

How can lessons learned from senior social studies developments inform teaching and learning in year 9 and 10 social studies classrooms?

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Abstract

Since the introduction of senior social studies for the National Certificate in Educational Achievement [NCEA] in 2002, some progress has been made towards developing a unique identity for social studies. An increased emphasis on conceptual learning, clarification of terminology, and progress towards a unifying theme based around social justice issues has provided greater internal cohesion for the subject. This paper will elaborate how the lessons learnt from the introduction of senior social studies and other developments can 'trickle down' to year nine and ten social studies to improve best practice and the status of social studies at both junior and senior levels.

Background

The introduction of senior social studies since 2002 for the national credentialing system, the NCEA, has precipitated a closer look at the nature and purpose of social studies. It has also encouraged teachers to adopt more effective pedagogies and has validated the use of standards-based assessment in the subject. This paper will identify the ways in which conceptual developments in senior social studies in years 11-13 can and have impacted on teaching and learning in junior social studies classrooms at years 9 and 10 in New Zealand secondary schools by discussing the possible 'trickle effects' or productive links between teaching and learning at both levels.

The data presented in this paper was gathered in 2005 and 2006 for my doctoral research in which I evaluated the first five years implementation of senior social studies from 2002 to 2006. One source of data comprised a postal survey of schools offering NCEA level one social studies in which question 3.3 asked "Do you regard your teaching of your junior social studies classes to be better as a result of teaching senior social studies?" Sixty-one per cent of the 45 respondents responded affirmatively to this question, 31% negatively and 7% did not respond. Space was provided for open-ended comments. Twenty-four of the 45 respondents provided voluntary comments to this question, many of which will be used in this paper along with data from in-depth interviews with both lead educators and a focus group of four level one social studies teachers.

Trickle effects can in fact go up as well as down. Teachers in the study concurred that having a strong junior social studies department provided a good basis for implementing senior social studies. This trickle up was expressed in responses like the postal survey:

We have specifically chosen more 'inspirational' teachers in year 10 social studies to encourage students into senior social science.

And in the in-depth interviews:

I think if social studies is being done well in the junior school of a secondary school there is more potential for it to grow in the senior school because there's the passion and there's the enthusiasm and there's somebody there who understands the curriculum and can make it dynamic. But if social studies is flat in the junior school, it won't grow.

They also felt that the introduction of senior social studies enabled students to specialise in the social sciences:

Students can become complete social scientists.

Two teachers [in the focus group] were offering level one social studies to their more able year 10 students to keep them in the social sciences.

Another trickle up effect arose from the *Social Studies Exemplars [Exemplars]* (Ministry of Education, 2004) written for levels 1-5 of the curriculum. The three 'aspects of learning' or 'progress indicators' used to unpack the achievement objectives within the *Exemplars* have been adopted for senior social studies planning. Unfortunately the *Exemplars* do not appear to have been widely used in junior social studies.

While these trickle up effects are important, the focus of this paper is on the trickle down effects from senior to junior social studies. Teachers who responded affirmatively to question 3.3 about trickle down effects focused on aspects of the *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum [SSiNZC]* (Ministry of Education, 1997) document to which the current NCEA achievement standards relate - especially in relation to improving understanding of the concepts, processes and perspectives. They also mentioned the relevance of the topics, understanding of ideas, and providing year 10 students with a taste of NCEA before year 11. One teacher commented in response to question 3.3:

ABSOLUTELY – I can't be forceful enough about this.

Conversely, those who disputed the trickle down effects commented 'no change', 'irrelevant, different focus' and 'haven't really noticed a difference as yet'. Other comments to this question indicated disillusionment with senior social studies as their reason, for example:

Feel frustrated at the repetitious nature of the standards. Students finish course early.

Seventy-five percent of the volunteered responses to question 3.3 were positive.

Framework for the Paper

Six major trickle down effects from the developments of senior social studies, which have the potential to inform teaching and learning in junior social studies classrooms, are to be discussed. This will be done by embedding these potential trickle down effects of senior social studies developments within the three stage framework of progress towards subject maturity posited by David Layton (1972). Layton studied the introduction of science as a new subject in the British curriculum in the late 19th century. While his study may appear unrelated to contemporary social studies, the generic descriptors he constructed have been utilised by some New Zealand social studies commentators (e.g., Barr, 2000; Openshaw & Archer, 1992; Taylor, 2005, 2008) as benchmarks against which the progress of social studies development towards maturity over the last sixty years has been measured.

