

## **Differential perceptions of teachers and students about the teaching and learning of history at the upper secondary school level**

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This study sought to examine students' and teachers' perceptions of history to determine the different conceptual paradigms that exist in students' thinking about history. 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 thirty-two participants were randomly drawn from selected secondary schools in Tobago and the east/west corridor of Trinidad. Findings of this research revealed a general weakness in student understanding of such concepts as historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation. This is largely because history concepts were taught only incidentally, if at all, at the upper secondary school level.

**Key words:** perceptions, teachers, students, history, secondary school

### **Introduction**

One of the challenges of history teaching and learning in Trinidad and Tobago is that very little is done to establish a firm foundation in the primary and early secondary school years. Students generally enter into the secondary school system with little or no background in the subject (Joseph, 2011). Given this situation, many students who choose to study history for the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination experience difficulty in understanding key concepts in history. Wineburg (2007) believes that historical thinking requires an orientation to the past: informed by disciplinary canons of evidence and rules of argument. History teaching, therefore, should assist students in mastering concepts like causality and comparison as well as the exploration of history as constructed interpretive account (Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000; Van Sledright, 2009). Without formal teaching in the early years, students generally grapple with second-order concepts such as historical significance, primary source evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence (Seixas, 2009). Some students also develop negative attitudes towards the subject which may contrast sharply with the way teachers view their discipline.

In studying students' understanding of historical time, Carretero, Asensio and Pozo (1991) confirm that 15 year olds are capable of developing a sense of linear order of events although their knowledge of historical dates may not always

be accurate. A study on student perception of historical evidence reveals that at the lowest level of understanding, students view evidence as equivalent to information, with little interest in how information is acquired and interpreted (Shemilt, 1987). Further studies on historical causation reveal that although the concept of causation is somewhat complex, students are able to appreciate the idea of multiple causation of history, rather than simple cause-effect relationships (Voss, Wiley, & Kennet, 1998). These three studies confirm that adolescent students, 15 years and over, are capable of understanding and appreciating key historical concepts taught in the classroom.

In another study, Gregory (1988) investigates the impact of classroom interactions on student perception of history. To achieve this, he conducted a number of teacher and student interviews and classroom observations of U.S. high school history students. Using pre- and post-test assessments, along with quantitative and qualitative analyses, Gregory observed that no significant improvement occurred in student perceptions of history at the end of one semester of classroom interaction. His findings implied that the lecture-discussion method with teacher reliance on the textbook as the only authoritative source did not encourage improved concepts of, or perceptions about history.

Recognising the impact of student perception on the whole teaching and learning process, Hallden (1986) investigates student beliefs about what constitutes an historical explanation. He argues that in order to understand the information presented in history lessons, students must first come to terms with what the information is supposed to explain (Hallden, 1986). If students, for example, base their understanding of history mainly on the actions of individuals, then the teacher is faced with a rather difficult task of bringing such students to a level of analysing the historical event as a whole.

In support of this thesis, Hallden conducted studies with 17 year old history students in a Swedish *gymnasium* (upper secondary level). His primary aim was to determine the extent to which students were able to form comprehensive and coherent wholes of teaching material presented to them in selected history lessons. As a case in point, Hallden cites a lesson on the Treaty of Versailles, where students were asked to explain the principle of distrust that characterized the peace agreement of 1919. Hallden found that student explanations focused on Germany's reaction to the terms of surrender rather than on the terms themselves. He concluded that pupils tend to seek explanations of historical events exclusively in the actions, reactions, and intentions of individuals or individual phenomena (Hallden, 1986). In the above example, the teacher expected students to focus on the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. But students' interpretations were different. The result was a clear mismatch between what pupils and teachers regarded as acceptable historical explanations.

Probing deeper into students' beliefs about what constitutes historical explanation, Hallden (1993; 1994) studied a group of high school students taking a course in Swedish history. Several major factors were presented as viable reasons for Sweden's democracy. These included industrialisation; the emergence

of different political parties; universal suffrage, and the development of the parliamentary system of government. After observing their various responses during the lessons, Hallden arranged an interview with students at the end of the course to assess their understanding of what was taught about Sweden's democracy. In his assessment, Hallden noted that students were unable to identify the major factors highlighted by the teacher, choosing instead to give only small fragments of information to suggest that democratisation occurred when people were suffering and wanted change (Hallden, 1993). He noted that once again, the conceptual frameworks of students and teachers differed sharply. The tendency for students to explain historical events in terms of people's actions and reactions reinforces Hallden's argument that students do not have the necessary conceptual framework to provide an acceptable historical explanation. Hallden suggests, therefore, that since the conceptual framework of students and teachers often differ, some type of conceptual change is needed for students to understand history appropriately.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, all teachers bring to the classroom their own philosophy of teaching and learning. Students also bring to the classroom certain expectations about the roles of teachers and students in the teaching and learning process. Very often there appears to be a gap in what teachers and students expect of each other in the classroom. For example, many teachers expect students to view history as a discipline that requires particular analytical skills, while some students view history simply as a series of facts and dates (Daniels, 1981; Marwick, 2001; Yilmaz, 2008).

