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**THE ROLE AND WORK OF THE EXPERT IN GEOGRAPHY
TEXTBOOKS FOR SCHOOLS – AUTHOR’S EXPERIENCES
AND REFLECTIONS**

Abstract: The article describes the process and procedures of allowing geography textbooks for schools for the public use by an expert appointed by the Minister of Education. The author shares comments on former and present forms and structures of a review along with their flaws and merits. Observations concerning the cooperation between the experts and the publishers of textbooks are also presented, as well as reflections on geography textbooks written by 1) geographers – academic workers, 2) geography teachers, 3) geography educationalist or academic workers employed in schools.

Key words: geographical school education, expert in geography textbooks

INTRODUCTION

Polish geography literature contains abundant articles on school textbooks, their role in modern schools (e.g., Kucharska 1999; Sadoń-Osowiecka 2009), conceptions used in reference to changes in contemporary world (e.g., Rodzoś, Wojtanowicz 2009), including the assessment of textbooks based on different criteria (e.g., Angiel 2003; Rodzoś 2004; Pytka 2009) or points of view of different people: publishers and users (Sadoń-Osowiecka 2009). However, there are not many articles dedicated to the work of experts in geography textbooks for schools, who are responsible for allowing textbooks for use in schools.

According to the author, a broader look into the role and work of the expert is required.

The author intends to take a closer look at the expert's work: the procedures, the "actors" who take part in publishing a textbook and who are determining the allowance of a textbook for school use. We will also look at the changes in procedures of this work and in forms of review and assessment which took place in the period of transformation of the education system. The author presents her own reflections on the issues above, having nearly 15-years experience as a MEN¹ expert in textbooks.

WHO IS/SHOULD BE AN EXPERT? A PROFILE OF AN EXPERT

An expert is appointed by the Minister of Education upon the candidate's application. Among the documents confirming appropriate qualifications defined by MEN², the essential one is the opinion by a recommending institution³ that the candidate is "a person who gives guarantee of performing the duties of a MEN expert properly and constitutes a warranty of high standards of textbooks allowed for use in schools". There are 25 people on the list of MEN experts in geography curricula and textbooks⁴, including 6 professors, 14 doctors and 5 people holding a master's degree. The largest number of recommendations comes from universities (15); other recommending institutions are: pedagogical academies (3), Polish Geographical Society (3), Polish Academy of Sciences (2), and other (2). The experts are required to have both geographical (substantial scope) and didactic knowledge (substantial and didactic scope), and have to follow the changes in theories and practices in a given field of knowledge. Being an expert spells the duty of permanent learning. It can be said that a given person is constantly "evolving" as an expert, not that he or she "is" one. The experts' personalities are also crucial: apart from being scrupulous, honest, and reliable, they must be marked by open-heartedness and empathy; moreover, or perhaps most of all, they should realize that they are not "omniscient". They ought to be aware of their knowledge, but also of their limits and imperfections (including lack of knowledge), thus they should be wise and humble.

¹ Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej (MEN) – Ministry of National Education, between 2001–2005 existing as Ministerstwo Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu (MENiS) – Ministry of National Education and Sport.

² Vide: www.men.gov.pl → reforma programowa → informacje dla rzeczoznawców (in Polish).

³ e.g., university, Polish Academy of Sciences, Polish Geographical Society.

⁴ as at 4.09.2010

WHO DO THE EXPERTS SERVE?

The experts serve the minister in making decisions on whether to allow a textbook for use in schools⁵. Therefore, they are responsible for their opinions and judgements before the minister; however, this responsibility concerns other people: students who will use the textbook, teachers and parents, who trust in their knowledge, conscientiousness and reliability. While writing a review of a textbook, they “involve” not only their mind, but also their conscience.

WHAT MATTERS DO THEY HANDLE; WHAT IS THEIR ROLE?

Educational and social role. MEN experts handle an important social matter; namely, the way students using the textbooks will perceive geography depends notably on them. Most of these students will not deal with this school subject after all. Will geography remain in their minds as a set of terms, theories, facts, indicators and numbers, because the teacher has to “go through” the textbook and curriculum, or as a guide which allows them to understand the place they live in, the world, people and themselves (vide: Delors 1998)?

The role of the “guard” of substantial correctness of geographical education contents, including knowledge (also methodological) revision. It is the basis of the experts’ work. They are to note down which contents of binding core curriculum⁶ are reflected in the textbooks, and which are missing, without judging the correctness and completeness of the curriculum itself.

