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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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Norman, Oklahoma

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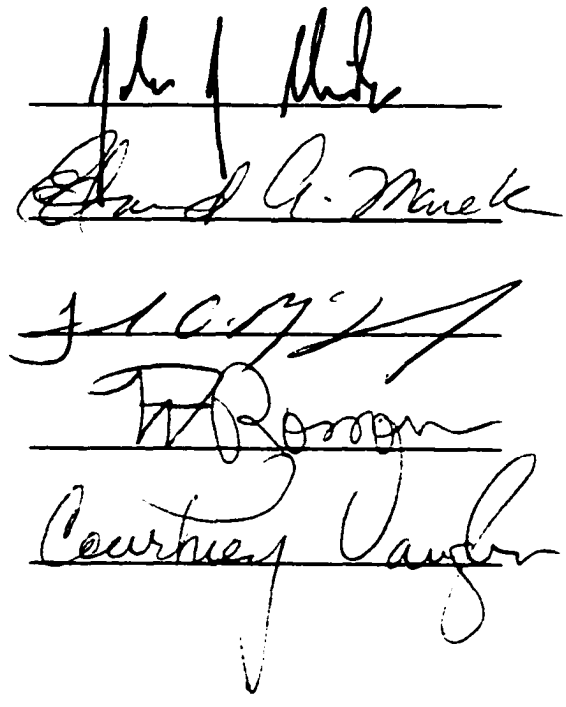
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

A DISSERTATION

APPORVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

BY



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Abstract

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

The purpose of this study was to investigate middle and high school students' perceptions of social studies. Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1982) contend that three factors had a direct correlation with student attitude. It is a function of 1) the teacher, 2) the learning environment and 3) pre-existing student tendencies including motivation, self-confidence and importance of subject matter. As a continuation of this research theme a phenomenological study was designed to answer the following research question. What are the attitudes of eighth and eleventh grade students toward social studies? To answer this research problem, the following questions were asked: a) how does teacher interest and enthusiasm affect student attitudes towards social studies? b) how does teaching methodology effect students' attitudes towards social studies? c) do the students see any relevance regarding the subject matter of social studies to their present and future lives? d) what are the concerns or recommendations expressed by students regarding the social

studies curriculum and instruction and e) do the comments and concerns regarding social studies change between middle and high school?

The study revealed two themes expressed by both middle and high school students. They are: 1) believe active involvement, teacher enthusiasm, and relevancy of subject matter led to positive images of social studies and 2) the perceived utilitarian value or lack of it is a major factor regarding students' views of social studies. In general, the study found that most students' did not have a negative perception of social studies. The results differ from past studies which found that students had a negative attitude toward social studies.

A Phenomenological Study of Middle School and High School Students' Perceptions of Social Studies

Chapter 1

Introduction

Throughout the past 50 years, researchers, administrators and teachers have sought to understand why students either like or dislike social studies. Previous research studies have attempted to identify and measure interests and attitudes and predict relationships that influence student behaviors and outcomes in this area of curriculum (Corbin, 1994; Curry and Hughes, 1965; Fraser, 1981; Inskeep and Rowland, 1963; McTeer and Blanton, 1975; McTeer, 1978, 1979, 1986). Ongoing changes in curriculum design, teaching methodology and administrative practices over the past few decades may have helped to improve students' current perception of social studies (Shaughnessy and Haladyna, 1985). However, since students spend a large part of their youth in school, the results of continued investigations of student attitudes towards this curriculum area should help teachers better understand and facilitate those they serve.

General attitudes toward school have been found to relate directly to achievement. In fact, bright students with positive attitudes achieve high grades, even when they dislike the individual subject matter (Schug, Todd, and Beery, 1982). However, there exist a large number of students

who may not like school, yet could still provide valuable information regarding their perception of the curriculum and the overall effectiveness of school. Moreover, if the curriculum in social studies is to continue to have support from school administrators, politicians and the general public, student attitudes for this subject matter should be positive. It is quite possible that negative attitudes toward this area could ultimately result in a sharp decline in the allocation of resources for various programs in the social studies.

Unfortunately, some past studies indicate youngsters are not positive about social studies and find the subject matter irrelevant for future careers (Schug, Todd and Beery, 1982). Historically, the most dominant negative perception made by elementary and high school students is that social studies was boring and had little relevance to students' lives. In short, social studies has been one of the least liked courses in the curriculum with a steady decline in interest from the fourth to eighth grade levels (Greenblatt, 1962; Herman, 1965; Jersild, 1949).

Haladyna and Thompson (1979) surveyed 350 elementary and junior high school teachers and 3,000 students to gain a better understanding of students' perceptions of school. This sample of teachers and students represented grade levels one through eight in three regions within the state of Oregon: the Portland area, and areas east and west of

the Cascade Mountains. Students were asked to rate reading, mathematics, physical education, art, music, social studies and science.

A likert scale was used with faces representing positive to negative ratings. Students were asked to mark an "X" on the appropriate face on their answer sheet. Teachers were asked to administer the survey following a standardized procedure. The findings of the study had mixed results. The attitude toward school showed a steady decline from grades one through eight. The sharpest drops occurred between the first and second grade, fourth and fifth grades, and between sixth, seventh and eighth grade. The results suggested that children are positive about school, but begin to become disenchanted as they move to higher grade levels. Surprisingly, not all subjects were viewed in a negative manner. Reading and mathematics maintained a fairly stable pattern across grades one through eight.

The study revealed a difference between boys and girls in ratings of attitudes toward school, and the difference widened in the sample of students in grades four through eight. Although both boys and girls scored consistently high ratings for art, girls' ratings were slightly higher than boys in grades one through three. Music followed the same pattern as art. Reading, mathematics, physical education, science and social studies had no significant differences. The study identified a distinct decline in attitudes toward school. Social studies was held in very low

regard by students surveyed regardless of grade level. Because social studies was not well defined below third grade, the survey did not explore attitudes below the fourth grade.

Another important historical survey was conducted in the San Francisco Public Schools by Fernandez, Massey and Dornbush (1975; 1976). These researchers found social studies ranked last in importance by students in grades 9 - 12 when compared to other core subjects like English and mathematics. Participants described social studies as confusing and having little relationship to their futures. Students believed social studies was less important than mathematics, English and science because, as one student wrote:

> I plan to major in engineering, and I like the problem solving aspect in math. In social studies the ideas are all there and you are learning them. Math is more of a subject where you've got a problem in front of you and you're having to try to figure out the right answer (Schug, Todd and Beery, 1982; p.13).

Joan Shaughnessy and Thomas Haladyna (1985) captured the essence of why social studies was one of the least like courses. They interviewed sixth and twelfth grade students in a Midwest school district regarding the social studies subject matter and teacher preparation. The research concluded:

> it is the teacher who is key to what social studies will be for the student. New materials introduced into the market are often not used. Instruction tends to be dominated by the lecture, textbook or worksheets. The knowing of information by memorizing facts and dates appears to be most important. As a result, goals are not explicit parts of curriculum and social studies does not inspire students to learn (p.694).

Academic achievement and perception of social studies may also be closely related to periods of brain growth during early childhood and adolescent years. Sylwester (2000) states there are four periods of growth during a child's school years. Most children experienced growth between the ages of 2-4, 6-8, 10-12, and 14-16. Brain growth generally occurs earlier for girls and later for boys. Between ages 10-12, female brain growth is estimated three times that of males. Males brain growth is higher than females during ages 14-16. Similar research by Bosowski (1981) concluded that cognitive development formed a step-like progression with peaks in grades 3, 6, and 9.

National and state standardized tests may possibly alter elementary and secondary students' perception of social studies. A wide variety of standardized tests are available to assess students' knowledge. Some of

the more well known tests include the American College Testing Battery, the California Achievement Test and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. While these instruments provide ready made tools for assessment in numerous curriculum fields, test users are often not informed about the scope of reliability, and validity of published tests. Davey and Neill (1991) suggested most national and standardized tests do not improve education. Davey and Neill imply that all multiple-choice and short answer tests are severely limited. They conciuded students often had difficulty assessing higher order thinking, problem solving, creativity and initiative on standardized tests.

Success in college is often dependent on both cognitive and affective skills. It is for this reason national and state standardized tests attempt to asses interpersonal skills as well as competencies in the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and writing. To increase emphasis on the three content areas may often overshadow the importance of social studies by society and educational institutions, thus leaving students to question the importance of social studies content found on standardized test.

Purpose of Study

The lack of recent and consistent findings with respect to students' attitudes and perceptions toward the social studies is an important reason for carrying out this study. In the past 50 years, the social studies

curriculum in the public schools and society has seen dramatic changes. The social studies curriculum has experienced changes in both subject matter and teaching methodology. The introduction of the cold war, civil rights and the women's movement were all influential on society, as well as social studies curriculum.

In 1957, two events helped set the stage for reform within social studies curriculum. When The Soviet Union launched Sputnik, Americans feared Soviet technical superiority, causing a collective re-examination of school curriculum. The second event came from two researchers at Purdue University in the form of a public opinion poll of school age children. The results of the poll were dismal for social studies. Students believed the government should exercise the right to limit freedom of speech and have the power of search and seizure of individuals' homes without search warrants. According to Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977), the Council for Basic Education and a portion of the population of American citizens pushed for educational reform. With the Korean War, the McCarthy hearings and the threat of communism, many Americans and as well as educators sought to purge social studies programs and make major changes in the nation's social studies school curriculum.

Almost over night the Office of Education launched the movement by funding a variety of social studies projects. The eventual outcome was more than 50 projects to either integrate social studies for the purpose of

citizenship education, or to teach history and social sciences as ends in themselves. During the 1960s and 1970s, new materials and projects were developed focusing on controversial issues and student led decision making. Two programs developed to facilitate children were the Harvard Social Studies project and Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) project.

The Harvard Social Studies project (Levin, Newmann, and Oliver 1969; Oliver and Shaver 1966) taught students to analyze controversial issues using the jurisprudential method of inquiry which was related to contemporary public issues. The study did not place heavy emphasis on deductive reasoning. Rather it emphasized the clarification on how public issues relate and promote dialogue between the teacher and students. Junior high material focused on analytical approaches to geography, United States history and current events. While senior high units focused on controversial areas such as equality, morality, and responsibility.

The results of the study were mixed. Students who participated in the Harvard University project performed better than the comparison group on concept application tests and on structured dialogue analysis tests. As for acquiring content, the average student taught with the project material did as well on standardized tests as those taught with traditional materials. However, they did not perform as well on standard United States history tests.

The MACOS project was designed to help students discover concepts, assumptions and data-gathering devices, so they could apply them in the real world. Man: A Course of Study was aimed to enlarge human capacity rather than refining narrow skills utilized by the social studies in the past. MACOS was structured around the community of learning rather than around traditional roles such as student, teacher and authority. Goals of the program were to stimulate students to think about the nature of man by providing studies of animal behavior and human group interactions (Hanley, 1970). Project MACOS centered around the process of learning, rather than around the topic itself. It encouraged students to develop a process of questioning, researching and drawing conclusions through the use of film, visuals, written materials, games and simulations.

