

# Chapter 5 Teaching social studies for social justice: Social action is more than just ‘doing stuff’

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## ***Key points***

- One of the aims of teaching social studies is to build students’ awareness of social justice issues.
- Social inquiry is a common approach to teaching about social justice, but it often stops before authentic social action is undertaken.
- The proliferation of models of inquiry can be confusing.
- A simplified social inquiry for social action process can help teachers to have a stronger social justice focus

## ***Introduction***

Yes I enjoyed taking the social action because we got to do something different and we also took the chance to raise awareness about obesity which is a major problem in our community. I loved it! (Year 10 student)

Students in today's classrooms face a world in which they will be confronted by choices and issues we might never have considered possible. *The New Zealand Curriculum* outlines our responsibility for preparing the next generation for this ever-changing, uncertain and volatile future. The Social Sciences learning area expects that we will help the students in our care to

develop knowledge and skills to enable them to: better understand, participate in and contribute to the local, national and global communities in which they live and work; engage critically with societal issues; and, evaluate the sustainability of alternative social, economic, political and environmental practices. (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 30)

Previous chapters have raised questions such as, 'How do we get students to critically engage in social issues?', 'How do we help them evaluate alternatives?' and 'How do we raise awareness of social injustice?'. As social studies educators we take these concepts seriously, but in the busyness of classroom life, as we aim to balance content and assessment expectations, we sometimes pay lip service to what teaching for social justice *really* means. In this chapter we suggest that social action is a way in which we can encourage students to critically engage in social issues and evaluate alternatives.

What our research has shown is that there are very few resources available to support teachers to help students to engage fully in relating issues of social justice to their own lives. Of those that do, many don't lead students to genuine social action. Take, for example, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)-approved NCEA Level 1 exemplar *Internal Assessment Resource Social Studies 1.4 v2 for Achievement Standard 91042* (Ministry of Education, 2012). In this achievement standard the social action is reflecting on personal involvement in an activity. Achieving the standard with excellence requires making suggestions for possible adaptations. In the exemplar, students develop awareness by engaging in a fundraising activity in which they cut out red cardboard hands. The exemplar for excellence states, "An alternative action would have been to get the students to make their own red hand print in paint to place on the sheet ... but the possibility of students getting paint on their uniform or around the school made

us reject this alternative as not being effective.” Is this exemplar really promoting *critical engagement* and *social action*?

The authors of this chapter are a group of researchers and practitioners who want to share their ideas about making social action more than just ‘doing stuff’. We want to inspire teachers at all levels to take that extra step towards critical and authentic social action. First, we discuss some key terms linked to social action. Next, we offer a way of incorporating social action into a typical planning cycle. To show what teaching for social justice might look like in practice, one of the authors then describes a social studies unit in which she incorporated social action into her planning, teaching and reflection. We conclude our chapter by reiterating the key ideas we have covered. Throughout the chapter we reference useful resources and suggest these as a starting point for teachers.

I enjoyed the social action because it is something I’m passionate about and I’d keep this going as a group in our school. (Year 10 student)

### ***Situating social action in a critical framework***

The concepts of fairness, equity, social action and transformative change reflect theoretical conceptions of social justice within the critical tradition. *Critical theory* offers a lens through which to examine the ways in which social institutions and cultural dynamics create and maintain inequities in society (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Critical theory underpins the thinking of the chapter authors in that it connects our work in teaching and research to broader societal and global contexts. At the same time, it challenges us to reflect on our identities, roles, positions and responsibilities in society (Anyon, 2009; Theophanous, 1994). We view education for social justice as an ongoing process that helps students to understand and respond to existing inequities in society. For us, teaching social studies through social inquiry and social action honours diversity, challenges inequity, and promotes the actions, practices and processes of a fair and inclusive society.

‘Social justice’ is an intensely contested and widely debated term. Varying understandings and uses of the term reflect equally diverse goals that traverse a wide spectrum of political and philosophical perspectives (Craig, Burchardt, & Gordon, 2008). Both NZQA and the

Ministry of Education provide definitions and guidance for teaching about social justice. NZQA describes social justice as “an outcome of social action taken to develop fair treatment and equity for all” (NZQA, 2010, p. 1). Social justice in this context is underpinned by two concepts: a human rights or ‘equity for all’ focus, and a personal involvement or social action focus. Social justice is also identified as a key concept within the Social Sciences learning area. The Level 6 achievement objective, for example, requires students to “understand how individuals, groups, and institutions work to promote social justice and human rights” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 30).

