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## Editorial:

# Research on Geography Education: Introduction to Nordidactica 2016:1

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During the conferences NOFA 5 in Helsinki and NGM (Nordic Geographers Meeting) in Tallin (May and June 2015 respectively), we invited participants to make contributions in a special issue on geography education in the journal *Nordidactica*, on the foundation of their conference abstracts and presentations.

The conference sessions on geography and education had a broad thematic spectrum, including practical as well as theoretical aspects of teaching, studying, and learning geography in schools and at institutes of higher education. With this special issue we want to continue the discussion on the themes of geography and education in the Nordic context. But the aim is also to broaden the exchanges with ongoing research on geography education in Europe, and in the rest of the world. The issue will highlight the challenges of geography education in line with the conference themes “*Changing Subjects, Changing Pedagogies: Diversities in School and Education*” and “*Geographical Imagination: Interpretations of Nature, Art, and Politics*”.

Since *Nordidactica* is a Swedish/Nordic journal, we would like to explain how geography and education is described in a Swedish and Nordic context before we present the contributions. Geography didactics is a minor research area in the Nordic countries, and geography is a school subject that faces several challenges. While being a relatively well-established school subject in elementary school, geography has met with considerable difficulties in acquiring a clear position in secondary school. This situation varies however between the Nordic countries. In Sweden and Norway, the subject is categorized as part of the social sciences, while in Denmark it is allocated to the natural sciences. In Finland, there is a linkage between the biology and geography subjects, and in lower ages between environment and nature studies. The different situations in the Nordic countries thus represent different models for incorporating geography as a school subject. The geography subject has acquired its characteristics by placing a strong focus on the relationship nature-society, making it somewhat difficult to place into the prevailing subject structures.

## **Contextualising Research on Geography Education- a Swedish perspective**

The geography subject has a weakened position in the Swedish upper secondary school, and is today available only as an optional subject in merely a few programs. Geography was removed as a subject in 1965, when it was divided into social sciences and natural sciences, but recurred in 1994. It has however not yet ascertained a clear position as an upper secondary school subject. According to the latest statistics of SCB (see the data base SIRIS, [www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se) [the Swedish National Agency for Education]), Sweden has just about 500 upper secondary school teachers in geography spread over 128 fulltime employments, and one third of these are lacking education in geography. This can be compared with e.g. 2360 history teachers in upper secondary school, corresponding to 840 fulltime employments, where 86 % are qualified. The number of teachers in the upper level of elementary school (years 7-9) teaching geography, history, civics, and religion are evenly distributed, with approximately 3700-3800 teachers in each subject. Also at this level, geography is the subject with the least number of qualified teachers. More than one third lack qualification in geography, and only one third of these have a geography education exceeding one semester (Bladh, 2014). The need of further education is thus substantial.

The school subject geography is still mainly characterized by the strong school tradition that prevails in terms of regional geography-oriented descriptive teaching. This is particularly prominent at the intermediary level at elementary school (Molin & Grubbström, 2013, Bladh, 2014), and may serve as an example of an apparent, selective tradition in the subject (cf. Molin, 2006 and Molin *et al.*, 2015). The geography subject has, as a contrast, been facing difficulties in terms of developing subject traditions around value issues and teaching about sustainable development, democracy, and environmental issues (see e.g. Lundahl *et al.*, 2003 and Torbjörnsson & Molin, 2015). In the latest Swedish curriculum in geography, from 2011, questions concerning sustainable development acquired a more clear position. Data from a national investigation of geography teachers' teaching (Gottfridsson & Bladh, 2012, Bladh, 2014) indicate that the subject is attaining a more notable environment-oriented geography profile at the upper level of elementary school, including also broader questions around sustainable development, and ethical issues linked to these.

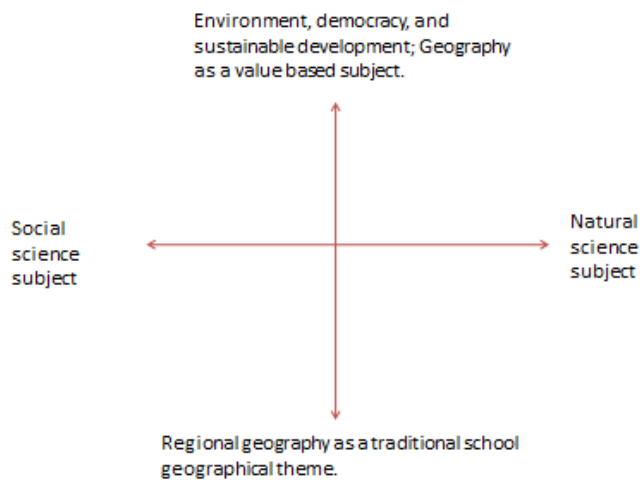


FIGURE 1.