A large portion of research was conducted in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s on the social studies curriculum and student learning. Studies completed by Fouts (1987) and Hahn (1982) examined the relationship between student attitudes toward social studies curriculum and achievement. However, little research has taken place in the past ten years related to this topic. Do the many curriculum changes that have taken place during this time period and the changing attitudes regarding public education by politicians and parents, it seems appropriate to once again revisit this area of research. Therefore, a study of both eighth and

eleventh grade students has been designed to gain insights into student perceptions and attitudes towards social studies. Such a study may suggest ways to modify and change the negative perceptions of this area of the curriculum.

Research Question

Despite a wide variety of teacher resources, creative lesson plans, thorough training, and parental and school support, students often have a negative attitude towards social studies. Whether students regard social studies as dull, having a lack of clear content or not applicable to their lives, research is needed to explore the rationale behind these perceptions. Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1982) contend that three factors have a direct correlation with student attitude. It is a function of 1) the teacher, 2) the learning environment and 3) pre-existing student tendencies including motivation, self-confidence and importance of subject matter. Building on these factors and previous research, this study attempts to answer the following research question. What are the attitudes of eighth and eleventh grade students toward the social studies? In answering this research question students will be interviewed to gather information on the following related questions: a) how does teacher interest and enthusiasm effect student attitudes towards social studies? b) how does teaching methodology effect students' attitudes towards social studies? c) do the students see any relevance regarding the subject

matter of social studies to their present and future lives? d) what are the concerns or recommendations expressed by students regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction and e) do the comments and concerns regarding social studies change between middle school and high school? By utilizing the findings of this study, educators will have a better idea as to students' perceptions of social studies

Significance of the Study

Most educational research deals with the important and fundamental aspect of academic achievement. While this is important in the success of students, attitudes and perceptions are often looked at as secondary to academic achievement. Mager (1968) indicates that attitude and perception are key for a variety of reasons. First, attitude towards a class or teacher may be casually related to achievement. Second, students who have a positive attitude toward a subject matter are more likely to want to continue their education in that subject area or possibly further their education. Third, student attitude is conveyed to parents, teachers, children, friends and others. If this attitude is negative, it may develop a prejudice against social studies, causing a negative attitude towards the subject.

Haladyna (1982) indicated the strong role that the teacher and learning environment played in potentially shaping student attitudes toward social studies. Teacher factors, such as commitment to help

students learn, enthusiasm, and individual attention, were highly related to students' attitudes toward subject matter. The teacher influence can create a positive learning environment in the classroom. Classroom climate and student attitudes can be modified through interventions to serve or improve the image of social studies (Wheeler & Ryan, 1973). Together, the teachers' attitude towards social studies development, and the students' and parents' commitment to education have unique and interactive influences on school curriculum and attitudes.

Limitation of Study

This study has been designed to explore students' perceptions of the social studies. It was the researcher's intent to explore this issue with the goal of providing practitioners, administrators and other researchers with information and insight into this area. In order to achieve this goal, 24 participants from two grade levels were interviewed over a three week period. Like other research studies, this project has been carefully designed and conducted however, possible limitations still exist.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) noted research studies have the capability to oversimplify or exaggerate a situation, causing false conclusions about actual states of affairs. Moreover, the interaction between researcher and participants did have an impact on the data. The researcher's position as an educator and his familiarity with the school setting did not necessarily

invalidate the data, but rather made students feel comfortable. As the interview proceeded, and the students became aware of no reprisals, trust was established with both grade levels.

Both school variables and outside variables did have an impact on the study. Variables other than the quality of school life or individual instruction may potentially create negative attitudes toward social studies. Sample size, community, school district, and socio-economic level of participants, may also influence data. School variables such as prior knowledge of the researcher, previous "good" or "bad" social studies teachers, or experiences in previous grades may also influence the potential outcomes.

Definition of Terms

Case Study: is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Merriam, 1998).

Expository Instruction: teaching method in which the teacher structures the learning situation to select materials that are appropriate for students and then present them in well organized lessons that progress for generic to specific details (Carbonell, 2001).

Phenomenological Study: the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings

mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced (Patton, 1990).

Qualitative Data: data that cannot readily be converted to numerical values. Such data can be represented by categorical data, by perceptual and attitudinal dimensions not readily converted to numerical values (e.g., color perception), and by real life events (Yin, 1984; 1989).

Qualitative Research: Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the study's use and collection of a variety of empirical materials - case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts - that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Chang, 1998).

Social Studies: The term was first introduced around 1916 and was intended to impart a particular meaning in curriculum thinking. Today, however, it is used mostly as a generic term referring to a set of subject matters or a segment of the school curriculum - comparable, for instance, to language arts or science. It often indicates the study of geography, history, government, economics, civics, sociology, and related subject matters (Chang, 1998).

Social Studies as defined by NCSS: Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (NCSS, 1993).

Summary

In this chapter, general information has been presented to provide an introduction to this study. Questions and problems that guide this study have been provided, along with a purpose and significance to warrant an investigation. An overview was included to clarify the procedures of the study. The limitation of the study was also a part of chapter one to provide the confinements of the research. Finally, a list of selected terms was provided that will appear in the following chapters of study to assist in the understanding of this particular investigation.

Chapter two reviews the historical literature with themes related to this study. Chapter three consists of the design of the study, and

methods applied to research. Chapter four consists of data analysis of eighth and eleventh grade subjects. Chapter five examines the implications of the study with recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2

Historical Background and Literature Review

The purpose of this section is two-fold. First, because elementary students' perceptions of social studies are often associated with being tiring, irrelevant and given less allocation of time than other subjects taught in the elementary grade levels, this negative attitude may have direct implications on students' attitudes and opinions in high school. Thus, the first part of this section will provide an overview of previous historical studies related to elementary students' (K-8) perceptions. Haladyna and Thomas (1979) indicated the importance of elementary students' perceptions of school because students grow increasingly disenchanted as a function of grade level. In addition, the findings illustrated that social studies was the least liked subject among students surveyed.

The second part provided insight on previous studies conducted over high school students' (9-12) perceptions of social studies and the difference in priorities, likes and dislikes. These studies provided a foundation for the current study conducted by this researcher.

Elementary Students' Perceptions of Social Studies

Recent studies have shown that the historical knowledge of young Americans is less than most educators and citizens would desire (Byer,

1999). Students' knowledge of history had suffered because of untrained teachers, reduced course requirements and textbook treatments that were bland and voiceless and directed toward more trivial coverage of details than to vitality and credibility to events of the past (Sewell, 1987; Cheney, 1987). Content in history was practically absent from the curriculum in kindergarten through third grade, and was usually taught in combination with content from the social sciences in fourth through sixth grade. As a result, the last ten years, National History Standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade had placed an increased interest on what knowledge elementary students had before entering the junior high school and high school grades (Ravitch, 1987).

One of the earliest studies was conducted by Jersild (1949) when he organized a nationwide survey of elementary students' perceptions of school. Pupils from kindergarten through sixth grade participated in the study. These students came from schools in large and small cities and suburban areas in Missouri, and similar size communities within a one hundred mile radius of New York City. Two thousand two hundred and forty-eight students represented the two geographic regions. Students were asked to complete an interest finder within a 20 minute time period. Children above the third grade wrote their responses to the interest finder, while kindergarten through third grade students were interviewed for their responses.

The study was designed to ask students their wishes, interests, likes and dislikes about school. The aim was to examine the situations and activities described in the practical language of children's everyday life, regardless of whatever their underlying motive may have been. The results revealed English and mathematics generally scored higher in popularity than the other curricular areas. Topics pertaining to social studies (geography, current events and history) were mentioned less compared to mathematics and English. With the exception of the first three grades, which rarely mentioned social studies, students in grades four through six complained social studies courses often appeared to lack human interest. Students suggested the use of more human elements and personal interests that relate to their lives.

Herman (1965) conducted a similar study with 400 students in fourth through sixth grades in the Chicago area. He asked students to rank their favorite to least favorite classes. A majority of elementary students viewed social studies as boring and not as interesting as other core areas such as mathematics and English. Students suggested their reasoning was based on boredom, teaching methods, and repetition of material.

Inskeep and Rowland (1963) studied responses to a questionnaire administered to students in fourth through sixth grades. Social studies was ranked behind mathematics, reading, spelling, science, the musical

arts and physical education. Only handwriting and grammar ranked lower. The findings from these previous studies suggested students were incapable of comprehending or relating to social studies content, which could explain social studies' poor ranking among students.

However, in a more recent study conducted by Downey and Levstik (1991) it was found that children do understand historical time in a variety of ways. Children's ability to understand cause and effect relationships taking place over time, increases throughout childhood and adolescence (Zaccaria, 1978). By the end of fifth grade, students had acquired a good grasp of historical time terminology, can detect historical anomalies, and show understanding of time periods in United States history (Hoge, 1991).

Different methods of teaching history produce different history learning outcomes. Children taught with textbooks, worksheets, and quizzes learn more names and dates compared to those taught in a topically focused, non-survey approach that employs a variety of instructional materials. Downey and Levstik (1991) concluded instruction in history should 1) begin in the early grades, 2) focus on in-depth, sustained study of proper material rather than shallow coverage, and 3) make use of age-appropriate learning strategies.

For young elementary students, an important purpose of education in social studies is to make the past appear real instead of remaining an

untouchable idea held only in adult memories or textbook passages. By making history believable, children in elementary school will develop knowledge of the American heritage, recognize and place historical context to important individuals' of the past, and gradually build understanding of time and chronology. Several factors were identified as contributing to the development of a positive outlook toward social studies. Teacher involvement, parental involvement, and interesting textbooks were important in the development of positive perceptions by students towards social studies (Haladyna and Shaughnessy, 1982).

Teacher Involvement

Fisher and Fraser (1984) found that classroom teachers have the power to elevate their students' perceptions of selected classroom environments. This is particularly true for elementary school teachers. Children enjoyed it when teachers were enthusiastic about subject matter; knew the subject matter; were committed to help every student learn; individualized the lesson for each student; demonstrated fairness in the classroom; and used praise and reinforcement on a regular basis (Ellenburg, 1972 & Miller, 1981).

Parental Support

Previous studies that dealt with students' attitudes underscore the point that parent participation in education is closely related to student achievement and success. McTeer, Blanton and Lee (1975) found

parents had a direct influence on student attitude towards social studies. Parents with more formal education had a direct impact on their children's grade averages and general belief towards education (Cobb & Cardozier, 1966; Edwards, 1938; Rosenberg, 1965).