### **Approaches to citizenship education**

*Citizenship education* encompasses ideas of participation and action for the good of society. Barr, Graham, Hunter, Keown and McGee (1997) suggested that citizenship education enables “young people [to] develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as members of a culturally diverse democracy in a changing world” (p. 5). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) offer another useful perspective. Their study of citizenship education programmes found three types of approaches: those that promoted *socially responsible citizens*, those that promoted *participatory citizens*, and those that promoted *justice-oriented citizens*. The approaches in New Zealand align most closely with teaching for participatory and justice-oriented citizens (Wood, Taylor, & Atkins, 2013). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe participatory citizens as individuals who “actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community” (p. 241), while justice-oriented citizens examine and critique the underlying “social, economic, and political forces” of social issues and injustices (p. 242). Banks (2008) extends the goals of citizenship education to include societal transformation. Through transformative citizenship education, which encompasses notions of democracy and civic participation, students are encouraged to

develop the decision-making and social action skills that are needed to identify problems in society, acquire knowledge related to their homes and community cultures and languages, identify and clarify their values, and take thoughtful individual or collective civic action. (p. 135)

Citizenship is often taught through *inquiry learning*. Inquiry learning appears in many forms, from the approach in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), which views all stages of teaching and learning as an inquiry, to a range of integrated activities across the curriculum. In its simplest form, inquiry learning has students follow a line of investigation—sometimes of their own choice, at other times with guidance from a teacher as part of a class topic. They collate and process information and share their conclusions. In social studies, inquiry learning came to the fore in the mid-20th century as a challenge to viewing teaching as an act of transmission of knowledge, and instead seeing learning as a process of engagement in ideas (Mutch, 2008; Wood, 2013). Since then it has been through many iterations. Today it is a common approach in many curriculum areas, especially given the ease of access to material through information and communications technology.

Boyd and Hipkins (2012) note three types of inquiry seen in New Zealand schools: generic, disciplinary and hybrid. In social studies, Wood (2013) suggests a hybrid approach is used most, appearing as a *social inquiry*, which includes going beyond information processing to include an analysis of social issues. A challenge for social studies educators is how to create an environment that fosters critically informed citizens and invites social action. Social inquiry offers a way forward. Social inquiry is defined by the Ministry of Education (2008, p. 2) as “an integrated process for examining social issues, ideas and themes”. Wood (2013) suggests that social inquiry is more than that: it “has a dual commitment to gaining deeper knowledge about society as well as knowledge, dispositions, and skills to participate in society” (p. 22).

Wood explains this further by elaborating on two strands: *informational* goals (understanding how society works and how inequity arises) and *transformational* goals (undertaking action in pursuit of a more equitable society). When teachers plan a social inquiry, Aitken and Sinnema (2008) suggest they consider: connecting the experience to students’ lives and selecting resources the students can relate to; aligning the experiences to important outcomes; building and sustaining a learning community through dialogue and collaboration; and designing experiences that motivate and interest students.

Active citizenship is historically linked to the concept of *social action* (Wood et al., 2013), and social action is acknowledged as being a difficult and challenging aspect of the curriculum to teach (Keown, 1998; Wood et al., 2013). To demonstrate active citizenship, students are encouraged to “participate and take action as critical, informed, and responsible citizens” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 17). In *Approaches to Social Inquiry* (Ministry of Education, 2008), social action appears as “Considering responses and decisions” and the “So what?” and “Now what?” prompts in the latter stages of the social inquiry. The resource suggests teachers and students ask, “Now what might be done about it?” Possibilities might include letter writing, petition signing, tree planting, rubbish collecting or informing others (Ministry of Education, 2008). We want to stress that the action needs to be tied to addressing a social issue, and that the activity should be the beginning of a more committed approach to social justice, not an end in itself. By engaging with the systemic roots of inequality, we aim to empower students to take action to mitigate these inequalities and create sustained and transformational social change (Adams et al., 2013).

