

# School Geography Textbooks in Francophone Belgium<sup>1</sup>

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Since the 1969 reform of secondary education within the state system, and since the 1972 reform in the catholic system, school geography textbooks have virtually disappeared, apart from the introduction of some new texts in the catholic system during the 1980s. This unusual situation within Francophone Belgium raises certain questions to which I shall attempt to respond.

## **What textbooks were available before the reform of education and how were they used?**

Geography textbooks published after the Second World War came mainly from two publishing houses: Wesmael-Charlier and La Procure. They focused essentially on content, largely dictated by the official curricula which outlined what was to be taught year by year. The syllabuses pertaining to each of the three systems of education and to the two main branches of study (classical and modern humanities) did not differ significantly, consequently the number of textbooks used did not exceed a dozen from Wesmael-Charlier, and six from La Procure. The former publishers supplied all systems of education whilst the latter supplied mainly the catholic system.

At that time the textbook was the essential instrument used by the teacher. Each textbook was closely geared to the official curriculum, it was divided in a series of chapters corresponding to lessons being taught and contained all the knowledge required of students for the examinations. Textbooks contained sufficient material and were well illustrated; the teacher only needed to supply a few extra teaching aids to bring some material up-to-date and to motivate the students.

## **Why has the reform of education resulted in the disappearance of traditional textbooks?**

In spite of attempts made to launch new type textbooks after the reform, notably by the publisher Erasme (textbooks associated with workbooks or exercises) and by *Sciences et Lettres* (two books for the first cycle of study), textbooks gradually disappeared for four principal reasons:

- (1) *Changes in the aims of education.* The emphasis of education changed from the learning of content to 'learning how to learn'. This implied a different pedagogical approach in the classroom, more flexibility in the curriculum and a concentration on process rather than content. Traditional textbooks

with their emphasis on content and their rigidity of approach did not lend themselves to these new aims.

- (2) *The multiplication of syllabuses.* With the reform of education, geography within the two main educational systems became differentiated. In the catholic system geography is only taught as a separate subject in the third and fourth years. In the first cycle of studies it forms part of environmental studies (history, economics and sociology), and in the third cycle it is part of social studies. Further, in the state system of education (transferred to the French Community in two phases — 1980 and 1988–89 — following two revisions of the Belgian constitution), geography is tailored to the various curricular options offered to students. Consequently in 1992 for example, there were not less than 32 different syllabuses in geography. It proved impossible to develop textbooks for all the possible syllabuses.
- (3) *The stress laid on the environment and current issues.* The new education's predilection for student-centred learning has favoured environmental studies and the study of current issues. Thus environmental studies in the first cycle begin from an examination of the pupils' own environment from which they can derive, using their own experiences, notions of the spatial, temporal and socio-economic factors which affect their lives. Similarly in the third cycle, geographical ideas are derived from the study of a problem case within the students local environment. Further current issues feature largely in the reformed education. These are seen as a means of preparing students for the world in which they will have to live. Teachers also feel that concentration on these issues helps to motivate students and is responsible for public recognition of the educational value of geography. But environments are diverse and current issues difficult to foretell, it is therefore difficult to conceive of these being treated in a textbook.
- (4) *Limited size of the market.* The population of Francophone Belgium is just over 4.2 million people, less than half the population of Paris. The publishers' market was always a small one, but the diverse nature of the education system and the multiplicity of syllabuses has reduced it to a negligible size, not to mention the borrowing and photocopying of books by students. Virtually the market had vanished and publishers concentrated their efforts on producing atlases.

### **What is the situation today?**

From the mid-1980s the two traditional publishers (now De Boeck-Wesmael and Erasme, the latter having merged with La Procure) have brought out a few textbooks. These differ from the traditional textbooks in several ways:

- They relate to certain syllabuses or parts of syllabuses of the catholic system, for example, the study of specified village or city environments for the first cycle, the study of certain countries for the third year or for the third cycle, physical geography for the fourth year. There is therefore no overall textbook series for Francophone Belgian students, only books which relate to topics which have some degree of commonality (physical geography) or where there is a lack of documentary evidence (on specific countries).

- Each book covers only one topic thereby enabling the teacher to make a choice.
- The books contain documents, definitions, objectives, exercises, suggested strategies and notes for the teacher. They are more like sourcebooks than textbooks.

These books seem to meet the needs of the new pedagogy, concentrating on students' learning. They provide useful teaching aids for the teachers who are free to choose from among the documentary evidence and exercises, those that suit their particular purpose. Such textbooks are little different from the documentary folders published by the FEGEPRO (Fédération des Professeurs de Géographie Francophone), either in its revue *GEO* or in the folders published in collaboration with such organisations as the European Union's Press Office, various ministries, transport bodies or firms supplying energy, which are also widely used by teachers.

## Conclusion

Given that there has been more than two decades of experience with the new practices it is possible to assess the benefits and costs of these. The lack of, or at least the paucity of textbooks has made the work that teachers have to undertake more complex, especially for beginners. Not only must teachers organise and manage the learning of their students in class, but they have to select appropriate content, find relevant documents, and design and reproduce worksheets. This is no doubt a creative and stimulating task, turning the teacher into an artisan of educational practice; but it also difficult and tiring if one wants to keep up-to-date. Further, it is Utopian to believe that teachers can excel in all these activities, especially when one is aware of all the problems met by teams who are engaged in drafting the modern textbooks. Thus, apart from those folders produced by such organisations as the FEGEPRO or the new textbooks, one must admit that good lessons are rare and that the majority of worksheets given to pupils consist mainly of collations of documents derived from foreign textbooks (especially French textbooks), from learned texts or university courses, or from other worksheets. Lessons appear more as collections of juxtaposed documents than structured learning situations. Such a state of affairs has contributed to a decline in the status of geography which is being seen in schools as a soft option with an unfocused and incoherent content.

It seems, therefore, imperative at a time when Belgian Francophone education is yet again being reorganised, to refocus geographical education on its basic concepts and skills, and to furnish it with textbooks dealing with the fundamentals of the subject, grouped together to assist the geographical understanding of adolescents.

## Note

1. Translated from the French by Norman Graves.