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The Analysis of the Content of the Geography School Curriculum for the Section *Country Studies* in the Republic of Kazakhstan

The concept of improving the content and structure of school geographic education was based on the following logic of building the subject: *Earth Science—Country Studies (physical geography of continents and oceans)—Geography of the Republic of Kazakhstan—Geography of the World*. The content of all geography courses in school was built on the basis of comprehensive country studies along with the scientific popularization of geographical knowledge available to basic school students. In the modern geography curriculum for 7–9 and 10–11 grades the content of regional studies is of socio-economic and geopolitical nature. A feature of the curriculum is the emphasis of students on mathematical modeling, on research activities, it is proposed to introduce the use of previously acquired knowledge to achieve the students' goals; new knowledge is closely related to previous and considered in terms of the information received; the complexity of the topic or subject increases with each repetition; the spiral educational program allows to move from simple ideas to more complex in a convenient way. The content of school geography also needs further integration of the content of physical and socio-economic geography in unified country studies courses. Comprehensive country studies create a reliable foundation for holistic geography and serve as the core of a comprehensive study of individual territories of the world. In connection with the change in modern curricula, the hours of the regional chapter have decreased and have gone through other changes. To improve country studies in Kazakhstan a high-quality teaching method is used. Due to improvements in teaching country studies 300 teachers took part in an online Google questionnaire prepared by researchers. The received data was evaluated by SWOT analysis.

Keywords: *Geography education, regional studies, curriculum, learning objectives, spiral method, Kazakhstan*

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Аналіз змісту розділу «Країнознавство» оновленої шкільної навчальної програми з географії у Казахстані

У статті розкрито зміст розділу «Країнознавство» оновленої шкільної навчальної програми з географії. До 2016 року в Казахстані зміст і структура шкільної географічної освіти відповідали такій програмі: землезнавство (6 кл.) — фізична географія материків і океанів (7 кл.) — географія Республіки Казахстан (8–9 кл.) — економічна та соціальна географія світу (10–11 кл.). Раніше зміст шкільної географії розглядався на основі всебічного й комплексного країнознавства. Сьогодні країнознавча освіта у школі має соціально-економічний і геополітичний характер. Нова навчальна програма для учнів має виражений акцент на математичне моделювання та дослідницьку діяльність. У зв'язку з особливостями викладання розділу «Країнознавство» 300 викладачів взяли участь в онлайн-опитуванні, яке проводилося у форматі Google. Отримані дані були оцінені й проаналізовані за допомогою SWOT-аналізу. Згідно з результатами аналізу рішення нових науково-методичних завдань сучасної шкільної географії та проєктування освітнього процесу, як і раніше, вимагають всебічного вивчення.

Ключові слова: *географічна освіта, країнознавча освіта, навчальна програма, цілі навчання, спіральний метод, Казахстан*

Introduction

The development of democratic processes taking place in all spheres of Kazakhstani society led to a refocusing of goals and a renewal of the content of the school education system. In modern society a new social order for school geography has been defined—to realize a holistic vision of the picture of the world, based on the acquired knowledge and skills, as well as the methods of independent activity of students, to form their initiative, the desire to creatively solve educational problems, tolerance, the ability to successfully socialize in society. The updated content and structure of the geography curriculum are determined by the specific features of the subject. If earlier geography was a science that describes new lands, countries, and their research, now the function of science is aimed at determining the impact of man on the environment, on the integrity of the ecosystem, on the pre-rotation of the harmful effects of man on nature; on the search for ways to preserve minerals; on the definition of cause-and-effect relationships occurring in nature; on the study of political, demographic, and economic processes occurring in the world. So what innovations have been introduced in the educational program in geography? First, it is a change in the content of the subject. Secondly, these are the evaluation goals that correspond to these sections. Each goal is aimed at developing certain skills. Skills are classified according to Bloom's taxonomy. Third, the spiral nature of the curriculum. Previously, each grade (from 6th to 11th grade) studied a certain branch of geography (6th grade—*Physical Geography*; 7th grade—*Geography of Continents and Oceans*; 8th grade—*Physical Geography of Kazakhstan*; 9th grade—*Economic and Social Geography of Kazakhstan*; 10th grade—*Economic and Social Geography of the World*; 11th grade—*Regional Overview of the Countries of the World*). Now, according to the updated curriculum, the main sections of geography are repeated from grade to grade, the assessment goals are complicated, and the lesson content is expanded ***[1]***.