Finally, in our discussion of approaches to citizenship education we note *service learning* as an emerging area of interest for New Zealand educators with an interest in social justice education. Originating in the US, the concept of service learning aims to connect academic learning with community-based projects (Eyler, 2002). Advocates of service learning promote its ability to connect education (students, educators and schools) with the wider world through community engagement, democratic goals, social justice and citizenship (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Following the Canterbury earthquakes, for example, university students who participated in the Student Volunteer Army could put that experience towards a credit-bearing service learning course (O’Steen & Perry, 2012). What is most important in approaching significant social issues through service learning is recognising that it is not just about helping in the community: it is also about developing an awareness of systemic social inequities and how they might be addressed on a wider scale.

Terms such as ‘social justice’ and ‘social action’ have different meanings in different contexts. To lessen confusion we have outlined definitions of relevant terms in ways that align with social studies ideas. In this section we have provided working definitions of social justice,

citizenship education, inquiry learning, social inquiry, social action and service learning in recognition of their close association with different approaches to citizenship education. The definitions set the scene for our discussion of fostering *social inquiry for social action* through social studies teaching.

I enjoyed the social justice action because it was something we did to help our community and knowing that we did something like that gives me a good feeling. (Year 10 student)

### ***Social inquiry for social action: Another approach to citizenship education***

Designing a social studies programme with social justice at its core requires an approach to teaching and learning that explicitly and purposefully sets out to achieve social action for social justice. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) study of different citizenship education approaches, discussed earlier, found that justice-oriented programmes do not necessarily produce citizens who take action, and that those with a focus on participation do not necessarily produce justice-oriented citizens. We argue that students must be given the opportunities and experiences, the skills and knowledge, both to take action in communities *and* to critically analyse societal structures in pursuit of social justice. To be effective, these dimensions of authentic participation and justice orientation must be explicitly integrated from the earliest planning stages.

Chapter 3 introduced social inquiry and its distinction from generic inquiry approaches. There are various approaches and templates for using a social inquiry process, and in this chapter we have distilled our own simplified model of *social inquiry for social action* from other constructs, such as *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), *Approaches to Social Inquiry* (Ministry of Education, 2008), and the social sciences *Best Evidence Synthesis* (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008), and from the literature (e.g. Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Wood, 2013).

We have also incorporated our own experiences of teaching for social justice. We have prioritised what we consider to be the essential elements, which include an initial stage where teachers consider the students' needs and interests, the content to be covered according to curriculum and assessment expectations, the time and resources

available, and ideas for incorporating authentic, engaging and motivating activities. We also discussed how to engage students at this stage. We call this stage the *setting-up inquiry*.

The next stage is one that is often not well considered. In our experience some teachers move too quickly to a student-led activity when students have only a superficial understanding of the topic. In this stage the teacher has explicit goals in mind, which they teach or reinforce. Key skills are revisited and students are introduced to the background, context, content and concepts that give the study meaning and purpose. We call this stage the *teacher-led inquiry*. We also feel there could be opportunities to model social action at this stage of the inquiry. This prepares students for their independent or collaborative inquiries and avoids social action being seen as an end-of-unit add-on.

As students begin to grasp a deeper understanding of the issue under investigation, they are invited to consider what aspects they might wish to examine in more depth—considering not just what they can find out but what they could do to promote awareness, contribute to alleviating the concern or engage in useful action. This we call the *student-led inquiry*. It builds on what has been done in the teacher-led inquiry but can also move in new directions.

The final element we considered essential was time for a *reflective activity*. This, we felt, was often rushed and tacked on at the end. Again, reflection, as with social action, can be undertaken at earlier stages. It also needs to go beyond a surface level that just asks students what they liked or what they'd do differently next time, to what they learned about social injustice and ways it can be remedied, how they could take what they learned from this experience to other aspects of their lives, and how it might make them think or act differently in the future. We emphasise that reflection is not just something that teachers ask students to do, but a thoughtful and purposeful activity they engage in themselves. As Figure 5.1 indicates, however, this is not the end but merely the beginning of the next inquiry cycle.



