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Reflecting on the powers, possibilities and constraints of geography curricula in England, Finland and Sweden

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ABSTRACT

National curriculum statements found within the Official Recontextualising Field (ORF) provide an insight into how geography as a school subject is conceptualized in a country's education system. National curricula can shape teachers' agency in curriculum making and what, how and where children and young people study and learn geography. This paper engages with the lower secondary national geography curriculum for England, Finland and Sweden. We examine the structure and nature of the national geography curricula in each country, before drawing on the *threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge* as a tool for the analysis of the curricula. Our analysis found that *deep and descriptive world knowledge* forms the largest proportion of all three national curricula documents, and we argue that this can lead to a potentially limited conceptualization of geographical knowledge and representation of geography. We also suggest that the threefold arrangement could more actively engage with political dimensions when considering futures, and that there should be greater attention paid to the histories and geographies of the discipline (geography) in school geography.

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National curriculum; geography education; school geography; recontextualisation; geographical knowledge

Introduction

In this article, we examine national geography curricula in three countries: England, Finland and Sweden. We begin with the premise that geography is a valuable element of a person's education, which speaks directly to young people's curiosity about the world (Owens et al., 2022; Puttick, 2023). School geography can play an important role in developing young people's knowledges of the world, supporting them to think about it in new ways and to contribute to debates in a variety of spaces (Maude, 2016). However, education is always political, and the construction and representation of geography as a school subject is complex and debated. Focussing on lower secondary education—England (11–14 years old), Finland (13–15 years old) and Sweden (13–15 years old)—we examine the last phase of education in which geography is compulsory in state schools in each country and the last time that many young people directly engage with geography through their schooling.

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Whilst it is in the classroom and out in the streets and fields that geography as a school subject comes to life for children and young people, and teachers of geography carry an important weight of responsibility in their curriculum making, the decisions teachers make do not take place in a vacuum. These decisions are dependent on how geography has been recontextualised through the Official Recontextualising Field (ORF) and the Pedagogical Recontextualising Field (PRF) (Bernstein, 1990, 2003, 1996, 2000). As part of the ORF, policymakers in each country determine the 'knowledge teams' that are involved in making decisions about the ways knowledge is selected and organized into official curriculum statements (Bernstein, 1990, 2003; Winter, 2012), including into what is often known as 'national curricula'. These documents are generally the work of 'ministers, ministries, boards and departments of education and, in some jurisdictions, legislatures and their committees' (Westbury et al., 2016, p. 730), as well as representatives of communities of practice (Westbury et al., 2016).

Curriculum making at a national level takes place in a wider global context—which Priestley et al. (2021) term the 'Supra site' of activity—with global actors such as the OECD and World Bank engaging in 'transnational curriculum discourse generation; policy borrowing and lending; policy learning' (p. 13). The decisions made through national curriculum policy and how knowledge is recontextualised through the ORF shape the nature of geography education in schools, a teacher's work and role, and ultimately young people's experiences of geography education (Bernstein, 1990/ Bernstein, 2003; Finn, 2021; Healy, 2024; Örbring, 2021; Vitikka et al., 2016; Winter, 2012).

Geography is a rich and diverse discipline. As Geoghagen et al. (2020, p. 462) express, 'it ranges across the physical and social sciences into the humanities and the performance arts. It's a discipline with a whole heap of different ways of doing what it does'. Geography's methodological, epistemological and ontological range means that it can be challenging to categorize as having a horizontal or vertical knowledge structure (Bernstein, 1999; Vernon, 2016). This makes decisions about what to teach and why in geography, and how to support progression, complex. Here, decisions inevitably involve processes of social selection (Lambert & Biddulph, 2015; Lambert & Morgan, 2010).

Drawing on Lambert et al. (2015, p. 732) 'threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge', we sought to examine how geography has been represented in the national curricula of England, Finland and Sweden. The threefold arrangement emerged from the GeoCapabilities Project (2012–2021; GeoCapabilities, 2021) and is an expression of the dimensions of knowledge that geography education encourages and enables in young people (Lambert et al., 2015). Our inquiry was framed by the question—*can engaging with Lambert et al.'s (2015) threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge support us in better understanding the content of national geography curricula?* We use the arrangement as a tool for analysis of the curricula, also considering wider implications for school geography. We begin by reflecting upon the role and influence of national curricula in schooling, before contextualizing the 'place' of geography in lower secondary education in each of the three countries.

Why national curricula?

National curricula are political documents, often compromise versions and can be interpreted in different ways (Apple, 1993). One way they can be seen is as an 'expression of society's conversation with its next generation' (Morgan & Lambert, 2023, p. 5). Through national curricula, the state makes decisions about what they think children and young people in their jurisdiction should be taught, and how much agency they think teachers should have in curriculum making. Quoting Inglis (1985), Morgan (2022), p. 2) argues that the curriculum should be seen as an 'ensemble of stories ... about what the possibilities are for the future and what it means to live well at that time'. National curricula are high stakes, and because of their scope, decisions made by knowledge teams in the ORF may well be scrutinized and contested by a range of actors. Here, learned societies, subject associations, teachers, academics and interested individuals and groups may debate the purposes, nature and value of

geography education, and consider how ideas and ideals about geography education might be realized through policy and practice (Geographical Association GA., 2022; Lavonen, 2020; Örbring, 2020; Winter, 2012). Through examination of national curricula, we can gain insight not only into how the state views the position of geography in education but also the stories it wishes to tell, and knowledge it wishes to develop in young people.