In this regard, the content of regional studies has changed completely. Instead of teaching developed and developing countries of the world in the previous comprehensive method, the concepts of rating, GDP, GNP, and parity were introduced. This created some difficulties for students and subject teachers.

The current state of the researched issue

This study provides a retrospective analysis of the process of regional education in Kazakhstan. The change in the content of country studies in the curriculum was analyzed. For a number of years, research in the methodology of teaching geography has been conducted on the unique experience of foreign countries to identify the state of school and university education, and its compliance with social changes ***[2]***. A particular interest is caused by the analysis of the development of national systems of geographic education abroad, their transformation in connection with the adaptation of the educational process to new civil and political institutions, and the national economic space ***[3]***. To understand the structure and content of geographical science, it is necessary, first, to emphasize its multi-object nature: the unity of nature, economy, and population; secondly, its complexity: the combined consideration of the complex structure of various objects; third—its territoriality ***[4]***.

Geography occupies a unique place within scientific disciplines and school subjects as it combines knowledge about the environment, space, and time. In most countries, geography is a classical part of the curriculum either as a separate school subject or it is integrated into natural and social sciences. Nevertheless, the subject of geography all over the world comes across threats in the form of attempts to reduce or even cancel the teaching of geography that brings up the issue of the place of geography in education systems ***[5, 6]***. A global reduction in academic hours for each geography subject is being observed, which diminishes the interest of students to study geography at higher school levels ***[7]***. Interest in studying geography at universities is also gradually declining. Perhaps this is the reason for discussing the value of geography in everyday life in the publications of J. Van der Schee, Š. Karolčík, S. K. Shrestha, A. G. Dizon, T. Binns, A. Kinder ***[8–12]***.

Geographical education mainly proceeds from the fact that the world of the near future will be very problematic, with many urgent problems, which are presented as the legitimation of the importance of geographical knowledge and skills. Education of the future applies a completely different approach to the future. The future—in the plural since many differ-

ent versions of the future can be imagined—should be the object of teaching and learning with the use of powerful knowledge and the practice of vision and reflection. Future-oriented school geography requires extensive knowledge and to be aware of the contextuality of all the knowledge. It is also a natural environment for pedagogical innovation. And, finally, a future orientation in geography will help to take a critical position towards the sense and nonsense of the "skills of the twenty-first century" movement ***[13]***.

The purpose of this work is to analyze the content of the school geography curriculum for the section *Country Studies* in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The purpose of the study is to validate the cross-cultural conceptual foundations of developing the subject activity of schoolchildren in teaching geography that enables them to expand the content and change the profile of schoolchildren's activities in terms of quality, to successfully master functionally significant skills in the process of geography study.

Under present-day conditions, the development of geography teaching methods is unthinkable without taking into account the trends in the development of geographical knowledge requiring the actualization of such features of geographical thinking as a globality, spatiality (territoriality), projectivity, complexity, environmental friendliness, prognosticality, constructiveness, reflexivity, which are specific to a modern functionally educated person. In this regard there arises a need to expand the activity potential of school geography based on the extension of the content and qualitative change in the profile of the subject activity of students, the development of their skills in the integrated application of knowledge and skills to solve life problems ***[14]***.

Geographical education is connected with education as a geographical phenomenon and therefore naturally accepts registers of space, scale, location, and time. Following that geographers recognize that the educational path from entry to results is differentiated and relative and it is influenced by various political, cultural, and socio-economic factors.

N. N. Baranskiy, as it is known, introduced the regional-country principle into the basis of the first Soviet textbook on economic geography having regarded the entire triad by fields: nature, population, and economy. This approach allows us to synthesize information about the nature, population, and economy of a particular territory (region, country, district, locality), to study the constant "substance exchange" between society and nature in the simplest and most natural way. It opens up the most favorable opportunities for the visual presentation and emotional perception of educational material, the formation, in essence, of the most important thing—the "image of the place" ***[15]***. And it must be mentioned that in the second half of the 1960s, during the transition of the Soviet school to a new content of education, comprehensive regional studies courses of 6th and 7th grades were replaced by physical geography courses. As it looked at that time it created the best conditions for introducing the foundations of geographical science into teaching. That is why they sacrificed complex regional studies in favor of physical geography and, to some extent, physical and geographical regional studies. Respectively, economic and geographical regional studies were fixed in the next grades ***[16]***.

