

STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE STUDY OF GEOGRAPHY IN HIGH SCHOOL

ILEANA VASILESCU

"Vasiles Goldiş" West University, Arad, Romania, e-mail: ileanavasilescu@yahoo.com

BOGDAN VASILESCU

University of Stirling, Scotland, UK, e-mail: bluetorchqs@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

This research emerged from the idea that the education system in Romania would achieve efficiency and applicability if it acknowledged the needs of students, who are in fact the ones who benefit from the system. The research was based on the scientific implementation of the methodology of designing and administering questionnaires, which were devised bearing in mind the importance of their purpose and role as instruments of inquiry. The aim of this study is that of identifying and reporting the students' views on Geography as a subject, with a view to materializing its findings, particularly at this stage when the education system is redefining itself. In this context, after designing the questionnaire, we administered it to 120 12th grade students from three high schools in Baia Mare. The interpretation of the results enabled us to draw some conclusions which reflected a significant gap between students' expectations and what we considered to be in line with the requirements of a society based on knowledge, globalization, and what they were offered by the education system in terms of Geography.

Keywords: *empirical research, questionnaire, gap, education system*

INTRODUCTION

We have embarked on this research because we think that as far as the education system is concerned, changes have been expected for too long and that too many generations have reached maturity, even old age without seeing anything change in this field. In order to avoid rendering this situation irreversible and so as to act in good time, we are trying to emphasise that there is a gap between what the education system offers students and their expectations concerning the study of Geography. What is more, their views and expectations are reasonable, being very close to what the education system offers students in many countries in Europe. Given

this situation, we should not wonder why so many well-prepared students choose to study abroad. But, most of the time, these youngsters find it difficult to choose between being in their psycho-relational and emotional environment, in the country where they were born, and their professional training, which ultimately means acknowledging value.

The aim of this research is in no way that of identifying discordant examples in the development of the education system in Romania, which has been in need of innovation for decades as a result of a totalitarian political regime, which not only controlled it, but it also acted as a barrier to innovation through its authoritarian spirit. On the contrary, we wish to contribute to overhauling the system by drawing attention to the fact that before proceeding to drastic changes in education, it is advisable to analyse facts, bearing in mind that it is students who benefit directly from this system.

We have been motivated by the fact that, while teachers can express their views on the system and pass judgement on it, students are never asked to share their opinions on the content and outcomes of their own training. Unfortunately, most of the time, the set of optional courses proposed to students have a compulsory character because they are "required" by the course path of their high school; sometimes they are essential for maintaining teaching jobs or they are promoted at a national level.

Under these circumstances, we undertake the legitimate task of trying to understand and report students' perception about the role and importance of their education process.

This study aims to highlight students' expectations concerning the role of Geography in high school. Thus, implementing the law of education should be justified by Romania's position as a European country, by local, regional, national development, by the logical correlation of the education levels, namely high school – university, and, most of all, by the young's legitimate needs.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH

The main objective of our research was that of obtaining information about the way in which students perceived the teaching of Geography in connection with the other essential elements of the education system: textbooks, teaching resources, the curriculum, the Bacalaureate examination (as an outcome of their studies), and teachers.

The secondary objectives of the research were:

1. Assessing and highlighting students' interest in Geography;
2. Analysing students' perception of the main characteristics of Geography textbooks, the necessity of promoting the pragmatic character of Geography with a view to allotting more time to practical activities through the syllabus;
3. Assigning a role to the Geography teacher (through methods, techniques, teaching resources) in close connection with students' real needs;

4. Identifying students' expectations about Geography and the changes that students would require in connection with the present position of Geography in the education system.

The hypothesis of the research was the following: the position of Geography, the syllabi, the content of the Geography textbooks and teacher training were not in line with students' needs and especially with the requirements of the national and European social and economic environment.

METHOD

Location and period of research

Our research included the following high schools: "Mihai Eminescu" High School in Baia Mare, "Dragoş Vodă" High School in Sighetu Marmăţiei, "Anghel Saligny" High School in Baia Mare and it took place during the months of October and November 2010.

The information was obtained from questionnaires which enabled the extrapolation of results, with an acceptable margin of error, from a part of the questioned population to the whole population.

Participants

This research was conducted on 120 12th grade students from three high schools which differed in many respects: specialization, students' background, students' level of performance. In order to obtain objective results, we chose high schools in such a way as to be representative for the types of high schools in Romania (theoretical studies in humanities, theoretical studies in sciences, technology-oriented specialization). We also chose classes which had different specialization, due to the intrinsic relationship between course path, specialization, and graduation examination (Figure 1).

