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Analýza problémov začínajúcich učiteľov geografie: dôkazy z Česka

Analysis of Problems Faced by Beginning Geography Teachers: Evidence from Czechia

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Abstract

This paper identifies and categorizes problems that beginning geography teachers (BGTs) face in Czech lower secondary schools. Drawing on qualitative research, the author conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with BGTs from the Liberec Region. Respondents most frequently reported time pressure linked to lesson preparation, low remuneration, low perceived prestige of teaching geography, excessive administrative workload, and challenges with student behavior and special educational needs. Communication with parents was mentioned less often. Geography-specific issues included limited access to suitable teaching aids and the underuse of fieldwork and GIS despite their curricular relevance. Differences across schools were evident in equipment, lesson allocation, and support structures. These findings are compared with previous scholarly evidence, and several recommendations were made.

Keywords: Beginning teacher. Mentor teacher. Geography education. Qualitative research.

Introduction

Reports about the low prestige of geography and suboptimal induction of beginning teachers in Czechia have surfaced in informal discussions with educators and in the media. Another impetus for the research was public debate about the planned reform of Czech education, including visions to reduce the number of lessons allocated to geography while shifting the focus from memorization of facts to competences. Problems faced by novice teachers are associated with their early departure from the profession (Hanušová et al., 2020), contributing to a growing number of out-of-field teachers or staff without pedagogical training. This article focuses on beginning geography teachers (BGTs) with a maximum of five years' teaching experience at lower secondary schools (ISCED 2), as defined by Průcha (2013). The study has two objectives:

- Identify and analyze the problems of BGTs.
- Compare the identified problems with those described in the literature.

These objectives lead to three research questions.
RQ1: What problems do BGTs face?
RQ2: Are there notable differences or similarities in the obstacles that respondents encounter?
RQ3: Does geography have specific problems that other subjects do not?

Theoretical background

The study is grounded in a constructivist and interpretivist metatheoretical perspective, which views teaching as a socially embedded, meaning-making practice shaped by individual experiences and institutional contexts (Voss & Kunter, 2020). There is a rich body of Czech and international research on novice teachers and geography education (see below), but little has been studied about beginning geography teachers in Czechia.

Novice teachers face interconnected challenges that can be grouped into:

- Emotional – stemming from a mismatch between expectations and the realities of school (Voss & Kunter, 2020), student behavior (Saleem et al., 2020), or workload (Garipov, 2019).
- Pedagogical – including difficulties engaging students, varying instructional styles, and a lack of structured induction (Aarts et al., 2019; Záleská et al., 2019; Wilcoxen et al., 2020).
- Systemic – caused by insufficient financial resources and administrative support (Saleem et al., 2020) or by the changing context of the profession (Hanušová et al., 2020).

For the problems of beginning teachers in the Czech environment, it is necessary to introduce the Competency Framework of Teacher Education Graduates (CFTEG) (MŠMT, 2023a) and the crucial curricular document Framework Educational Program for Basic Education (FEPBE) (MŠMT, 2023b). The first provides an overview of future teachers' knowledge, competences and strategies, and the latter contains a detailed curriculum plan for individual grades and subjects.

Czech novice teachers are reportedly better prepared for direct teaching than for communication with parents (Průcha, 2013). The mentor-teacher concept is currently relatively informal (Egerle, 2022). As a result, while most mentors declare that they actively assist novices, most beginning teachers say nobody helps them (Záleská et al., 2019). Table 1 presents the most frequent difficulties of novice teachers as reported by Průcha (2013).

Table 1. Activities of beginning teachers by perceived difficulty (author's processing)

Activity	Difficulty (%)
Working with underachieving students	76.6
Maintaining discipline during lessons	75.2
Keeping students' attention	70.2
Diagnosing students' personalities	63.8
Motivating students	59.6
Communicating with students' parents	57.5
Responding appropriately to unexpected developments in lessons	56.7
Applying an individual approach to students	54.6

Geography addresses the interrelations between the natural and social environment. Its breadth contributes to overloaded curricula. In an age when students can quickly find information online, geography may be perceived as superfluous, which degrades the subject's image (Knecht et al., 2020). Lambert and Morgan (2010) argue that competence in topics such as climate change and migration illustrates the necessity of geographical interdisciplinarity. Bendl et al. (2024) emphasize geographical thinking as a key feature of geography education, grounded in knowledge of core terms and cognitive operations such as analysis/synthesis and induction/deduction. Geographical thinking is linked to the highest levels of educational objectives taxonomy, such as creating, evaluating, and analyzing (Průcha, 2013). Kaya (2018) notes that geography teachers should more frequently involve students in activities with practical relevance – learning outside the classroom, using GIS, and socially responsible projects. A quarter of geography teachers at Czech lower secondary schools do not hold a degree in geography teaching, which limits these ambitions (Knecht & Spurná, 2021).

