

EXPLORING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INTEREST/ LACK OF INTEREST  
IN ACADEMIC WORK AT A FIVE YEAR GOVERNMENT SECONDARY SCHOOL IN  
SOUTH TRINIDAD

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study was to explore fifth formers' perceptions of their interest / lack of interest in academic work. Data were collected through open-ended interviews using a focus group of six purposefully sampled students. Individual follow-up interviews were done and the data were analyzed using the grounded theory methodology and constant comparative method. The results showed that students identified internal and external influences, contributing to their interest levels. They felt that teachers' personality and professional characteristics had a significant input and expressed hurt and disappointment about the uncaring attitude of some teachers. They also pointed to parents and peers as influences on their schoolwork. However, it was revealed that some of their own characteristics could have contributed as well, such as their performance goals orientation to school work and some psycho social issues resulting from a need to establish their sense of independence. Students felt that more academic support from significant others and more practical class activities could have increased their interest in the academic subjects at South Side Secondary School.

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND

Schools are charged with the responsibility of preparing young people to become productive citizens, capable of making a worthwhile contribution to society. Inherent in this responsibility is the necessity to adequately engage students in their learning and personal development so that this goal can be realized. For decades now, it has been realized how crucial a role “interest” plays in the learning process. Hidi and Renninger (2006) as cited in (Subramaniam, 2009, p.10) stated that "The level of a person's interest has repeatedly been found to be a powerful influence on learning". They believe that interest influences an individual's attention, goals, as well as levels of learning, while (Schraw and Lehman, 2001) are of the opinion that it determines in part what we choose to learn, and how well we learn this information.

Interest is generally viewed as being of two types— personal and situational. The former is said to arise from an intrinsic desire to understand a particular topic, which it is claimed can persist for a long time. (Krapp, Hidi & Renninger, 1992). It has both a cognitive and an affective quality that individuals carry with them from place to place. In contrast, situational interest is extrinsic. It is a kind of spontaneous interest that can fade as rapidly as it emerges, and is almost always place-specific (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). However, interest as a construct is not without its own contradictions. In the first place, despite tremendous research, its origin remains an enigma. Nobody knows for sure why some persons are interested in certain things, while others are not. The only explanation offered is that “each person is an individual, with his/her own set of psychological endowments and life experiences” (Fontana, 1985, p.218), thereby suggesting

that it could be either an innate or genetic characteristic or it could be the result of stimulation from the child's immediate environment. In some cases, it might well be a combination of both.

Hofer(2012) posits that age plays a critical role in the development of personal interest. He believes it may grow or decline over the years. It can also change depending on the other tasks a person has to manage and goals he or she is striving for, whether short or long term. Hence, the earlier view which proposed personal interest as a static and long-lasting phenomenon is to be questioned. Added to this, Hoffman (2002) as cited in (Hofer, 2012) suggests that loss of interest in school matters, is especially acute when students make the transition to secondary school. Given this reality therefore, the teacher's greatest challenge is to cater to learners whose interest levels vary widely and may fluctuate from mood to mood.

Added to these complications, while there is agreement that both personal and situational interest impact on learning, it is believed they do so in different ways. Yet another type of interest, of a psychological nature has been found to surface when personal and situational interest interact with each other. This is known as active interest (Ainley,1998).

According to Krapp, et al (1992), students who demonstrate active interest in their work tend to display characteristics such as increased attention, greater concentration, pleasant feelings of applied effort, and increased willingness to learn (Ainley,1998). By all appearances, these students are in line with the school's vision for them. These are the students that most teachers wish to have in their classes, at least once in their teaching career.

However, in many schools, students do not display the active interest described above. For such students, the educational experience seems not to be an enjoyable or even worthwhile one, thereby leading them to become disinterested in school work. Indeed, this is a problem being experienced internationally. Benders (2011) claims that it has risen to a level that places education in the United States at serious risks. He further contends that the current U.S. student has become “an unmotivated, apathetic individual with a lack of interest, goals, and determination to succeed in the academic curriculum” ( p.11).

Aside from its prevalence throughout the world , disinterest in schoolwork also exists within all levels of the school system . It usually begins in small degrees at the elementary level , is manifested in middle school and becomes progressively worse in high school . Lumsden, as quoted in Brewster and Fager (2000), reports that “by middle school, lack of interest in schoolwork becomes increasingly apparent in more and more students, and by high school, as dropout rates attest, too many students are not sufficiently motivated to succeed in school” (p. 4). University students are not exempt from this problem of disinterest in school work .In fact it has been reported that about 20% of US university students do not complete their first year. While there is a suggestion that disinterest has been observed even at the kindergarten level (Skinner ,et al,2008 ) ,I did not come across any specific research that supports this claim. It has been suggested though, that this behavior may not be as prevalent at the kindergarten level since children that age ,are naturally curious , so attracting their interest is not as difficult for knowledgeable and experienced teachers. Added to which, they do not fully understand what school is about.

However, this is not the same with older students, who have been in the system for a number of years and are fully aware of its debilitating effect on them. It is therefore no surprise to hear them complain of constant boredom ( High School Survey of Student Engagement,2009) They felt that the material presented to them was either uninteresting, irrelevant or unchallenging. Matthews (2010) made similar findings as did Schunk, Pintrich & Meece (2010). The latter group identified poor teaching strategies as the cause of the boredom. They commented : “Unfortunately ,much classroom teaching reinforces the students’ perception, especially when teachers lecture and students passively listen”(p. 38).

### **Regional Context**

Although data are not readily available at the regional level, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the problem of student disinterest also exists within the Caribbean, but to varying degrees. While Brown’s (2004) investigation cited drop-outs in Jamaican secondary schools, Barbados reported none. (This is credited to the fact that education there is highly valued and its importance entrenched in the national psyche). One can infer then, that the interest levels in academic work are high. However there were drop outs at the tertiary technical school for the period 2000-2002, not exceeding “20%” (Brown, 2004,p.20). The Kaitaur News (March 2010), reported that Guyana has its share of challenges within its secondary schools.

However, regardless of the number, if disinterest in school work is left un-addressed or is not adequately addressed over time, dire consequences are bound to arise. These can impact on the child him/ herself, the school, his family, the society at large and ultimately impact on the world. One of the most immediate and direct consequences is low achievement. Statistics show the alarming number of children who are not faring well at school because of a lack of effort. They



therefore leave school without acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes that school has been entrusted to impart. Another consequence of students who display a lack of interest and/or low achievement is violence and indiscipline . Over the last decade violence and indiscipline have been increasing in some schools at an alarming rate, including schools in Trinidad and Tobago to the extent that in 2006, the school under study was selected to participate in Deosaran's investigation into violence and delinquency in secondary schools (Deosaran,2006).In its response to the situation, the Ministry of Education embarked on numerous initiatives such as the "Peace Promotion Programme" , "Together We Light The Way" , "Trinidad and Tobago Violence Prevention Academy" and "The National Mentorship Programme" to name a few. The latter was launched by Colin Powell of the USA .

Another chronic problem that arises from disinterest is high absenteeism. In some countries , this phenomenon is referred to as "the silent epidemic" (Centre for Studies in Multiple Pathways (2010,p. 13). Chronic absenteeism usually leads to drop- out, which has been found to be an economic and social burden to the nation .International reports have cited billions of dollars in losses because of the high drop-out rate. This group has been associated with criminal activities , incarceration, high unemployment , health issues, and risky behaviors. More importantly , they propagate the same cycle within their families. Such therefore is the magnitude of the problem created by students who have become disinterested in academic subjects , a situation which continues unabated in Trinidad and Tobago and other countries around the world .

Many prominent individuals in the field of education in Trinidad and Tobago ,including the Minister of Education (Trinidad Newsday, June,2012 )as well as Deputy Principal of the University of the West Indies, Professor Rhoda Reddock (Trinidad Express , Oct,2012) have

bemoaned the fact that despite the heavy investment in the education sector(\$9B in 2012/2013 )and attempts at modernizing the system, the returns have been disappointing. On one hand, Dr. Gopeesingh has declared his dissatisfaction with the poor results of the 2012 Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination, (60% of candidates obtained less than 5 passes). On the other, Reddock expressed concern not only for the boys but also for the girls who leave school without critical skills , knowledge and competencies to manoeuvre in the society. Thus, the situation remains of grave concern . While the Minister blames principals for this sad state of affairs, Professor Reddock believes that something is “seriously wrong” with the education system.

