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Assessment practices in New Zealand year 9 and 10 social studies courses: An exploratory case study.

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Abstract

Assessment tasks that acknowledge the diverse social, cultural, and academic needs of learners, and the situated nature of learning, not only have the potential to scaffold effective learning, but can also generate positive outcomes for students in social studies. Assessment from this perspective aligns with sociocultural theories of learning and advances the principles of 'assessment for learning'. This multiple case study research set out to explore how five experienced teachers in New Zealand [NZ] were formally assessing learning in their year 9 and 10 social studies courses. The intention was to gain some understanding of how the current assessment practices that teachers use in their year 9 and 10 social studies courses align with: (i) contemporary perspectives of 'assessment for learning', (ii) findings from the international research literature, and (iii) the NZ Ministry of Education's assessment policies. The research involved visiting and interviewing each participant teacher on two occasions during the later part of 2009, and reviewing a selection of their school's assessment documents.

The results from this research suggest that effective NZ secondary school teachers consciously or unconsciously use 'assessment for learning' practices consistent with sociocultural principles, to formally assess learning in their year 9 and 10 social studies courses. The research also found that there are often a variety of factors—curriculum, school policy, time constraints, and professional support—that limit teachers' capacity to implement valid, constructively aligned, and effective programmes of assessment. While teachers were not always consciously aware of the theory that underpinned their practice, or the implications of the decisions they were making, the data suggests that the teachers in this study were committed to ensuring that their students had the opportunity to engage in interesting, manageable, and well constructed assessment tasks that had the potential to foster learning and empower students to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to become self motivated lifelong learners.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

A	Achieved
AO	Achievement Objective
ARG	Assessment Reform Group
AS	Achievement Standard
BCUSS	*Building Conceptual Understandings in Social Studies*
BES	*Effective pedagogy in social sciences / Tikanga a iwi. Best evidence synthesis*
E	Achieved with Excellence
ERO	Education Review Office
Exemplars	*NZ Curriculum Exemplars for Social Studies*
Handbook	*Social studies forms 3 and 4: A handbook for teachers*.
HoD	Head of Department
KMOFAP	King's-Medway-Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project
M	Achieved with Merit
MOE	Ministry of Education
NA	Not Achieved
NAGs	National Administration Guidelines
NCEA	National Certificate in Educational Achievement
NEGs	National Education Goals
NEMP	National Education Monitoring Project
NZ	New Zealand
NZC	*New Zealand Curriculum*
PD	Professional Development
PDF	Portable Document Files
SBA	Standards-based assessment
SMART	Smart, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-related
SocCon	Biennial combined Social Sciences Conference
SSiNZC	*Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum*
TKI	Te Kete Ipurangi
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America