Kegan (in Baxter Magolda, 2000) explains that a critical factor in the learning process is not *what* students think, but rather *how* they think. He argues that students who believe that knowledge is certain and held by authorities, ask those in authority for the truth. But those who believe that knowledge is relative to a context and acquired through inquiry, look to teachers to guide them in that inquiry process. This means, therefore, that student learning is largely dependent upon how they make sense of knowledge.

### **Purpose of this study**

The purpose of this study was to explore students' and teachers' perceptions of history and to present results of the different conceptual paradigms that exist in students' thinking about history. Another dimension of the study was to determine teachers' perceptions of history and their perceptions about students' understanding of concepts such as historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation. Two research questions served to focus this investigation:

1. What are students' perceptions of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of student understanding of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?

## 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 of Trinidad and Tobago. In the first stage, a cluster random sample was drawn from a list of 53 secondary schools located in Tobago and the east/west corridor of Trinidad. These schools were divided into three 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. History students and teachers of the fifth and sixth forms were used as participants. The sample size was 432, out of a target population of approximately 1,500 students and teachers.

In the second stage of the sampling process, a purposive sample was drawn to participate in focus group discussions. There were six homogeneous focus groups comprising six persons per student group and five participants in the teacher focus group. The first three groups comprised Form 5 students; two more groups were made up of Form 6 students; and the sixth group comprised history teachers of both Form 5 and Form 6 classes. The sample size for the focus group discussions was 35 participants.

Academic qualifications for teachers ranged from bachelor's degrees to master's degrees in History. Some teachers also acquired professional training in teaching. Other qualifications included Advanced Level Certificate (as the highest qualification obtained) and a Bachelor of Education degree. One private secondary school teacher was pursuing a degree in Law. Ten teachers out of a total of 17 held bachelor's degrees in History.

**Table 1.** Years of teaching experience

Years of teaching	No. of teachers
0-4	8
5-10	3
11-15	0
16-20	2
21-30	0
30+	1

Based on the distribution of years of teaching experience (Table 1), it is noteworthy that 11 of the participants were relatively new teachers with less than five years' teaching experience. It is also noteworthy that seven of these participants did not possess any professional teacher training qualifications. The significance of these factors is beyond the scope of this study but there are clearly questions to be asked regarding these facts in relation to the research findings.

### **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 the teaching and learning of history.

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 summarised 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
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 transcriptions 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 and teacher focus group findings**

#### *The students' perspective*

Five student 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. Findings on students' understanding of history concepts were also discussed in an earlier study (Joseph, 2011). Student focus group questions 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 history.*" Only three 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 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, but 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. Even after probing, only a few students were willing to consider multiple causation as a viable explanation for the occurrence of an 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, 2001). 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 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 summarise 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.”*

#### *The teachers’ perspective*

The teacher focus group comprised five history teachers from three different school groups, namely, Government Secondary, Senior Secondary, and Private Secondary Schools. All of the teachers had a bachelor’s degree in History, with two teachers possessing additional professional qualifications in teacher education. Of the five teachers, two had less than three years teaching experience; three teachers had between 5-10 years experience; and one teacher had over 30 years experience in teaching. Three teachers taught both Fifth and Sixth Form classes, while two taught only at the Fifth Form level. Four of the participants taught in secondary schools in Trinidad, and one teacher taught in a Senior Secondary School in Tobago. Teacher focus group questions were as follows:

- What is your understanding of a history concept?
- What historical concepts do you find appropriate to teach at the Fifth/Sixth Form level?
- Which concepts do you find most difficult to teach? Explain.

- What is your approach to teaching concepts such as causation, historical evidence, and historical explanation?
- How do you know that your students understand historical concepts taught in the classroom?

The first question required respondents to jot down on a piece of paper their understanding of a history concept. The following responses were given:

**Teacher A:** *A history concept is a viewpoint that has been generalized so as to explain an occurrence, event, or happening.*

**Teacher B:** *A history concept is an over-riding theme that is used as a guide or springboard to teach individual lessons.*

**Teacher C:** *Indentureship is an example of a history concept that describes a situation in which one group of persons works under the control of another group for a period of time.*

**Teacher D:** *A history concept is the formulation of a set idea or theme upon which a teacher bases a presentation. Such a concept must be made as clear as possible so that the student is able to properly grasp the idea being taught.*

**Teacher E:** *A history concept is used to engage students in some aspect of theory as it relates to the past, and as it bears upon themes.*

When asked to explain their various approaches to teaching concepts in history, the majority of participants admitted that they did not really set out to teach concepts, rather, they taught facts presented in the history texts. They confessed that if concepts were taught at all, they were taught incidentally. One teacher explained that a method of teaching concepts would be to link a modern day situation to the past. Another teacher maintained that knowledge acquisition was an important pre-requisite to understanding concepts. She stated that students could not engage in analysis because they did not know the facts.

Extending the point a bit further, one participant admitted that she did not leave it up to students to analyse historical information because she felt that they were incapable of doing so. Holding firmly to her teacher-centred approach, the teacher insisted that she determined how students should analyse history. It is important to note, however, that this was not the general view of the group.