### **School context**

The school where this research project is to be carried out is a five- year government secondary school in the St. Patrick district. It is one of the new- sector schools that underwent the process of de-shifting in 2006 and conversion to a five year institution two years later. The first cohort of Form 5 candidates wrote CSEC examinations in 2008 . The student population is approximately four hundred and fifty ,and they are serviced by 54 teachers , a vice-principal and a principal- both appointed. The majority of students are girls, following upon the Ministry of Education’s single sex initiative more than two years ago. Most students belong to the middle and low socio-economic backgrounds. While the literacy and numeracy levels among the student body are by no means outstanding, there are some students who have demonstrated academic potential. Unfortunately, this has not been sustained over the years. The 2012 CSEC results painted a dismal picture - 3 out of 66 students gained a full certificate of five subjects and more , while forty- one of them failed to secure a single pass

As a teacher at this school for most of my teaching career , it is disheartening to see year after year the majority of students displaying an indifferent attitude towards their school work, especially when it is clear they possess reading and writing skills upon which they could build and achieve a higher degree of academic success . I am also painfully aware of the risk factors to which youths from this catchment area are exposed when they leave school ill-equipped. Furthermore, student disinterest at this school has not been addressed in a conscientious manner. While the Administration speaks of its disappointment, the situation is not treated in a meaningful, so as to encourage staff to view as a collective responsibility. The problem is addressed in greater detail at the middle management level and Heads of Department (HODS) are given the responsibility of engaging their departments. In this way, it does not appear to be a united effort, but rather each department doing its own thing.

As a means of closer monitoring, clinical supervision was implemented over the last 2 years, but no form of training was provided for HODS . More than that, out of the 6 HOD'S, up until last year (2012) , only one had completed the Diploma in Education. So teachers are being supervised by individuals who have been in the system for a long time, but have had no professional training. Additionally , only two are officially appointed. The Administration, although concerned, adopts the role of adviser rather than that of a partner who can see firsthand what is happening. The fact that HODS/ acting HODS may be under- prepared for their role, has not prompted the administrators as the experts ,to lead by example or to organize training workshops for this critical group. In this regard, students are not being properly serviced . Taking all of this into consideration , I felt it my duty to find out from the students themselves , what contributes to their interest/ disinterest in academic work. Consequently, the topic “Exploring students’ perceptions of their interest / lack of interest in academic work at a five- year

government secondary school in South Trinidad” was specifically chosen so as to gain a deeper understanding of this issue from the students’ point of view, since there was obviously something that I and other adults, were missing.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Given that adolescence is usually a period of storm and stress, and confusion, it is not surprising for teenagers to be physically present in the classroom but mentally absent. Research has shown that student disinterest is a global phenomenon which often contributes to other problems including indiscipline, low academic achievement, absenteeism and subsequent dropping-out.

Quite recently Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, Minister of Education, commented on the high drop-out rate and the poor performance of students at the CSEC examinations 2012,. He also made reference to approximately five thousand youths who do not complete secondary school annually (Trinidad Newsday).Despite the Ministry of Education’s many initiatives at re-vamping the system — to date, educators have yet to see the highly anticipated improvement in student interest and enthusiasm (as would have been reflected by better examination results and an improvement in the drop-out rate).

Additionally, student disinterest creates frustration for teachers who become discouraged and demotivated. They too, can become apathetic. Moreover because of the serious negative implication it could have on the quality of the nation’s future workforce, the issue of fifth formers lack of interest in their academic studies deserves closer scrutiny. At South Side Secondary School, it has been noted that most Form Five students do not bring to class essential

equipment (pen, pencils, textbooks, geometry sets, calculators) ,do not complete homework or class work and they deliberately leave the Ministry of Education's issued textbooks under their desks. Their body posture (slouching, bending heads on the desk, day- dreaming, even sleeping) sends a powerful message of disinterest as well as other habits such as tardiness to school and to class, and high distractibility during class.

Marshall (2008) states that this lack of interest “robs our class of the passion and enthusiasm that we aspire to create in our students” (p.5) .He further posits that this disinterest is typically a manifestation of a deeper issue, and firmly believes that until we understand its root cause(s), a solution will continue to elude us. Clearly, any solution that may have been found thus far, internationally, regionally or locally, is minimal and so further research is definitely required. It is against this backdrop that I have undertaken this study.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore fifth formers' perceptions of their interest/ lack of interest in academic work at South Side Secondary School .

### **Significance of the study**

It is hoped that the information generated from this study could possibly raise awareness of the issue in an objective and constructive manner among stakeholders at the school including the parents. It is also expected to inform teaching/ learning practices and experiences. I expect that it would also inform my own practice with my students as well as add to the existing body of research on this issue locally.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Overarching Question

What are fifth formers' experiences with regard to their interest/ lack of interest in academic work at South Side Secondary School?

### Sub- Questions

1. How do fifth formers account for their interest /lack of interest in academic work at South Side Secondary School ?
2. What are fifth formers' views on how interest in academic work could be improved at South Side Secondary School?

**For this M. Ed. project, only Sub-Question One will be operationalized.**

## DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

**Interest-** liking and willful engagement in a cognitive activity (Shraw&Lehman,2001).

- **Academic work-** subjects of a cognitive nature that place a high demand on the use of literacy and numeracy skills
- **De-shifting-** the process of changing junior secondary schools that operated on a double shift basis to whole day operation

- **Conversion**- the process of converting former junior and senior secondary schools to five-year institutions. Junior Secondary schools had accommodated students of forms 1 to 3, while Senior Comprehensives accommodated only Forms 4 and 5, and Form 6, in a few cases.
- **Bracketting**- putting aside personal attitudes or beliefs about the phenomenon ( Merriam, 2002).
- **Caribbean Vocational Training (CVQ)** -a 2 year skills training programme offered at Form 4 -5

## Summary

Chapter One introduced the concept of “interest” as diverse in nature and the problem of disinterest in academic work was seen to be a global , infiltrating almost all levels of the school system and the consequences associated were highlighted. The school context, statement of the problem, as well as the overarching and subordinate questions were outlined so as to present a comprehensive overview of the topic under study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore students' perceptions of what accounts for their interest or lack of interest in academic work. Bearing in mind that interest in learning is influenced both by internal and external factors, the review of the literature began by elaborating on this construct and the teacher's role in the process. I then selected one internal and one external source of influence to explore- motivation and parental involvement respectively . The chapter ended with a look at a few of the studies done in this area.

#### **Interest**

Most interest theorists concur that interest is a phenomenon that emerges from individuals' interaction with their environment as declared by Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000, p.152).

Dewey's (1913) initial recognition of the importance of interest in learning was confirmed some seven decades later by Kintsch's (1980) actual investigation into this field . Drawing upon Dewey's original ideas, Kintsch identified interest as possessing an affective as well as a cognitive component. Emotional interest refers to the affective impact of a text, while cognitive interest describes the impact a text has on our thinking. A few years later, Schiefele (1991) assigned formal labels to Dewey's earlier observations of interest, referring to one as personal (or individual) and the other as situational interest.



Hidi & Harackiewicz (2000) and Hidi and Renninger (2006) contend that personal interest emanates from an intrinsic desire to understand particular subjects or topics, and is usually associated with high levels of knowledge and value, positive emotions and increased reference value (Krapp, Hidi & Renninger, 1992). Moreover, It is said to develop slowly and tends to be long-lasting . As such, it remains a relatively stable and enduring factor in one's learning over an extended period of time. Consequently, personal interest plays a major role in a learner's preference to engage in a task or activity over time.

Situational interest on the other hand, is extrinsically generated through the use of appealing stimulus materials and aimed specifically at catching students' interest in their work . This however may have a short-term effect, and only marginally influence an individual's knowledge and values depending on the external supports (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Mitchell, 1993).

While researchers tend to agree that although teachers have little influence/control over the individual interest or disinterest students bring to class, they all believe that the one thing they do have control over, is the learning environment. In fact, central to Dewey's beliefs is that each child possesses a set of interests "which it is the job of a good teacher to arouse" so as to encourage the child to take an interest in the required aspects of a lesson (Peters, 1977, p.38) Thus, teachers' casual assertion that students either have or do not have interest in a subject, is unsubstantiated by the literature.

