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**PERCEIVING GEOGRAPHY AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT
BY PUPILS OF LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL
(IN THE CITIES OF SILESIAN VOIVODESHIP)**

Abstract: The article presents results of research the perception of Geography by pupils of lower-secondary schools. Examinations were conducted by students of geography during teaching practice at schools in major cities of the Silesian Voivodeship. In the ranking of the importance of school subjects Geography is located in the center of the list, whereas in the category of „liked” mathematical-natural subjects it is the second after Biology. In the upper forms this school subject becomes more and more „indifferent”. The most liked contents by pupils of the lower secondary schools are as follows: the own region, the regional geography of world and astronomical issues. On the other hand the most difficult plots are connected with a geological history of the Earth and socio-economic issues of world. The decided majority of pupils thinks that the geographical knowledge is useful in the life, and the signs of her usefulness is the sense of direction and the ability of map reading. In the majority of schools lessons of Geography undergo exclusively in the class room. The dream of pupils in relation to the geographical education are field exercises, more frequent watching films and using teaching games during lessons and the group work.

Key words: perception of geography, ranking of school subjects, questionnaire survey at the lower secondary school

INTRODUCTION

During methodological conferences as well as personal meetings with geography teachers, the author often heard a statement that geography, as a school subject, is neglected in contemporary school. The value of geography decreases due to the continuous curriculum ‘reforms’. The most frequent teacher’s

postulate, in favour of increasing the number of geography lessons in lesson schedules, was accompanied by the statement that both geographical knowledge and geographical skills are used in practice, thus, they are essential when living in the modern world. It was also added that for good understanding the information from different sources that reaches young person, geographical education at school is more than necessary.

In this context, the question about the perception of geography by pupils, who, due to the Educational Reform 1999, start learning geography at the level of lower secondary school, seems interesting. How is geography perceived by them in comparison with other school subjects? Do they see the practical aspect of geographical knowledge? Do they think that it is difficult to live in the modern society without sufficient geographical knowledge? Which geographical issues taught at school are especially liked by the pupils and which of them are difficult for learners? Is the number of geography lessons sufficient in lesson schedules? Do the pupils take the opportunity to develop their geographical knowledge and skills by participating in extra-curricular activities such as geographical clubs or geographical competitions? Looking for the answers to these questions justifies the two-year study carried out in schools.

The issue of problems connected with the perceiving geography as a school subject by pupils is not a novelty on a field of geographical studies. This topic was undertaken previously by Mularczyk (1992), Mularczyk and Kowalska (2003), Grad and Grzyb (2006) and Zielińska and Zieliński (2007). These studies vary, however, in scope (different groups of respondents from the various stages of education) as well as in location (one school, different regions of the country). The novelty of this work is to carry out studies on a large group of respondents in the area of Silesian Voivodeship.

METHODS AND STUDY MATERIAL

The idea for the study developed during the geography teaching lessons with a group of students who did their pedagogical training in a school year 2008/2009. The study was conducted by two students' groups and continued in the next school year by the next groups.

Students' work concentrated on making a short survey that consisted of 12 questions (including information about age and sex of the respondents) and, later, conducting individual survey study in grades I-III at schools, and, finally, studying gathered results. The studies were conducted in 33 schools located mainly in the big cities of central Silesian Voivodeship. In some of them (e.g. Dąbrowa Górnicza, Sosnowiec, Będzin, Katowice) the survey was carried out in more than one school, but it has not been repeated in the same

institution the following year. The results of survey conducted in five smaller towns (moreover, located in some other voivodships from which students came from) were omitted due to the disproportionate amount of surveys. The remaining study material was acclaimed as homogeneous (without distinguishing between cities and their sizes) which allowed to recognize the pupils' opinion about geography as a school subject as well as compare the results only between the three grades of lower secondary school. In surveyed schools, different teaching programs were used.

