

Planning for critically informed, active citizenship

Lessons from social-studies classrooms

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KEY POINTS

- Social action is integral, but often difficult to implement, in social-studies learning.
- While the planning phase of taking social action can be a messy, iterative, and time-consuming, it is a highly valuable part of learning about active citizenship.
- Teachers can support active citizenship through “citizenship pedagogies” that enhance the affective, cognitive and practical domains of learning.

To be active members of a democracy, young people need to develop skills in active citizenship participation. Within New Zealand, there are opportunities to develop such skills within the social-studies curriculum as well as within the personal social-action achievement standards in NCEA (Levels 1–3). Drawing on a 2-year research project with teachers and students in five schools,¹ we identified three strategies which enhanced critical and active citizenship: affective engagement; critically insightful cognitive engagement; and practical democratic skills. Integrating these into planning for social action emerged as a crucial part of the social-action process.

Getting started

A key goal of learning in social studies is that students will “explore how societies work and how they themselves can participate and take action as critical, informed, and responsible citizens” (*The New Zealand Curriculum*, Ministry of Education, 2007 (NZC), p. 17). The focus of this article is on the “taking action” part of this statement and addresses the question: How can the approaches that teachers and students take in the planning stage for social action encourage meaningful and transformative citizenship actions? By “meaningful”, we mean social actions which have critical links to real-world social issues that matter both to young people and to society. By “transformative”, we mean social actions that have the capacity to challenge the status quo, deal with injustice and inequalities, and get to the root cause of an issue (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). We report on data from classroom observations, interviews with five participant teachers and focus-group discussions with students ($N=52$) which explored strategies which supported meaningful and transformative citizen actions. While this data was collected in relation to NCEA-level social action, we argue that the results also apply to social studies and citizenship learning at all levels of NZC.

Our research is important because the realigned NCEA social-studies achievement standards at Levels 1–3 have enabled students to take “personal social action” for credits since 2013. Social-action learning frequently gets minimised by teachers into safe and formulaic learning. Further, there is a tendency for students to be involved in uncritical and low-risk actions which can be achieved quickly—such as fundraising for an organisation or cause (Wood, Taylor & Atkins, 2013). These actions are not necessarily meaningful to the students involved, nor

are the actions likely to contribute to sustainable changes in society. Our research suggests that students implement more critically informed and meaningful social actions when they:

- affectively engage with the social issues they are exploring
- develop in-depth knowledge and critical understandings about these social issues
- acquire robust practical and democratic skills for active citizenship to enable them to logistically plan, action, and evaluate the impact of their social action.

These aspects of learning relate to Hill’s (1994) three knowledge domains in social-studies learning— affective, cognitive, and practical.

We argue that teachers need to also recognise that the planning phase of social action is messy, iterative, and time-consuming to navigate, yet vital if the social action is to be meaningful and transformative.

Kick-starting social action—the messy phase

Our expectation when commencing this research was that the most important part of taking social action was the action itself. Interviews with teachers and students, however, revealed that the planning phase which occurred before young people even took their social action was vital. However, rather than a linear process, teachers and students found that the planning phase was iterative, uncertain and, at times, frustrating (Figure 1). For most students, this phase involved selecting a social issue and then developing a social-action plan. They described how this initial stage involved lots of experimenting with ideas, talking with others (including teachers, parents, and peers) to get feedback, then refining either their social-issue focus or their intended social action:

[Starting] was quite a hard step...at first it was like ‘cool we can do this and this and this’ and then we thought ‘that’s a bit extreme’ and like ‘it’s just getting a bit too complicated for us...’ There was lots of refining to do. (Year 11)

Two students (Year 10) described how they “had a completely different topic at the start, [which didn’t work out] then had to start the whole thing, kind of like rebooting a computer”.