Dorothy Rich (1985) suggested tutoring is the best way for parents to participate in their children's education. Intensive, one-to-one teaching is highly effective, and unlike parent / teacher meetings, it did not take parents away from their children and home. Issues such as an emphasis on doing well in school, role modeling for their children, and providing and encouraging a place to study are attributes of positive parental involvement. Lower income families and parents with less than a high school education appeared to be at a distinct disadvantage. Ascher (1987) suggested that some parents from minority, at risk, poverty, or low income families tend to inhibit academic achievement with non-interaction with their children, constant family composition changes, or cultural traditions that sharply vary from the school's.

Textbook

Different methods of teaching social studies produce a variety of learning outcomes. Children taught with expositional textbook, worksheet and quiz routine learned more names and dates compared to those taught in a topically focused, non-survey approach that employed a variety of instructional materials (Booth, 1980). The hard-cover, basal textbook

dominated teaching and learning in elementary social studies classes. Too often, social studies instruction involves reading assignments in a single textbook. As with mathematics, science and English, there is a temptation to allow the textbook to define the curriculum.

According to Levstik (1986) research on the teaching of history in elementary school suggested that textbook-based teaching practices are unsuccessful in the development of historical understanding within children. Two problems young children have in reading elementary social studies textbooks stem from lack of background and complex social studies content. Dealing with lack of background, students who had traveled or even lived in different places were more likely interested in social studies.

Content load is also a difficult problem. The difficulty stems from social studies passages. Words such as "government", "immigrants", "interdependence", "constitution", "division of labor" and "political party" may have little or no meaning for students who do not understand the concepts. Fortunately, some teachers have found methods to expand the content area of textbooks. Hoge (1986) stated that teachers must develop the required background of experience, accommodate the varied reading levels of students, and provide direct instructional help in locating places, understanding historical time periods, and technical concepts, and pronouncing foreign names.

Effective teachers challenged students to apply or extend ideas, concepts and skills they had gained from textbook lessons. In another study using resources other than textbooks, teachers used simulations, games, videos and class discussions to support material found in the textbook. Such diversity in teaching styles had to elevate students' classroom involvement and perception of social studies (Fisher & Fraser, 1984; Hootstein, 1993).

High School Perceptions' of Social Studies

Just as elementary students had perceptions of school and social studies, the same is true of high school students. As with the studies conducted at the elementary level, similar studies were conducted in the past 50 years with high-school students.

Student Perceptions

Beginning in the 1960s, research by Greenblatt (1962) and Curry and Hughes (1965) ranked social studies fourth out of five core subject areas taught in school. Physical education, English and science all ranked higher with social studies described as one of the most unexciting subjects. Schug, Todd and Beery (1982) supported the 1962 and 1965 studies. The 1982 survey asked students to rank their favorite subject. English, mathematics and reading classes were ranked ahead of social studies. Several factors contributed to high school students' positive perception of English and mathematics. Students in the 1982 study

viewed by students as both subject areas important to their future careers. Writing and general mathematics were often viewed as important in both business and engineering professions. Unlike the Hughes (1965) study, students viewed both English and mathematics having a greater variety of teaching methods and techniques compared to non-useful and unappealing curriculum found in the social studies.

Certain content areas within the social studies appeared to be more positive than others. Students seemed to have a greater interest in social geography, social history, current events, anthropology, sociology and psychology (McTeer, 1979; Schug, Todd, and Beery, 1982). McTeer (1978) surveyed 2,092 high school seniors in northwestern Georgia, and discovered that 39.1% of students selected history as their most liked school subject. Psychology and sociology were the second favored subjects with 25.9%. Students remained neutral towards government and economics. Following his study McTeer (1979) surveyed 391 elementary and high school students in Cherokee County, Georgia. Students were asked to evaluate and rate subject areas within the social studies curriculum. The results differed from the 1978 study with relative ranking of importance as follows: social history, sociology, current events, social geography, military and political history, government, economics, and physical geography.

Several factors may have attributed to why McTeer's 1979 study greatly differed from his 1978 study. The 1978 study was administered only to high school seniors located in northern Georgia in a semi-affluent suburban setting. McTeer's 1979 study comprised elementary, junior high and high school students from two different school districts. Cherokee County is on the fringe of Atlanta. Students from the southern end of the county represent a suburban white population while students from the northern end of the county represent a rural population. The students in both schools were used to blend both rural and urban student perspectives.

Dislikes and concerns were also addressed. As with elementary students, high school students found social studies content, in general, dull. Repetition of content from previous grades was considered as boring. Students often viewed the content to be extremely difficult, with complicated and difficult tests. Little time was allocated for class discussion and debate, with learning methods such as lectures and worksheets regarded as standard teaching practices. Rather, students expressed interest in teaching methods such as games, simulations, debates, class discussions and group projects.

The State of Our Nation's Youth survey (2001) surveyed 1,014 students throughout the nation between ages 13 and 18. High school males and females were asked to rank their favorite subjects according to

preference. These results were substantially different between the sexes. Males ranked physical education and sports their overall favorite class with a 66 % approval rating. History ranked a distant second with 46% approval. This was followed by art / music / drama with 45% approval. Science, mathematics and computers had the lowest ranking. Females responded to the survey in a different manner. Art / music / drama were first with 60% approval rating. English followed a close second, with physical education and sports, languages, history and science having lower ratings. While no explanation was given in terms of content and teaching methodology, these findings mirror McTeer, Blanton and Lee's (1975) research. When compared with academic offerings of mathematics, science, and English, boys expressed a greater interest in social studies than did girls.

Teaching Techniques

Researchers also began to conduct studies related to the retention of social studies facts, concepts and generalizations by students. When students were asked to reflect on information learned in class, they were unable to recall significant amounts of information learned from classroom debates, games, simulations, and videos. Rather, students remembered information and major themes within the subject matter. Research suggested that students who are subjected to involvement in activities,

small group interaction and cooperative learning are more successful in social studies classes (Mills and Durden, 1992; Slavin, 1991, 1994).

Students identified in the Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1982) study said that a social studies classroom should have a clear sense of direction and goals. Teachers should use a variety of interesting material to help facilitate the class, along with having students feel welcomed. In addition, students should have a sense of satisfaction with the work performance in class. Negative feedback was also identified. Oral reports, rote memorization, excessive amounts of homework, worksheets, and difficult tests all were expressed as reasons for non-success in social studies (McTeer, 1979).

Gender Bias

Gender difference has been extensively explored as to why high school students perceive social studies in a positive or negative belief. Fraser (1981) suggested the lack of interest in social studies is explained by gender. In his study consisting of urban high school students, Fraser found females tend to be more favorable toward social studies than males, regardless of grade level. McTeer (1975, 1986) found males were more positive in their attitudes toward social studies than females. Of the urban and suburban high school seniors sampled, 24.9% of males compared to 18.6% of the females selected social studies as the most liked subject areas.

Corbin (1994) surveyed seniors from two urban schools located in New York City. The major findings of the study suggested that male and female students who liked social studies more than other subjects were more likely to report higher academic achievement throughout these four years of social studies course work. Compared to females, males reported more interest in social studies when compared to other major subject areas. Corbin explained most history and government classes were predominately male dominated. Courses in government and military history tend to have more male stereotypes in the course content compared to cultural geography, sociology and psychology. It is these latter courses that a majority of female high school seniors stated as their favorite subjects within social studies.

Future Careers

Fernandez, Massey and Dornbusch (1975) surveyed more than 1,400 high school students in San Francisco to evaluate the importance of high school curriculum. Most students failed to see social studies as relating greatly to life, relationships or careers. Courses in mathematics and science were viewed as prep courses for college and future careers. A survey of managers, supervisors and employers of entry-level personnel found problem-solving and reading skills as two of the most important skills required in the workplace. Determining work requirements to be performed, conducting work requirements in appropriate sequences,

collecting and organizing information, identifying possible alternative approaches to solutions and summarizing and drawing reasonable conclusions are all skills sought by employers that core high school courses such as social studies teach (Hulsart & Bauman, 1983).

Summary

A sizable and representative number of studies regarding students' perceptions, likes and dislike of social studies had been reviewed in this chapter. Historical and recent studies conducted with elementary and secondary students were included. Participants who played substantial roles in these studies were from several geographic regions within the United States representing both diversity and regional interests. Regardless of methodology, sample size, location or grade level, all these studies have provided substantial information in helping to further understand the nature of why students either like or dislike social studies.

Chapter three will furnish an explanation of the design of this study. A description of backgrounds of the participants, the schools and their students and types of questions will be covered. The types of data to be collected and the methodologies to be utilized in analyzing the data will also be presented.

Chapter 3

Design of Study

Understanding student behavior as being influenced by perception or personal meaning has the potential to increase educators' effectiveness in predicting learning outcomes and promoting students' classroom learning (Byer, 1999). Students' perceptions and involvement in classroom learning are an important dimension of classroom social climate that promotes students' academic motivation (Moos, 1979; Zevin, 1983).

The rationale for choosing one research tradition over another is connected to the nature of the subjects studied and the underlying goals of research. A qualitative study was used to investigate students' individual perceptions of the social studies curriculum. This process of investigating these students' perceptions utilized a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research can be traced to the philosophical roots of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation (Merriam, 1998).

In the a phenomenological study, the focus is on the essence or structure of an experience and the assumption there is a shared experience. "These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experience of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon" (p. 15). More specifically, the study

investigates: a) how does teacher interest and enthusiasm affect students' attitudes towards social studies? b) how does teaching methodology affect students' attitudes and perceptions towards social studies? c) do the students see any relevance regarding the subject matter of social studies to their present and future lives? d) what are the concerns or recommendations expressed by students regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction? And e) do the comments and concerns regarding social studies change between middle and high school?

Randomly selecting two groups of eighth (middle school) and eleventh (high school) grade students, the researcher examined what their perceptions were regarding social studies. The specific grade levels were chosen based on recent research related to brain growth and development (Sylwester, 2000). This was further developed by Bosowski (1981) who concluded cognitive development formed a step-like progression with peaks in grades 3, 6, and 9. Investigative research in this study was performed on eighth and eleventh grade students due to correlation's of grade and age. Eighth grade students' perceptions of social studies allowed research to be conducted after a period of intellectual growth (10-12 years old). Similarly, eleventh grade students' perceptions were used to evaluate post 14 -16 year old intellectual growth where Sylwester suggests the last significant brain growth occurs.

The participants in the study were randomly selected, creating a purposeful. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight into and, therefore he must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the researcher purposefully chose to study younger (eighth grade) and older (eleventh grade) students. It is "selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 1998, p. 62).

Site

The southwestern state where the study was conducted has implemented state objectives - Priority Academics Student Skills testing or P.A.S.S. Implemented by the state, P.A.S.S is designed to test students' knowledge in the core areas of education. Without successful completion of the P.A.S.S test, students, will not graduate. The southwestern state identifies social studies curriculum as the following: anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion and sociology to promote civic competence among students. The state mandated P.A.S.S test focuses on a sample of questions that reflects a large body of information and knowledge associated with the social studies. Test questions and criterion measures are designed for the state level. Content acquisition over general themes in social studies dominates the test material. Recall questions are

prominent with little analysis, synthesis and evaluation levels of cognition to measure problem solving tasks. Local school districts are responsible to correlate their district goals, teaching strategies and scope and sequence of social studies curriculum to the P.A.S.S tests.

