). Another important reason for neglecting the content of school subjects is the lack of clear guidelines for their selection, as well as the knowledge of the key to their frequent updating and improvement (Śliwerski, 2015). Today, the way we think about content needs to change; we should not only focus on how well students have mastered the curriculum but also examine their thinking process, especially in terms of understanding the surrounding reality, participating in it, and seeking a place in the process of creating knowledge (Klus-Stańska, 2002; 2018). It is one way to schools as learning organisations (Dalin & Rust, 1983; Kools & Stoll, 2016; Tołwińska, 2021). The content of regional education, a neglected field after 2008 (cf. Konieczka-Śliwińska, 2014), is particularly affected. Remember that regional issues were not popular in Poland for a long time. After World War II, much was done to make Poles pay less attention to regionalism and regionalisation (Petrykowski, 2003; Sobiecki, 2018). It seems that the importance of local and regional specificities, cultural heritage issues, the value of tradition (Petrykowski, 2013), and especially the sense of „belonging” that comes from regional topics, are forgotten as an essential element in the socialisation of every human being. Regionalism can be understood in the context of man’s dependence and immediate geographical environment (G. A. Theodorson & A. G. Theodorson, 1969, cited in Petrykowski, 2003).

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RESEARCH – A FEW REFLECTIONS

Being deeply relational is perhaps the human soul’s most important and best-known need. „Human beings have roots if, in an active and natural way, they participate in the existence of a community that preserves some treasures of the past and has a sense of tomorrow” (Weil, 1985, p. 144). Therefore, in the process of shaping the identity of every human being, it is imperative to enable and create opportunities for learning about their own cultural heritage, bringing regional traditions closer,

and also „internalising regional values and content, thus shaping and consolidating regional attitudes” (Petrykowski, 2003, p. 50). The school plays a crucial role in such education, and one of the effects of implementing content about the region is not only knowledge of one’s own cultural heritage but also „(...) awareness of one’s own specificity, exchange processes, and continuous transformations. Educators, by shaping a child’s sense of identity, must simultaneously build a foundation for their open and tolerant attitudes, which can create cultural pluralism. They need to notice and reconcile regionalism and universalism to help assimilate new cultures, environments, languages, and ways of communication, adapting to differences without rejecting family values. Such activities will enable a child to acquire the ability to recognise and name their own feelings, manage their own emotions, perceive the feelings of others, and establish and maintain social contacts” (Nikitorowicz, 2017, p. 134).

Regional studies take on particular significance in border areas, places with specific cultural values and qualities, where the strength of tradition, customs, and habits characterises originality and uniqueness. Therefore, in research on the region and its culture, a significant place is occupied by the scientific theory of identity behaviours by Tadeusz Lewowicki and the concept of identity formation in conditions of cultural borderland by Jerzy Nikitorowicz. Both theories relate to phenomena in human relations with society and culture in border areas. The theory of identity behaviours distinguishes four areas that form the basis for building identity. The first one is related to the historical fate of the community, as well as identification with the group and territory. The distinctiveness of culture, language, transmission of tradition, and knowledge of a given group’s spiritual and material heritage determines the second area. The third relates to the historical genealogy and specific community characteristics and stereotypes within it. The fourth area concerns the economic and living standards (Lewowicki, 1995).

In his writing, Tadeusz Lewowicki (2011, pp. 492–493) describes a unique model of multidimensional identity, which combines local, regional, national, and European identification with various national, ethnic, religious, or cultural affiliations. Individuals often choose the different components of this multidimensional identity according to their beliefs, views, faiths, and cultural heritage. This type of identity is open and does not depend on „inherited” nationality, skin colour, or religion.