Until just a few decades ago, in many Western nations, 'curriculum was allowed to be a matter for the professional discretion of teachers who referred to but were not wholly constrained by curriculum documents' (Hodge, 2023, p. 7). Today, state-led education policies vary in scope and level of detail, but often outline:

> . . .how the educational work of a system of schools should be described, categorized, and sequenced in terms of 'subject' categories and descriptors; what content should be taught to (different) classes of students at the various grade levels; (often) how teaching should be undertaken, i.e. the timetable; and they (typically) outline the social, educational and pedagogical rationales underlying the curriculum or syllabus. (Westbury et al., 2016, p. 730)

Teachers of geography 'enact, translate and mediate' curricula 'through a process of iterative refraction (Supovitz, 2008), filtered via existing professional knowledge, dispositions and beliefs' (Priestley et al., 2021, p. 6). Curriculum making is a social practice (Priestley et al., 2021), and teachers shape and inform discourses, spaces and practices. Teachers can be innovative and progressive in their curriculum making, as well as through contributions to research and debate (Castree et al., 2023; Trolley, 2020; Vernon, 2016). Yet, the selection of some geographies and not others in national curricula may mean that teachers focus less on areas of geography that are not included in national policy and there may be less professional discussion, teacher education and resources available on those areas (Hammond & McKendrick, 2020).

Engaging with Bernstein's (2000) distinction between the ORF and the PRF is helpful to considering how knowledge is 'selected from the fields it is produced, and transformed into school curricula, students' textbooks and teachers' lessons' (Maude, 2021, p. 25), and the impacts this has on geography education. The ORF 'is created and dominated by the state, its agencies and its official statements of curriculum' and the 'PRF consists of teacher educators in university departments of education and schools, subject associations, private research groups and textbook publishers' (Firth, 2018, p. 279). The relationship between the ORF and PRF can vary between countries and over time, depending on the ways in which the ORF enables or constrains the PRF (Bertram, 2020). Over time, in all three countries, researchers and teachers have informed the construction of national curricula in different ways (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Örbring, 2020; Rawling, 2015). However, just as some people have been 'excluded from disciplinary knowledge production' (Winter et al., 2024, p. 69), there are also questions of epistemological privilege in education policy making (Hammond et al., 2024; Hordern & Brooks, 2023). For example, in considering who is engaged with, and how, in debates about national curricula and who shapes political agendas in education (Winter, 2012).

International comparisons of curricula are always complex, as traditions, cultures and political and education structures vary. For example, in England and Finland, the lower secondary phase is the last stage in education whereby the content of geography curricula and assessment is not directly shaped by national examination structures, meaning that, in principle, teachers may have more agency in the decisions they are able to make about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, whereas in Sweden, there are standardized national tests at the end of Grade 9 (14–15 years old). Assessments developed and managed in the ORF can shape teacher education and teaching, education spaces and the nature of teacher–student relationships in schools, with high stakes assessment systems often restraining what is taught (Puttick, 2015a; Winter, 2022). However, critical examination of the nature of national curricula across countries remains a valuable endeavour as it can develop knowledge of how geography is conceptualized and constructed, and support examination of the nature of the stories that states wish to tell the next generation in, and across, countries.

Table 1. An overview of geography in schools in England, Finland and Sweden.

	Primary[a]	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
England	Geography is a discrete subject and compulsory at Key Stage 1 (children aged 5–7) and Key Stage 2 (children aged 7–11) (DfE, 2013).	Geography is a discrete subject and compulsory at Key Stage 3 (young people aged 11–14) (DfE, 2013).	Geography is an optional subject at GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education), and part of the EBacc (English Baccalaureate) for young people aged 14–16. Geography is an optional subject at A-Level (Advanced Level) for young people aged 16–18.
Finland	Geography is taught in an integrated subject 'Environmental Studies' together with Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Health Education in primary schools (children aged 7–12) (FNBE, 2014).	Geography is a discrete subject and compulsory in lower secondary education (young people aged 13–15) (FNBE, 2014).	Geography is a discrete subject, with one compulsory and three national optional courses (+ option for schools to offer some extra courses) for young people aged 16–19. Upper secondary school is finished with the Matriculation examination in which geography is optional (FNAfE, 2019).
Sweden	Geography is a discrete subject, but in grades 1–3 are taught together with Religion, Civics and History.	Geography is a discrete subject and compulsory in lower secondary education (young people aged 13–15). Geography is categorized as a Social Science and teachers generally teach Religion, Civics, History and Geography.	Geography is a discrete subject, but only compulsory in two upper secondary programmes. There are no Matriculation examinations in Sweden.

[a]Geography is also engaged with in the 'Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework: For Group and School Based Providers' for children from birth to five, primarily through the 'Understanding the World' area of learning and development in England (DfE, 2023).

Geography in England, Finland and Sweden: a wide lens view of national curriculum policy contexts

In this section, we examine the place of geography in national curricula in England, Finland and Sweden to situate the study. In Table 1, we set out how geography is represented at primary, lower secondary and upper secondary levels in each country. The aim here is to provide an overview picture, which we unpack further when sharing wider contextual information about each curriculum. In Table 2, we include an overview of the sections used to structure

Table 2. The structure of the national geography curriculum in England, Finland and Sweden.

Country	Section headings used to structure national curricula documentation
England	Purpose of study Aims Attainment targets Subject content for key stage 3 (locational knowledge; place knowledge; human and physical geography, geographical skills and fieldwork)
Finland	Task of the subject Objectives of instruction (geographical knowledge and understanding: 4 objectives; geographical skills: 7 objectives; attitudes and values: 2 objectives) Key content areas (map & world regions; current, changing world; basic conditions for life on Earth; changing landscapes & living environments; people & cultures on Earth; sustainable way of living and sustainable use of natural resources) Objectives related to the learning environments and working methods Guidance, differentiation, and support Assessment of the pupil's learning
Sweden	Aim of the subject Core content (key content areas: Living Environment; Geography, its methods, concepts and ways of working; Environment, people and issues concerning sustainability) Knowledge requirements

curriculum documents in each country, as we later examine how the structure of policy documents can influence how teachers engage with them.

