

WHAT ARE UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS SAYING ABOUT HISTORY?

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This study sought to examine students' thinking about history to determine the extent to which their perceptions coincided with widely held views on the subject. The study employed a mixed-method research design aimed at triangulating quantitative and qualitative data obtained from questionnaires and focus group interviews. Four hundred and fifteen participants were randomly drawn from selected secondary schools in Tobago and the east/west corridor of Trinidad. Findings of the study revealed that while students largely rejected the notion that history is boring and irrelevant to contemporary life, many of them were still reluctant to pursue the subject further at the tertiary level. This apparent reluctance seems to be influenced by the perception that history becomes increasingly cumbersome and details-laden as one advances in study. Perhaps this perception could be adjusted if students were introduced to history differently at an earlier period. This study, therefore, has implications for curriculum policy and practice regarding the appropriate time history should be introduced as a subject in the school curriculum.

Introduction

History is one of those subjects on the school curriculum that has consistently suffered from negative perceptions. Individuals with little or no exposure to the subject often make comments to suggest that history is boring and irrelevant to contemporary life. Outstanding international figures such as Henry Ford and Alexander Pope have also perpetuated the myth that history serves little purpose. While Alexander Pope spoke of the eternal and perpetual dullness of history, Henry Ford (1916) dismissed the subject as “more or less bunk.”

Contrary to negative reactions about the subject, history assists individuals in understanding not only who they are and where they came from, but also offers them a platform on which to make informed decisions about present issues and future developments. By carefully plotting the trends of the past, many historians believe that individuals

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can make intelligent estimates of the probable broad trends of the future (Laushey, 1988).

Without some rudimentary knowledge of history, says Robert Daniels (1981), we become victims of collective amnesia, groping in the dark for our identity. Arthur Marwick (2001) posits that it is only through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself. He asserts that a society without memory and self-knowledge is a society adrift. History, therefore, fulfils our desire to know and understand ourselves as well as our ancestors.

History teaches responsible citizenship, and develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 1988). Barton and Levstik (2004) also highlight the role of history in helping citizens engage in collaboration towards a common good. Moreover, the subject provides an opportunity for students to understand and appreciate the inevitability of change and the need to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness. When properly taught, history establishes a context of human life in a particular time and place, relating art, literature, philosophy, law, architecture, language, government, economics, and social life (Voss, 1998).

Historians believe that a study of history sensitizes an individual to the universality of the human experience as well as to the peculiarities that distinguish cultures and societies from one another (Daniels, 1981; Voss, 1998). With such knowledge, students are more likely to show tolerance and appreciation of others. They are also better equipped to coexist with those who think and live differently in a multiracial and multicultural society. Ferretti, MacArthur, and Okolo (2001) also support the view that certain skills students obtain from studying history are essential for “active and engaged” civic participation.

While history teachers generally agree that there are many values and virtues to be gained from studying the subject, not all students buy into the notion that history is essential to their understanding of who they are. There are several explanations for this. One such explanation is that students enter into the secondary school system with little or no background in the subject. This is due largely to the fact that history is not part of the prescribed primary school curriculum; and while some students may obtain a knowledge of history from educational films and selected television programmes, the only exposure a student is likely to get to the subject might be oblique references to history in a social studies class.

Furthermore, many secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago do not begin formal instruction in history until the third or fourth year of the 5-

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year secondary education programme. Social studies is generally taught in the early secondary school years as an alternative to history. This means that students who select history as one of their examination options often have only two to three years to understand key historical concepts as well as to develop an appreciation for the subject.

The authors of the social studies curriculum for Forms 1-3 clearly identify the primary purpose of the subject, and indicate that the curriculum is not designed nor intended to teach discrete social sciences disciplines such as history, geography, and economics (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Education [MOE], 2008). This does not mean, however, that history concepts are totally absent from the social studies curriculum. At the lower secondary school level, for example, basic concepts such as identity, resistance, and change form part of the content of social studies. Enquiry and research skills as well as information processing skills are also part of the intended learning outcomes of the subject (MOE, 2008). Still, key history concepts such as historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation cannot be adequately explored in a social studies curriculum that must also include a wide array of concepts in economics, government and politics, geography, and international relations. Given the structure of social studies and the treatment of history as one of several components of the subject, it is very difficult to determine what students actually take away from social studies as historical knowledge.

Seixas (2009) presents an interesting framework for history education, where he highlights six second-order concepts for developing historical thinking. These are historical significance, primary source evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective-taking, and ethical dimensions of history. Historical thinking, according to Wineburg (2007), requires an orientation to the past informed by disciplinary canons of evidence and rules of argument. History instruction, therefore, should assist students in mastering concepts like causality, comparison, and change, as well as the exploration of history as constructed interpretive account (Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000; VanSledright, 2009). But in the absence of adequate formal instruction in history during the early years, some students are likely to develop negative attitudes towards the subject and may find it difficult to appreciate the purpose and relevance of history to contemporary life.