Jerzy Nikitorowicz’s theory, on the other hand, assumes that the continuous formation of cultural identity primarily enables individuals to possess qualities that give them a sense of distinctiveness and similarity to others. It applies specifically to multicultural societies, and education in this process mainly involves

supporting individuals (Nikitorowicz, 1995). The first stage of identity formation is very important, and primarily involves identification with the native culture. The second stage involves acquiring local identity, which is „awareness of a sense of rootedness and native values, awareness of time, space, duration and transience, as well as associated awareness of the significance and weight of the past, common fate, experiences and all events stored in collective memory, and awareness of the present and the sense of individuality, strength and power of the individual, and prospects for individual and group development” (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 93).

It is precisely in the third stage that the acquisition of minority group identity occurs, and in the fourth, the entry into a fragmented autonomous identity. These are related to the functioning of individuals in intercultural spaces, where there is a problem of multiple homelands and the problem of preserving one’s individuality in shaping personal and social identity. The concept of cultural identity „combines what is individual with what is social, what is family and local with what is global and universal” (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 94). Each identity, being a dialectical process, thus begins with forming family, familial, local, parish, ethnic, regional, national, cultural, and even European, global, and universal identity. Therefore, regional education is important in building one’s identity and shaping intercultural competencies. It constitutes the first stage of intercultural education. Hence, as Ewa Ogrodzka-Mazur (2019) observes, the concepts concerning important determinants of identity-related behaviours can serve as the basis for developing much-needed educational offerings today, especially for institutions operating in culturally diverse environments.

3. REGIONAL EDUCATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The concepts of regional education that developed in our country, basically at the beginning of the 1990s, were presented in the work entitled „Regional education: fundamental and open problems” by Piotr Petrykowski (2003). The author distinguished, among others, the following theories: regional education as a general education orientation (by Dzierżymir Jankowski), regional education as a return to sources (by Kazimierz Kossak-Główczewski), regional education as acquiring competencies (by Jerzy Nikitorowicz), regional education as a structural system (by Stanisław Gawlik), and regional education as circles of knowledge (by Marek S. Szczepański). From the perspective of the topic concerning the content of regional education, it is worth paying attention to the oldest ones: by Dzierżymir Jankowski and Marek S. Szczepański. In the former, regional education is a mosaic of various

personal and group-building activities. According to Jankowski, regional education, in addition to conscious and intentional actions, also takes place spontaneously, „(...) as it is mainly a specific orientation and content of general education and as such should be implemented in the overall direct and indirect educational impact carried out by all educators and all educational institutions, as well as various other institutions (...)” (Petrykowski, 2003, p. 37). Regional education aims to introduce individuals and small social groups to the socio-cultural life of the local and regional environment – in terms of tradition and current events. The author focuses on issues such as the natural environment (with manifestations and effects of human activity), industry and other components of the socio-economic environment, social environment along with the social structure of people and dynamics of transformations in this area, and cultural environment, related to language, art, literature, customs, and traditions (Jankowski, 1990).

Another theoretical approach to regional education, which is more detailed in terms of content, belongs to Marek Stanisław Szczepański. The author distinguished the so-called „circles of knowledge”, which constitute elements of regional education and shape local and regional identity. Among them, he distinguished the following areas: micro- and mesoecology, concerning knowledge of the regional natural environment and its eco-development; micro- and mesogeography, which is knowledge of regional topography; regional history, defining knowledge of local events, heroes, structures, and political solutions; sociological knowledge about the local community, cultural regions, multiculturalism, and necessary civilisational transformations of the region; knowledge of dialects and their variations, as well as local literature; knowledge of local material culture, such as urban planning, architecture, local artistic and craft creations (Szczepański, 1999).