Geography curriculum in England

The first national curriculum in England was introduced in 1991 with the aim of 'raising standards' and 'presented as part of a wider project to reverse national economic and social decline' (Lambert & Hopkin, 2014, p. 70). Geography has been a standalone subject since the inception of the national curriculum (Rawding, 2015), and today it is a compulsory element of young people's education until they reach the end of Key Stage 3 at the age of 14, wherein it becomes an optional subject (see Table 1). The programme of study for geography is situated within a wider education policy context, which expresses areas the state identifies as important (e.g. inclusion and the professional standards that teachers are expected to uphold).

The national curriculum was revised substantially and frequently (every 5–7 years) between 1991 and 2014. Since 2014, the (DfE), has introduced other strategies and guidelines that may shape the teaching of geography (e.g. the sustainability and climate change strategy; Department for Education [Department for Education (DfE)], 2022b). Only some state funded schools are legally required to follow the national curriculum (Department for Education (DfE), 2014c). Private schools, academies and other education institutions may choose not to follow the national curriculum. However, there are other mechanisms of accountability that mean that school leaders and teachers may (opt to) adhere to the national curriculum, with education increasingly shaped by what Biesta (2023, p. 648) terms a 'world-wide education evidence "industry"' and associated performativity measures. For example, all state funded schools are subject to inspection and review by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

Whilst the (DfE), provides subject criteria for standardized public assessments—including General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) and Advanced Level (A-Level)—that exam boards are required to cover (Department for Education (DfE), 2014a, 2014b), schools can choose the exam specification they follow from a range of examination boards. Due to the relatively open nature of the curriculum at Key Stages 1–3, in principle, teachers can play an active role in the recontextualisation of knowledge as they engage in curriculum making (Healy, 2024; Lambert & Biddulph, Lambert & Biddulph, 2015), meaning that the enacted curriculum children and young people engage with in schools may vary.

However, there is sometimes homogeneity found within, and between, geography departments, which has been in part attributed to regulation from examination boards and Ofsted, approaches to resource sharing in 'ready-to-use' formats and discourse among teachers in digital and social spaces (Puttick, 2015, 2017). In recent years, changes in school governance and funding structures—including the evolution of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and government funded teaching resources (e.g. Oak National Academy)—have led to increased state control over education (Hordern & Brooks, 2023; Kulz, 2017). Kulz (2017, p. 7) argues when drawing on the work of Stephen Ball:

> Academies signified 'a "break" from roles and structures and relationships of accountability of a state education system. They replace democratic processes of local authority control over schools with technical or market solutions' (Ball, 2007: 177; emphasis added). Although some individuals may have gained access to money, jobs and status, marketisation fundamentally altered how the education system works.

The number of academies in England has risen from 203 in 2010 to over 10,000 or around 50% of all schools, 89% of which are part of a MAT (Education Datalab, 2024). Concerns have also been raised about Oak's reductive model of education potentially shaping curriculum making, classroom discourse, and what, how and where children study and learn (National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE), 2023 (Yandell, 2020).

The Department for Education (DfE), 2022a, n.p.) report that 90.1% of geography lessons were taught by a teacher with 'any relevant post A Level qualification' in 2021–22. However, over recent years,

there have been issues with the recruitment and retention of teachers in England and these challenges have intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic, with multiple subject areas (including geography) failing to meet Initial Teacher Education (ITE) recruitment targets set by the (DfE), (McLean et al., 2023). Coupled with significant changes to ITE that have reduced teacher educators' agency and sought to reduce university involvement in teacher education through the evolution of a highly centralized state-mandated curricula (Ellis & Childs, 2023; Hordern & Brooks, 2023), there is a risk that students may not be taught geography by a subject specialist and/or that the debates that teachers engage with about both teaching and geography education in ITE may be increasingly shaped by the state.

Geography curriculum in Finland

Geography in Finnish schools is closely connected with biology, and, therefore, geography is often understood as one of the natural sciences. At primary level (grades 1–6), geography is studied together with biology, physics, chemistry and health education in a subject called Environmental Studies, and taught by class teachers, who normally have not studied geography at university. In their degree, student teachers take two to three ECTs (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System; 1 ECT = 25–30 working hours) in geography didactics, potentially impacting upon their knowledge of geography and geography education. At the lower secondary level, geography is taught as a discrete subject by subject teachers, most of whom have biology as their main and geography as their second subject in their academic degree. To be a qualified teacher in Finland, a person must have a Master's degree and pedagogical studies completed.

National framework curricula for Finnish basic education have been renewed approximately every tenth year. The present curriculum was published in 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education FNBE, 2014). National core curriculum defines the objectives for the learning environment, principles for guidance, support, differentiation and assessment. It also defines the objectives and core contents of each subject. Education providers (municipalities and schools) design their local curricula based on the national core curriculum (Vitikka et al., 2016). It is worth mentioning that there are no national tests in basic education, so the assessment is done by the teachers. Assessment criteria are described in the national framework curriculum. At least in principle, teachers are relatively free to make their own decisions about what and how to teach. In practice, textbooks have a strong role in the teaching of geography. There is no official inspection of the teaching materials, but publishing companies follow the national framework curricula, leaving teachers room to consider how they teach the aims and content areas.

Integration of school subjects is highlighted in the curriculum and *seven transversal competence areas* have been defined in the core curriculum: Thinking and learning to learn; Cultural competence, interaction and expression; Taking care of oneself and managing daily life; Multiliteracy; ICT competence; Working life competence and entrepreneurship; Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future (Finnish National Board of Education FNBE, 2014). These competence areas must be included in every subject. All the competencies can easily be linked with the aims and contents of geography.

Dialogue between different subjects is emphasized by including *multidisciplinary learning modules* in teaching. Schools must organize at least one such module every school year (Finnish National Board of Education FNBE, 2014). Modules are planned as collaboration between subjects, and it is an underpinning principle that students should be active agents in the planning process of the modules. The way in which these multidisciplinary modules are organized varies remarkably: special thematic courses can be planned and implemented in some schools, but in others, these modules have been done as separate theme days without any strong connection to teaching subjects.

