

Teaching the Geographies of Urban Areas: Views and Visions

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This paper reports on empirical research in four countries on the growing interest in the perceived 'gap' between school and university human geography. Focusing on urban geography, we investigated the views of teachers and academic geographers about key elements of the field and those that were important for geography education. These views were compared with the urban geography in each country's curriculum and two sets of textbooks for the lower secondary age group. Findings suggest that there is indeed a 'gap' between the urban geographies taught at school and university level, at least as represented by the sources we accessed. The teachers' responses to curriculum change in this aspect of geography were mixed—some were keen to embrace new topics, others were happy with the current material. A further stage of the research will examine children's views about, and interests in urban geography, in order to inform curriculum development.

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Context of the Research Project

The starting point for this study was a shared perception of a gap between contemporary trends in academic cultural geography and the geography taught

in schools. Concerns about the existence of such a gap have already been raised in the geography education literature (Bonnett, 2003; Marsden, 1997; Rawling, 2000; Tani, 2004; Van der Vaart, 2001). We had followed academic debate on the cultural turn in geography, which started in the late 1980s and widened the horizons of geographers towards more culturally sensitive approaches by emphasising, for example, the importance of research on identity, difference, socially constructed space and power relations in space (Crang, 2000; Jackson, 2000). As researchers in geography education, we felt that there were many interesting themes in the new cultural geography that could be applied into school contexts and which could bring geography as a school subject closer to the everyday lives of young people. This shared concern led us to set up a project through which we could explore the relationships between academic geography and geography in schools in four countries, Finland, The Netherlands, The United Kingdom (taking England as a case study) and the USA¹ (drawing on the experience of teachers from various states). Circumstances necessitated group members focusing on their individual home countries, but we felt that these presented a sufficiently interesting contrast in terms of approaches to geography education to make such a comparison worthwhile and interesting.

Urban geography was chosen as a focus of the project for several reasons. First, the majority of the population in the four countries live in urban areas and the urban environment is therefore the most common context for students in their daily lives. Geography education should pay special attention to students' own experiences, and when they live in cities or other urban areas, their living environment should naturally form part of the geography curriculum. Second, urban areas and related themes, such as globalisation, have strong representation in the media and, therefore, it is important that students are well informed about them. Third, even though some level of difference will obviously be reasonable in the themes addressed by academic and school geography, we were concerned that academic geographers were talking about completely different urban issues than geography teachers were. Moreover, many of the recent conceptual developments in geography have taken place in the sphere of urban geography; accordingly we felt that school geography might be missing out on some interesting ideas associated with the cultural turn.

The aim of our research was to juxtapose thinking about urban geography from the perspective of the different stakeholders involved in framing geographical education, both from the academic and school communities. This would enable us to examine the interrelationship between the different 'voices' and to ascertain whether there was a 'gap' between academic and school geography in our countries at present. The choice of different voices is justified in the next section of this paper. An interpretative case study design (Bassegy, 1999) was chosen in order to afford detailed understandings of each voice within their context in place and time. Our eventual aim is for the understandings gained through this research to inform a practical curriculum development initiative. This paper presents a series of snapshots of views and practices rather than a comprehensive survey. While this gives some interesting and helpful insights into geography and geography education in our four countries, it should

be noted that statistical generalisation to a wider population of academic and school geographers is neither possible nor intended. However, preliminary work such as this lays a necessary foundation for the future curriculum development stage, as well as being interesting in its own right.

Structure of the Project

At the start of the project, we identified the stakeholders, those groups that had a particular involvement in the construction of urban geographies in the school context. These were seen to be: *education policy-makers* (represented by evidence from state curriculum documents relating to urban geography), *text-book writers* (textbooks being a key source of mediation between the state and the classroom), *geography teachers* (who mediate the first two sources to construct the reality of the curriculum in the classroom) and *academic geographers* (who are at the cutting edge of construction of urban geography research). Due to the nature of our own educational expertise, we focused on the early secondary stage of schooling when all students undertake some study of urban geography. Across the four countries, this stage covered students between 11 and 15 years of age² and the information was collected in 2004–2005. Further details of the method of gathering information from each source follow.

When reading curriculum documents from each country (see references in next section), all mentions of urban issues were noted. As the curricula had different ways of framing urban geography, themes in cultural geography that might be seen to particularly relate to a city context (such as multiculturalism or inequality in access to housing) were also included. Second, we analysed two current textbook series from each country.³ These included a more traditional series and a more innovative one, when such a range was possible. Content analysis of both text and photographs was used to determine the key urban themes and issues being presented in each instance.

