

Continuing the Debates: Towards Effective Social Studies

Benson, P. & Openshaw, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Towards Effective Social Studies*. Palmerston North, New Zealand: Kanuka Grove Press. 216 pp. ISBN 1-877249-33-5

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Building on earlier publications edited by these authors (Openshaw, 1992; Benson & Openshaw, 1998), *Towards Effective Social Studies* is the latest and most comprehensive collection of writings about New Zealand social studies education available, and represents a substantive contribution to the on going debates about the nature and purposes of the subject in this country. It comprises 10 chapters and a concluding section written by New Zealand social studies educators and advocates, each of which examines a critical issue related to social studies and its implementation in this country. Written amidst and in response to a period of curriculum revision, this book predates the publication of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007). It therefore offers useful contextual detail about, and ideas that might be brought to a critical reading of, the most recent iteration of New Zealand's social studies curriculum.

The first three chapters explore New Zealand social studies curriculum developments within their socio-political and historical milieu and highlight a number of challenges regarding curriculum design and professional learning. Among other lines that might be drawn between all three chapters is the sense that such challenges have buffeted, and at times obscured, the transformative potential of New Zealand social studies. The

first chapter, by Sandra Cubitt, canvasses critiques of the previous social studies curriculum's structure and implementation (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1997). She urges that a whole social sciences community approach is central to addressing, in particular, a lack of shared understanding about the learning area; greater dialogue across traditional subject divides (such as History, Geography and Social Studies) and teachers' active engagement in curriculum revision processes planned for 2004-2007. In the second chapter, John O'Neill examines *Getting Started*, a support document for the 1997 social studies curriculum. He argues that the approach to professional development carried through the ideological imprint of this document risks positioning social studies teachers' curriculum decision-making as an exercise in uncritical compliance; "*Getting Done*" perhaps. Whether this risk has been averted by a more inclusive approach to the curriculum consultations of the early 2000s (described by Sandra Cubitt) will no doubt be evaluated in due course. However, Roger Openshaw's chapter highlights that some challenges, such as social studies teachers' difficulties with interpreting curriculum intent, are longstanding in New Zealand. This chapter, which brings to light Ray Chapman-Taylor's largely unknown, 1966 report on intermediate¹ social studies classrooms,

¹ Year 7 and 8

might lead us to consider whether the *New Zealand Curriculum* and its implementation is any closer to capturing the hitherto “elusive spirit” of social studies education.

A number of chapters examine key concepts used in New Zealand social studies curricula, and would provide a useful basis for comparison with social studies and citizenship education literature in other school systems. In Chapter 4, for example, Hugh Barr considers ‘understanding’ and argues that this concept must extend well beyond recall of factual information – into a “network of connections”. He presents worked examples of what a more expansive conception of understanding could look like in assessment practices. Chapter 10, by Dale Bailey, challenges universalist and essentialist conceptions of ‘national identity’. Using examples of questions, places, historical themes and “worthy” New Zealand icons, he offers instead more fertile grounds for discussing this concept with social studies learners. In Chapter 8, Rowena Taylor and Rose Atkins examine the difficulties teachers have faced with teaching ‘values exploration’, partly (as John O’Neill points out in his chapter) as a result of its contested nature and lack of clarity about ‘values’ in official documentation. Echoing the thrust of Chapters 4 and 10, the authors argue for complex readings of ‘values exploration’ which permit critical thinking about the subjective nature of values, and leave room for students’ affective responses. There is, they say, more to values exploration than the oft-used ‘continuum’ strategy.

Two consecutive chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), by Carol Mutch and Graeme Aitken, consider ‘citizenship’ in New Zealand social studies curricula, and explore this in comparison to international contexts. Drawing on a

New Zealand primary classroom case study, Carol Mutch argues that citizenship education needs to be a much more explicit feature of New Zealand social studies teaching and learning, given that it is central to the subject’s aims. Graeme Aitken’s chapter reiterates this call and, of the many valuable chapters in this book, his most significantly advances the conversation about future curriculum design. His distillation of the issues facing social studies curriculum developers focuses particularly on the lack of a “distinctive aim” for social studies and the “structural complexity” of the then current curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1997). He suggests that the aims of social studies could be more sharply focussed on, and balance participatory and knowledge dimensions of the goals of citizenship education. Arguing for an issues-led approach, he offers an organisational framework for social studies which strongly aligns this citizenship focus with curriculum structure. For the reader interested in how this line of thinking has been developed through subsequent curriculum documentation, an examination of the ‘social inquiry’ approach strongly advocated in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2008) is highly recommended. Further, a number of chapters in *Towards Effective Social Studies* suggest ways in which the skills of social inquiry might be developed; for example, Clinton Golding’s chapter (Chapter 7) about the ‘Philosophy for Children’ approach to social studies, and Rowena Taylor and Rose Atkin’s previously mentioned chapter on values education.

The editors conclude the book eagerly awaiting what became a one-page statement for the social sciences learning area, in which the interdisciplinary, integrated and

foundational nature of social studies, recommended well over 60 years ago, continues to be a notable marker of the New Zealand curriculum. Despite the seemingly assured place of social studies, the title of *Towards Effective Social Studies* suggests an ongoing process of becoming. From the vantage point of 2010, the editors would no doubt argue for sustained debate about the challenges ahead. One possible challenge is pointed to in the chapter written by Clinton Golding and Ruth Millar (Chapter 9): the contributions that disciplinary knowledge might make to the integrated nature of New Zealand social studies. Philosophy and History are explored respectively by these two authors, but discussion around intersections with other contributing disciplines (such as Sociology and Media Studies) is notably absent.

Towards Effective Social Studies is a somewhat eclectic text; nevertheless, its format is highly accessible. Each chapter is introduced with a series of focussing questions, and ends with prompts for further reflection. The concluding section, written by Pamela

Benson, makes helpful connections between each author's key themes. The bridge between curriculum challenges and practicable shifts in pedagogy is a particularly strong feature of this book; though not intended as a methods text, many chapters suggest a way through curriculum and implementation issues with useful pedagogical examples.

Towards Effective Social Studies is chiefly suitable for New Zealand pre-service and in-service teachers yet there is also much that may be of interest to an international education audience, particularly in the fields of social studies and citizenship education. A number of the critical issues and challenges identified by the various authors will resonate with similar themes in the international literature. The chapters, though varied, represent some important axes for debate and discussion. Those with an interest in comparative curriculum studies, curriculum design and implementation, and teaching controversial issues will all find chapters that are informative and thought-provoking.

References

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