The variety of school disciplines should be referred to as the natural-scientific or social-scientific cycles. In this regard, it was a harder time for geography, which, as you know, includes two components—physical and geographical and socio-economic. Each of them has its own object of study, its own methods, and its own laws. The content of school geography presents a set of worldview ideas, scientific knowledge (concepts, ideas, facts, etc.), intellectual and practical skills, as well as experience of creative activity, which are subject to retention in the process of teaching geography. Throughout the 20th century attempts were made in the USSR to develop such content that would correspond to the scientific knowledge of academic geography. By the 1980s a sufficiently practical system of geographical education was developed and justified which intended first the study of physical (grades 5–7), and then socio-economic (grades 8–9) aspects ***[17]***.

However, the idea of integrating the above-mentioned elements of school geography in the form of a country-specific approach appeared long before that. The model of the classical study of geography from physical to socio-economic has a number of obvious advantages: (1) a well-structured logic of learning, where socio-economic knowledge is completely based on physical and geographical; (2) the nature and the processes occurring in it are more interesting to schoolchildren of early adolescence, therefore, the study begins with the physical-geographical block; (3) the most complex topics of geography included in the socio-economic block are studied at the last stages of school education; (4) the formation of a geographical picture of the world occurs at 2 different levels, which helps the student to see the differences between the physical and socio-economic aspects; (5) career guidance, which enables to accurately and

correctly determine the choice of one of the aspects of geography as a future professional interest.

In the 1990s—2000s integrated learning was of great importance in country studies. The country-specific education became of a physical and geographical nature in teaching the geography of continents for 7th grade and of socio-economic nature for 10–11 grades. The content allocated to the study of the natural component is gradually reduced, and the material on the complex description of continents, countries, etc. increases in textbooks.

In the study of geography special attention is paid in all countries of the world to the problems of the culture of interethnic relations, and attention increases to the educational possibilities of the subject. The humanistic and cultural potential of geography increases with the direct study of the diversity of life and activity of people in space, the role of man and humanity in the geographical environment, and the contribution of people to the development of world civilization ***[18]***. Such approaches to the content of geographical education are consistent with the main idea of the 29th Geographical Congress of the International Geographical Union—"Life in diversity" (Seoul, August 2000).

Comprehensive regional studies which combine the study of geography with the study of the material and spiritual culture of the peoples of the world, help students understand the reasons for the diversity of the nature of continents and oceans, large regions and individual countries, understand people of a different culture, who follow a different religion, and realize their place in life. Country studies knowledge will enable schoolchildren to see, understand and evaluate a complex system of relationships between people, territory, and natural environment ***[19]***.

Research Methods

This study applies one of the qualitative data collection methods—a review of documents and scientific literature. The review of documents includes an analysis of materials containing information on the investigated subjects. The findings were analyzed using descriptive and content-related analysis. Descriptive analysis was carried out by compilation and interpreting of data received in the research in terms of previously identified themes ***[20]***.

Data analysis. The advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and risks of the curriculum were analyzed using SWOT analysis. To analyze the difficulties of teaching the chapter of country studies, a survey of teachers of the Republic of Kazakhstan was conducted. The survey was conducted online in connection with the pandemic. One of the ways to get feedback is to create an electronic profile on Google HYPERLINK "https://docs.google.com/forms/. It is a free tool that allows to share a link with a questionnaire on social networks and get a code for the site. First, the preparatory work was assessed: the title and description, questions, and answers on the topic were written in a separate file. The topics identified in this study have a lot of data as they are designed according to the wide range of literature and content obtained from the research team. Besides conducting a study with several researchers is an important factor in enhancing the descriptive credibility of the study.

Presentation of the main material

A person, the peoples of continents and countries, their way of life, material and spiritual culture, the peculiarities of economic activity in specific natural conditions, both on land and in the adjacent waters of the oceans are to be placed at the center of the complex country-specific characteristics of the new geography textbooks. The selection of countries studied in geography lessons is advisable to make taking into account the specific character of the ethnic composition of the population, the lifestyle of the peoples of lowland and mountainous countries, the peculiarities of economic activity, and regional problems of interaction between man and nature ***[21]***.