For the analysis, 2512 questionnaires were finally picked. They were gathered from 28 schools. Number of pupils from each grade was as follows: first grade – 870 pupils (34.6%), second grade – 778 pupils (31%) and third grade – 864 (34.4%). Among them, girls were in majority (51.6% of respondents).

RESULTS

In the first study, from the list of 11 school subjects, pupils put geography in the fourth place (along with history and PE), right after mathematics, Polish language and second language (Table 1). The pupils from second grade put geography in the fourth place, yet the pupils from first and third grades placed it in the fifth position. Geography is the most important subject to the 8% of pupils, no matter what the grade was. Girls put geography in the fourth position; boys placed it as the fifth subject in hierarchy of importance.

Table 1. The most important school subjects according to the pupils of selected lower secondary schools in the Silesian Voivodeship (the first year of study)

the subject	class I	class II	class III	in total
Polish	1	2	1	1
Mathematics	2	1	1	1
Foreign language	3	3	3	3
History	4	4	4	4
Geography	5	4	5	4
Physical Education	5	4	6	4
Biology	8	7	6	7
Chemistry	7	8	9	7
Physics	9	8	6	9
Information Technology	10	10	10	10
Social studies	11	11	11	11

After a modification of this question in the second year of study, pupils were asked to grade each subject with points (1–10). The position of geography has dropped to the seventh place (Table 2). The change of study method proved that methodology of study has a great impact on the given results.

Table 2. The most important school subjects according to the pupils of selected lower secondary schools in the Silesian Voivodeship (the second year of study)

the subject	class I	class II	class III	in total
Mathematics	2	1	1	1
Polish	1	2	2	2
History	3	4	5	3
Foreign language	5	3	4	3
Chemistry	4	5	7	5
Biology	7	8	3	6
Geography	6	7	6	7
Physics	8	6	8	8
Social studies	9	9	9	9
Technology	10	10	10	10

A lot of factors had influence on such a hierarchy. In case of the first three subjects (Polish, mathematics and second language) it seems that the most important factor was the large number of lesson from these subjects in each of the grades. Moreover, previously mentioned subjects may be perceived as ‘more important’ as, when the study was conducted, there was a dispute in media about restoration of mathematics into compulsory subjects of Matura exam. As for the rest of subjects with similar number of hours in lesson schedules, one can assume that the results may be the reflection of attractiveness of the material, organization of the lesson and contacts between pupils and a teacher.

The next question in the survey was “*Which of the listed mathematics and natural science subjects do you like the most?*”. Listed subjects were: biology, chemistry, physics, geography and mathematics. Pupils could also answer ‘none of them’. In this ranking, geography took the second place, right after biology and before mathematics. Geography was put in the third position, after biology and mathematics only by the second grade pupils. The percentage of respondents who pointed to geography in each of the grades fluctuated about 25%,

meaning that the rating of this subject in each grade is very stable, compared to, for example, chemistry (fluctuations from 10% to 21%) or mathematics (from 21% to 29%). The least liked subject in this group was physics. In each of the study group was placed in the final position (fig. 1).