Question 3 in this category asked teachers to explain which concepts they found most difficult to teach. Having already admitted that history concepts were taught incidentally, this question did not seem pertinent at this stage. Still, the moderator persisted to ask about the question of historical evidence. Participants agreed that teaching students to use historical evidence was a rather difficult

exercise. They believed that since students generally did not read widely from different sources, they experienced difficulty in making syntheses.

Asked what teachers could do to assist students in acquiring the skills of analysing historical evidence, participants gave the following suggestions:

- Conduct interviews with senior citizens who were involved in historical events such as World War II and the Black Power Movement.
- Allow students to visit the museum and national archives to interact with authentic historical evidence.
- Take students on a historical walk around the community.

Participants believed that these activities would go a long way in helping students to understand historical evidence.

Although respondents felt that concepts such as black enslavement, class consciousness, and freedom were important concepts to teach in Caribbean history, they could not say for certain whether students fully understood these concepts taught in the classroom. In reflection, all the participants agreed that teachers should make a more conscious effort to teach historical concepts before students could begin to understand the meaning of concepts in history.

### **Findings of research questions**

*Student responses to research question 1: What are students' perceptions of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?*

Survey item 1 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. The remainder of respondents had no opinion on the matter.

Survey item 2 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 of the respondents disagreed.

Survey item 3 asked whether historical events were caused by a complex mix of different factors. 346 of the respondents agreed with the notion of multiple causation in history as opposed to a small number (26) who disagreed.

Survey item 4 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 117 who agreed, 186 who disagreed, and 129 who could neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

Survey item 5 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.

Based on the findings of students' responses to research question 1, 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 concepts.

*Teacher responses to research question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of student understanding of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?*

Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale whether their students understood the concept of continuity and change. The majority of teachers (10) reported that students understood the concept of continuity and change. However, five of the teachers disagreed with this view, while two could not be certain whether in fact students understood this concept.

Survey item 1 asked whether students understood the concept of historical evidence. Again, the majority of respondents (11) indicated that their students understood the concept, while four out of 17 teachers disagreed. Two respondents could not be sure whether their students really understood the concept.

Teacher survey items 2 and 3 were intentionally set to correspond with student survey items (also 2 and 3) to determine the extent to which both teachers and students shared similar views.

Survey item 2 asked whether participants believed that human beings determined the course of history. The majority of teachers (13) agreed with this statement, while only two of the respondents disagreed. This compares favourably with the views expressed by students on the question.

Survey item 3 asked whether historical events were caused by a complex mix of different factors. All the teachers agreed with the concept of multiple causation as compared to 80% of students who also shared similar views.

Based on the analysis of teachers' responses to research question 2, it could be assumed that teachers generally believe that students understand such concepts as continuity and change, and historical evidence. Both teachers and students also held similar views on the concept of multiple causation.

### **Analysis and discussion of research questions/findings**

*Research question 1: What are students' perceptions of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?*

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

*Research question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of student understanding of historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation?*

Based on teachers' survey responses to research question 2, it could also be assumed that teachers generally believe that students understand concepts such as continuity and change, and historical evidence. Both teachers and students also hold similar views on student understanding of the concept of multiple causation.

Findings of the teacher focus group discussions reveal that while teachers believe that students understand certain historical concepts, there is no definitive way of testing this assumption since teachers do not teach concepts as part of their regular history instruction. The majority of teachers in the focus group confess that

history concepts are taught only incidentally, if they are taught at all. Given this situation, one could reasonably assume that students' apparent understanding of certain historical concepts could be attributed to common sense deductions based on incidental teaching of history concepts.

If, in reality, students do not readily understand historical concepts, one can further assume that this situation is exacerbated by the lack of exposure to concept identification and concept teaching in the classroom. The assumption can also be made that unless teachers make a conscious effort to identify and teach concepts in history, students will continue to experience difficulty coming to terms with complex concepts such as causation and historical explanation.

This apparent difficulty of students to grapple with historical concepts seems consistent with Hallden's (1986) findings on students' historical understanding. After conducting two studies on students at the upper secondary level, Hallden concluded that the tendency for students to explain historical events in terms of people's actions and reactions suggests that students at this level do not have the necessary conceptual framework to provide an acceptable historical explanation. This conclusion resonates with this present study on students' ability to understand history concepts.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored students' and teachers' perceptions of history to determine the extent to which different conceptual paradigms existed in students' thinking about history. Findings of this research reveal a general weakness in student understanding of such concepts as historical evidence, causation, and historical explanation. However, teachers believe that their students understand these concepts. But there is no definitive way of testing this assumption since teachers in the focus group confess that history concepts are taught only incidentally, if they are taught at all. To avoid conceptual gaps in students' understanding of history, teachers should make every effort to deliberately teach history concepts at an early level if students are to apply these concepts at the upper secondary school level. It is, therefore, the responsibility of teachers to provide students with the best possible learning experiences and go beyond merely preparing them to pass examinations. Such learning experiences should provide students with the necessary conceptual frameworks not only to understand history, but also to appreciate the value and relevance of history to everyday life.

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