

CASE STUDY:

The social studies

Catering to diverse learners' needs

The New Zealand Ministry of Education wanted to establish what teaching approaches enhance outcomes for diverse learners in the social studies curriculum, and how and why these effects were happening.

The Ministry commissioned The University of Auckland to undertake an Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) project, which uses a systematic analysis of all published national and international research, to find out what works for whom and in what circumstances.

The synthesis focused on student outcomes, which were broadly defined to encompass knowledge and skills, participatory and affective outcomes, and outcomes related to cultural identity," say Principal Investigator Dr Graeme Aitken and Co-Principal Investigator Dr Claire Sinnema.

"Research has already established that teachers make a significant difference to student outcomes so it is important to support their professional learning in ways that increase the quality of teaching and learning for diverse learners whose needs are inter-connected with factors such as language and culture," say the researchers.

Existing evidence also shows that teaching that is responsive to student diversity can have very positive impacts on both high and low achievers at the same time.

"This was a large-scale project in both scope and subject matter. We ranged from early childhood through to senior secondary school where we looked at teaching and learning in different settings and across different languages."

In the classroom context, the project encompassed Te Whariki (the main source for early childhood education), the social studies and tikanga-a-iwi curriculum statements, history, and geography, economics, classical studies and other social sciences.

The project began with a content analysis of each curriculum document and culminated in a framework that synthesised curriculum intention, the general education literature on outcomes, and teaching experience.

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From this, the team identified four key outcomes that can have a direct impact on student outcomes:

- Making connections to the students' lives. For example, by using their own experience as a point of comparison to learning about others' experiences.
- Aligning experiences to important outcomes. Identifying prior knowledge is important to current and future learning.
- Building and sustaining a learning community. Productive teacher-student relationships enhances student understanding.
- Designing experiences that interest students. Learning needs to be as memorable as possible to enhance understanding of ideas and processes in the social studies.

The outcomes of the BES will help inform policy as well as future research and development work with teachers in schools.

“...teaching that is responsive to student diversity can have very positive impacts on both high and low achievers...”

Increasing the quality of teaching and learning for diverse learners



Dr Graeme Aitken

Graeme Aitken is Deputy Dean in the Faculty of Education. His professional and research interests include curriculum history, development and design especially in relation to social studies, history and geography; student conceptual development in social sciences; and the evaluation of teaching effectiveness.

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

- What works in one context may not work in another
- Effectiveness has to be assessed in each context by attending to the effects of the teaching on desired outcomes for students
- Effective teaching in the social sciences required an inquiry-minded approach to pedagogy that is captured in the evidence-informed model of inquiry and action

Delivery

Through Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis:

- Analysis and development of a framework
- A focus on student outcomes encompassing knowledge and skills, participatory and affective, and cultural identity

Benefits

The project identified five key findings:

- Learning must connect to students' lives and experiences.
- Aligning related experiences to important outcomes matters.
- Building and sustaining a learning community matters
- Designing interesting experiences matters
- Effective teaching requires an inquiry-minded approach