Both eighth and eleventh grade participants were located in a community with a population of one hundred thousand permanent residents. The community, which is considered progressive, has historically supported education with the passage of school bonds and increase taxes to improve the community's schools. A large state university is located within the community.

The school district, serves 12,511 students of which 81.4% are white, 6.6% Native American, 6.0% African American, 2.6% Asian and 1.7% Hispanic. The district's professional development program was designed in the early 1980s to help teachers expand their repertoire of skills in order to make effective decisions about teaching and learning. This program has been continually revised through the years.

The middle school where fieldwork was conducted is one of four similar size middle schools within the district. With a faculty of 52, the instructional program was based on the beliefs and expected needs and expectations from the school district and state curriculum guidelines. The staff was divided into three teams - sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Teams consist of core teachers and special education teachers. Within

each grade level team were two core teams. Each team had is a core team leader, a counselor, and an administrator who worked directly with that grade level. Social studies content covered in the schools' curriculum included early civilizations for sixth grade, geography for seventh grade, and pre-civil war history for eighth grade.

The high school used during fieldwork was one of two located in the community. It had a student population of nearly 1800 students and a faculty of 152 teachers. The high school's missions statement is reflective of the school district's commitment for its students' education. The school was noted for technology, community-based service learning, sports and the fine arts. It was recognized throughout the state as a leader in educating children. Social studies courses were diverse, allowing students a choice in levels of core courses and elective courses. Ninth grade students were required to take world history. Tenth grade students had choices in United States history, advanced United States history or Advanced Placement United States history. Juniors and seniors were required to enroll in state history and government and geography. Additional courses in sociology, current issues, psychology and Advanced Placement European history were considered electives.

Methods and Sample Selection

As noted before, this phenomenological study contained two bound systems. Although the methods used to collect data were similar, they

were not identical. In both cases, the researcher interviewed, took notes, and audio-taped each participant. Field notes were also taken throughout the study. The interviews were transcribed during one school year for both the eighth and eleventh grade participants.

Two hundred and twenty-five students were enrolled in the eighth grade level, while six hundred and forty students were enrolled in the eleventh grade level. A total of twenty-four students were selected to participate in the study. Twelve students (six male and six female) were chosen, using a two-stage random sampling from each perspective grade. The researcher decided to select four classes from each school and then randomly select three students from each class to ensure representation.

All interviews were conducted from February through March. The purpose of the interviews were to discover what are a select group of eighth and eleventh graders' attitudes toward social studies. Rather than predetermined items, a number of general questions derived from previous studies were used to initially guide the interviews (Appendix A).

Permission to conduct interviews was granted from the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (Appendix B) and the local school district where the interviews were conducted. Each of the participants and his / her legal guardians were asked to sign a release form before the interview. Thirty-minute interviews (approximately) were conducted with each student. Prior to the interview, demographic data was collected on

each student (Appendix C). An informal, conversational interview tone was used to increase the relevance of questions. Questions were asked as needed to ensure the information was significant to the questionnaire and scope of study. A set order of questions was given to each participant. Their responses were probed and clarified for comprehension, while personal and self-perceptions were encouraged. The purpose of interviewing was not only to listen to the words, but also to derive meanings, motivations, and conflicts (DeMoss, 1998). Interviews were designed to discover how individuals viewed social studies and how these interpretations were used as the basis for their perceptions. As is the case in numerous qualitative studies, the interviews evolved to include generic comments about school and life in general.

Interviews were tape recorded to ensure accuracy. The researcher transcribed each interview. Each transcript was verified for accuracy by listening to the audio-tape while reading the documentation. Analysis of data followed the Diener and Crandall's (1978) model in social and behavioral research. Notes were taken for each interview describing nonverbal cues, and posture within each bound system. Each interview was then coded and resulting themes were noted. Then corroborating themes were established within the bound system (eighth grade) through triangulation with field notes. The same process was done for the second bound system (eleventh grade) after which time similarities and

differences were noted. To ensure no researcher bias affected the data outcome, the researcher performed fieldwork in schools where he was neither employed nor knew student participants.

Internal validity was maintained by using two-stage random sampling procedures in the same school setting. In this multi-case analysis, the use of predetermined questions and consistent procedures in coding enhanced the generalizing of findings. Triangulation of previous research treated as a data set and outside resources were used to validate information obtained. Peer examination was from a university professor who examined and critiqued findings as they emerged.

Analysis

As a result of the interviews, the analysis examined the students' perceptions of social studies. Throughout the study, interviews, and interview notes were reviewed daily. The data from each bound system (interviews and interview notes) were coded individually. Each interview was coded, developed into a theme and analyzed to examine each individual's perception towards social studies.

Special attention was given to data that seemed to challenge previous studies. Each category from the first bounded system (eighth grade) was then compared to that of the other (eleventh grade) in order to trace the development of students' attitudes toward school and social studies throughout the middle school and high school experience.

Summary

In chapter three, explanations for the design and methodology used in this investigation were described. The experimental parameters, participants, site of the study, instruction, instrumentation, and procedures of data analysis were discussed as major themes of this chapter. In the following chapter, examination and interpretation of data gathered during this study will be presented. Eighth and eleventh grade students' perceptions of social studies will be reported and analyzed.

Chapter 4

Introduction

As stated previously, this study examined students' perceptions of social studies in the public schools. Eighth and eleventh grade students were asked the same questions to increase comparability of responses and reduce interviewer effects and bias. Interview questions were structured after Patton's (1990) six basic types of questions that can be asked of people. Any or all of these questions might be asked during the interview. The six types are 1) background and demographic questions, 2) knowledge questions, 3) experience or behavior questions, 4) opinion or values questions, 5) feelings questions, and 6) sensory questions.

Interviews were conducted with a standardized open-ended interview. Predetermined questions and sequence of order were determined in advance. All interviewees were asked the same basic questions in the same order. In order to clarify and increase the relevance of student responses, unstructured / informal exploratory questions were periodically asked to gain a greater insight into student responses.

Eighth Grade

The middle school where fieldwork was conducted was one of four similar size middle schools within the district. With a faculty of 52, the instructional program was based on the beliefs and expected needs and expectations from the

school district and state curriculum guidelines. The eighth grade social studies content covered in the schools' curriculum consists of pre-civil war history. The analysis of the twelve participants focused on the students' perceptions of social studies in middle school. The following is the students responses to the six initial interview research questions.

What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like?

Ten out of twelve students believed the social studies classroom should reflective social studies topics and themes, and have current computer / video technology. Students described the classroom as colorful and fostering a positive learning environment with student artwork, posters and maps. Erika, who thought for several minutes, described the classroom as a place where a student should want to learn.

> When I come into a classroom, I want it to look nice. I can really tell a lot about a teacher by the way the classroom looks. If the room is blank and has nothing on the wall, I think the teacher is boring. If the room has color and posters on the walls, it seems like the teacher cares about teaching.

When asked if this is always the case, Erika admitted that sometimes a teacher can have a really colorful room, but not be that interested in teaching.

> I guess I've had a few teachers who have some really

> neat looking classrooms, but not really cared about teaching. I just think, for the most part, if a teacher has an interesting room, then they probably have a better attitude about teaching than a teacher who doesn't care about making the room look interesting.

Sarah agreed and placed great importance on the display of students work both on the classroom walls, and outside of the classroom. She explains:

> I really like it when the teacher puts our work on the walls in the classroom and the halls at school. I like the idea that others see our work and it makes me want to do a better job if I know I will get to put my work up in the classroom.

Computer technology was also stressed among the eighth grade participants. Nine of the 12 participants described computers and televisions as important learning tools within the classroom. Students recommended more computers within the classroom or a personal computer at each students' desk. Interactive television and cable in the classroom was stressed among the students. Phil, who likes video games and would like to be a video game designer, described the importance of computer technology in the classroom.

> I like a classroom to have posters and stuff on the walls, but I would really like to see more computers in my classes. I think we should get rid of all of the books, because they are boring. Have a computer at each student's desk and

give the assignments that way. We could use the computer to research material and talk to other classrooms via-email.

The importance of technology in the classroom to raise academic performance and further learning among students was supported by Hunter (1985) and White (1988). Hunter explained that our society is moving into the information age, in which activities and institutions are based on the organizations' storage and dissemination of information. The ability to sort through information provided by computer and apply that information to problem solving must become a fundamental part of learning. The educational advantages are also important. White found that students using computers to retrieve data had a statically significant higher test scores than students using non-computer data-retrieved systems.

As a result of student feedback, most students favor computer technology in the classroom. Students enjoy classrooms that display colorful artwork and posters depicting themes of material recently or currently being covered in class. Students suggested the design and layout of the classroom may indirectly illustrate the teachers enthusiasm for the class and subject matter.

Some students would say that social studies courses do little to help them in preparation for the future. Would you agree with them or disagree with them?

Many of the eighth grade students differed on the importance of social studies in middle school curriculum. Seven students viewed social studies as

important in building an awareness of other cultures, to learn from the past, or to meet college entry requirements. Two students expressed the importance of citizenship as an important attribute of studying social studies.

> To be an American citizen you should know about your heritage and where you came from, who founded our country and how our government works. (interview with Austin)

Alex, who likes social studies, mentions the importance of good citizenship and voting as important reasons to study social studies.

> I realize that we haven't spent that much time in government this year, but I think it's important that I learn about how to vote and who should be the next president. If I don't learn this stuff while I am in school, then how am I going to know what is going on and who should be our president?

Learning from the past and learning about different cultures were identified by students as important reasons to study social studies. Sally, who wishes to become a missionary, feels learning other cultures is important.

> I want to be an missionary when I get out of college. I think by learning about other cultures, it will better prepare me for the future. Besides, I think it is a great idea to learn about other cultures, so we can

better understand who they are.

Phil, who selected social studies as his second favorite class, describes the knowledge of social studies as important because of past mistakes made by others.

> I have heard about the stock market crash on a show on the history channel. I think it is important to learn about mistakes like the stock market crash, so it doesn't happen again. If we did this with all of history, most of our problems could be solved today.

Sam, who would like to join the military after school, agreed with the importance of previous historical mishaps in relation to military leaders throughout the world. He explains:

> My history teacher told us about how history often repeats itself. He gave us some examples of how Hitler made several mistakes during World War II. I thought that was kind of neat, because I really like the military. I think it it is good to study the mistakes of others and then learn from them.

Four students were undecided about the importance of social studies in the middle school level. Students believed that social studies did have importance, but not for every eighth grade student. The four students believed social studies would be better suited for students who intended to use

government or history in their future careers. Aubrey, who spent several minutes thinking about the question, said it best when she explained the rationale for not being required to take social studies in middle school.