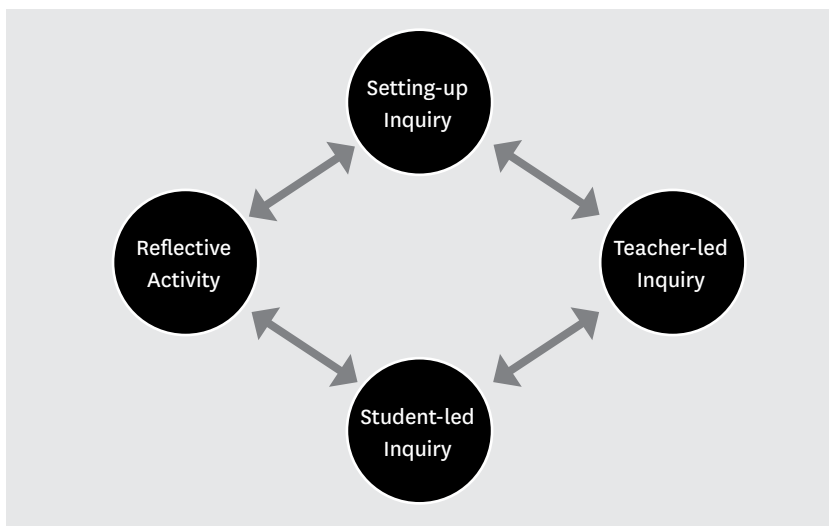


Figure 5.1: Social inquiry for social action

In the following section we reiterate the key aspects of each stage, providing advice to teachers from our teaching, reading and research.

## ***The four stages in detail***

### **The setting-up inquiry**

In the planning stages it helps to view *both* teaching *and* learning as independent but inter-related inquiry processes. Aitken and Sinnema (2008) suggest that teachers have three complementary, overlapping inquiries happening: “a focusing inquiry, a teaching inquiry, and a learning inquiry” (p. 52). Their first two inquiries are important at the setting-up stage. The focusing inquiry has teachers consider what strategies might work best and what new approaches they might want to try. The teaching inquiry has teachers consider what is most important and therefore worth spending most time on—we think this is a significant consideration before too much planning gets underway.

To ensure social justice outcomes are embedded in the teaching and learning it is worth remembering Wood’s (2013) informational goals and transformational goals. Questions addressing the *informational goals* might include:

- What theme, issue, resource or current event will be the catalyst for the learning inquiry?

- What sources will support an understanding of the context, content and concepts of the inquiry?
- What activities will assist students to access, evaluate, process and share information?
- What skills might be necessary to be taught or reinforced so that students can work on their inquiries independently or collaboratively?

*Transformational* goals might answer these questions:

- What aspects of society will be investigated and critiqued?
- Whose perspectives will be presented?
- What social action has already addressed, or is addressing, the issue?
- What contribution can students make to addressing this issue?

After matching ideas with curriculum and assessment expectations, teachers can establish the achievement outcomes and learning intentions for their students and decide how they will assess their students' knowledge and understanding of these. There might also be opportunities for student involvement in contributing to aspects of the setting-up inquiry.

### **The teacher-led inquiry**

Moving to the second phase of the *social inquiry for social action* process involves focusing on how students are scaffolded to take on their own inquiries. Here the teacher uses the most effective strategies and resources in order to help students reach the intended outcomes by embedding key concepts and competencies into teacher-led activities that will provide a strong foundation for the later student-led inquiries.

One of the authors of this chapter investigated what resources were available for teaching for and about social justice in senior social studies in New Zealand (Perreau, 2014). Taking into account the relevant literature in social studies, citizenship and social justice education, she developed criteria to examine a selection of resources. Her criteria were *availability*, *accessibility*, *acceptability* and *adaptability*. The acceptability criteria, which align most closely to teaching for social justice, are outlined in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Acceptability criteria for resources for teaching social justice

Criteria	Questions to ask of resource
Acceptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is <b>diversity</b> visible?</li> <li>• Is <b>knowledge</b> framed as contextual, contestable and changeable?</li> <li>• Are <b>contexts</b> relevant and are <b>connections</b> made?</li> <li>• Are successful <b>social justice</b> movements included?</li> <li>• Is a <b>critique</b> of society and its structure apparent?</li> <li>• Is there a focus on the integral role of <b>social action</b> in improving a democratic society?</li> </ul>

Source: adapted from Perreau, 2014, p. 26.

In selecting resources and strategies that are available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable, Perreau claims, teachers can more effectively design learning experiences for and about social justice, and embed social action at the heart of the social inquiry process.

