

CASE STUDY:

Social studies

Improving outcomes for diverse learners



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Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Improving the quality of teaching in Social Studies is a key strategy for improving learning outcomes for diverse learners.

The Ministry of Education asked The University of Auckland to deliver an initiative that used collaborative action research to support teachers' professional learning and, in turn, diverse learners' achievement in social studies. A key aspect of the research was the role of outcomes-linked evidence to inform teachers' own research.

The project is part of the Ministry's Quality Teaching Research and Development (QTR&D) Project. Key components of the Social Studies QTR&D project were a post-graduate course that teachers were required to participate in, in-school visits from facilitators to support teachers' inquiries in their own context, and Reflection and Planning days where teachers met together for dialogue about their work.

The research team, headed by Principal Investigator Dr Claire Sinnema, used a collaborative inquiry approach with involvement from other tertiary institutions across New Zealand. The university-based researchers, together with the teacher-researchers examined shifts in both teachers' pedagogical approaches, and in student outcomes. These included conceptual knowledge and understandings, skills, participatory, identity and affective outcomes.

"In this project teachers were positioned as both users, and creators, of evidence about teaching that impacts positively on diverse learners," says Dr Sinnema. Their focus, in particular, was on the improvement of Maori and Pasifika student outcomes.

During QTR&D, teachers engaged with literature about culturally responsive teaching and action research, and with an evidence-base about effective teaching in social studies. This has led to shifts in the way teachers design and interact in social studies teaching.

Dr Sinnema says some of the most important findings were evidence of significant changes in teachers' awareness and understanding of culturally responsive teaching, and of ways to inquire into the effectiveness of their teaching.

The research showed transformations across:

- teacher thinking – for example, more sensitive observations of diverse learners
- teaching practice – for example, teachers' awareness and use of strategies to make strong connections to student lives, to attend to their prior knowledge and experience, and to develop caring and inclusive learning communities
- teacher inquiry – for example, improvements in teachers' collection and use of data about social studies outcomes in the classroom.

"The findings from teachers' inquiries about effective social studies teaching in classrooms is one aspect of the work. The other aspect relates to the professional learning initiative itself - we have examined how the collaborative action research approach enabled or constrained shifts in teaching and learning outcomes."

A report on the study is scheduled for completion later in 2008.

"These teachers are committed to making connections to students' lives and to building and sustaining a learning community in their classroom"

Transformation of teacher thinking, practice and inquiry



Dr Claire Sinnema

Dr Sinnema is a Research Project Manager at The University of Auckland's Faculty of Education. Recent projects have included a Social Sciences Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis and evidence-based action research work with social studies teachers. A current national project is to evaluate curriculum implementation in New Zealand.

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The challenges

- Social studies outcomes for diverse learners are broad, complex and inter-related
- Past statistical measures don't take account of diverse concepts of success
- Effective teaching extends beyond the classroom to students' families and their communities

Delivery

- Research across three urban hubs using an inter-institutional collaborative approach
- Support of teachers' post-graduate work and in their own classroom contexts
- A series of cases about teachers' stories for publication

Benefits

- Increased teacher engagement with outcomes-linked evidence about effective teaching in social studies
- Improved teachers' ability to carry out inquiries about their own classroom-practice, and its impact on diverse students
- Greater understanding about ways of working with teachers that, in turn, support them to teach more effectively