From the perspective of educational and legal aspects, regional education in our country became a documented fact only in 1995 (Petrykowski, 2003). In essence, when tracing the fate of regional education in the methodological and educational context, it was then that a kind of renaissance of regional-local thought took place in Polish schools. Since 1999, the content of regional education has been implemented as part of the so-called inter-subject paths, which included Regional Education – Cultural Heritage in the Region (in primary school) and Regional Education – Cultural Heritage in the Region (in junior high school). The mentioned activities aimed, among other things, to gain a fuller understanding of one’s own culture and cultural heritage, to extract the values of one’s own region in the context of national, state, and universal values, and to develop open attitudes enabling the knowledge of other cultures and the approximation of Europe (Ministry of National Education, 1995). Educational publications also indicated that regional

education was supposed to promote school autonomy, emphasise innovation, and authorship of solutions (Ministry of National Education, 2000). A key issue was the introduction of content specific to a given region, with its unique traditions, customs, and local experiences, into schools. The classes conducted in those years had an educational and didactic character, with the school director responsible for incorporating regional content into the school's educational process and all teachers responsible for implementing them in their respective subject programmes. In school practice, the implementation of regional education content was aided by lesson-based, extracurricular, and out-of-school activities, often outside the „school bench”. Regional content in those years was implemented through organised meetings with local community representatives, and residents, field trips, and to acquaint students with the region's culture, traditions, and folklore. In many schools, regional education was associated with students' dynamic and active participation in various interest groups, scouting, school self-government, and their involvement in various educational projects. Its content was filled with appeals, performances, and other school ceremonies during which students could demonstrate their musical and vocal, acting, artistic, and language skills. The distinguishing feature of this activity in Podlaskie schools was the tremendous initiative of the students themselves in both creating and implementing regional education – with its values, customs, but, above all, rich and multicultural traditions (Misiejuk, 2013; Szwarc, 2014). It is a pity that phasing out interdisciplinary paths from curricula began with each subsequent change in the core curriculum. One might question whether regional issues are addressed in schools to such a high degree nowadays (cf. Konieczka-Śliwińska, 2014). Analysing the results of research conducted for several years in the Podlaskie region on local and regional issues, it can be assumed that the elimination of interdisciplinary paths was not a good decision (cf. Misiejuk, 2013; Białous et al., 2016). We should be concerned about signals that in many Podlaskie schools in recent years, there has been less and less interest among the younger generation in regional issues, both the history and culture of the immediate surroundings (Bartczak, 2016; Sacharczuk, 2020; Szwarc, 2021).

4. ASSUMPTIONS AND RESEARCH AREA. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The research was conducted in the Podlaskie Province in four schools (urban and rural) located in the towns of Białystok, Łapy, Narewka, and Juchnowiec Górny. Podlasie is a region with a rich and diverse cultural landscape. Undoubtedly, one

of its greatest socio-cultural values is its diverse regional and colourful cultural traditions and its multi-ethnic, religious, and popular characteristics. As a historical and geographical region, Podlasie has been a unique borderland for many centuries, both politically and socio-culturally, as well as in terms of nationality and religion. It was here that the „penetration of Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian ethnicity” took place. That, in turn, determined the formation of a durable religious, linguistic, and cultural border zone in Podlasie. This borderland was shaped by a series of ethnic and religious communities that have inhabited this area for centuries, interpenetrating each other and strongly influencing one another, creating a truly national, religious, linguistic, and cultural mosaic in the past and present. Multiple changes in political affiliation, especially the role of borderland in the Middle Ages, its distinctive borders for Poland, Lithuania, and Rus, and the resulting waves of settlement had a decisive influence on the ethnic and religious diversity of this area (Barwiński, 2014, p. 281). Therefore, the culture of the eastern borderland is characterised by situations of transition – „from cultural monologue to intercultural dialogue, from situations dominated by stereotypes to mutual understanding, respect, and care for the common heritage of borderland culture. Only such an approach allows the borderland to be treated as a state of consciousness of individuals” (Sobecki, 2016, p. 20). This borderland offers a unique opportunity to encounter the Other, understand their views and behaviours, and shape attitudes of respect and acceptance towards diversity. It allows for the search and development of new strategies, transformation of thinking patterns, modification, and reorientation (Nikitorowicz, 2001; 2020).