How teachers use resources is also important. Aitken and Sinnema (2008) remind teachers to begin by knowing their students: How do they learn? What do they already know? A variety of activities are then selected to align with the intended outcomes. Opportunities are provided to revisit learning processes and refine conceptual understanding. Milligan and Wood (2010) also emphasise the importance of building conceptual understanding. During the teacher-led inquiry the teacher is constantly reviewing how to engage students through relevant resources and activities, which build towards more sophisticated conceptual understanding. Conceptual understanding should also be seen as fluid and evolving. Useful questions for teachers at this stage might be:

- What are the big ideas that students need to grasp?
- What resources will enable students to understand the background to this issue?
- What sources will provide reliable information and different perspectives on this issue?
- What activities will help students to process multiple sources, gain deeper levels of understanding and refine their conceptual frameworks?
- How much time needs to be spent at this stage before students embark on their independent or collaborative inquiries?

Throughout the teacher-led inquiry it is helpful if students are exposed to examples of social actions that move beyond participatory to transformative. Examples can be drawn from historical or current events, works of fiction, film, drama, the arts or multimedia. Judiciously used, motivating resources provide opportunities to introduce and enhance conceptual understanding of social justice and social action (Tyson, 2002) and provide models of what is possible.

### **Student-led inquiry**

Student-led inquiries that are purposeful, leading to social actions that are authentic, are strong foundations for beginning to understand the nature of our world. As Aitken and Sinnema (2008, p. 185) state, "First-hand experience of social, cultural, economic, and political situations makes learning real." Although some aspects of our world are complex and confusing, authentic learning experiences that lead to social action are not just for older or more able students. Aitken and Sinnema provide an example of children at an early childhood centre who took action to stop trolleys being taken from the local supermarket and abandoned in their neighbourhood. This also illustrates that the actions do not have to have global reach and deal with large-scale issues, but can be small acts that make a real difference to the local community.

Student-led inquiries, whether by individuals, pairs or groups, give students an opportunity to apply their skills to a real-life setting. They need to clarify the issue, gather and evaluate information, set out and select possible alternatives and put their plans into action. The teacher's role now focuses on teaching or reinforcing skills and knowledge that enable students to solve problems and move to the next step in their inquiry. The teacher also helps students to revisit and refine their ideas, linking them back to the teacher-led inquiry so that the developing conceptual understanding is deep and enduring (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Social inquiry questions can lead to meeting the *informational* goals as well as the *transformational* goals of social studies learning (Wood, 2013). Such questions therefore have two aspects and might look like this:

- What free leisure activities exist in our community for young people *and* how can we ensure access to them in the future?

- What opportunities for children's voices exist in our community *and* how can we be more involved in decisions that affect our lives?
- Are bees declining in our local community? Why does this matter *and* how can we help to increase the numbers of wild bees in our area?

There are many models of student-led inquiry processes. Again we have aimed to present a simplified process that can be adapted to different needs and interests. At its heart, however, is the desire to understand more about a social issue and undertake an action that might make a difference to this issue. Here are some guiding questions for teachers to adapt for their students:

- What is the problem or issue to be investigated?
- Why is this an issue and who is affected?
- What information is needed to understand the size and nature of the issue?
- What are some possible solutions?
- Which is the most workable solution for our context?
- In what ways could I (or my group) contribute to this solution?
- How do we put this into action?

For *social inquiry for social action* to work, the teacher also helps students move through and beyond participatory actions. Community participation is a useful stepping-off point and could be part of the teacher-led inquiry, but ultimately teaching for social justice requires understanding social issues as wider, often systemic and embedded, injustices. Here are some examples of how we have taken a selection of resources and suggest both participatory and transformative actions.

