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Developing the Key Competencies in Social Sciences

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Abstract

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) identifies a number of key competencies (capabilities for living and lifelong learning). It states that “They are the key to learning in every learning area” (p. 12), and outlines that schools are required “to develop and implement a curriculum for students in years 1 - 13... that supports students to develop the key competencies” (p. 44). This paper will provide some reflections on the nature of the competencies, and explore appropriate and effective ways in which they may be planned for and developed in social sciences.

Introduction

Every day the news media provides examples of people exhibiting, or more commonly failing to exhibit, capabilities and competencies that may enable them to be positive members of society. Recent examples have included the inappropriate behaviour of some university students (“Riots rock Dunedin”) and sports personalities (“Williams tirade sees her knocked out of US Open”). What then can, or should the role of schools be in assisting students to develop the qualities that will prepare them to effectively participate in society?

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC), together with the parallel document *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa*, provide “a vision of young people who will develop the competencies they need for study, work, and lifelong learning and go on to realise their potential” (NZC p. 6). Development of the key competencies in the curriculum is considered to play a major part in achieving this vision.

The Education Review Office Report *Readiness to Implement the New Zealand Curriculum* (2009) noted that “most schools are now familiarising themselves with the key competencies and considering how these might be integrated into their curriculum frameworks to guide teachers’ classroom practice.” (p. 1). The aim of this paper is to provide guidance in this process for social sciences teachers.

The key competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum

The inclusion of the key competencies as an important part of the NZC signals a change in emphasis for education in the 21st century. There is a reduced emphasis on knowledge and content in the traditional sense, and a greater focus on the importance of students creating and using knowledge, and developing their capabilities for living and lifelong learning. There is a shift from students *knowing* things to *doing* things; and *how* students learn, as well as *what* they learn. This has implications for how we design and deliver curriculum at a school and classroom level.

The key competencies identified in the NZC are:

1. Thinking
2. Using language, symbols and texts
3. Managing self
4. Relating to others
5. Participating and contributing.

The NZC outlines a number of important ideas related to the key competencies. These include:

- There are different key competencies. Some teachers may see thinking, and using language, symbols and texts, to be of primary importance. However, the other three competencies are also essential for students to be successful in the modern world.
- They are interrelated. Learning may often involve a combination of competencies, for example through an inquiry or research process (as outlined in the NZC p. 38).
- They are more complex than skills. The competencies draw on knowledge, attitudes and values as well as skills, in ways that lead to action (NZC p. 12). They take the place of, and expand on, the essential skills in the previous curriculum. They are more than discrete, easily observable skills.
- Their development is both an end in itself (goal) and a means by which other ends are achieved. They are worth developing in their own right, but they should also be seen as supporting other learning.
- As they develop competencies, successful learners are also motivated to use them. Teachers can seek to provide expectations and opportunities to support motivation.
- They are developed in social contexts. The competencies will often be developed when students are interacting and working with others (students, teachers, family and members of the community).
- Challenge and support is needed in wide ranging and more complex contexts. Teachers can support the development of the competencies by providing a variety of more complex contexts.

Further information on the key competencies in general and their implementation can be found on the website: <http://keycompetencies.tki.org.nz>

The NZC emphasises the importance of the key competencies and states that schools are required to support students to develop these at all levels from years 1 – 13 (p. 44). As this is a clear expectation, it is important for all teachers of social sciences to develop their understanding of this aspect of the curriculum and how it may be implemented.

Guy Claxton, referring to translating curriculum ideals like the key competencies into effective teacher practice, warned that “get the process wrong and it can end on the scrap-heap of good ideas that don’t stick” (quoted in an article by Wayne Erb in the Education Gazette, 15 December 2008 p. 8). The following sections seek to provide guidance for teachers to enhance their understanding and to effectively implement the key competencies.