In preparing and presenting lessons, teachers clearly have a key role in mediating the demands of the state and the representations of resource-writers. Therefore, the third stage of the research was to ask geography teachers about their current practice regarding teaching about cities with the lower secondary age group. This also gave a useful opportunity to ask teachers' opinions on the state of urban geography in school and to elicit their desires for future development in this field, which will have a particular value in informing a later curriculum development phase. These views were accessed by means of questionnaires, comprising a mixture of short questions and open-ended questions inviting longer responses. Between nine to 26 geography teachers in each country answered the questionnaire. We would like to emphasise that the sample is a small and self-selected one, the aim of which is not to make any generalised image of the teachers' views in each country, but to give some insights into their ideas and opinions.

Finally, we were interested in exploring the kinds of themes that academic geographers saw as current within their fields, to compare with the themes emerging from the three sources as mentioned earlier. We were also interested

to know their views on the possibilities of applying these approaches into school contexts. This material was gathered through open-ended questions asked, either via email or in person, to 19 geographers (seven from Finland, three from The Netherlands, four from the UK and five from the USA).

When compared and contrasted, information from these four sources gave a useful insight into current practices and future possibilities in the teaching of urban geographies. The results from each stage, and the overall patterns of similarity and discontinuity are presented in this article. Before the project can move to a curriculum development phase, however, it will be necessary to consult one final important stakeholder group in the process of teaching and learning about urban geography – the children. This work will be completed in 2006/2007. We are particularly interested in their evaluation of their current urban geography curriculum and what they see as the priorities for future development.

Urban Geographies in the Curriculum

The results of the analysis of state geography curricula, taken as representing the views of policy-makers, are presented first in this paper, as they, in particular, frame the context of the construction of urban geography in school. Reference will be made to four curriculum documents (DfEE/QCA, 1999a; Geography Education Standards Project, 1994; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 1998; National Board of Education, 1994). The content of each document that relates to urban geography is summarised in this section of the paper. As might be expected, the lower secondary geography curricula are structured in different ways across the four countries. The Dutch geography curriculum is focused around six themes, whilst Finland takes a region-based approach, and the English Key Stage 3 curriculum and US National Standards use both a place-based and a thematic approach.⁴

Urban geographies have a place in all four curricula, but they are structured in quite different ways (see Table 1). Thus, urban geographies in the Finnish curriculum in 2004–2005 slotted into the systematic study of regions,⁵ whilst in The Netherlands they illustrated particular classifications of geographical areas, and in the UK and USA they illustrate themes in geography.

When the curricula are investigated in more detail, it is evident that each expects study of the urban, but some curricula specify this more directly than

Table 1 Summary of key urban topics in curricula

<i>England</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>USA</i>
Settlement (location, growth, structure, functions, changes)	Finland	Local area (spatial organisation)	Settlement (processes, patterns and functions)
Places, patterns and processes	Europe	Urban and rural areas (within The Netherlands)	Places
	Rest of the world	Multicultural society	Economic independence
			Rural-urban links

others. More indirect references are made via themes that could be exemplified through study of cities such as 'the characteristics of places' and by reference to local areas (which may well be urban). These more indirect references are shown in italics in Table 2.

As can be seen from Table 2, both direct and indirect statements are quite general in nature. Thus, the exact form of urban geography in the classroom will vary according to the teachers' interpretation and their choice of case studies. One feature of the Dutch curriculum is the emphasis given to the local area, so the urban input will, to some extent, depend on the schools' location in a rural or urban area. The English curriculum is the most prescriptive in the aspects of settlements to be studied, but is completely open regarding the case studies chosen to illustrate these – local, national or international. Conversely, the Finnish curriculum is the least prescriptive in terms of urban geography, but it would be impossible for the teacher to teach such a place-based curriculum effectively without reference to the urban. The US Standards consider rural–urban links, particularly in a historical context, to a greater degree than the other three curricula.

In all four curricula, the way in which the curriculum-writers conceptualise the urban is not precisely specified – are cities seen as nodes on a global network, environmentally and socially dysfunctional problem areas or planned and functioning systems? This is another choice for teachers to make, whether consciously or by default, through their selection of resources. In some ways, this lack of specificity is a positive feature, as it allows for curriculum development as ideas in geography, and the characteristics of urban areas themselves, change over time. However, without a healthy relationship between school and academic geography, plus a culture of teacher-based curriculum development in schools, there is also a danger of stagnation. The English and US curricula are the most specific with regard to the characteristics of urban geography to be studied under the focus of 'settlement'. These curricula emphasise form, function and change in settlements, broad topics that might be open to a relatively traditional interpretation, or alternatively one which is informed by more recent thinking about place and what it is like to live in cities. Given this comparative freedom of implementation, but also acknowledging the constraints on many teachers' time, there is a particular need for thoughtful and well-informed interpretations when textbooks are written.