Geography, like many other academic disciplines, is often presented as a set of a huge number of facts that it was important to remember. The national geographical school, due to the vastness of the Kazakh territory and the need to solve problems for its development, until recently was mainly busy with cataloging resources and assessing the prospects to involve them in the country's economy. Physical geography provided information about the location of these resources and economic geography built models of territorial production complexes around them. In modern conditions, it is more important to understand the laws of the development of geographical processes and to know where and how to get information about the state of geographical objects ***[22]***.

The secondary educational program on geography for the 7th–9th grades which came into force in

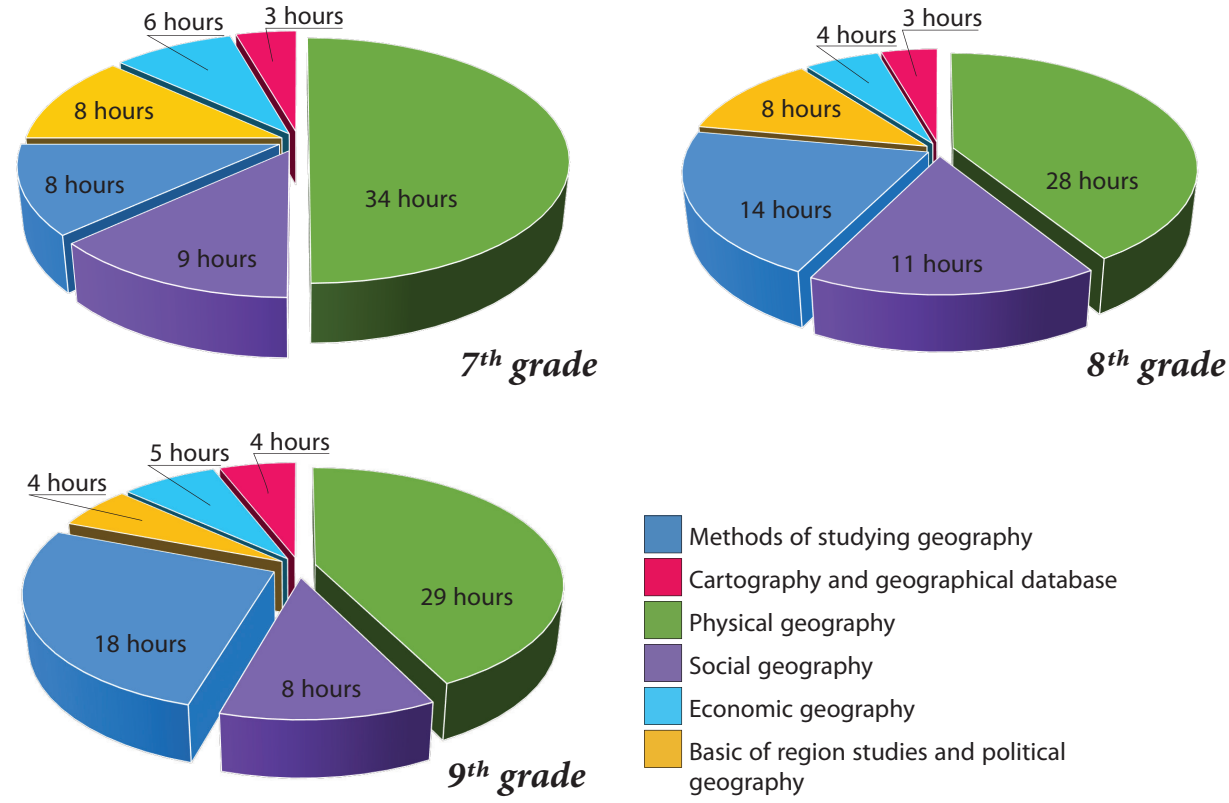


Fig. 1. Content of modern school geography (grades 7–9) in Kazakhstan

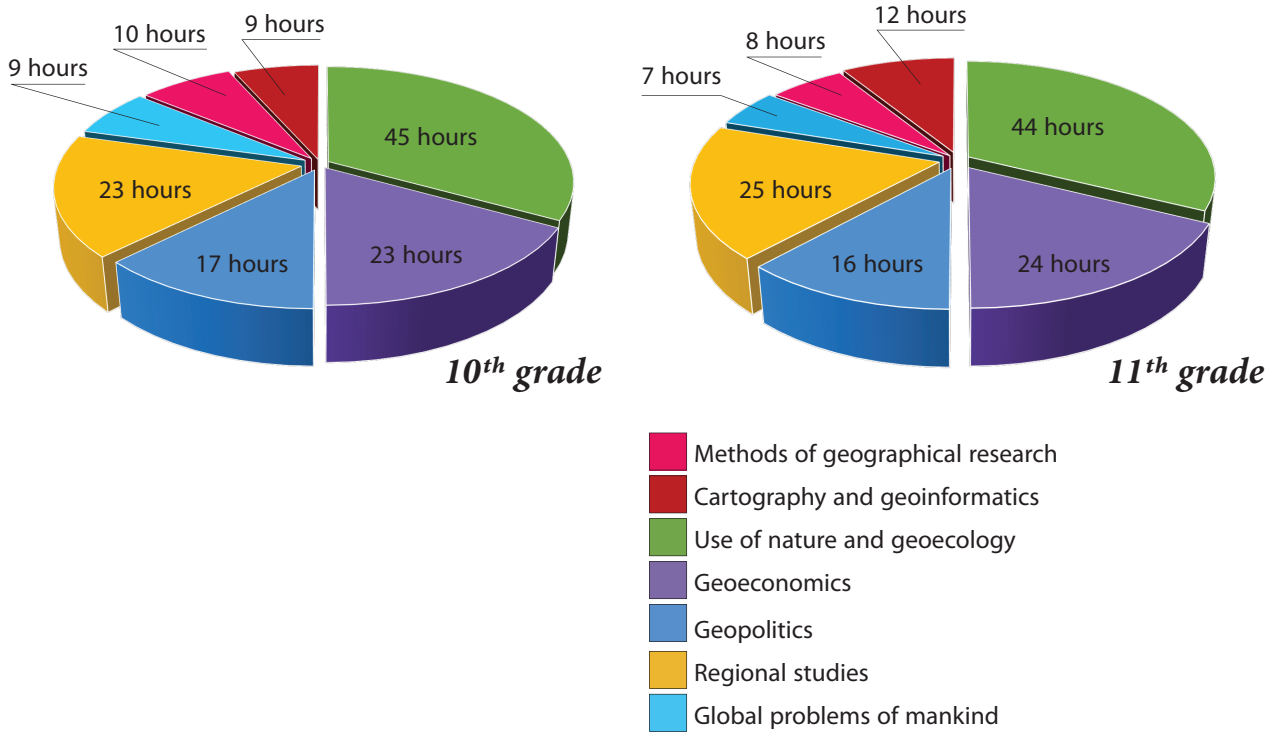


Fig. 2. Content of modern school geography (grades 10–11) in Kazakhstan

2016, differs from the previous secondary educational program. This curriculum was approved by Order No. 115 on April 3, 2013, by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan ***[23]***. On the basis of this new program, new textbooks were written. The classroom hours on the subject *Geography* for the 7th–9th grades is 2 hours a week, 68 hours a year. The content and the number of hours of the curriculum are given in ***Fig. 1 on p. 64***. In terms of the content the *Physical Geography* section takes up more hours. This section provides knowledge on the lithosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere. The commencement of the geography study from the 7th grade, not from the 6th grade as before, had a substantial impact on school teachers. As the geography of the 5th–6th grades has been transformed into the subject of natural science, the program is designed to study the subjects of physics, chemistry, biology, and geography.