Another explanation for students' apparent lack of interest has to do with the manner in which history is taught in schools. In some instances, history is presented to students as a compilation of facts and dates. In this

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approach, students are required to memorize a mass of information and recall a series of facts about history. This view of history contrasts sharply with the way historians see their work (Daniels, 1981; Marwick, 2001; Yilmaz, 2008). Unfortunately, students who perceive history as facts and dates often fail to appreciate history as a discipline guided by particular rules of evidence. Such students generally do not appreciate the relevance of history to their everyday lives. In discussing new approaches to studying history, Peck (2005) posits that content and pedagogy cannot be separated because historical knowledge develops most successfully by doing history—using the historian’s tools to construct historical knowledge (see also Barton & Levstik, 2004; Holt, 1990; Levstik & Barton, 1997, 2001; Rogers, 1987; VanSledright, 1998; Wineburg, 2001).

Student perceptions of history may also be shaped by factors outside the classroom. Such factors include a general perception that history is dull and boring and has little or no relevance to present-day existence. There is also the view that studying history offers little prospect for future advancement except, perhaps, in the field of teaching. Whether this is actually true or not, the fact remains that such a perception helps to shape students’ conceptions of history and impacts significantly on the subsequent learning of the subject.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover what upper secondary school students (Fifth and Sixth Form) say about the subject of history and the extent to which their perceptions coincide with popular views on the subject. The study examined students’ perceptions of the history curriculum and the influence of teaching methodology on students’ attitudes towards history. It also explored possible external factors that may have influenced students’ thinking about history.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design aimed at triangulating quantitative and qualitative data obtained from questionnaires and focus group interviews. A two-stage sampling process was used with a sample frame obtained from the Planning Division of the Ministry of Education. In the first stage, a cluster random sample was drawn from a list of 53 secondary schools located in Tobago and the

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east/west corridor of Trinidad. These schools were divided into 3 distinct groups:

1. Government Secondary Schools
2. Government Assisted Secondary Schools
3. Private Secondary Schools

A computer-generated series of random numbers was used to locate three to five schools within each group. All history students of the fifth and sixth forms were used as participants. The sample size was 415, out of a target population of approximately 1,500 students.

In the second stage of the sampling process, a purposive sample was drawn to participate in focus group discussions. There were five homogeneous focus groups comprising six students each. The first three groups comprised Form 5 students and the two other groups were made up of Form 6 students. The sample size for the focus group discussions was 30 participants per group. In these participant groups, females made up the greater portion of respondents with an age distribution between 15 and 19 years.

Table 1. Number of Students in the 15 to 19 Age Groups

Age Group	No. of Students
15	54
16	163
17	127
18	51
19	22

The survey instrument included 15 items covering three objectives arising from the following research questions:

1. *What are respondents' perceptions of history in the Fifth, Lower Sixth, and Upper Sixth Forms?*
2. *What are students' perception of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?*
3. *Does a relationship exist between students' perceptions of history and those of persons outside the school vis-a-vis the subject of history?*

For most of the survey items, respondents were required to express their opinions on a 5-point Likert scale designed to elicit responses

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ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Statistical techniques such as one-way ANOVA, Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc procedure, and Pearson correlation coefficient were used to identify underlying patterns of responses. Some responses required the use of open-ended items such as *fill-in-the-blanks* and *comment on* formats to elicit extensive comments from respondents on their perceptions of the teaching and learning of history. The instrument was pilot-tested and feedback from that activity was used to improve the instrument before formally distributing the questionnaires to the research sample.

Focus group interviews were used also as a complementary instrument to collect qualitative data for the study. These interviews were conducted in five mini-groups consisting of six persons per session. All questions were the same across differing groups of participants to facilitate consistency and ease in analysis. Pilot testing of questions was also done to determine the extent to which questions were clear enough to elicit appropriate responses from participants. The following 13 questions were used for one-hour-long student focus group discussions:

1. Think about your experience as a history student over the years. Now tell me how do you feel about studying history?
2. What were you thinking at the time that led you to choose history as one of your examination subjects?
3. Tell me how you feel about studying history at a higher level.
4. What in your view is a history concept? Think about it for a while and jot down your thoughts on a piece of paper.
5. How do you know that “historical facts” are really true?
6. What causes an event to happen in history (simple cause-effect relations or multiple complex causes)?
7. Who or what determines the course of history? (human beings, events, technology or supernatural forces?)
8. How does a historian use historical evidence?
9. Tell me a little about history classes. Describe what you do.
10. What do you like most about your history classes? What do you dislike most?
11. What are some of the things you feel history teachers can do to make the subject more appealing?

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12. What factors outside the classroom influence the way you feel about history?
13. Think back about all the things you have learned in history. Now tell me, what important lessons do you think people can learn from history?