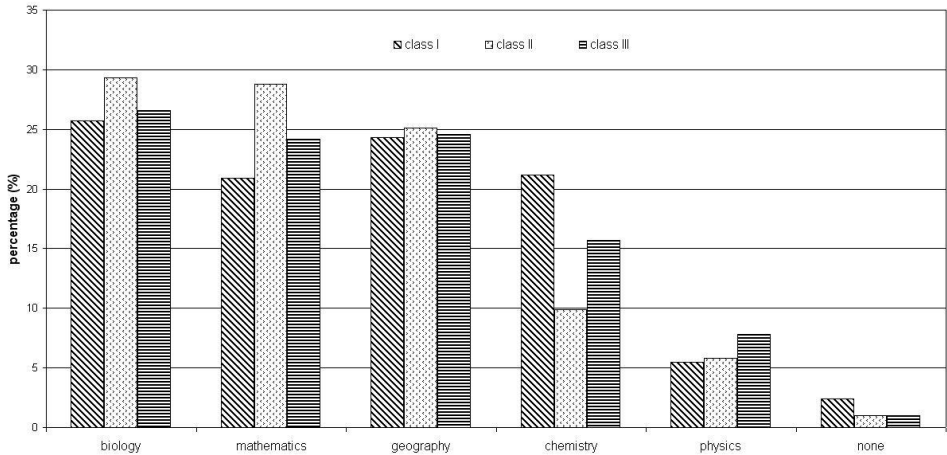


Fig. 1. The ranking of mathematics and natural science school subjects according to the pupils of lower secondary schools in Silesian Voivodeship

The next question was about feelings connected with the learning of geography. The respondent was to choose one of the options: learning geography is difficult, gives pleasure or is indifferent. 94.6% of respondents gave an answer to this question. For 39% of pupils, learning geography was pleasant. For the same number of pupils it was indifferent and 22% of respondents found it difficult to learn geography. Comparing the results between classes, one can observe that between first and third grade the percentage of pupils who learn geography with difficulties has decreased (from 25% to 18%). In subsequent years of education, the percentage of people who like learning geography has also decreased (from 42% to 37%). Unfortunately, the number of pupils who find learning geography as indifferent has increased (from 33% in the first grade to 42% in the third grade) (fig. 2).

On the basis of results, it can be assumed that the main reason for difficulties in learning geography is a common belief that geography is 'difficult'. The pupil does not understand some topics, there is too much information to remember, there are problems with maps (especially with remembering the contents of map) or pupils do not like geography at all (fig. 3).