Reflections on the key competencies in social sciences

The revised curriculum provides opportunities for, and indeed expects, a greater emphasis on school based curriculum decision making. For social sciences teachers this will involve consideration of both the nature and intent of the learning area (NZC p. 30), and also aspects of the “front” of the curriculum document – the key competencies, and the vision, principles, and values. The result will be programmes of learning that respond to the particular needs, interests, and talents of students.

The social sciences are especially well placed to integrate the key competencies into programmes. This learning area has had, and continues to have, a focus on:

- Thinking - critical thinking and deep learning is encouraged by the conceptual nature of the new achievement objectives.
- Using language, symbols and texts - text material, together with a range of oral/aural and visual resources, provides rich information to support learning in all of the social sciences.
- Managing self - students are encouraged to inquire into social issues that are of significance.
- Relating to others - there is an emphasis on collaborative learning and understanding diversity.
- Participating and contributing - students are often engaged in social action within communities.

However, social sciences teachers do need to take care as they support students to develop the key competencies. For example, awareness of diversity will help to ensure that interpretations of competencies and opportunities for their development are culturally appropriate.

Successful implementation of the key competencies in the social sciences can be indicated by:

1. **Planning** – teacher planning to provide opportunities for these to be developed by students.
2. **Practice** – teaching and learning approaches that support their development.
3. **Understanding** - an understanding of the competencies and how they are being developed that can be articulated by both teachers and students.

Details of each of the stages above are outlined in the following sections.

Planning for the key competences

It is important for all social sciences teachers to intentionally plan to develop the key competencies (at all levels). I would suggest that such planning should be documented at a both the scheme/programme outline level, and also the unit/lesson planning level.

The key competencies to be focussed on should be those that the students most need to develop. A school can plan to develop such competencies over time within the learning area, i.e. through providing a number of opportunities throughout a programme.

Scheme/programme outline planning

Many schools have a scheme or programme overview document that provides statements about the learning area and how learning will be organised and delivered. (Secondary schools could well develop one such overview to cover all of the social sciences subjects.)

Such a document can include a vision statement for the social sciences for their students. Vision statements will typically refer to general outcomes expected, and may also mention capabilities and competencies. For example:

Social sciences at our school develop students' understandings of...and prepare them to take an active and responsible role as members of their community.

Schools may develop explicit statements related to expectations for the key competencies to provide guidance for teachers. For example:

All of the key competencies can be supported by learning in social studies. However, it is not necessary to try to focus on all of them during every unit of work. Instead, one or more may be highlighted. They should be included when appropriate, rather than "ticked off" for coverage purposes.

I would also suggest that an overview document does not just list the key competencies, but includes examples from the social sciences of how they may be developed. For example:

Thinking – this competency can be developed as students undertake social inquiry, and as they are supported to frame and ask questions to enable information to be gathered on issues.

Unit/lesson outline planning

The general understandings that the school has for developing key competencies in the social sciences can then be more specifically outlined in documentation related to units of work and actual lessons. This will guide implementation at the classroom level.

It is not sufficient to simply name a competency (e.g. thinking) and expect that it will be automatically developed as students engage in a learning activity. An approach that has been found useful on unit outlines is to note both the name of the key competency that will be highlighted in the unit and also to explain briefly how this will be done. This is preferable to listing them all and having tick boxes on the outline. A social studies unit on enterprise and economic growth for example, could have noted:

KC for focus	How will this be developed?
Using language, symbols and text.	Students will have opportunities to develop this as they interpret a range of graphs and text material relating to economic cycles and develop confidence to communicate summary information.

Planning for specific learning activities within a unit can include details of explicit teaching that will assist students to develop a key competency. For example, if a teacher wishes students to develop relating to others, he/she could plan opportunities for students to work together in groups to share ideas. Planning can identify related skills, such as active listening, and outline how these could be taught.

