

What is a social inquiry?

Crafting questions that lead to deeper knowledge about society and citizenship

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KEY POINTS

- Social inquiry was introduced in the 2007 curriculum document *The New Zealand Curriculum* as a key approach within social studies. However, it appears that the nature and purpose of social inquiry is still unclear to many teachers.
- Social inquiry is not a “new” idea but reflects historical curriculum developments in the social sciences. Its purpose is to create knowledge (informational) and citizenship (transformational) outcomes.
- The type of questions asked in a social inquiry can be significant in generating different outcomes. Crafting social-inquiry questions carefully can “activate” thinking to facilitate deeper knowledge and citizenship outcomes for social studies learning.

The 2007 New Zealand curriculum introduced the idea of a “social inquiry” in the social studies curriculum. However, it appears that the nature and purpose of a social inquiry is still unclear to many teachers. The purpose of this article is to clarify what a social inquiry is, to examine its origins within the social sciences, and to consider the contribution it can make to inquiry learning. The article draws on empirical data from a secondary-school-wide local-community social inquiry. An analysis of the questions students and teachers asked in this social inquiry revealed that three broad types of learning outcomes were generated through this process: *information-based*, *values-based*, and *citizenship-based* outcomes. The article concludes by suggesting a number of ways social inquiry questions could be crafted to support informational and transformational/citizenship outcomes for social studies students.

Introduction

Inquiry-based learning is a key tenet of the Ministry of Education’s 2007 curriculum document *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* and has been embraced as a constructivist approach across a wide number of curriculum learning areas. Yet, emerging research in New Zealand schools shows that inquiry-based learning is interpreted and implemented in multiple ways. In a recent *set* article, Boyd and Hipkins (2012) proposed three broad approaches to inquiry that they observed to be currently practised in New Zealand schools: a generic inquiry, a disciplinary inquiry, and a hybrid inquiry (p. 20). This article responds directly to that article by clarifying the nature and purpose of “social inquiry”, described as a “hybrid” inquiry in Boyd and Hipkin’s (2012) classification,¹ to consider the contribution it can make to learning in the social sciences. The article draws on empirical data from a New Zealand secondary-school-wide social inquiry focusing on their local community. In particular, it examines how the questions teachers and students asked in this social inquiry shaped the type of learning outcomes that were generated. The article begins with an analysis of the contemporary expression of social inquiry as expressed in *NZC* and then tracks the origins of social inquiry historically.

Social inquiry: What is it?

There is considerable discussion about “inquiry learning” across both primary and secondary schools

in New Zealand following the implementation of the 2007 *NZC* (Boyd, 2013; Boyd & Hipkins, 2012; Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, 2011). While there are many inquiry models, many researchers agree that generic inquiry approaches provide a process that involves identifying questions, gathering and synthesising information, and developing reflective understandings (Boyd & Hipkins, 2012; Spronken-Smith & Walker, 2010). Increasingly, this process is seen to be an approach that can be student-centred and student-directed, which provides 21st-century learning opportunities for engaging in authentic and meaningful learning experiences (Boyd, 2013; Spronken-Smith & Walker, 2010). In light of this growing popularity for inquiry learning, it is important to understand what is actually happening when inquiry learning is undertaken and the outcomes that can be achieved. Moreover, it is important to clarify the contribution that different inquiry models can make (Boyd, 2013; Boyd & Hipkins, 2012). The focus of this article is on social inquiry—an approach that is linked specifically to social science learning. But what is a social inquiry and how does it differ from a generic inquiry?

The 2007 *NZC* introduced the idea of a “social inquiry” in the compulsory social studies curriculum. While there is little description on page 30 of *NZC* where it is mentioned twice, a supporting booklet put out by the Ministry of Education (2008), *Approaches to Social Inquiry*, provides much more detail about this approach, including a definition:

Social inquiry is an integrated process for examining social issues, ideas and themes ... that is specifically linked to the social sciences curriculum area. (p. 2)

The social-inquiry approach described in *NZC* shows many similarities to a generic inquiry by encouraging the exploration of questions, gathering information, and reflecting on and evaluating findings (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 30). In social studies, such questions focus on knowledge, concepts, and skills that are pivotal to gaining deeper understandings of society and how it works. These aspects can be broadly described as *informational goals* of social studies learning.