In Layton's continuum of a school subject's development from a 'callow intruder' to a mature subject, the first stage considers the subject as it first enters the timetable, the second stage as it develops higher levels of specialisation and credibility, and the third stage where it reaches a level of widespread acceptance and maturity. Descriptors for each of the three stages are summarised below:

Layton (1972) Stages Towards Subject Maturity:

Stage 1:

- A callow intruder stakes its place in the timetable
- Learners are attracted because of the relevance to them
- Teachers are rarely trained specialists but bring missionary enthusiasm of pioneers to the task.

Stage 2:

- A tradition of scholarly work emerges
- A corps of trained specialists emerges
- Students are attracted by its growing academic status
- The internal logic and discipline of the subject is influencing selection of the subject matter

Stage 3:

- Teachers constitute a professional body with established rules and laws
- The selection of subject matter is determined by specialist scholars
- Students' attitudes approach passivity and resignation
- Acquisition of university status (added by Openshaw & Archer, 1992)

Source: Adapted from Layton, 1972, in Taylor (2008).

Some of these descriptors are now used to propose six trickle down effects, from the evidence gathered in my study of the development of senior social studies, which can (and do) inform teaching and learning in junior social studies.

Trickle Effect One: Relevance to students' lives

The relevance of the subject to students' lives, a descriptor regarded by Layton (1972) as occurring during the first stage of a new subject, is the first trickle effect. One lead educator in the study noted the importance of all learning making **some** link to our students' lives in New Zealand today. Social studies does have a social justice agenda and concern about social cohesion (Mutch et al, 2009) which has informed the selection of subject material in senior social studies. Contemporary social issues such as human rights, civil rights, competition for scarce resources, and impacts of conflict at local, national and global levels, were identified by teachers in the study. Their responses indicated students' excitement over issues of substance and concern:

We do some really up-to-date and interesting topics, e.g. conflict, HIV.

...highly motivating topics of contemporary relevance

...the biggest thing for me was 9/11. The kids came to school after that asking 'Who is Osama bin Laden?' 'What are Al Qaeda?' 'Why did they do this?' ... to me this was the turning point. It got our kids interested in what was happening overseas...and then I could see the scope for senior social studies.

This social justice agenda can easily be adopted in junior classrooms and frequently is through studies of issues such as child labour and black civil rights in a variety of communities. Students have long displayed interest in issues of inequity and injustice. This focus on contemporary social issues links closely with the research conducted for *Effective Pedagogies in Social Sciences/Tikanga a iwi: Best Evidence Synthesis [BES]* (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008) in which one of the guiding principles, Mechanism Four, is "Designing experiences that interest learners" (p. 179).

Further, the collaborative pedagogies employed by many teachers of senior social studies in discussing and debating issues have enabled them to “build and sustain a learning community”, the third mechanism guiding effective pedagogy by Aitken & Sinnema (p.133). Strategies such as the ‘Irish debate’, the use of dressing up to get into role, talk back shows and other strategies for discussing issues indicate that teachers of senior social studies are confident in engaging students in real issues. One teacher articulated this:

I think social studies is a subject that should encompass different opinions and it should allow students to be able to voice them comfortably... some of my students thrive in social studies because they have strong opinions and it's the one subject they really do well in because they have an opinion.

The examination of social issues forces student engagement in the exploration of values and perspectives, discussions and possible participation in social action. This is good as these components of SSiNZC have traditionally not been well understood (ERO, 2001; Keown, 1998; Taylor & Atkins, 2005) but have more recently emerged as points of focus in the front end of the *New Zealand Curriculum [NZC]* (Ministry of Education, 2007). The increased use of such pedagogies in senior social studies can only benefit junior social studies.

Trickle Effect Two: The Internal Logic of the Subject

The second trickle down effect focuses on one of Layton’s (1972) stage two descriptors – “The internal logic and discipline of the subject is influencing selection of the subject matter” (p. 11). Social studies as a subject has struggled in New Zealand over its sixty year history to establish an internal logic and sense of coherence due to its lack of a clearly defined body of knowledge:

One of the most persistent challenges the subject has faced is that it does not have a commonly agreed distinctive purpose and an associated knowledge base.” (Aitken, 2005a, p. 85)

This section outlines four ways that junior social studies has improved the internal logic of the subject through (i) explaining the benefits of the low level of prescription; (ii) being able to counter repeated criticisms; (iii) legitimising conceptual learning; and (iv) providing strategies for integration including provision of a unifying theme.

