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13. HISTORY, SOCIAL SCIENCE AND GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION

in Finnish Schools and Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

The article highlights the main characteristics of the humanities, or school subjects having a humanistic orientation, from the point of view of geography, history and social science in comprehensive schools. The educational objectives for these three subjects in the present National Core Curriculum for Basic Education are focused on the development of students’ thinking skills and understanding of the nature of historical, societal or geographical knowledge, and skills of using, for example, historical sources. This emphasis on learning, thinking and skills implies that activating teaching methods are used in lessons, and the assessment of learning outcomes is expected to follow the skills-based strand of humanities education. Future challenges are also in focus, for example intercultural education, which is becoming more and more crucial to history, social science and geography.

Keywords: assessment, cross-disciplinary themes, geography, history, social science, subject didactics

INTRODUCTION

The composition of school curricula and the status and traditions of specific school subjects can be very different between countries. This is obvious in the case of the humanities, where subject constructions can be numerous. In Finland, the humanities as such are not an established entity, and the list of school subjects that basically could belong to this family having a humanistic orientation, includes a number of independent subjects in compulsory schools such as: history, social science, religion, and geography. Unlike for instance the subject cluster social studies in American schools, history and social science are independent subjects, and geography also as an independent subject, is counted in the science subjects and is taught by the same teachers who teach biology. In the Finnish
educational system, and in the present article, social science refers to the subject including elements of civic education, economy, sociology and law.

In our article the focus is on the geography, history and social science, on their aims and contents in the present National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (for comprehensive schools) and on their main features as school subjects. Moreover, we will also describe the education of teachers for these subjects. What is common to these three subjects is that each of them describes and examines human beings and their activities in their regional, social and cultural environments. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2003) as well as the one for Upper Secondary Schools (2004) emphasize basically similar values such as human rights, equality, democracy, respect for the diversity of nature and sustainable development and acceptance of cultural diversity, all of which are significant in the teaching of the humanities, both for their subject-specific aims and contents. These subjects are, however, rather different from each other from the point of view of their aims, contents and nature of knowledge.

For decades, history and social science had formed a kind of subject coalition (history and social science) and had a common curriculum although the contents of each subject were kept apart. In the 2004 curricular reform, they were finally separated into two subjects, in which students’ achievements are assessed independently. However, both subjects are still usually taught by history teachers who took social sciences as a minor subject in their degrees. A major reason for the separation was the different nature of these subjects, both relying on fundamentally different academic disciplines. The decision to separate history and social sciences into two independent subjects can be seen as an attempt to improve the status of social science education, as the politicians have been worried about young people’s political disinterest and disengagement, and thus they were willing to encourage citizenship education.

As for geography, this article will predominately look at cultural geography (one of the branches of geography), but the point of view of physical geography can’t be ignored in the Finnish school system, because it is an important part of the geography curriculum in schools. In Finland geography has long been taught as an independent subject. In the first school years geography is connected to biology and other natural sciences like chemistry, physics and health education, forming a subject group called environment and nature studies. From the point of view of humanistic geography it is noticeable that the social environment was not included in the first school years’ textbooks until after the 2004 curricular reform. The reason why geography has been connected to the natural sciences but not to the humanities or social studies in Finland is because the roots of geography lie in physical geography (see the article by Lavonen & Juuti in this book). There is a strong possibility that its connection to natural sciences, even at universities, gives geography a stronger stature as a school subject than is the case in some other European countries where geography is connected to the humanities. Also in Finland a knowledge of cultural geography, especially human geography has