Student perceptions in a Social Studies classroom

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS IN A SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

BY

Maria Darby Dip. Teach.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of

Bachelor of Education with Honours

at the School of Education, Edith Cowan University

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ABSTRACT

This study describes differential student perceptions towards Social Studies in a high school classroom. A case study approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques, was used to collect data by seeking individual students' perceptions of the classroom environment, the teacher, classroom instruction and the Social Studies subject content.

Social Studies education in Western Australia has been guided by the Social Studies K-10 Syllabus which has been implemented for almost 10 years. In 1990 a comprehensive review of the curriculum was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and undertaken by Print (1990a). This study found that a need existed for teachers to promote Social Studies education within the schools. To enable educators to act on this recommendation, it followed that, among other things, a need existed for data about students' thoughts and feelings towards the subject.

Since the review of literature indicated that the classroom environment was a variable that impacted on the formation of attitudes towards school subjects an exploratory case study approach was used to investigate student perceptions in a year 9 Social Studies classroom.
The most significant finding in the study was the high proportion of students who reported that they liked the subject. While some felt that it would not help them gain employment all valued the subject and thought it would help them understand the world around them.

The emergent themes from the study centred on the role that the teacher, achievement motivation and the classroom climate played in the formation of attitude towards a school subject.

Students perceived their classroom teacher as being well organized, able to explain clearly and fair in his treatment of all students. Teacher strategies that promoted active participation and a reasonable degree of independence were variables that were rated highly by all students and their importance appeared to negate the less desirable aspects of the class, particularly the amount of notewriting and lack of activities.

Students who liked the subject had high self-perceptions of ability, took responsibility for their own learning, were motivated by receiving good grades and attributed
their success to personal effort. Students who did not like the subject perceived it to be difficult to understand and irrelevant to their future needs. These students differed in reasons for their lack of achievement which included external causes, such as difficult content and poor teacher strategies, and internal causes such as lack of effort. All students reported that low grades affected their perceptions of a subject and they all tended to like subjects in which they achieved well.

The findings of this study are limited by the small sample size. Further study would need to be undertaken on a larger sample size for any broad generalizations to be drawn with greater accuracy.
DECLARATION

"I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text."
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the professional assistance and guidance provided by Dr. Len King, supervisor for this study. His time and support was greatly appreciated.

A sincere thank you is also extended to the teacher and students who agreed to be the subjects of the study.
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STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS IN A SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Since the early 1980's Social Studies education in Western Australian government schools has been guided by the Social Studies K10 Syllabus. This document integrates content, knowledge, skills and value processes in well sequenced and hierarchical stages. When it had been implemented for almost ten years a comprehensive review of the curriculum was commissioned by the Ministry of Education and undertaken by Print in 1990.

A prime area of concern for this review was the perception by students, parents and the wider community that Social Studies was of little value, frequently dull and boring and not related to future employment. Abundant evidence was also put forward by the review to indicate that "the image of Social Studies as an effective curriculum component is less than desirable". (Print 1990b, p. 6) In terms of status of Social Studies, studies by Fraser (1980, 1981b) reported that students ranked Social Studies well below the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. While students may not like these subjects they are perceived by students as being important subjects in gaining future employment and therefore essential subjects to study.
Such negative and indifferent attitudes towards the subject are bound to affect student motivation to learn Social Studies. Since attitude may be causally related to achievement the likely educational outcome would be reduced learning. Moreover, given the current economic situation and the greater accountability demanded of schools, unless corrected this negative view might lead to a lack of support and diminished resources for Social Studies. With the move to greater flexibility in post compulsory education there is a possibility that fewer students will choose Social Studies in upper school which will have a compounding effect on the status of Social Studies as a school subject.

A search of the literature revealed that studies as early as 1949 reported that Social Studies is the least liked school subject. Many later studies have confirmed this view but little research has been undertaken to provide potential causes for this attitude. What little research has been done has focused on two classes of variables. One is the family background over which the teacher has no control and the other is the classroom environment over which teachers have a great deal of control (Walberg and Weinstein, 1982). Additional research by Fraser (1980) and Eash and Waxman (1980) support links between the nature of the learning environment and the subject matter.
Statement of the Problem

The need for teachers to promote Social Studies within the school is stressed in the second recommendation of the Print (1990) review into Social Studies education in W A. It follows that a need exists for data about students' thoughts and feelings towards the subject be obtained to assist teachers to act on the recommendation. To be able to undertake this task educators require, among other considerations, information from students on aspects including reasons for their attitude to Social Studies, and how the subject could be improved. To date no such data are available.

Since the literature indicates that classroom environment is a variable that impacts on the formation of attitude towards school subjects an exploratory case study approach will be used to investigate student perceptions in a Social Studies classroom.
Statement of Research Question

What is the nature of student perceptions held towards the learning of Social Studies in a year 9 Social Studies classroom?

a) What are student perceptions of Social Studies in regard to:
   * interest in the subject
   * perceived value of the subject
   * attitude to subject teacher
   * class management
   * perception of own ability
   * attitude to other students
   * perceived teacher attitude to students
   * attitude to homework?

b) What are student perceptions of classroom climate in a Social Studies classroom?

c) What are the reasons students provide for the perceptions they have of Social Studies?

d) How do students perceive Social Studies being improved?

The specific interactive components of the study are represented in diagrammatic form in Figure 1. The shaded area where all three overlap will form the focus of the study. Each of the components will be explained in greater detail in the literature review.
Assumptions Underpinning the Study

1. The nature of the learning environment in Social Studies lessons contributes to the kinds of attitudes held by students towards Social Studies. Hence, changes to the learning environment can improve attitudes.

2. Information from students with positive attitudes to Social Studies can assist in the improvement of the provision of Social Studies to all students.

3. Information from students with negative attitudes to Social Studies can assist in the identification of aspects requiring change in the provision of Social Studies to all students.
Definitions of Terms

Social Studies
"The Study of people as social beings as they have existed and interacted with each other and the environment". (Social Studies K-10 Syllabus, 1985, p.1)

Classroom Environment
The group dynamics or the feeling tones present in a particular classroom.

Student Perceptions
The understandings and attitudes that influence students constructions of reality.
Summary

In order to answer the major research question this enquiry will present a micro-analysis of differential student perceptions towards Social Studies in a high school classroom. A case study approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data gathering techniques, will be used to collect data on the social and cognitive dimensions of classroom life by seeking individual students' perceptions of the classroom environment, the teacher, teacher behaviour, classroom instruction and the Social Studies subject content.

The next chapter will explore each specific component within the question in a review of the literature. Sub-questions, which were derived from the major question, guided the selection of the research design, formed the focus of the study and stimulated the discussion in the concluding chapter.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review will focus on the three key areas of student perceptions, classroom environment and Social Studies. Literature concerned with student perceptions was reviewed to provide a theoretical background to using student perceptions as a valid and reliable measure for research into what happens in classrooms. Literature concerned with classroom environment and Social Studies was reviewed to provide links between the three interactive components that provide the context for the study.

Perceptual Model for Classroom Research

In an analysis of learning environments Walberg (1977) is critical of the traditional behavioural model for its failure to take into account students' conscious perception of internal and external stimuli and the mediating effect that this is likely to have on student outcomes.

Further criticism of the process-product research paradigm is provided by Whitfield (1976) who maintains that teacher behaviour is not perceived the same by all students; by Doyle (1977), who states that students have
a central role to play in creating classroom conditions and therefore have a direct impact on their own learning; and by Levine and Wang (1983), who assert that research into what happens in the classroom must include the role of social process as both dependent and independent variables. Walberg's (1976) "perceptual model" allows for this social interaction within the group and acknowledges that the learning environment is subject not only to teacher influence on students, but also to student influence on teacher and student influence on student.

Winne and Marx (1982) add that teachers do not directly influence student product variables. Rather, their "cognitive mediational" model maintains that teachers have an influence on the way students think and behave during teaching and it is the students "thought processes" that result in the learning. Critical factors of this model are identified by Wittrock (1986) as:

"student background, perceptions of instruction, attention to the teacher, motivation and attribution for learning, affective processes, and ability to generate interpretations and understandings of instruction." (p. 297)

According to Wittrock these factors mediate the instruction experienced by the learner and may result in it being quite different from what the teacher intended.
Rohrkeemper (1984) agrees that in the classroom "all is not as it appears" (p. 272) and supports the need for additional knowledge of how students actively process and interpret their experiences in the classroom.

Doyle (1977) and Hamilton (1983) urge educational researchers to acknowledge these findings and strive to understand the complete picture by including qualitative research methods to investigate the student's point of view about what happens in classrooms.

Studies by Walberg (1977) and Cortis and Grayson (1978) point out that students are reliable and sophisticated judges of the learning environment and that it is incrementally valid to seek their opinions, thoughts and perceptions. In addition, Eash and Waxman (1980) stress that student perception research is an effective method of providing useful data on classroom functioning and important feedback for the classroom teacher.

Further justification for the use of student perceptions as a valid measure for study is provided by Walberg and Haertal (1980). They claim that since students' perception determine students' behaviour their self-reports are likely to be more reliable than observed behaviour. Fraser (1981a) cites numerous studies to provide:
"consistent and strong support for the incremental predictive validity of student's classroom perceptions in accounting for appreciable amounts of learning outcome variance, often beyond that attributable to student entry characteristics such as pretest or general ability." (p. 240)

While a number of different approaches are available for the study of classroom environments Fraser advocates the use of student or teacher perceptions of the psychosocial characteristics of the classroom.

Classroom Climate
Schmuck and Schmuck (1977) define classroom climate as the group dynamics or the feeling tones of the group. Dreesman (1982) elaborates on this definition by including the role of perception and information processing by students of the objective environment. He defines classroom climate as the element of cognitive representation which is shared by all the class members. According to this model

"climate is a result of the social integration of individual processes of perception, information processing, judging, etc. The model stresses the relation between climate and the common aspect of the cognitive representation, since climate must be considered as a situational factor which has behavioural relevance for all students of one class." (p. 54)

Variables that make up the dimensions of the classroom climate are identified by Schmuck and Schmuck (1977) as cohesiveness, interpersonal expectations, leadership, power, friendship patterns, and democracy.
While all these variables have been the subject of research studies it is beyond the scope of this review to discuss them all in depth. It is, however, important to note that these variables have both a social and cognitive impact on classroom climate which poses many challenges for students and can compromise achievement motivation in students.