However, there are some aspects to a social inquiry that provide the social sciences with “an appropriate and distinctive process for studying human society” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4). In particular, these include the “exploration and analysis of people’s values and perspectives”, and the “consideration of the ways in which people make decisions and participate in social action”. The two final questions that guide social inquiry (“So what?” and “Now what?”) are also distinctive to a social inquiry and suggest stronger links to citizenship and participatory outcomes of the social sciences (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 30). These aspects can broadly be categorised as *transformational goals* for social studies and speak to the wider democratic goals of education, such as the open flow of ideas and the full participation of students as active democratic citizens while at school (Apple & Beane, 2007). Social inquiry therefore has a dual commitment to gaining deeper knowledge about society as well as knowledge, dispositions, and skills to be able to participate in society (now and in the future). Figure 1 shows an adapted layout of the four main components to illustrate the twin informational and transformational goals of social inquiry.² It is important to note that these twin goals are intricately linked together and have only been artificially separated for the purpose of this article.

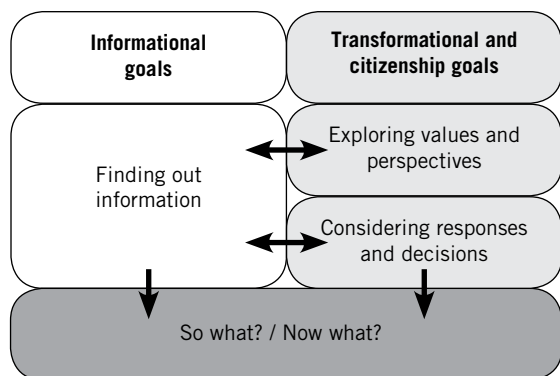


FIGURE 1. COMPONENTS OF THE SOCIAL-INQUIRY PROCESS AND THE TWIN GOALS OF SOCIAL STUDIES LEARNING

The aim of this social inquiry was to enable students to develop skills in social-inquiry research and to develop deeper understandings about their local community (with a focus on the concepts of identity, belonging, place, and change).

The commitment to informational goals and transformational or citizenship goals in a social inquiry fits closely with the broad purpose of social studies education. Barr (1998) describes these as the twin goals of learning in social studies which he considers to be “understanding the world and developing the skills of responsible citizenship” (p. 110). Undertaking a social inquiry therefore offers the opportunity to fulfil these twin goals as, through it, students will:

gain deeper conceptual, critical, and affective understandings about how societies operate and how they themselves can participate and take social action as critical, informed and confident citizens. (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2)

Importantly, the social-inquiry approach is described as a method of teaching and planning as well as a process of seeking knowledge and new understanding in social studies (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2).

Before *NZC*, research indicated that informational goals were the primary focus of social studies teachers in inquiry (Education Review Office, 2006; Keown, 1998). The “hard bits” of social studies—which, according to Keown (1998), included the values exploration and social action aspects (transformational outcomes)—were frequently overlooked. One motivation for the social-inquiry approach in *NZC* was to address this oversight by encouraging “a more intentional, integrated approach to these ‘hard bits’ which are so critical to developing a deeper understanding of society” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4).

To date, very little research has been conducted on how teachers are interpreting and implementing social-inquiry approaches in social studies in *NZC*. One exception is Taylor, Urry, and Burgess’s (2012) research on social inquiry in a Years 1 and 2 primary school class. Taylor et al. (2012) describe how the class’s attention to developing a more welcoming sign for their suburb built on the relationship between social studies concepts (such as belonging, roles, and responsibilities) and civic

engagement (lobbying the council for a new sign). Focusing on social inquiry was a key way to maintain the development of both cognitive understandings and social inquiry skills which could lead to social action. So how and why has social inquiry appeared in *NZC*? In the following section, I trace the historical origins and evolution of social inquiry.

What are the historical roots of social inquiry?