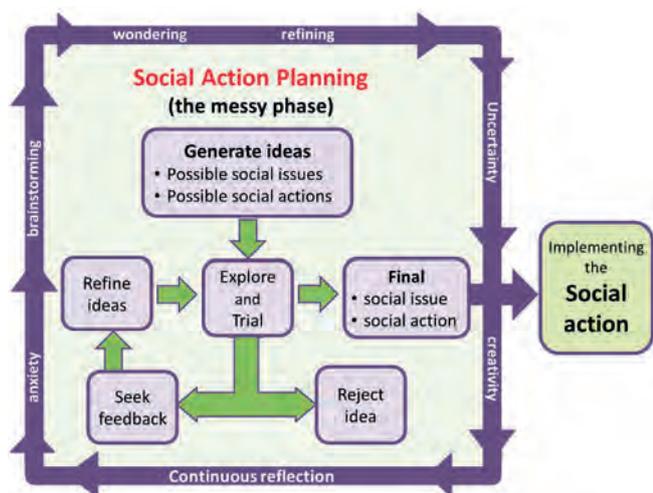


FIGURE 1. PLANNING A SOCIAL ACTION

Anxiety over perceived time-wasting during this unpredictable and messy phase, combined with the pressure to get “personal social actions” completed within strict time frames, can mean that teachers and students are tempted to rush through social-action planning. However, teachers in the project reported that students’ social actions were likely to be “quick-fix, minimal or superficial experiences” if the pre-action planning phase was cut short. When teachers and students spent focused time on planning, students gained greater levels of knowledge and agency before they actually went out to take action. Our research found that this planning phase was an extremely valuable time for learning and developing citizenship dispositions—including that of learning to deal with failure and learning to navigate the multiple stakeholders involved in a social issue.

Planning for success—a guide to successfully navigating the messy phase

The participant teachers typically allocated 5 weeks for students to complete their NCEA-level personal social actions. They described how almost half of this time could be taken up in the pre-action planning phase. During this phase these teachers helped students to:

- **affectively engage** with their social issue

- inquire deeply into the knowledge and perspectives inherent in the issue and critically question the issue and organisations involved (**cognitive engagement**)
- develop, utilise and critically examine a range of logistical and democratic skills needed to undertake their action as responsible citizens (**practical engagement**).

These engagements contribute to what we have termed *active citizenship pedagogies*. In the following three sections we outline how these citizenship pedagogies can contribute to helping students become critically informed citizens who can plan meaningful social actions that have the potential to shape or action change in their communities or society.

1. Promoting affective (emotional) engagement

Affective engagement in social studies relates to a student’s ability to empathise with others and to emotionally connect with social justice issues at a local, national and/or international level (Wood & Taylor, forthcoming). Affective engagement is a core component of social-studies education as it acknowledges the important role that values, perspectives, and emotions such as empathy, compassion, and anger play in students’ learning about social-justice issues (Hill, 1994; Keown, 1998; Sheppard, Katz, & Grosland, 2015). Navigating affective responses involves balancing the tension between avoiding emotional manipulation, yet encouraging students’ emotional engagement with the social issue and action, rather than passive compliance or assessment credit harvesting (Wood, 2015; Wood & Taylor, forthcoming). Teachers in our study were acutely aware of these tensions and had developed ways that “hooked” students in but also gave them freedom.

“Hooking students in”

Teachers in our research believed it was important to get students affectively engaged with the social-justice issue early in the pre-social action planning phase. They reported evoking emotional empathy by encouraging students to “step into other people’s shoes”, getting students to voice personal perspectives on issues, sharing “oh my god” moments about social issues with students, and spending hours on YouTube finding clips that would promote some sort of affective engagement. As one teacher stated:

It’s like a whole thing, the emotion that there’s an injustice or something that needs working on. What will I do about it? What will we do about it? How will we do it? What should we do?

The commitment of these teachers to establishing conditions that can help students develop empathy as

citizens mirrors Boler's (1999) contention that empathy is a popular emotion to cultivate in democratic education if students are to appreciate how society's ills impact on people's lives. The teachers therefore needed to develop non-coercive ways of encouraging emotional engagement from students so that their actions weren't conducted in a tokenistic manner (Wood & Taylor, forthcoming). A key way they did this was by allowing students to select their own social issue of interest. For example, one teacher had a social issue in mind but couldn't get the students enthused, so she dropped this issue rather than force it upon them. Another teacher, Mel, said "I will never impose my choice of social issue on them—I am willing for them to fail the assessment before I'd do that."

