

TEACHERS' OPINIONS ON THE GEOGRAPHY SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted due to the fact that in 2016, in Romania, the secondary school curriculum began to change. Two questionnaires were applied to teachers who taught or still teach Geography in secondary schools, in order to come up with a fundamental and operational good quality curricular document for Geography. This paper analyses teachers' opinions on the current Geography curriculum and on its improvement. The authors of this study believe that its results should be taken into account when elaborating a new good quality Geography curriculum.

Keywords: *pre-university education, general competences, specific competences, learning activities, curriculum*

INTRODUCTION

The last decades, in Romania, curricula have changed significantly. The O.M. [Ministry Order] 5097/9th of September 2009 has approved curricula for secondary school (gymnasium) (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009) and has introduced competences (general and

specific ones) as educational final goals, making them part of the curricula structure (Mândruț and Ardelean, 2015, pp. 19-20).

Between 2010 and 2013, several studies about the national curriculum were conducted with POSDRU [Human Resources Development Operational Sectorial Programme] project funding, coordinated by the CNEE [National Assessment and Examination Centre], who was also the beneficiary. One of these studies was meant to evaluate the curricula issued in 2009 and the Geography alternative textbooks (Căpiță, 2012, pp. 279-299), having O. Mândruț among the authors of the assessment reports on Geography (Căpiță, 2012, p. 2).

In 2014, the MEN [Ministry of National Education] approved through the Order no. 3593/2014 the *Methodology for developing and approving national school curriculum framework plans and curricula* (MEN [Ministry of National Education], 2014). On the 5th of April 2016, the MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research] launched an Appeal to select and organise teachers in study groups in order to develop the curriculum for compulsory secondary school disciplines. Every such group meant 15 specialised pre-university teachers with at least a second didactic degree diploma and also specialised university teachers for each discipline (MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research], 2016a, p. 1).

Selection of working group members was based on two criteria: a) the candidate's professional portfolio with the Curriculum Vitae and all the relevant documents for the selection criteria/sub-criteria; b) an innovative curriculum project draft for a compulsory course of the candidate's discipline, one school year long (MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research], 2016a, pp. 1-2). All of the documents were uploaded by the candidates on MONMedu platform (<https://mon.edu.ro>).

According to this Appeal, the candidates entered the contest between the 6th of April and the 4th of May 2016, their professional portfolios and innovative curricula projects were evaluated between the 5th and the 15th of May 2016 and the final results were published on the 20th of May 2016 (MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research], 2016a, p. 3).

On 10th of June 2016, the MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research] published on its website the members of the working groups for developing secondary school curricula (MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research], 2016b). The selected teachers' and professors' mission was to plan and elaborate secondary school curricula.

The Geography working group had 15 members: the coordinator – the MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research] general Geography inspector, a scientific coordinator from the I.Ș.E [Institute of Education Sciences], a member from the CNEE [National Assessment and Examination Centre], a university professor (the first author of this paper); 11 other members, secondary school/pre-university teachers (MENCȘ [Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research], 2016b).

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The members of the group worked face-to-face in Bucharest, during the 14th and the 17th of September 2016, and in Buzău, during the 9th and the 12th of November 2016. All the way from forming the group to finishing the curriculum, the group members have also worked at home, communicating via e-mail or phone.

The I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences], who was responsible for elaborating the curricula, offered to the working groups several "benchmarks for designing and updating the national curriculum" (I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences], 2016). This document refers to the main ideal of our education system, its final goals (the competences achieved in secondary school, the profile of graduate training), principles of development and structure of the national curriculum, implementation conditions (I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences], 2016). According to this document, the structure of preparatory, the 1st to the 12th/13th grades curricula should include: the disclosure note, general competences, specific competences, learning activities, learning content, methodological suggestions (I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences], 2016, pp. 28-29).

For the working groups to develop a useful Geography curriculum, we wanted to research the Romanian Geography teachers' opinion on the matter, those who have taught or are still teaching Geography in secondary schools and are working with this fundamental, operational curricular document.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Research methods. We used the enquiry method to collect data. We developed two questionnaires in Google Drive docs in order to collect information. The first one had 18 items and was sent in October 2016, via e-mail, and some discussion groups with geographers on Facebook. The second questionnaire had five items and was completed in November 2016 in order to further deeply investigate the competences and the methodological suggestions. The results of the two questionnaires were statistically processed in Microsoft Office Excel and were put into various charts of the same application.

Participants. The first questionnaire was completed anonymously and voluntarily by 163 Geography teachers. By home residence, 74 of them (45%) come from urban areas and 89 of them (55%) from rural ones. By the years of experience in the educational system, 7% of them had under 5 years, 20.3% had from 5 to 10 years, 43.7% had from 11 to 20 years, and 29.1% had over 20 years.

To the second questionnaire, 50 teachers answered voluntarily and anonymously. 51% of them were from urban areas and 49% of them from

rural ones. By the years of experience in the educational system, 4.1% had under 5 years, 16.3% had between 5 and 10 years, 57.1% had between 11 and 20 years, and 22.4% had over 20 years.

The research material is based on the teachers' answers to the two questionnaires.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1) *Use of the school curriculum.* In order to investigate the opinions on the Geography curriculum, we asked teachers if they had used the curriculum when elaborating their *Learning Unit Planning*. Almost all of them (95%) claimed they had used it.

2) *Formulating general competences.* We investigated two of the matters related to the formulation of the general competences in the current Geography curriculum: the clarity of the competence phrasing and the way these competences were adjusted for the educational final goals of Geography.

Regarding the phrasing clarity, 94.3% of the teachers agreed that the general competences were clearly formulated (Figure 1). Regarding whether the general competences were adequately stating what students should study in secondary school Geography, 87.4% of the teachers agreed these competences were appropriate.

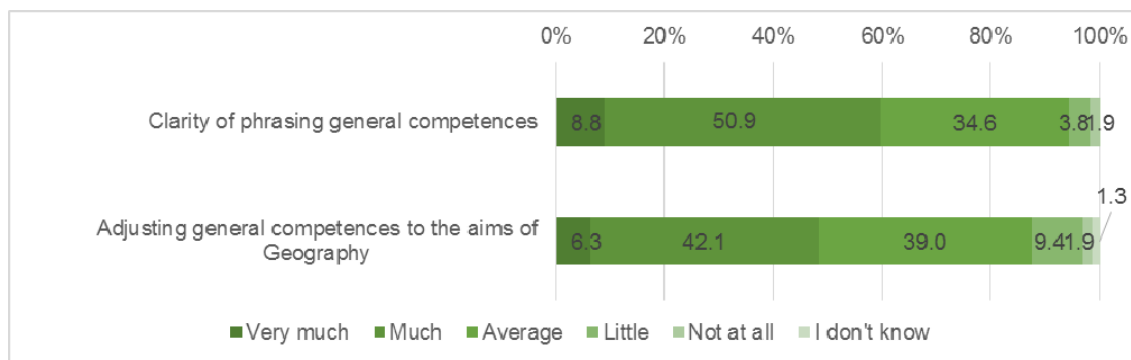


Fig. 1. Teachers' opinions about the clarity of phrasing general competences in the present Geography curriculum (2009) and their adjustment to the aims of this discipline

Because we were surprised by the fact that almost all the questioned Geography teachers considered the general competences from the current *Secondary School Geography Curriculum* (2009) to be clearly phrased and appropriate, in the second questionnaire we asked them to ponder on how adequate was each one of these competences related to what students

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should study in secondary school Geography, the importance of Geography, and their assessment. They gave a score from 1 to 5 to each competence. In Table 1, we presented the ranking of their scores. The maximum average score possible was 5.