While the explicit mention of “social inquiry” may be new to the 2007 *NZC*, according to Brian Hill (1994), a notable social science educator from Australia, “social inquiry” emerged in the 1960s as part of a shift to embrace the evolving “social science” discipline at this time. Earlier, most social science subjects had developed discreetly with little reference to each other. But, in keeping with the emerging “science inquiry” method that was developed as a result of the Woods Hole Conference (Massachusetts, USA, 1959), a “structure of the disciplines” (Bruner, 1960) for the social sciences known as *social inquiry* was proposed. A primary motivation for this proposal was to give the social science subjects similar comparability, rigour, and status as the general sciences, which were seeking similar goals as an integrated group of subjects (Hill, 1994). These ideas were embraced in the United States in particular, with the emergence of “the new social studies” curriculum projects, which sought to identify appropriate concepts and skills, in line with Brunerian principles (Hill, 1994, p. 47).

The original social-inquiry model sought to clarify factual knowledge about the world through a study of the social sciences. Hill (1994) reflects that, while this gave social studies a sharper cutting edge intellectually, it neglected the interplay of ethical considerations in the examination of social issues. In subsequent years, this model was adapted to align more closely with Dewey’s (1916) inquiry method and Freire’s (1973) idea of praxis to include a greater priority for citizenship and social action in the real world.³ Hill’s (1994) introduction of an “issues-based inquiry” as a “more personalised, ethically guided and action-intending” alternative to the original social-inquiry model (pp. 215–6) shaped this evolving social-inquiry model considerably.

Evidence of the beginnings of an inquiry approach was seen in the 1977 New Zealand social studies curriculum (Mutch, Hunter, Milligan, Openshaw, & Siteine, 2008). This was reinforced again in the 1997 Social Studies Curriculum (Barr et al., 1997; Ministry of Education, 1997) in which three separate processes

were described—an “inquiry process”, a “values inquiry process”, and a “social action process”. Hill’s work was very important during the development of the 2007 *NZC*. Graeme Aitken (2003) and Paul Keown (2004) both shared Hill’s model (slightly adapted) at the start of the curriculum review process as an option for organising learning approaches in social studies (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4). The final *NZC* “social inquiry approach” shows many similarities to Hill’s (1994) model with the inclusion of “So what?” and “Now what?” questions alongside the knowledge-based, values, and social action components.

This historical examination shows how social inquiry has evolved within disciplinary traditions and developments across the social sciences. However, emerging evidence since *NZC* shows that the nature of social inquiry is still not widely understood by teachers (Milligan & Wood, 2011). The latter part of this article tracks a qualitative, practitioner-inquiry research project that examined a whole-school social studies focus on a local-community social inquiry. The project included six Years 9 and 10 social studies classes and their teachers. Teachers followed a collective, planned approach to the social inquiry but had considerable room for individual adaptations. I participated in this process as an adviser and researcher, providing initial resources and guidance, and observing and helping out in classroom-based and community activities (such as trips to the archives) in three of the six classes. The data reported here are drawn from these interactions and an analysis of students’ inquiry questions and final reports (written reports, posters, and digital stories). Follow-up interviews with all six teachers and with some students ($n = 69$) also provided summative and reflective commentaries on the social-inquiry process.

Social-inquiry questions and learning outcomes

The aim of this social inquiry was to enable students to develop skills in social-inquiry research and to develop deeper understandings about their local community (with a focus on the concepts of identity, belonging, place, and change). Recognising that social studies has often been critiqued for having a “presentist” focus, a specific focus on local history was included. The key question guiding this inquiry was “How does the past shape our identity today and in the future?”

A further aim of the project was to give voice to young people in this school and enable them to celebrate the strengths in their community. To do this, a technique

known as *Photovoice* was used to create and discuss photos as a means to community social action and change (Wang, 1997). Activities related to the community social inquiry included:

- examining local Māori history and European settler history and contemporary issues
- participating in community walks in groups and undertaking a Photovoice activity to encourage awareness of the local area
- visiting the local historical archives and meeting with the archivist to explore social-inquiry questions.