Methodology

The study draws on qualitative research, oriented toward describing, discovering, and exploring phenomena (Hennink et al., 2020). The research can be classified as a case or community study. In total, 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with BGTs at lower secondary schools in the Liberec Region in spring 2024. The interviews were based on eight guiding questions (see Results) and lasted 30–40 minutes. Many questions were anchored in the CFTEG. The region was chosen due to the author's long-term familiarity with its educational and socio-economic context. Sample size reflected the number of existing and willing BGTs in the region. Respondents were purposively selected using snowball sampling, assuming that teachers in one area often know each other through university studies or

teacher training. All respondents were fully qualified geography teachers and are characterized in Table 2. All interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research and agreed to audio recording; the interviews were conducted via Skype. They were assured that their responses would remain anonymous.

Table 2. Selected socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (author's processing)

Respondent	Gender	Age	Years at lower secondary school	Years teaching geography	Additional employment
R1	Male	27	2	2	—
R2	Male	25	1	1	—
R3	Female	29	5	5	—
R4	Male	25	1	1	—
R5	Male	26	1	1	—
R6	Female	32	5	3	—
R7	Female	29	4	4	—
R8	Male	30	4	4	—
R9	Male	27	2	2	—
R10	Male	30	5	4	—
R11	Female	28	3	3	—
R12	Female	27	2	1	—
R13	Male	26	2	2	—
R14	Male	26	1	1	—
R15	Female	25	1	1	—
R16	Male	26	2	2	Yes
R17	Female	26	2	2	—
R18	Male	28	3	3	Yes
R19	Female	25	1	1	—
R20	Female	25	1	1	—
R21	Male	29	4	4	—
R22	Male	26	1	1	—

Results

Q1. Which obstacles most limit you in your profession?

Approximately two-thirds of participants mentioned the same five frequent difficulties. The most common was time pressure, especially lesson preparation time (1–2 hours per lesson). Second was insufficient remuneration. Third was the low perceived prestige of the teaching profession, particularly of geography. Respondents noted that the general public often sees geography as a supplementary subject. One interviewee stated: *"This effect is reinforced*

by schools that assign geography to out-of-field teachers as an easy, relaxing subject, for example, because they like travelling and know something about the world. Such an approach is not found with other subjects, such as physics or chemistry." Fourth was excessive administrative work (class registers, correspondence, project administration). The fifth was student misbehavior and working with students with special educational needs. Only four respondents mentioned problematic communication with parents. Geography-specific problems emerged in eighth place: insufficient equipment of schools with relevant teaching aids. Geography-specific issues are discussed under questions 7 and 8.

Q2. Is your profession psychologically demanding?

Most respondents consider teaching psychologically demanding. However, one participant said: *"Every job is psychologically demanding. You need some resilience in teaching, but it is not excessively demanding."* Many pointed to spillovers into personal life, especially bringing work home, which is almost unavoidable initially. Some complained about limited opportunities for personal growth. Half of the respondents had considered leaving teaching due to pay and doubts about their usefulness and abilities.

Q3. Were you assigned a mentor teacher or at least an induction plan when you started?

Most respondents reported that they were not assigned a mentor teacher. Several pointed to insufficient support or poor relations with the assigned mentor; in such cases, they preferred to seek help from other colleagues. Only four respondents were satisfied with their mentors. One said: *"Yes, I was formally assigned a mentor, but I learned nothing from him. In the end, a colleague with whom I share an office helped me. It's always about people."*

Q4. Are you satisfied with the time allocation for geography and your time planning?

There are observable differences in the time allocated to geography across grades and schools. Most respondents believe an ideal allocation would be two weekly lessons in each grade. One participant noted that even this is insufficient when planning project-based or fieldwork activities. Half of the respondents were satisfied with class size, an essential factor for time management; they saw 15–20 students as ideal, though they understood that such small groups are unrealistic in larger cities.

Q5. Are you satisfied with the material and technical equipment for teaching geography at your school?

One third of respondents were not satisfied with the equipment. One participant said: *"It is not always possible to be in a classroom with an interactive whiteboard or projector, and not every class has access to school*

tablets. In such cases, visual materials and textbook text can be useful (e.g., for text work, analysis and comparison of photographs, deduction from pictures and captions).” Many respondents noted that although they use textbooks, they mainly rely on them during preparation rather than in the classroom. They also often use online resources. Only one quarter uses textbooks in every grade. Respondents preferred workbooks and creating their own materials and presentations, despite the time burden. Negative assessments of geography textbooks were frequent, citing factual errors or outdated visual and content styles.

