

## DO PERSONAL EXPERIENCES HAVE AN IMPACT ON TEACHING AND DIDACTIC CHOICES IN GEOGRAPHY?

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### Abstract

Factors influencing teachers' selection of content in geography teaching is a fundamental didactic matter.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether Swedish geography teachers' informal and formal experiences have influenced their interest in geography and if so, in what way. The results disclosed that informal experiences like outings, holidays, and childhood memories have a significant impact. The results also revealed that childhood experiences might increase the comprehension of how nature and

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we use the terms *didactics* and *subject matter didactics*, being well aware that the common use of didactics in English is different from the use of *didaktik* in the Scandinavian languages. However, we are here connecting to the Nordic and continental philosophical traditions of didactics.

mankind are connected, and how various places differ. Selective traditions showed to be strong, i.e. geographic names and map reading were prioritized while at excursions, physical geography was particularly dominating. We argue that in the geography teacher education, didactics should include methods for field studies, giving emphasis also to the part dealing with human geography. Forthcoming teachers need to reflect on how to make didactic choices in order to renounce the selective traditions in the subject.

**Keywords:** *geography teachers, informal and formal experiences, reflection, selective traditions, subject skills*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Factors affecting how geography teachers perform their education are of great didactic significance. More knowledge about these might improve our capability to link teacher education to student teachers' own experiences. This will motivate and engage the student teachers in their own subject studies as well as in their own teaching. It will furthermore create more knowledge about which factors that affect educators' teaching, and increase their awareness about their own didactic choices, i.e. what purpose, content, and method they decide on for each new lesson, didactic choices of uttermost importance to the pupils' learning. Acquiring the ability to reflect on one's own didactic choices involves systematic practicing.

John Dewey (1933) concluded that all education needs to contain reflective thinking, and defined the concept of reflection as "an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds supporting it and future conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). Dewey's thoughts about the importance of developing reflection capability in an education context procured several followers, e.g. Schön (1983, 1987), who argued that a teacher can improve his/her teaching by constantly reflecting on his/her teaching practice, and through this develop different degrees of comprehension of his/her own role as an educator.

Other scientists considering reflection as one of the most important activities in teacher education and teaching are Zeichner and Liston (1996), Rodgers (2002), Griffin (2003), Lee (2005), Geerinck, Masschelein and Simons (2010), Henry and Bruland (2020), and Mackay and Tymon (2013). Reflecting is conceived as an intellectual process oriented toward an object or a profession, and aims at acquiring a deeper understanding of the profession or of one's self, the purpose being to reflect one's profession in one's self. To achieve this, teachers and student teachers need education in didactics, where concept, theories, and knowledge of the subject are combined to construct an active reflection process in linkage with investigating one's own practice (Ongstad, 2006; Schüllerqvist, 2009). We anticipate that the results acquired in the present study will be useful for teacher educators and student teachers as part of this reflection process. Teachers' subject comprehension is a vital starting point for their choice of profession and their didactic choices in teaching.

Our study was inspired by an article by Catling, Greenwood, Martin and Owens (2010), who reported on a study investigating whether previous experiences in life had affected their interest in studying geography and working as a geography teacher in primary school in Great Britain and Ireland, and if so, in what manner. Research in and about the school subject geography is limited in Sweden, and to our knowledge no studies exist on which factors that have influenced geography teachers to choose this subject. There are, however, studies investigating student teachers' and secondary school teachers' selection of content (Molin, 2006) and teachers' views on geography at the upper (Wennberg, 1990) and intermediate levels of elementary school (Molin & Grubbström, 2013). Studies have furthermore reported

on teachers' as well as student teachers' views on the subject (Ojanne, 1990; Nilsson, 2009; Gottfridsson & Bladh, 2012; Bladh, 2014). The present study thus supplements previous research in that it focused on Swedish geography teachers and disclosed which experiences in early life that had an impact on their choice of profession. A further purpose was to investigate the factors that influence the teachers' didactic choices, i.e. the purpose of their teaching, the content they select, and which methods they use, along with their opinions about the new syllabuses and national tests.