Following this, students developed their own social-inquiry question which centred on an aspect of the local community, history, and identity. An analysis of the questions students and teachers asked in this social inquiry revealed that three broad types of learning outcomes were generated through this process: *information-based*, *values-based*, and *citizenship* outcomes. In the following sections I describe these in turn and consider what they offer to the nature and purpose of a social inquiry in social studies. In particular, I map how they fulfilled what Aitken and Sinnema (2008) identified to be the five main outcomes in social sciences education (knowledge, skills, participatory, cultural identity, and affective outcomes) in the Best Evidence Synthesis.

Information-based outcomes

Informational outcomes are pivotal to gaining deeper understandings of society in social studies and involve the development of knowledge, concepts, and skills. A key goal in social studies is to develop conceptual understandings that move beyond lower level facts through to higher order conceptual understandings (Erickson, 2002). Teachers and students observed that the primary focus in this social inquiry had been on “getting the information”, which was primarily at the factual level. The majority of students framed their social-inquiry questions to focus on gathering facts and information. Examples of such information-based questions included:

- How was our river used 100 years ago?
- What was the history of the first shearing shed in our rural area?
- What leisure activities were popular in the past in our town?

In responding to these questions, students could report in detail ways in which “stuff has changed” and could give many examples about what had changed (roads, technology, clothing and so forth). One teacher commented that this had given students a greater understanding of the past and had “helped them form a bigger picture of time [...] which is quite a difficult concept.”

A key goal in social studies is to develop conceptual understandings that move beyond lower level facts through to higher order conceptual understandings.

However, while most students had a good grasp on facts about the past, fewer reached the level of generalisations and conclusions—what Levy and Petrulis (2012) describe as “personal sense making”. For example, Janine⁴ made a digital story which focused on how clothing, fashion, hairstyles, and accessories had changed through time. She proposed the generalisation that “overall, the way people used to dress has changed a lot over the years. It has gone from very formal everyday wear, to much more casual everyday wear with formal wear reserved for special occasions.”

Alongside this growth in cognitive understandings were a growing set of skills associated with the social inquiry—such as research, interview, and photography skills. Alongside reporting on facts about the past, the majority of students reported that skills, such as “how to take photos and how to make movies”, “time management”, “planning out the structure”, and “learning about what we asked at the archives”, were what they had learned through this social inquiry. Teachers also placed a high value on skills learning. Five of the six teachers felt that learning to use the local historical archives had enhanced current and future research skills: as one teacher noted, “The students are aware now that there is that place there that they can go and get information.” Four teachers stated that Photovoice activities had given their students new skills, and a chance to celebrate and reward their creativity. Yet, this skills focus led one teacher to reflect that this learning about “all technical stuff ... missed the concept of a social inquiry”. She surmised that mastering these technical and digital skills meant that deeper knowledge and citizenship outcomes would be easier in the future (and she intended to re-introduce this process later in the year).

Values-based outcomes

One whole class and a few students from other classes focused their social inquiries on what people valued or found to be important. These had more affective considerations and tended to show an awareness of other community members and groups. Examples of student-led “values-based” social-inquiry questions included:

- Which places around here are special for us and why?
- Who gave us the land for our school and why?
- Why is the [xxx] beach important to us and people in our community?⁵

Murdoch (2004) suggests that learning about real people, real places, real objects, and the stories that surround them is highly memorable for students. For example, Mason recounted in detail the story of the founding European settler of the town who “had a dream that everyone could own some land—and I think he had quite a bit [sic] of wives!”

Learning experiences that are based around local contexts can support students to develop “values-based” questions, such as those outlined above, which provide opportunities for students to develop greater understandings and appreciation of places which hold personal and social significance to the community. This understanding can also support students to develop affective responses and enhance aspects of cultural identity (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008) as students consider for themselves the importance of people, places, and events. For example, one class selected a local iconic beach as the focus of their social inquiry. They examined Māori and Pākehā history and myths associated with this site and also considered what this place meant to them and their identities as young people in their town today.

Citizenship outcomes

Finally, a smaller number of students from one class in particular pursued what I refer to as “issues-based” social-inquiry questions. Such questions were often closely linked to values-based questions about aspects which held the students’ interest or concern. For example, the Photovoice activity had asked students to respond to a values-based question (“What is important or special about our community?”) alongside an issues-based question (“What do we want to change?”). This activity generated a strong sense of community engagement and triggered many “So what?” and “Now what are we going to do about it?” types of social-inquiry question. Examples of these questions included:

- Why does our river have an algal bloom so we can’t swim in it and who is doing something about it?
- Why are there so few facilities for children and young people on our side of town?