Achievement motivation as defined by Covington (1984) focuses on the need to preserve the individual's sense of self-worth. Covington maintains that in a society where personal worth depends largely on one's accomplishments, and where ability is seen as a critical component of success, self-perceptions of ability become a significant part of one's self-definition.

This leads to the assumption that a climate of social comparison (Levine 1983) is likely to produce feelings of inferiority, lack of motivation, interpersonal hostility, competitiveness and loss of self-esteem in low achievers. Levine argues that classrooms which have a strong evaluative atmosphere and where reward is based on academic achievement need not necessarily be detrimental for low achievers. Rather, he maintains that loss of self-esteem is mediated by how relevant or important the performance dimensions are to the student's self-
definition. Further, social comparison gives students a "normative" high performing group that low achievers may seek to emulate and aspire to join. Finally, social comparison allows students to be realistic about assessing their own performance and abilities and so guide them in selecting future tasks that are within their capabilities.

Marshall and Weinstein (1984) agree that it is the totality of the classroom environment that determines how students interpret specific events. In a complex interactional model of classroom factors they maintain that the negative impact of social comparison may be negated by teachers who hold an incremental view of intelligence and ability. Teachers who believe that ability can be increased by mastering new skills and knowledge are likely to convey to students that with effort improvement is possible. Teacher strategies that support this view include non-competitive learning environments, flexible groupings, provision of opportunities to achieve in a variety of areas, mastery-oriented learning, and evaluation that is based on self-comparison to prior achievement.

Fouts (1987) also points to the teacher being the key to a successful classroom and identifies teacher controllable variables that have a high correlation with
positive attitudes held by students towards school subjects. In a cluster analysis of Social Studies classroom environments this study reports that classrooms high in involvement, innovation, affiliation, teacher support and order and organization, but low in teacher control, show an improvement in student attitude towards Social Studies. Specifically, his research suggests that teachers can improve student attitudes towards the subject by using diverse teaching strategies that increase active student participation, encourage co-operative learning activities to further greater affiliation and by working on improving interpersonal communications.

Ames and Archer (1988) provide additional support to both Fouts (1987) and Marshall and Weinstein (1984) in an analysis of classroom climate that shows how teacher behaviours influence the mastery or performance orientation of a particular classroom. In particular their findings showed that "it was the degree to which the classroom climate emphasized mastery, rather than performance, that was predictive of how students chose to approach tasks and engage in learning" (Ames and Archer, 1988, p. 264).

What is worthy of particular interest is the reported findings by both Weinstein (1983) and Ames and Archer
(1988) that each student interprets his or her own classroom experiences and that this experience can differ significantly between students within the same classroom.

Students' Self-Perceptions of Ability
The variable of "publicness" in the classroom environment has been investigated in studies of the formation of students' self-perceptions of ability. MacIver (1988) cites research undertaken by Rosenholtz and Simpson which showed that ability perceptions became stratified in classes where grades were frequently and publicly assigned. The effect of evaluation practices and task structure on students' self-perceptions of ability was the topic of a study undertaken by MacIver (1988). His research showed that a greater proportion of students in classes which were high in structure, where pupils used the same materials with little choice in the tasks and where public and frequent assessment of work was provided, perceived themselves as below average in ability.

In contrast, in classes where the teacher used differentiated task structures that permitted student choice, and relied on non normative evaluation criteria with a narrow dispersion of grades, students were unlikely to conclude that they were incompetent. There are however limitations on this finding. MacIver used
maths as the subject of this study and relied on teacher reports for measuring talent dispersion. It is questionable whether the same results would be replicated in subjects such as Social Studies and English where success is not so straightforward or clearly defined.

Student Perceptions of Teachers
In an Australian study undertaken by Poole (1983) on adolescents' perception of teachers and school subjects three quarters of the students interviewed felt that teachers should listen to students, should offer students more help and encouragement with their work and should provide them with greater opportunities for active participation in the classroom. They were critical of teachers who did not give individual attention and many, especially girls, complained of bias by teachers towards the academically able.

In an exploratory study of teachers' attitudes and perceptions and their interactions with students Benninga, Guskey and Thorbury (1981) reported that

"teachers who felt a greater need to exercise control over their students and felt less responsible for the positive learning outcomes of their students were perceived by their students more negatively than those teachers who felt less need to control and who felt more personal responsibility." (p. 72)

Teachers who were perceived positively by students were described as warm, responsive and stimulating. They
tended to have a favourable opinion of their students, held high expectations for all of them and felt less responsible for positive classroom events.

Weinstein (1983) reported that in the primary grades students were attracted to teachers who were warm, friendly and supportive. They saw effective teachers as those who were able to command clearly, discipline effectively and motivate students. Secondary school students reported similar attributes in their ideal teacher, but added that knowledge of subject and provision of feedback were essential qualities in effective teachers.

More recently Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986) found that students described influential teachers as being able to generate enthusiasm for learning through personal involvement and as having the ability to make the class and, most importantly, the subject enjoyable. To do this the teacher must "communicate a sense of excitement, a contagious intellectual thrill. When excitement is present, learning becomes a pleasure instead of a chore." (p.418)
Student Perceptions of Teacher Behaviour

Teachers do not treat all students the same and students are well aware of this differential treatment. Rosenthal (cited in Cooper, 1983) suggested that teacher behaviour could be categorized under the broad headings of socioemotional environment, verbal input, verbal output and affective feedback. Cooper explains that in Rosenthal's study teachers created a warmer, supportive environment for brighter students, these students received more smiles, were given more clues and time to answer questions and received more praise for a correct answer. Students who were labeled as slow generally were given fewer opportunities to engage in active learning, less time and clues for questions and received more criticism for incorrect responses.

Cooper's findings are supported by the results of a study undertaken by Weinstein and Middlestadt (1979) of differential treatment by teachers of male low and high achievers. In this study high achievers were perceived to receive high teacher expectations, academic demands and special privileges. A later study by Weinstein (1983), which included perceptions of female students, reinforced the earlier findings. Mitman and Lash (1988) provide additional support for this theory in their study of student perceptions of teacher's use of ability seating, individualized instruction and
comparative evaluations. They conclude that classroom environments influence students' perceptions of the differential nature of their interactions with teachers, that the gap in self-expectations between high and low expectancy students grew larger throughout the year in high differential classes and that greater task variety occurred in higher differentiation classes.

According to Cooper and Tom (1984) such differential treatment could lead to different self-concepts of ability and different attributional patterns among students. Good and Brophy (1987) see this leading to a decrease in low achievers' belief in a direct relationship between academic effort and achievement thus eroding students' achievement motivation leading to passivity and non involvement by low achievers. McClelland, Atkinson, Clarke and Howell (cited in Covington, 1984) coined the term "achievement motivation" to explain the two underlying motives that drive behaviour. On one end of the continuum is the need to achieve success to enhance one's ego, while on the opposite end is the need to avoid failure for fear of losing face and being humiliated. Therefore, if teacher behaviour communicates an "expectation" to the student it will affect how the pupil will respond resulting in what Good and Brophy have termed a "self-fulfilling prophecy".
Good and Brophy (1987) define teacher expectations as:

"inferences that teachers make about the future behaviour or academic achievement of their students, based on what they know about these students now. Teacher expectation effects are student outcomes that occur because of the actions that teachers take in response to their own expectations." (p.116)

The original research for teacher expectation effects was conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968 (cited in Good and Brophy, 1987). Their study was based on data gathered in an experimental project where randomly chosen primary students were placed in several classrooms and the teacher told that the students had been tested and identified as academically gifted. Some months later the researchers returned and tested the students and found that all had gained higher in IQ tests than other students in their schools, who had not been labeled as gifted.

Though these results were never replicated in subsequent studies, and the researchers received considerable criticism for manipulating the experiment, evidence supplied by Cooper (1983), Cooper and Tom (1984) and Good and Brophy (1987) supports the existence of expectation effects.

Student performance is most often the cause of teacher expectation and if this performance changes, teachers are
likely to also change their expectations. What is significant for the purpose of this study is the finding that:

"the occurrence of expectation effects in the classroom depends on teaching (or instructional) style and on the subject matter being taught." (Cooper and Tom, 1984, p. 71)

Student Perceptions of Instruction
As previously stated teacher assumptions of what students learn do not necessarily correspond with learners' actual experience. A 1981 study by Anderson (cited in Wittrock, 1986; Weinstein, 1983) found that primary school students believed that the most important aspect of classwork was simply "getting it done" while teachers interviewed felt that the emphasis had been on the learning process.

A later study of older grades by Winne and Marx (1982) found that where teachers attempted to promote student enjoyment in a task it was rarely perceived as such by the students who felt that the teachers' interest was in the content of the task.

Students interviewed by Peterson and Swing (1982) identified variables that influenced their perception of instructions as: amount of information presented, prior knowledge of material, attention, trying to understand
the teacher or problems using previously learned cognitive strategies. The variable attention was found to be not nearly as important as the thought processes that students were engaged in during the lesson. The results show a discrepancy between student self-reports and observers' reports on student attention, with student self-reports correlating higher with student achievement than did the observers.

This can be explained by a 1976 study conducted by Evertson and Brophy (cited in Peterson and Swing, 1982) which found that students as young as grade two can "fake" attention making the coding of off-task and on-task behaviour by observers a most susceptible variable. This supports earlier evidence by Rosenshine (cited in Eash and Waxman, 1980) that student ratings as predictors of teacher effectiveness achieved stronger results than observer ratings and further strengthens the argument for educational research to probe student thought processes "to discern the effective strategies that students use in school learning" (Wittrock, 1986, p.302).

An analysis of teacher effectiveness across different school subjects was undertaken by Eash and Waxman in 1980. Using data from a previous study by Rosenshine and Furst (1973) the above researchers devised a questionnaire, Our Class and its Work, which covered the
following nine areas: variability, enthusiasm and interest, task orientation, criticism, opportunity to learn criterion material, use of structuring comments to give clear direction and ideas to instruction, multiple levels of questioning, mismanagement (allowing students to interpret and confuse instruction) and "sustinity" to maintain continuity of instructional effort and sustain several activities at the same time.

Administered to a sample of 136 students in grades two through to eight their results showed that teacher effectiveness is specific to each academic subject. In particular this study indicated that use of structuring comments and the scale of criticism are significant predictors in Social Studies achievement. Overall, task orientation and opportunity to learn applied across all subject areas.

