Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING), 1, 3, June, 2014, pp. 5-7
DOI: 10.4458/3253-01

J - READING
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND DIDACTICS IN
GEOGRAPHY
homepage: www.j-reading.org

National cases, international collaboration – an example from Finland

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In his recent editorial of *J-Reading*, Joseph P. Stoltman (2013) described some changes that have been going on within geography education in the United States. The changes in question concerned the launch of the new version of the national standards in 2012 (Geography for Life, 2nd edition), the Road Map project and the Social Studies Curriculum Framework for College, Career and Civic Life. He noted how there had been an ongoing interest from the colleagues outside the US to learn about the status of geography in the school system and the factors explaining some of the changes being witnessed. In this editorial, my aim is to continue the same kind of discussion by opening up some perspectives on Finnish geography education. Why Finland? (In addition to the fact that, as a Finnish geography educator, I find it natural to write something which I am familiar with.) I have realised that many colleagues have been interested in hearing more about the Finnish educational system and the status of geography in our schools. I hope that in this short text, I could open up some of the issues which are of interest also for the geography educators outside Finland. I will conclude by hoping to enhance international collaboration – or, at least – discussion of the factors affecting the status of geography education in different countries.

One of the reasons for the remarkable interest in the Finnish educational system is its success in some international tests, especially in PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment). Finland got the top ranking in the tests for 2003, 2006 and 2009, which caused an interesting phenomenon, the so-called "PISA tourism", when a countless number of foreign experts (teacher educators, educational administrative persons, politicians etc.) came to visit Finnish schools and universities, in order to find out the factors behind the success. Some explanations of the good results have been given by several researchers in education (see e.g. Simola, 2005; Sahlberg, 2011; Niemi et al., 2012). In my recent article, I made an overview of these explanations (see Tani, 2014). The main reasons for the success included, for example: 1) the idea of providing equal and free education for everyone during the nine-year comprehensive schooling, 2) freedom of teachers to plan and execute their teaching without any external control, and 3) academic teacher education (all the Finnish teachers, both in primary and secondary schools, must have a

Master's degree). From the viewpoint of geography education, it would be interesting to compare these factors to the status, aims and contents of the school subject – even when the subject itself has not been part of these international tests. There are, however, some other issues, which are especially relevant for geography education and these I will briefly introduce in the following.

Geography's position in the Finnish school system has been – and still is – closely connected with natural sciences. Most of the geography teacher posts in lower and upper secondary schools have biology as another teaching subject. This means that the majority of student teachers, who will be qualified as geography (and biology) teachers, is more familiar with the physical side of the subject and can thus easily feel that human geography is more difficult or even boring. This is one of the challenges that Finnish geography teacher educators have to face. On the other hand, the close connection to natural sciences has kept the relationship between the human sphere and the environment as an important element in Finnish geography classrooms.

The close connection with natural sciences can also be seen in primary schools. At present, geography is taught as part of an integrated subject called "Environmental and Natural Studies" during the first four grades, after which it is taught together with biology as one subject in grades 5–6. The renewal process of the national framework curricula is now in progress, and the new curricula will be put into action in 2016. Then geography will be integrated with biology, chemistry, physics and health education which will form a subject called "Environmental Studies" for the whole primary school level (six years). In primary school education, student teachers will receive a very limited amount of knowledge from each discipline, which they should then be able to teach in practice. This easily means that especially the young teachers are willing to lean on the ready-made teaching materials. It can be said that the textbooks have a real power in steering teaching in the classrooms and even when the books are not controlled by any institution, they follow the framework curricula very closely. What is nevertheless easily "forgotten" from the books is the higher aims of the subject.

In the most recent PISA test, Finland was not as successful as earlier. Even when the ranking was still good, it has provoked a lively debate in Finnish society, when different interest groups have been eager to explain what is wrong with our school system. It is important to notice how the international tests can easily lead educators to stress certain elements in teaching, which are not necessarily in line with the broader educational aims or with some core ideas of each subject. It will be interesting to see how the concern for the performance level in the latest tests will affect the aims and contents of the forthcoming national curricula. What I am the most concerned about, is the status of the elements in geography education which are not easy to test or measure, and which should still belong to its core issues. With these I refer to different value-based themes (e.g. the local-global education, education for sustainable development, intercultural education etc.) as well as the teaching methods which link the ideas of the academic subject together with geographies of young people.

I hope that with my brief example from the contemporary issues in Finnish geography education I could encourage some readers to think about the possibilities to plan some international research projects or at least to enhance the sharing of knowledge between colleagues from different countries – and by doing that, learning *with* each other (Butt and Lambert, 2014, p. 9). *J-Reading* could be one of the places where the results and international debates could be published and thus shared with other geography educators.

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