

Creating active citizens? Interpreting, implementing and assessing 'personal social action' in NCEA social studies

Introduction

This project examined how the NCEA senior Social Studies 'personal social action' achievement standards are interpreted and implemented by teachers and students. The introduction of these standards has provided New Zealand students with a unique and valuable opportunity to examine social issues, design and implement social actions, and reflect upon the impact of their actions and decisions. Working with teachers and students at five schools we gathered evidence of strategies and approaches that have the potential to support students to engage in critical and transformative social action.

Project design

We used a mixed method approach which included:

1. An analysis of NZQA data on student enrolments and performance in NCEA social studies achievement standards in 2014 and 2015.
2. A survey of social studies teachers' perceptions of social action and current practices ($n=141$).
3. Forming a partnership with five teachers where we conducted school-based research that involved classroom observations, individual teacher inquiries into aspects of the social action process, and shared reflections and collaborative planning at three Hui.
4. Focus group interviews with students ($n=93$).

Implications for practice

1. Taking critical and transformative social action in schooling contexts can be challenging but if students: focus on issues of personal and social significance, critique and acquire in-depth knowledge about social issues and develop strategies that focus on addressing deeper levels of injustice/inequality; their actions are more likely to be transformative (Figure 2).
2. As social action rests upon personal values and intrinsic motivation, teachers need to navigate the affective dimensions of the *personal social action* standards carefully to enable freedom and provide support for students to plan and develop their social action with high levels of reflection.
3. Students who did not have a meaningful social action experience were less enthusiastic about their future participation as citizens. The stakes are therefore high to ensure that school-based experiences of social action are meaningful and empowering.
4. Encouraging students to consider social action beyond fund raising led to higher levels of criticality and potential social change but also at times lower levels of immediate satisfaction.
5. In order to empower young people as political actors, it is important that students gain an understanding of the opportunities and limitations of the NCEA social action assessments. Real change often requires collective action and initiatives from other bodies, including the state (Biesta, 2011).

Figure 1: Domains of learning for social action

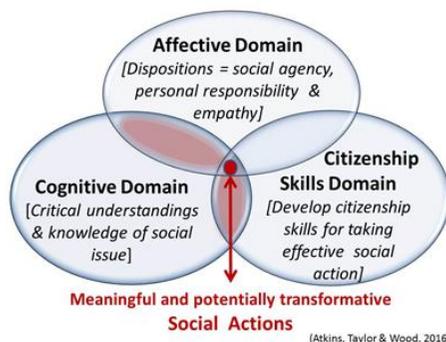
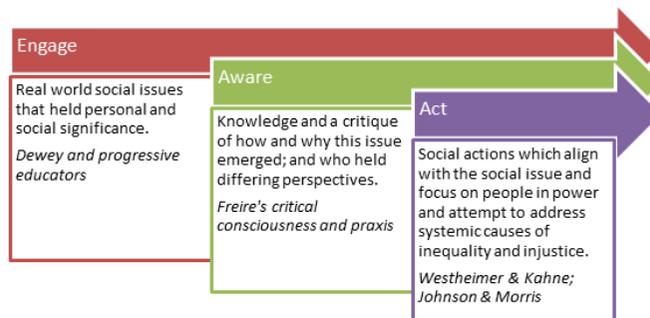


Figure 2: The process of social action and theoretical underpinnings



Key findings

1. Senior social studies achievement standards are now offered in more than 60% of New Zealand schools and the use of *personal social action* standards is growing steadily, especially at Level 1. There is some evidence that teachers who do not offer *PSA* standards view them as time consuming and difficult to implement.
2. Students found that undertaking social action differed from learning in other curriculum areas as it required 'performed' actions. This generally involved community engagement and a much more expansive suite of (citizenship and life) skills than traditional forms of written and numeric assessment.
3. Teachers needed to be confident, skilled practitioners to navigate the unique challenges associated with taking social action. This included the need to: (i) engage students at the affective level so their acts were authentic and personally meaningful; (ii) scaffold in-depth cognitive and critical understanding of real world social issues; and (iii) provide opportunities for the development of a suite of citizenship skills, values and dispositions (Johnson & Morris, 2010) (Figure 1).
4. Taking critical and transformative social action generally involved a process of engagement, awareness and action. This process is theoretically supported by forms of critical pedagogy and progressive education (Figure 2).



Atkins, R., Taylor, R., & Wood, B. E. (2016). Planning for critically informed, active citizenship: Lessons from social-studies classrooms. *SET: Research information for teachers*, 3, 15-22.

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