## **2. THE SWEDISH CONTEXT**

One plausible reason for the lack of research in and about geography as a school subject might be the weak position the subject presently holds in school. The reason behind this weak position in Sweden is an interesting question, as this was not always the case. On the contrary, looking back at the 16th century, geography was a high status subject within the seven free arts. Carl von Linné furthered the subject by his field studies and observations, and geography was an important school subject during the 18th century (Buttimer & Mels, 2006). From the middle of the 19th century, geography was studied in coalition with history, but became an independent subject in the first five school years in 1895, and from 1909 also in secondary school (Olsson, 1986). Geography was promoted as a subject in the building of the Swedish nation, and the early 20th century was a formative period for geography, in school as well as academically. A strong tradition of regional geography was established during this period.

The interest in geopolitics during the initial time of the first and second world wars, from which Sweden by its neutrality was spared, also brought about an increased interest in geography, map reading, and issues of the outside world. During the 1960's, however, something happened that affected the school subject geography negatively, and a stagnation of the contents can be derived from this point in time. Geography as a science was divided into human geography and physical geography at the Swedish universities, which led to the subject being split into different institutes and faculties (social sciences and natural sciences).

Hence, the interest in the coherent school subject geography diminished, and the desire to obtain a teacher education in geography decreased. The academic split furthermore had consequences for the subject in secondary school, from where it disappeared in 1965. Geography knowledge was instead incorporated into the new subjects civics and science. In 1994, geography was reintroduced as a subject, but has continued to have a weak position in secondary school, which has affected its status as a school subject (Bladh & Molin, 2012).

### **2.1. Subject integration or subject specialization**

Geography belongs in Sweden to the social science subjects (geography, history, religion, civics), similarly to e.g. Norway, England, and the USA, as in contrast to other countries, e.g. Finland and Denmark, where geography is a subject within natural sciences (Bladh & Molin, 2012). Whether some school subjects should be organized as Social studies (socially oriented; geography, history, religion, civics) or exist as separate subjects, has been under discussion – occasionally very lively – since the 1960's, and the discussion is still ongoing (Samuelsson, 2014). How to organize subjects is linked to what knowledge the teaching should convey and how grades are set, i.e. four grades in the separate subjects or one block grade in Social studies.

At two occasions between the beginning of the 20th century and to date, the separate subjects were fused into one SO-subject with a common syllabus and common criteria for grading. It started in the beginning of the 1960's when Sweden commenced a nine-year compulsory elementary school with a new curriculum (Lgr 62), in which orientating subjects

were introduced as one concept that was divided into Science Studies (NO) and Social studies (SO). Next curricular reform (Lgr 69) maintained the orientating subjects, one overarching purpose being to convey to the pupil “knowledge about the surrounding reality and about people’s lives and activities in the past and at present”. The curricular reform Lgr 80 still emphasized that teaching should be subject overarching. The subject labels were abolished and replaced by a number of themes in Social studies, e.g. *Surroundings of Mankind* and *Activities of Mankind – the time perspective*.

In the beginning of the 20th century, comprehensive educational reforms were implemented, changing the state school into a municipally governed school, and introducing private schools, enabling private ownership of schools. New steering principles were instituted: goal and result guidelines, entailing e.g. new syllabuses and a new grading system (Lpo 94). In the elementary school, the subject labels for the SO-block were reintroduced, while the joint comprehensive purpose of Social studies disappeared. A few years later, in the year 2000, it was once more time to revise the syllabuses, the reason being that the clarity of the syllabuses needed to be improved. This was achieved by introducing new grading criteria along with a coherent SO-syllabus. However, the subject plans of 1994 were kept intact. The teachers decided themselves whether to conduct subject-separated teaching or a subject-integrated SO-teaching, following the new SO-syllabus.