Traditionally social studies has been characterised as a ‘soft’ subject because of its low level of prescription (Bernstein, 1971). In Bernstein’s terms, the subject has blurred, permeable boundaries and stands in ‘open relation’ to other subjects. This is in contrast with the ‘hard’ subjects which are traditionally more highly prescribed and have relatively ‘closed’ boundaries, such as economics, geography and history. Further, in Bernstein’s terms, a subject like social studies deals with the “commonsense everyday community knowledge of the pupil, his family and peer group” (1971, p. 58) rather than the specialised “uncommonsense educational knowledge” (ibid) of more highly prescribed, closed, ‘hard’ subjects. This low level of prescription was, however, appreciated by the senior social teachers interviewed in the focus group as they regarded the openness and choice refreshing compared to the constraints of their more tightly prescribed parent disciplines such as geography and history.

New Zealand social studies has long been derided as “a dash of this and a dash of that” (Meikle, interviewed by Openshaw, 1991, p. 17), “a compendium of clichés” (Education Forum, 1996, p. viii), and a ragbag of vaguely related activities in time and space:

... I see no sense of continuity... no sense of sequence, or perspective, and little awareness of causal relationships ... we see at its worst the disturbing practice of blithely skipping centuries and continents as problems are pursued. (Stone, 1963, p.28)

The constant derision of social studies as a subject in the junior secondary school has left teachers feeling confused and that they are teaching a second tier, low status subject. The enthusiasm and knowledge engendered by senior social studies educators will potentially help teachers of junior social studies to advocate for their subject with a more solid foundation.

Indeed, new conceptions of knowledge (e.g., Gilbert, 2005) have legitimated the conceptual focus of the subject. Social studies has had a long history as a conceptual curriculum, with the *Social Studies Syllabus Guidelines Form 1-4 [F1-4 Syllabus]* (Department of Education, 1977) drawing on the ideas of American Hilda Taba. Taba was a developmentalist who considered that students would achieve self-actualisation through understanding concepts rather than memorising facts and figures (Keen, 1979). More recently in relation to New Zealand social studies, Barr et al (1997). Milligan and Wood (2009), Mutch et al (2009), and the *Guide Notes: Assessment of Concepts in Senior Social Studies*¹ have emphasised the importance and difficulties of a curriculum based on conceptual learning. This has resulted in terms like 'conceptual understanding' being added to some of the official documentation for NCEA, such as AS90217 *Conduct a social studies inquiry to communicate conceptual understandings about society* and the developments of a series of booklets called *Building Conceptual Understandings in the Social Sciences [BCUSS]* that has been published by the Ministry of Education (2008, 2009) to support the teaching of primary and junior secondary social studies. Reassurance that teaching for conceptual learning is pedagogically sound can also be found in my research as one teacher commented that their teaching was about "Understanding and ideas rather than [being] content driven." Another teacher, however, wrote that they wanted to develop a specific body of content for senior social studies.

Finally, the integrated nature of the subject needs to be considered. The lack of guidance for integration over time, with few integrating strategies being provided for teachers (Evison, 1963; Keen, 1979; McGee, 1998) has been an on-going concern. As many social studies teachers have had geography or history as their parent discipline, this has tended to strongly influence the way they teach social studies. Examples of senior social studies topics with a distinctively geographic or historical flavour have included tourism developments on Kapiti Island and an historical study of Parihaka. Both geography and social studies tend to select the same issues such as HIV aids and land mines based on commercial resources. Writers about curriculum integration (e.g., Drake, 2007) emphasise the role of concepts as an integrating theme. There is therefore still a need to acknowledge the integrative nature of social studies and its uniqueness as a subject in its own right rather than as introductory history or geography.

Trickle Effect Three: Curriculum Fidelity

The focus on the internal logic and discipline of the subject discussed above leads into the third trickle down effect, the alignment of pedagogy and assessment with curriculum requirements (Alison, 2005). *SSiNZC* (Ministry of Education, 1997) was a complex document whose various iterations followed the publication of a highly regarded and widely adopted (Murrow & Bennie, 1993; Mutch et al, 2009) prescriptive *Handbook for social studies teachers form 3 & 4 [Handbook]* (Ministry of Education, 1991). There is evidence that the *SSiNZC* was not well understood (Cubitt, 2005) nor utilised in the manner that was intended by the curriculum writers. One of the teachers interviewed articulated this:

I was not a good junior social studies teacher... I was not a social studies focused teacher. I was an English and history teacher... I hated social studies when I first started having to do it. I mean here you'd get the text book and you'd work your way through ... I could never see where I was going because there was no sort of

¹ http://www.tki.org.nz/r/ncea/socstud-conceptguidenotes_28feb07.doc

scheme, unit plan. I had no idea about the curriculum document and I think that happens in lots of schools. So once I got into senior social studies and it was really only then that I got into the curriculum document... now I carry it around 24/7... I began to realise that it's a damned good subject and I hadn't been doing it very good. You know, it's four years ago, it's embarrassing, isn't it?