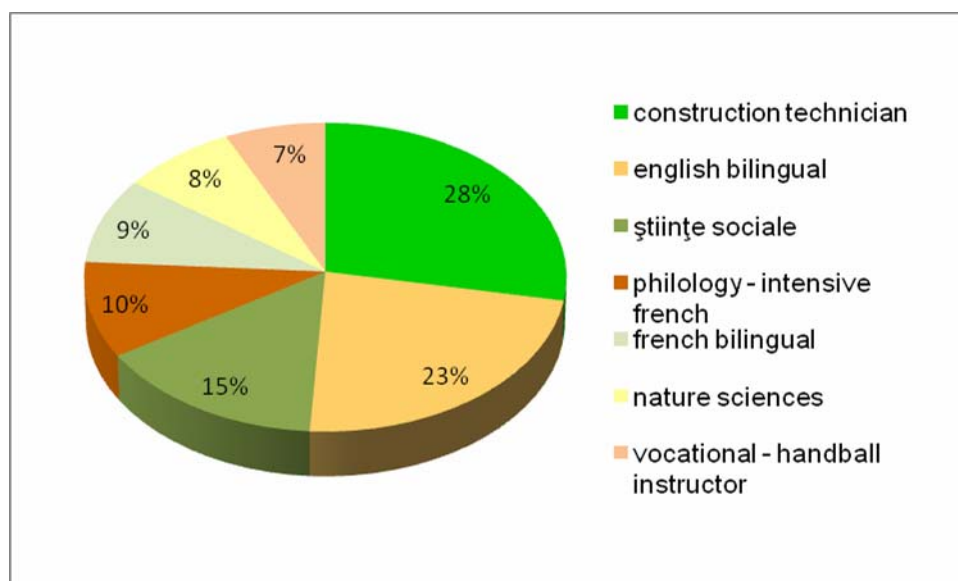


Fig. 1. Students' academic specialisation

The relatively balanced gender ratio was due to the large number of males from the technological specialisation compensating the large number of females from humanities (Figure 2).

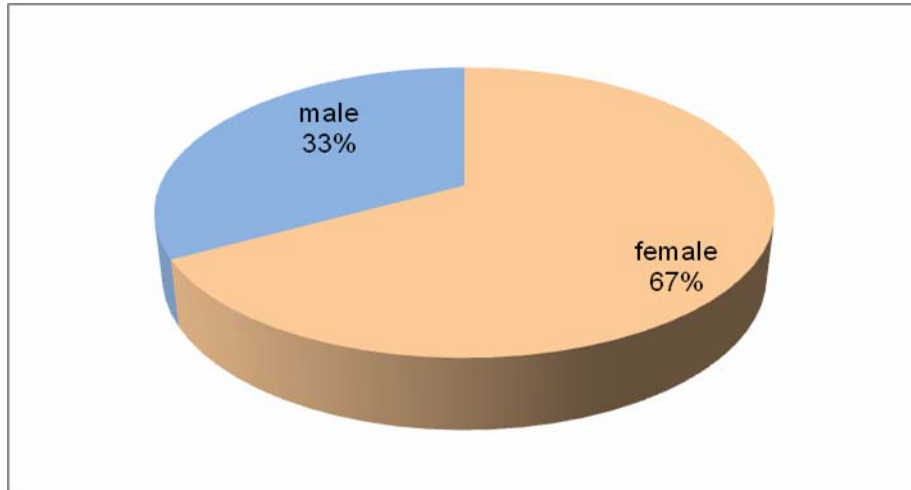


Fig. 2. Gender percentage

Considering that respondents were final year high school students studying Geography for the Bacalaureate exam, 56 were over 18 years old and 62 were 18 years old (Figure 3).

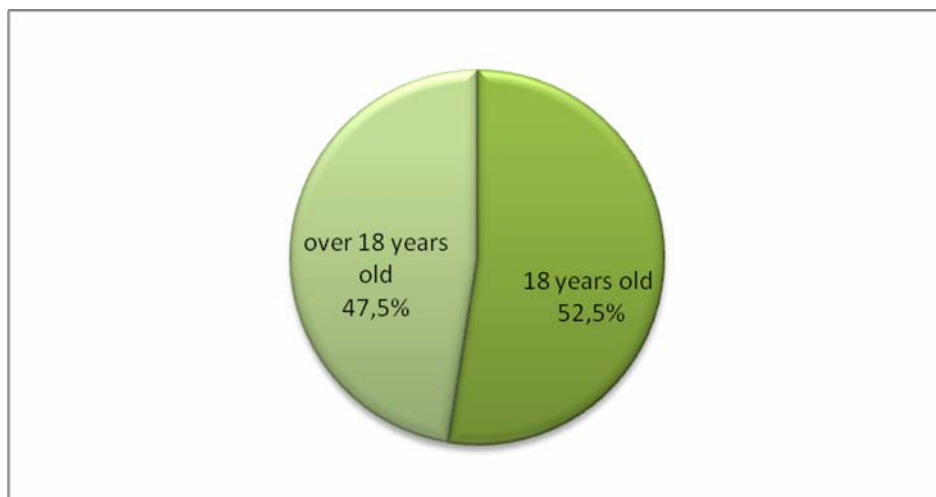


Fig. 3. Age percentage

Considering we started from the premise that students living with parents were more likely to have increased interest and performance (due to

parents supervising and controlling them), we attempted to have participants from a number of environments in order to further test this assumption and control for bias towards a single social status/environment. As seen in Figure 4, 24% of respondents did not live with parents.