An examination of different curriculum styles undertaken by Piper (1979) failed to reveal any strong relationship between curriculum style and social learning. What the study did show was that while students and teachers of all styles agreed that the ideal curriculum should give a high priority to "relevant knowledge, inquiry and decision making skills, personal development, social skills and social values" (p. 121) they differed in perceptions of the operative curriculum. Despite teacher
perceptions of emphasis on skills, personal development and social values, students clearly saw the operative curriculum as being firmly based on knowledge in the traditional areas. Piper concludes that teachers are more likely to be satisfied with their performance in the area of social learning than their students are, despite common agreement on the goals of social education.

Student Perceptions of School Subjects
A 1979 survey conducted by Haladyna and Thomas (cited in Shaughnessy and Haladyna, 1985) of 3000 American students in grades one through to eight showed that attitude towards Social Studies was not only low but also declined from grades four to grade eight.

These results were replicated in a cross-sectional study of years 7, 8, 9 and 10 Australian students conducted by Fraser (1980, 1981b). His research indicated that while significant deterioration in attitude towards all four core subject areas increased with grade level, students placed English and Mathematics well above Social Studies. Fernandez, Massey and Dornbusch (1979) contend that students not only perceive Social Studies as being less important but also much easier than Mathematics and English. More recently Shug, Todd and Beery (1982)
claimed that students could best be described as being "indifferent in their attitude toward Social Studies. It is not that students do not like Social Studies, it is just that they do not care much either way." (p.16)

The necessity to improve this attitude has been acknowledged by Print (1990a) in his inquiry into Social Studies education in W.A. and forms the second recommendation: "That the role and value of social education be actively promoted within schools and the wider community." (p. 8)

The responsibility lies with Social Studies teachers to acquire knowledge of the current research findings in their field and use this knowledge to promote their subject to school students. The problem as expressed by Fraenkel (1987) is that there is still much in Social Studies education about which little is known. Further, only a narrow range of research methodologies have been used by Social Studies educators prompting Fraenkel to call for additional models such as in-depth interviews, case-studies, participant observations and ethnographic studies to provide additional and different perspectives about issues in Social Studies.
Summary

Historically research into teacher effectiveness measured and observed teacher behaviours and assumed that these behaviours could be causally related to student achievement. Current research has tended to follow a "mediating process paradigm" which assumes that many complex contextual variables intervene between teacher behaviour and student learning and stresses the need to take a wider view that encompasses the totality of the classroom experience.

Research clearly indicates a need exists for further research into Social Studies, particularly as to why so few students like the subject. By exploring the classroom environment and the subject content from the students' perspective many new questions may surface about the thoughts and feelings of students while in a Social Studies classroom.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will provide an outline of the choice of research design, the means of data collection and the method of data analysis.

Design
An exploratory descriptive case study design has been chosen to collect data that may provide the basis for future research. The study was bounded within the context of a single Social Studies class.

The importance of context sensitivity led to the choice of a case study approach as the most appropriate methodology for the study of student perceptions. This methodology appears well suited to a situation where interrelationships between variables rather than the control of variables is the focus of the study.

Limitations of this methodology concern the generalizability of data from a single case study to other settings. Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis (1976) counteract this criticism by pointing to the following advantageous characteristics:

"case study data, paradoxically is 'strong in reality' but difficult to organize.... This strength in reality is because case studies are down-to-earth and attention holding, in harmony
with the reader's own experience, and thus provide a "natural" basis for generalization." (p. 148)

A case study allows a holistic approach to describe classroom life from the students' perspective while not intervening or controlling student behaviour in any way.

Site Selection
The choice of school was guided by the following criteria:

a) it was conveniently located and accessible to the researcher
b) the Principal, teacher, students and their parents were willing to participate and interested in the potential findings of the study.

The school has a population of some 500 students and is situated in an economically disadvantaged suburb. This places the school in the Priority Schools Programme (PSP) and, as such, is allocated extra resources from Commonwealth funding to enhance the school curriculum and so assist students to overcome their disadvantage. Students are drawn from a diversity of ethnic cultures and backgrounds resulting in a wide range of ability.

The teaching staff totals 42 with the Social Studies faculty having four experienced teachers all with majors in Social Studies and all having been at the school for a minimum of three years. Social Studies classes at the
school are streamed and the class that was studied is considered to be the top stream. Being a PSP school, the class still has a very wide range of abilities since some students are placed not because of academic ability but more to make up numbers. Also included in the class are one or two students whose behaviour has been monitored by the Managing Student Behaviour (MSB) Committee. The MSB system is a whole school approach to discipline that is guided by the Glasser approach to school discipline. School rules, and the consequences of breaking these rules, are clearly communicated to all students. Any student breaking the rules is withdrawn from the class into a time-out room until a solution to the problem is worked out. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions by entering into a work and behaviour contract which is monitored by the MSB committee.

The Subjects
The study concentrated on a single year 9 class in a suburban High School. It was considered that by year 9 students have been exposed to one full year of high school and have had time to form opinions and become accustomed to life in a high school.

The class chosen as the unit of study had a total of 23 students, comprised of 14 females and 9 males, with the majority of students being considered typical for their
age group in terms of ability and behaviour despite the demographic data of the school. The class teacher is a male Geography major with over 15 years teaching experience in Australian secondary schools.

The unit being studied at the time of the study was the topic Law. Of ten week duration this topic aimed to develop in students an understanding and awareness of the origins and reasons for law; the difference between civil and criminal law; the law as it applies to the individual and the issues concerned with law in society today.

Limitations of the Study
Limitations on the study have been imposed by the time constraints associated with a project which is designed to fulfil in part the requirements of a Bachelor of Education Honours degree. It is limited to a small scale study that sets out to explore the nature of classroom life in a Social Studies classroom from the perspective of a small sample of year 9 students.

Data Collection Techniques
Several kinds of data were gathered for the study and multiple data gathering techniques were employed to access information. Student attitude was measured using the Baseline Student Attitude towards School Subjects Questionnaire while the Individualized Classroom
Environment Questionnaire was used to measure classroom environment. Personal interviews were then conducted with selected target students to further probe for reasons into the perceptions students held towards Social Studies.

The ICEQ was developed by Fraser and Fisher (1983) and assessed dimensions such as personalization, participation, independence, investigation and differentiation which distinguish individualized classrooms. Initially tested on students and teachers in Sydney Metropolitan schools, the instrument has been well tested to ensure both reliability and validity (Appendix A).

The Baseline Attitude to Subject Questionnaire was designed by Officers in the Research Branch of the Education Department in 1986 (Appendix B). The focus of this questionnaire is on the variables of interest and value of the subject, attitude to other students, the subject teacher and homework, perceptions of their own ability and class management and perceived teacher attitude to students. Each variable has both positive and negative items attached which are cycled through at intervals of eight and form Part A of the questionnaire. Part B consists of four open-ended questions asking students to comment on what aspects they like, dislike, or would want to change about their Social Studies.
classroom. The final question asks them to comment on the type, and amount of homework, they are required to do. Aimed specifically at Secondary School Students it has been developed and extensively tested in Western Australia. The instruments were used to obtain the mean scores for the total class, after which a sample of 5 students were selected for an interview session to collect more in-depth data on the variables in the questionnaires.

In addition to the questionnaires the study involved the use of interviews. These interviews were designed to explore student perceptions in relation to the research questions.

What are the reasons students provide for the perceptions they have of Social Studies?

What improvements can students perceive for social studies?

A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to probe for motivations and reasons for students' thoughts and feelings towards the learning of Social Studies.

Examples of questions for the interview session are included in Appendix C. While the questions were structured the intent for the interview session was on an informal conversation with open-ended questions, as outlined by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander.
(1990), to probe when the opportunity arose and clarify answers drawn from primary questions.

Problems of the interview process such as personal bias, talking too much, listening too little and suggesting answers were considered and acknowledged as a limitation of the study. To minimize these effect the interview questions were tested with a group of year nine students from another class. The trial provided the researcher with an opportunity to practice interviewing techniques and to develop an awareness of the non verbal cues that impact on the quality of answers during an interview. This process assisted in developing a trusting relationship with the students being interviewed.

Ethics
Prior to the study commencing a standard consent letter, which is included as Appendix D, was issued to all students in the class requesting written permission from parents for student participation in the study.

Data Collection
Both the ICEQ and the Baseline survey were administered on the one occasion. The class teacher was informed of the scope and purpose of the study and his advice and assistance was sought to administer the Baseline Attitude-to-Subject Questionnaire and the Assessment of Classroom Psychosocial Environment Questionnaire.
Guidelines provided with both instruments suggested a morning period be selected for administration of the questionnaires so a Social Studies lesson timetabled for period one was chosen. Students were also informed on the scope and purpose of the study and were given instructions for completing the questionnaires. Students were given the opportunity to voice any concerns and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was optional and volunteers were asked to put their name on the questionnaires. It was also made clear to students that a summary of the findings of the study would be communicated to them after the completion of the study. All students present in the class volunteered to participate and disclosed their names.

Initial examination of the Baseline survey revealed that in response to item 1 "I usually like Social Studies" 3 male students and 2 female students strongly agreed, 16 students agreed and only 2 female students responded negatively to the item. For the purpose of the interview it was decided to choose one male and one female who strongly agreed that they liked the subject, one male student with inconsistent responses to some items in the survey and the two female students who did not like the subject. The class was visited the following day and students were asked to volunteer to take part in the interview session. All but one male
student with inconsistent answers agreed to be interviewed and final selection was made on students' willingness to participate. Interviews were conducted in a morning session and students were interviewed alone since it was felt that there would be less peer pressure to conform to popular opinion so students were more likely to give their own personal thoughts and perceptions in response to the questions.

Data Analysis

Data for the study was obtained from the following sources:

i) standardized questionnaires.
ii) transcripts of interviews with students.

The data from the questionnaires served two purposes:

i) to provide an overall profile of perceptions on specific elements of Social Studies classrooms, and classroom climate

ii) to enable the identification of two students with generally "positive" attitudes, two students with generally "negative" attitudes and one student with a "moderate" attitude to Social Studies.

Analysis of Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire

Statistical analysis was undertaken to obtain individual scores, class mean and standard deviations for the 5 variables in the ICEQ. The findings from this instrument were then used to describe the classroom environment in relation to the research question b) What are student
perceptions of classroom climate in a Social Studies classroom?