Owning the social issue and selected action

Our findings showed that when students were given some autonomy to select their social issues, they also demonstrated higher levels of affective engagement. Students reported being more motivated to explore social issues that they had personally or democratically selected as a group. In cases where the teachers had pre-selected the issue, some students reported feeling a bit "flat", even when the teacher's scaffolding of the inquiry was strong. As one student described:

...like this was kind of imposed on us, we didn't get any choice this year whereas last year we got to choose our charity. Whereas this year we got a set one [social issue], I mean it gives us all the substance of what we have to do, but at the same time I feel don't feel as emotionally charged about it. (*Year 13*)

Many of the social issues that students selected stemmed from media reports of human interest stories that had the potential to capture wide attention and involved issues of social justice, human rights and inequality. For example:

Our interest was sparked by the case of Emilita Bourne, ... the [two year old] girl who died...the coroner related her death to the [damp] conditions of her house, so we thought that [warrant of fitness for rental housing] was an important thing [social issue] to be addressed. (*Year 13*)

As illustrated in the following case study, students' affective engagement was particularly high when they had considerable personal interest vested in a social issue.

Case 1: Students' affective engagement with a social issue

This case illustrates the significance of personal experience in shaping affective engagement by two 14 year old boys, who were planning a Level 1 "personal social action". The boys were relatives who were in the same class at a low-decile school. One boy's mother, who was

the other boy's aunty, had died in the local public hospital a year previously. Their strong emotional connection to this event was obvious:

Son: My social issue was the way patients were being treated in the hospital. We did it because it was quite personal ...

Nephew: The reason why I did it was because it was personal to me as well and I believe that the company that we're arguing with [the hospital] didn't give it too much action ...

The boys wanted to raise awareness of their own case and that of others, but they were struggling to work out the best way to get attention from the hospital which had until now ignored them. A TV3 report had confirmed that overcrowding and understaffing had contributed considerably to the woman's death. The boys decided to write to the hospital to ask for a formal apology and to request improvements in the hospital's systems of patient care. The boys' literacy levels were low so they needed carefully structured support from their teacher to cognitively and practically engage with the task of constructing a formal letter. Their strong sense of injustice and personal tragedy powerfully motivated them to persist with mastering the knowledge and skills to craft a high-quality letter. Sharing their letter on Facebook drew more attention to their cause. They were also affirmed by the many posts that agreed that the hospital's patient-care systems needed to be improved. This experience proved personally empowering for both young men, as one reflected: "I believe that people's voices were heard... and we got feedback from one of the journalists".

This example illustrates how young people's "embeddedness in their local world shapes their thinking about politics and their political and social action" (Harris & Wyn 2009, p.329). It also illustrates what Paulo Freire (1973) called "critical consciousness", or the process by which people develop an enhanced awareness of their own situation in the context of wider structures in society, which enables them to undertake a critical intervention. While affective engagement with an issue was found to be important during the pre-social action phase, our research also revealed that scaffolding cognitive engagement and critical thinking are equally as important.

2. Promoting critically insightful cognitive engagement

The cognitive domain plays a significant role in pre-social action planning as it relates to how students develop conceptual knowledge about their social issue and how they engage in critical thinking. A central debate in citizenship education is the extent to which programmes should focus on "knowledge transmission"²

or “active citizenship” approaches (Brooks & Holford, 2009). Some see a focus on one as trading-off the other. Our discussions with students confirmed that a mutual focus on knowledge and action benefited both their critical understandings and their ability to take critically informed and meaningful social actions.