Such learning focused on issues young people identified they wanted to see changed and had strong participatory and citizenship outcomes that encouraged students to contribute and become involved (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008). Students prepared digital stories to address these questions and talked about taking their findings to the local council to share their learning. Similar to Taylor et

al. (2012), this provided students with an opportunity for first-hand experience in analysing and addressing an authentic local issue. While the issues-based nature of these questions pointed towards social action, students at times overlooked the historically and geographically situated nature of these issues. Taking time to examine these aspects in depth may have generated deeper understandings about society and therefore informed citizenship actions more closely.

Crafting questions for rich social inquiry

This analysis of the local community social inquiry shows that even within a whole-school approach, teachers and students employed many different strategies that led to different outcomes (Figure 2). Importantly, it also showed that the type of questions asked in a social inquiry can be significant in generating these different outcomes. The prevailing focus in the social inquiry across the school was on “getting information”—a finding which has also been identified in inquiry learning at tertiary level (Levy & Petrulis, 2012). A lesser focus was on values and social-action components of the social inquiry; these aspects led to affective, cultural-identity, and participatory outcomes (see Figure 2). This presents a challenge for teachers: How can we promote social-inquiry learning in social studies that has both informational and transformational outcomes?

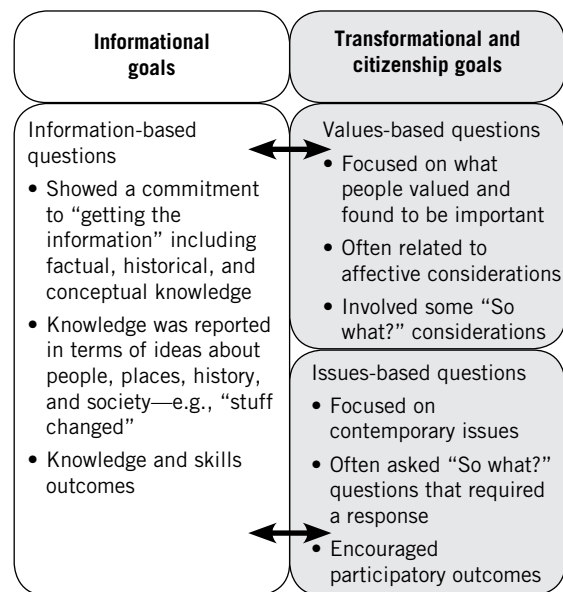


FIGURE 2. TYPES OF SOCIAL-INQUIRY QUESTIONS AND OUTCOMES

If we reflect on the social-inquiry questions asked, we can see that very few questions embraced all aspects of the social-inquiry process. Instead, they tended to focus on only one side of Figure 2. This meant that learning rarely occurred at the intersection of informational and transformational approaches to social inquiry. This is where rich social studies learning occurs. Keown (2004) argues that there needs to be a constant interplay between the “objective” and “subjective” aspects of social inquiry so that values and “So what?” dimensions are intertwined with the historical and current factual material. This reinforces Abbiss’s (2011) discussion on the tension present in the social studies learning area itself about the extent to which it advocates for students who are “citizens in preparation”, who learn about others’ experiences (informational outcomes), or whether they are “citizens now”, ready to take social action themselves (transformational and citizenship outcomes). As Hill (1994) states:

The ultimate intention, however, will be not to merely achieve the goal of academic understanding and competence, but to build this learning into one’s own *response* to the social environment. Hence the final question: ‘so what?’ (p. 216)

In the final section of this article, I want to consider how we can develop approaches in social inquiry that “activate” both sides of Figure 2, and which may enable students to develop deeper understandings about society as well as critical citizenship responses. One key way we can work towards these twin goals is to focus more specifically on the questions which drive both teacher-led and student-led social inquiry and consider ways that we can “activate” thinking through these questions to contribute to more critical and creative social studies thinking.