Urban Geographies in School Textbooks

As described earlier, the national traditions in school geography are quite different and for each country the two textbooks, or textbook sets, analysed vary in style and focus. Elements of urban form and functions, the descriptive basis for understanding the city, are present in all textbooks. In some textbooks (for example, the *Key Geography* series in the UK), there is a systematic introduction to these aspects of the city in a settlement-themed chapter, whilst in other books (for example, both US textbooks and *Koulun maantieto* for Finland), a regional approach means that urban content is touched on at many different points in the book, as major cities in each country or continent are discussed. Changes in approach from older to more recent books are evident, most noticeably in the UK,

Table 2 Direct and indirect references to the urban in each curriculum

England	The key theme of 'settlement', includes:
	location, growth and nature of settlements
	variation in the provision of goods and services
	changes in settlement and how these affect people
	land use patterns and their changes.
	Urban themes also relate to:-
	<i>knowledge and understanding of places, patterns and processes</i>
	<i>environmental change and sustainable development</i>
Finland	<i>form of the cultural environment</i>
	<i>become acquainted with Finland</i>
	<i>become acquainted with the rest of Europe</i>
	<i>become acquainted with other areas of the globe</i>
	<i>recognise changes that occur in technological, economic and cultural development in different areas</i>
The Netherlands	The key theme of 'local area', includes:-
	<i>spatial organisation of the local area</i>
	<i>changes in organisation in the local area and how these affect quality of life</i>
	The key theme of 'urban and rural areas', includes:-
	urban land use
	transport issues
	urban planning and sub/re-urbanisation
	Urban themes also relate to:-
	<i>characteristics of developing countries</i>
	<i>multicultural society in The Netherlands</i>
US	processes, patterns and functions of human settlement
	<i>understanding and appreciating the web of relationships between people, places and environments</i>
	<i>the characteristics of places</i>
	<i>networks of economic independence</i>
	rural – urban migration, who goes where and why
	<i>apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future</i>

Note. Indirect references in italics.

where the emphasis shifted from more theoretical discussions of urban form in the earlier series to case studies of planning and sustainable urban development in the later one. A similar shift was evident in the Finnish books, where the later textbook took a more thematic approach and had a greater emphasis on images of the city and modern experience of city life. The two US textbooks were almost identical in their structure.

Urban geography content was systematically compared across the eight sets of books. Although the main focus was on the written text, we also considered graphics, as photographs and pictures made a substantial contribution to the representation of cities. The books differed in their organisation and structure, but there were similarities in the aspects of urban geographies included, as can be seen from Table 3.

Table 3 Themes in urban geography emerging from the textbook analysis

<i>Aspect of urban geography</i>	E	F	N	US
Examples of urban functions, such as retail and housing	●	●	●	●
History of particular settlements/reasons for locations	●	●	●	●
Issues lowering quality of life, such as low-quality housing	●	●	●	●
Processes of city growth (for example in-migration)	●	●	●	●
Population distribution and major world cities	●	●	●	●
Urban land use, in particular, different types of housing	●	●	●	●
People's experiences of living in cities	●	●	●	●
Contrasts in wealth and economic issues	●	○	●	●
Environmental issues in the city, in particular, air pollution	●	●	●	○
Social issues in urban areas, e.g. crime	●	●	●	○
Changes in city structure and land use, e.g. re-development	●	○	○	●
Cultural/religious functions of urban areas	○	●		●
Diversity or multi-culturalism in cities	○	●	●	○
Patterns of urban land use	○	●	○	●
Physical environment, e.g. urban microclimates, hazards	●	●		○
Planning or decision-making in the urban environment	●	○	●	○
Different types of settlements classified by size and form	○	○	●	○
Major landmarks in certain cities	○	●		○
Positive aspects of city living	●	○		○
Effects of terrorism in urban areas	○	○		○
Global importance/links for certain cities		○	○	○
Political functions of urban areas		○		○

Note. ● = significant attention in one/both series from that country; ○ = limited attention in one/both series from that country.

An emphasis on built environment and urban functions can be seen from the table, as also the tendency to focus on negative aspects of urban life. Thus, urban problems such as poor housing or the rich – poor gap are prominent, although more recent textbooks, such as *Investigating Geography* in the UK, focus to a greater extent on evaluating solutions, for example, redevelopment schemes. The city tends to be presented as a mainly human environment, with more ‘physical’ aspects such as urban microclimates or the effects of natural hazards in urban areas receiving less attention. When people’s experiences of the city are considered, it tends to be in terms of weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of city life, rather than considering images of the urban as constructed within popular culture.