The fact that these average scores range between 3.87 and 2.93 shows that teachers do not think these competences have a maximum adequacy degree to the study of Geography in secondary schools, to its importance and to the evaluation of competences, so they need to be revised and reconsidered, which was concluded and recommended also by other several studies in the Didactics of Geography (Dulamă, 2007; Dulamă and Ilovan, 2010, 2013).

Table 1. The degree of adjusting general competences to the objectives of studying Geography during the secondary grades, to the importance of Geography and to their assessment

General competences	Average score
Relating the geographical reality to cartographic and graphic material	3.87
Using correctly proper names and terms in foreign languages	3.63
Using specialty language in presenting and explaining the geographical reality	3.51
Accessing and using geographical contents by means of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT)	3.40
Transferring elements from Mathematics, Science and Technology to studying the Earth	3.32
Identifying and explaining the social, civic, and cultural dimension of the geographical space features	3.16
Elaborating certain models and solutions for organising the geographical space from the perspective of sustainable development	2.93

Regarding the general competences in the secondary school Geography curriculum project, we asked teachers to choose from two sets of such competences (Table 2). The general competences in the first column (Group A) were designed in the first development stage of the curriculum project by the working group members, and the competences in the second column (Group B) by the first author of this paper, a university professor of the Didactics of Geography, also member of the working group. Similar general competences as those in Group B were formulated in other several papers (Dulamă *et al.*, 2009; Dulamă, 2010, p. 33; Dulamă, 2011, p. 73; Dulamă, 2013, p. 54).

Table 2. General competences phrased for the curriculum project (the first draft)

General competences phrased by the working group (Group A)	General competences phrased by the didactician (Group B)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presenting the geographical reality using the specialty language 2. Relating the spatial and temporal geographical reality to cartographic and graphic materials 3. Using elements from Mathematics, Science and Technology in studying the geographical reality 4. Using basic elements from ICT/GIS to learn about the surrounding objective reality 5. Explaining certain social, cultural, and civic features of the geographical reality 6. Exercising/Developing certain skills and work techniques for lifelong learning 7. Using in everyday life the learnt geographical knowledge 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exploring the geographical reality/ <i>the geographical cover</i> 2. Collecting geographical information from diverse sources 3. Analysing geographical information from documents 4. Processing and representing geographical information 5. Solving geographical problems 6. Presenting the geographical reality using the specialty language

Figure 2 shows that 65% of the teachers chose the competences formulated by the working group members.

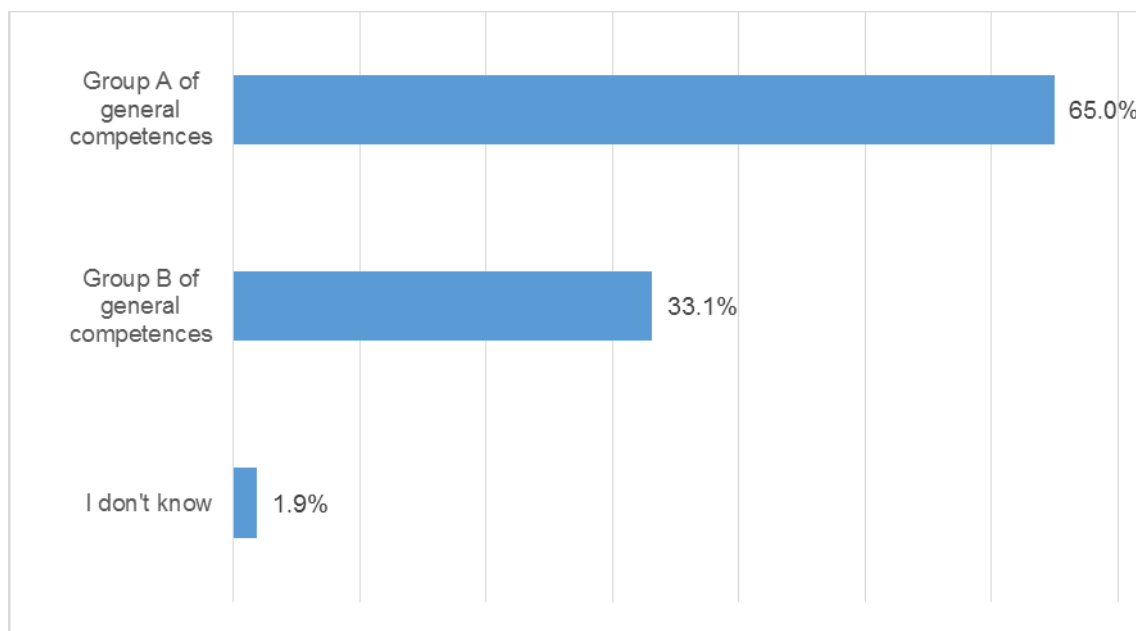


Fig. 2. Geography teachers' options about phrasing general competences

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We were surprised by the fact that Geography teachers chose the first set of competences, so we rephrased them in the second questionnaire as answers to the following question: *What do you think students should learn in secondary school Geography, taking into account the study field of Geography, its specific methodology, and importance?* We asked them to give scores from 1 to 5 to each answer.

In Table 3, we marked the correspondence between these goals, the general competences in Table 2 and the average scores obtained. Although the educational goals associated to the competences in Group A obtained a higher average mark, we noticed that three of the educational goals associated with the competences in Group B ranked 2nd to 4th places in the final hierarchy.

Table 3. What students should learn at Geography during the secondary grades

Aims	Package		Average score
	A	B	
How to apply in day to day life the learnt geographical knowledge	A7		4.64
How to study what they see around them in order to understand and manage correctly the world they live in		B1	4.53
How to take geographical information from diverse sources (photos, maps, charts, profiles, films, texts, etc.)		B2	4.50
How to analyse geographical information from diverse documents (photos, maps, charts, profiles, films, texts, tables with data, etc.)		B3	4.50
How to relate the spatial and temporal geographical reality to cartographic and graphic materials	A2		4.32
How to exercise/develop certain skills and working techniques for lifelong learning	A6		4.30
How to explain certain social, cultural, and civic features of the geographical reality	A5		4.22
How to use the basic elements of ICT/GIS in order to know the surrounding objective reality	A4		4.22
How to process and represent geographical information in diverse forms (maps, charts, profiles, films, tables, etc.)		B4	4.12
How to apply certain elements from Mathematics, Sciences, and Technology in studying the geographical reality	A3		4.12

How to present geographical information using the specialty language	A1	B6	4.04
How to solve geographical problems		B5	4.02
Average score	4.44	4.28	

3. Phrasing specific competences. On phrasing the specific competences of the current Geography curriculum, teachers answered questions about the clarity of the text and the relevance towards the secondary school Geography final educational goals, just like in the case of the general competences. 91.2% of the teachers agreed that the specific competences were clearly phrased (Figure 3). 95.6% of the teachers claimed that these specific competences are adequate to what students should study in secondary school Geography (Figure 3).