Furthermore, Dewey believed that it is not enough to *catch* attention; it must be *held*" (Dewey, 1913, p. 91 as cited in Pressick- Kilborn and Walker, 1999). In responding to this 'catch' and 'hold' admonition, Mitchell (1993) has proposed that the essence of triggering interest lies in finding ways to stimulate individual interest and that the key to maintaining interest lies in

empowering students by helping them to find meaning or personal relevance. (Schraw , Flowerday & Lehman, 2001) .

After his study with secondary school mathematics classes, Mitchell (1993, p.157) contended that creating appropriate environmental settings triggers situational interest (or interestingness) and this does play an important role in the development of individual interest . Hidi, 1990; Hidi & Anderson, 1992; Krapp et al., 1992; Hidi & Renninger, 2006 all concur with these findings.

The research states that although the two aspects of interest are distinct , they are not dichotomous . Rather, it has been noted that they are expected to interact and influence each other's development ((Krapp et al, 1992; Mitchell, 1993; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2008)

However, Pressick- Kilborn and Walker( 1999) lament that the inter-relationship between individual and situational interest has not been thoroughly explored, as researchers have generally focused upon one of these conceptions of interest at the expense of the other in their empirical studies, with the exception of Ainley & Hillman, (1999).

Having examined the interplay between individual and situational interest, Ainley (1999) has contributed another dimension to the construct- that of interest as a psychological state, sometimes called 'active' interest. He contends that both individual interest and situational ( interestingness) can bring about experiences and psychological states in an individual that are generally referred to as interest.

Some of the psychological processes which are active when students demonstrate interest in classroom activity, according to Krapp et al., (1992), may include increased attention, greater concentration, pleasant feelings of applied effort, and increased willingness to learn. Sansone and

Morgan (1992) add that features such as engaging in an activity freely, with persistence, energy and intensity are the important hallmarks of active interest.

Further research into understanding the inter-relationship between individual and situational interest from a socio- cultural perspective, was also undertaken by Lightfoot (1988) and Valsiner (1992). Their concern lay with the processes involved in the development of interest, not only the learning and motivational outcomes. One of their goals, among others, is learning how to best nurture and utilize individual interest in the educational process . Valsiner as cited in Pressick-kilborn & Walker (2004) foresees that capturing this process in empirical studies will be the challenge.

It is quite clear that all dimensions of interest have implications for student learning , especially student academic interest. Nevertheless, it is an area that educators continue to wrestle with as they work with academically unmotivated students (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). An understanding of this construct and the crucial role of teachers in this regard, could help to shed some light regarding why students show interest/ disinterest in all or specific subjects.

## **Motivation**

Motivation is described as the force which starts and sustains our activities towards achieving our goals (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) and this force is easily recognized by students' "excitement, interest, and enthusiasm towards learning" according to Crump, 1995 (as cited in Nilsen 2009, p.

546 ). Eggen & Kauchak (2010 ) acknowledged the importance of motivation by positioning it “at the heart of all learning”. (p.283)

Researchers are in agreement that there are two basic types of motivation- intrinsic and extrinsic . At the same time, they acknowledge that individuals exhibit not only different degrees of motivation, but also different kinds of motivation (Nilsen ,2009 p.547). While research confirms that all impact on students’ attitude towards their academic work, one that is widely accepted is the Achievement Goals theory, which has arisen as one of the most influential approaches to academic motivation (Elliot, 1999 ;Ellsworth 2009 ).

Turner and Patrick (2004 ) assert that achievement goal theory describes different purposes that students adopt for engaging in academic tasks. It is felt that goals, once adopted in a particular achievement context, will guide an individual’s approach to academic activities as well as influence their thoughts, feelings and performance .Ellsworth (2009) explained that depending on the personal goals students pursue and the goals emphasized in the contexts in which they learn, their motivational behavior may differ (p .51).

These fifth formers under study have identified different goals in pursuing particular academic subjects. For example, they saw the importance of these subjects in helping them to get a good education, to secure a good job, to be “something in life”, because they don’t want to ‘ketch tail” later on. However although students at South Side Secondary claim to understand how important the academic subjects are , as with the fifth formers in Mohammed’s study(1996), their low levels of interest and academic output do not match this understanding.

Their behavior may be explained by the achievement goal orientation they have adopted - whether it is mastery driven or performance- driven. Students driven by mastery goals persist, even when learning is difficult, and they view mistakes as opportunities to learn, not as failures. Additionally, they show interest and diligence when working on a task or express excitement when learning new skills or knowledge (Kaplan et al., 2002, as cited in Turner & Patrick, 2004)

In contrast, students who engage in performance approach goals tend to use superficial strategies such as memorization, exert only enough effort, engage in self handicapping behavior such as not trying when they are uncertain about meeting their goals. Some even resort to cheating. ( Eggen & Kauchak,2010, p.304). Elliott & Dweck (1988) posit that the difference between mastery and performance goals are less evident when individuals are performing well. However Dweck and Leggert (1988) as cited in Eggen & Kauchak,(2010) are of the view that some of the negative traits are more visible with students who display lower levels of perceived competence .

Researchers have observed that in the initial stages of learning, differences between the two orientations go unnoticed since younger students adopt both mastery and performance goals in fulfilling their goals. However as they progress through school, their performance orientation tends to increase while their mastery orientation decreases. ( Eggen & Kauchak,2010). Of course this has relevance for the present study since it focuses on students in the later stage of adolescence. This information will undoubtedly prove quite useful. Eggen & Kauchak (2010) further add that teachers and parents alike unknowingly contribute to this developmental trend. When they emphasize that the purpose of school is to promote achievement and increase understanding, mastery goal is more likely to be adopted. However a performance orientation is

encouraged when adults constantly focus on their charges' need to get good grades as a requirement for further studies, display their grades or compare their performances to others ( Eggen & Kauchak,2010, p.305).

Of equal importance though is that failure on performance goals can lead to anxiety and a performance avoidance orientation, which has been deemed to be most detrimental for motivation and achievement. Students in such situations, tend to display low self-efficacy and self-confidence and to experience anxiety about tests and other tasks. (Turner & Patrick, 2008) In many cases, this has driven students to the point of dropping out of school altogether, so as to avoid looking incompetent. However, it is to be noted that some studies have reported null effects of performance goals on academic performance (Kaplan& Midgley ,1997 ), while others have reported some positive effects (Harackiewicz et al., 1997). These findings suggest that performance goals do not always have negative effects, even for individuals low in perceived competence.

### **Parental involvement**

For decades, the family has been recognized as the major influence on students' academic performance and their ultimate successes in life.( Gullota, 2000, p.238). Fishel & Ramirez ( 2005), as cited in Fan and Williams(2012 p.56) describe parental involvement as “parents’ participation in their children’s education with the purpose of promoting their academic and social success”. This definition therefore presents a broad view of the parent’s role .In keeping with this perspective, Epstein has outlined six different types of overlapping family activities,

inclusive of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home ,decision- making and collaboration with community. (Epstein, 1990, 1992; ). Caro ( 2011, p.2) posits that the significance of these overlapping spheres of influence lies in the recognition that “parent involvement in children’s education and family-school connections is not static,” but dynamic and complex. The importance of parental involvement therefore may vary according to the type of involvement, students’ developmental stage and grade level, social background and experiences of families, and school policies (Epstein, 1992).

Given all these variables ,it is little wonder therefore that research into the impact of parental involvement on children’s performance has proven inconsistent. Caro (2011) sought to explain, the complexities associated with the nature of the involvement. He explained that supportive and encouraging parental involvement is typically associated with higher achievement levels . Fan (2001) as cited in Caro has added that high parental academic aspirations for their children also had positive effects. However , other studies have reported negative effect and others no impact of parental involvement. For example, parental pressure and punishment are negatively associated to school success. It is also interesting to note that whereas some quality of parent–teacher interactions can be positive , quantity of interactions can prove negative.

Another factor to consider is age. Research has also shown that parental involvement and its effectiveness declines as children get older (Muller, 1998; Singh et al., 1995;). In elementary school, parental involvement has more desirable effects because students have less developed study habits and parents are more able to assist them with their school work, but at the secondary school, the standard of work is more advanced , thereby rendering most parents helpless from the

academic standpoint. Added to that, adolescents try to become more independent from parents and during this period, parent-child conflicts tend to increase (Newman & Newman, 2003).