Given the history of initiatives such as Agenda 21 and concerns over global warming, it is interesting that there is little explicit consideration of the sustainability of urban areas (apart from that in one UK book and, to a lesser extent, in one US text). Case studies of traffic congestion and pollution predominate when environmental issues are addressed, with little consideration of issues such as energy provision or waste disposal in urban areas across the textbooks as a whole. Similarly, in the context of significant media debate on globalisation, it is surprising that only three textbooks considered the global role of major cities, or the ways they were linked with other areas. In fact, the local context was explored much more than the global, particularly in the Dutch texts. It could be that textbooks categorise globalisation more as an economic phenomenon, and consider it under sections on industry without relating it back to urban geographies, but this seems a significant omission, even as a reflection of older curricula.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, given the origin of the texts, urban case studies from North America and Europe tend to predominate. The Finnish and US books have the widest range of case studies overall, in the Finnish case influenced by the regional approach of the curriculum. Only the US books use case studies from Australia or New Zealand. Discussions of urban form and function are more likely to be applied to case studies from the home continent (although examples of functions from cities in poorer countries are represented in all books). There is increased balance between richer and poorer countries when urban issues and solutions are discussed. For example, five of the eight texts consider housing issues in poorer countries to a greater extent than in richer ones, a pattern that is repeated when rich/poor contrasts are discussed. However, all five texts that explore the benefits of city living do so in relation to poorer countries, often as part of the pull/push factors involved in rural – urban migration. Only one textbook considered issues of planning and decision-making in the context of urban areas in poorer countries and discussions of change in functions (three books/sets) were exclusively based on case studies from richer countries.

The overall image constructed of urban areas does vary according to each set of texts. The earlier Finnish text has elements of being a tourist guide, with many images of famous landmarks from world cities, whilst the earlier UK text suggests cities with an ordered structure, yet many problems, and the later UK text emphasises dynamism and redevelopment. One of the US books (*World Geography* published by McDougall-Littel) covers the same topics for each city case study outside the US – where the inhabitants live and comparison of the

type of housing with that in US cities, also almost always commenting on migration to these cities because of work and education.

Taking the textbooks as a group, elements of urban form, function and issues are represented. There is a greater focus on case studies from richer rather than poorer countries, particularly in the Dutch books. The scale on which the city is discussed tends to be local and regional, often treating the city as a discrete unit, divorced from its rural surroundings or global context. Contextuality (political, cultural, social and economic perspectives on the city) as a whole is weak in the textbooks, with case studies often illustrating just one or two sides to the city, rather than exploring how the different aspects link together. However, it is recognised that the images of the urban presented in these textbooks may not directly transfer to those represented in lessons as teachers will use, select, supplement and reject ideas and images of the city presented. Thus, it was also important to consult teachers directly on their classroom practice regarding urban geographies.

Teachers' Views on Urban Geographies

The majority of respondents were selected from urban areas because the main interest was in finding out how teachers relate to urban themes in their work (however, the UK teachers were from both urban and rural schools). The respondents' background in geography education varied quite considerably, as summarised in Table 4. In the US, most classroom teachers graduate with either a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science degree from a School of Education where they take on a specialty, such as math, English, social studies or science. This will necessarily impact on specialist geography knowledge, as can be seen from the fact that only one of the nine US respondents noted that his/her degree included limited work on urban settlement or cities, a much lower total than in the other three countries.

Table 4 Teachers' background in geography education

	England (27)	Finland (26)	The Netherlands (18)	US (9)
Level of geographical education at the university level	B level 24	B Level 14	B Level 3	B Level 6
	M level + 3	M Level + 12	M Level + 14	
Year most recent degree completed	pre-1980 7	pre-1980 4	pre-1980 8	pre-1980 4
	80s 9	80s 3	80s 5	80s 2
	90s 10	90s 8	90s 1	90s 3
	00-04 0	00-04 11	00-04 4	00-04 0
Number whose degree included work on cities	22 (82%)	21 (81%)	17 (95%)	1 (11%)

Teachers were also asked about their special fields of interest in geography. In Finland, physical geography was the most often mentioned and in the US, cultural/human geography was mentioned the most often. Only one US teacher gave physical geography as a special field of interest, while the balance of physical and human geography specialisms was roughly even for Dutch and English teachers. An explanation for the popularity of physical geography among Finnish teachers can be found from the tradition by which biology and geography are usually taught by the same teacher. Thus, the scientific aspects of geography are often thought more interesting, or easier to teach, compared to the human content of the subject.

In terms of current practice, Table 5 details key ideas that teachers identified as being important for inclusion in geography work with lower secondary pupils. These results were produced by grouping and ranking statements given in response to an open question about key ideas in urban geography. As can be seen, the top four categories in each country were similar in the European countries, with a slightly different emphasis given by the US teachers.

Cultural, political and economic dimensions of the cities (such as city life, urban economy and governance) were seen as less important elements for the students in Finland, The Netherlands and the UK. Environmental issues and urban sustainability also rank rather low in most of the teachers' replies regarding current key concepts. These issues could bring new themes of culturally oriented geography into school geography, but the teachers did not appear to find them important for their students, perhaps reflecting relative lack of emphasis in textbooks and curricula at present. However, the impact of political priorities that filter down into educational goals (such as anti-racism education in The Netherlands and education for sustainability in the UK) can be seen in the teachers' replies.