Murdoch (2004) talks about “activating” inquiries in two ways. First, she suggests that we choose a unit that involves problematic questions and issues. By centring learning on social issues of significance to human society, we immediately place problem solving at the heart of the social inquiry. Social issues inevitably have a “real world” application that enables us to explore citizenship responses of our own and others. In this research, the students identified five key “themes” that related to their region in response to the social-inquiry question. These included rivers, leisure activities (especially for young people), transport, industry (especially shearing), and people. Each of these themes had associated contemporary issues (such as the cleanliness of the rivers) which provided opportunities for citizenship responses. Keeping these current issues alive throughout the social inquiry by examining how they were situated within historical and geographic patterns is one way to integrate

informational and transformational learning and provide opportunities for citizenship action now (Abbiss, 2011).

A second way that Murdoch (2004) suggests we can “activate” an inquiry is to look at opportunities to ask questions that promote social and personal significance and relevance. Murdoch (2004) suggests that units which “fall flat” often do so because we fail to connect students with the “emotional terrain” around a topic. “Activating” these questions by providing clearer links to the differing perspectives of people and groups gives avenues into values exploration as well as citizenship responses. It also encourages students to gather information from direct experience and stories. These can be both personal stories (of the students) and stories from the community. A key aim through this process is to reduce passive questions and link historical ideas with the present. Table 1 provides some examples of how questions for social inquiry may be further developed with teacher support to activate a) values-based and b) citizenship-based learning.

TABLE 1. ACTIVATING VALUES-BASED AND CITIZENSHIP-BASED LEARNING THROUGH SOCIAL-INQUIRY QUESTIONS

Before	After
1. How was our river used 100 years ago?	1a. How and why have people valued our river in the past and today? (<i>values focus</i>) 1b. What future actions could we and others take to ensure our river is protected in the future? (<i>citizenship focus</i>)
2. What was the history of the first shearing shed in our rural area?	2a. How has shearing shaped our identity and that of our town? (<i>values focus</i>) 2b. Which shearing issues (technological, economic, social) are important for the shearing industry and how have we/others responded to these? (<i>citizenship focus</i>)
3. What leisure activities were popular in the past in our town?	3a. How and why have leisure activities changed through time and what impact does this have on us today? (<i>values focus</i>) 3b. How can we work toward better leisure facilities for children and young people in our town? (<i>citizenship focus</i>)

The suggested changes in Table 1 do not mean we underplay the importance of historical ideas; on the contrary, the goal is closely explore how the past shapes the present in order to attain deeper conceptual and citizenship outcomes, now and in the future. This may necessitate more than one question to guide a social inquiry—teachers and students may need to craft a couple of questions to give opportunities for informative and transformative avenues of inquiry. Hoepper and McDonald (2004) describe “effective questions” to be ones which reflect the current concerns and interests of students but also provide links to wider societal issues.

They propose that illustrating a range of views in a social inquiry will lead to socially critical understandings of the world which reflect the values of social justice, democratic processes, and ecological sustainability (pp. 32–33). Crafting such social-inquiry questions may be a small change for teachers and students, but offers one effective way to work towards both informational and transformational outcomes in social studies learning.

Further reading

- Further details and examples of the social-inquiry process have been summarised in the *Approaches to Social Inquiry* booklet, available to be downloaded from <http://ssol.tki.org.nz/>
- An online interactive social-inquiry planner is also available at <http://ssol.tki.org.nz/>
- Kath Murdoch's article on "What makes a good inquiry?" is available on <http://www.eqa.edu.au/site/whatmakesagoodinquiry.html>

Notes

- 1 Boyd and Hipkins (2012) describe a "hybrid" approach as a form of learning that blends aspects of generic inquiry, discipline-specific inquiry, and the democratic approach to curriculum integration endorsed by Apple and Beane (2007) and others.
- 2 This diagram leaves out "Reflecting and evaluating" which is a central component of social inquiry (and indeed, most generic inquiry). For further on this and all aspects of social inquiry, see Ministry of Education (2008), pp. 7 and 9.
- 3 For example, see Gordon (2000) for three such examples of social inquiry models in the Queensland School Curriculum (Studies of Society and Environment).
- 4 Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
- 5 This was a whole-class social inquiry question.

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