

## REGIONAL EDUCATION ON THE FRONTIER OF EASTERN POLAND (ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE BELARUSIAN COMMUNITY)

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**Abstract:** The paper outlines the key issues: goals, objectives and problems of regional education at school. The significance of this issue in the education of young people belonging to ethnic minorities is discussed on the example of the Belarusian minority living in the border areas of Eastern Poland. The research findings on the practice of regional education and regional awareness of Belarusian children and youth indicate that although classes about 'their region' are formally included in the curriculum, their regional awareness is still very low.

**Key words:** regional education, border areas, Belarusian minority

In recent years, in Poland we can observe a distinct revival of "regionalism" which is sometimes referred to as "return to the roots" or "search for identity". Regional identity is of great importance for everyone who is aware of their roots. This attachment to the "small homeland", shaping emotional ties with it and the strength of the region's spiritual culture must be sustained and continued by the generations to come (Ogrodzka-Mazur, 2000).

The idea of regional education is currently widely promoted by leading Polish educators, including geographers. They emphasize the cardinal role that regional education has to play in shaping a system of values and educating young people. By studying this category of space, pupils become familiar with the reality that forms their direct environment – which is one of the tasks of the school.

### 1. REGIONAL EDUCATION IN POLAND

Following the reform of the educational system in 1999, regional issues were officially incorporated into the curriculum in the form of educational path entitled: Regional Education – cultural heritage in the region, understood as a 'set of contents and

skills with a high formative value'<sup>1</sup>. In this way, this issue acquired the status that it deserved.

The nature of educational paths is related to their interdisciplinary character. An educational path brings together a subject matter which is broader in scope than any single school subject, and therefore should be taught as part of several subjects. In the case of regional education, issues concerning the pupils' own region should be discussed on the occasion of relevant topics on history, Polish, art and – naturally – geography lessons.

The key goals and objectives of regional education were formulated in the framework curriculum for general education. Currently, work is under way to modify the existing framework curriculum, which gives rise to many disputes. The amended curriculum proposes to liquidate the interdisciplinary paths, and regional education issues are to be included in social science lessons.

It should be remembered however that regional education, that is lessons about the pupils' own region, have been taught in geography lessons since the very beginning of the discipline. At the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Jan Amos Komenski, who is thought to be the father of geography at school, emphasized the great role of the home place (the direct vicinity) in the process of geographical education. For a number of years many Polish geographers (Pulinowa, Plit, Mordawski, Angiel, Hibszer) have expressed their opinions and shared their views in the discussion on regional education in geography. Joanna Angiel (1993) wrote on How to conduct lessons about one's own region? ["Jak realizować lekcje o własnym regionie?"] in *Geografia w Szkole* long before the educational reform. In many of his articles, Adam Hibszer discussed the great significance of "small homeland" for young people in their formative and educational process. We can say therefore that regional education is an indispensable component of geographical education and should be taught at all levels of schooling.

The overriding goal of regional education is to develop a sense of regional (local) identity through familiarization with the wealth and diversity of culture in a given region and shaping an attitude of tolerance, openness and acceptance for other cultures. According to Nikitorowicz, regional education is a process of acquiring competences in the sphere of culture and language of a given ethnic group, in the context of a larger (majority) group. Regional education aims to develop respect for the cultural heritage, system of values, language, traditions and customs of a given region (Korepta, 2003). Lessons about the pupils' own region are also intended to prepare them to act responsibly in their adult life, in their local communities. With such goals and objectives, classes about the region can be regarded as an important element in the education of young people living in border areas.

## 2. THE NATURE OF POLAND'S EASTERN FRONTIER

The frontier is a very broad concept, which can be examined and defined in many different aspects, such as space, territory, area, but also interaction, contacts, symbolic exchange.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of the educational path developed during a seminar entitled: Formative Educational Paths – Definitions, Implementation, Curriculum, Sulejówek, 1-3 October 2001.

The frontier is inherently connected with the existence of the border which differentiates and separates. According to this simple dictionary definition, the frontier is an area near the border which separates certain territories; mainly between individual states (Słownika języka polskiego, 1998). In the context of regional education, this concept should also be explained in a territorial and cultural aspect. Territorial frontier is a specific area in the geographic space which is located in a periphery, at a point where two or more cultural (usually ethnic, language, religious, ethnographic) groups meet. At the same time, cultural frontier is an abstract, a symbolic concept and denotes a set of customs, rules and principles which facilitate living together in a territorial frontier.

At this point, we should also explain the use of the word 'frontier'. In the literature of the subject, other terms appear, such as border, boundary, frontier, borderland. However, in international scientific terminology the word frontier denotes a border in historical times, e.g. Kresy in Poland (Komornicki, 1999).

The peculiarity of Poland's eastern frontier is that this is a place where, for centuries, the cultures (traditions and customs) of the neighbouring nations – Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians – would intermingle. The cultural diversity of this area makes up a unique linguistic, ethnic and religious mix. This is an area where Poles live next to Belarusians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, descendants of Jews, Karaites and Tartars. Temples of various religious denominations are an essential element of the cultural landscape. Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches, synagogues, mosques, Old Believers' temples<sup>2</sup> are all proofs of the transient nature of cultures in Poland's eastern frontier.

Podlasie is an example of a region situated along Poland's eastern border, between Poland and Belarus. This historical land is situated in the Podlasie Lowland along the middle course of the Bug River. Administratively, it is a part of the Podlaskie voivodship (province). The population of Podlasie represents a broad cultural and ethnic mix.

The entire frontier area was formed as a result of the constant changes in state borders, which implied changes in the political (state) and administrative status. For centuries, this area was under the influence of different nations and churches, and a place of struggles for social and political status, a place of conflicts, discrimination, revolt and resistance on ethnic and religious grounds. During the centuries' old cooperation and contacts between the different communities, many specific values as well as stereotypes and prejudices have evolved, which can significantly affect the development of cultural and regional awareness of the region's inhabitants. According to Nikitorowicz (1995), the evolution of a cultural identity in heterogeneous regions (such as Podlasie) is a more difficult and complicated process than in homogeneous regions. During the many years of observations at Poland's eastern frontier, Nikitorowicz noted a progressing weakening of the cultural identity in the minority groups, alienation, sense of being disinherited from the culture of their ancestors, which to some extent could be observed in the Belarusian community. On the other hand, symptoms of a revival of regional and religious identity, and a sense of the region's cultural distinctness can be observed, especially in the recent years (Nikitorowicz, 1995).

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<sup>2</sup> Old Believers – those who split from the Russian Orthodox church after the reform of Patriarch Nikon was rejected by the Synod in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **3. THE BELARUSIAN MINORITY**

The Belarusians are the largest ethnic minority living in Podlasie, with the biggest populations living in the poviats (counties) of Bielsk Podlaski and Hajnówka. Most of the schools teaching Belarusian as the native language are located in those two poviats. The city of Białystok is an important cultural centre of the Belarusians, where Belarusian organisations have their seats. Groups of Belarusians also live outside the Białystok region, in larger Polish cities such as Warsaw, Gdańsk, Olsztyn or Lublin.

The Belarusian population in Poland is estimated at 200 to 300 thousand. However, during the National Census of 2002, only 47 640 Polish citizens declared "Belarusian" as their nationality. Belarusian is taught at 38 schools (including 23 primary schools, 13 lower secondary schools and 2 general secondary schools). In the 2004/05 school year, about 3.6 thousand pupils had lessons of Belarusian in those schools<sup>3</sup>.

In Poland, Belarusians lived mainly in rural areas, and for this reason they were usually regarded as peasants, poor and uneducated. A small group of intelligentsia with a well-developed sense of national identity represented the elite of Belarusian activists. The Belarusian community has always suffered from a lack of urban middle class, with a strong national identity, who would be the very core of the nation and the vehicle for transmitting national traditions.

A serious problem which has affected the Belarusian community in the last dozen years was the progressing assimilation and Polonization of a large part of the Belarusian population migrating from rural areas to large cities. There was a popular conviction in this group that being of Belarusian descent, which as a rule implied rural origin, was somehow inferior. It has to be admitted at this point that many young Poles migrating from rural areas thought along similar lines. It is likely therefore that this could hamper social and professional advancement. Ambition to improve the material and social status resulted in a rejection of Belarusian and striving for receiving education in Polish.

It should be stressed at this point that the recent years have brought a gradual revival and restoration of regional identity among Belarusians. These positive changes are manifested by the return of Belarusian as a language taught in Białystok schools. In Podlasie's major urban centre, Belarusian was not taught as a school subject for more than ten years. Several years ago, also a kindergarten for the Belarusian minority was opened. Nonetheless, the overall tendency which can be observed in the system of schooling for the Belarusian minority is worrying because the number of such schools is falling. The liquidation of small schools and creating schools serving large rural areas is a serious problem. Those children who have learnt Belarusian in a small school may not want to do this in a larger school, where frequently most of pupils are Polish. Lowering the status of Belarusian as a school subject, which is treated as an additional subject in most schools, is also regarded as a serious problem by Belarusian activists.

### **4. REGIONAL EDUCATION IN THE FRONTIER AREAS**

The peculiar ethnic and religious mosaic of Podlasie certainly represents a challenge for education, including regional education, which seems to be less pronounced here than in other areas of Poland.

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<sup>3</sup> Data about the educational system concerning the Belarussian minority from GUS statistics, as at 30 September 2004.

Language is considered to be the crucial element in shaping regional identity, which both integrates and differentiates ethnic and religious groups. Language also plays an important role in the education of children and youth from ethnic minorities. In addition to communication within the group, language is a major vehicle for transmitting cultural heritage between the generations, and at the same time is a factor of identification and identity (Nikitorowicz, 1995). For this reason, school along with the family should play a significant role in the strengthening of regional ties and shaping cultural identity among the Belarusian youth living in the border area.

How does the school cope with this task? What does regional education look like in school with Belarusian as a language of instruction? These questions were addressed in the interviews and observations carried out among the teachers of a complex of schools teaching in Belarusian in Bielsk Podlaski. Over the same period, surveys were conducted among pupils on the perception of the area with which they had emotional ties.

In the surveyed school, a School Regional Education Curriculum is implemented, according to the recommendations of the Education Minister. It is mainly intended to familiarize teachers and pupils with the major topics about the 'region' that should be discussed as part of different subjects. In addition to the school curriculum, there are different topical programmes, such as the history interest group's activities: *In Our Fathers' Footsteps* and *My Small Homeland*. Unfortunately, there is no curriculum for regional education in geography, although there are topics in the regional education curriculum which should be discussed during geography lessons, e.g.: *Landscape of the Podlasie Lowland*, *Condition of the Natural Environment in the Direct Vicinity* or *Role of the region in united Europe* (lower secondary school level).

Among all the subjects during which regional content is discussed, Belarusian is particularly important. An analysis of class registers where topics related to regional education should be recorded in a special column, *Educational Paths and Their Implementation*, showed that Belarusian teachers conducted most of the classes about the region. The topics of these lessons are mainly related to history and regional culture, and their main aim is to familiarize pupils with folk traditions and customs. Typical topics of such lessons include: *Customs and Traditions Connected with Religious Festivals* (*Kaladnyje Abrady*, *Shrovetide*, etc.); *The Famous People from Our Region* (*In the Past and Nowadays*); *History of Bielsk Podlaski*; *Cultural and Religious Diversity of the Region*. Educational forms include meetings with historians, people of culture (writers, folk artists), trips to museums (*Small Homeland Museum*, *Municipal Museum in the Town Square*). Trips to martyrdom sites. In addition to that, daily workshops are organized (e.g. about harvesting) and numerous competitions about regional issues, practical activities, fun and games which are aimed to familiarize pupils with local customs, traditions, celebration, as well as folk music, etc.

These examples can be seen as proofs of a dominant role of issues related to folk culture (folklore, traditions of the rural population) and history of the region. Understandably, therefore, teachers of Belarusian and history are most active in the implementation of the regional path at school.

Regrettably, the analysed materials and documents made available by the school principal, that is school regional education curricula and class registers, failed to provide an answer to the question: Which area is regarded by teachers and pupils as their 'own'? In the school regional education curriculum, there are different terms pertaining to the region, and different categories of space, such as *direct vicinity*, *region*, *small homeland*, etc. Unfortunately, these terms are not described sufficiently clearly. As a result, it is not

clear with which are (fragment of space surrounding us) they should be identified with. This may lead to a situation in which every teacher can conduct lessons about the region in a different way and they can pertain to a different reality. On one occasion, the 'own' region may be tantamount to the place where the pupils live, on another – with the commune (gmina) or the voivodship, and yet on another – with the historic and cultural region (Podlasie). It could also turn out that in many cases the approach proposed by the teacher does not correspond to what the pupils' may feel. Pupils may identify with a totally different area than the one proposed by the teacher, textbooks or curricula.

This focuses our attention to an important problem that regional education has to face, which is related with an answer to the question: How pupils perceive 'their' region? And What area do they feel emotionally tied to? To obtain answers to these questions, a survey was conducted among the pupils of the above mentioned school with Belarusian as the language of instruction. 103 pupils aged 10 to 12 (years 4 to 6 of the primary school) and 97 pupils aged 13 to 15 (lower secondary school) took part in the survey. The surveyed pupils were supposed to draw, on a blank sheet of paper, the area they identify themselves with, that they feel close about, 'their neighbourhood', and answer about a dozen questions of the survey questionnaire.

Having analysed the drawings (mental maps) made by the pupils it was concluded that the area they identified themselves with occupied a very small area and was confined to home, housing estate, sometimes the school. The surveyed pupils, in the primary and lower secondary school, most frequently drew their family houses with its direct vicinity: courtyard, playground, housing estate. The pupils' direct neighbourhood was the area where they lived, stayed most time and spent their leisure.

Lower secondary school pupils (aged 13 – 15) were also asked which area they consider as 'their region'. The obtained answers proved extremely varied. Most of the pupils pointed to their direct vicinity, i.e. family house, courtyard, housing estate, etc. Some of the pupils had emotional ties with the town they lived in (Bielsk Podlaski) and with Podlasie – a historic and cultural region. Few of the pupils saw the administrative area (county, voivodship) as "their region". A large group did not provide any answer or gave a negative answer (None, I don't know), which can be interpreted as a lack of regional identity.

The above, preliminary survey results, which will be continued in other schools, indicate that the regional identity of pupils is still very weak. Young people declare the strongest ties with their home and family, while their identification with the local (regional) community is very low (which is corroborated by other research, e.g. by Nikitorowicz, 2000). Even though regional education has been a compulsory element of general education for as long as six years now, it remains a problem and a challenge for many teachers, and therefore requires broader studies which should be conducted in many regions of Poland.

## **5. REGIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITY CURRICULA**

The practical dimension of promoting the idea of regional education is the introduction of such courses as regional, European or multicultural education into

university curricula. More and more research establishments in different academic centres take up these issues. The Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology of Białystok University is implementing a programme in intercultural education, aimed mainly to emphasize the issue of Otherness (diversity). As part of intercultural education classes, and activities undertaken by the Student Intercultural Education Interest Group, meetings with representatives of various cultural groups are organized. School and nursery school teachers prepare regional education curricula. Also, the programme entitled "The Other and I" is implemented, with an important module under the name "My Family – I – My Town/Village – My Region". It is aimed to make pupils sensitive to otherness and uniqueness in biological, social and cultural aspects. Programme implementation involves the use of plays and games with cognitive or psychological elements. Through play, pupils learn how to communicate well with their peers who live next door but who profess a different religion or have different views. This also serves to strengthen the pupils' self-esteem. In addition to that, other projects are initiated which facilitate pupils to better know one another.