Useful examples of planning to integrate the key competencies can be found in the Ministry of Education booklets in the *Building Conceptual Understandings in the Social Sciences* series, and also in units recently published online in the Asia Knowledge section of TKI, available at:

http://asia-knowledge.tki.org.nz/curriculum_resources

Practice to support students to develop the key competencies

A precondition for effectively developing the competencies with students is a classroom environment that is supportive of both the more academic competencies (thinking, and using language, symbols and text), and those that are particularly related to self management, and social and community involvement. Students should be encouraged to move beyond their current capabilities, safe in the knowledge that it is acceptable to take risks. A teacher's

explicit modelling of key competencies is also likely to have a powerful impact on students.

Opportunities that are provided to develop the key competencies during a sequence of teaching and learning should be authentic, i.e. seen as relevant by the students. For example, it would be better to incorporate relating to others when collaborative work is required to complete a group inquiry, rather than to create an activity simply to “cover off” this competency.

Teachers can make explicit for students the particular focus for development of the key competencies as part of such opportunities. This will make students aware of the intended learning related to the competencies as well as social sciences understandings.

The development of skills that can support the key competencies will be helpful. This can be done effectively by integrated the development of the competencies with the learning that occurs in social sciences. For example, particular strategies to support thinking can be covered when they are considered to be useful to help understanding of a topic.

An approach that will help with the further development of competencies is to provide students with a number of contexts, and contexts that are increasingly wide-ranging and complex. Individual students, as well as groups, should be considered. For example, opportunities for participating and contributing could be arranged for students with unfamiliar groups.

The social inquiry process, and research in senior social sciences subjects, will provide good opportunities for students to develop the key competencies. A table of examples is included in *Approaches to Social Inquiry* (2008, p. 15). Some selected examples from this table are provided below.

Key competency	Developed through social inquiry when students
Thinking	Pose questions, collect and analyse information...
Using language, symbols and texts	Use and make meaning of the wide range of literacies inherent in the social sciences, including texts such as newspapers, graphs...
Managing self	Act in ways that are enterprising, resourceful...
Relating to others	Interact effectively with others, listen and respond to other points of view...
Participating and contributing	Work and learn cooperatively in groups...

Developing understanding of the key competencies

The level of teacher and student understanding of the competencies will impact on their development, and provide an indication of the extent to which this has occurred. Ideally both the teacher and students in a class should be aware of

what aspects have been developed and be able to clearly explain goals for further development.

The development of students' own understanding of the key competencies will be particularly helpful with effective implementation. Without such understanding there is a danger that students may simply attempt to match simplistic external criteria and not develop internal motivation to use competencies.

Decisions about the most appropriate ways to monitor the key competencies are best made at the school level. The primary focus for any monitoring should be formative. The following ideas are offered for schools to consider and discuss as they develop a framework to support the key competencies.

Appropriate approaches to monitoring the development of the key competencies may include:

- Ensure that teachers and students have a clear understanding of each of the competencies. (Identification of particular aspects of a competency may be of some assistance, however, the competencies are more than simple, easily observable skills.)
- Discuss with students aspects of their current capabilities, and what may be necessary to develop these further
- Have students self monitor their progress
- Identify next steps to develop competencies further, and encourage goal setting.

The competencies can be seen as capabilities that will help students to achieve social sciences outcomes in particular contexts. For example, a student undertaking a research project will need to manage their time well to be successful. Therefore, it may be most appropriate to monitor the achievement of research outcomes. If comments are made on managing self, these could be in relation to time management during the research project.

Further guidance on monitoring the key competencies is available on the website: <http://keycompetencies.tki.org.nz/Monitoring> This site notes that documentation for monitoring key competencies is not about recording indicators, criteria, marks, grades, or rubrics. Documentation for monitoring key competencies is more about rich descriptions, examples, accounts, and narratives.

Teaching as Inquiry

A particular approach that will support the implementation of the key competencies is for teachers to follow an inquiry process themselves to:

1. Decide what competencies most need to be developed by their students
2. Plan and implement strategies that are most likely to make a difference

3. Reflect on the effectiveness of the approaches they used to help students to develop the key competencies, and on the opportunities they provided for these to be demonstrated.