Additionally, parental socio economic background has been shown to shape students' academic interests. It is generally believed that students of parents belonging to higher socio economic status are more inclined to academic work than students from lower socio economic background. But other studies do not support this view. They claim the effectiveness of parental involvement is just as great or even greater among low SES families. In Trinidad and Tobago, Osuji (1987) found that the type of school as well as socio- economic status had significant effects on educational attainment. Within schools, socio- economic status was the main factor influencing educational attainment. It was found however, that this effect differed from school to school (Osuji, 1987).

### **OTHER STUDIES ABOUT INTEREST/ DISINTEREST**

Matthews (2005) Alabama used a phenomenological case study in which 32 former high school students between the ages 18-21 who admitted to being apathetic when they attended school, were purposively sampled. The purpose of the study was to understand the reasons that potentially intelligent students had for choosing not to complete their assignment, with a view to helping other students who were facing the same dilemma. The data collection instruments included written responses, open- ended interviews and a video- taped session in which the participants responded to questions. The results showed that the students were bored because the lessons were not fun nor entertaining and not understandable in some cases. They felt a one on



one approach to teaching and a tangible awards program to recognize their efforts would have motivated them to continue learning.

In 1997, Jules conducted a longitudinal study with a 10% representative sample of form one secondary school students in Trinidad and Tobago. This sample consisted of 2125 students in 64 classroom groups from every school type and education district. Towards the end of each school year, students were asked whether or not they *liked coming to school* and *why*; what classroom events evoked *interest*, which ones *feelings of being "unsure,"* and *how they responded* in each case.

The main survey instrument was a questionnaire which utilized open ended essay-type responses. Additionally classroom observation and interviews of students and relevant school personnel of three of the 64 classrooms were done.

Three major findings- there was growing alienation between teacher and student- the interest levels were highest in teacherless classes while the delivery of the content experience was often a blur. However in situations where students believed that a teacher genuinely cared for them, will come to class once s/he is able, and that they (the students) will be actively involved in the lesson, they eagerly looked forward to that class. Unfortunately, where the opposite situation existed, feelings of isolation, confusion, mistrust, hurt, anger, and resentment between teacher and student existed.

Mohammed's 1996 ethnographic study investigated career aspirations and expectations of 24 fifth form students at a senior comprehensive school in Trinidad. These students captured the researcher's attention since they seemed uninterested in schoolwork or the educational qualifications necessary for the world of work, although they were on the verge of leaving school. Long, in- depth, open- ended interviews were carried out, along with observations. The findings revealed that students blamed teachers, the subjects as well as their peers for preventing them from learning. Most students engaged in strange rationalizations to explain their apparent shortcomings.

Maharaj ( 2009 ) , investigated upper primary school students' perceptions of Science, in regard to age , gender and ability. She too used purposive sampling strategy. She used open ended questionnaires and informal student discussions which were led by the teachers. While students stated that they understood the importance of the subject, the method of delivery rendered it difficult to understand as well as uninteresting. They said they would have appreciated a more practical , hands- on approach.

Having examined these studies, I opted for the phenomenological slant taken by the first three. I also used interviews as my main data collection instrument and my sample was purposefully selected. My study was not restricted to a specific academic subject as the Maharaj study, but looked at academics generally. Unlike the others, Maharaj cited age and gender as additional influences on interest/ disinterest in academic work , which I will be on the look-out for, as I undertake my research. All these studies have been helpful in guiding my research and have

provided findings that are similar in some respects. I have undertaken my research at South Side Secondary to see what is applicable or not, as well as what is unique to the students at this site.

Having regard to the assumption that interest in school work is both internally and externally motivated, I have adopted Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory as the conceptual framework for this study. It is a model of interlocking systems which places the child at the centre of other systems such as the school, the home, the peer group and the community and presents us with an alternative way of understanding human behavior and development.

It is well-known that development results from the interaction of one's genetic background and environmental factors (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010) and it is in the context that Bronfenbrenner's theory proves valuable. In his model, the individual is at the centre not merely as a passive recipient of these experiences but as someone who helps to construct the social setting.

While the model encompasses a system of five environmental systems comprising the micro system, meso system, exo system, macro system and chrono system, the scope of this study does not permit an investigation into all the levels of this construct. Moreover, it is believed that the most powerful environmental influences on development occur in the micro system- the child's immediate surroundings. It is for these reasons, the micro system was chosen as the framework for this study which set out to explore students' perceptions of what accounts for their interest or disinterest in academic subjects.

It must be acknowledged though that Bronfenbrenner's model has some drawbacks. It ignores the role of cognition (the ways children think about themselves and their relationships with others) as well as the idea of developmental stages . Eggen & Kauchak( 2010 ).Nevertheless its contribution in providing an alternative way of understanding development, is undisputed.

This chapter addressed some of the relevant literature and studies on the issue of interest in learning . In light of the different influences that undoubtedly impact on the adolescent's educational development , I have recommended Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory as the conceptual framework for the study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter addresses the research methodology employed in this study to explore fifth formers' perceptions of what accounts for their interest/ lack of interest in academic work at a secondary school in South Trinidad . The chapter gives a description of the research design, the sample and the sampling strategy. A detailed description of the data collecting instruments and the data collecting procedure is then followed by the presentation of the data analysis techniques. The researcher's role is also declared. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the study.

#### Research design

For this study into fifth formers' interest/ lack of interest in academic work, I adopted a qualitative research design. My main reason for so doing was that this was a problem that has intrigued me for a long time and I felt it needed to be explored (Creswell (2007). By exploring the issue, I hoped to arrive at an in-depth description and understanding of the experience (Lichtman,2010). In this regard, Psathas, ( as cited in Lichtman, 2010 p.30) claim that qualitative researchers in education are concerned about finding out from their participants “what *they* are experiencing, how *they* interpret their experiences, and how *they* themselves structure the social world in which they live.”

Because I was concerned with meaning and interpretation, I did not deal with hypotheses ( Bogdan & Biklen (1982 p.30) . Neither, was it in my interest to reduce

“pages and pages of narration to numerical symbols” Bogdan & Biklen (1982, p. 28 ), which is the focus of quantitative research. Instead, I would try to analyze the data in all its richness, as close as possible to the form in which I recorded or transcribed it, so as to extract the rich thick data. It is this richness of data which can provide me with a thorough ,holistic understanding of the issue of fifth formers’ interest/lack of interest in academic work.

Moreover, I was guided by Creswell’s belief (2007) that true realities can only be accomplished by allowing individuals to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature . In this way, qualitative research empowers individuals to share their stories so that their voices can be heard. What was also a advantage was the fact this kind of research allowed for an emergent design flexibility ( Best & kahn,2006 ).As such, I started very tentatively and developed the design as the inquiry progressed and so, I re-examined and re-structured the study as it progressed.

Taking all of the above into consideration, I did not believe a quantitative approach was the most appropriate means by which to unearth students’ experiences of everyday classroom realities; hence, a qualitative approach was chosen to examine fifth formers’ perceptions of their interest / lack of interest in academic work at South Side Secondary School.In so far that what is being sought, is the subjective meanings that these fifth formers have created of their experiences, it is natural therefore that the social constructivist paradigm underpins this study (Creswell, 2007, p. 21) .

My intention is to deal with a normal, everyday situation which goes un-probed in my school and many others, by exploring the inner experiences of the students who live through the experience daily. Hence, I felt the phenomenological tradition would be ideal, since it focuses on “the essence or structure of an experience” (Merriam 2002, p. 7).

### **The philosophical underpinnings**

Phenomenological inquiry has been influenced by the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schultz. Researchers in this realm believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available to each of us through interacting with others and that it is the meaning of our experience that constitutes reality. “Reality consequently is socially constructed” (Bogdan & Biklen p.31). It is a philosophy without presumptions and therefore encourages the suspension of all judgments about what is real, until they are founded on a more certain basis. This approach therefore affords me the opportunity to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of those fifth form students under study at South Side Secondary School, who display interest/ a lack of interest in academic work. Although the study was phenomenological in nature, I decided to explore the issue by means of a case study approach. Creswell (2007, p.72) states that case study research explores an issue “within a bounded system, over time through detailed, in-depth data collection.” The bounded system or setting therefore was the one school under study and it was confined to six students who were purposefully selected.

## **SAMPLING PROCEDURE**

I decided on purposive sampling for this study because it is based on the assumption that I, as the investigator, want “to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam 2002 p.61). Patton 1990 ,(as cited in Merriam 2002 p.169) adds that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in “information- rich cases” from which one can learn a great deal .

Best & Kahn (2006), endorse this method since they believe that the participants who can provide the richest information , also possess the required criteria. The criteria used were that the students are currently in Form Five and would have experienced the phenomenon under study. All of them are literate but display a lack of interest in academic work.

### **The Sample**

For the focus group, I selected six students representative of the three main ethnic groupings -African, East Indian and Mixed , as well as both genders. However, I was unable to get a female East Indian student to be a part of the sample. The reasons being firstly this population is quite small. Some do not qualify since they may have entered school with very low S.E.A scores, others are showing interest in their work , while a few are quiet and withdrawn . Hence they might not have been able to provide me with the necessary information . Lichtman (2010) made it clear though, that in a focus group setting, perfect representation is not absolutely necessary since the results are not meant to be generalized . She declared that “there is no scientific research that speaks to group size, group number or group composition.” ( p.155).



## **METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

### **Interviews**

The use of interviews permitted me to engage in a dialogue or conversation with the participant, but it was a conversation with a purpose, as I was able to enter the inner world of another person to gain an understanding of that person's perspective (Patton, 1987). I got a chance to probe, and in that way obtain rich, detailed answers. Although interviews can be challenging, yet they remain "the most common method of data collection in qualitative research" (Lichtman, 2010 p.139).

Both focus group and individual interviews were used. Firstly, the social orientation of focus groups (Marshall & Rossman, 1995) connects quite well with the qualitative nature of my research, since it allowed me to study participants in an atmosphere which is more natural and relaxed than an artificial experimental setting. Secondly, this method assumes that attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed; not formed in a vacuum. Marshall & Rossman (1995 p. 149) are of the view that people's opinions and understandings are often shaped by others. By participating in a group discussion therefore, members of a group may stimulate others to comment or react in ways that do not occur in individual interviews. "While all may not want to state an opinion, most are willing to share their experiences" claim Lichtman, (2010, p. 154), which is the purpose of phenomenological study. An additional benefit for me is that this method saved time (Lichtman, 2010 p.134). Given that my interviews began during the second week of the final term, time was limited, Through this focus group method, I was able to get the views of six persons in a shorter time frame (Silverman, 2004).

Four follow-up interviews were undertaken- one in the form of a mini- group of three participants and the others individually .The mini group lasted about twenty minutes while the others between 5 to 10 minutes. They were mainly held in the Deans , two in other rooms that were unoccupied but guaranteed privacy. These sessions gave me the opportunity to clarifying information and ideas that were not fully expressed. A semi-structured approach was used to conduct the interviews with the interview protocol as a guide so that I was free to modify as the need arose. Being a new researcher, it was helpful to have this since I could not have anticipated how participants would have responded in this new scenario . This gave me added confidence, since I was treading in unfamiliar territory.

## **DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS**

### **Interview protocol**

I prepared an interview protocol ( Appendix A ). Patton (2002) indicated that the interview guide lists the questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview .It consisted of 11 open- ended questions which were designed to encourage free response and sharing of experiences and feelings. Depending on how the conversation went, I could have re- phrased the questions or changed their order.

### **Documents**

The documents included SEA Scores, and Form one and Form Five End- of- Term Performance reports . (Appendix B). Review of these documents was conducted discretely with Administration's permission.

## **Questionnaire**

A simple questionnaire ( Appendix C ) was administered to collect basic information regarding family's educational and socioeconomic background . Additionally it sought to obtain students' opinions about the academic subjects they were pursuing.

## **RESEARCHER'S ROLE**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Patton 1990, Merriam 1998) . As such, an element of bias is to be expected. While it is impossible to eradicate this completely, efforts can be made to reduce it to a minimum. In this regard, it is critical to declare my biases, my interest and perspective on this issue ,which is central to my research.

My concern regarding fifth formers' interest /lack of interest in academic work has been influenced by my experiences as a teacher, a Dean and occasional administrator. I have taught at the school for more than 25 years and have actively participated in the many transitions the institution has undergone- from a junior secondary, to being de-shifted and then converted to a five- year institution and presently, predominantly single-sex in a co-educational environment .Needless to say, the emotional attachment I feel is strong.

As a Dean, I am charged with responsibility for maintaining discipline as well as monitoring academic performance and may have interacted with participants from this position. Some of them were taught by me at a lower level (not at the upper level). In addition, as a teacher, I would often hear colleagues express concern and frustration over students' laissez- faire attitude to their work. I must admit that I have also expressed similar sentiments about the students I teach, so this is a problem that I experience too in

my practice. Also as teachers, there is a tendency to accuse students of not trying hard enough, since we believe that we are doing everything in our power to teach them well. However, I had to shelve those beliefs to truly get to understand the issue from the students' point of view.

Creswell (2007) pointed out that in conducting phenomenological study, bracketing one's prior beliefs and biases is essential. However, this is easier said than done, especially in light of the fact that as researcher, I am the primary human instrument for data collection and analysis. All information is filtered through me (Lichtman, 2010). Because I am privy to information, some of a negative nature regarding a few of the participants, I had to make a conscious effort on many occasions, to blank out of my mind all prior judgments, to accept what was being shared with a new pair of ears.

## **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

Having obtained official permission from the administration, I started to peruse the records. Although I had a fair idea of the students whom I wanted to comprise the sample, I sought suggestions from a few Form Managers and subject teachers. When I finally decided on the participants, I met them individually and invited them to participate in the study. Initially, some expressed hesitation. After explaining what I was going to do and putting their minds at rest, they agreed. One student declined. I then administered the questionnaire, but not all at the same time. Over the next few days, I continued to peruse the records.

A day or two before the interview was scheduled, I asked a colleague who is experienced in this field, to check the voice recorder and change batteries. On the morning of the interview, I tested it a few times to ensure that it was functioning properly. I am usually quite nervous with gadgets of this nature so I did not want the interview process to be negatively affected by my lack of expertise.

I decided to use the Dean's room as the venue for the first interview (It is not generally in use and therefore will not be associated with a place of discipline for any of the students). It is situated away from the main block where the much of the school activity takes place, so the area is quiet. It is air- conditioned, clean and comfortable.

The interview was held on Thursday of the second week of the third term. I informed participants that their voices would be recorded for the purpose of transcription. Again I reminded them that this was a confidential conversation and the information would be strictly for my use as previously explained. Quite early into the interview, I realized that they were a bit reserved in their responses and had to reassure them ,while mentally reminding myself too that I was not an expert interviewer and really should not be expecting expert interviewees. I made sure everyone got an opportunity to contribute, although some were more willing to share than others. This interview lasted close to an hour. After the session, all participants were treated to refreshments of their choice from the cafeteria.

After reading the first transcription and noting the areas for further clarification, I conducted follow up interviews. I met with three of them together in a mini group while

the others were done individually. Because they were on their last few official days before CXC, organizing times to meet proved a challenge since some had begun staying home.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen (1993 p.89) stressed that ethical considerations should always be at the forefront of this type of research. Of greatest importance is respect for the person or group under study. Having been allowed into the very private world of participants, I was expected to proceed with “sensitivity and integrity” (p.156). Hand in hand with respect goes mutual trust because of the deep and close interactions between participants and myself. Gay and Airisan (2003, p.195) are of the view that “trust is earned, not given” and must be maintained not only throughout the study but even after. Erlandson et al. (1993) add that deception is never justified, since it is demeaning to the participant as well as counter-productive to the researcher’s objective (p.155).

With full knowledge of all the above considerations, I therefore obtained formal informed consent (Gay and Airisan, 2003 p.194) from the necessary stakeholders- school principal, (Appendix D) parents and participants. I informed them of the nature and purpose of the study and participants knew of their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Appendix E). I also sought their approval for the interviews to be audio-recorded. I made a promise of confidentiality and in an effort to guarantee anonymity, each participant was assigned an alias during the data analysis process.