Analysis of Baseline Questionnaire

Part A
The scores for each of the 40 fixed-response items in the Baseline Survey were tabulated and the mean and standard deviation obtained for the eight variables under investigation.

Part B
Responses for the open-ended questions were analyzed for content and then classified and categorized under the following headings:
Teacher
Subject/content
Student
Classroom environment.
Student response would often encompass more than one area so a frequency of like-response was noted and added together to form a table.
Interview Data

Descriptive information gathered by the interview schedule was tape recorded and analyzed using the headings which were identified for the open-ended questions of the Baseline Questionnaire. Systematic data analysis followed the cyclical process outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984) of data reduction, data display and conclusion-drawing/verification.

Verification of Data

To ensure reliability of data a research colleague agreed to check a sample of the questionnaire results and listen to the taped transcripts of the interviews. Verification of data followed by the researcher double checking results and comparing them to the data coded by the colleague.

The summary findings from the three instruments were then used to describe and discuss the outcomes in relation to the research questions.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter reports on the data collected from the Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire, the Baseline Survey into Student Attitude towards School Subjects and the student interview schedule. Results of the Questionnaires are summarized in table and figure format while the interview data is presented in transcript.

Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire

An analysis of the Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire (ICEQ) revealed that the students in the classroom studied perceived a favourable climate for their classroom. Scores for each variable were derived for each student on the following basis:

- students respond to each of the five items with a 1 (almost never), 2 (seldom), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often) and 5 (very often).
- raw scores for each item added together yield a possible range of 5 through to 25, with 15 being the midpoint.

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation for each scale measured and provides an overview of a class where
students were encouraged to be active participants in the learning process (21.4); where the teacher showed a satisfactory degree of concern and interest for the individual (18.0); and where students felt that they had a measure of control over their learning and behaviour (17.1). A low mean score for Investigation (13.8) and for Differentiation (10.3) could suggest a traditional approach in method and instruction from the teacher. Standard Deviations for the different scales showed that there was a considerable spread in answers for Independence (3.1) and Personalization (2.8) which indicated that students differed in their individual perceptions of these variables in their classroom.

Table 1
Class Means for the ICEQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean (N=23)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigation</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Personalization

Dimensions measured in this scale included the extent to which students perceived the teacher:

- taking a personal interest in and talking to each student
- displaying a friendly attitude towards students and considering their feelings and
- helping each student who is having trouble with work.

Results were generally positive but a SD of 2.8 showed a considerable spread in responses which ranged from a low 13 to a high 25 and may suggest some students perceived differential teacher behaviour towards themselves.

Participation

In this scale students were asked to rate the extent to which:

- there is classroom discussion where their ideas and suggestions were used and where
- students can give opinions and ask the teacher questions.

A score of 21.4 out of a possible 25 was a very positive result for this scale. With a SD of 2.3 the lowest figure recorded was 16 which is a score that is still over the midpoint for the scale.
Independence
This scale measured the extent to which students perceived they were able to decide where they sit, who they work with and how they behave in the classroom. While a mean of 17.1 was over the midpoint, and still a positive result, the standard deviation of 3.1 was significant. Extremes in answers were recorded and further strengthen the assumption of differential pupil perceptions of the classroom environment.

Investigation
A relatively low score of 13.8 was recorded for this scale which measured the extent to which students were able to carry out investigations to test ideas or answer questions which puzzle them and if students were able to explain the meanings of statements, diagrams and graphs. An analysis of the SD of 2.3 showed that only 5 students rated this scale over the midpoint of 15, so the majority of students perceived that little investigation occurred in their classroom.

Differentiation
This scale asked students to rate the extent to which they do different work, use different books, equipment and materials and if different teaching aids were used for different students in the class. A low score of 10.3 with a SD of 2.4 revealed that all but one student recorded scores below the midpoint of 15.
The majority of students in the class studied perceived a classroom environment that was high in active participation. Many perceived satisfactory levels of personalization and independence but the wide spread of responses for these variables implied that considerable differential perceptions of the classroom existed among some pupils in the class. Most students perceived very little investigation in their lessons and all but one student recorded negative scores for the variable differentiation.

Baseline Questionnaire

Fixed-Response Items

Table 2 lists the eight variables of the Baseline Questionnaire and the means and standard deviation for the variables. The scale of possible responses for the Baseline is as follows:

- (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree) and 4 (strongly agree).

Each variable comprised of 5 items which, when added together yield a possible raw score range of 5 through to 20 with 10 being the midpoint.
The item means are calculated by dividing the total raw scores by the number of students while the class group variable is obtained by adding item means and dividing the total by 5.

Table 2

Class Means for the Baseline Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean (N=23)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in the subject</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived value of subject</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to subject teacher</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Management</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of own ability</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to other students</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived teacher attitude</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to homework</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the Baseline Questionnaire are shown in Figure 2 which provides the item means for the eight variables that comprised the fixed response questionnaire. A full list of items is included as Appendix E.
Interest in the Subject

An overall variable mean of 2.7 showed that most students liked the subject but items 9 and 17 also indicated that a reasonable proportion of students felt that it was occasionally boring and that some topics were not interesting. Items 25 and 33 showed that a significant number of students did not always enjoy the activities and often did not feel good about attending social studies lessons. Scores from these items contributed to
a SD of 2.3 for this section and was the widest spread in answers for the Baseline survey. A high mean of 3.1 for item No 1 "I usually like Social Studies" was recorded with only two students reporting negative attitudes to the subject. In terms of gender 3 males and 2 females strongly agreed that they liked the subject, 10 females and 7 males liked the subject and 2 females disliked the subject.

Value in the Subject
A high proportion of students did place value in the subject showing a consistency with students liking the subject. This resulted in the same mean score of 2.8 for the group variable mean. Results of item 18 showed that all 23 students perceived Social Studies as helping them to understand the world around them while in item 34 six students did not feel that the subject was useful in helping them get a job.

Attitude to Subject Teacher
An overall mean of 2.9 suggests most students were happy with their teacher but in some items there were extremes in answers which merit closer attention. Three students felt strongly that they were not allowed to work at their own speed. In the open-ended questions one of the students made the point that "we work too fast" and that
students should be allowed to "slow down and concentrate on the one topic at a time".

A low mean of 2.3 was recorded for item 11 "The teacher usually arranges interesting things for us to do" while a high 3.1 was recorded for item 19 "My teacher will often help students who were having difficulty with school work".

Class Management
Generally students perceived the teacher as being able to explain clearly, being well organized and fair to all students. The overall mean of 2.9 was affected by a low mean of 2.0 for item 36 "In our Social Studies class, students who finish their work are rarely left with nothing to do". All but 5 students agreed with this statement. This item was negatively phrased and reverse scored and posed a problem in interpretation for the researcher. This result could imply that the majority of students perceived the teacher to be well prepared and able to extend most students who finished early.

Perception of Own Ability
Variations in pupil ability levels contributed to the uneven means obtained for the 5 items in this variable. Item 5 "I always try to do work that I find difficult"
scored a particularly low 2.0. In contrast Item 29 "In Social Studies lessons I usually understand the work we are given" scored a positive mean of 3.0. Item 5 made no direct mention to Social Studies so an assumption could be made that students generally do not try to do work that is difficult but that the work in their Social Studies class was well matched to their abilities. Support for this assumption was provided by the consistency of responses to item 13 "I can usually handle the work I am given in Social Studies" which scored a positive mean of 3.1 and by the overall small spread in answers with a SD of only 1.5.

Attitude to Other Students
A positive mean of 3.00 was scored for students liking their classmates and being happy to work with most of them. However, low scores were obtained for item 14 "The students in my Social Studies class pay attention to what the teacher is saying" and for item 38 "Most of the students in my Social Studies class don't want to waste time". This variable recorded a SD of only 1.1 which was the lowest recorded for the Questionnaire.

Perceived Teacher Attitude to Students
The mean score of 2.9 is very consistent with the variable mean for student attitude to the subject teacher. Students felt strongly that the teacher
genuinely liked his students and was interested in their opinions. Some inconsistency appeared in this variable since item 31 "I feel I can speak to my Social Studies teacher about things on my mind" scored lower than the average. Some students appeared happy to talk to the teacher about the class and the subject content but not necessarily about their personal problems.

Attitude to Homework
A high mean of 3.1 showed that most students could cope with the homework they were given and were happy with the amount of work they were asked to do. Significant variations in this variable were recorded for item 40 "My parents encourage me to do my homework" 3.2 and item 24 "Doing Social Studies homework helps me understand the subject" 2.5. While there was strong support from parents for students to do their homework a high proportion of students did not feel that doing homework helped them understand the subject. Some concern was raised about this question during administration with two students expressing fears that if they responded honestly to the homework not being enough they may get more work to do in the future.

The majority of students recorded means above the midpoint for all 8 variables in the questionnaire. The smallest variation in perceptions related to attitude to
other students and perception of own ability and of classroom management, while the largest spread of answers were recorded for interest in the subject. Generally results from the fixed response items were complimentary to, and supportive of, the findings of the ICEQ.

Open-ended Questions

In this section students were asked to respond to four open-ended questions. A content analysis of their responses showed that some students were happy to give broad opinions that covered a variety of categories while others commented on only one or two areas. Answers for the first three questions were examined for frequency of like-responses and listed and classified under the headings of Teacher, Subject, Classroom Environment or Other. Question four related solely to homework so answers were reduced and presented almost as stated. Results are summarized in the following tables which were calculated to show how often the response appeared in the students answers.
Table 3

Q 1. What do you like about Social Studies lessons?

Category of responses

1. Teacher strategies
   - Participation/discussions: 7
   - Explanations: 1
   - Makes things fun: 1
   - Help available: 1
   - Tests well worded: 1

2. Subject
   - Interesting topics: 3
   - Law: 4
   - Geography/Earth & People: 2
   - Help get a job: 2

3. Classroom Environment
   - Help each other/express what you feel: 2
   - Friendly attitude/good time: 2

4. Other
   - Hardly anything/boring: 1
   - Everything: 1

The responses to Q.1 appeared to confirm the results of the ICEQ in relation to the variable of participation and was mentioned by 7 students as an aspect they liked about their Social Studies lessons. Consistency in student response between open-ended questions and the fixed response items of the Baseline Survey was provided by the 11 students whose answers were subject related. Differences in individual perceptions of the same
experience was provided by the two extreme views in the responses headed other.