Aspects of curriculum fidelity noted by the teachers who responded affirmatively to question 3.3 in the postal survey, included clarification around the perspectives (7 mentions), the role of the concepts (6 mentions) and the processes (4 mentions). Comments included:

Working at the senior level helped clarify the curriculum document at junior level; helped with research at junior level.

The importance of constructive alignment to the curriculum was also noted:

Importance of addressing the strand and process achievement objectives.

Further:

Senior social studies often throws up gaps in understanding for teachers who for many years taught year 9 and 10 social studies. 'So you know I can do that because I've taught social studies for years' but having to look closely at the curriculum, and align the assessment with the curriculum ... I think for some people that [has been] a new revelation.

The complex SSiNZC has recently been replaced by a streamlined NZC and supporting documents, informed by both senior social studies and *Exemplar* initiatives. These developments have helped clarify the social studies community's thinking about the intent of the curriculum. Thus there exists a greater impetus to filter down these lessons learned from senior social studies to junior social studies classrooms.

Trickle Effect Four: Specialist Social Studies Teachers

The fourth trickle down effect considers teacher capacity, and relates to Layton's stage two descriptor "A corps of trained specialists is emerging" (p.11). The importance of subject specialists has been an historic issue in social studies. The adage initiated by Phoebe Meikle (1994) in the 1950s that anyone can teach social studies ... providing that they have some spare slots in their timetable" (p. 108) has been a continual thorn in the flesh for heads of social studies departments. As one teacher wrote:

I think it is getting harder (in our school) for just 'anyone' to teach social studies without significant upskilling.

Thirty years ago, after the publication of the *Form 1-4 Syllabus* (Department of Education, 1977), Neville Northover (1980) argued:

In every respect the 'new' social studies is a very demanding subject, that requires highly trained and skilful teachers of a mature personality and outlook – and they need a school climate that is in keeping with the aims of back-up services. (p.16)

A recent *Education Review Office Report [ERO]* (2006) noted that only 20% of primary school teachers are effective teachers of social studies (p.1). Further, the *National School Sampling Survey* (McGee, 2002) discovered that 21% of secondary school social science teachers of years 9 to 13 held no formal qualifications in any of the social science subjects at that time; 60% held a bachelor's degree in social sciences and 19% a master's degree or higher in social science (Chapter 7, p.7).

Only 22% of the respondents to my postal survey had undertaken all of their NCEA training in social studies and 17% some of their NCEA training. Sixty-one per cent had trained in

another subject, such as geography, history or English, or not at all. Of these, geography was the most common parent discipline.

Finally, a tradition of scholarly work is emerging, another of Layton's stage two descriptors. Two position papers (Barr et al, 1997; Mutch et al, 2009) have been pivotal in clarifying the subject within an historical and international framework; the *Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004); *the BES* (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008), and recent theses on social studies in New Zealand (e.g., Aitken, 2005b; Milligan, 2006; Mutch, 2003; Taylor, 2008; Wendt Samu, 1998) as well as journal articles about social studies add to the small but growing collection of scholarly work in the field. Whether busy teachers of junior social studies can access and have time to read such work, especially if their main interest is in another senior subject, is another matter.

Trickle Effect Five: Professional Support

Layton (1972) regarded the establishment of "a professional body with established rules and values" (p. 11) to be the hallmark of a mature subject (stage three). In fact social studies has had a professional body since 1986, four years earlier than the history teachers. The Aotearoa New Zealand Federation of Social Studies Associations [ANZFSSA] has served as the professional body at both regional and the national level. Evidence of senior social studies teachers seeking guidance from the organisation was limited to 11% of the postal survey respondents who reported that they received on-going support from their local association. A more frequently cited source of support was a 'buddy teacher' at their or another school (34.5%) whilst 18% were supported by a subject adviser and 18% considered they were professionally isolated.

