

FIELD TRIPS (EXCURSIONS) – NEW POSSIBILITIES TO IMPROVE THE GEOGRAPHY TRAINING

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Abstract: Field trips (school trips) are a traditional question in geography education and it is naturally due to its particular importance. Using field trips the students learn more about the surrounding environment (geographical space) and foreign countries and nations, and respectively about their homeland in direct observation and in its natural state. The important features of school trip are: stimulation of activity for understanding and acquiring the geography curriculum content; learning the notions on the basis of “superior” observation; cultivating students’ practical skills and habits; developing cognitive competence of students and it also has a strong positive impact on pupils’ health condition. Furthermore, it is very valuable to investigate the different functions and purposes which excursions can perform in particular stages of learning process: in introduction - to motivate and address the problematic situation and subject matter; in presentation of new content - to gather materials and information; in assessment - to strengthen and deepen the learnt information; in transfer – to transmit and apply acquired knowledge and skills.

The above-mentioned arguments are the basis for our scientific interest in this research field. According to us, the traditional presentation of field trips in geography training methodic in Bulgaria can be improved and enriched with up-to-date notions and interpretations from “modern” didactics (in our country and abroad). If we search for accomplishing the full effectiveness of field trip, than we should present it in a new plan using analysis of it in a different perspective. The field trip is accepted as specific methodic category - a big one and part of the so-called “big” methods in geography training (macro methods). Such thesis is proven with the following features of field trip:

- it has "internal structure and target orientation";
- it has a specific character (respectively "more closed" or "more open");
- it has well-defined targeting (to develop cognitive competence or activity).

In current paper is presented a different notion about field trip (school trip) related to its:

- nature;
- specific features;
- role and position in geography training.

Key words: field trip (school trip), geography training, “big” methods (macro methods)

Field trip (school trip) is “a specific and very important element in the system of geography training” (Кънчев, 2000: 260). Geography didactics in Bulgaria defines it as a form of training and as a form of organization of the training-educational process. This definition, in our opinion, is not entirely up to date in the context of modern trends in geography training. We support this statement with the following considerations:

- The main problem in geography didactics in Bulgaria is the efficiency of the educational process and in this context the role of field trip is unconditional;
- Planning and implementing an effective geographic educational process requires the following of a comprehensive methodical training model;
- And in such training model the school trip should take its respective place.

Didactical modeling and methodical models are not new to geography didactics in the countries with advanced educational systems and they have long proved their worth. The various notions of didactical modeling can also be found in scientific researches of Bulgarian authors (e.g. Радев, 2014; Василева, 2016a and 2016b; Vasileva, 2017a). In an exemplary model of geography teaching methods elaborated by Vasileva (2017b) the field trips are presented as methodologically large form and one of the “big” methods of geography training. In current paper is accepted the cited comprehension of field trips.

The field trip is a “big” method of training as it has its “internal structure and target orientation”; specific character (respectively “more closed” or “more open”) and well-defined targeting (to develop cognitive competence or activity). Excursions are described as school learning or so-called organized school learning and training outside classroom. With the same or similar meaning concepts “field work” and “working with real objects” are used in geography didactics. This can be explained by the fact that as specific ways of working in geography education are

defined the methods of collecting information, processing, presenting and interpreting it. Within a school trip the most important specific is that pupils are making real "field work" and gather the needed information in direct access to reality. In-depth processing and presentation of collected information takes place after the excursion, and then a new source of information is created that is subsequently interpreted.

And we have to answer the important question - What are the main goals of school trip?

- During the field trip geographical space and reality are studied and become known as well as homeland.
- School trip helps pupils to gather their own experience which is far more valuable than the "distorted" information transmitted and received from other sources of information.
- During the field trip the self-directed learning ("learning by doing") is carried out and geographic working methods are practiced.
- School trip supports the joint activity and cooperation between teacher and pupils and among pupils themselves. During the excursion the social goals are much easier to be accomplished than in the classroom.
- Field trip enhances the emotional relationship with surrounding environment including one's living space.

Apart from the above-mentioned goals the school trip can pursue other results - for example to increase pupils' motivation for learning by offering more interesting problems related to practice.

Of course, the school trip has also negative traits but by comparing them with the positive ones we find that the field trip benefits are much greater than the problems of organizing it. The greater workload of the teacher is justified at least by the limitation of the problems with discipline in the classroom.

A special feature of the school trip as a methodically large form is that it introduces not only the "small" methods but also some other "big" forms in training and education - for example games and projects (Василева, М. 2017b).

The group work is preferred for the field trip. Unlike group work in class, there are fewer difficulties to implement it in out-of-class situations. For example, the communication between pupils and mutual support between them is stimulated during the excursion. Namely the convenient communication and social interaction between pupils from a pedagogical point of view make group work the most appropriate form to be used during the excursion. Cooperative work between pupils is also appropriate for field work but in contrast the individual activity has a limited role.