Table 4

What don't you like about Social Studies lessons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of responses</th>
<th>1. Teacher Strategies</th>
<th>2. Subject</th>
<th>3. Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing notes</td>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of activities</td>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions from books</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Close to half of the students surveyed disliked the amount of note writing they were asked to do in Social Studies lessons. Two students qualified their statements by adding "the notes do help us learn" but they could be "cut down a little bit". One student clearly reflected the struggle some students experience in trying to avoid failure when confronted by a difficult task. He commented "the work gets hard for me and I get frustrated and don't do the work". This student appeared to be in a failure syndrome/learned helplessness pattern. The
research literature suggests that students in this pattern have come to believe that nothing they can do will enable them to succeed consistently and so they give up. It is important to place this information in context for the purpose of this study. The student who made the comment is one of the students placed in the class from the MSB committee and has a history of failure and discipline problems. The literature makes comments on the role low teacher expectations play in encouraging this belief in low achievers but it is very difficult to form any assumptions from this data in this particular situation.

Table 5

3. What changes would you like to see in Social Studies lessons?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Teacher Strategies</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More discussion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less note writing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More activities</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excursions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow the pace down</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Subject</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More current events</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Geography</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interesting topics</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More history</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Other</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similar response patterns to the previous questions emerged for Q. 3 with the main emphasis being on teacher strategies. Students would obviously like to change aspects of their class that they don't like and increase the occurrence of strategies that they do like. Hence, less note writing, greater discussion and more activities and excursions were the most frequent responses. The subject content variable was mentioned by 5 students and is possibly a reflection of students' personal preferences for the various topics offered by the Social Studies curriculum.

Table 6

4. How do you feel about the homework you are set in Social Studies? Do you get the right sort of homework and the right amount?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of responses</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right amount of homework</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough homework</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly any</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate it</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty easy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from this table were almost identical to the information obtained from item 40 in the fixed response page -53
section of the Baseline Survey. Most students could cope with the amount of homework given and were happy with the amount of work they were asked to do. The three responses which suggested that there should be more homework were from students who liked the subject.

In summary, the most frequent category of responses were related to teacher strategies and were seen by students as both negative and positive aspects of their Social Studies classroom. This was followed by subject related responses which showed individual student preferences in topics and a scattering of answers that were almost polarized in their extreme.

The majority of students were happy with the level of active participation in their lessons and some would like to see this level increased further. All students would like to see a reduction in the amount of notetaking in their lessons and an increase in activities and excursions. The difficulty in meeting individual needs in a traditional classroom were highlighted by the responses from one student who would like to see more work being done as opposed to the two who wanted the pace slowed down because they could not keep up.

The content analysis of the open-ended responses showed a high degree of consistency with the results of the fixed
response items in Part A of the Baseline Survey and the data from the ICEQ.

Interview Data

After administration of the questionnaires five students agreed to be interviewed. Students A and D did not like the subject, students B and C liked the subject and student E was chosen for having some inconsistent answers in the Baseline Questionnaire. Students A, C and D were females and the remaining students B and E were males. All target students were comparable to any year 9 group in any other school. All were average to slightly above average achievers and none were noted as being highly popular or isolates in their class. All five students selected none were considered "normal" typical students in their year group.

Transcript of Interviews

Q. 1 Did you understand the topic covered in this particular lesson?

A. - "didn't really understand it very clearly"
   Why?- "the way it was taught" "Too many notes and questions from books"

B. - "Yes"
   Why? - "Amount of work was easy for me to understand"
C. "Yes" - Why? - "Because I find it interesting"

D. "Yes - it was not too difficult" Why - "relevant - it was in the news and it relates to kids our age"

E. "Yes - most of it was easy"

Four of the five students were happy with the content of the lesson and attributed this to the topic being interesting and aimed at the right level for their year group. Student A attributed her difficulty in understanding the subject matter to the method and strategies of the teacher.

Q.2 Do you have any suggestions that would improve that Social Studies lessons?

A. "Excursions, going out more" Improve speakers some were "boring".

B. "Go to a court or a hearing"

C. "No - He is a really good teacher, allows students to express opinions"

D. "Improve the pace - it drags on a bit too much"

E. "Go to court, police station instead of sitting in the class and writing out 18 pages of notes"

Student responses were consistent with the responses in the open-ended questions in calling for excursions and activities to improve their Social Studies lessons.

Q. 3 Why do you think the topic was considered necessary for year 9 students to study.

A. "Help understand more about law and the different types".
All students agreed that the Law topic was an interesting and relevant subject for year 9 students to study.

Q. 4 Is this topic as interesting as other Social Studies subjects?
Q. 5 Have you found other topics to be interesting?
A. "Yes - more interesting"

Why? - "prior knowledge helped" "Don't like olden day stuff - didn't find it interesting".

B. - "Interesting but not as interesting as Earth and People especially the Geography sections".

"Didn't like Australian Society"
Why? - "I couldn't understand it properly"

How could it be improved? - "More homework, talk more"

C. "Law was good and interesting". "More interesting than others". "Also liked Ancient World and Australian Society can't remember one Unit that I haven't liked".

D. "Bit boring - because it drags too much"

Why? - Could it be improved? - "Instead of teaching the same way - changing the way the teacher teaches sometimes". "Excursions, people with real life experiences instead of the teacher sometimes, more research and allow us to give ourselves a bit of self tutoring".

E. "Sometimes boring when you have to write notes" I have liked other subjects better, particularly History and Geography"
"Could be improved with more practical activities, like we had to do papier-mache dinosaurs for a unit and a model in another I liked that"

The data showed that most students found intrinsic value in the content of most Social Studies topics. Responses were consistent with answers to Q. 2 where teacher strategies can make the difference between a topic being considered interesting or boring.

Q. 6 Do you achieve well in this subject? Why?
A. "No- I always get D's -C was my highest mark". "Boring- hard to understand"
How can it be improved for you?
"More explanations, make it more fun, group activities, getting out of class".
B. "Yes - I get A's or B's"
"Because I like it"
C. "Yes I get A's/B's"
"I do well because I like study because it's interesting so I get around to doing it".
D. "Yes - been getting better grades this term"
"Don't like it as much as other subjects". How do you achieve in other subjects? "I got an A in Maths and yes getting an A makes you feel a lot better".
E. "C or B not too bad - doing well helps you like a subject".

Good grades and achievement were seen as motivation for liking a subject and were consistent with the literature on "achievement motivation". The statements by Student A and Student C lend direct support to the research by Weiner (cited in Good and Brophy, 1987) on causal attributions for performance. Student A attributed her
poor results to external causes beyond her control, such as difficult content and poor teacher strategies, while Student C attributed her success to internal causes such as the effort she was prepared to put into personal study as opposed to set homework. The following answers to Q. 7 on the amount of time spent on homework showed that students who achieved well all had expectations of success and showed greater commitment to personal study. Students B, C and E all liked the subject and concentrated their efforts on achieving success as opposed to avoiding failure.

Q 7. How much time do you spend on Social Studies homework?
A. "Don't get much, "Don't do much"
B. "Doesn't give much", "Not a positive aspect we should have more".
C. "We don't get much but I study before tests"
D. "We don't get much".
E. "Yes, I spend about an hour going over notes and organizing my file".

As previously stated the three students who liked the subject and achieved well appeared happy to expend effort to get a good grade. While the teacher did not set a lot of homework these students were self-motivated enough to review their notes to enhance their understanding of the topic.
Q. 8 What aspect of this class do you like the most?

A. "Being with friends', "teachers good too".
B. "Tests- because I do well in tests"
C. "discussions, talking about the topic and being able to give your opinion."
D. "Being with friends, teacher is alright, he talks to you a lot".
E. "Get to stir the kids sitting next to me, I like to annoy her".

Students appeared to place value on a supportive, friendly environment where their opinions were encouraged and listened to by an interested teacher. This is a particularly interesting view since students A and D, who both disliked the subject, both stated that the teacher was a positive aspect of their class. The likelihood of achieving success was the aspect most liked by Student B and was a motivating factor in encouraging effort.

Q. 9 What aspect do you dislike?

A. "Writing too much"
B. "Too many notes"
C. "We do a lot of writing, but I suppose we have to do that".
D. "Writing".
E. "Getting slapped by Natalie when I annoy her".

Answers were consistent with Q.2 and with the results of the Baseline survey data. Students were unanimous in their opinions about the amount of note writing in the
class and was the single aspect most students would like
to change in the teaching and learning of Social Studies.

10. Would you choose to study Social Studies in Upper
school?
N. "Depends what I'm doing in the future".
R. "Yes, probably Geography"
V. "Don't know yet, maybe! Not sure how important it is
in the future for employment".
M. "Don't know yet, Depends on how I go next year, if I
do well I might take it up. My mum wants me to do TEE so
I might if I get a bit smarter".

Generally students were indecisive about choosing Social
Studies in upper school. This appeared to be related
more to an uncertainty about future careers and how the
subject would help them attain their goals.

Reasons for liking/disliking the subject?
A. "It's pretty hard to understand and I don't think
the topic is interesting."
B. "Most informative, good class to be in. It's always
been my favourite subject". I think Social Studies is as
important as other subjects but it is relevant only to
some careers e.g. Law if you want to be a Lawyer or
Geography if you want to be a Geologist".
C. "He's a good teacher, that makes a difference
because he explains things".
D. "If you can't see the point in the subject you tend
to slack off. "Most of the jobs these days don't need
Social Studies, so you concentrate on other subjects that
you really need."
E. "Mainly because of the teachers. If the teacher
helps you with the work you don't get so aggravated about
the other kids."
The three students who liked the subject attributed their positive attitude to the teacher. Student A attributed her dislike of the subject to the difficulty factor while student D felt that if the subject did not appear to lead to employment it was unlikely to maintain her interest.

Student Profiles

A summary of the results recorded by the five students in response to the standardized questionnaires is presented in the following tables.

Table 7

Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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From the table summary it can be seen that a spread in answers is apparent for the scale of personalization and independence. This spread does not appear to follow a pattern of gender or of students who like or dislike the subject. It is more likely to reflect the findings by Weinstein (1983) and Ames and Archer (1988) that students differ in their interpretation of classroom events and it is this interpretation that results in different learning experiences.