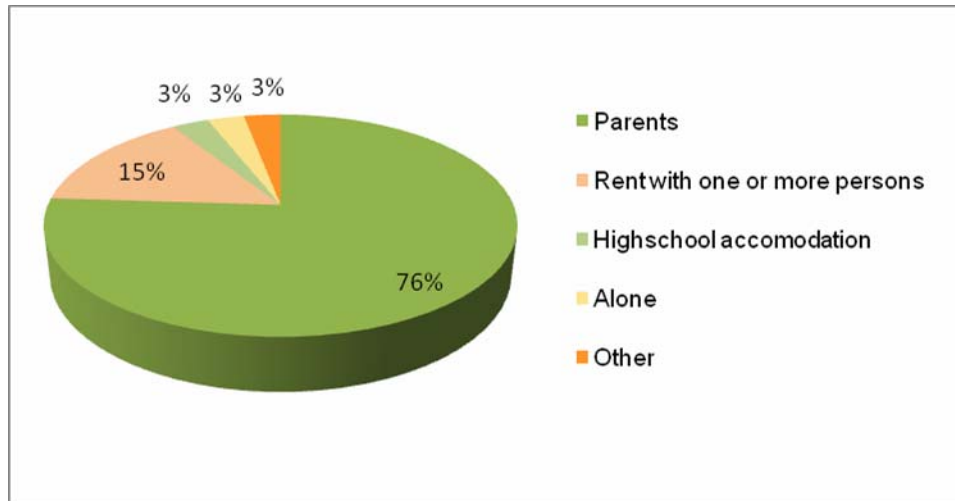


Fig. 4. Respondents' residence

Procedure

We collected data using a 23 items questionnaire. The items were devised in such way as to allow for a complex analysis (with focus on the qualitative part) and reach valid conclusions that could potentially be used to make changes or adjustments to the educational system.

The data from the questionnaires was then organized and analysed and graphics were created in order to understand what students thought the role and place of Geography was. To further understand the data, the results and discussion section was divided into three parts: opinions about students' perceptions; students' expectations and conclusions; final conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The high interest for Geography is reflected by the large percentage (69%) of students that gave it ratings between 8 and 10 (Figure 5).

Interest for Geography was especially present among students of humanities, the same ones that could choose Geography as one of the subjects in the Baccalaureate exam. Humanities classes also had the highest number of students that planned to study Geography (or a linked subject) in university.

The main objection posed by respondents was that History was a mandatory subject in the Baccalaureate exam (for humanities classes) and had a high number of hours even though students were free to choose between Geography and History for their midterm exam during the final year of high school.

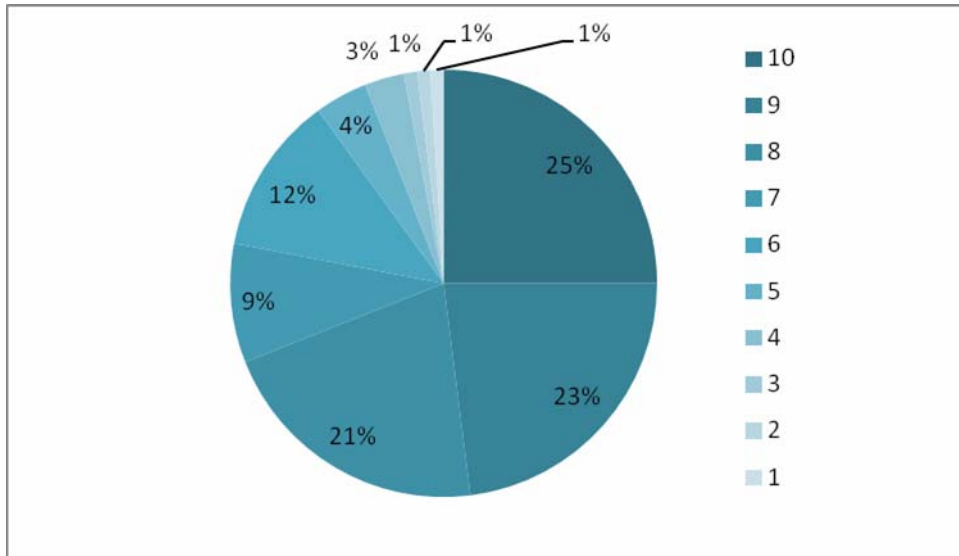


Fig. 5. Respondents' interest in Geography on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 was not important and 10 very important)

The present study identified a gap between students' interest for Geography as a subject of study (Figure 5) and their degree of satisfaction with the textbooks currently in use, with 51% of students rating their satisfaction between 1 and 4 (Figure 6). This would suggest that the textbooks provided should be changed/improved in order to satisfy students' needs (they appeared to be interested in studying this subject but very dissatisfied with the instruments provided by the Romanian education system). The main factors that maintained their interest were the Geography teacher and didactic methods while the textbooks and education system were at the other end of the scale (Figure 7).