In terms of teaching practices, urban fieldwork was used as a teaching method by two-thirds of the Dutch teachers and around half of the Finnish and English teachers. These figures seem low in relation to the fact that the majority of teachers' schools are situated in urban environments, which should make implementation of urban fieldwork easy. In Finland, students' own experiences should be central in teaching, according to the curriculum, but many of the teachers do not

Table 5 Key ideas for urban geography with lower secondary classes

<i>England</i>	<i>Finland</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>US</i>
1. Planning/management	1. Urban planning	1. Urban change	1. Cities and the world
2. Change	2. Urban structure	2. Social issues	2. Economic and environmental issues
3. Social issues	3. Social issues	3. Urban structure	3. Location and growth
4. Urban structure	4. Urban change	4. Urban planning	4. Land use issues
5. World contrasts		5. Urban economy	5. Population growth and change
6. Sustainability			

seem to combine their students' environmental experiences with their teaching. In the US, eight of the teachers indicated that if they were given complete freedom to plan an ideal curriculum, they would employ fieldwork as a teaching strategy, but only one respondent actually used the city as a site for fieldwork at that time.

With the aim of generating ideas for a future curriculum development project, a Likert scale was included on which teachers could rate the degree to which they felt their classes would be interested in various aspects of urban geography (for example, inequality, planning, sustainability). The Dutch and US teachers believed that their students would be most interested in issues pertaining to inequality, multiculturalism, migration/immigration and segregation. In The Netherlands, this links to current emphases from government, whilst in the US, this may link to the perception that American cities are sites where issues of race and identity politics play themselves out. The concern with migration/immigration is both social and economic. The US teachers also ranked urban growth, housing, globalisation and sense of community high in terms of student interest. The Finnish teachers felt that migration, sustainability and urban growth would interest their children the most. The English teachers also thought students would be interested in immigration, as well as people's image of the city, urban growth, inequality, housing and sustainability. Issues of globalisation were considered to be fairly interesting to students, but were not near the top of any group's ratings for perceived interest. Issues of urban policy or governance fared worse, even in England where the teachers felt urban planning was very important. Overall, the teachers seemed to think students would be most interested in social issues in urban environments.

Academic Geographers' Views on Urban Geographies

The questionnaire to the urban geographers was designed to elicit complementary information to that asked of the teachers, in terms of the geographers' views on key elements of urban geography (concepts and debates from a socio-cultural perspective) and what should be communicated to non-experts. In addition, we asked about their perception of the importance of the cultural turn and global–local nexus in their area of study. In this section, we summarise their representations of the field and their views about the educational value of urban geographies.

Key concepts that were identified by the urban geographers included political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions of cities. The contexts for the urban issues varied from globalisation, neo-liberalism and post-industrial society to questions of the role of state and privatisation, to mention just a few. These ideas are summarised in Figure 1.

There were no specific themes in the academic debates that were mentioned by every respondent. Instead, some commented that the field of urban geography research is very multi-disciplinary and fragmented. However, one respondent reported that even though there were differences between academic debates in different European countries, there were some very broad categories of topics that were relatively common across Europe. He gave three examples: the diversity of urban societies, urban governance issues and ethnicity in the city.