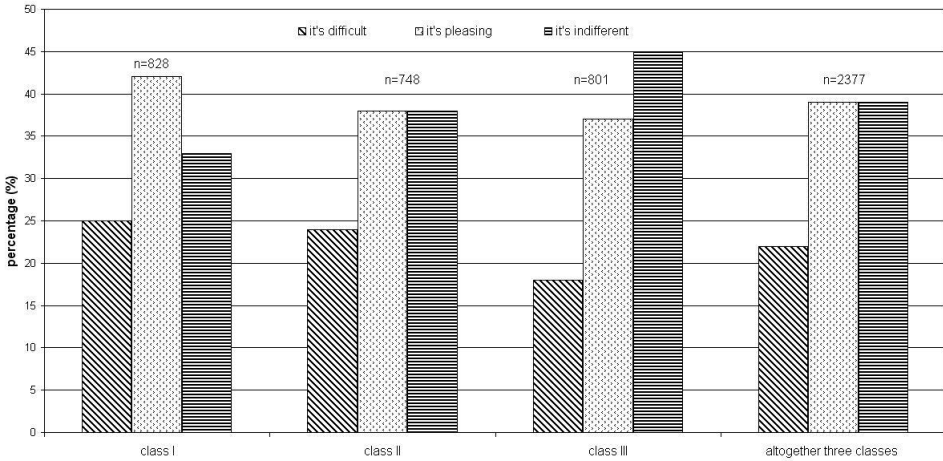


Fig. 2. The attitude towards learning geography according to grades

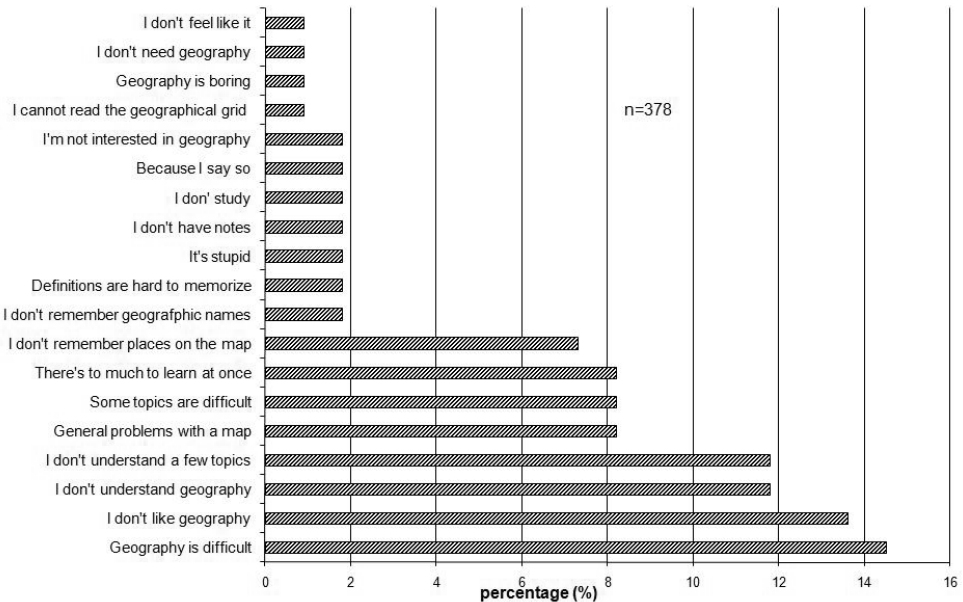


Fig. 3. Main reasons for difficulties in geography learning according to the pupils of lower secondary schools

The indifferent feelings towards geography were justified by the lack of interest in this subject and the lack of necessity to learn it ('it is not necessary for me') by stating that geography is 'just like other subjects'. The biggest group of respondents (around 14%) answered 'I don't know' which points to the helplessness in justifying the answer (fig. 4).

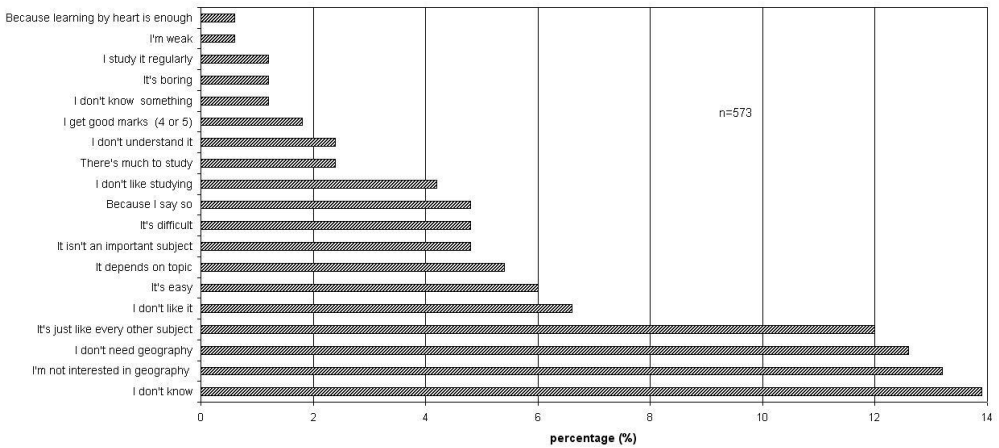


Fig. 4. Main reasons for being neutral towards geography learning according to the pupils of lower secondary schools