Useful frameworks for this process are provided by the Teaching as Inquiry model in the NZC (p. 35), and the model in *Effective Pedagogy in Social Sciences / Tikanga ā Iwi* (2008 p. 53), which is shown below.

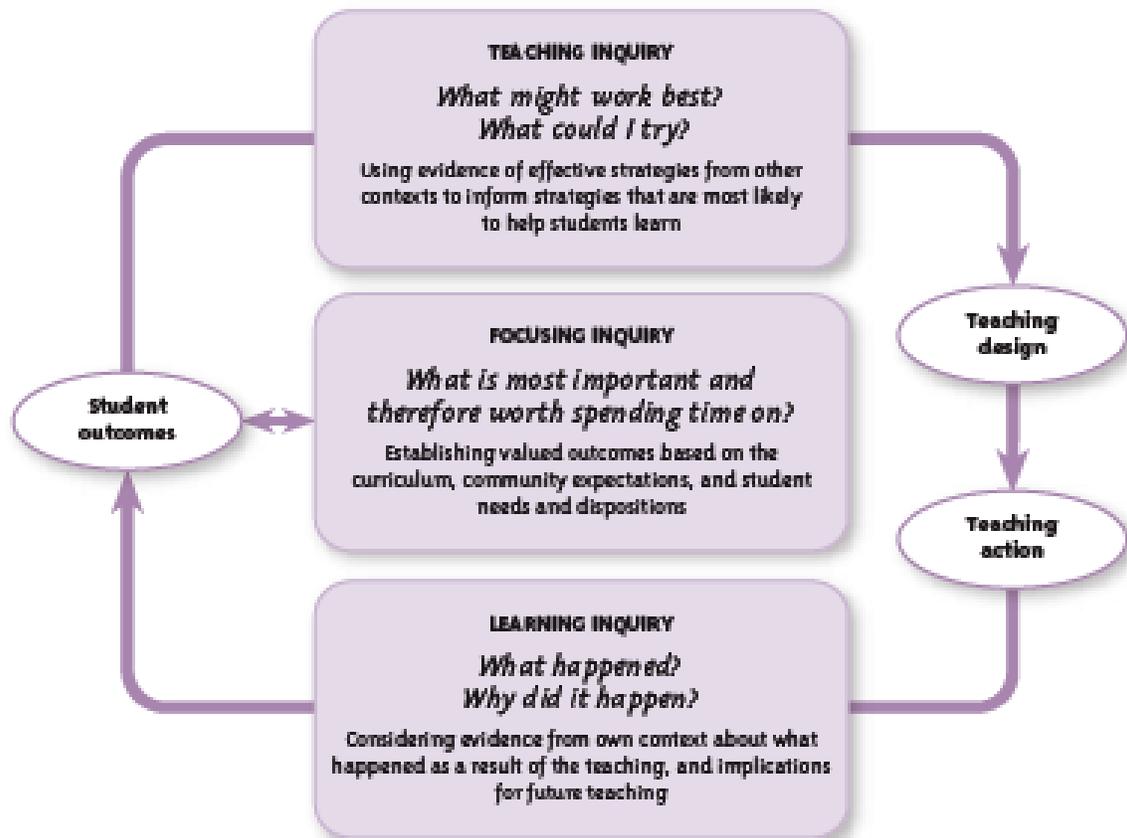


Figure 9: Teaching as inquiry: a model of evidence-informed pedagogy

Conclusion

The social sciences at all levels provide many opportunities for teachers to support their students to develop the key competencies. Development of the competencies will also greatly assist the achievement of the outcomes and vision articulated in the learning area statement for the social sciences. The implementation of these aspects of the revised curriculum provides a tremendous opportunity at this time to further prepare students for sustained learning and effective participation in society.

References

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