## **CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Gay and Airisian (2003 p.215) suggest a number of measures that can be used to enhance the integrity and credibility of research. For this study, I have employed triangulation, peer debriefing, using a reflexive journal and keeping an audit trail, in addition to employing purposive sampling as the strategy to select participants.

I used one main focus group interview comprising six participants. In an effort to triangulate the data, follow-up interviews were conducted with three of the individuals separately and the others in a mini group of three. Follow-up served to confirm and clarify what was said before and probe for further understandings. All interviews I audio recorded and transcribed verbatim so as to ensure the accuracy of the statements of the participants. It would have been impossible for me to rely on my memory given the voluminous amount of data.

Through peer debriefing, I allowed a colleague who has experience in this type of research to become the devil's advocate by critically analyzing aspects of the project. She listened to my ideas and concerns and in so doing, allowed me to vent my feelings of uncertainty and frustration. She made certain recommendations which proved quite helpful. Erlandson et al. (1993, p.140) suggest that this strategy is "valuable in helping the inquirer deal with a process that is a lonely one."

To record this feedback and other valuable insights, thoughts and feelings regarding the progress of the study, I kept a reflexive journal which is a kind of diary (Appendix F) . Aside from this method of reflecting on the process, it is also important to keep adequate

records for a study such as this. Consequently an audit trail is recommended and I kept one, which I updated and consulted regularly.( Appendix G)

Trustworthiness was also assured by openly declaring my possible biases up front, being a teacher at the school under study ( See Researcher's Role above). Moreover, the phenomenological paradigm demands that I suspend my prior beliefs and opinions regarding the issue under investigation. This is not an easy feat to accomplish, but at least I am always conscious of my responsibility to not to allow my biases to get in the way of accepting what is said to me. Purposive sampling likewise contributed in my effort to guarantee a high degree of credibility and trustworthiness in this study.

## **DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES**

According to (Creswell, 2008 p.148) ,data analysis in qualitative research consists of “preparing and organizing the data for analysis ,then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes and finally representing the data through figures ,tables or a discussion.” Bogdan & Biklen (1982 p.29) liken the process to a funnel where “things are open at the beginning and more directed and specific at the bottom”

Data analysis is a process, that alternates between data collection and data analysis (Johnson 2004; Gay and Arisian,2003 ).It is not the practice therefore to leave analysis until the end when all data are collected as is done in quantitative analysis. Thus , the first step that I undertook was perusal of the documents which consisted of school



records such as the participants' SEA scores, their Form One and Form Five performance reports. The earlier documents were used to show that students selected were literate and possessed academic potential while the latter ones reflected a decline in performance, suggestive of their disengagement with their academic work. I also examined the data from the questionnaires.

I then turned my attention to the audio-taped interviews. Before the data could be effectively analyzed, it must first be converted into a format that can be easily analyzed. Boyatzis, (1998, p.43) suggests that "written material is easier to review repeatedly than audio-taped or videotaped material", and so I transcribed the audio-taped interviews, manually. Following this, upon recommendation from Agar (1980) as cited in Creswell (1998, p.150), a general reading of all the transcripts were done in order to get a feel of the overall data. This was done several times in conjunction with the journal entries. In so doing, I began the process of familiarizing myself with the data. During this time I also returned to the purpose of the study and the main research question as suggested by Berg (2009). Bearing in mind that the research question was "What accounts for fifth formers, interest /lack of interest in academic work", I kept reading through the transcripts, constantly asking questions of the data. The research question was uppermost in my mind. It had guided the data collection and as Merriam (1998) suggests, would also guide the data analysis.

I noted the gaps in the information from each participant, and this formed the basis of the follow-up interviews. These were similarly audio-taped and transcribed.

The method that I used to analyze the data was the grounded theory methodology, which involves open coding, forming themes and categories, interconnecting the categories and building a story that connects the categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). They further add that “Coding represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized and put back together in new ways” (p.57). During the initial open coding stage, I read the data line by line, looking for leads, ideas and issues. As I read each transcript, I noted what it seemed to be about. The data was then broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and labelled. Using the constant comparative method, I then compared codes and grouped similar ones, looking for patterns, contradictions and inconsistencies. I then colour-coded similar ideas (Appendix H). The colour-coded data items were grouped to form themes. Among themes which emerged from the interviews were: teacher competence, choice of subjects, different abilities, relevance to real life, peer influence among others. What followed next was axial coding. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990 p.97), “axial coding puts data back together in new ways by making new connections between a category and its sub-categories.” I read through the transcripts again and noticed that there were overlaps among some of the themes. According to Merriam (1998) the categories or themes should reflect the purpose of the research and should be mutually exclusive—no single unit should be placed in more than one category. As a result, some themes were re-grouped eg. “connection to career” was placed under “relevance to the future” and “romantic interest” under “support from others”, “learning styles” under ‘different abilities.’ (Appendix I)

I then categorized the emergent ideas and themes into broader themes or categories. Consequently, four main categories were formed: these were, teacher characteristics, student characteristics, motivation and psychosocial issues. In the closing stages of analysis I interpreted the data, based on the emerging themes and categories. I then undertook writing an interpretive narrative, sometimes using direct quotes of the participants as well as summarizations of their discussions, I incorporated thick description to present the underlying meanings and understandings that represented the experiences of the participants.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Limitations are defined by Best and Kahn (2006) as “those conditions beyond the control of the researcher that may place restrictions on the conclusions of the study and their application to other situations” (p.39). According to Creswell 2008 these may manifest as “potential weaknesses or problems” as identified by the researcher (p. 207). It is well-known that assembling focus groups can prove challenging, and for this study it was no different. At the start of Term 3, Form Five students were waiting for their CSEC time tables, so some had already begun staying away from school. As a result, I was able to meet students on two occasions, not wishing to distract their attention away from their examinations

## **DELIMITATIONS**

Best and Kahn (2006) defined delimitations as “the boundaries of the study” (p.39).

This research topic was conducted at one five -year secondary school in South Trinidad with six fifth formers.

This chapter therefore provided the methodology by which the research question would be approached in order to unearth the data to better understand the participants’ realities in regard to their interest or disinterest in doing academic subjects.

In Chapter Four, the data collected are analyzed and the findings are presented in relation to the main research question.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

In this chapter I will describe the nature of the analysis procedure and present the findings in relation to the main research question of the study. Before embarking on the analysis, I returned to the purpose of the study which was to explore fifth formers' perceptions of their interest /lack of interest in academic work. I used the grounded theory methodology to analyze the data, by reading through the data several times, labeling segments of it and then colour coding. After that was done, I proceeded to identify the themes generated from the data. Having done so I collapsed the themes into broad categories. Four broad headings emerged: teacher characteristics, student characteristics, motivation and psychosocial issues. I will now present the findings, using the categories as headings and the themes as sub- themes.

### **FINDINGS**

#### **TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS**

The characteristics of teachers were identified as a significant contributor towards students' interest/ disinterest in academic work – both in terms of their personality and their pedagogical competence.

#### **Personality**

In commenting on teacher's personality, SH stated that “some ah dem does loud yuh up- dey doh talk to yuh nice”. RB said that “some ah dem always quarellin” DG agreed, “dey doh show yuh patience, dey wouldn' come close to yuh”. WC suggested that others “need to buck up on dere attitude” while DG agreed that they “dey does try to embarrass yuh, nah”. The following

students' reactions indicated the effect teachers' behaviors had on their academic work, "yuh have less to say", "yuh pretend yuh sick or sleepin" or "yuh keep a low profile". WC said about her Mathematics teacher "he jus borin- kind a way doh talk to nobody . She claimed that he "make me drop asleep fas". She admitted that she would have preferred somebody "more lively. Somebody who does smile; not sour,sour."However, they appreciated the qualities displayed by some teachers in the practical subjects like Home Economics, and CVQ (Caribbean Vocational Qualifications) like Welding, Carpentry and Furniture Making) . RB said "dey doh be buffing yuh up ,dem real patient, if yuh do something wrong, dey does take dey time to explain what yuh do wrong."