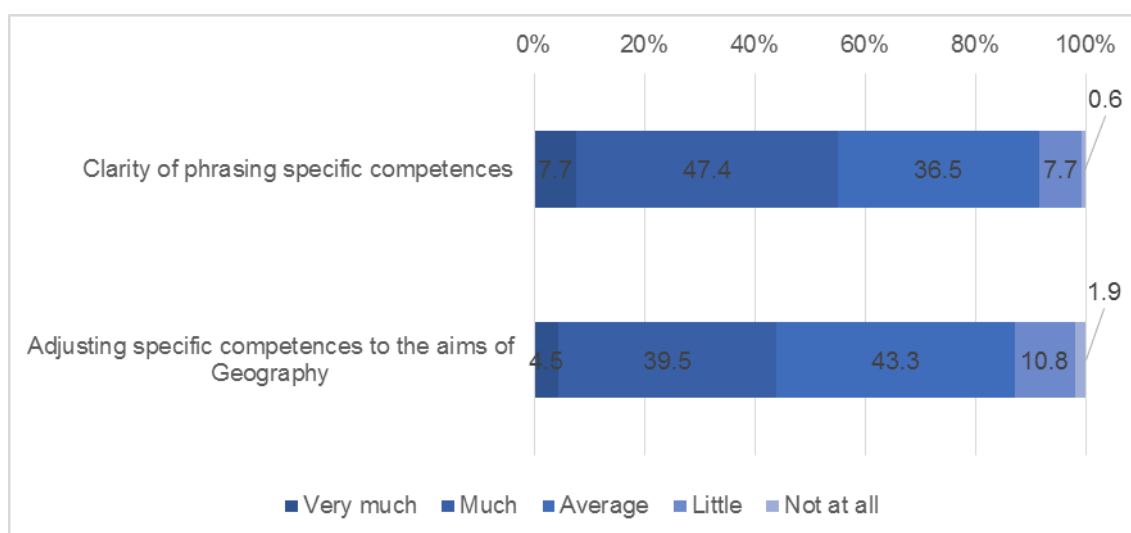


Fig. 3. Geography teachers' opinions about the clarity of phrasing specific competences in the present Geography curriculum (2009) and their adjustment to the aims of this discipline

Due to the fact that most of the teachers considered the general and specific competences in the Geography Curriculum (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009) were properly phrased, we wanted to know what teachers thought about these phrasings after the changes brought by the National Education Law (2011) regarding the final aims of the pre-university education system.

In the second questionnaire, 52% of the teachers who answered claimed that every specific and general competence in the current Geography curriculum (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009) was clearly phrased according to the competence

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definition in the National Education Law (2011). However, according to this document, competences are "multifunctional and transferable sets of knowledge, skills, and abilities" (LEN [National Education Law], 2011, p. 2), so the general and specific competences in the current secondary school Geography curriculum do not match this definition.

The Didactics of Geography studies conducted so far tend to consider competences as "results – complex knowledge already achieved" (Dulamă, 2013, p. 57) and that they can be assessed (Dulamă, 2010, 2012, 2013), so we questioned the teachers about this issue. 42% of the teachers that answered the second questionnaire claimed that, when analysing each general and specific competence in the current Geography curriculum, they did not express results that could be objectively assessed at the end of the secondary school, which is also our opinion.

Based on these statements, we asked whether they thought that the general and specific competences in question actually indicated a purpose or an objective. 66% of the teachers answered yes to that, of which we also approve.

At the first question, teachers claimed taking into account the curriculum stipulations in their activity. To find out the extent to which they actually did this, we asked them to give scores from 1 to 5 to several activities that required them to consider the competences in the curriculum. In Table 4, we see that teachers have taken into account the general and specific competences in the curriculum with an average score ranging from 3.52 to 3.87, the maximum average score being 5.

Table 4. The degree of relating certain didactic activities to the general and specific competences of Geography

Activities	Average score
Planning learning units	3.87
Planning lessons	3.87
Final assessment	3.61
Geography classes	3.58
Assessment during each class	3.52

The I.Ş.E. [Institute of Education Sciences] conducted a study to analyse the 6th grade curriculum which recommended "the description of specific competences on at least three levels of accomplishment, correspondent to concrete educational and everyday situations in every classroom (a proposal which was formulated after analysing the 5th grade curriculum)" (Căpiţă, 2012, p. 284). The I.Ş.E [Institute of Education Sciences] requested the

working groups to take this into consideration when elaborating the current secondary school curricula.

We can easily see, in Figure 4, that more than half (52.9%) of the respondent teachers think that, in order to properly support students in forming and developing specific competences for Geography, a certain competence (numbered with the same code) should be differently phrased from one grade to another, but then the specific competences would be in great number, and thus contrary to the teachers' wish to have fewer competences (Figure 5). Some researchers claim that there are several levels of development in a competence, without making a difference in their phrasing or describing them (Dulamă, 2010a, 2011, 2012a, 2013), because the differences are hard to notice, both in theory and in everyday practice.

Other researchers deny that such competence development levels even exist (Flueraș, 2014).