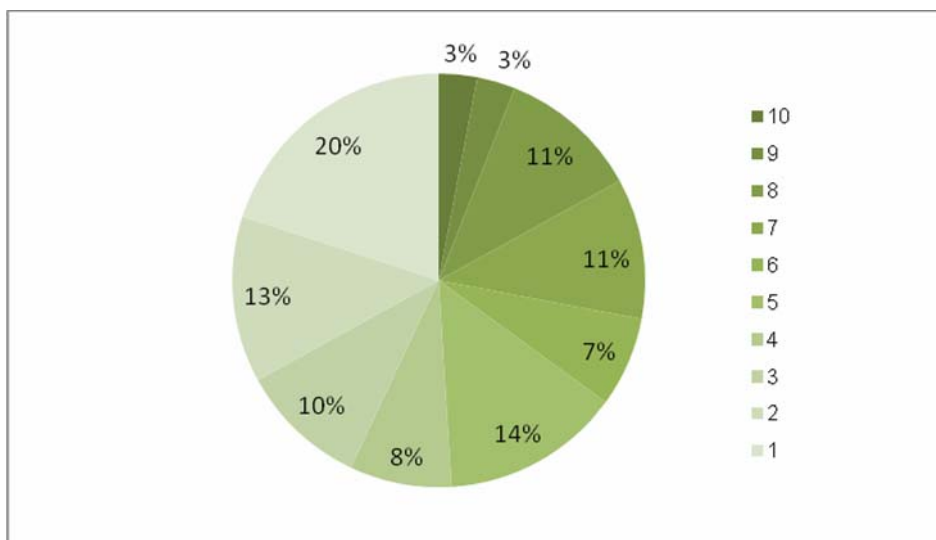


Fig. 6. Satisfaction with textbooks on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 was very low and 10 very high)

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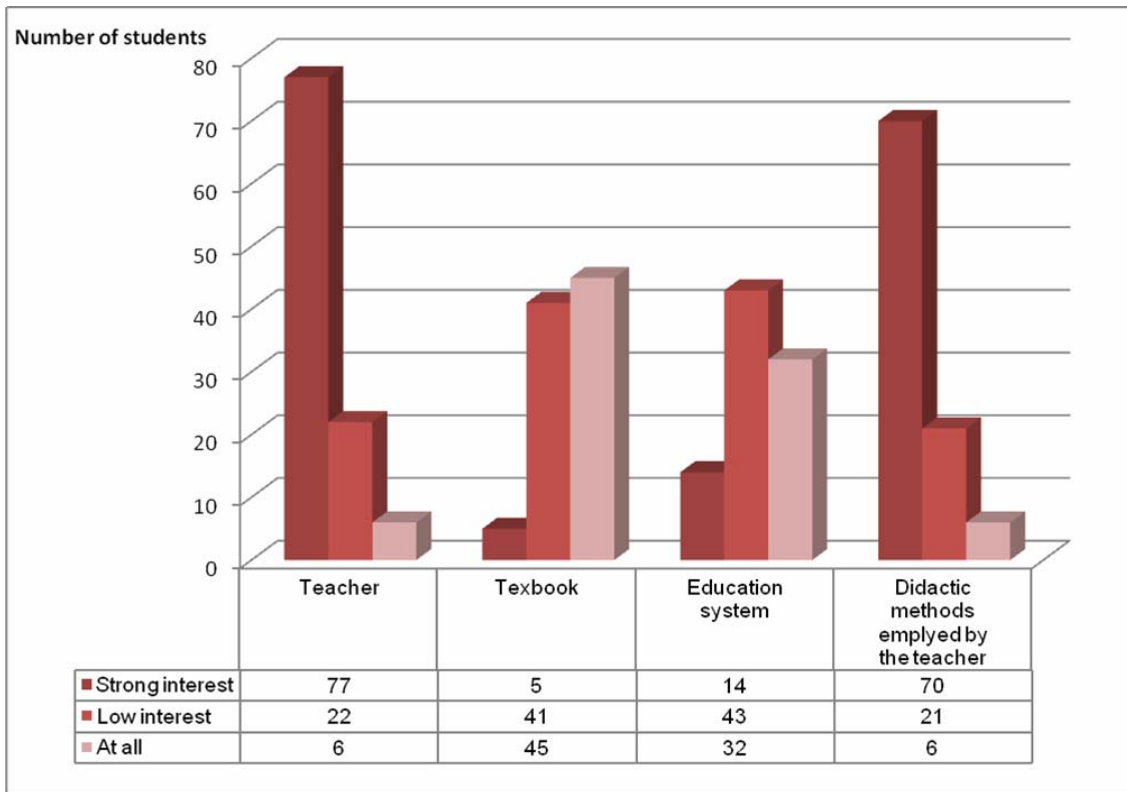