In the 7th grade country studies are taught with the basics of political geography, where the concept of the geographical and economic-geographical position of the countries of the world is given. In the 8th grade issues of the political map of the world, the political typology of countries, quantitative and qualitative changes on the political map of the world, the political and geographical position of the countries of the world, political integration, interests, directions and initiatives of Kazakhstan in the processes of political integration are analyzed. In the 9th grade students study the following topics: the classification of countries of the world by the level of economic development; levels and goals of international organizations; the social, economic, and political-geographical position of the Republic of Kazakhstan; political and administrative khoronyms in Kazakhstan; forms of presentation of complex geographic information about the Republic of Kazakhstan ***[24]***.

The purpose of the updated curriculum for the 10th–11th grades is to provide students with geoecological, geoeconomical, and social knowledge and analysis of human global problems ***[25]***. In this case, in schools that provide knowledge in the natural-mathematical direction, the volume of the academic load for the 10th–11th grades makes up 4 hours a week, in schools of the social-humanitarian direction—3 hours a week. However, they are also taught only depending on the choice of specialty according to the school policy. If a student does not choose geography at school, this subject is not held. The content of the curriculum for grades the 10th–11th is given in ***Fig. 2 on p. 64.*** The displacement of the subject of geography in this way, that is, the transformation of this subject into a subject of choice raises many questions. Among neighboring countries, the subject of geography is taught in this way only in Kazakhstan.