Table 8
Baseline Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Student Mean</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Group Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A  B  C  D  E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Subject</td>
<td>2.2 3.4 3.4 2.6 2.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Subject</td>
<td>2.8 3.6 3.0 2.8 2.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to Subject</td>
<td>3.0 2.6 3.2 3.4 2.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Management</td>
<td>3.0 3.0 3.2 2.6 3.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of own ability</td>
<td>3.0 3.6 3.6 2.8 2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to other students</td>
<td>2.8 2.6 2.4 2.8 3.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitude to students</td>
<td>2.8 3.2 3.4 3.2 3.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude to homework</td>
<td>2.8 3.2 3.2 2.9 2.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data from this table showed that many similarities exist in responses from the two students who liked the subject. In particular these students had high self-perceptions of their own ability and displayed a most positive attitude towards homework. Students who did not like the subject showed greater variations in response but displayed a more positive attitude towards their classmates. Student E recorded the lowest mean for interest and value in the subject but scored the highest mean for attitude to other students.

Student B

Generally Student B displayed a genuine intrinsic interest in the subject content. He achieved well and was motivated by receiving good grades. He attributed his success primarily to the interesting content and to the effort he was prepared to put into his work. This work ethic was evident when he commented that students should have more homework because what they received was "not enough".

His overall average mean score for the 8 variables in the fixed response Baseline survey was a positive 3.2 and this attitude could be summed up by his comment that this Social Studies classroom was a "good class to be in".
Student C

Student C displayed an intrinsic interest in the subject describing it as "interesting" and "enjoyable". Like Student B she attributed her success to the interesting content, her own ability and the effort she was prepared to put into her work. The teacher was perceived as a reason for liking the class and was referred to in positive terms on numerous occasions. The social dimensions of the classroom were important to Student C and this perception was reflected in her responses to the ICEQ where above average scores were recorded for the scales of Personalization, Participation and Independence.

Many similarities were evident in the responses from the two students who liked the subject. Aside from finding the subject interesting both students were prepared to take responsibility for their own learning and attributed their success to an internal locus of control where success was linked to personal effort. Both displayed a positive perception of their own abilities scoring a mean of 3.6 for this variable as opposed to the class average of 2.9. This score indicated that students maintained an expectation of success which was a strong motivating factor towards their perceptions of Social Studies.
These two students differed in perceptions of the classroom climate particularly in the ICEQ scale of Personalization where Student B recorded a low score of 15 which was 3 below the class average. A slightly lower than average score of 2.6 for the variable attitude to the subject teacher in the Baseline Survey could infer that differential teacher treatment was perceived by Student B.

Student A

Student A attributed her lack of interest in the subject to the difficult content and the uninteresting nature of the topics. Generally Student A had a positive perception of her own ability scoring an average of 3.0 for this variable in the Baseline Survey. Her lack of success in the subject was attributed, not to lack of ability, but to external causes such as the methods and strategies employed by the teacher. Despite this perception Student A held a positive attitude towards the teacher and, along with being with friends, cited the teacher as a positive aspect of the class. Student A scored a low 2.8 for the variable attitude to Homework and her lack of personal effort is summarized in her comment on the variable homework, "Don't get much, Don't do much". 
Student D

A practical perspective towards Social Studies was supplied by Student D who felt that while Social Studies lessons were "O.K." she didn't think that the work on the past would help her get a job in the future. Her orientation to education appeared solely as a means for future employment.

Unlike Student A this student attributed her failure to achieve high marks in Social Studies to her lack of effort but agreed that getting a good grade was a strong motivation for liking a subject. Student C also felt that her peers and the class teacher were positive aspects of the class and was a view consistent with her response to the ICEQ scale of Personalization where she scored 4 above the class average.

Student E

As expected the pattern for Student E was unpredictable. He maintained that he liked the subject but recorded a mean score of 2.2 for both interest and value in the subject which was below the class average. Student E often referred to the subject as "boring" and wanted more practical activities built into lessons.

Student interview answers displayed an awareness of class peers and an often frivolous comment was counteracted by
his personal commitment to organizing and revising notes in his own time to ensure that he achieved a reasonable grade. Doing well was a motivation to like a subject for this student but he did not want to be seen by his peers to be trying hard to achieve good grades. This attitude could also explain the statement that the teacher was the reason he liked the subject. Obviously a good teacher would provide a classroom atmosphere where work was expected from all students and the opportunity for this student to conform to peer pressure would be reduced.

Despite greater variations in responses some similarities were also evident in students who did not like the subject. These students described the subject as "boring", but differed on reasons for these perceptions. Student A thought that the subject was difficult to understand, Student D complained that the pace of the lessons tended to "drag on" while Student E wanted more practical activities incorporated into the lessons.

These students had positive self-perceptions of ability but different attributional patterns for their success or failures. Students D and E attributed their results to internal causes within their control, such as the amount of effort they were prepared to put into their work, while Student A attributed her lack of success to
external causes such as the difficult content and poor teacher strategies.

All students reported positive attitudes towards the subject teacher and placed greater importance on the social aspect of the class than the students who liked the subject.

Much of the data from the interviews highlight the different orientations that drive student behaviour and the impact that these different orientations have on student perceptions of their Social Studies classroom. Interwoven in the results however, there were much data that appeared to support the findings of the questionnaires, particularly on student attitudes towards the subject, the perceptions students hold of the teacher and on student perceptions of how the subject could be improved. These similarities of findings will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter examines the results in terms of the research question. The examination will look for consistency across all data collected as a means of analysing and interpreting data to look for emergent themes in student perceptions of the classroom climate, the reasons students provide for their perceptions of Social Studies and student suggestions for improvement in Social Studies lessons. The results of the study also will be considered in relation to the literature review.

Research Question

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS HELD TOWARDS THE LEARNING OF SOCIAL STUDIES IN A YEAR 9 SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM?

a) What are student perceptions of Social Studies in regard to:

Interest in the Subject

All but two students reported that they usually liked Social Studies even though seven students claimed that it...
was sometimes boring, feeling that it was not interesting most of the time and almost half not enjoying the activities in their Social Studies lessons. While this information appeared to contain contradictions when viewed with additional data from the ICEQ, the open-ended questions and the interview data it could be assumed that students were generally happy with the subject content but occasionally found the strategies and methods of the teacher boring, repetitive and uninteresting.

The high proportion of students who liked the subject appears at odds with the trend identified in the research literature. However, these results were supportive of the research undertaken by Fouts (1987) who claimed that teachers who promoted active participation, involvement and affiliation in their classrooms could improve student attitude towards school subjects. Results from all three instruments suggested that these teacher controllable variables were present in the classroom studied and may have mediated the impact of the negative aspects of the teaching strategies.

Perceived Value of the Subject

The high proportion of students who valued the subject and felt it would be useful for later life was also contrary to the findings of Fraser (1980, 1981b) who reported that students not only perceived the subject to
be irrelevant to future employment, but also ranked it well below the other core subjects. Interview data showed that four of the five students ranked Social Studies highly in comparison to other subjects. However, strong perceptions still existed among some 25% of students that Social Studies was not relevant in gaining future employment and this perception was likely to be a deciding factor in choosing Social Studies subjects in upper school. Data from the student interviews suggested that not liking the subject did not appear to preclude students from choosing Social Studies if they felt it assisted them in attaining future goals.

This information strengthens the need recommended by Print (1990a) that the goals of Social Studies education be clearly communicated and promoted in the school community.

Attitude to Subject Teacher
Data collected from all three instruments indicated that students felt that the teacher did contribute to the quality of the classroom climate during Social Studies lessons. Of the students interviewed all three students who liked the subject mentioned the teacher as at least part of the reason for the perceptions they held towards the subject. On a frequency count in open-ended
questions 1-3 teacher related comments accounted for 47 responses in a total of 78 received.

Teacher strategies appeared to be seen as both positive and negative aspects while the teachers' personal attributes were generally viewed as positive. More than half the students thought that the teacher did not arrange interesting things for them to do lending support to the assumption that it was the methods and strategies used in the classroom that students found boring and uninteresting rather than the subject content.

On a personal level almost all students reported that the teacher would never embarrass a pupil for giving an incorrect answer and 80% of students thought that he often helped students who were having difficulty. This data could infer that the teacher promoted a classroom climate which encouraged students to take risks since failure was unlikely to lead to humiliation. This relates directly to the notion that the classroom climate can mediate student perceptions and reduce the negative consequences of failure that affects students' self-evaluation (Marshall and Weinstein, 1984).

According to Good and Brophy (1987) teacher expectation effects can operate on a class level and have an impact on the classroom climate. They maintained that successful
teachers who believed they were capable of motivating and instructing their students, and believed their students were capable of achieving success, would communicate this expectation to their students. These teachers were confident and at ease with their students and were not defensive when students disagreed or challenged them in the classroom. Successful teachers who are perceived positively by their students are described by Benninga, Guskey and Thorbury (1981) as those who have favourable opinions of their students, hold high expectations for all of them, feel less need to control students and feel less responsible for positive classroom events. Student satisfaction with the degree of active participation in the classroom studied, and their positive perceptions of the teacher, could imply that the teacher communicated this attitude to his students.

Class Management
Data from the Baseline Survey showed that the teacher was perceived by all students as being well organized, able to explain clearly and to have firm control in the classroom. In terms of gender all students felt that he was fair to both sexes and showed no bias to any student or group.

In the review literature research by Poole (1983) and Weinstein (1983) reported that these qualities were
perceived by students as important attributes in effective teachers.

Perception of Own Ability

With one exception all students claimed that they usually tried to do as well as they could in their Social Studies classroom. However, 18 students reported that they would not try to do work they found difficult. Since 22 of the total 23 students surveyed felt that they could handle the work they were given it could be assumed that the teacher was very adept at presenting material and tasks that matched pupil's ability levels and was a perception shared by some 78% of students in the class.

Results from all instruments suggested that a co-operative reward structure which placed students at little risk of public humiliation was practised in the class. This type of organizational structure, along with the discriminative use of criticism directed towards academic work, were factors identified by Weinstein (1983) as having a positive effect on student's self-perception of ability. The positive perception by most students of the variable Independence in the ICEQ indicated that most students felt a satisfactory degree of autonomy and choice about the practices in their classroom which, according to Blumenfeld et al. (1982), decreases negative self-evaluations.
All 5 students who strongly agreed that they usually liked the subject held positive perceptions of their own ability. These students recorded means above the class average for this variable and were particularly high for interview Students B and C.