Students also cited unfair treatment as the greatest turn-off from teachers and by extension, the subject. GM expressed his point in this way "dey does favour dose who picking up de work a little faster and you taking a little more time to pick up on the subject, he go run to the person who picking up the subject faster". This causes some to "feel left out when de odder person getting more intrist dan you, because dey getting tru". RB added " yuh doesn try as hard because yuh feel well ,dat person done get tru arready and you ent getting it." WC said the same of her Maths teacher, "he have he favorites. DG added "dey doesn't want to tell de odders to shut up, dey does only be on you". Such situations may end in a confrontation between teacher and student or a complete withdrawal of effort and enthusiasm. They say " Miss, yuh doh fight up" or "I does have to defen mehself" .When asked what will make them feel to try harder, RB alluded to equal treatment for all "Well, if de teacher treat everybody equal. Doh show more attention to one person."

## **Pedagogical skills**

In regard to teacher competence and pedagogical skills, WC spoke her mind: “Dey doesn’t explain de work properly”. She continued “de English teacher he just makes no sense, just comin for so, he doh do tings to intrist yuh.” She also remarked that he “does teach once in a blue moon” SH likewise expressed his frustration: “It boring, dem teachers and dem dey doh make the work sound intristing.” RB added “some ah dem doh come to teach, dey just come in and sit down.” DG seemed to adequately sum up the feelings of them all, “When I in class for Maths and dem odder two subjects, I does just be in anodder world. I just doesn’t feel the vibes.”

From the statements such as “only a set a talking, talking, nothing practical”, “dem subject like torture, too much writing” leads one to conclude that teachers hardly ever incorporate different strategies to break the monotony of delivery. References by students to innovative teaching strategies were almost non-existent, except SH’s mention of a co-curricular activity, which incorporates games as the prime teaching technique. He said, “the numeracy skills and all dem tings making yuh feel better” (this however, is not normal classroom teaching and moreover, not at the standard required for CSEC). However, the games attracted his interest in the subject.

One student, GM acknowledged the effort of the Mathematics teacher to engage them sometimes by employing a meta-cognitive technique, which he attempted to explain in this way: “Some questions, Sir will chain yuh up, nah. The same answer you did get, yuh kind ah confuse when yuh realize it coming back to the same ting.” NH gave credit to one teacher who she claimed “does really try she best to explain de work to yuh”. She however, could not cite any particular strategy except “explaining”. Two of the participants were adamant that nothing done in the

academic classes appealed to them and admitted they have stayed on just to complete their CVQ and get their certificate.

Teachers' interaction with students and their sub-standard teaching skills stand out as being an obstacle in the way of students embracing the academic subjects. Students seem to feel under appreciated and un-loved by most of the teachers, who are either very rough or their teaching style does not suggest the warmth and caring that should characterize such a special and important relationship.

## **STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS**

**Personal Interest :** As indicated in the literature students have personal or intrinsic reasons for liking certain subjects . DG said he liked “ English, the reading part” to the extent that he does not feel discouraged, even when children laugh at his mistakes . He said jokingly “ you might just make a little mistake ,dey will laugh wit yuh and tell yuh is not dis , is so so.” Furthermore, he said “it does help yuh to understand more nah Miss, a little more about the questions and tings yuh does have to face in the exam, it help yuh to explain yuhself better”. GM was interested in Human and Social Biology (HSB)because he enjoyed “learning about the human body - the different organs in the body , how dey work.” NH also liked HSB because, she says “I want to be a nurse”, whereas WC enjoyed Social Studies because “it easy to learn”. On the other hand, some students simply had no personal interest in any of the academic subjects, like RB and SH who declared : “Miss ,dat doh interest me” .



### **Different abilities**

Students recognized that they all possessed different abilities and this may also account for their interest/disinterest in academic work. SH expressed his opinion by saying that “It have some ah dem does do a ting more better in dey hands dan in dey brains.” GM explained why they were more interested in the Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ). He said “because yuh using yuh hands” and “yuh learning new skills” Similarly, WC felt that “yuh does learn faster in de practical dan de theory because yuh enjoying de practical part”. RB referred to his own situation “I’s a slow learner .I doh read fast like how some ah dem who does learn fas , yuh have to tell me someting eight times before I know wha going on dey.” When asked what would be his reaction if the teacher tried to make the work more interesting , he replied “I go try, is to see if I go learn it, when I revising, I go forget it” Responses such as these point to the different intelligences in the classroom . The fact they are not being catered for in the classroom can easily cause students to lose interest.

GM made a comparison with the CVQ classes where learning was more individualized. “ It have different tings you could do, one person might be learning to carve, anodder learning to make a mortise” (a term used in furniture making). Students were concentrating on accomplishing their own task and so worked at their own pace. This tended to hold their interest.

### **Gender bias**

Some of the male students suggested that their gender might have something to do with their interest /disinterest in academic subjects. SH boasted “ we build for the concrete”. RB stated that “dem girls and dem brighter than we”. GM claimed that “dem make for office work , dem cyah wuk in de hot sun like we, we is man, is dem ha to learn dem kinda subjects.” RB expressed his

opinion like this: “ We eh bong for dat, dat is for dem girls.”The girls did not voice any disagreement with this suggestion. Ironically, the person who declared love for English was a male student, even though the research refers to English as a “feminine” subject.

At this school, the number of students declaring a personal love for academic subjects is quite small. The majority of them seem to prefer practical subjects, and this may work to their advantage because the teachers there have to liaise closely with the students and assist them as much as possible. This could account for their preference for the practical subjects. In the academic stream however, they only get this type of help for CSEC Social Studies School Based Assessment (SBA). A number of students have different abilities but these are hardly acknowledged, much less maximized in the classroom and students are frustrated.

## **MOTIVATIONAL ISSUES**

### **Choice of subject**

Some of the students felt that choice had a lot to do with their interest/ lack of interest in academic work. RB stated, “We didn’t choose dat . In a way, yuh jus have to do it”. SH agreed, “When we did get de paper to sign up, yuh had was to do it, Miss, dey never ask yuh if yuh want to do dat.” DG joined ,”Miss, I woud ah never choose dem subject and dem. I doh like dem , dey hard. RB surmised that what a person chooses for himself, he does better at . He sought to justify his argument using the CVQ which they chose to do: “the CVQ make you feel more interested in the subject ,you does want to do the CVQ, you choose to do that so yuh doesn’t feel lazy to do it.” Others agreed: “Yeah Miss, dat’s true.”

## Relevance to future

Another consideration regarding interest in academic work is whether the subject is relevant to students' future plans. The majority of students viewed the practical subjects as being more important to their future than the academic, since they were already working or were guaranteed a job because of family or other connections. DG boasted, "Miss, I going in the army. I have family in the army". RB added "Miss I does go in de wholesale market wid meh father. I does be handling tousands ah dollars. Bandits hold we up and ting arready." He continued, "So Miss, why I must bust my brains for. Anyhow yuh take it, I don wuking arready. Me eh bong for dem subject"

Some again are not motivated to study because they see other young people like themselves doing fine without the academic subjects. GM shared some of what he knew, "Miss, I have a pardner, he leave school now, right now he wuking on a rig offshore and watch, he cyar even read too good. Miss he wuking for real money. I wish I could get a job like he, yes."

In addition, for most of the students, their future careers were connected to the practical subjects, not the academics. SH declared confidently, "Construction is a ting Miss, everybody billing house nowadays, so yuh sure yuh go get a wuk". RB joined "I does only come to school to get meh certificate and go out dey and finish up, do the next level, get certify and get a wuk somewhere in some mechanical area." WC saw herself "working on the cruise ship, cooking." Only one student, NH, was doing a practical subject, but did not intend to pursue it. She stated that she would like to be a nurse.

### **Achievement goals**

Because of mismatch between goals and academic curriculum, students were unprepared to exert any great effort towards learning these subjects. When asked how they would prefer to learn the subjects, one said ‘See it’ and ‘By listening to the teacher’. Another said ‘Well miss ,I doh really revise, like is jus when de teacher teaching, I does pay attention, so mostly test time come around, yuh jus watch tru yuh book nah Miss ,no big set ah studying’. This is clear evidence of students who have adopted performance goals rather than mastery goals orientation towards their work- watching through the book, is nothing more than a sham to ease their consciences.

Deep down , students know that they don’t need the academic subjects to have a decent life . They seem confident that their skills will provide them the kind of lifestyle they want. It could be too that their vision is just limited to what they are accustomed to, and they have not as yet entertained the possibility of something far better. Under these circumstances, it becomes really difficult for the teacher to encourage students to do the academics since their goals are so real and predominant at this point in their lives.