Q6. Which teaching tools and methods do you use?

Respondents reported trying to alternate teaching methods. They warned about occasional difficulties when introducing novel methods among conservative senior colleagues. The most common were verbal methods (explanation, text work), competence-oriented methods (group and cooperative activities), and activating techniques (discussion, mind maps, brainstorming, didactic and movement games). Half said they also used project-based learning, but only to a limited extent due to time constraints. All respondents reported not using GIS in their teaching, despite knowing it from their studies – either due to negative attitudes toward GIS, lack of time, or insufficient school equipment. They also feared students’ reactions to GIS, as students often struggle with simpler tasks. Only half felt competent to teach in the field because they lacked concrete ideas, feared student behavior, or were limited by time. Although respondents use innovative methods, they often cannot avoid traditional whole-class teaching focused on explanation; they do not see it as bad, but ineffective in the long term.

Q7. Does the topic taught influence students’ engagement?

Most respondents stated that the topic, combined with teaching methods, affects student activity. Positively, only one respondent admitted that he does not try to engage students who remain persistently uninterested, explaining: *“Since I work at a school with many Roma students, this is normal. I do what I can. I adapt the topic so it is closer to them. If that does not help, I give up and focus on those interested in the syllabus.”* Others strive to reach the highest levels of the taxonomy of cognitive objectives with their students. More than half observed increased interest in geography among some students. One respondent even teaches an elective called Geography in Practice.

According to respondents, the most attractive topics for students are world macro-regions rather than regions of Czechia. The Americas and Australia were frequently mentioned, and in some cases, Europe. Respondents added that students often like Europe, except for its eastern part, because many have visited European countries and can share experiences. Czechia, especially its geology and geomorphology, is unpopular. Within physical

geography, the pedosphere is particularly disliked; by contrast, some students like the atmosphere and hydrosphere. Human geography is generally more popular than physical geography. International organizations, migration, and demography are the least popular human geography topics. Cartography is very unpopular among students.

Q8. What are the most frequent difficulties your students have during geography lessons?

Responses were largely consistent: cartography and spatial orientation are the biggest problems. Spatial thinking is an issue for about half of the students, not only those with special educational needs. Related geographical and broadly critical thinking is also challenging. Other serious problems include gaps in knowledge from lower grades or from associated subjects, and a weak command of basic geographical vocabulary.

All answers are briefly provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Main results (author's processing)

Question	Main theme	Frequency	Details
Q1	Preparation time, pay, prestige, administration, behavior	12–15/22	Long preparation (≈ 1–2 h/lesson), low pay and prestige, heavy admin, student behavior and special needs support
Q2	Psychological demands	11/22	Emotional exhaustion, work–life spillover, thoughts of leaving the profession
Q3	Mentoring and induction	4/22 satisfied	Inconsistent mentoring, reliance on colleagues rather than mentors
Q4	Time allocation and class size	–	Ideal: 2 lessons/week, 15–20 students/class
Q5	Equipment and materials	7/22 dissatisfied	Outdated textbooks, limited aids, self-made materials and online resources preferred
Q6	Teaching methods and tools	GIS 0/22, fieldwork 11/22	Verbal/activating methods common; lack of time and ideas for projects or field lessons
Q7	Topic attractiveness	–	Students prefer world regions over Czechia, dislike pedosphere, cartography, enjoy atmosphere/hydrosphere
Q8	Learner difficulties	–	Weak spatial orientation, poor map skills and vocabulary, gaps in prior knowledge

Discussion

Table 2 shows that the dominant groups among respondents were BGTs with one year (n=8) or two years (n=6) of experience. This aligns with Aarts et al. (2019), who note that most beginning teachers remain in the profession during their first three years. Teaching tenure does not always match years of teaching geography; as Průcha (2013) notes, novice teachers are often assigned subjects outside their specialization. This practice did not typically affect our respondents in the sense that they taught geography. Length of practice was not as decisive as expected, though it mattered for lesson preparation and handling discipline, where experience helps.

Preparation time is the most significant problem for BGTs, followed by financial issues in the education sector. For male teachers, this is more pronounced, given societal expectations to be primary breadwinners. Some obstacles, such as salaries, affect not only novices but experienced teachers as well. Problems with communication with parents (Průcha, 2013; Hanušová et al., 2020) were not strongly present in this study. This may reflect the average socio-economic profile of the Liberec Region, neither heavily marginalized nor highly privileged. Therefore, the region is relatively representative for the whole country, considering also the urban-rural division and school sizes. In older analyses by the Czech School Inspectorate, administration was the main obstacle; the difference here may reflect current macroeconomic conditions (high inflation and rising costs).

Given the perceived lack of time, teachers should be able to generalize content – hence the need for didactic curriculum analysis (content, student activities, and cross-curricular links). Findings on lesson planning are consistent with Průcha (2013), who shows that planning is not the most challenging task for BGTs compared with other teaching activities. Frequent criticism of geography textbooks (quality and attractiveness) deserves attention, though it is sensitive because authors are often academics in geography education. Worryingly, geography seems to have a worse reputation among other teachers, principals, and the public than among students themselves – consistent with Knecht & Spurná (2021).

Support for BGTs was confirmed to function poorly, echoing Záleská et al. (2019). The current state contradicts the point of colleague cooperation in the CFTEG. Induction system needs reform, which is already underway (Egerle, 2022). Kaya (2018) recommends innovative methods with an emphasis on fieldwork, yet many BGTs find field teaching difficult; GIS usage is even more limited, despite its presence in the FEPBE. The most problematic topics, physical geography and cartography, are closely linked to the natural sciences, which students perceive as difficult. Human geography is generally more popular, though subfields like political and economic geography are less attractive. A possible way to reduce negative attitudes is to integrate physical and human geography – for example, linking the pedosphere to natural hazards or nutrition, and cartography to the age of exploration and colonial

division. However, Czech universities tend to separate physical and human geography, regional geography, and cartography into discrete courses even in teacher-training programs. It is also questionable whether even more focused teaching is feasible for teachers who already report heavy preparation loads. Students' perceived attractiveness of topics in geography merits deeper investigation.

Although contemporary geography didactics reduces rote facts, instruction is hard to manage without students mastering basic geographic terminology, which implies some memorization. Spatial thinking is a fundamental cognitive mode in child development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). It can be fostered through mental mapping and compass work, ideally outdoors. At ISCED 2 ages, critical thinking also develops; spatial and critical thinking jointly form geographical thinking – how we perceive spatial relations at multiple hierarchical levels.

Most respondents did not criticize their university studies, but no firm conclusion is drawn here because many graduated from the author's university. Some suggested that universities should better prepare students for the administrative workload, in coordination with partner schools where teaching practice takes place.

Conclusion

The research questions posed in the introduction were answered as follows:
RQ1: Respondents pointed to several problems, with the five most salient: chronic time pressure, low pay, low prestige of the teaching profession, especially in geography, heavy administrative tasks, and student misbehavior or work with students with special educational needs. Using the typology of problems of novice teachers (see Introduction), two emotional and three systemic barriers were identified; the pedagogical problems mentioned were less severe.
RQ2: The most pronounced differences across answers concerned equipment quality, lesson planning, and teaching competences. The strongest consensus concerned poor remuneration, dissatisfaction with the prestige of teaching (especially geography), and problematic cooperation with students. Length of practice has some influence on BGTs' problems (e.g., planning, preparation burden, confidence in managing discipline). Still, among BGTs, there is no clear linear relationship whereby more years always mean fewer problems or lower exit intent.
RQ3: Regarding geography-specific issues, its low prestige, students' difficulties with geographical and spatial thinking, and insufficient knowledge and skills linked to primary-school content are noteworthy.

The findings were compared with existing literature, and several discrepancies emerged. No extensive problems in communication with parents were observed here, and administrative burden was not perceived as

the primary issue. There are also inconsistencies between BGTs' everyday realities and official documents of the Ministry of Education. General and systemic/emotional problems outweigh specific and pedagogical ones. While geography has discipline-specific challenges, their importance is overshadowed by the status of geography in society. These problems lead many BGTs to contemplate leaving the profession; low prestige and pay may dampen teacher enthusiasm, which students perceive.

In conclusion, it is hoped that geography, essential for understanding today's globalized world, will maintain or strengthen its position within the planned education reform. Teachers should, by example, promote geography that examines diverse spatial interactions linked to everyday life and leverages advanced technologies, provided that conditions are in place.

The study is limited by reliance solely on self-reported perceptions from BGTs, without triangulation through classroom observations, student feedback, or mentor perspectives; therefore, they capture perceived rather than enacted practices. Future research should extend this work through multi-regional/national comparative designs, mixed-methods approaches that include lesson observations or student outcomes, and longitudinal tracking of teacher trajectories beyond the induction phase.

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