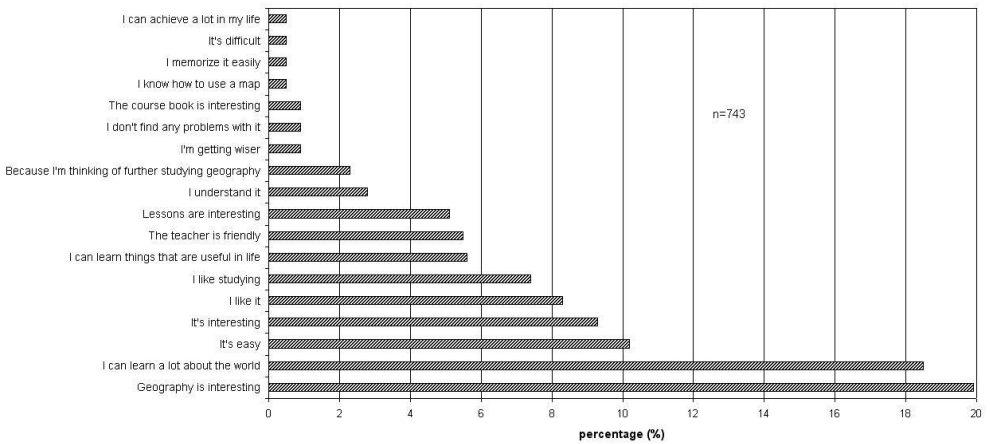


Fig. 5. Main reasons for pleasures in learning geography according to the pupils of lower secondary schools

Pupils who like learning geography accounted for this opinion by saying that ‘geography is interesting’ (almost 20%), ‘I can learn a lot about the world’ (18%), geography is ‘easy’, ‘interesting’ and ‘I like it’. In these answers one can also observe the opinion about geography teacher – 5% of respondents wrote that ‘lessons are interesting’ and 6% of pupils answered that ‘teacher is friendly’ (fig. 5).

The next question was: *Which of these issues are the most problematic for you and which of them do you like the most?* The respondents could tick more than one answer, distinguishing between the topics which they have the biggest problems with and those that were easy for them to learn.

The results from all the classes showed that the favorite topics were: the Earth's movements (astronomy), continents and selected countries of the world (world's regional geography), the own region and geography of Poland. Pupils found it difficult to learn about the geological history of the Earth, economy and social issues in the world and also topics connected with the cartography (fig. 6). These results were identical to the opinion of pupils from the third grades who covered almost everything from the required geographical material. According to the third-graders, the most problematic issues were ones from the geological history of the Earth as well as economy and social issues in the world. The most liked topics were: world's regional geography, the own region and geography of Poland and issues connected with astronomy.

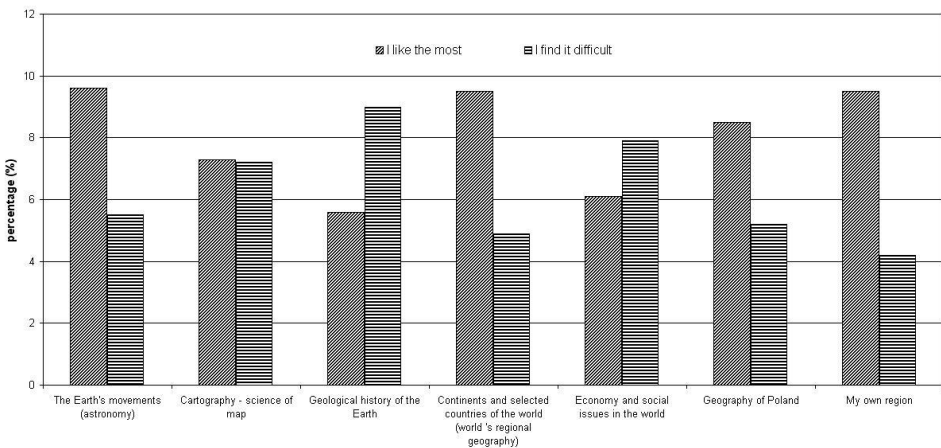


Fig. 6. The attitude of the pupils of lower secondary schools towards particular issues learned during geography lessons

For the question *'Do you think that the number of geography lessons in lower secondary school is sufficient?'* almost 80% of respondents answered positively. Only the answers of pupils from the third grades were slightly different – 75% said 'yes' and almost $\frac{1}{4}$ found that number of geography lessons is not sufficient enough to cover all the required geographical material. Pupil's opinions clearly vary from teacher's views on that matter. The latter claim that the number of geography lessons is too small.