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis for this study was done with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Using the SPSS software, variables from the survey were put in the correct form and checks were made for missing values. The student data were grouped according to forms (Fifth Form, Lower Sixth Form, Upper Sixth Form) to assist in easy analysis of student perception of teaching and learning of history. This procedure was useful in assisting the researcher to find out the extent to which student perception of history changed over a 3-year period from Fifth Form to Upper Sixth Form.

One-way ANOVA tests were used to analyse student responses to Research Question 1, which asked about student perceptions of history. The Pearson correlation procedure was helpful also in identifying significant relationships between the variables measuring student perceptions of history and those measuring external opinions about the subject of history. Both tests of significance (one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation) were done on the basis of a probability of error threshold of 1 in 20, or $p < .05$.

Qualitative data analysis was done without the aid of a software program. All focus group sessions were taped and information from the audio cassettes was reviewed several times to obtain verbatim accounts of focus group interviews. All redundant or overlapping statements were removed, leaving only those points that were pertinent to the study. These points were later summarized and presented as data for the research. Some verbatim accounts were presented also as findings. Qualitative data were used to inquire into student understandings of history concepts such as historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation. Qualitative data also served to confirm or highlight contradictions in the survey findings as well as to clarify certain unclear elements of the survey. The following techniques were used to ensure credibility or validity of the focus group process:

1. Verbatim accounts of focus group interviews
2. Use of audio cassettes for recording data

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3. Participant review of researcher's synthesis of interviews

I employed all of the above measures in an attempt to strengthen validity. Care was taken to capture verbatim accounts of respondents in order to avoid misrepresentation of the data. At the end of each focus group session, I gave a brief summary of the major issues discussed to allow respondents a final opportunity to add or clarify aspects of the account. The extent to which interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings between participants and researcher is the extent to which validity is achieved in qualitative research.

In order to achieve consistency, I engaged in a series of self-monitoring and self-questioning exercises. Some of these involved multiple listening as well as multiple transcription of audiotapes used in focus groups. To avoid analytical errors, I gave an oral summary after each section of the discussion. I then asked whether or not the summary represented the collective views of the group. In one case where the summary was challenged, I obtained clarification on key issues before restating the summary for group consensus.

Summary of Student Focus Group Findings

Findings from focus group questions revealed that the majority of participants in the five student focus groups expressed mixed feelings about studying history. While on the one hand students generally appreciated the value of studying history, on the other hand they expressed reservations about the quantity of details students of history were expected to remember. As a result, the majority of respondents doubted whether they would pursue the subject at a higher level. Three major themes emerged from focus group discussions: (a) teaching methodology, (b) the impact of outside influences, and (c) understanding history concepts.

Teaching Methodology

Findings from the question on teaching methodology revealed that students generally expressed preference for interactive class sessions where they were given the opportunity to share information and engage in critical thinking activities. Participants felt that excessive note taking and long lectures served to lessen their enjoyment of the subject. All participants suggested that field trips, visual aids, and other graphic representations would stimulate greater interest in history. One respondent felt that teachers should “*give more personal attention to*

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students,” while another wanted teachers to demonstrate “*greater passion*” for the subject.

When asked to identify what they liked or disliked about history classes, students reported that they enjoyed class discussions most since these sessions gave them the opportunity to sharpen their argumentative skills. Generally, students disliked having to adjust their thinking to suit that of their teachers. One student stated that “*not enough opportunity was given to engage in analysis*” and that he often felt “*pressured to express only the views of the class teacher.*”

Impact of Outside Influences

Further discussions revealed that students were able to obtain a great deal of valuable information from sources outside the classroom. Historical information obtained from family members, television programmes, and historical websites provided a good source of history instruction. However, several factors outside the classroom also contributed to students’ negative perceptions of history. Many of the respondents agreed that perhaps the greatest negative influence came from their own peers who perceived history as boring. They admitted that history was not a popular examination subject in the school, and some history students often buckled under the pressure to drop the subject.

Understanding History Concepts

Five focus group sessions were conducted to probe deeper into students’ perception of key concepts in history. These sessions also provided greater insights into participants’ ability to master the kind of conceptual reasoning needed to provide acceptable historical explanations. Focus group questions 4–8 were as follows:

- What in your view is a history concept?
- How does one know that “historical facts” are really true?
- What causes an event to happen in history?
- Who or what determines the course of history?
- How does a historian use historical evidence?

Findings from the first question in this category revealed that students had varying views on what a history concept was. Not only were these views varied but, for the most part, they were also inaccurate. For example, student “A” understands a history concept as “*distinguishable events or persons.*” Student “B” has a similar view of a history concept as “*these important terms or remarkable events that took place in our*

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history.” Only 3 out of 30 students demonstrated some degree of understanding of what a historical concept was. Two of these three responses came from Advanced Level students; the other response came from a student of the Fifth Form focus group. One such response was that “*a history concept is a mix of historical ideas of what influenced contemporary society.*” Another respondent puts it this way: “*a history concept is a matter of ideas being formulated about a particular event – the time period it took place, and the impact of this event on society, economy and politics.*” The vast majority of students could not readily identify one single concept that they had learned in history class. The majority of participants believed that human beings were the primary determinants of history. Some were willing to consider other factors such as man-made events and supernatural forces as possible suggestions, only after much probing by the moderator.