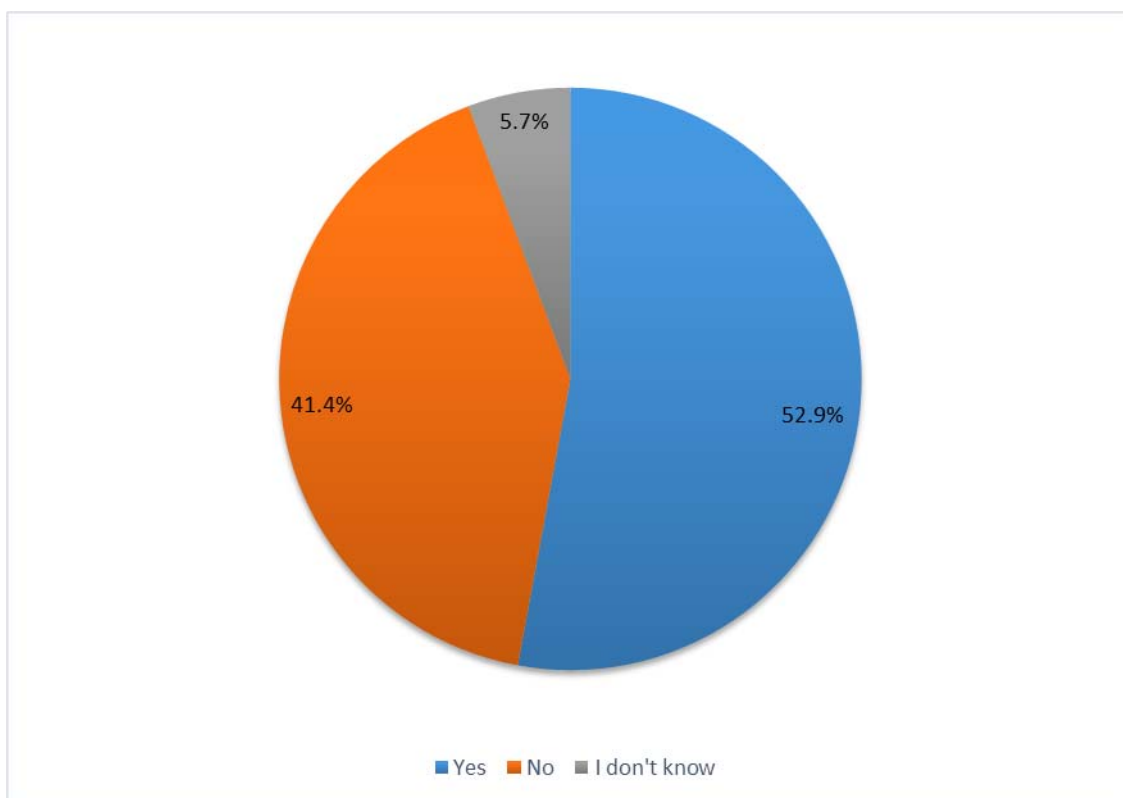


Fig. 4. Geography teachers' opinions about phrasing differently from one class to another the same specific competence (having the same code)

4) *Number of specific competences.* Mândruț and Dan claim that the number of general competences and the specific competences associated with them for one particular level of the education system has not yet been fully investigated (2015, p. 80).

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In the current secondary school Geography curriculum (for the 5th to the 8th grade) (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009), there are 28 specific competences for the 5th grade, 30 for the 6th, 31 for the 7th and 34 for the 8th grade (Căpiță, 2012, p. 281). According to a study conducted by I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences] about this curriculum (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009) "the number of specific competences for each grade is rational" (Căpiță, 2012, p. 281). Nonetheless, we think there are far too many competences, which makes it difficult for teachers to plan and organise their activity accordingly, leading to an incapacity of forming and developing their students' competences.

60.1% of the respondents think the highest number of specific competences for the secondary school Geography should be of 10 to 15, which is also our opinion, and a smaller part of the teachers think there should be a larger number of competences.

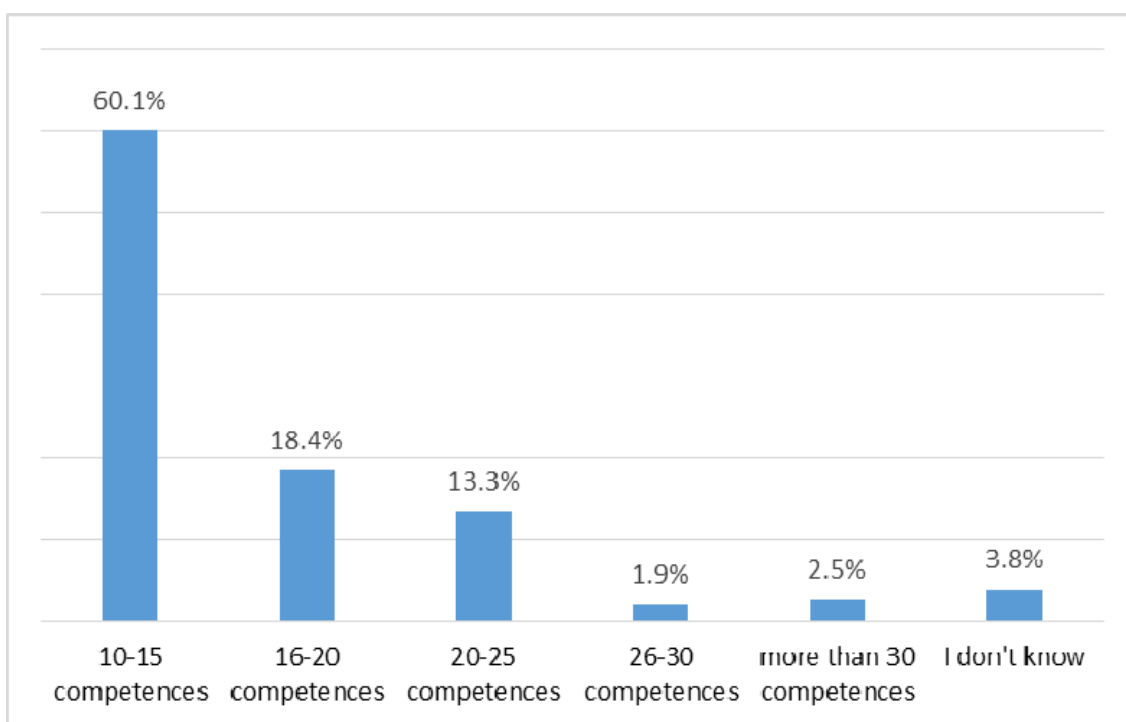


Fig. 5. Geography teachers' opinions about the maximum number of Geography specific competences appropriate for the secondary grades

5) *Contents of the curriculum.* 93.3% of the teachers think that the contents of the Geography curriculum are presented in a clear manner, which is not our opinion.

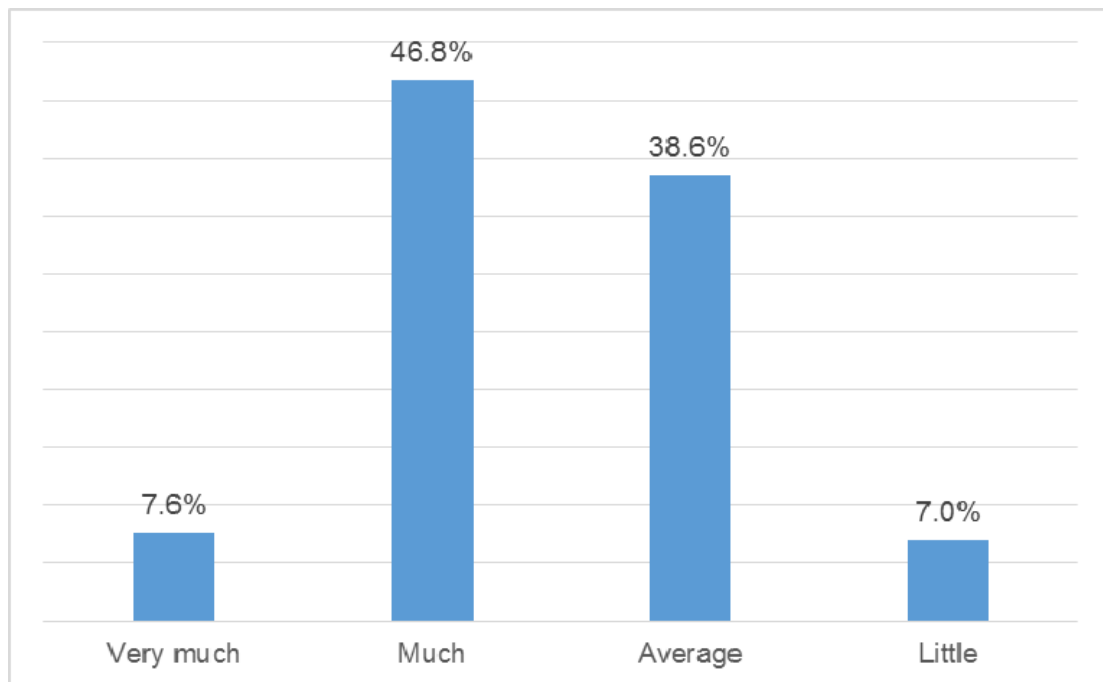


Fig. 6. Geography teachers' opinions about the clarity of presenting the contents in the *Geography school curriculum* (2009)

In order to add quality to the curriculum project, we asked the teachers to choose how the contents of the curriculum should be organised. We offered three different types of contents structure that could help teachers better understand what a student needed to study during a Geography class, at the lowest level of training.

88.4% of the teachers claim that every lesson in the curriculum should clearly state all its main concepts/terms/glossary, 69.7% of the teachers prefer that all the lessons in every chapter of the curriculum are put in chronological order at the end of it, and 67.6% of them claim that every lesson in the curriculum should have its subtitles presented here (Figure 7).

These opinions are somewhat different from what they all stated for the former question, because if the teachers really thought the contents in the current curriculum were clearly presented, there should have been a far smaller percentage of the respondents to approve of the alternatives we offered for a different presentation of the contents (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009).

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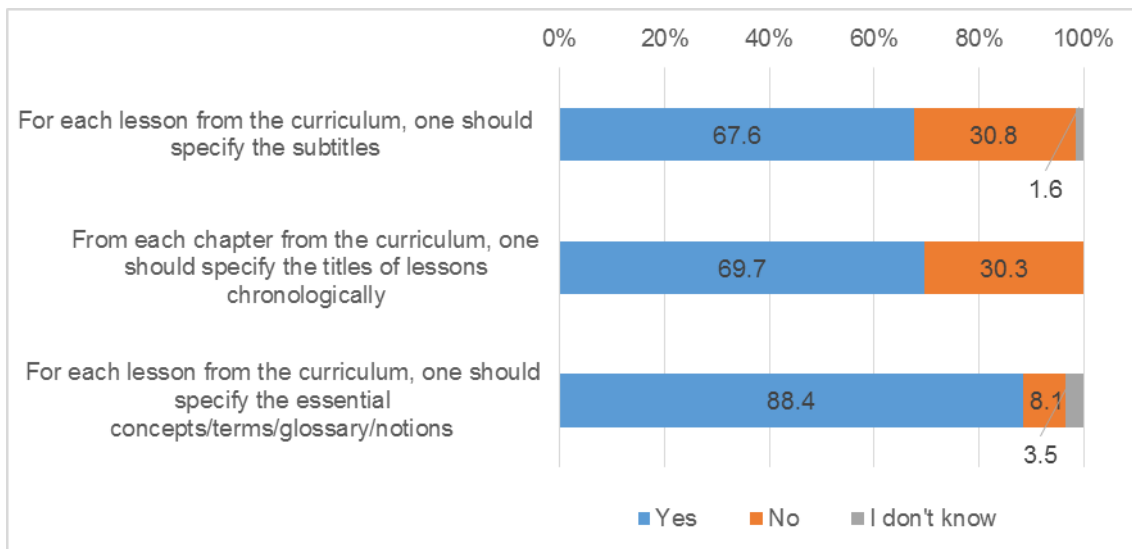


Fig. 7. Geography teachers' opinions about the presentation of contents in the *Geography school curriculum*

As we think detailing the contents in the curriculum could be also useful to textbook authors, we asked the teachers to make statements about that, as there were among them many (possible) authors of textbooks and of curricular written supports.

Their answers were similar to those for the former question. In order for textbook authors to create the right kind of learning contents for each grade, 91.5% of the teachers agree that every lesson of the curriculum should have its main concepts/terms/glossary specified, 78% of them think every chapter should have the chronological order of the lessons presented and 74.6% of them claim each lesson should have its subtitles specified (Figure 8).

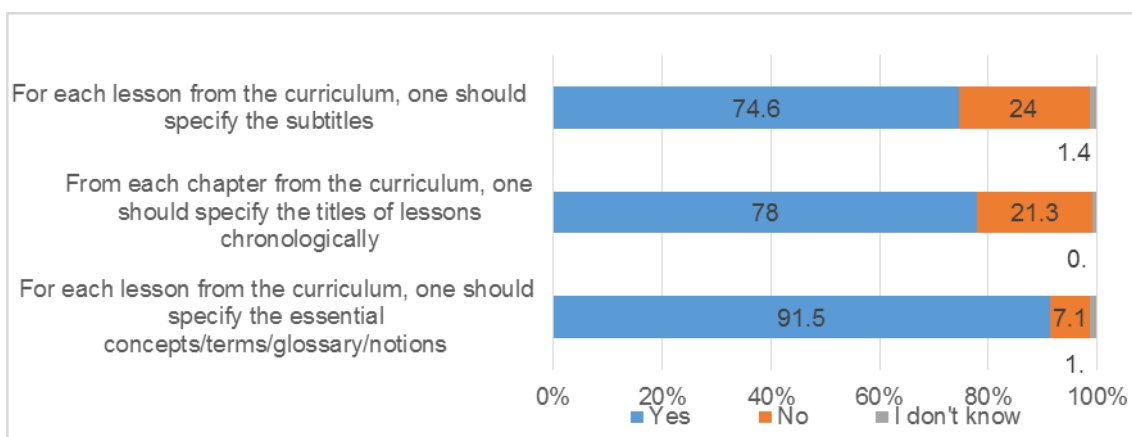


Fig. 8. Geography teachers' opinions about the presentation of contents in the *Geography school curriculum* with the aim of enabling textbook authors to create their textbooks

6) *Learning activities in the curriculum.* The current curriculum (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009) offers different examples of learning activities. As we wanted to know the extent these activities improve teachers work, we asked them if they used these examples in planning their learning units. 86.7% of them answered they did. 89.5% of the teachers also claimed these learning activities in the curriculum helped them very much in choosing and creating their own activities in their Learning Units Plan (Figure 9).

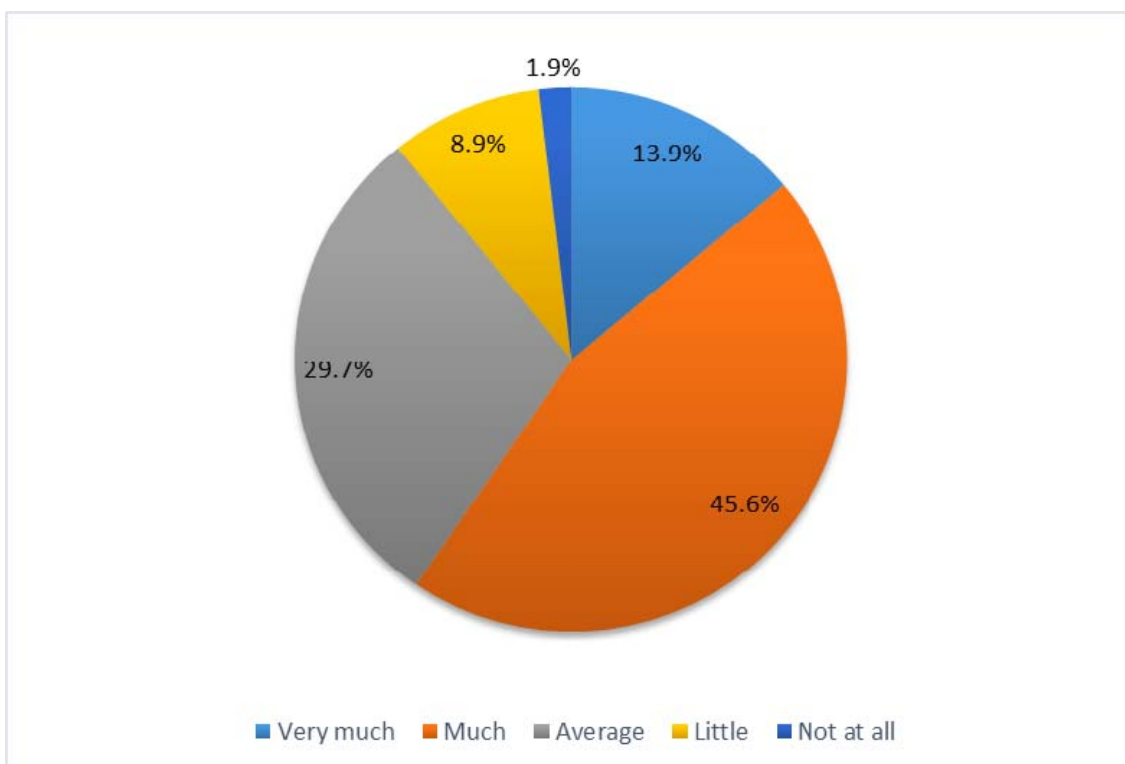


Fig. 9. The usefulness degree of the learning activities exemplified in the Geography school curriculum for choosing and phrasing learning activities, in the *Learning Units Plan*

In order for teachers to better understand what students should accomplish in a Geography class, we offered several ways to improve the learning activities in the curriculum. Although most of the teachers claimed the current curriculum offered useful examples, they were also in favour of researchers' proposals. Of all three of them, 81% voted our proposal to have the main learning activities detailed/specified for each lesson in the curriculum (Figure 10).

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It is thus obvious that teachers want an improvement of the curriculum in terms of specifying learning activities and that they want these activities to be related to the actual contents, a fact also stated by other studies (Radu, 2000), not only to the specific competences, as the I.Ş.E. [Institute of Education Sciences] curriculum project is proposing.

A large percentage of the teachers (74.8%) think there should be a list of general learning activities for each grade, as the current secondary school Geography curriculum has (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009). Even fewer teachers (56.5%) agreed having general learning activities for every chapter, which proves to be the least useful solution.

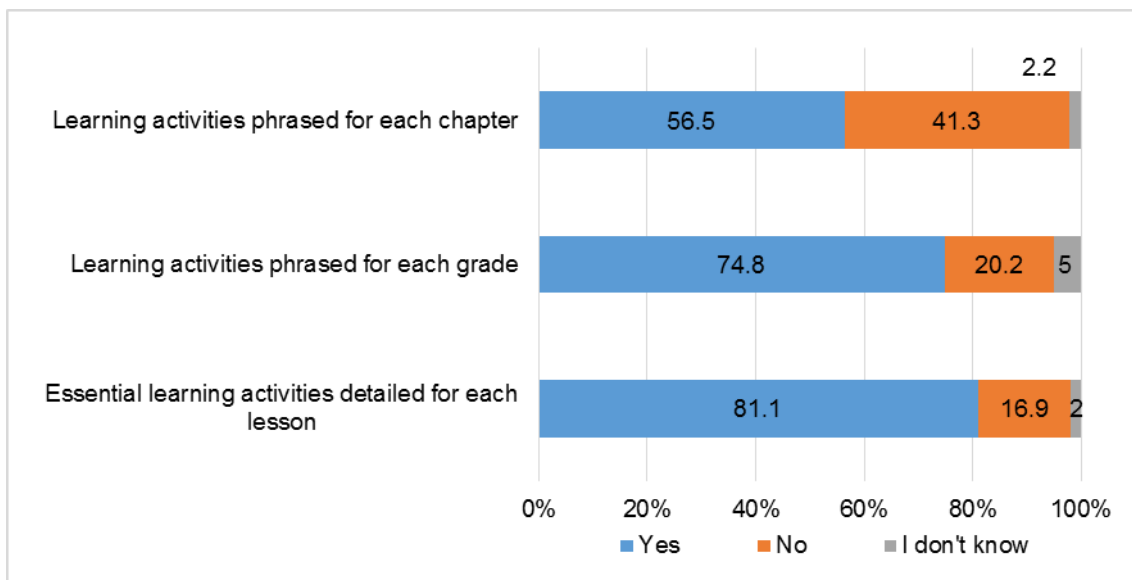


Fig. 10. Geography teachers' opinions about the presentation of the learning units in the school project curriculum aiming to enable the didactic activity

Most of the teachers (80.4%) think that specifying in the curriculum the main learning activities for each lesson could help textbook authors even more (Figure 11). A smaller part of them (72.2%) feel that authors could create better textbooks if the curriculum had lists of general learning activities for each grade and an even smaller percentage (61.3%) think these activities should be generally formulated for each chapter.