The answer to the next question was a chance to see the pupil's opinion about the usefulness of geographical contents taught during the lessons. The respondents were to write whether and when the geographical knowledge was used by them in their lives. In particular grades, the positive answers were in majority: 61% (first grade), 57% (second grade) and 66% (third grade). It can be assumed that the majority of respondents observed that both geographical

knowledge and geographical skills taught at school were useful in a lot of daily life situations. The most of the answers involved map reading and orientation field, especially during trips and travels. Large group of pupils considered geography as a subject that allowed them to learn interesting facts which they could later boast with among friends (fig. 7).

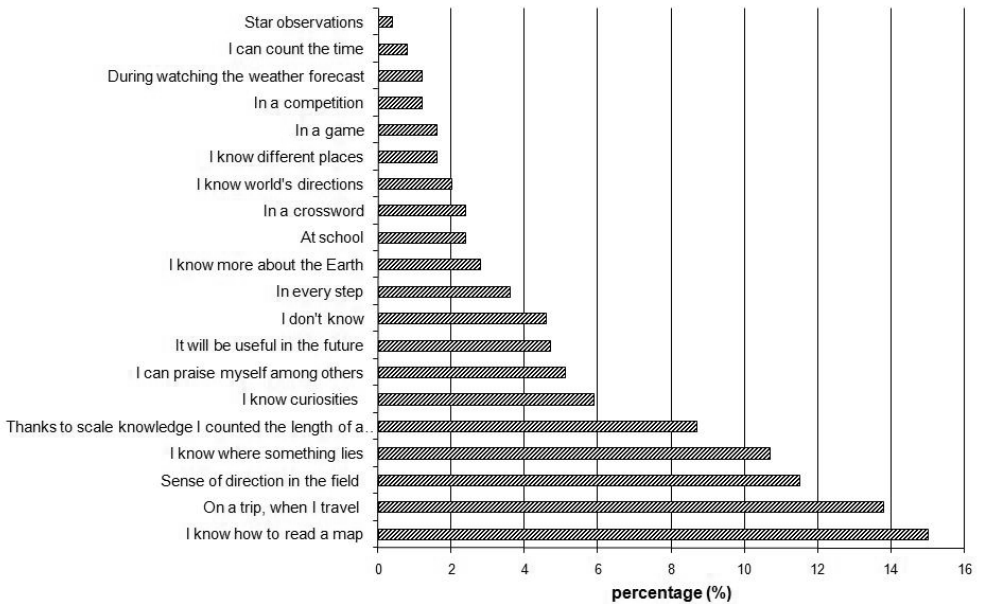


Fig. 7. The pupil's opinions about the usefulness of geographical knowledge learnt at school

In the eighth question in the survey, pupils were asked to choose three out of eight elements which '*could be more frequently used during geography lessons*'. Pupils suggested using more pictures and films (27.5%), organizing more field activities (27.2%), applying more group work (20.1%) and educational games (12.1%). One can assume that pupils want activities which they like most and which are often not applied during geography lessons. This interpretation is proved by the fact that the least (less than 5%) number of pupils expects material revisions, exercises, book work and homeworks (fig. 8).

The next question was a chance to see how many pupils had an opportunity to learn geography 'beyond a classroom' – that is, during field activities. It proved, however, that only one in five pupils has participated in this form of lesson. About 80% of respondents from all the classes have never had a geography lesson outside their classrooms.

The following two questions allowed gathering information about whether the pupils used the opportunity to develop their skills by attending extra-cur-