Geography curriculum in Sweden

Since the 1980s, geography has been classified as a social science subject in the Swedish compulsory school curriculum together with civics, history and religious education. However, the subject of geography can be seen to be conceptualized as an integrated subject, including both physical and human geography. Grade 7–9 teachers in Sweden usually teach all four social science subjects (Table 1), and as a consequence, about one-third of teachers lack a formal qualification in geography.

Several researchers have stressed the way that school geography is strongly formed by specific selective traditions influenced by older curriculum traditions (Bladh, 2020; Bladh & Molin, 2012; Molin, 2006; Molin & Örbring, 2017). The regional tradition from the policy documents of 1919 is still clearly visible in student teachers' view of the subject, even if new content connected to issues of, and ideas about, sustainable development have started to change the nature of the subject (Bladh, 2014).

Since the curriculum reform in 2011, the geography curriculum has specific common aims for the subject in all compulsory schools and a new structure which specifies central content and knowledge requirements (Table 2). The reform in 2011 implemented a standards-based curriculum structure in Sweden (Wahlström, 2018). The effect of the new curricula and its implementation has been a strong incentive for a kind of backwards pedagogy (Alvunger, 2021; Carlgren, 2016), where teaching is governed by the knowledge requirements, i.e. the criteria designed to support teachers' assessment of pupils' knowledge. Backward pedagogy, i.e. making the expected outcome the starting point, content and purpose of teaching, has profound consequences, where the assessment criteria are transformed into the content of teaching. Counteracting such effects has been an important aspect of the newest curriculum revision carried out in 2022.

In connection with the 2011 reform, the government decided to introduce annual national tests in natural and social science subjects for grades 6 and 9 from 2012, including for geography. While the grade 6 tests were abolished in 2015, the grade 9 tests still exist. Although the accountability regime that those tests represent is problematic in many ways, the situation has been paradoxically fruitful to the subject of geography. The aim of the national tests is to assess the curriculum with a specific focus on the common aims and specific core content and knowledge requirements for the subjects. This has clearly challenged the selective traditions, which also were distinctly visible in the first tests. New curriculum themes focusing on environmental and development issues were the biggest challenge for pupils in 2013, while questions emphasizing knowledge about countries and of names and location of places, seas, mountains and other geographical phenomena in line with the selective traditions had the best results (Molin & Örbring, 2017). The situation has brought about a changing focus in grades 7–9, moving geography teaching from the older regional geography tradition to a more updated environmental geographical tradition (Bladh, 2014). However, the tensions between regional geography as a classical school theme and a more critical and values-based subject including questions of environmental, democractic and sustainable development still characterize the context of geography education in Swedish schools (Bladh, 2020; Örbring, 2021).

Materials and methods

To further examine the construction of geography in national curricula, we used Lambert et al. (2015, p. 732) *threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge* (Table 3) as a tool for analysis. The arrangement represents a theoretical perspective as to the power and potential of geography education, and we sought to examine what insights can be gained into both national curricula and the arrangement itself.

The arrangement expresses the dimensions of knowledge that 'teaching geography encourages and enables students to develop' (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732). It emerged from The GeoCapabilities project, which applied Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's work on the Capability Approach to the geography curriculum to 'examine ways in which school geography

Table 3. Interpretation of Lambert et al'.s (2015) threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge.

Expression of the threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732)	Description of the knowledge that studying geography encourages students to develop (Lambert, 2016, p. 404)[a]
'A deep descriptive world knowledge' (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732)	'The acquisition and development of deep descriptive and explanatory "world knowledge"; this may include (for example) countries, capitals, rivers and mountains; also world wind patterns, distribution of population and energy sources. The precise constituents and range of this substantive knowledge is delineated locally, influenced by national and regional cultural contexts' (Lambert, 2016, p. 404).
'A critical conceptual knowledge that has explanatory power and systematicity, providing a relational understanding of people living on the planet' (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732)	'The development of the relational thinking that underpins geographical thought (Jackson, 2006); this includes place and space (for example, the local and the global), the human and the physical and notions of environmental interdependence and interaction. This knowledge component is arguably more independent of local circumstances and influences, being derived from the discipline: concepts like place, space and environment are complex, evolving and contested and, referring back to our earlier metaphor, can be thought of as fundamental components of geography's syntax. They are sometimes referred to as geography's "big ideas", "key concepts" or "second order" concepts (see Brooks (2013) who refers to Taylor's (2008) ground-clearing work on concepts in school geography)' (Lambert, 2016, p. 404).
'A propensity to think through alternative social, economic, and environmental futures in specific place and locational contexts' (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732)	'A propensity to apply the analysis of alternative social, economic and environmental futures to particular place contexts; this draws on a range of skills developed through appropriate pedagogic approaches such as decision making exercises; in addition to intellectual skills such as analysis and evaluation this also encourages speculation, imagination and argument. If we accept that it is what students are able to do (including, to think in new ways) that gives geographical knowledge its "power", then this category of what we might think of as "applied geography" is crucial' (Lambert, 2016, p. 404).

[a]We draw our definitions of the *threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge* from Lambert et al. (2015) wherein it was first introduced, and Lambert (2016) in which the arrangement was restated and developed.

contributes to developing the capabilities young people need to live a life that they value' (Biddulph et al., 2020, p. 260). Human capabilities—'defined as the different combinations of human functionings that can be achieved by people, groups, or both' – can be seen as important components of human development (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 724). Formal education—as an often state-led and funded public service—can play a role in supporting children and young people to develop capabilities (Bustin, 2019).