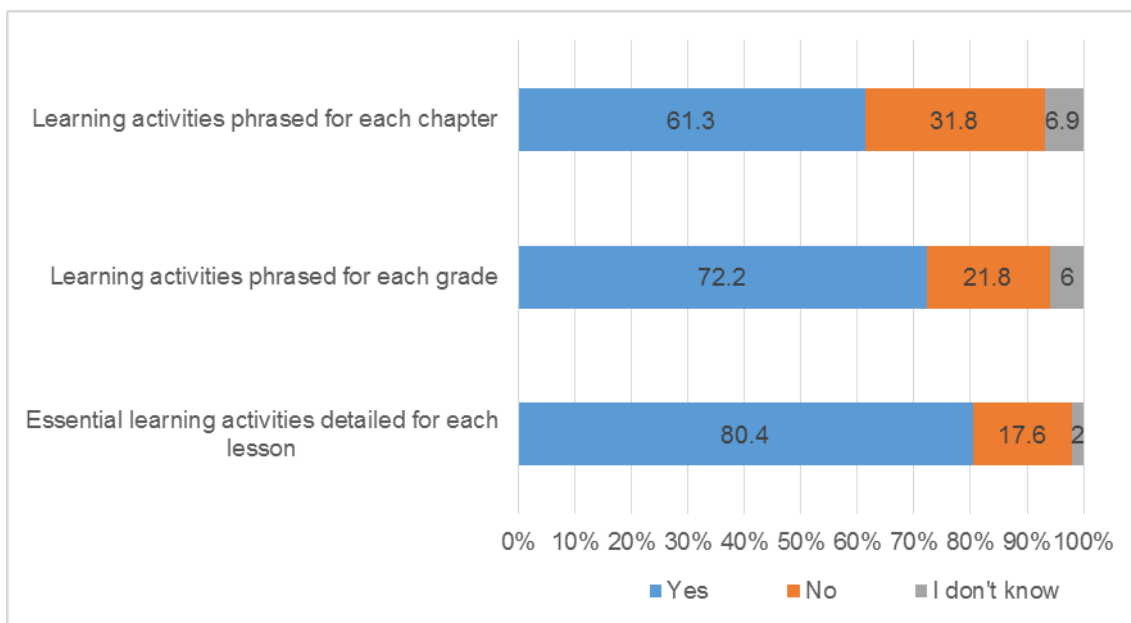


Fig. 11. Geography teachers' opinions about the presentation of the learning activities in the Geography school curriculum project for improving school textbooks

7) *Methodological suggestions in the curriculum.* 88.1% of the Geography teachers claimed that the methodological suggestions in the curriculum were useful in planning and organising the learning content for each grade (Figure 12).

As we were surprised by this opinion, in the second questionnaire we formulated several other sets of methodological suggestions that we considered useful for clarifying certain theoretical and methodological aspects of the curriculum. We asked teachers to give them a score from 1 to 5. Table 5 shows that teachers need those suggestions most when forming and developing competences in their pupils (average score 4.64), when evaluating specific competences (with an average score of 4.51) and general competences (4.36), when planning the learning activities and the lessons according to the specific competences, contents, learning process, methods, learning means (an average score of 4.26-4.20) and when phrasing the learning activities. These urgent needs come from the lack of such methodological suggestions for teachers in the official curricular documents in Romania.

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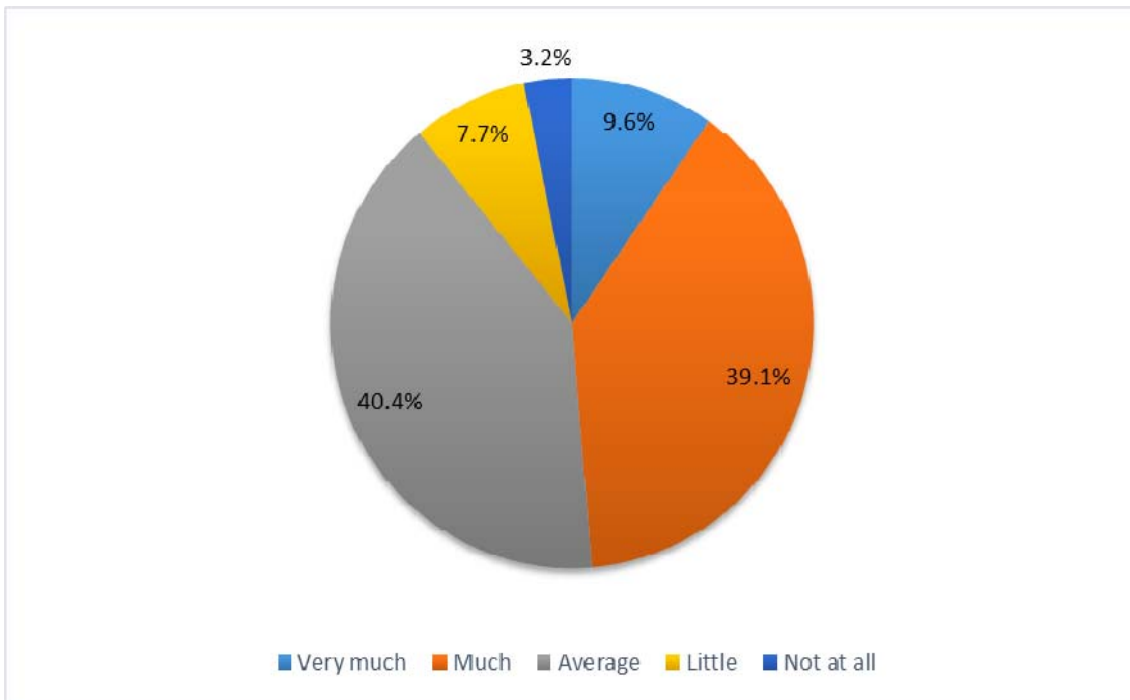


Fig. 12. Geography teachers' opinions about the usefulness of the *Methodological suggestions* in the *Geography school curriculum* for planning and organising lessons

Table 5. Geography teachers' needs related to the *Methodological Suggestions* from the project on the *Geography school curriculum*

Methodological suggestions	Average score
How to form/develop a certain competence to students	4.64
How to assess a students' certain specific competence	4.51
How to assess the formation of a general competence to students	4.36
How to plan a certain learning activity according to the specific competences, contents, development of the learning process, didactic methods, and to the learning means	4.26
How to plan a lesson according to the specific competences, contents, development of the learning process, didactic methods, and to the learning means	4.20
How to phrase the learning activities within planning the learning/thematic units	4.18

8) *Associations between different components of the curriculum.* For the Geography curriculum to be an effective and coherent tool in the teachers' activity, 67.4% of the respondents think that there should be a neat

association between the general and specific competences and then, furthermore, between specific competences, contents and learning activities for each lesson. This is also our opinion (Figure 10).

A much smaller percentage of the teachers (28.8%) think that the Geography curriculum would be an effective and coherent tool if general competences, specific ones and learning activities would be associated, whilst contents would be mentioned separately. This way of regarding the matter is also the one that experts from the I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences] (2016) proposed and it is used in the current primary school curricula (MEN [Ministry of National Education], 2013), but we think it makes planning and organising didactic activities more difficult (Dulamă, 2011b; Dulamă, 2012b; Dulamă and Magdaș, 2014).