The overall positive class average for student self-perceptions of ability in a class with such low scores for differentiation of task structures was at odds with the study undertaken by MacIver (1988) and referred to in the literature review. In this study students in classrooms which were high in differentiation, and where non normative evaluation criteria were used, were likely to perceive themselves as competent. These findings suggest that evaluation practices mediated the effects of low differentiation on students' self-perceptions of ability. However, there was not enough data on evaluation practices in this present study to support this assumption.

... Attitude to Other Students
Generally students appeared to like their classmates and all but one student were happy to work with most of the students in the class. Despite this some 40% of students also felt that a significant proportion of students in the class tended to waste their time, paid little
attention to the teacher and distracted them from learning. Clearly all students did not have the same experiences within the classroom and it was difficult to draw conclusions from this amount of data. There may, however, be some justification for linking this data to the responses in the student interviews which related to perceived reasons for personal success or failure to achieve. The underlying reasons for student behaviour in the classroom may relate to Covington's (1984) self-worth theory of achievement motivation which stated that students who fear failure would rather be seen by their peers as not really trying so their failure could be attributed not to lack of ability, which would damage their self-esteem, but rather to a lack of effort. McClelland et al. (cited in Covington, 1984) explained that student behaviour would be directed towards avoiding failure because any observed effort that resulted in failure exposed the student as lacking in ability and presented a potential threat to self-worth.

Student E appeared to fit into this category and lends credence to the statement by Hamilton (1983) that for some students the classroom was a place of stress and anxiety where students must balance the teacher's evaluation with that of their peers. This student was motivated to achieve good grades but did not necessarily
want to be seen by his class peers to be trying very hard.

Interview data also provided an insight into the importance of having friendship groups in the class and it was interesting to note that being with friends was of greater importance to the students who did not like the subject.

Perceived Teacher Attitude to Students
Baseline data showed that all students reported that the teacher genuinely liked his students and was very understanding. This confirmed the data from the ICEQ where the variable Personalization recorded a satisfactory 18.0 mean for the class. Some 85% of the students perceived the teacher to be interested in their opinions and in whether they could handle the work they were given. However, approximately 35% felt that they could not talk to him about things they had on their minds. The data may indicate that students felt comfortable talking to the teacher about subject content but were unsure about divulging details of any personal problems.

Since the variable Personalization recorded a spread of answers with a SD of 2.8 some pupils may have perceived differential treatment from the teacher. Blumenfeld et
al. (1982) pointed out that the context, the non-verbal behaviours, the situation and the students' past experiences all contributed toward the interpretation and meanings that students attributed toward teacher behaviour. Research by Weinstein and Middlestadt (1979) confirmed this finding in interviews with students which revealed that four different interpretations of the observed teacher behaviour "calling on" was provided by different students. Therefore, from the data available in this study it was difficult to draw accurate conclusions about reasons for student perceptions of differential teacher treatment.

Attitude to Homework
All students appeared happy with the amount of homework given and all but two reported that they could handle the work and that help was readily available if they needed it. While there was strong support from home for students to do homework almost half of the students surveyed felt that it did little to enhance their understanding of the subject.

It was interesting to note that data from the student interviews showed that the three students who liked the
subject were prepared to put personal effort into self-directed study as opposed to set homework and consequently achieved good grades. Students who did not like the subject reported that since little homework was set they rarely spent time on Social Studies homework.

b) **What are student perceptions of classroom climate in a Social Studies classroom?**

Students perceived a high degree of participation and personalization in their classroom. The teacher was described as having a "friendly attitude" and he "often makes things fun". In this class students could "have a good time and learn as well"; they were "allowed to work together and get plenty of help", were able to "express what you feel about the subject" and be involved in talks and discussions.

Active participation, personalization and a reasonable degree of independence were variables that were rated highly by the students and their importance appeared to negate the less desirable aspects of the class, particularly the amount of note writing and lack of activities.

This finding related directly to the research undertaken by Marshall and Weinstein (1984) who maintained that it
was the "totality" of the classroom environment that determined how students interpreted specific events. Variables that helped mediate student perceptions and were positively linked to learning gains were identified by Haertel, Walberg and Haertel (cited in Weinstein, 1983) as student perceived cohesiveness, satisfaction, task difficulty, formality, goal direction and democracy. Data from the Baseline and ICEQ implied that, to some extent, these practices existed in the classroom studied. The limitations of time and the exploratory nature of this study restricted further probing in this area so assumptions must remain tentative but could become the focus of further study.

c) What are the reasons students provide for the perceptions they have of Social Studies?

Three of the five students interviewed felt the teacher had a big role to play in students liking the subject. This was supported by the data from the open-ended questions where eleven students cited teacher strategies as the aspect they most liked about their class. Interesting topics were an important factor for a further eleven students and the classroom environment was a significant factor for four students.
Students did not like topics that they did not understand. This lack of understanding was likely to lead to difficulty and failure in the subject and was given as a reason for not liking the subject.

The literature on achievement motivation suggests that students in this position will look for ways to avoid failure for fear of losing face and being humiliated. (Covington, 1984) These students will come to believe that they are incapable of performing the tasks set so they do not approach tasks with any expectation of success and will often stop work at the first sign of difficulty. This is likely to result in low self-perceptions of ability, an external attributional pattern for failure and an inability to realize that they can control their behaviour to produce the outcomes they desire. (Good and Brophy, 1987)

In the class studied students generally displayed positive self-perceptions of ability. Students who liked the subject revealed an internal attributional pattern while one student who didn't like the subject attributed her poor results to external causes. This could imply that the expectations communicated by the teacher encouraged or contributed to these perceptions and attributional patterns in the students studied.
Support for this assumption was provided in the literature by Hamilton (1983) who quoted a study by Mehan which found that in classrooms were the incidence of teacher disapproval of student initiated talk was reduced, and where a greater responsiveness was displayed by both teacher and other students to student initiated topics, the greater the increase in the competence levels of the students in the class. Mehan also stressed that students in classrooms which were high in participation were also more likely to influence the teacher's behaviour. While the sample size for the study was small there was considerable evidence of active participation and student satisfaction with the levels of discussion in the classroom to support this assumption.

d) How do students perceive Social Studies being able to be improved?

The ICEQ and the Baseline survey data showed a consistency in student perception of teacher method and strategies and was the area all students would like to see changed and improved. Most students would like to see a reduction in the amount of notetaking and an increase in activities. Increased excursions was strongly supported by most students and suggestions for
the law topic included going to a court hearing or visiting the local police station. Guest speakers with real life experiences were also seen as an improvement but only if the speakers were interesting and articulate. Some guest speakers that were asked to speak to students were described as "boring".

Summary
In summary, initial data from the standardized questionnaires presented an overview of a classroom in which students perceived that they were encouraged to be active participants in their learning by a teacher who showed considerable concern and interest in his students. The climate was described as supportive and co-operative but the teaching style and curriculum was perceived as being centred on knowledge in the traditional areas.

All students in the class claimed to value the subject and all but two of the students reported a favourable attitude towards the subject.

Student interview data probed for reasons behind these perceptions and revealed that students who liked the subject held positive self-perceptions of their own ability, were prepared to take responsibility for their own learning, were motivated to achieve by receiving good
grades and attributed their success to the effort they were prepared to put into learning.

Students who did not like the subject perceived it to be difficult to understand and irrelevant to their future needs. While these students did not achieve well in the subject they also had positive perceptions of their own ability but they differed in reasons for their lack of achievements. One student attributed her difficulty to external causes such as the difficult content and the poor teacher strategies while the other attributed her low scores to internal causes such as lack of effort. Both students were of the opinion that low grades did affect their perception of a subject and both reported that they achieved better grades in subjects they liked.

While all students made reference to the friendship groups and the social dimensions of the classroom they appeared particularly important to the two students who disliked the subject and to the student who was somewhat indifferent and inconsistent in his perceptions of Social Studies. This particular student achieved well and attributed his success to the assistance the teacher was prepared to give and to his personal commitment to study. The effects of the peer group and the pressure to conform appeared to impact on the perceptions held by this student towards the class and the subject.
While there were many similarities it must also be noted that some of the data implied that students did perceive differential teacher treatment and had different learning experiences within the class studied.

Such a finding is important because the initial measure of the classroom environment resulted in a positive mean average for the class. However, as Weinstein (1983) pointed out, it is possible for different environments to exist for high and low achievers within the one classroom setting. In this study it was interesting to note that of the students interviewed only Student A could be considered as a low achiever but in the variable Personalization she, along with Students B and E who considered themselves to be high achievers, recorded scores that were lower than the class average.

According to Good and Brophy (1987) individual differences among students often result in some students decoding teachers' communications of expectations more often and accurately. While this may apply to the classroom studied this study can only claim that students did perceive differential treatment but further research is needed on underlying reasons or causes for these perceptions.
CONCLUSION

The majority of students in the study reported favourable attitudes towards Social Studies but some felt that occasionally the topics were boring and uninteresting. All students valued the subject and thought it would help them understand the world around them but approximately 25% did not perceive it to be useful or helpful in gaining employment.

Students held positive opinions of their classroom teacher. They felt he was fair in his treatment of all students and would never embarrass any student. He was perceived to be well organized, able to explain clearly and always available to help students with difficult work. Almost all the students in the survey held positive self-perceptions of ability and believed they could understand the work they were given. These students were usually proud of their work but approximately 74% stated that they would not do work they found difficult.

While attitudes towards other students were generally positive some students felt that some class members did not pay attention to the teacher and tended to waste their time in class.
Very little homework appeared to be given to the students and what was set was well within their capabilities. There was strong parental support for students to do homework but almost half of the students felt that it did little to enhance their understanding of the topic.

Students in this class reported a high degree of satisfaction with the level of active participation in their lessons and this contributed to the positive perceptions held by students towards the subject. Most students perceived that the teacher encouraged student initiated discussions, listened to the students in his class and allowed students a measure of autonomy and choice in classroom practices.

Responsibility for learning in the class was shared between the teacher and the students in a co-operative and supportive atmosphere which contributed to the high level of positive self-perceptions of ability held by the students in the class.

Achieving success was the predominant reason given for liking a school subject. Students who liked Social Studies took responsibility for their own learning, achieved well and attributed their success to internal causes. While fewer similarities were evident for students who did not like the subject these students all
perceived the subject to be "boring" which they defined as repetitious, routine work. All placed greater emphasis on the social aspects of the class and were more likely to be influenced by the peer norms.