The pilot study aimed to determine the place of regional content in primary school education and to learn students’ opinions on this topic. In this paper, I present a fragment of the analyses relating to students’ knowledge about their region. The study used a diagnostic survey method and a survey technique (in the form of a Google Form). Eighth-grade students participated in the study. The survey questionnaires were active in the 2020/2021 academic year, and 127 students completed them. Of the participants, 57,48% were female and 42,52% were male. 55,91% of the students attended schools in cities, while 44,09% learned in rural schools.

One of the important issues that researchers sought to address was to determine how the respondents evaluate their knowledge about their region’s history, culture, and traditions. It turned out that 49,61% described it as „average” (including 52,11% of city dwellers and 46,43% of rural residents). A level of „good” knowledge was declared by 26,77% of young people, more often by women (30,14%) and residents of rural areas (33,93%). The highest, very good level of knowledge

about the history, culture, and traditions of the region is possessed by 7,87% (9,26% male students and 6,85% female students). Meanwhile, 13,39% consider their knowledge in this area insufficient, and 2,36% of male students even admit that they have no such information. Another significant question concerned the sources of students' knowledge about their region. 67,72% agree that their parents and grandparents play the biggest role in this area (66,93% answered „definitely yes” and „rather yes”). The Internet is confirmed as a source of obtaining such information by 65,35% of young people, and 49,61% consider observation of the surrounding reality to play an important role in learning about the region. However, only 47,24% of respondents indicate school as a place disseminating knowledge about the region (in turn, 26,77% choose the answer „hard to say”, 21,26% – „rather no” and 4,72% – „definitely no”). A similar percentage of young people learn about their region from television (45,67%), but 40,16% also from books. 32,28% use the radio for this purpose, and only 16,54% of students point to magazines. It also turns out that regional topics rarely constitute a subject of conversation with peers, as only 14,96% confirm it (Figure 1.).

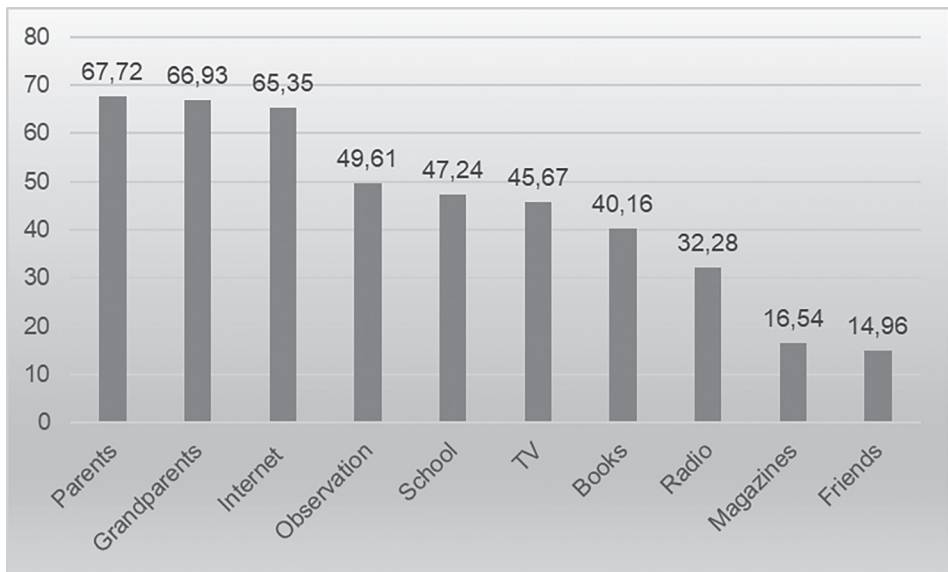


Figure 1. Sources of knowledge about the region

Source: own research.