The role of the Ministry of Education [MoE] in providing on-going professional support, both face-to-face and electronically, and of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA] in dissemination of information came in for considerable criticism in the study. Meetings of lead educators held jointly by the MoE and NZQA in 2006 and the subsequent publication of the *Guide Notes* on the Perspectives, Concepts and Values Exploration in 2008 and 2009 have helped clarify key terms which were not well defined in *SSiNZC*. They also grappled with the term 'perspectives' which is a term used in different ways amongst the social sciences. Question 4.3 in the postal survey about the *Guide Notes: Assessment of the perspectives in senior social studies*² ascertained that 74% of teachers had accessed this document, though fewer than 50% of these teachers noted that they had found it helpful.

The low level of resourcing in social studies was a consistent theme throughout its sixty year history. The widespread availability of content material on the internet has been embraced by many senior social studies teachers, but guidance in terms of planning and pedagogical content knowledge is still needed. The *BCUSS* series (Ministry of Education, 2008, 2009) is a very positive spin off from the new understandings gained during the senior social studies developments as signalled previously.

Teachers of senior social studies have had to be very resourceful due to the absence of text books for their subject, creating their own resources from the internet:

As with most of the social studies course it is a requirement to use very up-to-date material that is both costly and time consuming.

We don't use text books any more, we create our own resources.

This level of resourcefulness can also trickle down to junior social studies to supplement the text books and other resources in existence. The failure to maintain the *Social Studies*

² http://www.tki.org.nz/r/ncea/socstud-perspectiveguidenotes_28feb07.doc

Online site from 2004 has been difficult for teachers of senior social studies, with 40% of responses to the postal survey revealing a strong reliance on this MoE site.

The major trickle down effect for junior social studies has therefore included the clarification of key terms, and progress towards ways of knowing and doing things which are already well developed in economics, geography and history. Much of this material is widely available on the internet but relies on the initiative of junior social studies teachers to access it.

Trickle Effect Six: Assessment 'driving' programmes

The final trickle down effect that was evident from the study was the driving role of assessment. The introduction of standards-based assessment is not new in social studies, and was formalised by the *Handbook* (Ministry of Education, 1991).

The *NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools 2006* (Hipkins, 2007) identified 80% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that "assessment is driving the curriculum now, even at Years 9 and 10" (p.67). In my study 39% of the teachers agreed that "assessment drives my programme" in senior social studies, while 34% were neutral, while the other 37% disagreed. The link between pedagogy and assessment, however, was noted:

Assessment and teaching must both be part of a high stakes programme.

Teachers [should] provide a wide rich learning programme of which assessment is only one bit, not the whole thing - a sample here and a sample there, what bits will we sample... and how will we show progression?

The adage 'assessment drives our teaching' was seen as a cliché by one respondent who considered that he had a responsibility as a professional to help his students to succeed in the high stakes, national examinations.

My study provided evidence that the practice of standards-based assessment is 'trickling down' to the junior school. One half of the respondents to the postal survey and two of the four focus group teachers were offering level one achievement standards to their year 10 students, especially for extension purposes. One teacher commented:

Giving year 10 students a taste of NCEA before their year 11 start.

This practice is not dissimilar to the School Certificate era when year 10 (form 4) was seen as the time to develop the knowledge and skills of history or geography (depending on the parent discipline of the teacher) to help them the following year. Thus social studies was seen then, and appears to still be, as a 'ladder' or 'camel' subject (Northover, 1980).

Some teachers who used the level one achievement standards with year 10 students were quite happy to abandon them if they proved problematic. They were most likely to drop the 'capricious externals'. A focus on the internals has had the benefit of forcing teachers to grapple with all three processes from *SSiNZC* as they have been assessed separately to date. Knowledge of the values exploration and social decision making processes may therefore have improved, as in junior classes it has been easier to solely focus on the inquiry process (ERO, 2001).

We do not have a clear picture of what kinds of assessments are occurring in junior social studies classrooms, but it is likely that schools who offer senior social studies have made concomitant changes in their assessment of junior social studies.

Conclusion

This paper has identified six potential trickle down effects on the teaching, learning and assessment of social studies at a junior level in the secondary school as the result of the introduction of senior social studies. These productive links have been embedded with reference to Layton's (1972) continuum of stages toward subject maturity. Social studies commentators (e.g. Barr, 2000; Openshaw & Archer, 1992) were pessimistic that the subject would not get beyond stage two while Taylor (2005) considered that the implementation of senior social studies was the defining factor in social studies reaching stage three and establishing a greater level of credibility in secondary schools. While the number of schools offering senior social studies remains small (less than 20% of the total secondary schools in 2006), it is hoped that the lessons learned by the community and associated developments thus far and in the future will continue to flow down to improve pedagogy in junior social studies classrooms.

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