10th–11th grades study the regions of the world and methods of comparing countries. Students rate the position of the Republic of Kazakhstan; forecast changes in the position of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the map of geographic regions in the context of globalization on the basis of research; study the dynamics of Kazakhstan's position in indices and ratings determined by a set of indicators (using the example of one optional rating) and geographic, social, economic and political factors that influence Kazakhstan's place; propose on the basis of calculations, ideas for increasing the rate of Kazakhstan in indices and ratings, determined by a set of indicators; determine the value, subjects and consumers of applied regional information; prepare and present in a creative form complex regional characteristics of the countries of the world for various target audiences; present in graphical form the ratings and indices of the countries of the world, determined by a set of indicators. The assigned tasks for schoolchildren in 10th–11th grades are difficult ***[26]***.

In ***Table 1*** the educational goals and objectives are given in accordance with the Bloom taxonomy under the section *Country Studies*. In the process of studying the section *Country Studies*, comparing the educational goals of the 7th grade and the 10th grade you can notice the specific features of the spiral teaching method. In the section *Country Studies* students need to form an opinion on the importance of the facts formed on the basis of the information provided. The Bloom taxonomy offers to classify the tasks of teachers assigned to students and, accordingly, educational goals. It divides the goals of education into three areas: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor, they can be described by the words "know," "understand," and "apply" ***[27]***. Also, the basis of the updated curriculum is based on the Bloom taxonomy. In the process of applying Bloom's taxonomy of cognition levels' technology the work with complex cognitive tables based on previously formed supportive knowledge, discovering connections between natural or socio-economic phenomena and processes is substantiated on drawing conclusions.

It is necessary to note that regional geography is completely "humanized" and strives to answer the main question—how people live in different natural, historical, cultural, and economic environments.

Table 1. **Learning objectives of the country studies' section 7, 11 grades in Kazakhstan**

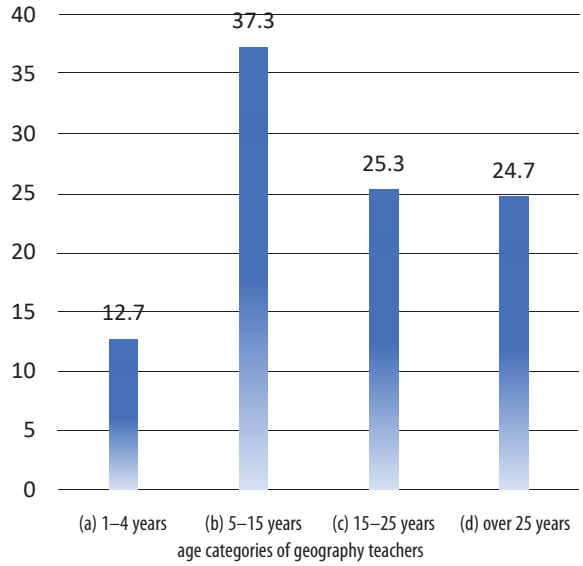
Thinking skills	Descriptions	Learning objectives 7-grade	Learning objectives 10-grade
Knowledge	To know and to reproduce the specific facts, information	With the additional coverage of the Kazakh component classifies countries according to their geographic location	Determine the indicators used in the comparisons of the countries of the world
Understanding	Show understanding by correct interpretation of the information	With additional coverage of the Kazakh component it characterizes according to the plan the geographical position of the countries	Explain the methodology for calculating one of the indicators used in the comparison (optional: gross domestic product (GDP), gross national product (GNP), including per capita, purchasing power parity (PPP), and gender equality)
Applying	Use the information previously acquired in a new or unfamiliar context	With additional coverage of the Kazakh component classifies countries according to their economic and geographical location	Graphically represent the ranking of the countries of the world by one of the indicators (optional)
Analysis	show the ability to identify arguments or reasons for justifying general provisions, break information material into component parts for studying information	With additional coverage of the Kazakh component it characterizes the economic and geographical position of the countries according to the plan	Characterize the indices and ratings of the countries of the world, determined by a set of indicators (calculation / assessment indicators, subject of assessment, areas of application of the results)
Synthesis	new context to show the ability to rebuild different parts of previously acquired knowledge	with additional coverage of the Kazakh component it assesses the geographical, economic and geographical position of countries	graphically represent the rating of the countries of the world, determined by a set of indicators
Evaluation	forming an opinion on the significance of ideas or facts according to certain criteria	with additional coverage of the Kazakh component it suggests ways to improve the economic and geographical position of countries	determine the geographical, social, economic and political factors that influence the place of the country in the ranking