Fig. 7. Main elements that offered satisfaction to students

The high theoretical content, lack of practical applications and discordance between textbook content and Baccalaureate requirements were the main objections to current textbooks.

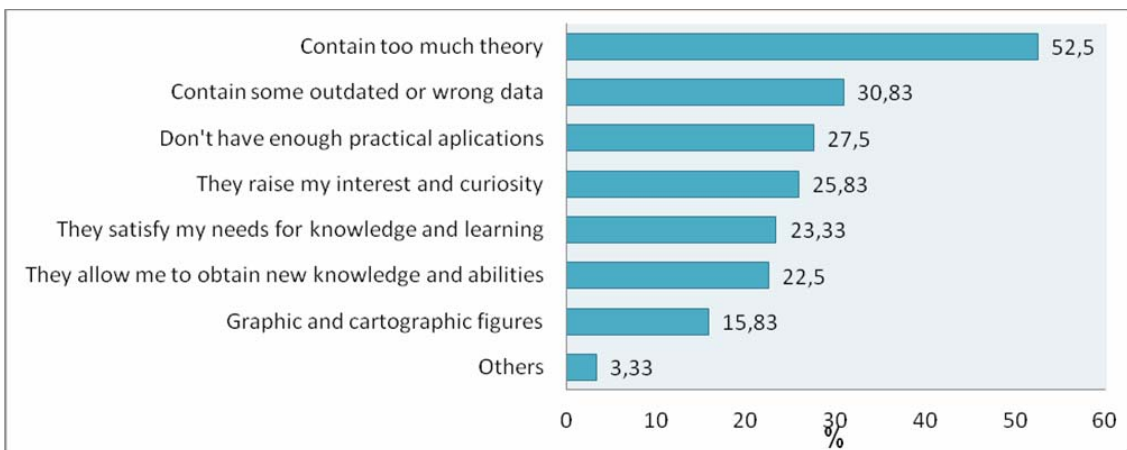


Fig. 8. Students' opinions about Geography textbooks

To analyse the status of Geography, several factors were considered: its place in the school curricula, speculations about studying Geography in the future only until the 10th grade, the fact that some classes have just one

hour per week (regardless of the fact that it is one of the Bacculaureate subjects and an important discipline for general culture) (Figure 9).