Arguing for a 'progressive form of discipline-orientated teaching within broad educational aims' (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 275), the GeoCapabilities project considers whether the purposes and values of school geography can be expressed through a capabilities approach (Bustin, 2019; Lambert & Béneker, 2024; Lambert et al., 2015). Here, Lambert's (2018) idea of a progressive knowledge-led curriculum is underpinned by Young's (2008) notion of 'powerful knowledge' – knowledge that has been created and tested in academic disciplines. For Lambert, 'providing children with access to powerful knowledge and exploring with children that knowledge is not fixed, but is contested and open to change, then educational inequalities and "capabilities deprivation" can be challenged' (Hammond, 2022, p. 273). However, questions have been raised as to whether this theorization adequately engages with the injustices faced by children and young people, injustices in knowledge production in the discipline of geography, and the relationships between different knowledges in education (Catling & Martin, 2011; Hammond, 2022; Kasuji et al., 2022; Puttick et al., 2024; Roberts, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2018).

Table 4. The sections of national geography curricula in England, Finland and Sweden that were coded.

Country	Sub-section for the subject/core/key content for each country
England	Subject content for key stage 3 (locational knowledge; place knowledge; human and physical geography, geographical skills and fieldwork)
Finland	Key content areas (map & world regions; current, changing world; basic conditions for life on Earth; changing landscapes & living environments; people & cultures on Earth; sustainable way of living and sustainable use of natural resources)
Sweden	Core content (key content areas: Living Environment; Geography, its methods, concepts and ways of working; Environment, people and issues concerning sustainability)

Table 5. References to different dimensions of knowledge in national geography curricula.

Dimensions of the threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge	England	Finland	Sweden
Deep descriptive world knowledge	7	13	15
Critical conceptual knowledge	5	2	8
Thinking through alternative social, economic and environmental futures	0	6	2
Total	12	21	25

The threefold arrangement was introduced as a 'working hypothesis' that the authors argued provided a 'productive foundation' for the school geography curriculum (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732) after the first phase of the project. The hypothesis posits that all three dimensions of knowledge, and the interplay between them, are of value in geography education (Lambert et al., 2015). As such, an over-focus on one of the dimensions may be limiting to geography education.

The curricula contents (as shown in Table 4) for geography were coded deductively using the threefold arrangement. Whilst curricula sit within a wider policy context, we focus on the geography curricula specifically as this is often the policy teachers engage with most when curriculum-making, although we do make connections with the wider context to elucidate some discussion. We acknowledge that this sets limits on the claims that we make, as the wider policy context also informs teacher education, teacher agency and teacher's curriculum making in complex and intersecting ways. Coding was initially conducted by one researcher, and then reviewed and discussed collaboratively by all researchers during four virtual meetings which took place via Zoom between spring and autumn 2023.

The threefold arrangement is comprised of bounded, but broad, descriptions of the dimensions of knowledge a progressive geography education can develop (see Table 3). This means that there was a degree of subjectivity in the coding, even though a deductive approach was taken. This is important to note, as one of the researcher's was a co-author of the 2015 paper which introduces the arrangement (Tani), two authors were co-investigators on the GeoCapabilities project (Tani and Bladh), and all authors have engaged with the project in academic debate. The regular meetings aimed to support open reflection on our understandings of both national curricula and the threefold arrangement, and the value and limitations of the use of the arrangement as a tool for analysis. This process involved individual and collective reflexivity as 'by recursively reviewing data and connections between codes, researchers can also come to see elements of their own research practice, subjects' representations, and broader strategies of knowledge construction that had not previously been apparent' (Cope, 2021, p. 363). All analysis was conducted in English, and the discussion that follows reflects our collaborative reflection on the nature of national geography curricula in England, Finland and Sweden.

Results

In this section, we discuss the findings of the analysis through subheadings drawn from the dimensions of knowledge in the threefold arrangement. Through this process, we also identify dimensions of knowledge that are under-explored in the present hypothesis. Table 5 shows the number of references to each of the three dimensions of knowledge between and across countries, and Figure 1 shows the proportion of each curriculum that focuses on each dimension of knowledge identified through coding.

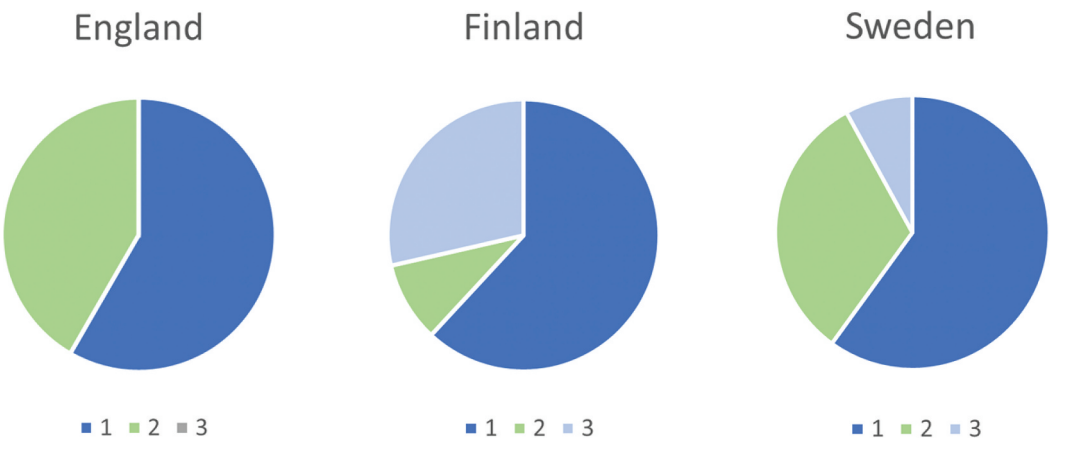

Figure 1. Representation of the knowledge 'make up' of national geography curricula in England, Finland and Sweden. 1: Deep and descriptive world knowledge. 2: Critical conceptual knowledge. 3: Thinking through alternative social, economic and environmental futures.