Almost all students felt that their Social Studies lessons could be improved by reducing the amount of notewriting. Other suggestions for improvement included increased practical and group activities, more real life experiences and more outside excursions.

The emergent themes from this study centre on the role that the teacher, achievement motivation and the classroom environment play in the formation of attitude towards a school subject. Since all three can, to some extent, be controlled by the classroom teacher it should be possible to use this knowledge to promote Social Studies within the school.

It is acknowledged that any collection of individuals make a unique environment so it will not be assumed that the classroom studied is representative of other classrooms. However, this should not preclude the possibility of similarity between other classrooms. Whether the same pattern of responses would be obtained in another setting could be the basis of a future study.
Implications of the Findings

The most significant finding in this study was the high proportion of students who reported that they liked Social Studies. While some did not necessarily feel it would help them gain employment, all valued the subject and thought it would help them understand the world around them.

Strong perceptions existed among approximately 25% of students that Social Studies was not relevant in gaining future employment and this is one aspect which must receive attention from Social Studies teachers to encourage students to study the subject in Upper School. Not liking the subject did not appear to preclude students from choosing Social Studies if they felt it would assist them in attaining their goals.

To promote Social Studies education in the schools teachers need to consider the strategies they employ, the classroom atmosphere they promote and the expectations they communicate to their students.

In order to be effective in this process it would be useful to ensure that there were no discrepancies between teacher and student perceptions of the actual classroom environment. Once a match existed intervention strategies could be employed to ensure that a positive attitude towards the subject was encouraged.
In the final analysis the teacher's personal qualities and roles seem to be significant factors in contributing to the quality of the classroom climate during Social Studies lessons.

Limitations of the Findings
These findings are limited by the exploratory nature of the study, the small sample size and the constraints of time. Variables that appeared to impact on student perceptions but need more focused study include evaluation practices within the classroom and the effect they have on student self-perceptions of ability, and the reasons behind perceived differential teacher treatment.
Recommendations for Further Research

Questions arising from the study which could direct further research:

1. Do evaluation practices in a classroom mediate the effects of low differentiation task structures on students' self-perceptions of ability?

2. To what extent is there a match between teacher and student perceptions of the classroom climate?

3. What effect do positive performance expectations have on the formation of attitudes by students towards Social Studies?

REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
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<th>Seldom</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2. Students give their opinions during discussions.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3. The teacher decides where students sit.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>4. Students find out the answers to questions from textbooks rather than from investigations.</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>5. Different students do different work.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>6. The teacher takes a personal interest in each student.</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>7. The teacher lectures without students asking or answering questions.</td>
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<td>8. Students choose their partners for group work.</td>
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<td>9. Students carry out investigations to test ideas.</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>10. All students in the class do the same work at the same time.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Students carry out investigations to answer questions coming from class discussions.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>15. Different students use different books, equipment and materials.</td>
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<td>16. The teacher helps each student who is having trouble with the work.</td>
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<td>17. Students ask the teacher questions.</td>
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<td>18. The teacher decides which students should work together.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Students explain the meanings of statements, diagrams and graphs.</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>20. Students who work faster than others move on to the next topic.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. The teacher considers students' feelings.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>22. There is classroom discussion.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>23. The teacher decides how much movement and talk there should be in the classroom.</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>24. Students carry out investigations to answer questions which puzzle them.</td>
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<td>25. The same teaching aid (e.g., blackboard or overhead projector) is used for all students in the class.</td>
<td>1</td>
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ATTITUDE TO SOCIAL STUDIES

- We are interested in how you feel about social studies.
- Please answer honestly.
- These items don't have right or wrong answers.
- Do not write your name on the booklet, unless instructed to do so by your teacher.
- In the boxes provided above, write in your:
  - Year Level, e.g. Year 9
  - Sex, e.g. [F] or [M]

PART A

Before you commence, practise on the sample below.

Place a circle around:

4 if you STRONGLY AGREE with the statement;
3 if you AGREE with the statement;
2 if you DISAGREE with the statement; and
1 if you STRONGLY DISAGREE with the statement.

* 1. I ENJOY GOING TO A GOOD MOVIE.

* If you agree with this statement you will circle the 3.
1. I usually like social studies.  
2. I find social studies less useful than other subjects.  
3. My social studies teacher does not allow me to work at my own speed.  
4. My social studies teacher always explains clearly what he/she would like us to do.  
5. In my social studies class I don't try to do work that I find difficult.  
6. I like most of the students in my social studies class.  
7. My social studies teacher is very understanding.  
8. I can usually cope with the social studies homework we are given.  
9. Social studies lessons are usually boring.  
10. I feel that I learn a lot in social studies.  
11. The social studies teacher usually arranges interesting things for us to do.  
12. The teacher is not able to control the students in our social studies class.  
13. I can usually handle the work I am given in social studies.  
14. The students in my social studies class don't pay attention to what the teacher is saying.  
15. My social studies teacher is not interested in whether or not the students can handle the work.  
16. We get too much homework in social studies.  
17. Most things we learn about in social studies are interesting.  
18. What we do in social studies will help me understand more of the world around me.
19. My social studies teacher will seldom help students who are having difficulty with school work.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

20. Activities in this social studies class are carefully planned.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

21. I am usually proud of the work I do in social studies.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

22. Some of the students in this social studies class prevent me from working.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

23. Our social studies teacher seems to like most of the students in this class.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

24. Doing social studies homework helps me to understand the subject.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

25. The thought of going to a social studies lesson makes me feel good.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

26. I don't expect to make much use of what I learn in social studies.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

27. My teacher is able to make social studies easier to understand.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

28. Boys are more likely to be asked to answer questions during our social studies class.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

29. In social studies lessons I usually don't understand the work we are given.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

30. I am happy to work with most of the students in my social studies class.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

31. I feel that I can speak to my social studies teacher about things that are on my mind.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

32. If I needed help to do my social studies homework, I would not be able to get it.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

33. I don't enjoy many of the activities we do in social studies.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

34. If I do well in social studies it will help me to get a job.
   STRONGLY AGREE
   AGREE
   DISAGREE
   STRONGLY DISAGREE

page -100
35. My social studies teacher embarrasses students who don't know the right answer.  

36. In our social studies class, students who finish their work early are usually left with nothing to do.  

37. In my social studies class I usually try to do as well as I can.  

38. Many of the students in my social studies class just want to waste time.  

39. Our social studies teacher is not interested in our opinions.  

40. My parents do not encourage me to do my homework.  

---

4 - STRONGLY AGREE  
3 - AGREE  
2 - DISAGREE  
1 - STRONGLY DISAGREE

4  3  2  1  
4  3  2  1  
4  3  2  1  
4  3  2  1  
4  3  2  1
PART B

1. What do you like about social studies lessons?

2. What don't you like about social studies lessons?

3. What changes would you like to see in social studies lessons?

4. How do you feel about the homework you are set in social studies? Do you get the right sort of homework and the right amount?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Did you understand the topic covered in this particular lesson?
   No - Why do you think it was difficult to understand?
   Yes - Why do you think it was easy for you to understand?

2. Do you have any suggestions that would improve that particular lesson?

3. Why do you think the topic was considered necessary for year 9 students to study?

4. Is this topic as interesting as other social studies topics you have studied?
   No - Why did you find the other topic interesting?
   Yes - What other topics did you find interesting?

5. Have you found any other topics to be interesting?

6. Do you achieve well in this subject?
   No - Why do you think you do not achieve well?
   Yes - Why do you think you achieve well?

7. How much time do you spend on social studies homework per week?

8. What aspect of this class do you enjoy the most?

9. What aspect of this class do you dislike?

10. Would you choose to study social studies in Year 11?
    Why?
    Why not?
APPENDIX D

PARENT CONSENT LETTER

Dear Parent

I am a teacher at Cyril Jackson Senior High School undertaking a research project in your child's classroom. The study is an examination of student attitudes towards Social Studies and is being conducted through a course at Edith Cowan University. The research has the approval of the Principal Ms Hams and the class teacher. As part of the research students may be recorded on cassette tape and interviewed about their perceptions and attitude towards the subject and so I seek your permission for your child to take part in the research. I assure you that all recorded and interview information will be used for research purposes only and that the child's identity will always remain anonymous.

Would you please complete the slip below and sign accordingly and return to the school as soon as possible.

I thank you warmly for your help in this matter.

Maria Darby

-----------------------------------------------

Research into student attitude and perceptions of Social Studies at Cyril Jackson Senior High School.

(Please complete the child's name, check the appropriate box, and sign in the space provided).

I/we approve my child_________________________, to take part in the research.  (child's name)

Yes ______

No ______

Parent's signature:________________________________________

Date: ____________

__________________________________
### TALLY SHEET FOR STUDENT BY ITEM MATRIX

#### APPENDIX E

**APPENDIX E**

**TALLY SHEET FOR STUDENT BY ITEM MATRIX**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT</th>
<th>RESPONSE</th>
<th>INTEREST IN THE SUBJECT</th>
<th>ATTITUDE TO THE SUBJECT</th>
<th>CLASS MANAGEMENT</th>
<th>PERCEIVED INABILITY</th>
<th>ATTITUDE OF CLASSROOM TEACHER</th>
<th>ATTITUDE OF OTHER STUDENTS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I usually like social studies,...</td>
<td>9 Social studies lessons are not boring,...</td>
<td>3 My social studies teacher allows me to make mistakes,...</td>
<td>5 I can usually handle the work,...</td>
<td>3 I am usually good at the work I do in social studies,...</td>
<td>7 My social studies teacher is...</td>
<td>16 We don't get too much homework,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I find social studies as useful...</td>
<td>15 I usually learn a lot in social studies,...</td>
<td>17 My teacher is able to make social studies easier to understand,...</td>
<td>12 The teacher is able to control the students in our social studies class,...</td>
<td>9 I usually understand the work we are given in social studies,...</td>
<td>11 I usually feel comfortable in this social studies class,...</td>
<td>24 Doing social studies homework helps me understand the subject,...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>My social studies teacher allows...</td>
<td>20 Activities in this social studies class are usually enjoyable,...</td>
<td>19 Some students in my social studies class are not interested,...</td>
<td>18 Some students in our social studies class care more about grades,...</td>
<td>21 I usually feel that I learn a lot in social studies,...</td>
<td>22 I usually feel that the teacher is fair,...</td>
<td>25 We don't usually get much homework,...</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>In my social studies teacher always...</td>
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<td>11 Some students in my social studies class are not interested,...</td>
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