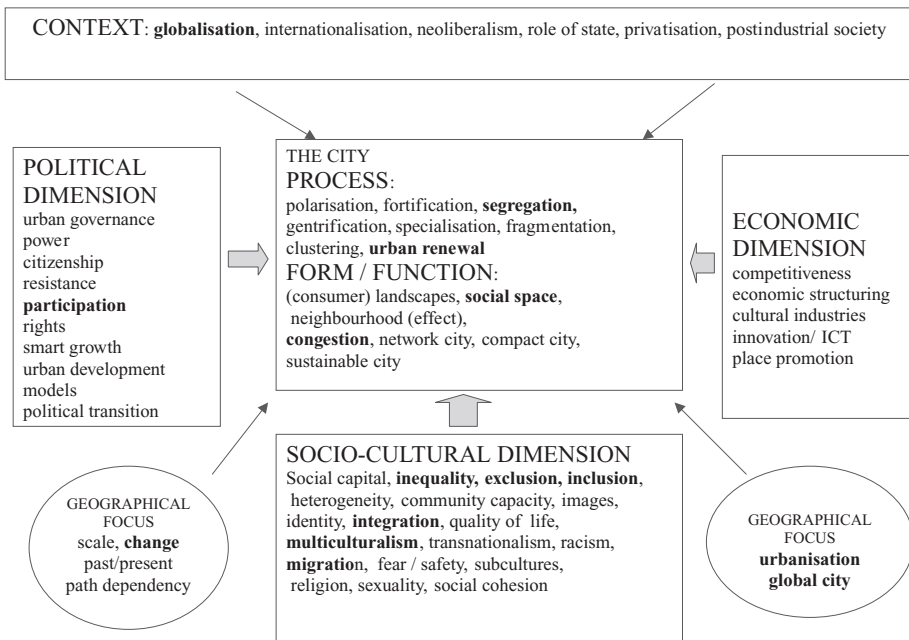


Figure 1 Key concepts about contemporary cities suggested by urban geographers

This situation was also reported by the US respondents. The socio-cultural aspect of the urban seemed to receive particular attention. As this includes issues such as migration and sub-cultures, there seems to be some link with the teachers' perceptions of students' interests, but the academic geographers were also suggesting aspects not mentioned by teachers, such as issues of identity.

The academic geographers also gave more priority to political issues in cities, such as urban governance, power and citizenship, and they mentioned economic concepts such as cultural industries and competitiveness, which did not come across in responses from teachers. This was echoed in some suggestions for new academic debates in the field that would be valuable in an educational context, for example:

Spatial–political dimension, which can be understood also by using examples from everyday life

Understanding the global through the urban local, and vice versa, was also seen as a valuable new theme coming from the contemporary academic debate:

The idea that the whole world can be read through cities but that cities still remain unique spatial formations

New ways in which local and global are intertwined (for example, in the case of September the 11th)

Some respondents also stressed the meanings of neighbourhoods for people and the understanding of urban social aspects, which could be easily applied

into geography education. Socio-cultural diversity of urban populations was highlighted with the notion of juxtaposition of exclusion/marginalisation and urban wealth. Understanding the geographical and historical context was seen as relevant for educational purposes.

Discussion

At this point in the project, we have information on the current teaching of urban geographies from four major stakeholders in the teaching of urban geographies – teachers, textbook writers, policy-makers and academics. A key piece of the jigsaw, what children think, has not yet been researched, but in preparation for this stage, it is useful to compare the material from different sources so far. Which sources are presenting similar views of urban geographies and where are the gaps? This can be explored by comparing and contrasting various sets of evidence.

Curricula and textbooks

Not surprisingly, there is considerable congruence between the textbooks analysed for each country and the curricula they seek to mediate. Each country's curriculum had its own distinctive slant on urban geography, for example, the particular focus on change and planning in England and multiculturalism in The Netherlands, and this was reflected in their textbooks. Having said this, in all but the US texts, there was considerable variation in the way the texts interpreted the curriculum, with some older texts still reflecting ideas current in earlier versions of the curriculum. There were also strands of continuity between the set of books and curricula as a whole. For example, in general, the texts and curricula emphasised relatively local scale examples. Even when the cities in question were in distant parts of the world, cities were often portrayed as discrete urban entities – the interplay of rural and urban was rarely emphasised, with the exception of studies of migration. Global links and the role of globalisation were rarely explicitly discussed. Historical context for cities also tended to be played down, though the US texts and curriculum were stronger in this respect. A minority of books give more emphasis to processes and outcomes of change, but rarely at the level of real individuals' experiences and choices.

As noted earlier, the curriculum documents leave considerable room for interpretation as to the way in which the city is conceptualised. The response to this challenge from the textbook writers is mixed – some books take quite a traditional, descriptive approach to city form and function, either through discussing generalities about city structure and function or by presenting a wide range of short case studies within a regional framework. Particularly, in older texts and when referring to cities in poorer countries, the city was constructed as a place of problems and issues, even though curricula tended to be more neutral in approach. In texts and curricula alike, the city as built environment tended to be foregrounded, with less emphasis on the 'natural', for example, urban ecosystems or wildlife were rarely mentioned. When the 'natural' environment was considered, it tended to be in connection with issues such as air pollution from vehicle exhausts. There was very little attention given to the concept of sustainability in urban planning, apart from the more recent English text,

reflecting a new emphasis in the 2000 curriculum in that country. The majority of textbooks and curricula seemed to be reflecting a relatively traditional view of cities as discrete entities, displaying relatively predictable form and functions and experiencing a range of issues. To what extent did the teachers agree with this portrayal of the urban?

Teachers and curricula/textbooks

The key ideas presented by the teachers as important elements of urban geography did seem quite similar to those current in their textbooks and curricula. However, there were some differences, for example, the English teachers stressed world contrasts to a greater degree than was reflected in their texts/curriculum, and Finnish teachers gave more of a priority to urban planning. When considering their ideal curriculum, US teachers wished to give more emphasis to multi-culturalism than seems to be present in their current materials and English teachers suggested exploring images of the urban. Although sustainability did not tend to rank high in teacher's lists of current key concepts in urban geography, perhaps reflecting the relative lack of discussion in textbooks, it was given higher priority in terms of concepts that they thought would interest pupils, so this could be an area for future development.