In 2011, a larger curricular reform (Lgr 11 and Lgy 11) was implemented, introducing new syllabuses and a new grading system. Social studies was kept intact for years 1-3, but for years 4-6 and 7-9, new syllabuses for the separate subjects were formulated. This latest curricular reform is even stronger emphasizing perspectives where understanding geographic contexts and relations – such as resource conflicts and vulnerability – is covered, and where a value-based geography with themes like environmental and sustainable development are highlighted.

Even though the school subject geography has been reorganized several times during the last fifty years, the academic break-up of the subject into human and physical geography has remained, which has resulted in student teachers at many universities and university colleges studying geography as two separate subjects, which in turn makes it problematic for them to convey the content of the joint geography subject. The teaching in school is consequently conducted much the same as at the universities, i.e. a separation of human and physical geography (Molin, 2006). Another problem is that subject didactics to a large extent are missing in the education of student teachers. At several institutes educating subject teachers in Sweden, schoolteachers with no education in didactics (not just geography) have since long been the ones responsible for teaching subject didactics.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2. Subject status

Being a subject within Social studies, geography became synonymous with geographic names and blind maps, and this concept persists. Geography is today a subject that in elementary school as well as secondary school has a large number of uneducated teachers. Along with Swedish as second language, technology, art, Spanish, music, domestic science and consumer knowledge, geography is on the schools’ top ten-lists of subjects with the highest proportion of uneducated teachers. According to a report by the National Agency for Education geography is a subject with less than fifty percent of the teachers being eligible. Gottfridsson and Bladh reported on one third of the teachers completely lacking education in geography,

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<sup>2</sup> This situation changed with the teacher education reform 2010, when all subject institutes educating teacher students were obliged to verify that subject didactics were responsible for the teaching in didactics of the subject in question. If the subject institute had no subject didactic, its examination right was withdrawn.

while just above one quarter had an education corresponding to the eligibility of a newly examined teacher (Bladh, 2014). A large group of eligible teachers at the upper level of elementary school of today had attained one semester of studies in combination with teaching experience.

The presently prevailing curricular reform (Lgr 11 and Lgy 11) was inaugurated in 2011, and resulted in the geography subject losing its status in secondary school, no longer being included in the common program subjects (subjects that all pupils study regardless of program choice) such as history, religion, and civics.

A decision to initiate national tests in the separate SO-subjects for years 6 and 9, starting in spring semester 2013, recently raised the status of geography in elementary school. Regretfully, the decision was revoked at the government shift, and in spring semester 2015, national tests in the separate SO-subjects were abolished for year 6.

The large proportion of geography teachers being uneducated has resulted in a conservation of the subject's teaching traditions. Previous studies have revealed strong selective traditions in secondary school's geography teaching (Molin, 2006; Ojanne, 1999; Holmén & Anderberg, 1993; Wennberg, 1990). In the years 4-6, i.e. the intermediate level of elementary school, the selective traditions primarily entail geographic names with the following working process: the provinces of Sweden, Sweden, the Nordic countries, and Europe. The world outside Europe is included in the education only at the upper level of elementary school (Molin & Grubbström, 2013).

Bladh (2014) reports that at the intermediate level, teachers use climate, habitat types, and geographic names as the most important themes in their teaching, and "...a regional geographic tradition with knowledge about countries and numerous geographic names are still prominent" (p. 164). There are indications of core value perspectives, linked with issues about sustainable development, environment and justice, being dealt with to a higher degree in the geography teaching of the upper level of elementary school. Geography is however mostly presented in the form of thematic advances in specialized human or physical geography, with a relatively weakly developed holistic perspective. "In conclusion, geography at the intermediate and upper levels of elementary school emerges to a degree as two different subjects" (ibid; p. 164).

### **3. THEORY - SELECTIVE TRADITIONS**

In reality, curricular reforms and new steering documents have not resulted in any great changes in how geography teaching is carried out; it is rather syllabuses from previous curricula along with the contents of textbooks that govern the educational activities. Studies in Portugal (Alexandre, 2009) and Slovenia (Kolenc Kolnik, 2010) disclosed that educational reforms were of minor importance to teachers' geography teaching; once their university studies were accomplished, teachers rarely furthered their education in order to reach new theoretic knowledge about the subject.