*Fields of tension – school geography in Sweden (developed from Bladh, 2014)*

The use of GIS and ICT (information and communication technology) are important areas of development in the geography subject. Data show that in general, geography teachers do not often utilize geographic ICT-devices and GIS (geographic information system), while qualified geography teachers are using them to a significantly higher degree (Bladh, 2014). GIS is provided as a separate optional program course in the Swedish upper secondary school, but is, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education, offered only in 12 of the country's 1300 secondary schools.

Studies by Molin *et al.* (2015) disclosed that informal experiences of geography and events linked to e.g. outdoor activities and travelling at a young age appeared to be central to a geography teacher's positive attitude to his/her subject. This pinpoints the need to develop field studies as an important and integrated part of the teaching, and this theme has currently been given a more prominent place in the latest curriculum in Sweden.

Geography teaching has, like other activities in school, been affected by an increased trend toward accountability, with increased focus on international investigations and various kinds of evaluations. Sweden has introduced grades in year 6, and national tests have been incorporated into natural as well as social sciences, including geography (from 2013). For a subject like geography, national tests have yielded positive attention and an opportunity to display the broadness of the geography subject, way beyond the selective traditions. Evaluations have furthermore

shown that the teachers have a positive attitude toward the tests (Alm Fjellborg, 2014, 2015). The addition of further national tests has however been criticized; it increases the workload for teachers to an unacceptable level, and the tests for year 6 were abolished in 2015. Nonetheless, the national subject tests have generated substantial material for continued didactic research in geography.

The subject specialization at the universities toward physical and human geography has resulted in cementation of the gap between geography as a school subject and geography as a research topic. Only a few doctoral theses in the Nordic countries may be categorized as geography didactics (cf. a research overview in Bladh & Molin, 2012). We now discern a stronger focus on developing subject didactics as a research topic, and this has led to more research on didactics in the geography subject being carried out in Sweden. Research schools in geography have for instance been arranged at the universities in Uppsala and Karlstad, a number of theses have recently been completed, and a handful of doctoral students have been adopted at different academies. This will mean a well-needed contribution to the area of geography didactics in Sweden.

The following number of Nordidactica contains a selection of the presentations given at the above-mentioned Nordic conferences in 2015, developed and extended into full papers. Several of these articles are in various ways connected to the fields of tension displayed in Figure 1.

Søren Witzel Clausen examines in a small-scale survey what characterizes Danish geography teachers' topic-specific professional knowledge when reporting on instructional strategies and practices concerning weather formation and climate change. The teachers underlined the categories knowledge and human interaction with nature as the most important learning goals and content areas. In terms of organizing lessons, classroom discussions and student teamwork were emphasized. A central part when teaching climate change was the teachers' reflections on how students can learn given facts and at the same time learn to become informed citizens. Witzel Clausen discusses this "dual perspective" in the context of the changed macro system of education during the last fifteen years.

Then follows two articles based on research in German geography didactics. Peter Bagoly-Simó and Anke Uhlenwinkel highlight the relationship between the social and natural science components of the geography subject. In countries where school geography primarily is regarded as a social science, physical geography is normally included as an important part of the geography teaching. The scientists investigated how physical geography themes are being legitimated in selected German geography didactics journals, and whether any change in argumentation can be discerned between the years 1979 and 2013. They compared the German argumentation with the analogous argumentation in a British debate on physical geography teaching in England. Different modes of legitimation concerning articles on volcanoes and weather were furthermore compared. The authors highlight a shift in argumentation from content-based to skill-based, which may be an attempt to simplify a complex and diverse geography subject. They furthermore call for an epistemological discussion on

how to integrate physical geography into school geography, which is mainly social science-oriented.

Yvonne Behnke investigates how geography students' learning may be affected by textbook design. By eye tracking she monitored students' eye movements while they studied geography textbook spreads. Different kinds of textbook spreads on the identical geographical topic were compared. The results revealed that visuals were often studied rather superficially, while there was a notable focus on text. She discusses learning related challenges related to textbook design.

Per Jarle Sætre puts focus on the thematic issues and how the incentive for education for sustainable development has affected Norwegian geography curricula. He discusses the relationship between environmental education and education for sustainable development, and investigated by text analysis whether the incentive shows in the geography curricula. It appears that there has been little change in the geography curricula after the introduction of the concept ESD. Core goals in the general national core curriculum indicate a shift to ESD. Nonetheless, no follow-up in terms of developing the geography curricula has been conducted in Norway.

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