The analysis of collected data shows that in the context of knowledge about the region, the highest percentage of young people indicate geographic content related

to the location of their own town (75,59% positive responses, more frequently chosen by women). However, only 55,91% of students declare knowledge of the origin of their town's name (61,65% for residents of Białystok and 48,15% for residents of Podlaskie villages). 62,20% of respondents know regional monuments, including 71,24% of girls. The students' responses indicate that regional content related to nature is also taught in primary school. Students pointed out issues related to Podlaskie parks (65,35%), nature reserves (62,20%), animals found in Podlasie (51,97%), as well as vegetation typical for the region (45,67%). 55,12% of students confirm their knowledge of such natural content, including 63,38% of city residents and 44,64% of rural residents. As it turns out, students are less familiar with topics related to the history of the region – only 33,86% confirm their knowledge in this area. Meanwhile, 62,20% of young people claim to have also learned about regional traditions, customs and habits in school, but only 41,73% of students can list and describe them. The respondents also confirm that topics related to regional folk art (49,61% of responses), including folk dances (48,82%) and costumes (45,67%), were also taught during their primary school education. It also turns out that these topics are less related to regional dialects (33,86%), although 58,27% of students confirm that they understand the dialect (64,39% of girls and 50% of boys). Furthermore, students confirm that the topics related to the region included in the primary school curriculum also include those related to figures that played an important role in the region's history (57,48%), various regional institutions and cultural centres (55,91%), including those promoting regional music culture (40,94%). It should be noted that, according to eighth graders, the least known topics concern regional literature (35,43%), including works by regional authors (40,94%). It is also interesting to note that although over 60% of all students agree that contemporary young people need knowledge about their own region, only 29,92% admit that more time should be devoted to regional topics in schools (this opinion is held by 38,89% of boys and 23,29% of girls). At the same time, 37,04% of students and 31,51% of female students (more frequently city residents) declare that they will participate in additional classes related to regional topics if they are offered in the school's educational offer.

5. CONCLUSION

Contemporary education is currently facing a new social reality. The tremendous dynamics of social life require consideration of many factors in educating and raising the younger generation. Research shows that the school as an educational

institution has a vital cultural function. As one way of transmitting a given society's cultural heritage, it is responsible for shaping its students' cultural competencies, enabling them to function effectively in reality. As confirmed by research, the family still constitutes the primary source of cultural models from which young people draw – and it should be this way. However, the role of schools as a source of knowledge about the region, as indicated by various analyses, is decidedly insufficient. It may indicate a lack of educational offerings related to implementing regional content conducive to learning about and promoting one's own region. Research points to the urgent need to intensify and restore methodological foundations for regional education. The lack of specific solutions in this respect and the absence of classes with a specific curriculum profile will not help restore the school's rightful place in implementing regional education. Of course, this activity cannot be limited to schools alone. Promoting knowledge about the region is impossible without considering the role of the local environment, institutions, offices, organisations, and associations (cf. Marszałek, 2015; Sulima, 2020; 2022). In this regard, curricula involving cooperation with these environments require more attention. From the perspective of school activities, the most pressing need seems to be to take care of the programmatic framework for regional education, as their dispersion and inclusion in the curricula of various school subjects may be the reason for the school's low rating as a source of knowledge about the region. Creating a school subject that would strengthen long-term activities in this area is necessary. It would help young people remember how important the values of local cultural heritage and their own roots are in life. Contemporary schools should restore the idea of regional education and civic education necessary to shape competencies conducive to integration and openness to others. Podlaskie schools were once filled with a wealth of regional content – colourful and diverse – with different histories, traditions, and customs. Preliminary research allows us to suppose that with the core curriculum change, the dimension of regional content in schools has also decreased. Certainly, further analyses need to be conducted in this area to learn the opinions of a larger group of students and their teachers. I think it is also worth examining how students perceive the concept of „region” and what significance local values have for them. It is also important to determine which regional content students would like to learn about and what knowledge from this area is interesting from their perspective.

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