Wennberg (1990) showed that in Sweden, the curriculum was a document not very familiar to geography teachers, and was rarely used in the planning of their teaching. According to Holmén and Anderberg (1993), the low level of ambition characterizing geography teaching in elementary school has consequences throughout the whole school system, i.e. teachers' low educational level, a lowered subject status, as well as conservation of pupils' geographical knowledge and of how the subject is appraised. Similar results were obtained in a study on secondary school teachers' purpose and selection of content in geography (Molin, 2006). In this study, Molin highlighted that traditions in the geography subject had over time developed into being selective, which means that they included as well as excluded subject matters, and in conjunction had formed one dominating discourse of the

school subject. Molin and Grubbström (2013) disclosed that at the intermediate level in elementary school, geography teaching is steered by selective traditions focusing on knowledge about individual countries and geographic names.

This static situation might be explained by specific opinions about e.g. purpose, content, and method, developing over time, and which may be perceived as ideologically cemented rules of educators' teaching. These so called *selective traditions* signify that subject content and teaching method are taken for granted. Williams (1973) used the concept *selective traditions*. Subject traditions emerge from history and reflect specific perceptions associated with various purposes, content, and methods. As Williams pointed out, selectivity of content is the main issue: "...the way in which, from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded" (ibid; p. 3). Cherryholmes (1988) maintained that competition between the discourses makes it possible to problematize both education theory and practical content. Several didactic typologies are often involved, as shown for North America by Roberts (1988), and by Östman (1995) for science education in Sweden.

The concept *selective traditions* was introduced in the Swedish research on curriculum theory by Englund (1986), and was later used by Östman (1995) who suggested that subject discourses are governed by selective traditions, and that a school subject discourse may encompass several different selective traditions. The discourses are distinguished by different values and viewpoints, e.g. different ideologies, knowledge aspects, and by fundamentally different views of human life competing with each another. Cherryholmes (1998) argued that this competition is what makes it possible to problematize the education's theoretical as well as practical contents.

Educational philosophies form an important foundation for the categorization, and were utilized also by Molin (2006) in her study on geography teachers in secondary school and their understanding of purpose, content, and method. This study showed that contemporary geography teachers' selection of content are characterized by an essentialist philosophy of education, which is problematic from a core value perspective, as the curriculum specifically accentuates these issues to be the responsibility of school and its teaching. If the moral dimension is missing in geography teaching, the opportunity to discuss issues concerning solidarity, social justice, equality, ethnicity, and the development of a sustainable society, will to a great deal be lost (Molin, 2006).

One dominating discourse of the school subject (see above), not being exposed to competing alternatives, might in the end be perceived as objective, and may consequently not be questioned. The result may be concretized with the aid of five didactic typologies in the school subject geography: traditionally value-based, natural science-based, social science-based, multidisciplinary-based, and actuality- and value-based teaching (Molin, 2006). The typologies, as they involve separate purposes, contents, and methods, result in teaching leading to different kinds of meaning creation. The present study revealed that these were linked to early experiences in life, and that these experiences had affected the teachers' choice of profession, their didactic choices, and also their views on new syllabuses and national tests.

The concept *selective traditions* thus points at teachers' comprehension and perception of a subject often being notably resistant and excluding. This made for an interesting issue to investigate: Are geography teachers' own experiences in childhood and as adults linked to their choices of profession and to their comprehension of the subject. With a starting point in McPartland, Butt and Biddulph (2001), Catling et al. (2010) discussed experiences tied to learning and geography, and how different forms of memories may be related to such learning situations. Semantic memories are recognized as information that is received and conveyed as a result of general experiences, while episodic memories are tied to specific events and experiences, often associated with active participation and sometimes strong and emotional

situations. Such specific events and learning situations, which may be considered formative to the individual, may be linked to informal situations as well as to formal educational contexts. With the perspective of biographies and lifetime stories (cf. Buttimer, 1983 and Goodson, 1988) in mind, the present study took an interest in identifying which episodic memories with association to the subject geography that had earned a formative position in the teachers' interests and choices. Relating this to the subject traditions of geography was also deemed significant in the light of the obvious selective traditions of the subject.

#### **4. METHOD**

Seven researcher and teacher educators in geography education at five different universities and university colleges in Sweden interviewed operational teachers in elementary and secondary school with a common interview guide. Each interview started with an open question where the interviewed teacher explained why he/she had acquired an interest in the geography subject. We subsequently focused on various themes that related to memories in their childhood and their educational process from elementary school to university and university college studies. Finally, the interview pertained to issues relating to their own teaching and to the latest curriculum, Lgr 11.

The investigation by Catling et al. (2010) comprised a questionnaire, with only 26 % responding. Our experience is that the high workload of teachers may be responsible for the difficulties in receiving a sufficient amount of responses to questionnaires. Furthermore, since we wanted to follow up on the answers to the questions and to be flexible in terms of the order between the questions, we chose to conduct a semi-structured interview study. This rendered a possibility to further develop interesting themes that the interviewees brought up themselves, and that we, the scientists, had not been thinking of. An example of such theme is how leisure-time activities contributed to the geographic comprehension. The interviews provided opportunities to take part in the teachers' own backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences. We strictly followed the ethical guidelines on informed consent, confidentiality, and right of use (The Swedish Research Council, 2011).

We conducted 27 semi-structured interviews, and made an effort to vary the selection of interviewees. In total, 19 women and eight men of different ages were interviewed during 2013. The reasons for men being outnumbered and whether this situation affected the results are not clear and might be a matter for discussion. All interviewers were given directives to interview men and women, and by coincidence most of them interviewed women. Our purpose was however not to analyze gender differences. The experience of the teacher profession varied between the participating persons, from recently graduated to extended experience as a geography teacher. There was also a spread of the grades in which the teachers were operating, from the lower level of elementary school to secondary school. Several of the interviewees had also been teaching different grades. Also the scope of the geography education varied, from one semester to a licentiate degree.

The dialogues were recorded and transcribed. The analysis centered on elucidating the relationship between formal and informal experiences, and how they had affected teaching. We furthermore analyzed how the interviewees related their experiences to city/country, outdoors/indoors, and nature/mankind. We found a linkage to the theory, where the traditional image of the subject is that physical geography is predominant; thus a highlight on the countryside, the outdoors, and nature would be a reasonable expectation. We also wanted to discuss how experiences from the city and the indoors may create an interest in geography as a subject, how these experiences may affect the teaching, and how an interest in human activities might be epitomized. The analysis also aimed at demonstrating whether – and if so how – the interviewed persons gave prominence to a comprehensive perspective where these

aspects were integrated and formed a holistic view of the subject. Another focus of the analysis was to discuss to which degree semantic and episodic memories were mentioned in the interviews, and how the interviewees described these memories and their significance. The purpose was not primarily to compare different groups, like e.g. teachers of different ages, but rather to show examples of different experiences and viewpoints. In doing so, we were also able to demonstrate the complexity behind teachers' selection of contents in their teaching.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. Informal experiences

#### 5.1.1. Childhood memories

Many interviewees brought up maps as central to their interest in geography. The interest in maps was often founded already in their childhood. One man narrated: *Had a large world map over my bed, I might have noticed it when I was 6-7 years old, and I quite often sat down studying it, checking different places* (man 42 years). Some individuals underlined their interest in geographic names, how they were able to name places by heart. In this context, other feelings emerged, concerning the traditional teaching emphasizing geographic names.

One woman said: *Unfortunately, I feel anxiety about name-knowledge from my own time in school* (woman 33 years).

Hence, traditions focusing on geographic names might have increased the interest in the subject, but have simultaneously created negative feelings about parts of the school geography. Many interviewees mentioned outings and holidays with the family as consequential for an interest in geography being born. One woman related: *We were there at Kinnekulle, and the damsons and the cowslips were blooming, so that sits nicely, and they (parents) always told me why this happened whenever we like travelled somewhere, and when we were in Norway, then it was about the fjords. So I got that knowledge all the time, and I think that's what's making me think that it is important also to convey this to children. If you have the knowledge, then you look at all these things in another way* (woman 60 years).