> I think social studies would be a great class to take if you were going to run for office or government when you got older, but I really don't think leaning about how a bill becomes a law, or how our government works is that important for the average kid who will not use it when they get older unless you plan to study history or government when you get to college.

The researcher then ask a follow-up question. He then asked Aubrey if she ever wanted to learn about government or how a bill becomes a law. After a few moments, she replied:

> I guess I will learn it when I get older and go to high school. I will eventually learn it, but I really don't see the importance of that in eighth grade. We are suppose to have fun while in middle school, not worry about how to run for political office!

Trey was the only student to suggest social studies was not important in middle school. While Trey agreed that social studies is important if a student plans on running for political office, or studies government, he also stated:

> that hardly anybody will actually run for office. Why

> do we need to learn who founded our country? Will this have a major impact on my life? No. I think a large part of social studies is a waste of time. Social studies is usually a bunch of small details that no kid will ever use in their lives.

The researcher closely listened to Trey's comments, and then followed-up by asking Trey what should be taught in eighth grade social studies to make it more interesting. Trey thought for several minutes and then stated:

> I don't know. I really don't think we should have social studies in eighth grade. I think of social studies as being taught at the high school and not at the middle school. I want to be a golfer when I get older, so I just don't see the importance of social studies.

Trey's opinion of social studies was similar to the results found when Fernandez, Massey and Dornbusch (1975) surveyed 1,436 students regarding the importance of social studies. The findings indicated that most students failed to see the relevance of social studies to life, or the relationship of social studies to future occupational goals. With seven out of twelve students finding some relevance in social studies taught in middle school, all participants were asked describe their favorite eighth grade class.

How would you rate your social studies class using a scale of favorite to least favorite?

Recognizing the importance of social studies, students were asked to describe their favorite eighth grade class. While social studies was viewed as important to curriculum, only one student selected social studies as their favorite subject. Students' choice of subjects varied from mathematics, science, English to the arts and humanities. While some of the choices were motivated by self interest, others were selected by factors such as college preparation or personal interest.

Kim, who wanted to be a photographer, describes her social studies class as fun and diversified in the way the teacher teaches.

> I like my history class. While other classes may at times be better, I think all around I enjoy my history class the most. My teacher makes learning history fun and interesting. I think the stuff I learn now will only help me when I go to high school.

When the researcher asked how the teacher made it fun and interesting, Kim replied "by letting us do group work, argue in class, and independent projects". Three students selected mathematics and two students selected the sciences as their favorite classes. Students mentioned both mathematics and science will help their future careers while providing them with a greater chance

of admittance into college. Jefferson, who would like to be a meteorologist, summarized the feeling of a number of students.

> I think science and math are my two favorite classes. I like them because I really think it will help me with my job in meteorology and in college. My teacher makes learning science fun, while my math teacher both challenges us and also show us new ways to use math. I guess the major difference between both math and science compared to my other classes is that my other teachers tend to teach the same way everyday. In science and math, my teachers change things and make learning fun.

According to Weiss (1977) the popularity of science and social studies was never high among students but increases somewhat as students age. Mathematics, by contrast, was the favorite of nearly half of nine year-olds, yet becomes less popular with older students. It was, even, the favorite of more 13-17 year-olds than either science or social studies.

Three students selected English as their favorite subject. All three students suggested English would be valuable in their future careers. Austin selected English as his favorite class. He mentioned that:

> English is really important, but so is social studies. I really like both, but I would say that English is probably

more important. I love to read, so literature and English are interesting to me. My teacher really doesn't make English that exciting, but I do. The more reading I do now, the better writer I become. It will only make it easier for me in the future.

When asked how he made English exciting, Austin explained:

I like to read more books than the teacher assigns in class. Since I read all of the time, I challenge myself to read not only the book, but find out as much about the book as I can. I do this a lot with books that relate to history.

Two students chose the arts and humanities as their most liked subjects. Sam, who would like to join the military upon graduation, selected band as his favorite class. When asked why, Sam replied:

While band might not be the most popular class in middle school, I like it. I like the idea that I am in charge of my part of the music, and I am responsible for helping the rest of the band make the music sound good. I don't know if I will stay in band once I get to high school, but for now, I like the fact I can make a big difference.

Sam explained that while he believes he makes a difference in all of his classes, his impact in band is the greatest. With a big smile, Sam said "it makes me feel good to know I make a big impact with something".

Sarah chose vocal music as her favorite class. Sarah also suggested the importance of teamwork and individual skill as one of the top reasons why she viewed vocal music as her favorite class.

> I have always been told I am a good singer. God gave me this talent, so I want to use it. I love to sing not only in school, but in church and whenever I can. I like vocal music, because I am good at it. I like to sing solo, but also as a group. Vocal music is the only class I have where you can excel individually, but also as a group.

The predominant characteristics of this question was that eighth grade students, while most view the importance of social studies, rarely selected as their favorite class. Even though eleven students selected social studies in their top five classes, mathematics, science and the practical arts and humanities all scored higher than social studies.

Suppose you could change anything about your social studies class. What would you do and what would it be like?

Involvement from the participants within the eighth grade was a result of knowledge and constructive criticism. Eighth grade participants sought to

provide not only information regarding social studies, but also important feedback for a variety of social studies related issues. These issues included various teaching methods, classroom structure and discipline.

Ten students indicated that most teachers used either lecture or the book as the dominant method of transmission, with a minimal emphasis placed on alternative assessments such as group projects, group work, class discussions or class debates. Whether the information was the name of state capitals, members of the Boston Tea Party, or how a bill becomes law, students were in large part expected to memorize specific information for a specific time period.

Kelsey, who spent several minutes thinking about the question, said it best when she explained the importance or neither lecturing, nor using the textbook on a regular basis.

> I really like hands on learning. Classroom discussion is okay, but I like the idea of debates and arguments. I like being in groups, being assigned a task and then being held responsible for knowing the material to present to others in class. You have fun while doing it, and most important - you remember what you read and said to others in class. Teachers who always use lecture or the textbook seem to bore me. Me and my friends seem to "zone out" because often the teacher just randomly goes on, so you either fall asleep, or

> flip pages to keep yourself awake. When a teacher lectures or always uses the textbook, you don't get to work with others as much and ask questions.

Sam agreed:

> I really don't like it when my teacher just gets up in-front of the class and lectures. I think the stuff is interesting, but when he does it almost everyday, it gets old. I wish we could do more hands on learning and have an opportunity to do more projects instead.

When asked why he wanted more hands on learning and projects, Sam replied that:

> Doing projects gives me a chance to do something on my own, but also show the teacher I know the material. I think that sometimes doing projects is the best way to teach the stuff to the class because it makes us have to think about, and use some creativity to let the teacher know I understand.

Areas noted relating to class instruction were also recommended for possible change. Recommendation for class structure and discipline were stressed by two students. These two students suggested several teachers did not have nor maintained control of their students or classroom. As a result, the

two students believed this "lack of control" interfered with their learning environment. Austin, said it best when he stated:

> I think if I had to recommend change in my social studies class, or any class, I think I would change the class structure and discipline. I mean, I understand class discussion is important, but when we go to class, all of the kids just talk and talk and the teacher has no control over the class. Bell work and other assignments given at the start of the hour doesn't even work. Many students realize the grade given on busy assignments will not really hurt their grade, so the act like they don't care.

Students' results indicated that teachers should limit the amount of lecture used as a means of instruction. Students recommended teachers use more class discussion, debates and projects to be the preferred method of teaching. Reasons for their responses varied, but overall students believed they received a better understanding of content when given an opportunity to express their beliefs, opinions and factual data with their peers.

What do you think the best method or way to learn social studies would be?

When students were asked to describe the best method in learning social studies, all twelve participants expressed active learning as the preferred method

of instruction. Students believed discussion / debate and simulations made learning social studies both fun and interesting. Kelsey, described discussions in any classroom as:

> an opportunity to let students express themselves. I think it's a good idea to listen to the teacher talk and then give the students a chance to give their side. A few of my teachers do that, and the class really responds when he gives us a chance to argue. Debating in class is fun, because you can see what others think.

The researcher then asked Kelsey if she thought it was important to listen to the teacher and takes notes while the teacher lectured. With a puzzled look, she responded:

> Yes, I have to listen to the teacher in order to know what the stuff is about. The teacher always has the chance to talk, but after he gives the lesson to us and he asks us what we think, it is not long before an argument takes place. Sometimes I think my teacher tries to start arguments just to get us involved. I only wish we did it more.

Phil agreed:

> I think it's important to listen to the teacher first. After the teacher is finished, I think it's cool when we have

> the chance to argue our side. The class usually gets pretty fired-up and we get to see what others think about the lesson and how they could solve the problem.

The researcher asked Phil if he could give an example of when the class used either discussion or simulations. Phil responded:

> Okay, when we studied the making of the thirteen colonies. We spent a couple of classes talking about how the colonies came together and worked to make a country. What I think is cool is when our teacher then asked us if we thought the colonies did the right thing. He divided us into groups, and our groups became one of the thirteen colonies. We had to make our currency, flag, laws and other stuff. It was easy until we had to all agree on what laws worked and didn't work. It was fun, and I think I learned more from that than when I took notes over it.

Bonwell and Eisen (1991) believed students who engage in these forms of active learning do more than merely listen. Students must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most importantly, students are actively involved and must engage in such higher order thinking tasks as analysis,

synthesis and evaluation. As a result, students are doing things and thinking about what they are doing and how it relates to the lesson.

How important would you say teacher interest and enthusiasm are in your attitude toward social studies?

Apart from students' views of teaching methodology, students expressed an overwhelming interest and importance on teacher interest in the material and enthusiasm for teaching. Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982) described the strong roles the teacher and the learning environment play in potentially shaping attitude toward social studies. Furthermore, teacher factors such as commitment to help students learn, enthusiasm and the provisions of individual attention, were highly related to students' attitudes. Katie explained that even when a teacher lectures, the attitude the teacher has towards the subject and students is important.

> Regardless of the class material, I think a teacher has to be excited about teaching the material. My social studies teacher is excited about what he is teaching, even though the material is boring and dull. Even when he has to lecture, you can tell he really cares about the stuff he is teaching us. It isn't just my social studies teacher. My math teacher is the same way. While math is my

favorite subject, he teaches the material in a way that makes students want to learn.

Sam, who at times, would classify as a non-achiever, summarized how a lack of teacher interest and enthusiasm could alter a student's opinion of a subject.

> Some of my teachers won't even attempt to make learning fun, even when they do like it. My science teacher doesn't like anything and you can really tell. She is a nice person, but she just never seems to enjoy the stuff she teaches us. I think a good teacher will teach the material, make it fun and interesting and move on to another topic.

Sam's opinion is reflective of Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1982) when they concluded teacher variables and learning variables were high when the teacher showed; 1) enthusiasm for subject matter; 2) knowledge of subject matter; 3) commitment to help students learn and 4) frequent praise and reinforcement. Miller (1981) stressed the importance of teacher morale and enthusiasm for subject matter suggesting high teacher morale makes learning more pleasant for students and more conducive for learning.