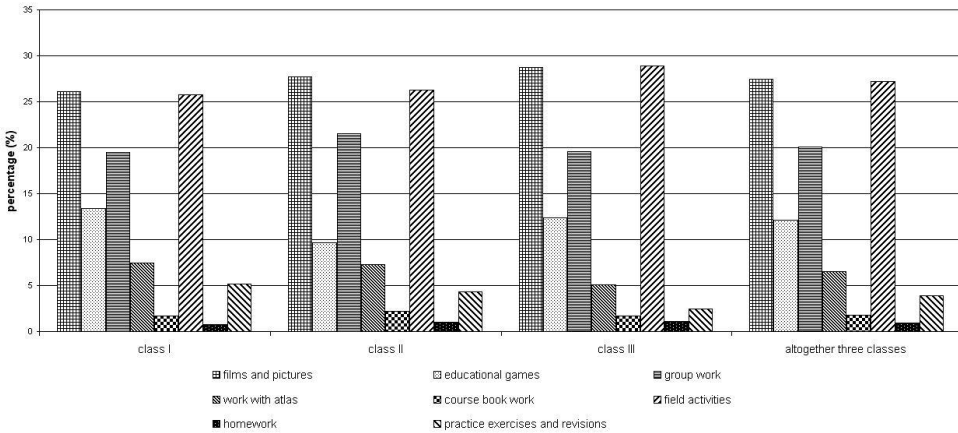


Fig. 8. The answers of lower secondary school pupils to question ‘What could be more frequently used during geography lessons?’

ricular activities, such as joining geographical clubs or participating in geographical competitions. These questions also showed what the reasons for participating in mentioned about activities are. 93% of respondents have not attended the geographical club because of the lack of time (as much as 44% of the answers), lack of the problems connected with geography (20%), not being interested in it (8.9%) and having no will to attend such a club (7.3%) (fig.9). Some of the respondents (7%) have attended the geographical club because, in their opinion, these meetings help in learning (26%), prepare for geographical competitions (18.5%), are conducted interestingly (about 15%), are the chance to check geographical knowledge and skills (about 15%) and prepare for the lower secondary school final exam (about 11%).

For the question ‘Would you take part in a geographical competition if one was organized in your school?’ in each of the surveyed classes negative answers were in majority. As much as 70% of pupils responded negatively. The most common is a pupils’ lack of belief in them (28% of respondents). Pupils often wrote that they were ‘too weak’ from this subject or they ‘couldn’t manage’. The second explanation was ‘I can’t/don’t understand the subject’ (18%) and a third one was ‘I don’t like geography’ (15%). Among the frequent answers were also ‘I don’t have time for this (8%), ‘I don’t like competitions’ (7%) and ‘I wouldn’t want to take part in it’ (6%). On the other hand, pupils, who would like to participate in a competition if one was organized in their school, would do it because they ‘like geography’ (28%) or because they would like to check their knowledge (18%). Another important, especially from the pupils’ point of view, factor for taking part in a competition, is the opportunity to get a higher mark from geography as well as obtain extra points which may be necessary when

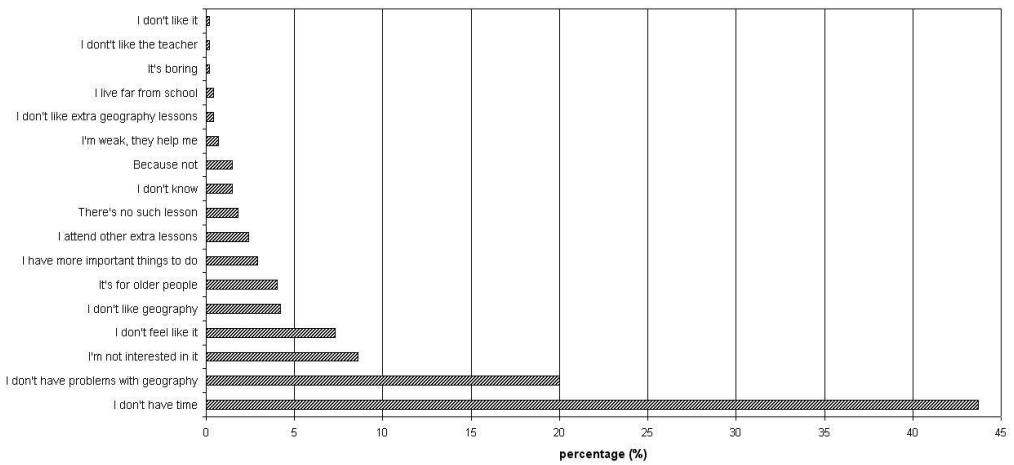


Fig. 9. The answers of lower secondary school pupils to question *Why do not you participate in the meetings of geographical club?*