Depth of knowledge

While some students are naturally confident and eager to express their concerns about any social issue, they do need to develop a sound knowledge base to be able to articulate factually accurate viewpoints. Being able to justify a viewpoint is a core element of learning in social studies as it has always been the focus of the *exploring values and perspectives* component of the social-inquiry process (NZC; Keown, 1998; Wood, 2013). When students were given the opportunity to delve deeply into their issue and examine its causes and consequences, they reported being more cognitively engaged.

The more we learned about it [the damp condition of some state houses], the more it was like ‘Oh my goodness, I really wanted to help, I really want to contribute like to bettering our society and stuff.’ (Year 11)

Students described how knowing more about the social issue, improved their actions too:

when we researched more ... we realised there were a lot more limitations to what we were doing... with the statements that had been made and things like that. We realised that ‘oh, what... maybe we could have done things a lot better than we did’. (Year 13)

Conversely, when students had weak knowledge of social issues, or when their chosen social issue did not really have much depth; their social action could fall flat as they struggled to articulate their concerns and come up with an appropriate action.

Critical thinking

Of particular significance to enabling strong cognitive engagement during the pre-social action planning phase was identifying the value of teaching students how to think critically when deciding what social issue to explore and actions to take. Critical thinking entails more than simply identifying advantages and disadvantages of an issue, policy, or social action. It requires students to consider the bigger picture, the more global view of the social, economic, political, and other forces that might be influencing their selected social issue and any potential actions.

One participant teacher developed a series of prompts to use with her students to encourage deeper and more critical thinking when selecting a social issue/action

1. Does this social issue affect many people or a few? Who is involved? Are there groups which represent this issue? (Perspectives of stakeholders)
2. Can you find more than five articles on this? (Depth of knowledge)
3. Is there a policy on this issue? If so, who responds to it? What are the political parties’ positions on this? (NCEA Level 3)
4. What can we realistically do to bring about change on this issue and who else can we join to do this?
5. Is your social action a one-off or can you build on sustainable change?

Our research suggests that teachers need to assist students to ask “big” questions about the causes of the issue they are investigating and the possible impacts of their proposed actions. For example: What are the short-term/long-term impacts of our social action on the organisation we are supporting or the policy we are addressing? How can our actions be sustained? How will we be contributing to long-term community change? Whose responsibility is it to improve the situation (locally, nationally, internationally)? Answering questions like these and understanding multiple perspectives will encourage students to not only critique their issues and potential actions, but also consider how society responds to address various social issues that arise.

To promote critical thinking, questions need to range from addressing students’ own personal social actions, to critiquing: the philosophy and activities of a selected NGO or charity; the policies and structures of local and national communities; and the national and global forces (political, social, economic and cultural) behind a social issue. The increasing levels of sophistication and depth of analysis required are outlined in Figure 2.

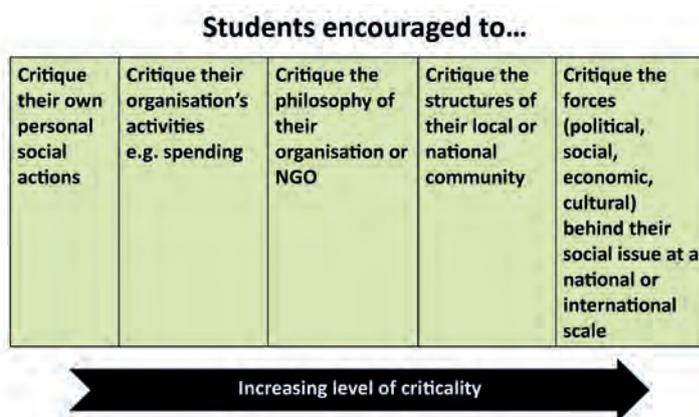


FIGURE 2. LEVELS OF CRITICAL THINKING

The following case study illustrates how two Year 13 students’ cognitive engagement with an environmental issue sparked their Level 3 social actions.

Case 2: Students' cognitive engagement with a social issue

Sally and Alice self-selected their social issue on how people were making decisions about soil and crop contamination, in particular addressing the National Cadmium Strategy. Sally describes how they gained knowledge in this area:

I did research [on cadmium poisoning of our soils] in Chemistry and there was a Campbell Live clip about cadmium contamination and I was kind of amazed, I had never heard of it before so I decided to make sure everyone else had heard of it ...