In order to improve country studies' education an online survey was conducted. Because of the pandemic, the survey was held online. 300 Geography teachers from 14 regions and the main cities of Kazakhstan took an active part in the survey. The questionnaire was made up in Kazakh, Russian, and English. School teachers on geography found the allocation of the hours and sections difficult to put targets in the scope of educational materials. The questionnaire contained 8 questions of which two questions were regarding the field and work experience of teachers in the secondary education system. Work experience of teachers who took part in the survey ***(Fig. 3, 4)***.

The objectives of the survey can vary much. It can be an assessment of the popularity of various educational programs, an assessment of the content of a particular program or discipline, an assessment of the quality of teaching, etc.

The survey as one of the monitoring mechanisms is a rather complicated process. It is due to the fact that the human factor plays a decisive role in the survey.

The study shows that there are certain problems in modern country studies' education. When teaching the section *Country Studies* teachers are aware of the complexity of educational goals (32.4%) and



‹ ***Fig. 3.*** Content of modern school geography (grades 10–11) in Kazakhstan

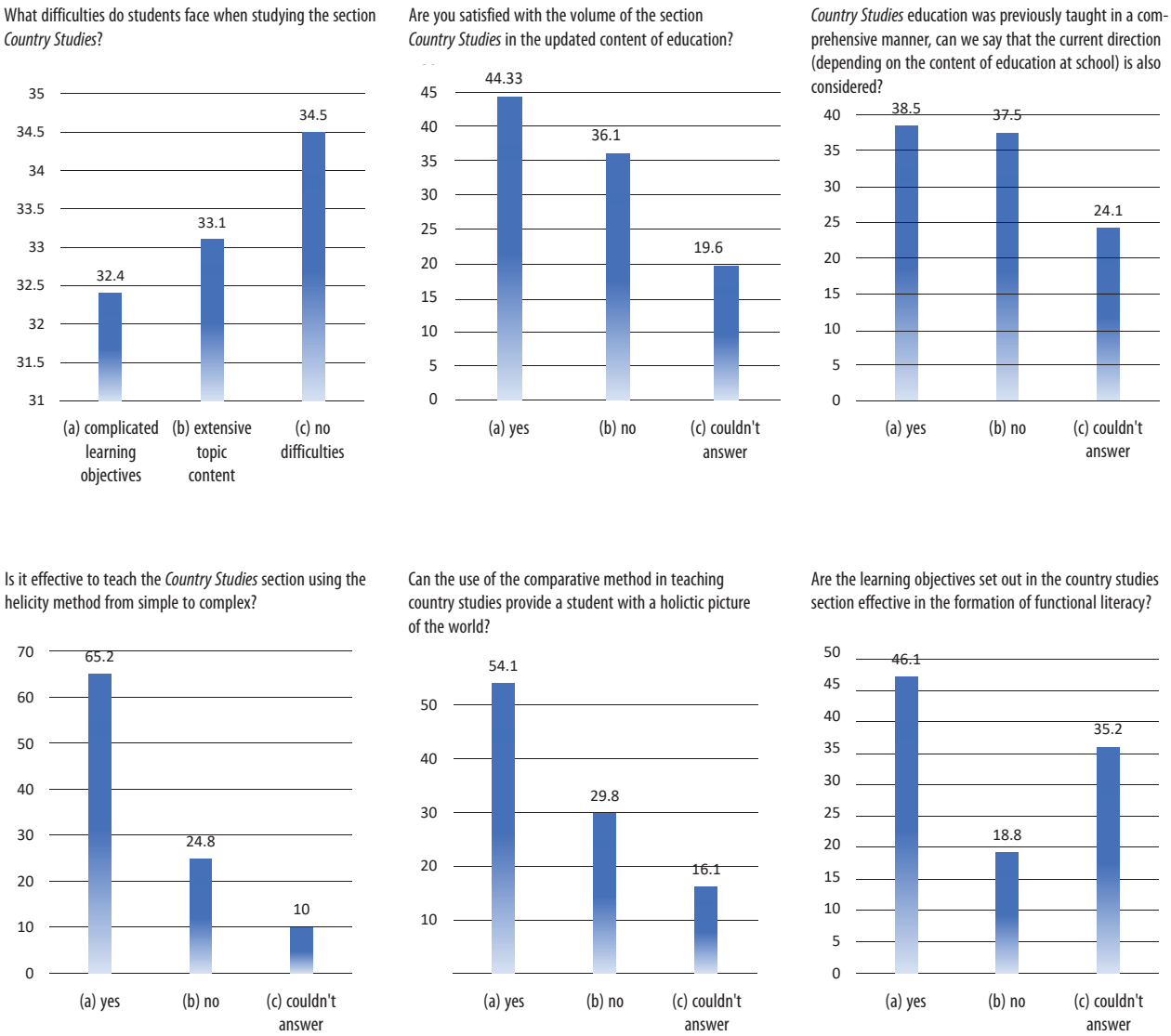


Fig. 4. The main questions of the questionnaire.
Compiled by the authors on the basis of an online questionnaire in Google format.

Table 2. **SWOT-analysis of the results of learning the section *Country studies***

Strong points	**Weak points**
1. It can form a complete picture of the world by ratings, indices; **2.** It graphically represents the ranking of the countries of the world by one of the indicators; **3.** Master the elements of mathematical modeling.	**1.** Weakness of an integrated approach; **2.** Learning objectives in country studies teaching are complex; **3.** Magnitude of the topic content **4.** Small quantity of hours to teach country studies.
Threats	**Possibilities**
1. Neglect of age-related features in the curriculum and textbooks **2.** Information in a textbook in a scientific language; **3.** Vast amount and universality of information.	**1.** The presence of a research orientation in teaching *Country Studies*; **2.** The focus of country studies is on applied geography.

the scale of the topic content (33.1%). 65.5% of the 300 teachers surveyed agree with the complexity of the updated program. Answers "Couldn't answer" in the questionnaire are equal to answers "No" which means that the overwhelming majority of respondents found the number of hours allocated to the section *Country studies* not sufficient. The subject of country studies was previously taught in a comprehensive manner and the current direction cannot be considered as a comprehensive education, it is not effective in the formation of functional literacy. This opinion was also expressed in the survey. Most teachers don't object to teaching country studies using the spiral method. At the same time, it is believed that the method of comparative country studies forms a complete picture of the world for the student. Based on the survey results, a SWOT analysis was carried out ***(Table 2)***.