As mentioned above, the aim of regional education is to strengthen regional (local) identity of pupils and develop an interest in various problems and issues of their community and neighbourhood. For this very reason lessons about "their own region" should draw on pupils' personal feelings and experiences. Teachers and authors of curricula and textbooks in geography and other subjects should pay more attention to how pupils perceive "their region", an area where they live and grow, and what they identify it with. Such issues should therefore remain within the scope of research interest of representatives of many disciplines, including geographers.

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## **Edukacja regionalna na pograniczu Polski Wschodniej (zilustrowanie społeczeństwa Białoruskiego)**

### **Resume**

Edukacja regionalna, czyli zajęcia o „własnym regionie“, jest nierozzerwalnym elementem kształcenia geograficznego. Poznawanie tej kategorii przestrzeni odgrywa ważną rolę w procesie wychowania i kształtowania systemu wartości młodego człowieka oraz sprzyja umacnianiu więzi z jego najbliższym otoczeniem. W Polsce, w 1999 r. w wyniku reformy oświaty edukacja regionalna została oficjalnie włączona do powszechnego programu nauczania w postaci ścieżki międzyprzedmiotowej – „Edukacja regionalna – dziedzictwo kulturowe w regionie“<sup>4</sup>.

Spośród wielu celów stojących przed edukacją regionalną jest m.in. rozwijanie poczucia tożsamości regionalnej (lokalnej), przybliżanie bogactwa i różnorodności kulturowej własnego regionu oraz kształtowanie postawy tolerancji, otwartości i akceptacji innych kultur. Przy tak sformułowanych celach, zajęcia o własnym regionie stanowią bardzo ważny element kształcenia i wychowania młodzieży zamieszkującej tereny pogranicza. W Polsce przykładem takiego obszaru jest woj. podlaskie (Podlasie) – region w północno-wschodniej części kraju – zamieszkały przez przedstawicieli różnych narodów, grup etnicznych, religii i wyznań. Żyją tu obok siebie Polacy, Białorusini, Litwini, Ukraińcy, Romowie a także potomkowie Tatarów i Karaimów.

W procesie wielowiekowego współżycia zróżnicowanych kulturowo grup będących „u siebie“ wytworzyło się wiele wartości oraz powstało wiele stereotypów i uprzedzeń, wynikających z ciągłego stykania się i ścierania się tych grup. Taka sytuacja stanowi wyzwanie dla edukacji, w tym dla edukacji regionalnej, która jednak na tych terenach wydaje się słabiej zaznaczona niż w innych regionach Polski. Zadaniem szkoły powinno być rzetelne zapoznanie z wspólnym losem narodów zamieszkujących obszar pogranicza, oraz uświadomienie potrzeby zachowania odrębnego dziedzictwa kulturowego.

Z perspektywy edukacji regionalnej istotnym problemem jest również rozległość terytorialna pogranicza, które obejmuje nie tylko tereny północno-wschodniej Polski, ale też obszary przygraniczne Litwy, Białorusi i Ukrainy. W tej sytuacji pojawia się ważne pytanie, z którym obszarem utożsamiają się uczniowie z mniejszości narodowych i jaki zasięg ma dla nich „własny region“?

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<sup>4</sup> Warto wspomnieć, że ostatnio prowadzone są prace nad zmianą dotychczasowej podstawy programowej; nowy projekt przewiduje likwidację ścieżek międzyprzedmiotowych, elementy edukacji regionalnej ujęto w ramy przedmiotu Wiedza o społeczeństwie