Table 5.2: Examples of participatory and transformational actions

Resource example	Participatory action	Transformative action
Stormwater education and action programmes (e.g. <a href="http://www.waicare.org.nz">www.waicare.org.nz</a> ; <a href="http://www.enviroschools.org.nz">www.enviroschools.org.nz</a> )	Rubbish collection / litter pick-up	Interview community members about rubbish habits. Establish how litter gets into waterways and propose changes to the system so fewer people litter or illegally dump rubbish.
Community fruit harvest articles (multiple links on <a href="http://www.pickfruit.co.nz">www.pickfruit.co.nz</a> )	Volunteer to pick fruit, or make jams, sauces, etc, or donate fruit from your trees	Investigate the food supply chain from production to consumption. Critique the system, and propose an action plan to address the food supply issue at a structural level.
“Trade: Buying in or selling out?” (Levine, 2005). Or news articles on zero-hours contracts in New Zealand	Consumer actions: buy fair trade, boycott certain products or processes of production	Investigate the trade laws and regulations that perpetuate systemic injustices of workers. Propose legislation changes to protect workers.
<i>Seedfolks</i> (Fleischman & Pederson, 1997)	Plant trees, vegetables or flowers in the school grounds or in the local community	Meet with community members and the local council to investigate the possibility of space for a community garden for all to be involved and learn to grow food for themselves in small spaces.

In the *social inquiry for social action* process, the social action is the central focus of the inquiry from the outset. The setting-up inquiry, the teacher-led inquiry and the information processing part of the student-led inquiry all lead to undertaking an authentic and hopefully enduring action.

### Reflective activity

Reflection is a key part of the social inquiry process for teachers and students alike. Reflection may be written—but it need not be. We suggest students choose how they reflect and teachers offer a variety of prompts for reflecting at various stages of the inquiry process. Sometimes reflections may be highly personal and independent; at other times they may be collective and expressive. What is significant is the process of reflecting: looking at what has been learnt, what it means in terms of understanding social justice, and how the experience influences their learning and their view of the social world. The ultimate aim is for students to see social issues not as fixed and insoluble, but as something in which they have a part to play in contributing to the solutions.

I enjoyed the social action task because everybody contributed with the ideas, but next time extend our time so we can add more ideas.  
(Year 10 student)

### **Social action in practice**

In this section one of the chapter authors outlines a social studies unit she taught with her Year 10 students at McAuley High School in Otahuhu, Auckland. As you will see, the stages of the social inquiry for social action process may overlap or be extended: the realities of the classroom in the context of a school are evident in this vignette.

At the end of term 4, my Year 10 social studies class and I embarked upon implementing social action within our community. From the beginning of this unit I decided that I wanted it to be student-led—that the students would identify the social justice issue they wanted to explore and that they would work together as a class to develop their social action. For me, this was an opportunity to develop not only student understanding of social justice but also their own sense of self efficacy.

**Setting-up  
inquiry**

Social justice is a concept that is often discussed at our school, but when it came to identifying the social action we could take within our community it quickly became apparent that I needed to clearly define social justice for my students. If social justice is an outcome of social action taken to develop fair treatment and equity for all people, then the students needed to clearly understand from the outset that any social action we took as a class needed to be more than fundraising or raising awareness: it needed to effectively address inequality within our community.

**Teacher-  
led inquiry  
introduces  
social action  
as transfor-  
mative**

I showed my students an interview with the creator of “Humans of South Auckland”, a Facebook page dedicated to changing negative perceptions of South Aucklanders. With this goal in mind, my Year 10 students were encouraged to look for examples of inequality in our local community. Students brought local newspapers to class and I also provided them with a range of articles that highlighted local issues. Groups of four to five students brainstormed the different issues that affect their community, using the articles as a basis but also drawing on their own understanding of the world around them, and shared them with the class on the whiteboard. The issues raised by my class included low educational achievement rates among Māori and Pasifika youth, stereotyping of South Aucklanders in the media, high rates of obesity within the community, and issues of youth suicide and domestic violence.

**Teacher-led  
inquiry and  
emerging  
student-led  
inquiry**

For many students the issue of obesity struck a personal chord. Obesity is a significant issue in South Auckland and often results in

poorer health outcomes for members of our school community. My students also felt this was an issue for which they could develop a social action that was both sustainable and had the potential to effect real change. Once we decided as a class to target obesity, each group of four to five spent two to three lessons researching the issue further— identifying the different ways obesity affects our community. Our school nurse visited the class to discuss effective ways to target health issues within our school community. Students began investigating the physical consequences of obesity and subsequent strain on health services, while also considering the emotional and inter-generational issues that arise.