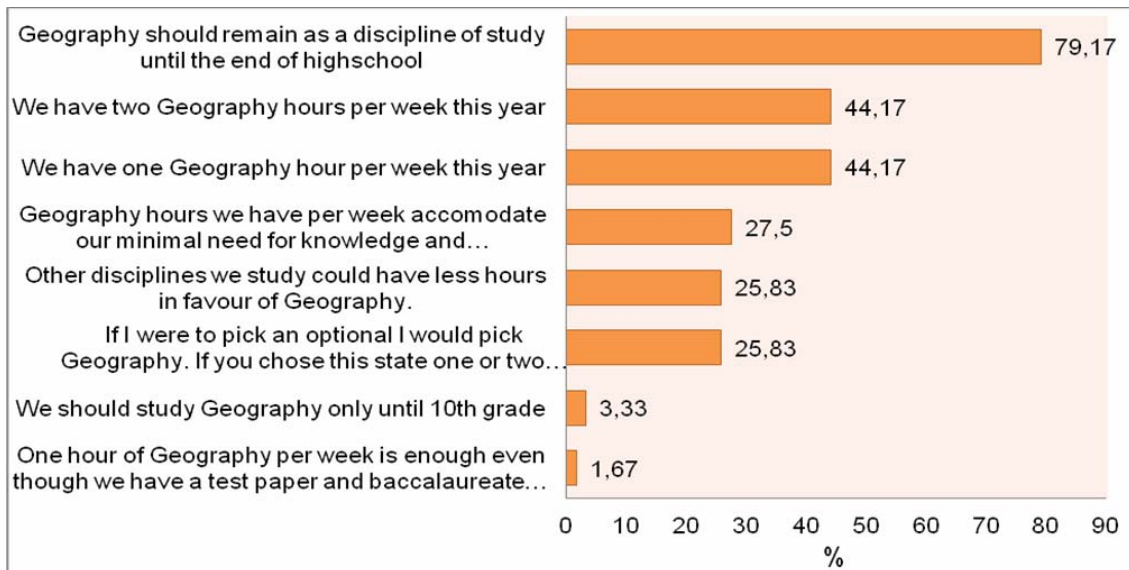


Fig. 9. Appreciation of the status of Geography

The main objection against the current education program is the lack of practical applications, be it field work or as part of institutions that would facilitate understanding of theoretical content (meteorological station, hydrological station, planetarium, Agency for the Protection of the Environment, etc). There is also a general displeas with the fact that starting with 2010 Geography is no longer among the Bacculaureate exam choices for sciences classes.

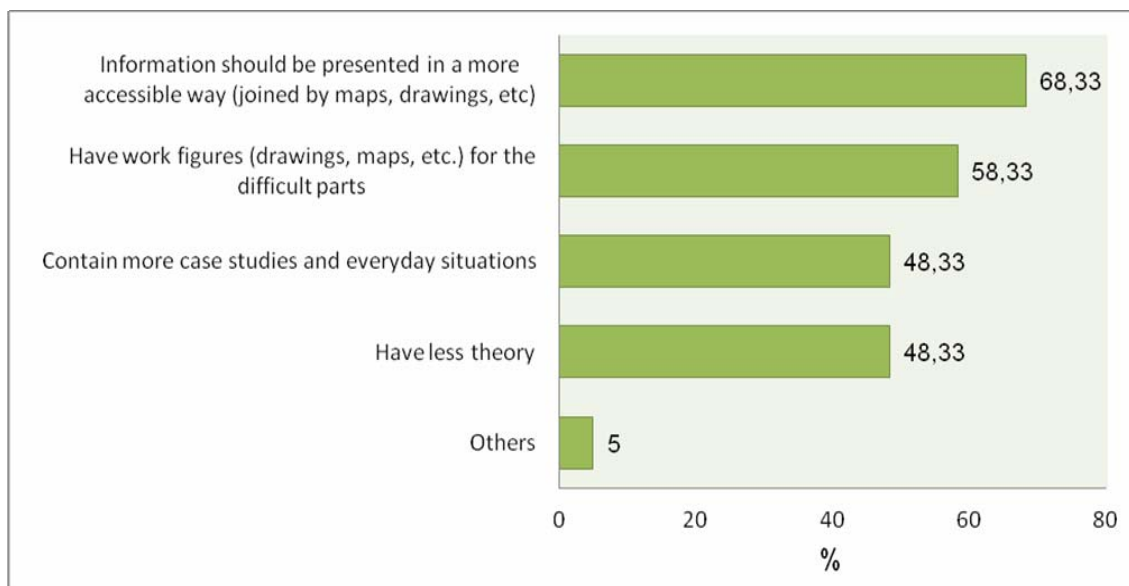


Fig. 10. Participants' opinions about what the textbook should be like

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Almost 50% of the students questioned have one Geography hour per week (Figure 9). Under these circumstances, it seems unlikely that there is enough time to devise a solid teaching-learning program that would ensure students are capable of performance, ready for the Bacalaureate exam and indeed for life after high school (university and general culture).

It also appears that students' opinions are ignored or unheard as it became clear from the results that they were indeed aware of the weaknesses of the system and textbooks (Figure 10). The best argument for that is perhaps the 68% that believed that "Information should be presented in a more accessible way (joined by maps, drawings, etc.)".

Geography is a complex discipline that can interact with other subjects and even improve students' competence in the six key competences. This interaction can be seen in Figure 11.