Another interviewee told: *I liked hanging over my father's shoulder when he ... studied terrain maps, like before an impending Sunday outing, or road maps before a holiday drive* (woman 61 years). As the quotation shows, it was often parents that passed over their interest to the children by narrating, buying maps, and showing the children places. If the family had relatives in different parts of the country, it resulted in regular trips to these places, which gave an insight into differences in climate and looks of the landscape. Travelling also provided an opportunity to see things in real life that they had read about in school. Another important geographical insight was that ... *it became important to consider where a place was located in relation to another*. Some of the interviewees also mentioned TV and movies providing insights much the same as travelling: *TV has probably meant a lot. It's always been fun watching movies about other places. That is also a part of geography; ooh, is that what it looks like there* (man 42 years). Indoor activities calling attention to different places have thus contributed to an interest in geography.

Leisure-time interests may also have contributed to the interviewees becoming enraptured by the geography subject, something that associates to the report by Catlin et al. (2010), in which the authors stressed "freedom to roam" to be an important part of the memories that the interviewees linked to their interest in geography. In our investigation, the participants often referred to trips to the countryside and to an interest in maps. One example is a man telling about his childhood: ... *then I've also been a scout all my life. I very early learned to orient*



*myself with the aid of the map* (man 43 years). Others gave accounts of activities like skiing and high mountain hiking. One man described how his interest in skiing also led to an interest in weather, wind, and ground conditions, which he argued is an important foundation for geographic thinking. One of the interviewed had grown up on a farm, and underscored that this early lead to insights into the relationship between mankind and environment. These childhood memories were not always comprehended as geography by the children, and it might only be as adults, in connection with their studies at universities or university colleges, that they experienced a sense of “coming home”. In this coming home feeling, positive childhood memories that associated to geography appeared to hold significance.

## **5.2. Formal experiences**

### **5.2.1. Own school time**

The experiences from the interviewees’ own school time varied. Some of the interviewees did not remember much of the teaching: *I don’t have a lot with me from elementary school. I don’t remember the teachers being particularly interested in geography* (man 64 years). It appeared that the geography subject might have played a subordinate role among the other SO-subjects, not exhibiting a clear subject profile.

Others remembered the geography teaching well, often hinging on the teacher, either because the teacher had been competent and inspiring (quotation) or because the teacher had been inadequate. The teacher either became a role model or an antipode to the kind of teacher they wanted to be. The importance of the teacher’s education was underlined in this context. Some interviewees claimed that teachers lacking education were not particularly interested in the subject, which is vital for pupils attaining a positive outlook on the subject.

One of the interviewees stressed how less positive experiences has affected her own teaching: *Even if I try to counteract bad experiences from my own time in school, it will probably shine through* (woman 33 years). She argued the importance of raising awareness of the subject traditions in the teacher education, enabling the forthcoming teacher to tackle them. Several interviewees mentioned that geographic names, learning about countries and highlighting exotic places, and physical geography with learning facts as a focus, had dominated their own time in school. Excursions remembered by the participants were primarily about physical geography. This image of school geography agreed well with the findings of Molin and Grubbström (2013) and Bladh (2014), which showed that geographic names and learning about countries have a strong tradition in the Swedish school.

### **5.2.2. Education at universities and university colleges**

Several of the participants meant that their studies at the university or the university college as well as the teacher education had revealed the extensiveness of the geography subject. The breadth rendered clarity to the comprehensive perspective of geography, with its physical as well as cultural parts: *it became more of a holistic subject* (man 43 years). One of the teachers said that he looked at the relationship between mankind and nature in a new way: *It was an awesome experience that it was so much more than just sitting with maps and map books* (man 42 years). In that way, several of the interviewees had discovered geography to be an exciting and interesting subject. In this context, themes like sustainable development and resources were brought up. An important part of what had created an interest in the subject, were the excursions and field studies that had been carried out during the university studies.