Her growing awareness of this issue through her research also resulted in high levels of affective engagement when she learned that the cadmium contamination of the soil and crops had the potential to affect people's health in a potentially fatal manner. She held the bigger picture view that decisions made by one sector of society can impact a much wider sector of society.

Previous experience in working with others to plan and critique "personal social actions" at NCEA Levels 1 and 2 expedited the planning phase. Both students had developed agency to plan a broad range of actions that could potentially influence a national policy (a NCEA Level 3 requirement). As Sally stated: "We are old hands at this ... [so we are planning] ... a Facebook page, a petition and emails to lots of different MPs." Sally described how their plan to email MPs was personally empowering as receiving replies from several of them provided her with a strong sense of agency to effect societal change: "The feeling when ... one of the MPs responds [personally] to your email and says like, 'yes, we would support this', and it's like 'yes!'" She regarded the Level 3 social action to be "more real" than previous levels, "linked to your own life and engaging in politics in your own country".

International studies (e.g. Kahne & Sporte, 2008) confirm that classrooms where students were able to engage in citizenship pedagogies which involved discussing community problems and ways to respond, partaking in open and critical dialogue about controversial issues, and studying topics which mattered to them, have the effect of fostering a long-term commitment to civic participation. Creating such classrooms is challenging for teachers, yet essential if we want young people to be active citizens who can cognitively and critically engage with significant social issues and actions.

3. Promoting practical engagement

Students who master a range of practical and logistical skills for active citizenship are better able to plan, action,

and critically evaluate the social actions they are involved in. Our research revealed that developing skills and knowledge during the planning phase which related to advocacy and appropriate ways to communicate in social and political contexts, enabled students to devise social actions suited to raising awareness, instigating change, and influencing policy.

Skills in advocacy and communication about a social issue

Garnering interest to promote an idea, educating others, developing a way to find more information (e.g., a survey), speaking out for a cause or organising an event are ways to collect and disseminate information to advocate for change. For example, students who wanted to share information about their social issue via an information board, flier, video on Facebook or other social media, not only needed to learn practical writing and design skills, but they also needed to consider the costs and logistics of disseminating this information. Issues of privacy and the ethics of showing identifiable people online needed to be considered as did the etiquette of respectful online engagement. Students described how they required strong oral and written communication skills and knowledge of how to use social media to raise awareness, interest and action.

Political communication skills and use of democratic processes

For NCEA Level 3, students need to learn how to use democratic processes to influence national policies. For example: they can learn how to access, interview, and lobby politicians; organise a petition; or write formal submissions on a Bill. Year 13 students in our study attempted to influence policy on a range of current social issues by raising awareness and influencing policy through writing letters to politicians, visiting their local members of Parliament, and using different types of media. Issues that these students tackled included: raising the refugee quota; warrants of fitness for state houses; climate change policies; and the minimum wage. These students found that experiences such as visiting Parliament, meeting their local MP and hearing about parliamentary processes (such as seeing how a select committee works) helped them to develop important practical skills and knowledge.

Students working at Level 3 also learn that engaging in political conversations to influence national or regional policies can be challenging and time consuming. While some students in our study found that they had to wait for responses to their requests for information, they acknowledged that the actions they planned to influence

social policies had the potential to impact more people over a longer period of time. The following case study illustrates how studying one context, in this case the Syrian crisis, led students to develop a range of practical actions to address this social issue.

Case 3: Students' practical and cognitive engagement with a social issue

One year 13 class decided to advocate for an increase to New Zealand's refugee quota. Their teacher helped them develop sound knowledge of the Syrian crisis and New Zealand's policies and procedures around accepting refugees. Students used Google slides to co-construct presentations on an assigned aspect to share with their class. Following this strong knowledge-building phase, the teacher facilitated students' social action planning decisions by, for example, helping them learn correct protocols for communicating with MPs and using social media. One group wrote to several MPs and cabinet ministers to advocate for New Zealand's refugee quota to be increased to 1000. While their initial letters and emails appeared to have little impact (as most received tardy or neutral pro forma replies from politicians), these students were excited when the prime minister announced a few weeks later that New Zealand would accept an additional 600 refugees from Syria over the next 3 years.