Findings also revealed that the majority of students gave single-factor explanations for events in history. For example, when asked to explain what causes an event to happen, students gave responses like: “*people cause events to happen,*” or “*a particular disturbance causes an event to happen... like the attempted 1990 coup.*” The data indicate that students generally believed that an event was caused by one particular factor rather than by a mix of different factors. After some probing, only a few students were willing to consider multiple causation as a viable explanation for the occurrence of a historical event.

This contrasts sharply with responses from the survey questionnaires which suggested that students generally understood the concept of multiple causation in history. Focus group discussions revealed, however, that while students were able to identify appropriate responses on the survey, they were unable to adequately defend their positions with any adequacy in the focus group setting.

Students were more confident, however, about their perception of historical facts. Many respondents hesitated to state categorically that historical facts were really true. Instead, they adopted a somewhat postmodern, deconstructionist approach, questioning the validity of certain historical sources. Deconstructionists generally challenge what they consider as the old modernist principles of historical truth and methodological objectivity (Munslow, 1997). In response to the question about the truthfulness of “historical facts,” one student stated: “*I will not limit myself to any one way of thinking. I prefer to look at different interpretations rather than hold on to one way of thinking.*”

The final question in this category dealt with the historian’s use of historical evidence. An analysis of students’ responses revealed that

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students generally regarded the historian as a detective using a number of clues to solve a mystery. Respondents were also aware of some of the limitations historians faced in trying to reconstruct the past. Still, students believed that notwithstanding the possibility of bias, historians were expected to carefully assess historical evidence before presenting any account of the past. One student volunteered to summarize the discussion in this way: *“History is a mystery story to be pieced together. The historian searches for clues and puts them together to determine the most logical explanation of a particular event. But there is also need to consider other alternatives that may also be plausible.”*

Summary of Survey Questions on Students’ Perceptions of History

The student survey questions were:

1. All students in secondary schools should study history.
2. History is a boring subject.
3. History is relevant to everyday life.
4. I would enjoy history more if there were fewer details to be studied.
5. Historical evidence should be questioned.
6. Human beings determine the course of history.
7. Historical facts are caused by a complex mix of different factors.
8. All historical events are inevitable.
9. History involves the study of change over time.
10. I learn a great deal about history from other sources outside of the classroom.
11. My family and friends influence the way I feel about history.
12. Studying history will enhance my chances of employment.
13. I intend to study history at a higher level.
14. Identify two (2) things you like most about your history classes.
15. Identify two (2) things you dislike most about your history classes.
16. What is the most important lesson a student can learn from history?
17. Give two (2) reasons why you study history.
18. Give two (2) reasons why you believe some students are unwilling to study history.

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Four hundred and fifteen (415) participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the above questions by circling the appropriate letter on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with the letter *A* representing strong agreement and *E* representing strong disagreement. Students were required to write responses for questions 14–18.

Research Question 1

What are respondents' perceptions of history in the Fifth, Lower Sixth, and Upper Sixth Forms?

Survey items 1–4 and 14–18 addressed this research question. Survey item 1 asked participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale whether they agreed with the statement that all students in secondary schools should study history. Of the 415 respondents, 72 indicated strong agreement and 124 students indicated agreement. This gave a general total agreement of 48%. Of this group, 136 students (33%) disagreed and 26 students (6%) strongly disagreed. Fifty-six of the total number of participants (14%) were uncertain as to whether all students in secondary school should study history.

Survey item 2 asked whether history was regarded as a boring subject. Only 14% of the respondents agreed that the subject was boring, while 73% disagreed with the statement. A relatively small percentage (13%) held no opinion on the matter.

Survey item 3 questioned whether history is relevant to everyday life. Seventy-five percent of the respondents felt that history was relevant; 14% disagreed, and 11% expressed uncertainty.

Hypothesis Testing

Research Question 1 was tested through the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: There is no difference in students' perceptions of history based on Form level.

This hypothesis was tested using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with data from student survey items 1–3. Table 2 illustrates findings for this hypothesis.

Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc procedures in Tables 3 and 4 were used to show differences in students' perceptions based on three different Form levels, namely Fifth, Lower Sixth, and Upper Sixth Forms.

With regard to survey item 1, the implied null hypothesis is retained. There is no significant difference in students' perceptions in the three year-levels about whether or not all students should study history.

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Table 2. One-Way ANOVA of Students' Perceptions About History

Survey Item	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
1	Between Groups	8.455	2	4.228	2.840	.060
	Within Groups	613.193	412	1.488		
2	Between Groups	30.216	2	15.108	9.012	.000*
	Within Groups	690.709	412	1.676		
3	Between Groups	12.526	2	6.263	4.234	.015*
	Within Groups	609.435	412	1.479		

Note. Survey item 1 = All students in secondary school should study history; Survey item 2 = History is a boring subject; Survey item 3 = History is relevant to every day life;

* Significant at $p < .05$ level.