Deep and descriptive world knowledge

Analysis found that *deep and descriptive world knowledge* formed the largest part of the national curricula, with over half of the curriculum being categorized as this dimension of the threefold arrangement in each of the countries. The specificity and focus (e.g. places, geographical features and geographical processes) of this dimension of knowledge varies across each country's national curricula. While the Swedish primary geography curriculum focuses on Sweden, the Nordic Countries and Europe, the secondary curriculum document does not make any specific references to countries and continents within its core content (e.g. 'Names and location of more important countries in different continents, water, islands, mountains, deserts, regions and places' (National Agency for Education NAE, 2011, p. 153). Within this framing, it is not clear what criteria could be used to establish which countries might be classified or seen as 'more important countries' (NAE, 2011, p. 153) and the commentary material indicates that this is left to the judgement of the teacher. The selection of names and locations should be linked to the themes and current issues addressed in the classroom (Skolverket, 2017). Within the Finnish curriculum, there is a focus on the locations that are connected to the Finnish context (e.g. 'the contents focus on perceiving the world as a whole and learning key place names of Finland, Europe, and the world' (FNBE, 2014, p. 325). This appears to be held alongside a selection of places that will help students engage with the world as a whole (e.g. in considering inter-relationships between people, processes and places).

The national curriculum in England sets out a focus on specific continents and countries (e.g. 'extend their locational knowledge and deepen their spatial awareness of the world's countries using maps of the world to focus on Africa, Russia, Asia (including China and India), and the Middle East' (Department for Education (DfE), 2013, p. 2). This connects to the approach taken in earlier stages (Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2), whereby students begin by learning location knowledge of where they live before moving on to a range of other places. Here, echoes can be seen of what has been termed the 'knowledge turn', which has evolved following the election of the coalition government in 2010 (Ford, 2021; Lambert, 2011; Young, 2018) and fed into the development of the 2014 National Curriculum, which was heavily influenced by the work of E.D. Hirsch on 'core knowledge' and the 'Core Knowledge curriculum', including lists of what every child should know (Hirsch, 1987; Kinder, 2015).

The focus on *deep and descriptive world knowledge* in geography is consistent with the overarching aims of the 2014 National Curriculum—'the national curriculum provides pupils with an

introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens' (Department for Education (DfE), 2014c, n.p.). As Dorling (2023, p. 215) highlights this raises questions, including about what is essential knowledge, and who decides, when he writes:

> So, every child will hear what the Secretary of State and his friends believe are the best thoughts; and all will be given the chance to appreciate what was produced by those few who had their great potential tapped.

Dorling's concerns are echoed by Ford (2021), who, when reflecting on history education in England, argues that the curricular constructions which have come out of the 'knowledge turn' have been more akin to the 'knowledge of the powerful' (Young, 1971).

It is also worthy of note that the list of topics specified by the national curriculum is open to interpretation. For example, the first sentence specifying the 'subject content' for Key Stage 3 geography in England states 'pupils should consolidate and extend their knowledge of the world's major countries and their physical and human features' (Department for Education (DfE), 2013, p. 2). Again, it is not clear how a country is classified as 'major', and this statement could be interpreted as students' merely naming and locating geographical features such as world cities, or critically engaging with different knowledges and socio-spatial (in)justices in urban environments and of urban life. Critically considering how cities and geographies are represented in education is important, as these representations can shape children's imaginations of, and engagements with, the world. For as Soja (2010, p. 19) argues, the geographies in which we live are not 'just dead background or a neutral physical stage for the human drama but are filled with material and imagined forces that affect events and experiences'. Here, whilst we individually and collectively shape spaces, place(s) and our lives, wider geographies can 'intensify or sustain our exploitation as workers, support oppressive forms of cultural and political domination… and aggravate all forms of discrimination and injustice' (Soja, 2010, p. 19). Whilst schools are not the only places that children learn about cities, if a backward pedagogy—as discussed in the Swedish context—were to be applied here by a teacher or teacher educator who was not engaged in debates in geography, this could risk limited geographies being engaged with in education and young people potentially developing a limited knowledge of urban life and the discipline of geography.

Critical conceptual knowledge

None of the three national curricula is considered concept-led. However, there is evidence in some places within the curricula that conceptual knowledge would be required, and this varies between countries. Sustainability is a concept that is explicitly referenced within both Finnish and Swedish curricula text but is not found within the national curriculum in England. Place appears to be more explicitly foregrounded in the national curriculum in England. However, Rawling (2018a, 2018b) has provided an in-depth account of the ways in which the concept of place is represented in a limited way in the national curriculum by using approaches to studying place developed from Cresswell (2015). Here, Rawling's (2018b) analysis indicated that there was a focus on 'understanding places (descriptive)' rather than 'investigating processes (social constructivist)' and 'exploring being in the world (phenomenological)' (Rawling, 2018b, p. 57).

The focus on the descriptive approach to place(s) is also found within the national curriculum in Finland and Sweden. However, within the Finnish curriculum, there appears potential evidence that other approaches to studying place might be explored where there is reference to 'human rights and the prerequisites for a good life are discussed, particularly from the viewpoint of children and young people' (FNBE, 2014, p. 325). Here, a teacher of geography may engage with children's experiences and imaginations of the world, and/or critically consider children's rights and citizenship when teaching about, or in, place(s). For example, by considering international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and/or by engaging with children's geographies and lived citizenship in different spaces and places (Kallio et al., 2020). In the

Swedish curriculum, thematic conceptual perspectives of vulnerable places, exploring consequences of climate change or conflicts of interests over natural resources, open for a more critical approach when examining geographical processes. Within geography education, concepts are positioned as providing a link between school geography and the academic discipline (Brooks, 2013). However, Healy (2022) argues that to maintain this link there ought to be attention to the ways in which 'concepts remain in motion in the academic discipline of geography' so that geography education critically engages with 'how geographers are drawing upon these concepts in contemporary research' (p. 200). The absence of this link can be seen in the three national curricula documents, as there is a lack of insight into the ways in which geographical concepts are contested and/or evolving.