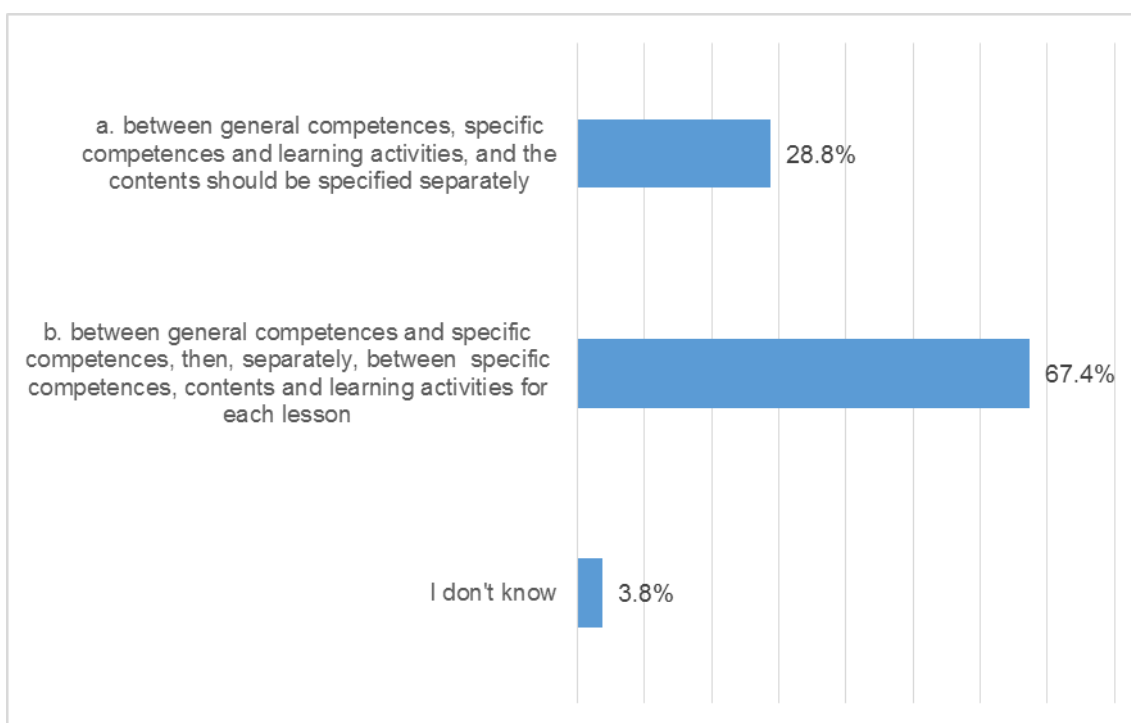


Fig. 13. Geography teachers' opinions about the associations among the components in the *Geography school curriculum*

9) *Values in the curriculum.* 51% of the questioned Geography teachers think that the Geography curriculum should have a list of spiritual values and attitudes that every discipline should form in secondary school students, and we think the same. This kind of approach would ensure promoting the same set of values by all the pre-university study disciplines, which is similar to other countries educational systems (Cîineanu, 2016; Eade, 2008).

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47.1% of the teachers claim that there should be a list of values and attitudes that Geography in particular should form in secondary grades students, which is actually the current way of introducing values and attitudes in the secondary school Geography curriculum in use (MECI [Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation], 2009).

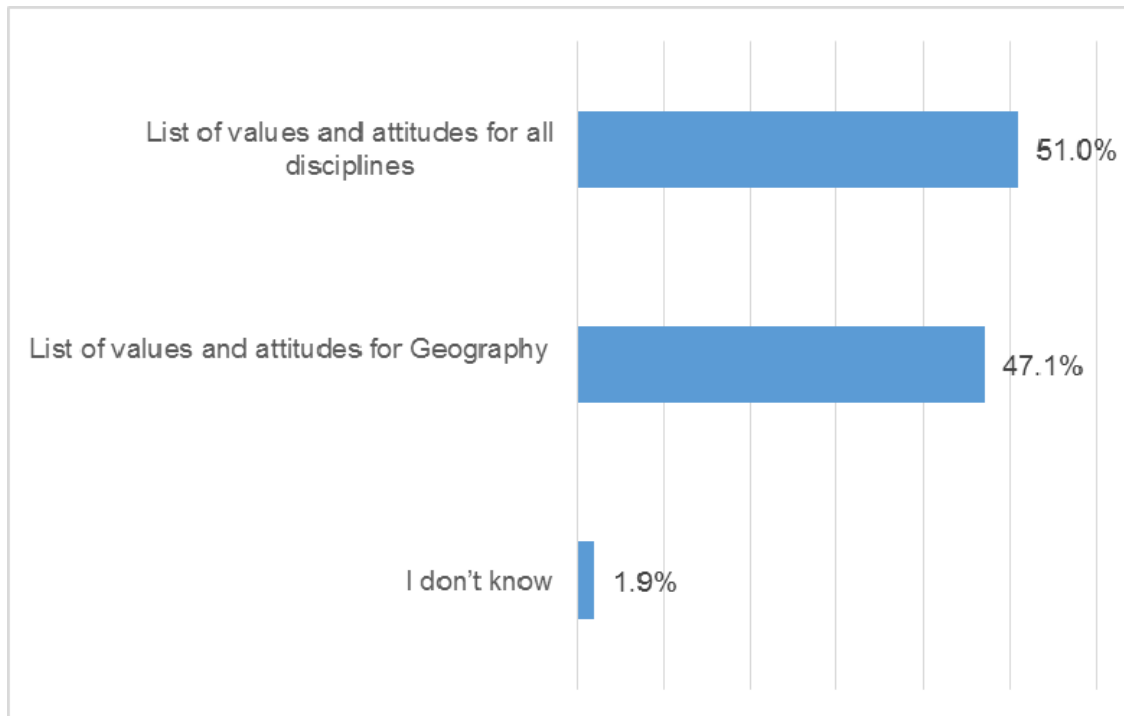


Fig. 14. Including a series of values and attitudes in the *Geography school curriculum*

CONCLUSIONS

As far as the general competences in the current curriculum are concerned, although teachers thought of them as clear and appropriate, in the next one they want these general competences to be more about studying (exploring, investigating) the world we live in and extracting and analysing geographical data from various sources.

Regarding the specific competences, teachers think there should be only 10 to maximum 15 of them and that they should be phrased differently from one grade to another, the levels of accomplishment specified, just like the experts of the I.Ş.E [Institute of Education Sciences] are suggesting. This solution is not yet very documented, both in theory and in methodology, in Romanian studies.

Although the contents in the curriculum are considered to be articulated, most of the teachers still think that the next curriculum should have lessons put in chronological order for each chapter, the main subtitles and concepts specified for each lesson, which should also ease the work of textbook authors.

Regarding the learning activities, teachers would like them to be distinctly formulated in the curriculum for each lesson, in association with the contents (just like all the other specialty studies support), not only with the specific competences (which is the way the I.Ș.E. [Institute of Education Sciences] wants to do for the curriculum project).

A large percentage of the teachers claims they need methodological suggestions in the curriculum, especially those relating to forming, developing and evaluating competences in their students and to planning the learning activities and the lessons according to the specific competences. These needs come from the lack of such suggestions in the official curricular documents.

Teachers also claim they need a certain list of values and attitudes that every student should embrace in the secondary grades, no matter the discipline.

Our final conclusion is that most of the teachers' opinions are similar to our own (the authors of this study), and that these opinions should be taken into consideration by all decision factors in order to elaborate a fully functional good quality curriculum.

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