With regard to survey item 2, the implied null hypothesis is rejected. The Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc procedure indicates that students in the Fifth Form are more likely to view history as boring than students of the Lower and Upper Sixth Forms.

With regard to survey item 3, the implied null hypothesis is rejected. The Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc procedure indicates that students in the Fifth Form are more likely to see history as relevant to everyday life than those students in the Lower and Upper Sixth Forms (see Table 4).

Survey items 14–18 were open-ended questions that elicited students' reactions based on their perception of history. Item 14 asked participants to identify two things they liked most about history classes. The majority of respondents listed “*interactive class activities*” as their first choice. The second most popular response was that “*my teacher makes the subject interesting and lively.*” These responses placed great stress on the teacher's role in providing a stimulating environment for learning.

Table 3. Student-Newman-Keuls of Students' Perceptions About Whether History is Boring

Forms	Mean	1	2	3
1. Fifth	3.5890	----	*	*
2. Upper Sixth	4.0889	*	----	----
3. Lower Sixth	4.2787	*	----	----

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Table 4. Student-Newman-Keuls of Students' Perceptions About the Relevance of History to Everyday Life

Forms	Mean	1	2	3
1. Fifth	3.7087	----	*	*
2. Upper Sixth	4.0656	*	----	----
3. Lower Sixth	4.1556	*	----	----

Survey item 15 focused on negative classroom experiences. Students were asked to identify two things they disliked most about their history classes. Respondents cited the following as their major dislikes:

- *too much information to write*
- *too many dates to remember*
- *too much reading to be done*
- *the subject is too long and boring*
- *limited access to supplementary texts*

Respondents from one of the private secondary schools identified “*poor teaching methods*” as one of the things they disliked most about history classes. A few students felt that the time of the day (immediately after lunch) in which the subject was offered heightened their dislike for the subject.

Survey item 16 asked participants to identify the most important lesson that a student can learn from history. Only a few students felt that avoiding the mistakes of others was the most important lesson to be learned. Some students felt that the single most important lesson was the idea that the present is shaped by the past. The majority gave responses that did not seem to relate to the question precisely. One such response was “*knowledge about my ancestors*” is the most important lesson one can learn from history. Others identified “*patience, persistence, and tolerance*” as important lessons to be learned from history.

Survey item 17 asked students to give two reasons why they studied history. While some participants cited love for the subject as one of the reasons, many felt that they had no choice since the subject fell into a particular subject grouping that required students to select history as one of the options for the Caribbean Examinations Council/Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CXC/CSEC) examination. Some participants indicated that history expanded their knowledge; others

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studied the subject to gain greater insights into the past and to bolster a sense of self. Only a small percentage indicated, however, that they studied history mainly to receive a passing CXC/CSEC grade in the subject.

Survey item 18 required participants to give two reasons why they felt that some students were unwilling to study history. The vast majority indicated that the primary reason was that some students viewed the subject as “too boring.” Others felt that history had too many dates and events to study, and some students simply did not like to read. Respondents also indicated that some students did not study history because of the view that history is not required for their future career and that the subject is not relevant to everyday life.

In analysing student responses to Research Question 1, two observations are noteworthy:

1. Students generally disagreed with the notion that history was a boring subject, and that it was irrelevant to everyday life.
2. Many students cited interactive class activities as the single factor they liked most about history classes, while too much reading was a major deterrent to the subject.

Research Question 2

What are students' perception of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?

Survey items 5–9 addressed this research question. Survey item 5 asked students to respond to the assertion that historical evidence should be questioned. The majority of students (309) indicated that they agreed with the statement, and a small number (52) disagreed. Thirteen percent (13%) of respondents had no opinion on the matter.

Survey item 6 probed deeper into the question of historical understanding and asked participants to respond to whether they believed that human beings determined the course of history. Again, the majority of participants (316) responded in the affirmative while 43 or 11% of the respondents disagreed.

Survey item 7 asked whether historical events were caused by a complex mix of different factors. Eighty percent (80%) of the respondents agreed with the notion of multiple causation in history as opposed to a small percentage (6%) who disagreed. This high response rate is reflected in the one-way ANOVA at Table 5, which suggests that a highly significant relationship exists between students' year level and

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their perception that historical events are caused by a complex mix of different factors.

Survey item 8 inquired into the question of historical inevitability. The question asked whether all historical events were inevitable. Respondents seemed divided on this issue as evidenced by the 27% who agreed, 43% who disagreed, and 30% who could neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

Survey item 9 probed into the students' understanding of continuity and change. The question asked whether history involved the study of change over time. The majority of respondents (357) agreed with the statement, while 24 expressed disagreement.

Figure 1 gives a graphic representation of student responses to Research Question 2.