applying for secondary school (14%). Some of the respondents 'like competitions' (11%) or think that they are 'good from geography' (10%). It may be observed that such a competition is interesting for ambitious pupils.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Obtained results, that the geography is located in the further positions of the subject importance hierarchy and that this subject is considered as 'indifferent' for the large group of respondents, are the confirmation of other authors' results. In the studies carried out by Mularczyk and Kowalska (2003) in some of the schools located in Lodzkie Voivodeship, geography was put in the tenth position (and penultimate, thirteenth position in the big cities of that region) of the subject importance hierarchy. In the less representative studies conducted by Zielińska and Zieliński (2007) in only one lower secondary school in Kielce, geography took, in particular classes, fifth, sixth and seventh place. Sadoń-Osowiecka (2004) also wrote about the distant place of geography in the school subjects' ranking on the basis of the study conducted among geography students as well as teachers and pupils in lower secondary schools. In this work, similarly to the authors of studies in Lodz, observed a decrease of interest in geography and its importance among other school subjects. In the earlier works it has also been observed that pupils adopt indifferent attitude towards geography.

Similarly to the other studies, a majority of respondents considered geography as a difficult subject, learned mostly due to obligation. Young people

complain that geography has too many facts to remember (Mularczyk, Kowalska 2003).

A majority of pupils claim that geographical knowledge is useful in life, giving as examples field orientation and the ability to read maps. In this aspect, the results of author's study differ from the former ones. In the studies of Kowalska and Mularczyk (2003), the respondents living in big cities claimed that geography is only slightly useful in further education and daily life (unlike the respondents living on the countryside who better assess the usefulness of geography). Sadoń-Osowiecka (2004) also wrote about the low assessment of geography in the matter of usefulness in future life and work career. Respondents of these studies defined geography as a discipline of purely scientific nature, completely unrelated to the reality.

The results of survey showed that according to the vast majority of pupils (around 80%) the number of geography lessons in the lower secondary school is sufficient. In this respect, pupils' opinions are similar to ones from the previous studies. In the work of Zielińska i Zieliński (2007), 55% of respondents claimed that appropriate number of hours is devoted to teaching geography at school. Alike opinions are also to be found in the studies of Mularczyk and Kowalska.

As in previous studies, the respondents from all classes suggested organizing more field activities, using illustrations and educational videos as the ways for making the geography lessons more interesting. The studies of Grad an Grzyb (2006), conducted among the secondary school students in Krakow and Bilgoraj, pointed that pupils value more the practical lessons and they prefer working in groups, which gives them a chance to use geographical knowledge and skills they had previously acquired.

Summarizing the studies, one can conclude as follows:

1. The results of survey conducted in the lower secondary schools of big cities located in the Silesian Voivodeship on the perception of geography as a school subject correspond with the observations of other authors (distant place of geography on the list of school subjects, pupil's indifferent attitude towards geography).

2. Students prefer using visual materials (using videos and illustrations) by teachers when learning geography as well as learning during field activities, group work or by playing educational games. Teachers should be encouraged to use these methods in classes.

3. The study confirms the discrepancy of teachers' and pupils' assessment regarding the number of geography lessons at school and, at the same time, convergence of their views on the usefulness of geographical knowledge in everyday life.

4. The survey with changed question about the position of geography in the ranking of school subjects was used in both stages of the study. The method of

obtaining the information about the position of the subject by grading it with points, according to the importance, seems to be more reliable.

5. In case of continuation of this type of study, it is recommended to choose schools according to their location – in the cities with different number of residents.

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