The role of the “guard” of other issues. An expert is obliged to make sure that a textbook is not overloaded with educational contents and that it is written in a language understandable to students. Answering the following questions is helpful:

- does the textbook contain subject and illustrative material suitable for the amount of lesson periods anticipated in the general schedule?
- is it adapted to a given stage of education in terms of the level of difficulty, form of presenting information, selection of terms and ways of explanations?

⁵ In the final clause of the review he states that a given textbook “can be (or cannot be) authorized by the Minister of Education for use in schools for general education”.

⁶ Core curriculum is a regulation of compulsory aims and contents of education, as well as students’ achievements.

WHAT CHANGES TOWARDS PROCEDURES, FORMS AND STRUCTURES OF REVIEWS HAVE OCCURRED IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSFORMATION?

In the period of transformation some changes in procedures and structure of reviews have been observed. At the beginning of educational reform a review used to be written without imposing its structure and content by MENiS. The only necessity was a note on relevance of a textbook's content to educational aims, curriculum content and planned students' achievements presented in "Core curriculum of general education" within the subject "Geography"⁷, as well as its conformity to the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and appropriate conventions ratified by Poland.

Probably due to too much latitude of content and detail of a review, MENiS changed the rules of its construction and introduced binding internal structure. Until 2008, a review contained following parts:

- Title of the textbook, author (authors), publisher, year. Purpose of the textbook⁸. Stage of education.
- Assessment of relevance to core curriculum of general education.
- Layout, structure and scope of contents of the textbook. Substantial correctness.
- Assessment of illustrative material. Didactic correctness.
- Flaws and merits of the textbook. General opinion.
- Qualifying conclusion.

At the beginning of the transformation period the publisher used to submit a request for an expert's review; however, MEN is in charge of that today. Financial settlements were also established between the publisher and the expert. MEN (MENiS at that time) usually received final opinion from an expert with qualifying conclusion. Conditional opinions with lists of all mistakes and necessary edits were given to the publisher. The exchange of the text between the expert and the publisher was usually repeated until proper order of the text was achieved together with substantial, didactic and language correctness, clearness of illustrations, and the like, all of which allowed to give a positive opinion. Specifically between 2001–2003 there was an opportunity of direct and constructive dialogue with the creator of the textbook. In more recent years the process has been becoming more and more "impersonal", as well as formalized by MEN.

According to the new educational reform, an expert is asked for the opinion by MEN (it also sets all time and financial arrangements). The procedure of

⁷ Journal of Law No. 51 of 9 May, 2002, Ordinance of Minister of National Education and Sport, No. 458 of 26 February, 2002

⁸ Meant for geographical education in lower secondary (*gimnazjum*) or secondary (*liceum*) school, as geography is taught only on these stages of education in Poland.

approval is typically carried out in two stages. The first stage is a conditional review, in which the expert presents all mistakes and flaws (as well as various doubts) to the author of the text and to the publisher. Correcting the mistakes usually leads to the second stage, when the expert reads the text again⁹ and generally gives a positive opinion on it. It results in enrolling the textbook on the MEN list, publishing it and making use of it in schools.

Since 2009 we have been also dealing with the change of form and structure of a review. MEN decided to simplify experts' opinions and make the work easier by introducing tabular form of the opinion and, in some part of it, a requirement to assess different elements and features of a textbook¹⁰. An expert is to rate on a five-point scale whether the textbook, for example:

• considers current state of academic knowledge, including methodological knowledge ¹¹	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
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but also whether it:

- is adapted to a given stage of education in terms of the level of difficulty, form of presenting information, selection of terms and ways of explanations;
- contains illustrative material relevant to teaching contents;
- is constructed in a logical and coherent way;
- enables students of diversified abilities to gain skills defined in core curriculum of general education;
- contains subject and illustrative material suitable for the amount of lesson periods anticipated in the general schedule for integrated teaching (early childhood education) or teaching a given subject, block or module;
- has aesthetic graphic design and correct editorial layout.

The other necessity is answering the following demonstration questions with YES or NO; writing detailed comments in a special space is possible:

- Does the textbook enable the accomplishment of educational aims defined in core curriculum?
- Does the textbook enable the accomplishment of detailed requirements defined in core curriculum?
- Does the textbook present detailed requirements selected for this part of the series in a systematic way?

⁹ This version of the textbook is different from the previous one after making corrections and considering suggestions by two other reviewers, including a reviewer of language correctness. It is not uncommon that on the first stage one of the reviewers gives a negative opinion, while the others give a positive or a conditional one. In such cases an independent reviewer is appointed to decide the fate of the textbook.