**Student-led inquiry with ongoing teacher support**

Students quickly identified that a key problem within our local community was the ability to access approachable information on healthy living that could be adapted to their lives. The students sought to solve this problem through social action. Possible social actions brainstormed in groups and on the whiteboard by the class were endless (and at times very ambitious!), and included running lunchtime exercise classes at school and creating a healthy recipe book for the school community.

I encouraged the students to develop success criteria for their action to help guide their choice, asking them, "What goal do you want to achieve through your social action?" Students responded that they wanted to increase the activity levels of people in their community, encourage them to try healthy recipes and stop stereotyping based on weight. As a class they decided that their social action needed to be sustainable, have the potential for wide-ranging impact and the ability to be responsive to the community's health needs. Through a process of elimination the students decided that a blog, tailored to their school community, could be an effective way to meet these success criteria and help address health inequalities.

The students wanted the blog to provide accessible information to students and their families about how to live a healthy life (rather than focusing on just losing weight). As a class they identified a range of resources they could include on the blog, such as a recipe page, fitness videos, motivational music/playlists and printable documents. Very early on in the process a number of students also identified the need to translate key information on the blog into Māori, Samoan and Tongan so that it was accessible to as many members of our community as possible. The opportunity to work with multiple departments throughout the school, such as languages, P.E. and technology, during our social action also meant that the project had the potential to develop into interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

**Social action identified and planned by students**

Students self-selected and split themselves into various groups according to the following interest areas:

- creating fitness videos using props that could be found around the school by the students



- trialling and reviewing popular health and fitness apps, making recommendations for readers
- interviewing a staff member who had recently embarked on a healthy lifestyle change, creating a profile page on the changes she had made
- trialling healthy recipes with their families at home and sharing them on the website
- translating key information into Māori, Samoan and Tongan for the blog
- creating printable resources for readers to track their activity or plan their meals for the week.

Once in their groups they were left to allocate roles to individuals. This meant that once the social justice issue had been identified and the social action decided, the remaining lessons of the term were entirely self-directed.

Student reflections at the end of the unit were overwhelmingly positive. They enjoyed the opportunity to work as a class towards a common goal: looking for solutions to significant problems in their community and taking action to address them. The most important piece of feedback the class gave me was that they wanted more time to take part meaningfully in the social action and see it through. Although some students felt rushed, many also saw the social action as something they could continue with in the future. Students felt that the process of learning about healthy living through the development of the blog had a positive impact on their lives, which they shared with their families. In their reflections the students indicated that they were hungry for opportunities to contribute to their community and develop a sense of empowerment. Bringing social justice into the classroom provides students with an opportunity to do just that.

Reflective  
activity

Yes I enjoyed it. It would have been cool to cook the recipe, but we probably didn't have any time. Also it would've been better to have more time to work on the social action and develop our website more. (Year 10 student)

## Conclusion

Through the model of *social inquiry for social action* we have provided our ideas on what authentic learning for social justice might look like. We have shared our collective experiences from teaching, reading and research in the hope that we can inspire teachers to approach social inquiry with renewed enthusiasm. Our hope is that students will see transformative social action as more than 'just doing stuff'.

In this chapter we provided working definitions of key terms before

outlining a four-stage social inquiry cycle. The cycle begins with a *setting-up inquiry*, moves to a *teacher-led inquiry*, which provides the necessary knowledge and skills for students to undertake a *student-led inquiry*, before completing the cycle with a *reflective activity*. We then described a social inquiry undertaken with a Year 10 class that illustrates some of the key points we are making about the teacher's role, the nature of the student-led inquiry and, finally, the importance of issues that relate to students' lives and offering them the chance to make a difference to their own community.

We acknowledge, along with other writers, that social justice-oriented action takes time (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Wood et al., 2013). In our busy schools and classrooms, where units of work are often between 5 and 8 weeks long, we cannot expect students to take actions that will correct systemic injustices, but we can inspire them to begin an initiative that, over time and with collective effort, could make a real difference. If we connect important social issues to students' lives and give them the confidence and competence to begin to address them, our citizens of tomorrow will be better equipped to make their world a better place for all.

### **Reflective questions**

- How do you currently engage students in learning about issues of social justice?
- In what ways do you currently engage students in authentic social action?
- What changes could you make as a teacher, department and school as a result of the ideas in this chapter?
- What is the role of students in planning and implementing social inquiries for social action?
- What is the role of social studies in transformative social action?

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