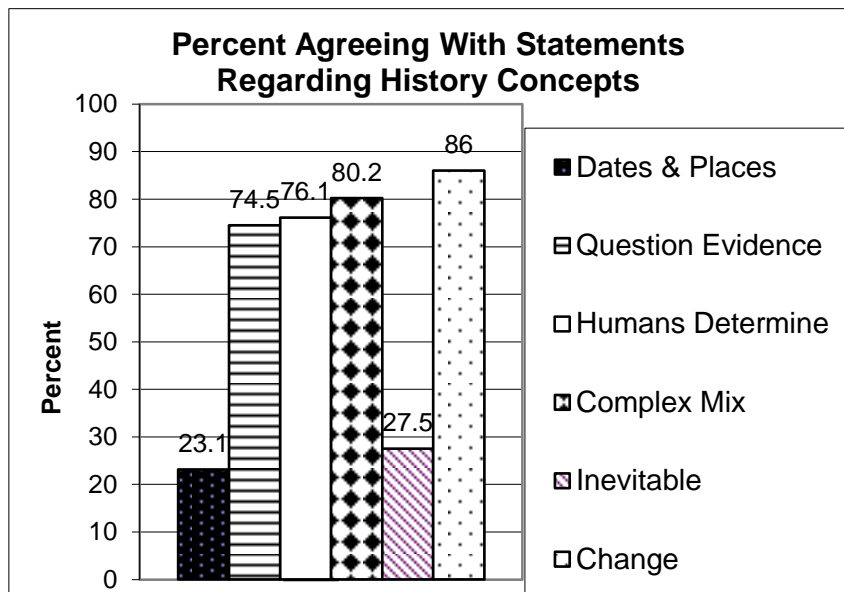


Figure 1. Student understandings of historical concepts.

Based on the findings of students' responses to Research Question 2, it appears that students generally demonstrated understanding of historical concepts such as historical evidence and causation. This is noteworthy because upon further probing in focus group settings, students displayed a general lack of clear understanding of these

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concepts. This matter will be examined more closely in the analysis section.

Research Question 3

Does a relationship exist between students' perceptions of history and external opinions about the subject of history?

Survey items 10–13 addressed this research question. Survey item 10 probed into the question of the role of factors outside the classroom in shaping students' understanding of the subject. This particular question asked whether students learned a great deal about history from other sources outside of the classroom. The majority (257 or 62%) of respondents admitted that they did learn a great deal of history from sources outside of the classroom. One hundred and thirty-one students (31%) felt that little history was acquired outside of the classroom.

Survey item 11 asked whether family and friends influenced the way students felt about history. Only 28% (116) of the students reported that their perception of history was influenced by relatives and friends, while 55% (230) of the students disagreed that friends and family members had any significant impact on the way they view the subject of history.

Survey item 12 asked whether studying history would enhance students' chances of employment. Fifty-four percent (223) agreed, while 20% disagreed. One hundred and nine (26%) students could not say for certain whether history instruction could make them more employable.

Survey item 13 inquired into students' intention to pursue the subject at a higher level. Forty-seven percent (195) reported that they intended to do so, while 33% (138) said no. Twenty percent of the participants were undecided.

Hypothesis Testing

Research Question 3 was tested with the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: There is no relationship between the variables measuring student perceptions of history and those measuring external opinions about the subject.

The null hypothesis was tested using the Pearson correlation procedure to identify significant relationships between the variables measuring student perceptions of history and those measuring external opinions about the subject. This analysis yielded five significant relationships among the variables that are represented in Table 5. Thus the null hypothesis was rejected for these five significant relationships.

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The first item relating to student perception of history asked whether all students in secondary schools should study history. Here, two significant relationships were identified. The first of these indicates that those who feel all students should study history also believe that a great deal of history can be learned from other sources outside the classroom ($r = .115, p < .05, N = 415$). The second significant relationship suggests that those who believe that all secondary students should study history also believe that family and friends influence the way they feel about history ($r = .171, p < .05, N = 415$).

The second item relating to student perception of history dealt with the question of whether or not history is a boring subject. Two significant relationships were identified. The first significant relationship indicates that students who think history is boring do not believe that they learn a great deal about history from sources outside the classroom ($r = -.172, p < .05, N = 415$). The second significant relationship indicates that students who think history is boring do not think that family and friends influence the way they feel about history ($r = -.113, p < .05, N = 415$).

Table 5. Relationship Between Student Perceptions of History and External Opinions About the Subject

Variables Measuring Student Perceptions of History and Those Measuring External Opinions About the Subject		All students in secondary schools should study history	History is a boring subject	History is relevant to everyday life
I learn a great deal about history from sources outside of the classroom.	Pearson Correlation	.115*	-.172*	.200*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.019	.000	.000
	N	415	415	415
My family and friends influence the way I feel about history.	Pearson Correlation	.171*	-.113*	-.096
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.021	.050
	N	415	415	415

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The third item relating to student perception of history dealt with the question of the relevance of history to everyday life. One significant relationship was identified. This significant relationship indicates that students who think that history is relevant to everyday life also believe

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that they learn a great deal about history from other sources outside of the classroom ($r = .200, p < .05, N = 415$).