Eleventh Grade

The eleventh grade students who took part in this study were part of a four year high school. In this school social studies courses are diverse, allowing students a choice in levels of core courses and elective courses. Juniors are required to enroll in state history and United States government. Additional courses in sociology, geography, current issues, psychology and advanced placement European history are considered electives. The analysis of the twelve participants focused on how and what students thought about social studies at the high school level. Like the eighth grade sample, the eleventh grade participants were asked the same interview questions.

What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like?

Unlike their eighth grade counterparts, eleventh grade students did not place a large emphasis on the actual physical surroundings inside the classroom. Rather, eight students described the ideal social studies classroom as being an environment where students are to learn. Artwork, maps and other visual aides, while important, were viewed as reinforcements to the curriculum taught. Heather, who would like to be in theater, described the classroom as a place to learn.

> I like classrooms, and I guess this also applies to
> social studies, where you go into the classroom,
> get the lesson and go on with your other classes.

> I like it when teachers give you the material, and you have time to work on it in class, so if you have questions, you can ask there rather than waiting until you get home and become totally lost.

Ryan agreed and believed the ideal social studies classroom has active participation among the students and the teacher.

> I think the ideal social studies classroom for me is where the students have the opportunity to ask questions and argue with other students. The desks are arranged where every student can see each other, so when we talk about stuff everyone can listen and speak.

Michelle firmly believed more technology should be in all social studies classrooms. After thinking for a minute, and acting somewhat hesitant, she mentioned that:

> Most all of the history classes I've been in lacked computers. I think if we are to study other political parties and governments, we should have the opportunity to research them on school computers and watch it on television. To me, having technology is important not only in social studies, but every class.

The remaining three students did not have a specific preference for the ideal social studies classroom. All three students implied they had no opinion for

the physical arrangement of the classroom or if technology was provided. Stephen illustrated it best when he said:

> I never really gave it a lot of thought about how a class should look. I come to class to learn or to pass time. I really don't care that much for school, so the way a class looks is not that big of a deal.

Some students would say that social studies courses do little to help them in preparation for the future. Would you agree with them or disagree with them?

Ten of the participants viewed social studies as an active important role in their high school education and preparation for the future. Within high school curriculum, social studies was not viewed as having one single importance, or one subject area being dominant among students. Instead, like other content areas, the importance of social studies was derived from the participants' own educational goals and past experiences.

Students related social studies to their lives and preparation for future careers and civic responsibility. Social studies classes were not viewed necessarily as a waste of time, but rather important building blocks centered around United States history and United States government.

John, who classifies himself as an "A" student and would like to be an engineer, described the transformation of social studies in high school by stating:

> When I was younger, I thought history and social

> studies in general were a waste of time. I thought it was dumb, and I would never need it in the future. My attitude really began to change when I got to high school and took harder classes. As I got older and could choose different types of social studies classes, social studies became more interesting. The classes were hard, but I noticed how the world, especially the news, related to what we talked about in class.

Michelle agreed:

> I think my attitude throughout school changed. When I was a freshmen, I felt that I had to take world history because it was a requirement. When you have to take something, I feel like not putting one hundred percent into it. As I got older, I realized the stuff I was taking was for a purpose. Do I think some of the stuff we study is stupid? Yes, but as I got older, I realized how it would affect my life. You need the government and especially the American history to help you when you get out school.

Four students explained that government was important in their high school curriculum. Students mentioned government classes gave them a better

understanding and overall awareness on how our government works, what the differences in political parties were and what other governmental ideologies were. Nicole, an 18 year old junior, described government as an important instrument in building citizenship.

> Government is the most interesting social studies course. I've had several social studies courses, and I think government is the best class. Other courses like state history and United States history are good, but cover way too much material. My government teacher makes learning government fun and interesting. When I walked into the class at the start of the semester, I had no idea what political parties were out there and which on I likes best. The fact is I still don't know which one best represents me, but at least I know which ones are out there and have a better idea of what they do.

When asked how Nicole's government teacher made learning fun, she responded:

> He gives us a chance to ask questions and speak our minds about how it should or shouldn't work. If we think something is wrong, we have a chance to decide how we would change it. I also like the fact we have an

opportunity to explore other political systems and decide the good and bad points within each political system.

Newman (1989) described the main task for democratic citizens is to deliberate with other citizens about the nature of public good and how to achieve it. Therefore, social studies classrooms should serve as a lab in which students can experiment with democratic processes. Harwood and Hahn (1990) believed debate and controversial issues should be used in social studies classrooms because; 1) it prepares students for roles as citizens in society; 2) debates develop critical thinking and research skills and 3) debates improve students interpersonal skills.

Questions related to United States history had similar results among students. Six students described United States history as the most important course in their school's social studies curriculum. Students commented by studying United States history, Americans can learn from our's and other's mistakes.

> History is an opportunity for us to learn from others' mistakes and poor choices. I can remember last year when we studied about the stock market crash and why it happened. I know I will not be an banker when I get out of college, but I least know what signs to look for if our country has another stock market crash. (interview with Ryan)

Emily also described United States history as her favorite course in social studies, but focused rather on learning minority and multicultural issues as her reason of choice.

> I like how in history we talked about different minority groups and people from different backgrounds. We talked about stuff like that in world history, but in American history, we had the opportunity to argue, research and explore the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Movement in the 1960's. I like the fact that people became mad and wanted to argue about issues discussed in class. I enjoyed learning and discussing stuff that other people often don't like to talk about.

Two students did not find a connection and importance with social studies. Both students explained they had never enjoyed social studies and found the content among all social studies classes as, dull and lacking in creativity. Stephen, who is studying to become a mechanic explains:

> I have really never enjoyed social studies. My teachers have tried to make it fun, but there are just some subjects that a person really doesn't like. I really don't think I will ever need to know social studies. yes, it is important to learn about voting, but in my life, I really don't think I need

to know everything my classes have tried to push down my throat.

When asked what he believed was important regarding social studies, Stephen responded that "I guess the idea of voting is important, but I will probably just listen to the candidates and then decide who I will vote for". As a result of their beliefs, ten out of twelve students found importance in the social studies classes taken. Students believed social studies, particularly government and United States history as useful in building their multicultural, political and international awareness. Findings contradict Fernandez, Massey and Dornbusch's (1975) survey which concluded most students failed to see social studies as relating greatly to life, relationships or future careers.

How would you rate your social studies class using a scale of favorite to least favorite?

Eleventh grade students' perception of social studies did not necessarily consider social studies as the dominant and most important subject taught within school curriculum. Among the participants, social studies, while viewed as important, was not selected as the most important subject. Rather, all twelve participants selected courses within the practical arts, mathematics, sciences, English and foreign languages as their choice.

Eight students selected practical arts related courses as their most important classes in high school. Nicole, who admits she has difficulty in school, struggled over the question.

> This is a hard one. I mean I like a lot of classes. But I would have to say that my computer and business class is the most important. Every class has its good and bad points, but I think by taking this computer class, I will be better prepared when I get out of school, because I don't know if I'm going to college, so at least I will know how to work on the computer.

Students who chose business related classes told the importance of needing to know how computers and the business world operated. What is surprising is that several students who identified practical arts curriculum as their most important class described their reluctance to continue their education at a college or university. Clay, who states he has never really enjoyed school, describes how Vo-Tech was the most important course in his school career.

> I know I am not going to college. My grades are bad and to be honest, I think school sucks. I like going to Vo-Tech because nobody messes with you, and I like working on cars. This is my first year at Vo-Tech and I really like it. I really don't want to go on to college.

> I am happy working on cars and one day opening my own shop.

All students who identified the practical arts as their most desired course, identified teaching methodology as both important and supportive in learning. Matt, who ranked business as his first choice, summarized the experience for a number of students.

> The one thing that I like about the business classes is that the teacher lets you work at your own pace. When you come to class, the assignment is on the board along with the due date. You can work at your own pace and not feel rushed to get it done that day. When you need help, the teacher will help you. As long as you try to do your work, turn your stuff in, you can make a good grade.

When asked if he felt it was right to receive a passing grade for trying to do an assignment, Matt replied that "it is a self-paced class. I don't feel bad at all for making a passing grade and doing as little as possible". Choir, media, and student council also were mentioned as being important. Students believed, while they were elective courses, they were important in the balance of school curriculum. Kristen, who wanted to be in politics, describes student council as:

> Important because it gives you a better understanding about how our government works. It shows you how

to better help your fellow students and it prepares me for civil service when I get out of college.

John mentioned the experiences and knowledge gained from media will help in his future goals.

> Our school district has one of the best media centers anywhere. Both our school and the other high school have some great programs written and produced by the students. I would love to work in media when I get older, so to me, media is the only class that I think is going to really prepare me for college. I am good at media and hopefully this will help me get into a college's journalism department.

Mathematics and science were selected by two students. Jenny, who was a straight "A" student had some difficulty answering this question. She explained that several classes were of great importance such as mathematics and science. After a short period of time, she came to the decision that physiology was the most important course because it would help her in the future. Her decision was made because of her ambition to become a doctor. She describes her interest in both biology and trigonometry as a close second and third in relevant courses, with social studies ranking last.

> I am a science and math person. Everyone has classes and subjects they are good in, and science and math are

mine. I make good grades in history, but since it doesn't come natural to me, and I want to become a doctor, history is not one of my top picks.

Ryan agreed:

> I really like physics. I have the opportunity to do a bunch of hands on learning in physics and I think it will help me in my math and science courses once I go to college. I don't mind history, but I just like science better.

Two students selected English and foreign language as their most important classes. Both students described the importance of verbal and written communication as important reasons for their choices. Michelle, who loves French, described how foreign languages are important in today's culture and society.

> I think everyone should learn a foreign language. I think it's important to learn someone else's culture and language. With what happened on Sept. 11, it may come in handy someday. Besides, it makes you look smarter when you speak more than one language.

Emily described her love of writing as her major factor in selecting English as her most important class.

> I know most people hate English, because of all of the reading and writing. I like it, though. I really don't know

> why, but I like to write and read poetry. In English we cover all of this material compared to other classes. I have nothing against my other classes, but if I had to pick just one class, English would be it.

Five students ranked social studies as one of their top three courses. All five students chose United States history as their favorite social studies class. Michelle, who ranked United States history as her third choice stated that "social studies is important to know, but not my most important class in high school". Clay, who chose business over social studies explained:

> The way I see it is that history is a good class. This is my last year to take history, unless I want to take more electives. I probably won't, but that is not a bad thing. I think business and math are more important in college.

When asked why he believed business and mathematics were more important in college, Clay thought for a moment and said:

> I don't know. I never really thought about it, but I don't plan on majoring in history, and I know I will have to take at least one history class, but I bet I will take more business and math than history.