¹⁰ Full text of an expert's form (in Polish) can be found here: www.men.gov.pl → reforma programowa → programy i podręczniki → informacje dla rzeczoznawców → wzory opinii

¹¹ This is an example of a table row; other features are rated in the same pattern.

COMMENTS CONCERNING PRESENT FORMS OF OPINIONS

According to the author, present form of a review may cause the loss of humane factor. Although it does not have to be limited to the assessment, but can contain comments, justification, or polemics, those are not obligatory elements of a review.

This form of opinion is only apparently simplified and more clear-cut. Still a question arises: what is this point assessment for, or rather: who is it for? It is read only by the author, publisher and MEN, while the users of the textbook do not receive such information. They will only be aware that the textbook has "received authorization for use in schools...". Only the three parties listed above know whether it was assessed for "5 – very good" or "2 – passing grade".

Formalization of the process and form of the review presented above involve another important matter. For example, if the expert assessed a textbook for "2 – passing" or "3 – satisfactory", he ought to write an opinion on allowing it for use in schools, as he did not give it "1 – fail". But does it conform to the dictates of his conscience, which says that only a "very good" or "good" textbook should be authorized for use in schools?

HOW DOES THE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EXPERT AND THE PUBLISHER PROCEED?

The expert's work is carried on between the author of the text and publisher on one side, and MEN on the other. As for MEN, there is no requirement for close cooperation or dialogue, but only for keeping the deadline. Cooperation with the publisher is different. It should be filled with understanding the publisher (their problems, time predicted to publish the textbook connected with the beginning of the school year), but to a certain limit. The fact that the publisher is in a hurry to publish the textbook cannot cause quality loss. Realizing this fact leads to rational actions. Learning to be assertive towards the pressure of time forced by the publisher is one of the reviewer's necessities. The hurry in publishing textbooks is connected with the quality of the text delivered to the expert. Formerly, the text used to be carefully prepared and contained aesthetic figures, while nowadays, more and more often, the expert receives a rough text without illustrations which are still in preparation. After all, the opinion should concern the entirety of the textbook. Aesthetic layout of the pages¹², substantial coherence of the text and selection of illustrations must be well thought out to serve the students successfully.

¹² Whereas the sum of positive elements can, but does not have to give a good total effect.

The author is often under impression that she receives a working text from the publisher, which is often rough considering the amount of mistakes and flaws, also grammatical and stylistic. As an example, in a 300 pages long geography textbook, 175 mistakes and various flaws were noticed, including 15 factual mistakes and 7 didactic ones.

However, there are also positive examples of well thought out textbooks in terms of the structure and correctness of the text.

The author also observes exemplary relations with publishers, which are not based on absolute compatibility of views, but on concerted work on creating a good textbook, on dialogue, mutual respect and reliability, discipline of work and consistency¹³.

REFLECTIONS ON THE AUTHORS OF TEXTBOOKS AND THEIR WORK

The author has observed that: the authors of textbooks are usually 1) academic workers, 2) teachers, 3) both, most often academic workers employed by departments (workshops) of geographical education.

Academic workers who write textbooks usually have substantial qualifications, although they might concern only a narrow field of study. Some of the writers are convinced that writing a textbook for lower secondary school is a simple task. However, it is deceptive, because if they do not have skills e.g., 1) to select educational contents, 2) to generalize and simplify selected issues, 3) to write clearly, but correctly about difficult matters, or if they lack knowledge in school geography didactics, the textbook will be overloaded. In the case of teachers who are textbook writers it has been observed that the texts were sometimes written in “teachers’ jargon”, as if the author wrote down his own words while conducting a lesson. This results in grotesque texts, which prove deficiency of knowledge, but also lack of ability to distinguish written and spoken language. Textbooks which are good in terms of substance, didactics and language are most often written by people listed in the third group, that is academic workers employed by schools or geography departments.

Finally, the author has one more reflection. There are not many geography textbooks in Poland written from the problem solving perspective or so-called “new perspectives”¹⁴. In case of those last ones, it is not about revolutionary approaches breaking off geographical tradition, but about textbooks containing

¹³ It depends mostly on the managing editor, cooperating with the author of the textbook, but also on graphic designers, workers typesetting the text, and the like.

¹⁴ Presented in detail by T. Sadoń-Osowiecka (2009).

humane ideas¹⁵. There are only single examples of such textbooks. However, the transformation period has created favourable conditions for such perspectives of geographical contents.

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Translated by Anna Angiel

¹⁵ The author means textbooks in geography understood as geography with „human face” (Szkurlat 2004).