Such an example of policy change within the same year is unusual and in general few students in our study received immediate success. However, many students articulated that they believed their actions were still valuable and may cause, or contribute to, a ripple effect that may eventually lead to long-term social change.

As a teenager, I feel I don't have ... a voice to make a difference. However ... I realised that even doing something small [writing a letter] can create a ripple effect and really make a difference to the way New Zealand is now or in the future. (Year 13)

Taking social action has the potential to lead to a growing sense of empowerment in two ways. First, students gain confidence in their own ability to plan and carry out a social action. Second, through learning more about a social issue, students can develop a deeper level of critique about social-justice issues and the consequences that forms of social action can have on such issues.

To sum up: Engaging students in meaningful and potentially transformative social actions

Our article has drawn attention to the phase of planning and reflecting *before* students even take the social action as citizens. We argue that teachers need to expect

and allow time for this rather messy, complex, and uncertain phase that is characterised by experimentation, refinement, and possible failure. These findings are also relevant to other learning areas, such as music and drama, which require a "performed" element of learning.

Taking time to engage in careful planning before taking action arguably has the greatest potential to equip students to undertake authentic, meaningful, and potentially transformative social actions. In the words of a participant teacher: "If this phase is sped through, you will only get superficial and minimal versions of social action".

We argue that in order to support students to enact creative and meaningful actions that have the potential to address important social issues, teachers need to address the three knowledge domains (affective, cognitive, and practical) during this iterative planning phase (Figure 3). Employing critical questioning throughout this pre-social action planning phase will also help students view their social issue within a wider social, economic, cultural, and political context. In Figure 3, the more heavily shaded intersections between the cognitive domain and the affective and practical domains illustrate the influence of critical thinking. These social-justice oriented actions are critical to scaffolding students to towards taking meaningful and transformative social actions. The dot in the central intersection shows the condition that has the best potential to enable students to develop into informed citizens who have the confidence, knowledge, and agency to plan and implement transformative social actions that have the potential effect societal change.

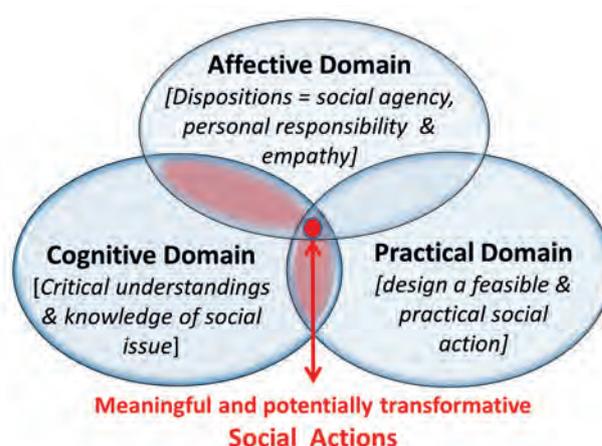


FIGURE 3. THE PATHWAY TO MEANINGFUL SOCIAL ACTIONS

Our research has shown that the absence of any of the three knowledge domains can leave students disengaged, unsure as to how to go about setting up a meaningful social action, or naively participating in weak actions.

Conversely, students who are passionate about their social issue tend to be more motivated to inquire deeply into their issue and have the agency to plan effective social actions. Moreover, with the activation of critical thinking, we found that students planned social actions that were potentially more transformative for themselves and for their selected social issue.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 The article reports data from a Ministry of Education funded Teaching and Learning Research Initiative [TLRI] research project (2015–2016)—*Creating Active Citizens*.
- 2 The terms *civic literacy* and *civic engagement* are alternative terms used for these two approaches (Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

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