Analysis and Discussion of Research Questions/Findings

Three research questions set the parameters for this study. The following is an analysis of each of these research questions.

Research Question 1

What are respondents' perceptions of history in the Fifth, Lower Sixth, and Upper Sixth Forms?

It can be concluded that, generally, both CXC/CSEC and Advanced Level history students have a positive perception of history as a subject in the school's curriculum. Contrary to the belief that history is dull and boring, students in this study regard history as interesting and relevant to contemporary life. For example, when responses of Fifth, Lower Sixth, and Upper Sixth Form students were analysed using one-way ANOVA tests, findings revealed that there was a significant difference in students' opinions in the three year-levels about the relevance of history to everyday life.

When the Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc procedure was used to further analyse differences in students' perceptions, the findings revealed that students in the Fifth Form are more likely to view history as boring than students in the Lower and Upper Sixth Forms. Based on these findings, one could assume that students' perceptions of history are likely to improve with greater exposure to the subject.

The assumption could also be made that Fifth Form students seem to operate at a lower cognitive level with regard to historical reasoning. If these students view history mostly as the compilation of dates and places, then they are operating at what Hallam (1970) describes as the concrete operational level of thinking. According to Hallam, such students possess the ability to give organized answers, yet very often their responses are limited to what is immediately apparent in the text. It is necessary, therefore, that teachers guide students beyond this threshold to the point where they could move past historical dates to engage in deeper probing about the meaning of the events associated with historical dates and places.

While students generally regard interactive class activities as the single most positive aspect of history instruction, they consider information overload and too much reading as major deterrents.

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Notwithstanding their apparent interest in history, less than half of the respondents on the survey agree that all students in secondary schools should study the subject.

When responses of Fifth, Lower Sixth, and Upper Sixth Form students were examined by one-way ANOVA tests, the null hypothesis was retained. This suggests that there is no significant difference in students' opinions in the three year-levels about whether or not all students should study history. One can conclude that, notwithstanding their earlier position, neither maturation nor greater exposure to the subject of history affected students' opinion of history as a subject to be studied by all secondary school students.

Student focus group discussions also highlighted students' mixed feelings about studying history. While students generally appreciate the value of studying history, they express reservations about the quantity of details students of history are expected to remember. As a result, the majority of respondents have serious doubts as to whether they would pursue the subject at a higher level.

Students' apparent reluctance to pursue history at a higher level seems to have some relationship with their perceptions of history as a details-laden subject that becomes more cumbersome as one advances in study. While students are required to engage in deeper learning as they move toward higher levels, the fear of becoming overwhelmed by an endless series of names, dates, and places needs to be addressed if students are to appreciate the value of history in later years. The onus is therefore on teachers to clarify this conceptual misunderstanding by instruction. This could be more readily achieved if students were exposed to history at an earlier Form level where teachers have adequate time to properly introduce students to the subject of history.

Wineburg (2007) supports the view that the development of historical thinking requires what he refers to as an orientation to the past informed by disciplinary canons of evidence and rules of argument. VanSledright (2009), and Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg (2001) concur that history instruction should assist students in mastering concepts like causality, comparison, and change, as well as the exploration of history as constructed interpretive account. But this can only be achieved by careful history instruction and engagement over a period of time. Once this is done, students' conceptions of history are likely to improve.

Research Question 2

What are students' perceptions of historical evidence, causation and historical explanation?

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Based on student survey responses to this question, one can reasonably assume that students understand concepts such as historical evidence, causation, historical explanation, and continuity and change. But the focus group discussions do not support this assumption. The majority of students in these discussions demonstrated a lack of clear understanding of what a history concept is. While the majority naïvely regarded history concepts as events of the past, only 3 out of 30 respondents were able to identify historical concepts as ideas formulated about past events. This finding reveals the need for greater emphasis to be placed on the teaching of history concepts in secondary schools.

Findings of the focus group discussions also contradict survey responses to the question of causation. While students demonstrated understanding of multiple causation on the survey questionnaire, during the focus group discussions they continued to offer single-factor explanations for events in history. Based on responses, it appears that students believe that an event is caused by one single factor, rather than by a mix of different factors. After much probing, only a few students were willing to consider multiple causation as a viable explanation for the occurrence of an historical event.

Given this lack of understanding, one can reasonably conclude that the wording of the survey questions made it easy for students to select an appropriate response. But when placed under closer scrutiny in a focus group setting, these students were unable to adequately account for their perceived knowledge of multiple causation in history. In this regard, the focus group interviews served as an effective mechanism for cross-referencing student knowledge of information recorded on the survey questionnaire.

Focus group discussions also confirmed what students regard as an historical explanation for events of the past. Holding fast to their popular survey response that human beings determine the course of history, students generally failed to consider other possible factors such as social and political events, technology, or even supernatural forces, as other possible explanations for events of the past. This suggests a lack of clear understanding on the part of students of what constitutes an historical explanation. But given the complexity of this particular historical concept, one needs to be sympathetic with students who are generally not taught history concepts at the secondary school level.