Teachers' reactions to the textbooks they used varied from country to country, for example 85% of the English and 71% of the Dutch teachers reported that they were very or fairly satisfied with their current textbook(s) compared to around half of the Finnish teachers and the American teachers. However, the American teachers' sources of dissatisfaction tended to be more about practical issues of classroom use, rather than a critique of the substantive material. In contrast, there was also evidence of teachers critiquing the substantive elements within the urban geography they teach, for example two English respondents commented that it:

Needs to be made more relevant. Feels [like] a lot of theory that doesn't really fit. No time to deal with contemporary issues

Can be a bit boring – models especially – I've chopped it down! Redevelopment is interesting, e.g. Docklands, local examples.

In this instance, the English curriculum does not specify any type of theoretical approach, or the need to use urban models, so there is room for change, but this does depend on being able to access more recent ideas in urban geography.

Academic geographers and the other three stakeholders

It is clear that many elements of the urban geographers' images of cities are entirely absent from the current curricula. New ways of understanding place and recent topics of research, such as landscapes of consumerism, are virtually absent. In addition, process-related concepts (for example, segregation, gentrification, fragmentation, polarisation) are rarely touched on. The American teachers, however, did suggest that children would be interested in issues pertaining to segregation. Some socio-cultural issues are considered, such as fear/safety (which links to the topic of crime in a more recent English textbook, following

production of some non-statutory schemes of work; QCA, 2000), and multiculturalism (Dutch, American and Finnish books), but topics such as sexuality and urban subcultures are not approached.

'Change' as such is certainly a part of the urban images of textbooks and from teachers as well, but the focus is on 'traditional change' (industrial restructuring, urban growth) and the contextualisation of change is rather poor. Citizenship issues such as urban governance, people's rights, immigration, mobilisation, community or transnationalism are well represented in the expert images, but only weakly present in the curricula, the textbooks and in the perceptions by teachers of what their students should learn. In England, this may be partly due to the introduction of a separate citizenship National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999b) operational from 2002. Some ideas current in cultural geography, such as multiple identities, appear in the schemes of work for citizenship (QCA, 2001) rather than geography.

When we asked teachers for their perceptions of whether students would be interested in certain urban issues mentioned by the academic geographers, the topics of migration/immigration and images of cities received the most positive responses, with urban governance being seen as the least likely to interest children. We have to be cautious about such results as responses to a set of words or phrases depend so much on the preconceptions of the respondent, and the extent to which the teachers were familiar with current material in academic urban geography was not clear. Also, teachers were not given an opportunity to ask questions of the survey instrument. It may be that teachers' visions for the future of the urban geography curriculum were also conservative simply because they were not fully aware of new ideas in the field, had not thought through how these might be introduced in a school context or were conscious of pragmatic constraints to change.

Implications for Geographical Education and Future Research

The evidence so far suggests that there is a gap between the urban geographers' ways of conceptualising cities and those used by the other three stakeholders at the lower secondary age range. This raises interesting questions – is such a gap a problem? Some would see a gap as an inevitable result of a trickle down model of curriculum development, whereby ideas naturally filter down from the university into schools. However, if material currently being developed at university level might be more helpful to children in making sense of the world than some more traditional elements of urban geography, is it fair to deprive current students of this material as we wait for it to somehow filter down? We might also beg the question of how such a change happens, particularly, when the current pressures on academic life in some countries seem to have curtailed the partnership of teachers and academics in the spheres of examining and textbook publishing. A gap in methodological complexity and cognitive challenge would be expected between school- and university-level geography – there must be room for progression in sophistication of material, in whatever way this is conceived. Thus, it would obviously be inappropriate to make wholesale transfer of material from university geography to the lower secondary school context. However, a gap in the level of sophistication does

not necessitate a gap in substantive theme or way of framing the urban – it just requires good scaffolding to enable children to access new material. The gap becomes a problem if the way urban geographies are represented in teaching resources is over-simplified and remote from the complex, messy, global – local urban areas that children experience, directly or indirectly, in their daily lives.

This concern particularly relates to the contextualisation of city case studies – the urban geographers constantly emphasised the relationship of the global and the local in cities, yet few case studies in the textbooks were considered from a range of spatial scales. The urban geographers also suggested that school geography should explore the real lives of city people – ‘the way people are connected to their local context’, as one respondent put it. Evidence from the questionnaires suggested that teachers were keen to use fieldwork to help their students experience the city, but were less inclined to use the students’ daily experience as a resource. If some of these elements of the ‘gap’ are to be overcome, how can this happen in a way which is sustainable, and also more empowering to teachers than being at the receiving end of ‘trickle down’? The recent ‘Valuing Places’ project run by the Geographical Association in the UK, and based on their ‘local solutions’ curriculum development model, of partnership between university and school geographers may provide pointers for future work in urban geography too (GA, 2006).