The predominant characteristic discovered from this questions suggests students valued the importance of social studies in building citizenship, but did

not selected it as the most important course in school curriculum. Subject areas such as mathematics, science, the arts and humanities all scored consistently higher than social studies. The results were similar to Schug, Todd and Berry's (1982) survey were English, mathematics and science were all ranked ahead of social studies. Students in the 1982 study viewed these subject areas important to future careers. Courses in mathematics and sciences were viewed as prep courses for college and future careers.

Suppose you could change anything about your social studies class. What would you do and what would it be like?

Ten out of the twelve students recommended no changes to their social studies classes. Students believed the content, materials and teaching methodology was acceptable, giving little feedback or criticism. Two students did mention changes in course length and scope and sequence of world history, state history and United States history.

Heather did not rank social studies as one of her favorite classes, but she did express the importance of her government class as a year long course rather than one semester.

> I will be the first to tell you that social studies is not my strong area. But, even though it may not be my best class, I think it's important to have government be longer than one semester. It is an important class that we need

before we graduate.

Heather continued to describe how a full year of government would benefit students more than one semester. She claimed that one semester is not long enough, and the teacher rushes through the material to complete the materials by the end of the semester.

> It just seemed like my teacher was always in a rush to finish the chapter and give us the test. Looking back, I bet it was because we didn't have enough time to do everything he wanted us to do. We didn't even get halfway through the book.

Matt mentioned that state history be taught in the ninth grade, teach world history in tenth grade, and United States history in eleventh grade. His rationale for change involved both maturity and importance of material.

> If I could change anything, looking back, I think I would switch some classes around. Our state history class is a joke and really easy. This would be great for incoming freshmen because it would be easy and they could get it out of the way. I would take world history and move it to the tenth grade and move U.S. history to the eleventh grade.

Matt continued to discuss why he would make such a move in the school district's scope and sequence. He justified his changes with the importance of maturity.

> The reason why I would do it this way is because we take world history our freshmen year. I can't remember anything from my world history class, and I had a good teacher. If we moved it up one year, students are more hopefully more mature and I think they would learn more. Besides, you can relate material from world history directly to American history. Students are older, better prepared, and will take it more seriously if they want to graduate.

What do you think the best method or way to learn social studies would be?

Eleventh grade students did stress the importance of teaching styles in the classroom. Unlike a majority of eighth grade students, seven students viewed lecture with open discussion as their favorite learning style. Students illustrated the importance of note taking and perfecting writing skills as an important factor in their decision.

> I think it really helps me when the teacher lectures. Even though it may not be the best part of the class, I know the material given will be on the test. From

what I have been told by a couple of guys in college,

that is only way they teach.

(interview with Jenny)

The remaining five students selected independent projects or group work as their favorite learning style in social studies. Students described the importance of lecture and how often it was necessary in class, but how alternative methods may produce the same information and results. Brian explained it best when he said:

> Group work and individual projects are important.
> In all of my high school history classes, I can count
> on one hand how many times my teachers let us
> do a project for a test grade. Most of my teachers,
> even outside of history, hardly ever give us projects.
> I like them, because it gives me a chance to either
> work on my own, or work with someone else. The
> results to me are the same. I sill learn the material,
> but instead of just memorizing facts, numbers and
> dates, I actually remember what I learn. For example:
> when we studied the Cold War, we were allowed to
> do a project where my group escaped from East Berlin.
> We had to research and really know our material.
> It was fun because we had a chance to present the

material to the class, but also use our imagination.

Student interest and attitude toward content and methodology choices differed greatly from McTeer's (1979) study. In McTeer's study student's of similar grade level expressed a greater interest in geography and sociology compared to United States history and government. In relation to various teaching methodology, McTeer's study identified discussion type classes more than lecture and independent group projects.

How important would you say teacher interest and enthusiasm are in your attitude toward social studies?

All twelve students valued the importance of teacher enthusiasm when in the classroom. Students believed the learning environment should be positive, yet also professional. Students indicated that while teacher enthusiasm should be positive, teachers should also tailor the enthusiasm and interest according to the grade level. Kristin said it best for all twelve students when she said

> I think the fact the teacher is interested in the material is mandatory. If the teacher doesn't care about the material or even know the material, then it makes it harder on me to learn the material. I do think a teacher, regardless of whatever they teacher should teach according to the grade level.

The researcher asked Kristen to clarify the statement regarding grade level. Without hesitation, Kristin said:

> What I mean is that I think teacher enthusiasm is important, but it has it time and place. If I'm in an advanced A.P. class, I would expect to learn the material and then have fun. Some teachers just have students draw pictures, color paper and make posters. This is fine if you're middle school, but I think in high school, it needs to be more balanced.

Chapter Summary

In chapter four, the data gathered through interviews with eighth and eleventh grade participants were explored. The attitudes' and perceptions' of these groups were the foci of the discussion. Notwithstanding some dissimilarities, the fact that both groups had both similarities and dissimilarities was evident.

Chapter five will present the themes which emerged from the data gathered, and implications derived from this research. Possible avenues for further study will be proposed.

Chapter 5

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore in depth middle school and high school students' perceptions of social studies. To accomplish this, twenty-four students from a local middle and high school were chosen as the major participants of this study. During this investigation, qualitative methods of research were utilized as the research paradigm. These individuals provided valuable information, interesting ideas, important insights, and true feelings that were more than the writer imagined.

Each of the participants was interviewed from February through March. Interviews were conducted at the participant's school site and generally lasted thirty minutes. Prior to the interviews, demographic data was collected on each student. During the interviews, a set order of questions were given to each participant. Their responses were probed and clarified for comprehension, while personal and self-perceptions were encouraged.

The researcher studied these two groups in the hope that a greater knowledge would develop about students' perceptions of social studies. The specific questions that were raised in this study were: a) how does teacher interest and enthusiasm effect student attitudes toward social studies? b) how does teaching methodology effect students'

attitudes towards social studies? c) do the students see any relevance regarding the subject matter of social studies to their present and future lives? d) what are the concerns or recommendations expressed by students regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction and e) do the comments and concerns regarding social studies change between middle school and high school? could be answered. The results of participant responses to the questions led to the emergence of two dominant themes shared by both grades. Chapter five presents a discussion of these themes and related issues.

There were many different teacher and environmental variables closely related to social studies. As Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982b) concluded, there were six teacher and five learning variables which gives credence to the importance of subject matter, image and future career objectives. These teacher variables were: 1) enthusiasm for the subject matter; 2) knowledge of the subject matter; 3) commitment to help students learn; 4) individual attention; 5) fairness; and 6) frequent praise and reinforcement. Learning environment variables were: 1) a sense of direction for the goals of the class; 2) use of interesting materials; 3) friendly group of students; 4) a pleasant physical environment; and 5) satisfaction with the work of the class and importance of social studies.

With both teacher and learning variables, previous research and research questions in mind, the researcher developed several themes that related to the analysis of the information provided by the eighth and eleventh grade students. Themes were determined by terms, concepts and categories the investigator interpreted from the data. Themes were designed to answer the research question as well as the specific interview questions (see Appendix A). Themes were developed from the frequency of data, and the uniqueness of participant feedback. Although individual students held a dominant perspective, careful analysis revealed that students also expressed qualities mentioned by other participants. As each bound system was analyzed, two dominant themes emerged. These are: 1) active involvement, and teacher enthusiasm led to positive images of social studies by middle and high school students; and 2) the perceived utilitarian value, or lack of it is a major factor regarding student views of social studies.

Over the past years, both the eighth grade and eleventh grade students had gained experience, knowledge and recommendations in terms of their social studies classes. Their insights were comprehensive, and could be felt and appreciated not only by their teachers, but the researcher as well. Their insights come from years of social studies classes and numerous exposures to different teaching methodology, content and evaluation.

Most students were realistic and expressed an interest about social studies. Minor problems such as school spirit, clean campuses, and discipline did not alter students' perceptions of social studies. Rather, students immediate concern, within social studies, were focused on teaching methodology, and the value of civic participation within social studies. As a result, students spent some time describing experiences and possible recommendations for change.

From casual conversations with the students and recorded interviews, the researcher believed the two themes are evident. During the interviews, students often expressed the importance of participation in the learning process. Active learning, teacher enthusiasm, and relevancy of material led to positive images and perceptions of social studies by both middle and high school students.

> The teacher needs to be excited about learning. When the teacher is excited about the material, I tend to have more interest in the stuff being taught. If the teacher doesn't make it exciting, and something I can understand, then how am I going to like it, and study it?
> (interview with Erika)

Both middle and high school students mentioned times of boredom and uncertainty when the teaching methodology was primarily expository instruction.

> I think the drawback when my teacher lectures is the the fact that we have no idea what the class is doing unless she writes an agenda on the board. Otherwise, the class is lost and sometimes struggles to keep up (interview with Heather)

Eighth grade students saw the need for alternative methods of instruction, where students were allowed to perform group projects, group work, debates in class, and simulations as a form of instruction. Middle school students viewed expository instruction as repetitive and often predictable. For the eighth grade students, their initial concern with the lecture method, reading from the book and worksheets was the loss of interest over subject matter. The students opinions reflected Siler's (1998) belief that teachers who use only one teaching style day after day often deny students the opportunity of a variety of teaching techniques. As a result, those teachers quickly become boring to students. The students then perceive the subject matter as uninteresting.

High school students also viewed the importance of a variety of teaching methods. Eleventh grade students placed a heavy emphasis on classroom discussion and debate as beneficial for post-high school success and improved communicating skills.

> It is important to give the students a chance to debate or even argue as long as it doesn't get out of hand, over

the material covered in class. I think it show the teacher that we have listened, but also gives us a chance to see what other students think.

(interview with Kristin)

Students described most of their social studies classes still dominated by the textbook and by a subject-centered emphasis on acquiring knowledge. Ellis, Fouts and Glenn (1992) agreed that the social studies teacher generally relies on the text, lecturing, videos, worksheets, and traditional tests as methods for learning.

So far, it would seem that students supported Hess's (2001) emphasis that teaching with discussions. This allowed student feedback and helped students improve their reasoning skills. The outcome of class discussion were students who may become skilled debaters. Furthermore, teaching with discussion extends to the consideration of the need to develop understanding of a specific issues, to enhance critical thinking skills and to improve interpersonal skills. Students expressed the importance of lesson variety to retain knowledge of social studies facts and concepts, supporting the idea that students who are subjected to involvement in activities, small group interaction and cooperative learning are more successful in social studies classes (Mills and Durden, 1992; Slavin, 1991, 1994).

In addition, the researcher also observed teacher enthusiasm and creativity as a need to improve students performance in school and the perception of social studies. Both bound systems revealed the importance of teacher "excitement", "trust", and "ability to make it fun". All students realized the importance and need for teachers to enjoy and be enthusiastic about their curriculum. Students described how they were excited to learn material when the teacher expressed a sincere, genuine interest in the subject matter even if the material was initially labeled as boring or dull.