Beyond concepts, we also examined the 'relational understanding of people living on the planet' (Lambert et al., 2015, p. 732), where there is emphasis on the relationships between physical and human geographies. Within the national curriculum for England, this is the most explicit within the framing of 'understand[ing] how human and physical processes interact to influence, and change landscapes, environments and the climate; and how human activity relies on effective functioning of natural systems' (Department for Education (DfE), 2013, p. 2). Here, both climate change and sustainability are not made explicit but could be taught. There is also a separation between physical and human geography as if the human was layered on to the physical (Latour, 2017), rather than a conceptualization of the Earth as a unified system. The wording of *human activity* suggests a potential focus on economic activity and can be seen to reflect a potentially problematic conceptualization of relations in the present time-space, where some humans still view 'the Earth as though it were an inert entity that exists primarily to be exploited and profited from, with the aid of technology and science' (Ghosh, 2021, p. 119). This wording also fails to mention the slow violence faced by more-than-humans (Sutoris, 2022), and highlights how political decisions about stories which might be told through curricula can potentially shape young people's imaginations of, and engagements with, the world.

Within the national curricula for Finland and Sweden, there is a more specific reference to where this form of *relational understanding* is required. For example, within the Swedish core contents, there is reference to 'relationships between poverty, ill-health and factors such as population density, climate and natural resources' in relation to the subsection on the 'Environment, people and issues concerning sustainability' (NAE, 2011, p. 154).

Thinking through alternative social, economic and environmental futures

Analysis showed that a *propensity to think through alternative social, economic and environmental futures in specific places and locational contexts* is the smallest dimension of the threefold arrangement in England and Sweden, but comprises over a quarter of the Finnish curriculum. However, the aims section of the Swedish geography curriculum states: 'Teaching should also contribute to pupils developing knowledge of how we can influence the future in the direction of a more acceptable living environment for all people' (NAE, 2011, p. 198). Further, one of the four abilities in the aims section is that teaching in geography should give students opportunities to develop their abilities 'to assess solutions to different environmental and development issues based on considerations concerning ethics and sustainable development' (NAE, 2011, p. 199).

The absence of this dimension in the programme of study for geography in England is significant in the context of the climate and ecological emergencies, and the structural and everyday injustices that pervade the present time-space (Hammond et al., 2023; Morgan, 2011; Puttick & Murrey, 2020). This absence can also be seen as contradictory to long-standing debates in geography education about futures thinking (see, for example, Hicks, 2007; Huckle & Sterling, 1996; Norcup, 2015; Scoffham & Rawlinson, 2022), and potentially reflective of epistemological privilege in education policy making. Engaging with alternative futures is at once an ethical and intellectual matter. As

Walshe and Sund (2022, p. 1) examine when reflecting on the importance of environmental and sustainability education:

> As such, environmental and sustainability education (ESE) has a critical role to play, for example, in ensuring that it forms part of a broader response to the global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to reduce the likelihood of further catastrophic climate change; however, it also needs to address emotional responses, such as eco-anxiety, and empower children and young people to address environmental issues, such as climate change, both individually and collectively, now and in the future. In this way, it might become truly transformative.

However, as Norcup (2015) powerfully details when reflecting on her doctoral journey to research the journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education* (*CIGE*), it is also important to be attentive to multi-scalar geographies of power in geography education communities. Here, people may use (their) power to restrict or enable research and/or debate, especially on issues which are deemed by some as 'controversial' or require changes that impact upon the interests of those in positions of power (Latour, 2017; Norcup, 2015).

In contrast to England and Sweden, Finland's transversal competence areas—which include both *participation* and *building a sustainable future* – aim to develop young people's capacity to make decisions about how to act in the world today and in their futures, through developing their knowledge and skills to act as responsible citizens, to understand the significance of the choices that they make, and to be able to reflect on alternative futures (FNBE, 2014, p. 24). These transversal competence areas have been considered in the aims and key content areas of every school subject. In geography, in addition to these transversal competencies, one of the key content areas is 'a sustainable way of living and sustainable use of natural resources' (FNBE, 2014, p. 386), and one of the value-related objectives is 'to support the pupil in becoming an active citizen who acts responsibly and is committed to a sustainable way of living' (FNBE, 2014, p. 385). This can be seen to stress the importance of young people's citizenship, both today and in the future.

In the first general part of the Swedish curriculum on fundamental values and tasks of the school, four perspectives (historical, environmental, international and ethical) are presented as curriculum tasks for all subjects, opening up the potential for inter-disciplinary teaching. In relation to an environmental perspective, it is stated that 'teaching should illuminate how the functions of society and our ways of living and working can best be adapted to create sustainable development' (NAE, 2011, p. 8).

Lambert (2018, p. 36) argues that a propensity to think through alternative futures:

> draws on a range of skills developed through appropriate pedagogic approaches such as decision-making exercises; in addition to intellectual skills such as analysis and evaluation this also encourages speculation, imagination, and argument. (see Hicks, undated)

In England, the national programme of study for geography includes a list of topics and a section on 'geographical skills and fieldwork' (Department for Education (DfE), 2013, p. 3). This section focuses on GIS, map and source work, and fieldwork including subsequent data interpretation. However, there is an absence of any curricula statements that would contribute to developing students' understanding of knowledge production and power relations in research, which have been highlighted as an underdeveloped aspect of school geography (Firth, 2015; Healy, 2021; Lambert & Solem, 2017; Quirke et al., 2024; Winter et al., 2024). The curriculum also contains a very specific conceptualization of research methods in geography. For example, there is no mention of research ethics, or of arts-based methods, citizen science or participatory methods in the section on geographical skills and fieldwork. These absences may limit young people's knowledge of geography as a discipline and ideas about knowledge production. This is significant in considering 'the gap' (Castree et al., 2007) between school and university geography, and how school geography supports students as they progress on to their next steps/transitions in education, careers and/or life.