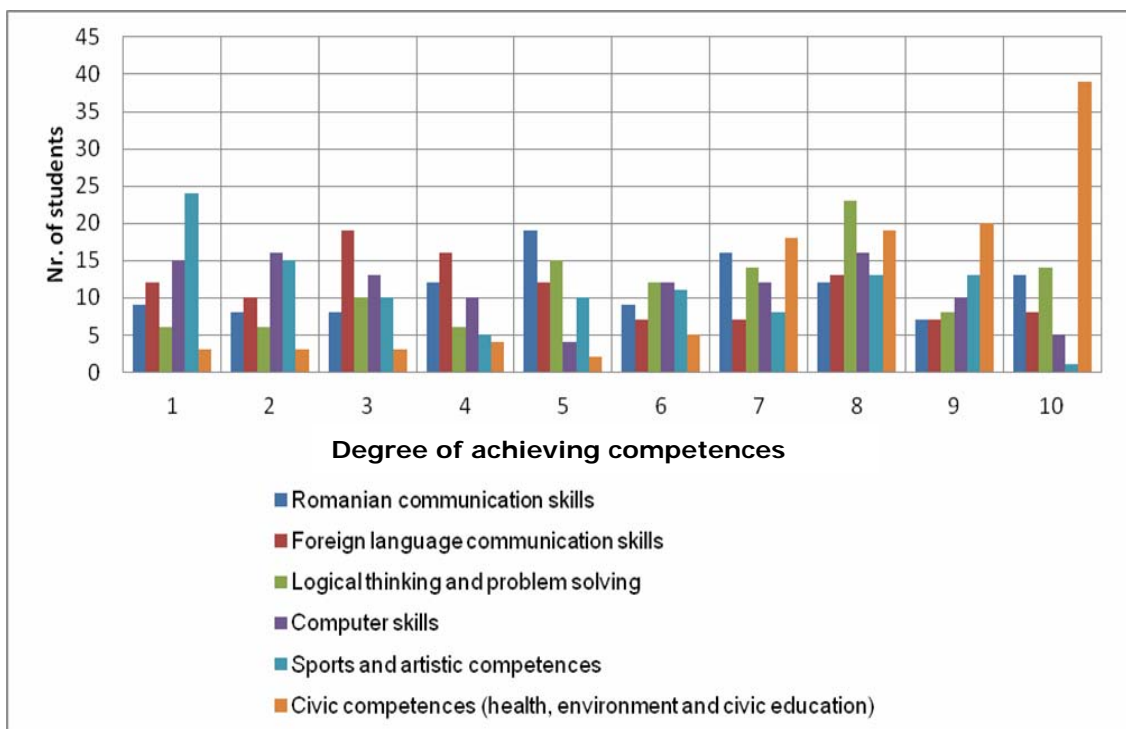


Fig. 11. Interaction of Geography with the six key competences on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 is very low and 10 is very high)

Field work is one of the highly valued activities; however it is not included in the current learning program (Figure 12).

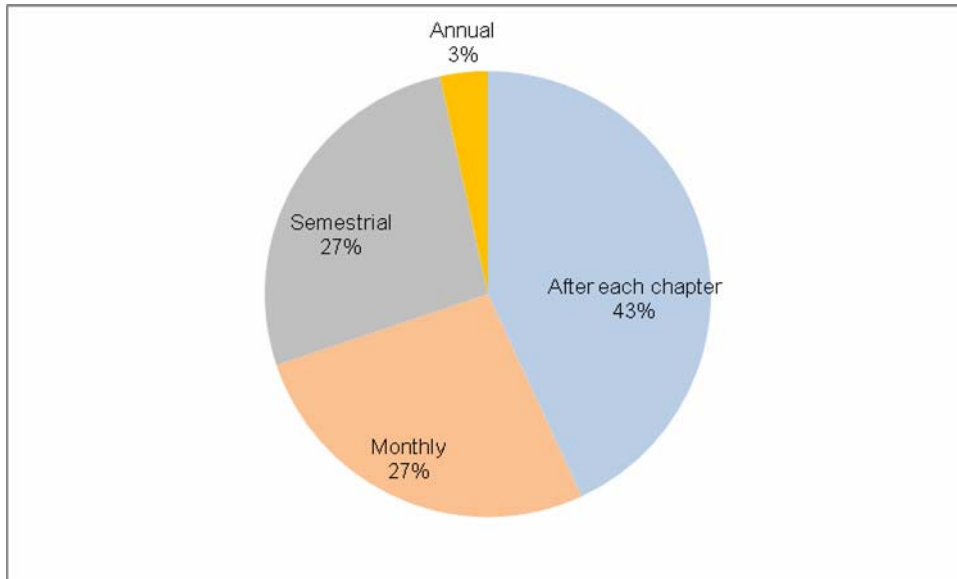


Fig. 12. Students' opinion about the necessary frequency of field work

The shortcomings of textbooks and learning programs are often compensated by the materials and didactic methods employed by teachers which is why, for example, many students refuse to purchase textbooks. Teachers' participation in forming courses brings benefits to the school system and society. Out of the efficient teaching-learning methods, students appreciate conversation, debate, projects and problem solving the most (Figure 13).