Several interviewees declared that it was only during their university or University College studies that they had partaken in excursions. These excursions were by many participants experienced as inspiring, and had resulted in the forthcoming teachers viewing the geography

subject in a new way. In particular, they claimed that the excursions had pinpointed relationships. Their studies seemed to have contributed to a more positive attitude toward the subject, which in turn had increased the interest in the subject even further. Altogether, the increased interest had led to the subject rendering more weight in the participants' own teaching. One of the interviewed teachers had no education in geography. In that case, the informal memories and experiences along with the subject knowledge of colleagues had been of greater consequence.

It was furthermore clear, however, that to many of the participants, the education at the university and the university college had not contributed to creating an interest in the subject. One of the interviewed persons expressed that the teaching had been hacked into pieces, and that a comprehensive perspective of the subject had been missing. Another person noted that the content discrepancy between the university course and the school syllabus was too large. Several teachers said that the didactic angles of geography had been allotted a far too small scope in the teacher education. *I have probably learned more by colleagues and by myself while I worked* (man 44 years). Altogether, the interviews showed that the teacher education often had provided adequate knowledge of the subject and had created an interest in the subject, but had not emphasized subject didactics to an acceptable extent. This might explain the cementation of the subject traditions in geography, new teachers often complying with the selective traditions that prevail in the schools. New teachers had not developed a subject didactic competence making them question fixed patterns, and were thus not teaching in accordance with the syllabuses.

### **5.2.3. Participants' own geography teaching**

Many different themes were brought up when the participants reasoned about what they felt was crucial to teach. Some of them concurred with the selective traditions that knowledge about countries and geographic names should be in focus. Several interviewees mentioned environmental issues and the climate changes, and that the pupils should learn to see the linkage between mankind and environment. They emphasized in this context that pupils should view themselves and their environment as part of the world as a whole. These areas of knowledge agreed well with the new syllabus. Several persons discerned a stronger focus on sustainable development in the present syllabus than previously. To link teaching with the everyday life of pupils was deemed important. Sustainability issues were often integrated into other themes. The teachers in the present study were not doing field studies to the extent they wished. The excursions mentioned were mostly in physical geography. Teachers seemed to perceive field studies as large, time-consuming projects. Shorter teaching segments carried out in the neighboring area might offer a possibility of fulfilling the intentions of the syllabus, without high costs or impinging on other subjects' allotted time.

Most participants meant that they would make use of the new syllabus. One teacher said that the syllabus improved lucidity: *Much larger focus on linking each teaching segment to a knowledge criterion. More clarity for the pupils* (man 42 years). The new syllabus giving prominence to geographic concepts was something that the one of the interviewees felt might make teaching more subject-specific. One motive for complying with the syllabus was that national tests might feel less stressful if teachers were following the syllabus in their teaching. When mentioning stress in this context, the teachers argued that they personally became stressed by the possibility of results being too weak in the class as a whole, but also posited that the children might be stressed by the very act of performing a national test. Some participants claimed that the syllabus had in fact not particularly changed their teaching. One motive for not changing anything was that their teaching already was in line with the intentions of the syllabus.

The interviewees disclosed that their teaching mirrored their own interests. *The more fun and interesting I think it is, the better teaching* (woman 42 years). Another person meant that communicating a *positive spirit was possible because of one's own experiences* (woman 30 years). One specific example was travelling, and one of the teachers was convinced that the stories arising from her travelling had interested the pupils (woman 47 years). Things that the teachers meant had been of great significance to their own interest were things that they wanted to convey in their own teaching. One of the interviewed teachers said that the map had been the great source of inspiration for the geographic interest in childhood: *One of my great challenges has been to make pupils interested in maps. I think they are the key to geography* (man 43 years).

Hence, the positive experiences that the teachers had had in life, and that could be associated with the geography subject, had affected their teaching. The positive experiences were also motivating: *I am passionate about the subject* (man 25 years old). The childhood memories mostly referred to by the interviewees were about nature encounters in the countryside. One of the interviewed women said that when she was younger, she mainly associated the geography subject with the countryside, but as an adult her eyes had opened to interesting geographical phenomena in the cities. Showing pupils that you find it interesting yourself, was conceived to be crucial. The interviewed persons also believed that their geography education had yielded knowledge that enabled them to perform a better and more entertaining teaching.