Conclusion

One of the most important tasks solved in the process of modernization the school geography education is the integration of students' knowledge about nature and society, which they receive when they study traditional courses in physical and socio-economic geography. While studying geography in modern conditions it is recommended to pay special attention to the regional geographic component of the content and implementation of an integrated regional geographic approach.

Country studies serve the following functions:

- Epistemological function. Regional geography is of great cognitive and educational value. It makes a significant contribution to the creation of a geographical picture of the world.
- Axiological (evaluative) function. An assessment of a country or a region is given in terms of the availability of certain resources (natural, economic, tourist, etc.).
- Information function. It consists in collecting, storing, and providing information about the country and its regions (geography, nature, culture, history, etc.).

The tendency to integrate physical and socio-economic geography in the conditions of a small number of hours allocated to studying geography also affects the level of teaching students: subject knowledge and skills are formed fragmentarily for each of the two components. The study of the country studies content of the geography course is an important stage in the formation of regional ideas about the current state of the Earth's nature as an environment for human life, and society, as well as in understanding the elementary connections between the components of nature, between nature and man. Students get an idea of the spatial heterogeneity of the earth's surface and its parts as complexes that differ at different levels of its differentiation: local, regional, and planetary.

An analysis of the survey of geography teachers reveals that most of them would like to increase the number of hours for *Country Studies*. Many teachers are not ready for radical changes in the structure and content of school geography disciplines. A significant part of teachers mainly use traditional lessons and traditional teaching tools, ignoring lessons with active methods and forms of teaching, and modern ICT technologies. Many teachers are not ready to solve new scientific and methodological problems of modern school geography: designing and organizing the educational process, developing universal educational activities, and strengthening the regional approach to geography.

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