Frontal training is the most appropriate in an illustrative excursion when an area/terrain is presented and observed. Frontal training also dominates in the strengthening and application of the excursion results. When conducting a school trip it is also necessary to take into account the specific of explored real geographic object. For example, if we visit an industrial plant it is appropriate to combine frontal training with pupils' self-directed learning (for strengthening the knowledge and skills) and use the help of experts with regard to security and supervision of pupils, and production peculiarities.

Exploratory learning dominates among the action forms of training. It can be done alone or in cooperation but it is conducted primarily in group work and using games. And it is important to highlight that in such cases less cognitive goals are accomplished but many ways of working are practiced (targeting at instrumental sphere of training goals), and the mastering of social and affective competence is achieved.

The presentation held by teacher is the other preferred action form of training used in field trips - especially for visits to industrial enterprises and museums. It is also predominant training form in illustrative and other types of excursions where the teacher has to provide the basic knowledge needed to perform the tasks. The presentation held by teacher is also used to introduce various work techniques that have to be demonstrated initially by the teacher so that the pupils can then effectively and expediently work them out.

The approach of presenting can be conducted not only by the teacher or the expert but also by the pupils themselves. A paper made by student could present one's agricultural experience, leisure or environmental topics, and also a short report presented on the spot. Apart from the verbal forms of presentation demonstration of activities could be used as well, e.g. it is possible to perform natural outdoor experiments or plot the different stages of a geographic process.

The developmental approach by asking questions and impose impulses is achieved in frontal training when the field trip is conducted. This approach is commonly used during observations of a geographic object or process. After that the geographic phenomena are described and larger relationships and processes are explained to pupils. The training that applies series of questions and answers with the possible insertion of verbal and visual impulses creates the opportunity for more student responses and develops critical thinking.

A very close methodical interrelation is observed between the field trip and the project: an excursion could be part of a project for the near-by surroundings. Such an excursion is always a purposeful work trip that takes place in a project implementation phase and with the use of numerous specific ways of working, gathering information and obtaining research results. The school trip and the project in the nearby area have many common features like high self-directed learning and activity orientation of pupils, direct communication and joint learning in group work, high engagement of students, high degree of inclusion in the different stages of excursion as compared to classroom training. Simultaneously between field trip and the project exists gradually expanding differences that are above all in:

- The student's self-determination is always heavily emphasized in the project compared to a field trip;
- Topics and educational content of a project are related to real problems and locations and present geographical but also sociocultural and political conflicts;
- Projects stand out with a stronger orientation to students than a field trip. Thus the projects enhance the exploratory learning of pupils;
- The final result/product of a project (as opposed to a final product of the field trip) has practical value and appliance. So it becomes obvious for the students that learning is of a real worth and thus is a prerequisite for changing the environment (activity orientation and behavioral pattern).

Frequently, the field trip is used and is a stage of conducting project when the topic is inter-subjective, e.g. the origin of contemporary landscape, historical development of homeland, economic structure in the surrounding area, etc.

Fig. 1. School trip in different stages of the training process

Introduction	A brief real contact with the terrain aiming to increase pupils' motivation and awaken their interest in the subject.
Presentation of new content	Conducting a purposeful field trip and ensuring new information in direct contact with environment/subject.
Strengthening and deepening	To illustrate and consolidate abstract knowledge.

Furthermore, it is very valuable to investigate the different functions and purposes which excursions can perform in particular stages of learning process: in introduction - to motivate and address the problematic situation and subject matter; in presentation of new content - to gather materials and information; in assessment - to strengthen and deepen the learnt information; in transfer – to transmit and apply acquired knowledge and skills. (Rinschede, 1997: 43-46). In current paper the field trip provides the following options when is used appropriately (Figure 1).

Despite the variety of field trips, it is pointed out that they are arranged in three steps: preparation, implementation and follow-up activities having in mind the change in activity between the teacher and the students. It is proposed the following algorithm for conducting the school trip (Figure 2):

Preparation	The main activities are done and responsibility belongs to the teacher.
Implementation	The activity of students dominates by gathering materials and information. The teacher performs rather a counseling function and offers help.
Follow-up activities	The collected data is presented and evaluated. Then the activity is shared between the teacher and the pupils but the pupils' activity still dominates.

Fig. 2. An exemplary algorithm for conducting a field trip

And in conclusion:

- We reiterate the need for a contemporary interpretation on the subject of the field trip.
- We put stress on its irreplaceable role in enhancing the effectiveness of the geographic educational process.
- We lay emphasis on the fact that the field trip has to take its proper place in the geography teaching methodology, respectively in the training methods model.

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