## 6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

With the aid of an interview study, the present investigation discussed how teachers perceived that previous experiences had affected their interest in the geography subject, how these experiences were utilized in their geography teaching, as well as viewpoints concerning the new syllabuses and national tests. The interviewees believed that the informal experiences that were linked with how their interest in geography arose were of decisive significance, with outings, holidays, and childhood memories being underscored in this context. As expected (i.e. in line with the traditions of the subject), most participants told about outdoor activities rather than activities indoors, with the exceptions of TV and literature. In terms of childhood memories, most interviewees highlighted nature rather than people. In a similar mode, memories associated with the countryside dominated. Such large proportion of the interviewees associating their geography-related childhood memories to experiences of being outdoors, nature encounters, and countryside, might be an effect of the selective traditions, where physical geography has been in focus, e.g. in the excursions arranged by the school. Notwithstanding, formal experiences, i.e. the education, had often contributed by offering a comprehensive perspective of the subject and by emphasizing linkage. Children and youth growing up in the cities are increasing in numbers, and if teaching is to have a starting point in the everyday life of the pupils, city geography needs to be lifted, which is conveyed in the new syllabus.

The episodic memories dominated; the interviewees often referred to events and autobiographic episodes that associated to places, seasons, and emotions. Our investigation forms a supplement to the study by Catling et al. (2010), since we disclosed in what way memories contributed to an interest in geography, for instance differences between places, and the linkage between mankind and environment. Semantic memories, more closely associated with facts, were in the present study complying with the results of Catling et al. (ibid.) in that their impact on the interest in geography appeared low. Our study indicates that upbringing and parents might be of momentous importance by offering opportunities for experiences paving the way for an interest in geography, e.g. by means of travelling or using maps.

Since not all children are given these opportunities, it is important that the school is able to make space for this type of experiences in the teaching. It is hence urgent that teachers in their subject didactics education develop a competence that makes fieldwork and teaching outdoors a natural part of teaching. The interviews showed that few teachers included field studies in their work, the reason being practical hindrances, e.g. time and schedule. Through the subject didactics, the student teacher can acquire prototypical examples of how field studies may be carried out during class, close to the school, and in the schoolyard, and how pupils in these studies are given the opportunity to participate in improving the neighborhood area and thereby society as a whole.

One way of strengthening the subject didactics education is to use research literature on how active teachers contemplate and reflect on their teaching. An active process of reflecting in connection with exploring one's own practice is essential since previous research has shown that selective traditions are strong in the Swedish geography teaching. Also the teaching material has been imprinted by strong selective traditions rather than knowledge on subject theory such as education about sustainable development, which today comprises a distinct segment of the subject.

According to the teachers, the new syllabuses put emphasis to environmental issues, climate changes and the relationship between mankind and environment. Focus on sustainable development is much stronger in the present syllabus than previously. The new syllabus also puts forth geographic concepts, which makes teaching more subject-specific. One motivation for following the syllabus, the teachers claimed, is that the national tests will feel less stressing.

Several studies, e.g. by Au (2007), have shown that national tests lead to teaching turning more teacher-centered, and the content to be concentrated to what will be brought up in the tests. Since national tests in geography previously were not carried out in Sweden, no research exists about how the test affects the teaching. There are however several studies on older pupils in other subjects, national as well as international, and these have shown that national tests do affect the teaching and the didactic choices the teachers make (The National Agency of Education, 2004). There is consequently reason to believe that the now introduced national tests will change the teaching conducted by geography teachers; and depending on which selective tradition the teachers are practicing, this change might yield variations in didactics as well as teaching material. We need a qualitative-oriented teaching of subject didactics in order to make future teachers aware of the momentousness of reflection, and by that break the strong selective traditions that still prevail in the geography subject.

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