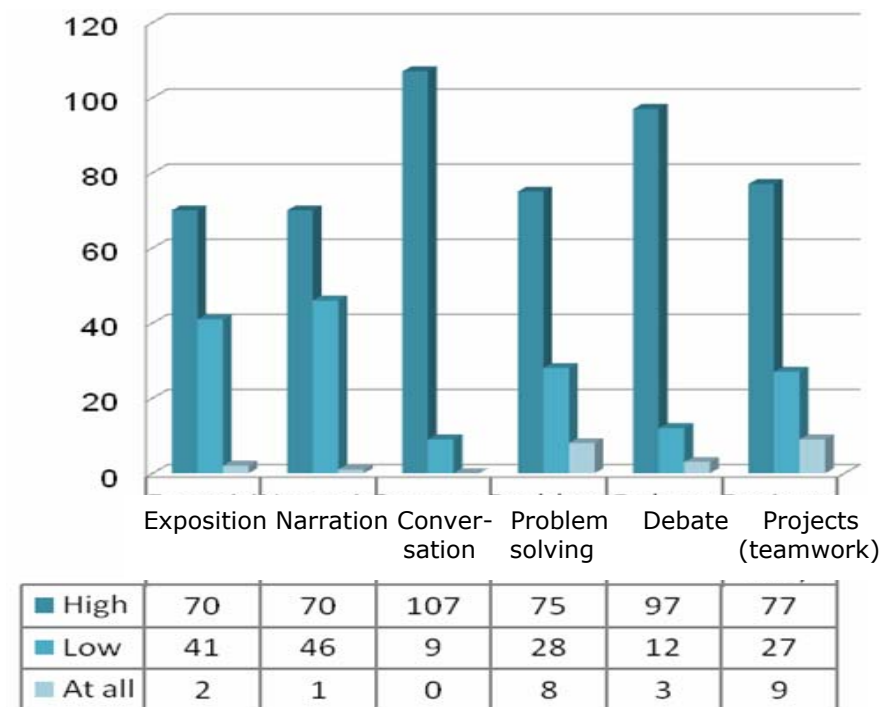


Fig. 13. Perceived efficiency of teaching-learning methods

As to students' expectations (question 22 in the questionnaire: *what are your expectations regarding Geography in school*, in reference to the present situation of Geography in school, here are the most common opinions: better structured textbooks, focused on precise and interesting things; reducing the theoretical content and focusing on building up general knowledge, field work respectively; correlation of textbook content with the requirements of the Baccalaureate curriculum; fair attitude towards Geography as a school subject in the educational system; interactive classes (use of the AEL system, video projector, wiki sites, etc.) and debates; more diverse teaching means; visual aids; outdoor classes: at a museum, library, on tourism sites, etc.; balancing the number of classes between Geography and other subjects, according to students' requirements and wishes, not in order to fill the position of certain teachers; preserving Geography as a Baccalaureate subject, so that students can choose between Geography and History; ensuring an appropriate number of hours per week in order to meet the requirements of Geography as a Baccalaureate subject; benefiting from interesting and enjoyable worksheets; students' going on field trips in order to know the environment they live in; organizing and participating in challenging and, perhaps, interactive Geography contests; drafting research projects and diaries, reports subsequent to certain field trips or field work; the need for an improvement of the educational system, because, as they say, "everything is confusing and Geography loses ground"; textbooks are full of superfluous details and topics; therefore, "there is a need to implement activities that will be helpful later on in life".

Consequently, to students' answers to the question *Were you to change certain issues related to the status Geography enjoys nowadays in school, what would you change? Express personal opinions on the matter*, there were notable differences between what students objectively perceived as useful and interesting and what Geography actually offers them as a school subject. Thus, the following answers were the most common: I would make Geography an interactive subject in order to organize field trips, which would contribute to a better understanding of the environment we live in; I would foster team-work, ensuring students' ability to relate to each other, thus enabling them to know each other better; I would suggest teaching Geography by presenting curiosities and analyzing various studies, carried out by groups of students; I would organize field trips within the country at the end of each textbook chapter and international field trips at the end of each semester, requesting students to draft reports upon the completion of each stage; I would create exercise books for students or interactive ConQUIZtador-type games; I would request that textbooks be less dense and should also include maps and practice sections; I would design more appealing textbooks, which would consider the presentation and a cause-effect analysis of the current issues in the area of Geography; I would allow teachers to make use of interactive teaching, using video projectors; I would ensure that theory is supported by practice; for instance, it would be interesting to have classes in a museum or in tourism areas, including contests; I would request that a higher number of hours per week be allotted to Geography in school curriculum, because we need to be able to design group-projects, enjoy field trips and open-air classes

besides the mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge; I do believe Geography should be a source of drawing pleasure from and opening doors to knowledge; that is why I think such measures are necessary; We need classes centred around practical methods and debates, as Geography plays a major role in our development as individuals; I would not change anything, because I am content with the way classes are currently being held (it reflects, as I have already mentioned, the idea that student satisfaction level is largely dependent upon teachers' input); I would change the teaching method and I would motivate teachers and students alike; I would devote more attention to Geography from all points of view.

CONCLUSION

The interpretation and analysis of the results push us to reconfigure the status Geography has earned through redefining its object of study: practical and applicable science that can provide clear and satisfying solutions to a number of issues. Thus, Geography should not be a purely theoretical subject, but offer the possibility to interact directly with the environment in order to understand it. The curriculum, teaching plans, text books and especially teachers should provide the necessary means in order to achieve that.

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