However, before this project moves on to its curriculum development phase, we are committed to eliciting children’s views on learning urban geographies. As many of our children live in cities, we could consider that they are already urban geographers, from one viewpoint, and experts in a range of urban phenomena. How, then, can their existing expertise be recognised, and what more can formal geography offer them to broaden and refine their current thinking? As we move to the next stage of this project, a methodological challenge presents itself. It will be relatively easy to gather older children’s responses to the urban geographies that they have already been taught in school, and how these compare to their own thoughts on the urban, but a very real question is how can younger students offer an informed but independent reaction to the urban geographies they have not been taught? Perhaps the ideas or issues that the children don’t mention would be the most revealing. Nonetheless, resolving this methodological issue will be vital if any future curriculum development work is to be genuinely centred around the lives and current interests of students.

In the work so far, we have been interested in comparing the urban geographies taught in the four different countries by drawing on the views and voices of teachers, textbook writers and the curriculum, and then on comparing these with ideas at the cutting edge of academic geography. We have certainly found evidence of a considerable gap between conceptualisations of cities current in university-based urban geographies and those current in the curricula, textbooks and ideas of the teachers who took part in our study. Of course, this project concerns just one aspect of geography, but it seems likely that such a research approach could also inform curriculum development in other strands of the discipline. It would be interesting to see if a similar gap existed in other fields of human geography (i.e. cultural geography, economic geography or social geography), or indeed in the more physical topics. Obtaining students’ views about the urban geographies that interest them will be an important next

step in evaluating whether such a gap is a genuine issue. If there is a discrepancy between the urban geographies that students feel is relevant to their lives and those presented in the current resources, this will certainly be a major incentive for curriculum development.

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Notes

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2. Due to slight differences in the organisation of schooling, the age ranges chosen in each country were as follows: Finland 13–15, Netherlands 12–15, UK 11–14, USA 11–14.
3. Textbooks analysed were as follows: *Finland* Leinonen, M., Nyberg, T., Kenno, P. and Veistola, S. (2003) *Koulun maantieto. Amerikka*. Helsinki, Finland: Otava; Leinonen, M., Nyberg, T., Kenno, P., Martikainen, A. and Veistola, S. (2003) *Koulun maantieto. Eurooppa*. Helsinki, Finland: Otava; Leinonen, M., Nyberg, T., Martikainen, A. and Veistola, S. (2002) *Koulun maantieto. Suomi*. Helsinki, Finland: Otava; Cantell, H., Houtsonen, L., Jutila, H., Kankaanrinta, I.-K., Tammilehto, M. and Vaalgamaa, S. (2001) *Maaailman ympäri*. Helsinki, Finland: WSOY; Cantell, H., Houtsonen, L., Jutila, H., Kankaanrinta, I.-K., Tammilehto, M. and Vaalgamaa, S. (2002) *Matkalle Eurooppaan*. Helsinki, Finland: WSOY; Cantell, H., Jutila, H., Kankaanrinta, I.-K., Tammilehto, M. and Vaalgamaa, S. (2002) *Suuntana Suomi*. Helsinki, Finland: WSOY; *Netherlands* van den Berg, G. (red) (2002) *BuiteNland 1 havo*. vwo. Houten: EPN; van den Berg, G. (red) (2003) *BuiteNland 2 havo*. vwo. Houten: EPN; Bijker, S.H., et al. (2002). *de Geo. Lesboek 1 havo*. vwo. Utrecht, Zutphen: ThiemeMeulenhoff; Bijker, S.H., et al. (red) (2003). *de Geo. Lesboek 2 havo*. vwo. Utrecht, Zutphen: ThiemeMeulenhoff; *UK* Grimwade, K. and Durbin, C. (eds.) (2002) *Investigating Geography (Books A, B & C)*. London: Hodder & Stoughton; Waugh, D. and Bushell, T. (1996) *Key Geography: Foundations, Connections & Interactions* (2nd edn.). Cheltenham, UK: Stanley Thornes; *US* Arrelola, D., Smith Deal, M., Peteren, J. and Sanders, R. (2003) *World Geography*. Evanston, IL: McDougall-Littell; Baerwald, T. and Fraser, C. (2000) *World Geography: Building a Global Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Ideally, the US textbooks were designed to be used in grades 9–12, corresponding to ages 14–17.
4. The Standards lay out the broad elements to be covered while the specifics are worked out in individual school districts and sometimes in individual schools.
5. It is important to note that a new version of the Finnish curriculum has recently been issued. The new framework curriculum for comprehensive schools (primary and lower secondary education) is operational from 2004, but it will be implemented in all the schools by 2006 at the latest. During the data collection in this project, school curricula were still based on the 1994 curriculum and, therefore, it is used here.

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