Focus group discussions corroborated survey findings on students' perceptions of historical evidence. Generally speaking, students believe that historical evidence should be questioned, and that the historian, like a detective, uses a number of clues to unlock the mystery of the past.

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Students also demonstrated understanding of some of the limitations that historians face in attempting to reconstruct the past.

Research Question 3

Does a relationship exist between students' perceptions of history and external opinions about the subject of history?

Survey findings revealed mixed results. While the majority of students admitted to learning a great deal of history from sources outside the classroom, only a small number believed that external factors, including family members and friends, influence their perception of the subject.

The analysis of student focus group discussions gives some confirmation and elaboration on responses obtained through the questionnaire. But some degree of contradiction is also evident. Focus group findings confirmed, for example, that students are able to obtain valuable information from sources outside the classroom. These sources include family members, selected television programmes, and historical websites. However, unlike survey findings, focus group discussions revealed that the greatest negative influence came from factors outside the classroom. These factors have been identified largely as non-history students who perceive history as dull and boring.

Based on these findings, one can argue that, to a large extent, factors outside the classroom shape students' perceptions of history. These factors are both positive and negative. One is uncertain, however, about the extent to which the external negative factors supersede positive factors. Still, one can assume that these external factors, both negative and positive, contribute in some way to the formation of student perceptions about the subject of history.

Research Question 3 was further investigated by testing the null hypothesis of no significant relationship existing between the variables measuring student perceptions of history and those measuring external opinions about the subject of history. The null hypothesis was tested using the Pearson correlation coefficient. This analysis reveals that a significant relationship exists between the perception of those who feel all students should study history and the perception that a great deal of history can be learned from other sources outside the classroom.

The analysis also reveals that those who think that history is boring do not believe that they could learn a great deal of history from sources outside the classroom ($r = -.172$, $p < .05$, $N = 415$). Conversely, those who regard history as relevant to everyday life also believe that they

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learn a great deal of history from sources outside the classroom ($r = .200$, $p < .05$, $N = 415$).

The assumption could be made that students who have a positive attitude towards history also make use of opportunities outside the classroom to heighten their appreciation of the subject. This concurs with the literature that seeks to establish a link between student interest in a subject and students' ability to discover their own knowledge, both inside and outside the classroom.

Epstein (1997), for example, posits that many students learn a great deal of history outside the classroom from their families and friends. Notwithstanding the possible conflict that may arise from different interpretations of the "official history" taught in the classroom and the "unofficial history" acquired outside, the idea of students exploring the historical account beyond the classroom augurs well for a constructivist approach to learning. The possible conflict in interpretations should not necessarily be cause for concern since Fifth and Sixth Form students are at the developmental stage where they are capable of reflective thinking as well as formulating perspectives of their own.

Concluding Comments

This study explored students' thinking about history to determine the extent to which these views coincided with popular external views about the subject. Generally speaking, students rejected the notion that history is boring and irrelevant to contemporary life. As a matter of fact, most upper secondary school students regard history as a subject to be studied by all students in the education system. Still, there seems to be some reluctance among students to pursue history at the post-secondary and tertiary level. This apparent reluctance seems to be influenced by the perception that history becomes increasingly cumbersome and details-laden as one advances in study.

The study also revealed a general weakness in student understanding of such concepts as historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation. For example, while the majority of focus group respondents naïvely regard history concepts as events of the past, only 3 out of 30 respondents were able to identify historical concepts as ideas formulated about past events. Findings of the focus group discussions revealed that students continued to offer single factor explanations for events in history. Based on responses, it appears that students believe that an event is caused by one single factor, rather than by a mix of factors. These findings reveal the need for greater emphasis to be placed on the teaching

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of and about history concepts in secondary schools. Lévesque (2008) is perhaps correct in concluding that students may well need powerful conceptual and procedural historical-thinking tools and ideas now more than ever.

Focus group discussions also confirmed what students regard as an historical explanation for events of the past. Some popular responses suggested that human beings determine the course of history. This means that, generally speaking, students failed to consider other factors such as social and political events, technology, or even supernatural forces, as other possible explanations for events of the past. This suggests a lack of clear understanding on the part of students of what constitutes an historical explanation. But this is not surprising as these students are not adequately exposed to history concepts in the lower forms where social studies is often taught as an alternative to history.

Perhaps these conceptual gaps could be adjusted if all students were exposed to history at an earlier level, maybe at Form 1, where teachers can spend more time teaching students to appreciate the subject while also laying the foundation for sound historical understanding. In this regard, the study has implications for policy and practice concerning the introduction of history at an earlier level in all secondary schools of Trinidad and Tobago. Of course, the preferred seamless approach would be to introduce history to students as early as the primary level. But all of this is based on the assumption that teachers are secure in their own ability to adequately teach history concepts at various levels of the school system.

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