Conclusions and discussion

Our analysis of national curriculum documents for geography in England, Finland and Sweden has shown how geography education is entangled in complex multi-scalar ecologies of education policies which may inform how the geography curriculum is written and structured in national guidelines. For example, geography, along with other subjects, contributes to the development of transversal competencies (such as cultural competence) in children and young people as part of the curriculum in Finland.

Using Lambert et al. (2015) threefold arrangement of geographical knowledge as a tool for analysis, we found that the curriculum in all three countries had a significant focus on developing *deep and descriptive world knowledge*. Whilst this dimension of knowledge is important to developing students' knowledge of (life on) the Earth—including, but not limited to, how it is shaped by physical and human processes—as we have seen in England, there is a risk of this dimension of knowledge being conceptualized as merely lists of knowledge to be learnt about the world. This raises questions about the discourses and spaces which shape teachers' curriculum making, along with wider education structures and processes—such as (initial) teacher education, and accountability and performativity pressures within and beyond institutions—which may support or constrain teachers in their work.

The risk of *deep and descriptive world knowledge* being conceptualized as merely lists to be learnt can become more pronounced depending on how *critical conceptual knowledge* and *thinking through alternative, social, economic and environmental futures* are constructed in curricula, in terms of the amount and nature of focus given. As we have seen in the case of the national programme of study for England, there is a separation of human and physical geography which is problematic when engaging with wicked problems such as the climate and ecological emergencies, and not representative of recent academic discourse (Latour, 2017). In the case of Finland, students' role as active and responsible citizens is highlighted in the aims and contents of the curriculum, but the role of geographical thinking—relational understanding—that could enhance their capabilities to construct links between physical and human geographies remains surprisingly weak. In the Swedish curriculum for geography, topics relating to environment, people and issues concerning sustainability have been more emphasized as central themes than in previous curricula. This is changing the subject towards an environmental geography focus, which provides new opportunities to deepen the relational dimensions of geography as a school subject. However, the introduction of specific knowledge requirements in the curriculum risks consolidating a more descriptive perspective of geography.

Reflecting on the arrangement, we note that alternative political futures could be further engaged with as part of the third dimension of knowledge. Conflict between people and amongst states, sometimes as the result of ongoing entanglements with colonialism, pervades our time-space, with there also being increased (social) media representation of conflicts and tensions (Roberts, 2020). Here, it is of critical importance that young people's knowledge of political systems is developed, and the constructed, embodied and multi-scalar—across places, political units and scales of governance—nature of citizenship considered, so that geography education can support children 'to rethink that which we take for granted, to unpack concepts and geographical "facts", and to question the way in which the world operates' (Anderson et al., 2008, p. 35). This can help make visible the active role that children play in shaping (their own) lives and geographies, and how wider geographies are shaped by (powerful) others (Soja, 2010) in both education spaces and everyday life.

We also note that the threefold arrangement fails to engage with the histories and geographies of geography as a discipline. We feel this is a significant omission, as it is important that school geography engages with the diverse roots of the discipline (Bonnett, 2023; Cresswell, 2024), its ties to colonialism (Daley & Murrey, 2022; Noxolo, 2017; Winter et al., 2024), and how geography has been shaped by turns. For example, Marxist geography developed through a radical movement,

which 'began as part of a culture of political opposition that coalesced in the mid- to late 1960s' (Peet, 2015, p. 274) and aimed to critically engage with issues such as conflict, inequities and racism, sexism and environmental degradation. In studying geography, it is important for children and young people—in age-appropriate ways—to engage not only with geographical knowledge but also debates about how knowledge has been produced and how knowledge production has been shaped. The value of which ultimately lies in supporting young people to think through alternative futures and to critically engage with the present time-space, and to consider how it has been shaped and the impacts this has had on people and places.

In conclusion, whilst geography comes to life for children and young people in a variety of education and everyday spaces, national curricula shape knowledge discourses, education spaces and teachers' agency in curriculum making. Analysis of national curricula can give us insights into the knowledge the state wishes to develop in young people through geography. It is of critical importance that national curricula are engaged with as political documents—which are constructed by knowledge teams appointed by the state and often regulated by agents of the state.

We make four suggestions for future research. First, research in to how teachers of geography and geography teacher educators engage with, teach and contribute to debates about, the national curriculum could enhance our knowledge of how the national curriculum and wider policy context shapes spaces, practices, debates and pedagogies in geography education. Empirical research in this area across countries would support examination of how the ORF enables and/or constrains teachers' curriculum making, and how place-based factors and social and political infrastructures in different contexts shape teachers' agency and the nature of their work. Such comparative work could also examine how the framing of school curricula is influenced by different historical, philosophical and conceptual roots in education, for example, between the Anglo-Saxon tradition of curriculum studies and the north-west European Didaktik tradition (e.g. Krogh et al., 2021), thinking also about how traditions are changing through ongoing transnational shifts. Second, further research as to how school geography is constructed with, or in relation to, other subjects (such as biology in Finland or civics in Sweden) or competencies across the curriculum would enhance our knowledge as to how the teaching of geography is shaped by wider curricula priorities and its (politically drawn) boundaries with other subjects in policy and schools. This would support examination of how 'wicked problems' are engaged with in (geography) education, and how the construction of subject's shape (initial) teacher education, teacher and student identities, and the infrastructure developed to support the teaching of geography. Third, research into if and how the histories and geographies of geography are taught in different countries would enhance knowledge of how geography as a subject is constructed in different spaces, and the impacts this has on young people's engagement with geography as a discipline. Finally, engaging with children and young people's experiences of geography education in different countries and contexts would enhance our knowledge of their values, perspectives on, and lived experiences of, geography education. Whilst there have been many arguments about the value of geography education, engaging with young people's perspectives is significant in examining their aspirations for, and experiences of, geography education. Here, research with, for and by, young people, could also seek to examine if, how and why, perspectives vary between children, and within and between countries, as well as supporting active consideration of what young people perceive to be the value of geography education to their lives and futures.

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