> I've had teacher before where they make learning fun not because the material is interesting, but because they are excited about it. If they are excited it makes me what to hear what they have to say or do the class assignment and learn the material. (interview with Alex)

Students expressed an sense of joy when teachers were enthusiastic about material presented. Furthermore, students suggested a teacher's enthusiasm brought a sense of belonging and motivation to learning.

In addition to teacher enthusiasm, students indicated the importance of teacher professionalism. Although they recognized the importance of creativity, spontaneity and creative activities, students

expressed the desire for teachers to treat them with respect and credibility.

> Even though I do think all my classes should be interesting, I also want them to treat us like young adults. I think some of my best classes I have taken is when the teacher was cool and treated us with respect. I think most of the students in that class in return treated the teacher better.
> (interview with Ryan)

Research (Fouts, 1987; Mager, 1968; McGowan, Sutton, & Smith, 1990; Fouts, Chan, & Biao, 1993) suggested that positive attitudes toward social studies may be more affected by classroom environment and teacher interest.

Furthermore, research by (Ellenburg, 1972; Miller, 1981; Wheeler, 1972; Wheeler and Ryan, 1973; Fisher and Fraser, 1984) found that classroom teachers had the power to elevate their students' perceptions of selected classroom environments. Students enjoy it when teachers were enthusiastic about subject matter; knew the subject matter; were committed to help every student learn; individualized the lesson for each student; demonstrated fairness in the classroom; and used praise and reinforcement on a regular basis.

There was one area of the study that did not seem to be a concern for the majority of students in either eighth or eleventh grade. That area was the negative perception of social studies in middle and high school. Informal conversation and an interview question with both groups validated this. After a few short moments during the interview, the researcher realized that most students did not have a negative perception of social studies.

Discussions with both grades revealed that seventeen students expressed the view that social studies was productive and important in their education (utilitarian value). Seven middle school students revealed they were pleased with the content taught in the eighth grade. They also revealed they learned good citizenship skills and history better prepared them for high school and college requirements.

> I know taking government and history are required,
> but I think by talking these classes, I have become
> more aware of our political system and our history.
> I know it was hard now, but I think it will help me
> when it comes time to vote, and help me when I
> go to college.
> (interview with John)

Since the scope and sequence of the local district from where the students were selected requires pre-Civil War and an detailed study of the

constitution, this potentially had a direct impact on the importance of citizenship education and participation. Students indicated their interest in social studies increased as they progressed through both elementary and middle school grades. This contradicted researchers findings which suggested elementary and middle school students find social studies had little relevance, was boring and student interest dropped with every grade level (Greenblatt, 1962; Haladyna and Thompson, 1979; Herman, 1965; Jersild, 1949).

High school students also expressed their ideas about the utilitarian value of social studies. Students indicated the importance of gaining an understanding of the political process and civic duties and responsibilities. Eleven out of twelve high school students described the importance of government and United States history. Students described these classes as having a direct relation to their lives and gaining knowledge in civic responsibility.

> Government has help me understand our country's political system and I think, after talking in class and hearing guest speakers, I now know the importance of registering to vote, voting and expressing what I think is right and wrong with our country.
> (interview with Emily)

This contradicted Fernandez, Massey and Dornbusch (1975), when they found most students failed to see social studies as relating greatly to life, relationships or careers. Rather, students appeared to have higher levels of civic development and a possible willingness to participate in community service activities, which Niemi and Chapman (1999) believed will increase political knowledge and a stronger sense of understanding politics.

Five high school students and eleven middle school students ranked social studies as one of their three favorite classes. Both middle and high school students often selected mathematics, science and English as their first and second choices. This justified their decisions based on future careers, supporting Todd and Beery's (1982) survey which asked students to rank their favorite subject. Students in the 1982 study indicated such courses were often viewed important to their future careers, with general mathematics and English viewed as important in both business and engineering professions. Jenny, who likes both mathematics and science suggested that

> These course will help me in the future. I plan on going into the field of medicine, and these classes will have a direct impact on my career, because from what I have been told, these classes will either make me or break me in college.

Emily illustrated the importance of English as important in her future occupation by saying English

> Will be used in whatever job you take in the future. English will be important because you must know proper grammar for business reports, papers or even books you may write when you get out of college. To me, English is the backbone of everything. If you know how to write, you will succeed in the business world, or whatever you do.

Both middle and high school students' had a variety of perceptions towards school and social studies. They, like all students expressed their likes and dislikes about school and social studies. In talking to all of the participants, the researcher came to view students' perceptions and opinions about school as complex, cynical and informative, even though most students had the same social studies classes. To try to describe all twenty-four participants' perceptions, even if those perceptions are only general categories seemed somewhat simplistic, and cannot be done.

Implications

Based on the questions stated in chapter one, students found a utilitarian value for social studies. While students did not necessarily believe that social studies was their favorite choice among classes, students believed social studies was needed in the school curriculum.

Factors such as teacher enthusiasm, previous experiences, technology and content methodology were all influential in the development of student choices.

Based on this study, teachers, administrators and school districts must continue to reinforce the utilitarian value of social studies, and explore different teaching methods, to create and enhance the overall perception of social studies. Educators should understand the complexity of students learning styles and needs. Teachers should understand that every student is not created equal when it comes to learning styles. Some students preferred to learn independently, while others liked to work in groups, read from books, or learn from lecture. Because of these differences, a successful teacher must use a variety of teaching strategies and evaluate techniques to suit the needs of their students. Teachers should become aware of Gardner's (1983) theory intelligence's to structure lessons and activities that would engage different forms of assessments for students.

It is known that attitude can be measured. Previous studies have measured attitudes and perceptions of students regarding social studies. When student attitudes were measured, they reflected a negative view of social studies. It is important to realize the teacher is the key to students' attitudes and perception of social studies. When teachers used a variety of teaching methodologies, and improved the learning environment, it is

believed the positive perception of social studies would increase. The implications of failing to recognize and implement change may lead to an increased decline in the overall value and perception of social studies, and further support previous research. As a result, social studies educators should continue to support in research and change that will examine the attitudes and perceptions of our nation's children towards social studies.

Suggestions for Further Research

As a result of this investigation, possibilities for additional studies were considered. Although it is believed by this researcher that the experiences of these participants depicted in this study represent what could happen to any middle or high school social studies student, additional research is needed to add or to refute the conclusion of this study.

The fact that both bound systems come from the same school district, could be a potential deficiency. Further studies, therefore, need to explore and compare participants from a variety of school districts. The atmosphere, expectations, scope and sequence, may not be the same in different school settings. The attitudes of the students, the teachers, the school district, as well as parents may all vary. There is no doubt that a majority of the participants in this study enjoyed and recognized the importance of a social studies education. However, it is possible that the perceived concerns, recommendations and support for social studies is

less supportive in different school districts. Indeed, these two bound systems may be the exception and not necessarily the rule.

It is also possible that school district's scope and sequence and state guidelines are influential in developing students' opinions. Thus, students from other locations in the state, or the nation, need to be researched.

Since this research study was designed and conducted utilizing a phenomenological method of qualitative analysis, quantitative methods should also be encouraged. Although the researcher is comfortable with the facts and findings, the limitations of qualitative studies are recognized. A more broad quantitative survey research, may further contribute to the understanding of students' perception toward school and social studies. Qualitative and quantitative research could work together to further research and unveil data dealing with students' perceptions of school and social studies.

Having analyzed the data for this study, the researcher could never overemphasize the complexity and difficulty of being a student. The success of being a student relies not only on his or her teachers, but the support of the school district, town, parents, and personal motivation to succeed. Further studies, therefore, are not only necessary, but crucial in providing further insight on the essence of these factors and related issues.

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APPENDIX A

Appendix A

Interview Research Questions

1. What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like?

2. Some students would say that social studies courses do little to help them in preparation for the future. Would you agree with them or disagree with them? Please explain.

3. How would you rate your social studies using a scale of favorite to least favorite? Please explain.

4. Suppose you could change anything about your social studies class. What would you do and what would it be like?

5. What do you think the best method or way to learn social studies would be?

6. How important would you say teacher interest and enthusiasm are in your attitude toward social studies? Please explain.

APPENDIX B

Appendix B

March 1, 2001

Dear, _____:

In this letter, I, Jeffrey Byford, a graduate student at the University of Oklahoma - Norman Campus and teacher at Norman North High School, are requesting your consent to participate in our research project, "Students' Perceptions of Social Studies".

Middle and high school students often have perceptions and beliefs about subject areas in school. Often, students are not given the opportunity to explain and express their reasons for these beliefs and perceptions. As an active student. It is important for your perceptions of social studies to be recorded. The interview will only take thirty minutes. Your identity will remain completely confidential, and your identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the finding of this study. (You will have a pseudonym and all identifying places and names in the written report will be changed.) The interviews tapes and transcriptions will be stored in a locked cabinet when not being used and destroyed after the study is completed. There are no perceived risks in this study. Your participation in this study will help teachers and administrators improve social studies curriculum. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please call the Office of Research Administration at (405) 325-4757 or email at irb@ou.edu

If you agree to participate, please sign below.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Byford
Graduate Student
University of Oklahoma

I hereby agree to participate in the above -described research. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without loss of benefits.

Student Signature Date

Parent Signature Date

Purpose / Objectives

The purpose of this study is to evaluate students perceptions and opinions of social studies classes in both middle and high school. Prior research indicates that students often have negative connotations and attitudes towards this subject area. With the last in-depth research study taking place nearly ten years ago, an in-depth study over student perceptions is overdue. The objective of this study is to identify potential problems and perceptions to help better prepare teachers and administrators in developing core curriculum and developing more effective teaching methods.

Research Protocol

Students will be randomly selected from a pool of qualified students from two schools in a southwestern town. After random selection, students will be contacted to see if they desire to participate in the study. If the student concurs to continue, a permission slip will be given to the student requiring both the student and parent signatures. Interviews will be conducted in a neutral open location in the library. Audio taping and note taking will be the only forms of data collection. Students will be asked only the following questions; 1) What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like? (Ideal Position Question); 2) Some students would say that social studies courses do little to help them in preparation for the future. What would you say to them? (Devil's Advocate Question); 3) Would you say that social studies classes are one of your favorite subjects? Please explain. (Interpretive Question); 4) Suppose you could change anything about your social studies class. What would it be like? (Hypothetical Question); and 5) What do you think the best method or way to learn social studies would be? (Ideal Position Question). Please note that no other questions will be asked in the interview including leading questions.

Confidentiality

Please see attached consent form.

Subject Benefit / Risk

There are no perceived risks in this study.

APPENDIX C

Appendix C

Demographic Data Sheet
Please Print Clearly Code # _____

Name: _____

Circle One: Male Female

Age: _____

Grade: _____

Circle One: I am an A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, or F student

Classes currently enrolled:

_____

_____

Favorite subject(s) (if any):

_____

Brothers or Sisters enrolled in school:

_____

_____

Hobbies and Interests:

_____

_____

Parent's education (if known):

_____

_____

Parent's occupation:

_____

_____

Future goals: