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Is there a place for young people in the geography curriculum? Analysis of the aims and contents of the Finnish comprehensive school curricula

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## **Is there a place for young people in the geography curriculum? Analysis of the aims and contents of the Finnish comprehensive school curricula**

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*Abstract: Geography is one of the school subjects in which children and young people's own experiences and views on the world can be easily taken into account. In the last decade, interest has been growing in the geographies of children and young people in contemporary cultural geography, and therefore, these issues seem even more central than before. In this article, which is based on the situation in Finland, changes in the status and contents of the national curricula for comprehensive school will be explained. A closer analysis will be made of the child-centred approaches of the geography curricula published in 1970, 1985, 1994 and 2004. The results of the analysis show how children and young people's experiences are taken into account in principle, but most often only in the overall aims of the subject. The specified contents of teaching in curricular texts include just a few mentions of child-centred approaches. The same omission has also been reflected in school textbooks, which have a powerful position in guiding teacher's choices in their practices of teaching. Based on these findings, it will be argued how in the future curriculum renewal process, more emphasis should be put on the geographies of children and young people.*

**KEYWORDS:** GEOGRAPHY, CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES, GEOGRAPHIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE, CURRICULUM, FINLAND

## Introduction

There are at least two major gaps influencing the aims and contents of school geography. First, there is a gap between academic geography and the geography taught in schools. This has been noted many times in the history of geographical research and its implementation in school geography. For example, the quantitative revolution in academic geography from the 1950s until the 1970s resulted in criticism of the regional geography and its descriptive approach that was popular in school geography. The new geography of the time highlighted theoretical models of land use and understood space as an abstract entity where different phenomena were located. Although this spatial turn was often considered too abstract and difficult for the school context, these ideas were still implemented in curricula but often with some delay, for example, in the US and Great Britain. The same type of change was also witnessed in Finland during the 1970s (Rikkinen 2004; Kaivola & Rikkinen 2007). Another example of this type of gap can be found in the early 1990s, when new aspects of cultural geography were introduced in academic research. Although the new themes could have easily been transferred into classrooms, they seldom had any clear effect on the geography taught in schools (about this gap, see Bonnett 2003; Rawling 2000; Tani 2004; Béneker et al. 2007).

The second gap influencing school geography has been identified between young people's everyday lives and the contents of geography courses studied in schools (Tani 1997; Morgan 2000; Biddulph 2011). Geography is one of the subjects in which students' experiences and their relationship with their environments can be taken into account. These ideas and the reality of geographical education in schools, however, are seldom connected in practice. In this article, I will study the status of geography education in the Finnish primary and lower secondary schools. To do this, I will follow the changes in curricula during the history of comprehensive school in Finland, starting from the 1970s. Earlier studies of the geographical curricula in Finland offer a valuable basis for this analysis. Hannele Rikkinen (1982) has analysed the roots of geography teaching in Finland, the diffusion of international trends and the role of individual experts in a process in which new ideas have been applied in school contexts. She has also researched the background for the Finnish tradition in which geography is closely attached to biology in school education: most of the geography teachers in secondary and upper secondary schools still have biology as their other teaching subject. Rikkinen's analyses have also encompassed the curriculum reform of the 1990s (Rikkinen 2004; Kaivola & Rikkinen 2007). Lea Houtsonen's (1988) research has concentrated on the changes in geography teaching in Finnish upper secondary schools in the 1970s and 1980s. In my previous work I have investigated the role of geography as part of an integrated school subject in primary schools by analysing the framework curriculum and some school textbooks (Tani 2004). My analysis was based on the situation at the turn of the millennium.

In the present article the aspect of analysis differs from the previous studies in that the emphasis will be put on issues reflecting children and young people's geographies. The main aim of this article is to analyse the four national curricula from the

viewpoint of child-centred approaches. I will investigate how students' experiences and their environmental relationships have been treated in the overall aims and specified contents of the curricula at different times. The analysis covers the national curricula published in 1970, 1985, 1994 and 2004. A new curriculum reform will begin soon in Finland, and therefore all efforts to analyse present and past curricula – both their positive elements and the challenges arising in them – should be welcome.

### **Children and young people's geographies: a growing field in cultural geography**

Children and young people have been the objects of geographical studies for a long time. The behavioural geography of the 1970s with its special interest in perception and spatial cognition and studies closely connected to environmental psychology are just some of the many examples of the tradition (see Johnston 2003). Only recently, however, have children and young people's geographies become popular among more culturally oriented studies in geography. The launch of the journal *Children's Geographies* in 2003 as well as the publication of various academic monographs (Aitken 2001; Kaivola & Rikkinen 2003; Valentine 2004; Hopkins 2010) and edited books (Holloway & Valentine 2000; Robertson & Gerber 2008; van Blerk & Kesby 2009) are obvious examples of the growth of this field of study.

Special issues concerning studies on children and young people have been acknowledged in the methodological literature. Several researchers have noted how the position of the researcher and the children/young people in the research should be carefully considered. It is said how the research should be done *with* children, not *about* them (Fraser et al. 2004; Cahill 2007; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher 2009). For this reason participatory and many visually oriented, child-centred methods have become popular (Thomson 2008; Gallagher 2009). Children and young people's involvement in research has made it important to take ethical aspects seriously: while young people's rights as competent persons should be ensured, they should also be protected from issues which could somehow be harmful to them (about this discussion, see Thomson 2007; Gaskell 2008; Morrow 2008; Strandell 2010; Tani 2010).

Child-centred approaches are also important for geographical education, or at least they should be. For example, Morgan (2008) and Lambert (2009) have criticized geography curricula in the UK for their emphasis on 'post-disciplinary' approaches which are far from young people's needs or interests. Butt (2011) has also raised these ideas in his edited volume *Geography, Education and the Future*. He has listed themes in contemporary geography which are relevant for young people as they build their futures. Among these themes are conceptualizations of spaces and places, identity and consumption, but also themes such as employment, citizenship and sustainability (Butt 2011, 4).

For younger children, home and neighbourhood form the centre of their lived world and thus act as key elements in constructing their identities and local

attachments. From the adult perspective, this kind of daily engagement with the local area is easily neglected as ‘too commonplace to recognize and investigate’ in geography classrooms but, as Catling (2011, 21) highlights, for children ‘the world is new’ and therefore their perspectives should be an integral part of geographical education.

As the world around older children is not as ‘new’ as it is for the younger children, teenagers’ position in their environment and in society is different from what they have been used to as children. Young people have more freedom to move independently than small children, and therefore their territories are wider. Due to their position between childhood and adulthood they must learn to negotiate with other groups of people in order to be able to take possession of their space. Young people’s social interaction with their peers acts as an important element in constructing their identities (Hopkins 2010), and thus its relevance should be acknowledged in geography curricula. To make geographical education meaningful and interesting for young people, their own experiences of the world should be taken into account.

In this article, my aim is to investigate the contents of the geography taught in school in Finland. I will analyse the framework curricula introduced during the forty-year history of basic education. Special attention will be paid to the status of student-centred approaches in the curricula. Through this analysis I hope to be able to raise some issues which ought to be taken into account in curriculum planning in future.

## **Data and methodology**

The material for the following analysis is comprised of the four national curriculum documents published during the forty-year history of the Finnish comprehensive school system. The role of these documents has varied from the strict instructions of the 1970s towards more flexible guidelines. For the purposes of this article, I will concentrate on the aims and contents of geography in these national curricula and, when geography has been integrated with other subjects in primary schools, also on their aims and contents. Interpretations will be made on the basis of a content analysis of the documents.

To give an overall idea of the changes in the curricula, some of their special features are presented in Table 1. It is easy to see how there have been obvious changes in the amount of detailed information given to schools.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE GEOGRAPHY CURRICULUM? ANALYSIS OF THE AIMS AND CONTENTS OF THE FINNISH COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL CURRICULA

Sirpa Tani

TABLE 1

*Main features of the Finnish comprehensive school curricula 1970–2004.*

	<b>1970</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>
<b>Number of pages (in total)</b>	700 pages: 264 (educational aims) + 436 (different subjects)	332 pages	111 pages	318 pages
<b>Grades in which geography is integrated with other subjects (name of the subject)</b>	1–2 (environmental studies)	1–2 (environmental studies)	1–6 (environmental and natural studies)	1–4 (environmental and natural studies)  5–6 (biology and geography)
<b>Grades in which geography is taught as an individual subject</b>	3–9	3–9	7–9	7–9
<b>Number of pages on geography</b>	20 (together with natural history)	10 (together with biology)	2	5
<b>Main themes in geography teaching (grades)</b>	Finland (3 <sup>rd</sup> ); Nordic countries (4 <sup>th</sup> ); Europe (5 <sup>th</sup> ); Asia, Africa, Australia, Pacific islands (6 <sup>th</sup> ); North and South America, Antarctic (7 <sup>th</sup> ); Systematic geography (8 <sup>th</sup> ); Finland and Nordic countries (9 <sup>th</sup> )	Local area, Finland and other Nordic countries (3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> ); the globe, Africa, Asia, Australia, Oceania (5 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup> ); Americas, circumpolar areas (7 <sup>th</sup> ); Europe (8 <sup>th</sup> ); Finland and other Nordic countries (9 <sup>th</sup> )	<i>The globe, man's home planet; Finland as a part of Europe; One area and its people (grades not specified)</i>	<i>Earth, human being's home planet; Europe; Finland in the world; The common environment (grades not specified)</i>

Table 1 shows that the first national curriculum was very detailed, including carefully defined educational goals as well as detailed instructions for the implementation of each school subject and that the 1994 curriculum was the most

general. In the following, I will shortly describe the main features of these national curricula in order to make the changes in the status of geography understandable.

## **Curriculum reforms in Finnish comprehensive schools**

The nine-year compulsory comprehensive school was created in Finland in the 1970s, and the first national curriculum was published in 1970. The basic aim of the new school system was to offer equal opportunities for all children to obtain a nine-year education free of charge. The system was strongly centralized in that the national curriculum gave detailed regulations for both the educational aims and the contents of each school subject. As shown in Table 1, the curriculum document included two separate parts: the first defined educational aims, while the second concentrated on teaching subjects.

As Rikkinen (2004, 176) has noted, while the 1970 curriculum was the start of the new school system, the next decade brought a major revision of its contents. The first curriculum reform in the new school system in Finland was realized in 1985 (Kouluhallitus 1985). While the earlier curriculum had given detailed directives on the aims and contents of the courses and was planned to be implemented as such directly in every Finnish school, the revised curriculum gave more freedom of choice to schools. The national curriculum was meant to give guidelines for the municipalities to follow so that the local context could be taken into account more easily than before.

The second renewal of the curriculum was carried out in 1994, when even more power was given to local authorities. Municipalities and schools started to make their own curricula based on national guidelines. Ideas of constructivism in pedagogy were applied to school education, and following a curriculum was seen as a dynamic process, not as implementing a ready-made collection of firm regulations (Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School 1994; Tani 2004; Kaivola & Rikkinen 2007). Eight cross-curricular themes were launched which were meant to be applied to the school context so that students' experiences could be related to them. *Environmental education* and *international education* were among these themes.

The most recent curriculum reform was carried out in 2004. The biggest change was the increased guidance from the national level compared to the 1994 framework curriculum. The aims and contents of subjects were described in more detail, and some changes were made to the cross-curricular themes. Now there were seven themes mentioned (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004):

- Growth as a person
- Cultural identity and internationalism
- Media skills and communication
- Participatory citizenship and entrepreneurship
- Responsibility for the environment, well-being, and a sustainable future
- Safety and traffic
- Technology and the individual

As the above-listed cross-curricular themes show, environmental education as a concept disappeared from the curriculum and was replaced by education towards a sustainable future. Students were supposed to become environmentally responsible citizens who could enhance the well-being of their environment with their own actions. In the theme 'cultural identity and internationalism' students' understanding of the Finnish and European cultural identities and the construction of their own cultural identities were meant to be enhanced to strengthen students' abilities to interact with people from other cultures (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004).

As described above, the national curricula has been revised approximately every tenth year in Finland. The next round or revision process will start soon, and therefore there is interest in analyzing the changes in the emphases of child-centred approaches this far. To do that, I will make an overview on the status of geography in different national curricula and concentrate more closely on the contents of the subject.

### **The status of child-centred themes in the Finnish national geography curricula**

Since the first years of the Finnish comprehensive school, early geography teaching has been integrated with other subjects. Traditionally, geography has been closely connected with biology both in schools and in teacher education, which is also reflected in its integration with biology during the primary school years. In the national curriculum of 1970, for the first two school years geographical themes were taught in an integrated subject called *ympäristöoppi* (environmental studies). Environmental studies were meant to work as a basis for later studies in geography, natural history (the former name for biology), physics, chemistry, history, civics and social studies. Children's own observations, which were based on the use of all the senses, were emphasized together with problem-based learning in the aims: the idea was that children should make observations, describe them and draw conclusions based on their own reasoning. Teachers should be guiding the process of learning, not explaining the studied phenomena. Textbooks were not meant to be used because learning was supposed to be based on child-centred approaches and the application of the children's own experienced knowledge (Komiteanmietintö 1970, 152–153, 168). Although the aims of the environmental studies highlighted children's observations and their own experiences, the reality in schools was far from these educational aims (Rikkinen 2004). The change from the previous subject *kotiseutuoppi* (local studies) to environmental studies meant that the elements of students' local environments – if those elements were still included in the subject – had lost their central position to topics concerning scientific inquiry. In practice, this meant that experienced knowledge was often replaced by observed phenomena, which were investigated in a more scientific manner.

In the curriculum of the 1970s geography, which was introduced as an individual subject from the third grade, followed the traditions of regional geography. The



starting point of teaching was the regional geography of Finland, followed by studies of Nordic countries and after that, from the fifth grade, moving first to other European countries and then to more remote areas. In the eighth grade, the regional approach was replaced by studies of physical and human geography, which was followed by the geography of Finland and other Nordic countries in the ninth grade. The main aim of the subject was to guide the students to familiarize themselves with the countries and peoples of the world, but the emphasis was put on their own country and its neighbouring areas. At the same time, students' emotional attachment to nature and people in Finland as well as an appreciation of other peoples were highlighted in the aims of the subject (Komiteanmietintö 1970, 195–202). However, the guidelines in the curriculum highlighted an orientation towards international issues for international understanding and, although the students' own experiences should have been taken into account, they were easily seen as old-fashioned in their local emphasis (Rikkinen 1982, 348; Tani 2004, 7).

In the 1985 national curriculum, geography was still integrated into environmental studies during the first two grades, and after that, it was taught as a separate subject from the third until the end of the ninth grade. One of the most obvious changes in the aims of environmental studies was the role of environmental problems and the need for environmental protection, which was hoped to be enhanced by emphasizing students' growth towards acting in environmentally responsible ways (Kouluhallitus 1985, 102).

The role of the student's living environment and students' attachment to their home region was emphasized more than in the curriculum of 1970. The teaching based on students' local environments had been seen as old fashioned and in opposition to the need for international themes at the beginning of the 1970s, but in the 1980s, there seemed to be no such confrontation between local studies and internationalism (Tani 2004). The aims of each subject were presented by classifying them into aims concerning knowledge, skills and attitudes. For geography education, one of the attitudinal aims was to encourage the students' attachment to the local environment and their country in order to foster their national identity (Kouluhallitus 1985, 165). At the same time, students' understanding and appreciation of other countries, their people and cultures were meant to be strengthened. The contents of the courses remained almost the same, the only clear change being in the eighth grade where physical and human geography was replaced with the regional geography of Europe.

Despite the emphasis on the local context in the national curriculum, it is not easy to see any clear changes in teaching practices during the 1980s. Teachers could take their students' experiences into account in geography lessons, but when the textbooks were published nationwide by big publishers and formally approved after inspection by the National Board of Education, local issues had seldom any remarkable role in teaching. The role of textbooks, which had traditionally been important in teaching (Heinonen 2005), was maintained, and thus there was little local variation, even though the basic idea of the 1985 curriculum would have encouraged the schools to apply the curriculum in their own way.

In the 1994 curriculum, the position of geography changed so that it was taught as an integrated subject together with biology, civics and environmental studies during the first six grades. The main aim of *Environmental and Natural Studies* was ‘to support and guide the student’s growth into an investigating, active citizen who is interested in nature, the study of nature, and nature conservation’ (Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School 1994, 85). This quotation clearly shows the emphasis on nature compared to other types of environments. The subject was intended as a foundation for developing students’ scientific thinking, and even when there were some aims that included social and cultural elements and students’ own experiences, in the contents of the subject they were, practically speaking, absent (Tani 2004). The geographical contents of the subject were described shortly under the titles *The globe and its areas* and *Man (sic!) and the environment*, the latter including studies of people’s relation to nature and the built environment as well as environmental protection (Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School 1994, 86–87).

The subject *Environmental and Natural Studies* constructed the basis for geography, which was taught as a separate subject from the seventh grade. Geography was defined as a subject working ‘as a binding bridge between natural and social sciences’ (Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School 1994, 91). People’s relationship with the nation was emphasized from the local to the global level. Environmental responsibility, the ability to estimate the beauty of natural and cultural landscapes, students’ strengthened cultural identity as well as their understanding and appreciation of other cultures were mentioned in the aims of geography teaching. These ideas were not, however, implemented in the contents of the subject. *The globe, man’s (sic!) home planet, Finland as a part of Europe* and *One area and its people* were the titles of the themes which were planned to be studied during the three years (Framework Curriculum for the Comprehensive School 1994, 92). In practice, textbooks interpreted the framework curriculum so that in the seventh grade teaching was concentrated on the regional geography of the American continents, followed by the geography of Europe in the eighth grade and returning to studies of Finland in the ninth grade. When the national guidelines did not define which areas should be taught, even more power was given to the textbooks than before (Kaivola & Rikkinen 2007, 323).

In the present curriculum, which was launched in 2004, geography stayed integrated in environmental and natural studies along with biology, chemistry, physics and health education in the first four years, after which it was taught together with biology in the fifth and sixth grade. In the lower secondary school it remained a separate subject. Problem- and inquiry-based learning were defined as bases for environmental and natural studies, and students themselves and the phenomena concerning their own environments served as starting points for teaching (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004). In the contents and skills listed in the curriculum, the status of observations and inquiries were obvious, but there was no mention of any subjective experiences which should be applied to teaching. The responsibility for inclusion of these child-centred approaches was thus left to the

teachers and textbook publishers. It is important to note that since 2001, school textbooks have no longer been formally inspected, but for the most part, they are still following the same habit on concentrating on the regional approaches.

The aims of the geography teaching in the lower secondary schools were defined as investigation of the globe and its different regions and regional phenomena, so that the construction of students' geographical worldview would be enhanced (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004). Natural and built environments were mentioned, but in addition to these, social environments were also included in the geography curriculum for the first time. This new aspect was not reflected in the description of the contents of the subject, though, and even when students' own experiences were considered as a starting point of learning, they were not included in the curriculum texts. There seems to be some kind of a hidden curriculum written between the lines of the actual curriculum: despite changes in the educational aims, little change can be observed, for example, in the textbooks, which still have a strong position in guiding teachers' work in practice.

### **Conclusion: young people's lives and the curriculum**

In this article I have overviewed the phases of the forty-year history of the Finnish comprehensive school system from the perspective of geographical education. My emphasis has been on investigating how children and young people's geographies – their spatial experiences, for instance – have been taken into account in the national curricula. Even though major changes occurred in Finnish society in these decades, the changes in the curricula have been surprisingly modest. In the aims of the framework curricula some child-centred aspects have been mentioned, which means that – at least in principle – it would be possible to include these elements in textbooks. Based on my earlier research on the contents of textbooks (see Tani 2004), I dare to say that the textbooks seldom encourage teachers to include children or young people's geographies in teaching. Teachers still have the power to choose how and what they teach, but when the teaching materials do not emphasize student-centred aspects, teachers will not always realize the importance of these themes. Even when students' experiences have been included in the aims of the subject, they do not really come across in the described contents of the curricula.

Knowledge about physical and human issues in geography as well as some basic understanding of different regions and their people are important but are not enough for a geographical education core that is relevant to young people. In Finland, the tradition of regional geography has been strong and still dominates the contents of geography courses in primary and lower secondary schools. The close connection of geography to biology has kept the idea alive of geography as one of the natural sciences, while the social and cultural aspects of the subject have stayed relatively weak. From this background it is easy to understand how it has been a complicated matter to integrate students' emotional spatial experiences seriously into teaching. This is an obvious problem in the subject: when there is no space for students' own

lifeworlds in geography, it is difficult to convince young people of the relevance of the subject to them. Therefore, as I have argued earlier in this article, children and young people's geographies should be an integral part of geography teaching.

In the present article, I have shown the existing gap between the aims of the geography taught in school and the geographies of children and young people in Finland. As shown earlier, the same type of gap has been observed in many other countries (Béneker et al. 2007; Morgan 2000; Biddulph 2011). From the Nordic perspective, it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study considering the status of child-centred approaches of geography education in the Nordic region. It could help us see the possible problems more clearly, but also help us understand the potential of our own curricula and educational systems. In future curriculum planning, children and young people should be taken into account much more than they have been this far. Doing so would enhance their opportunities to construct their identities as active and competent citizens for future societies.

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