### **Academic support systems.**

Students stated that access to academic support had likewise affected the amount of interest they displayed towards their academic work . This source of support could be teachers, parents or peers. In so far as getting help from teachers was concerned, SH said ‘Some ah the children might know and you might not know it, the teacher will tell you ketch up with the others. Dey wouldn’t come and sit down privately and show you how to figure it out nah ,Miss.’ DG felt that some teachers were unwilling to explain things over .He said : ‘Some might come to the

table and explain it over to you, some might be like ‘Oh God, that again’.” RB said he would have appreciated more “one on one teaching” to keep him interested.

At home ,the dilemma also presented itself. DG explained his experience in this way:

“Sometimes yuh might have a little project for school . Den when yuh reach home yuh mudder not dere, yuh fadder eh home, nobody eh home but you alone and sometimes yuh might want a little hand, but nobody dere to help yuh and it does affect yuh in dat way.” RB added, “My mudder dem eh know nottin about what we doing in class. Dem cyah help me self. ”

From peers, it is a similar disappointment . NH made this observation, “Miss sometimes yuh ask dem to show you so so so , something yuh doh understand. Dey go tell yuh yeah awright, and after dat, dey doh bodder wid yuh .” WC added “Yeah Miss, dey feel dey too bright to help”. GM pointed to “more group assignment in class so we could help one anodder”. Two of the participants indicated on the Questionnaire that they got help from friends, another from her mother. NH pointed to an external source of help in that she used to “go lessons” when she was in Form Four , but stopped because of an injury to her hand. She never attended while in Form Five.

Quite surprisingly, one of the male students took issue with the MOE’s single-sex initiative because he felt it could interfere with what he considered his main source of academic support. SH declared, “Some ah de boys, we does want we girlfriend dem to help we out in we work and ting .” RB joined in, “ yeah ,yuh does get a little help from dem”. Aside from this direct help, they were of the view that their girlfriends helped them to stay focused on schoolwork . DG stated “you’ll be studying she alone and wouldn’t study nobody else in the whole school and that go really make yuh concentrate on yuh work and ting.” RB supported this opinion saying,

“the girl go be pushing yuh to do yuh work.”GM also believed that to be true. He opined , “ Both ah allyuh go be studying all yuh work . In time to come, yuh mightn’t know someting and she might help yuh and vice-versa and so it will be going on. You all go help one anodder.”

One of the girls declined comment in the group setting , while the other NH offered a different view .Instead she felt having a boyfriend can be a distraction from studies. “Miss, I agree and doh agree at the same time. Sometimes I does be in class and I does be tinkng bout my boyfriend and studying wha he doing and den I go call him or tex him and he might text meh back, yuh know. I does cyah concentrate after dat.” Academic support is vital for any child, let alone those who are operating at a low standard. In the absence of such support, they have become demoralized and feel abandoned by the persons who should care about them the most . However, I am not too sure how credible their argument is in terms of needing the girls for academic support. It could be the girls are helping to keep them in school yes, but keeping them interested in their school work , I’m not too sure. Their disclosures have not proven this to be the case.

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES**

### **Challenging authority**

Some students felt that their rebellious nature as adolescents on the verge of manhood may have some small part to play in their level of interest in academic work. RB admitted that “when yuh young, yuh eh taking on nobody ,yuh want to have yuh own way. Yuh does feel yuh eh have to listen to the teacher.”This is defiant attitude is also evident when an infraction is committed. Some students exert their own form of control over the situation by deliberately delaying in

bringing a parent as requested . GM stated “I doesn’t bring my parent one time. Dem does want to treat yuh like little children.” Conflicts that are not quickly resolved can lead to students being away from class, sometimes longer than necessary because of their own decision to show defiance .

SH explained : “When yuh parents doh come , yuh does have to stay out ah all de classes and den it does be hard for yuh to ketch up.” DG joined in “ Yeah, yuh does feel los , yuh doesn even know wha going on. NH offerred her experience : Me and de cosmetology teacher- we fall out nah and she didn want me in she class until meh parents come ,because she say I disrespect she nah miss ,so I couldn’t go no class ,if dey only see yuh dey chasing yuh like dog .After a while like I wasn’t even feelin to come to school because everytime yuh come, yuh have to stay outside. Sometimes it was awright , but den it get borin, so I stay home plenty because ah dat.

### **Self esteem**

Self esteem is also an important consideration in regard to student interest .RB boasted “Miss ,I know me eh so good in dem odder subject, but ah know ah good in meh CVQ - I done pass it aready. De whole class pass.” GM added : “We feeling proud ah weself. De teacher and dem does tell we, we doing good.” DG said: “When de examiner did come, he was happy wit what we do”. SH asked with pride in his voice: “Miss , yuh wasn dey de day Mr. M. gone in de Assembly and say how de CVQ boys do good in dey exam?”

Negative comments however from a few teachers have caused them to become discouraged and disinterested in academic work. WC was visibly upset with some teachers who “ does tell de children bad tings” .They admitted to feeling hurt by these comments .NH stated “dey does tell me how we’s a waste of time” while WC added “And how we wasting we parents money coming to

school ,better we go and work KFC from now”. SH agreed “Yeah and dat de only job we so go get is CEPEP”. Some teachers even told them they “eh passing no subject”.

Then too , their pride has gotten in the way of them seeking help when in trouble . RB acknowledged “I does feel shame in front ah de whole class, dem children go laugh at yuh.” They preferred that the teacher came “by the table”, “privately”. In the absence of this privacy, they shut down. SH related to this: “ Miss I does switch off fas too. If I doh understand someting, I does shut down right dey.”

### **Family issues/ adult responsibilities**

Most participants admitted that family problems have affected their focus on academic work. DG confessed openly that “ some people does have tings going on dere life, dat is why dey doh concentrate much and ting in school.” SH shared his opinion “Miss dat is true ,sometimes yuh mudder quarrelling with yuh fadder, he coming home drunk, right now he eh wuking, talk about pressure. Everyday yuh go home is ah set ah noise in yuh head , yuh does cyah study.” RB mentioned a situation that had interrupted his ability to focus “Miss I de having real problems wit meh big brudder, and meh fadder dem wasn doing notting about it , is de guidance officer who help me. I use to feel stress out.” GM stated, however that he got encouragement from his parents: “Dey does tell meh to come to school and study meh work and doh get in trouble”.

Performing adult roles also seemed to play a part with regard to students’ concentration on their school work. WC complained of the amount of household chores: “Home, yuh have a set ah work to do ,dem doh care bout yuh studies. When yuh finish yuh tired, yuh doh even want to see a book.”Some students were already working part -time jobs and earning their own money. SH



declared “ yuh can’t depend on your mudder dem for everyting, try and work for yourself “. He added , “Miss we doing dat part ah de time. RB stated that “By two o’clock, I done get up already and goin up de highway . NH added “Miss, When I was in Form 4 I had was to drop meh little sister to school in de morning before I come to school and by de time school over I had to go and pick she up. Every day I use to reach to school late.”

### **Peer pressure**

Peer pressure was also identified as impacting on students’ interest in academic work . All the boys readily admitted that their friends did influence their thinking to a certain extent. RB sought to explain: “Well, yuh sitting dong wit yuh friends and dey say dey doh like dat teacher and dey doh like dat subject , you fall into dat same kind ah tinkin.”GM added “ Yeah , sometimes if yuh want to learn in class, dey does disturb yuh from learning and take yuh opportunity to learn from yuh.” Similar sentiments were echoed by the others : “yuh get carried away” ,”yuh lose focus” , and “yuh join dem” . The girls however did not concur. Commenting on their friends’ approach to academic work , WC stated “ dey doh really do English and Maths” while NH said “they doh respond to no subject”. They however felt that they were not affected by their friends’ disinterest: “ I don’t really take dem on” and “I doh study dem, I does do my work ” are their responses to how they handle the situation respectively.

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Analysis of the data revealed that these Form Five students cited teacher practices as a major influence on their interest in academic subjects. They felt that teachers’ open display of favoritism and their low regard and respect for them contributed significantly to their feelings of

disinterest. They also felt that academic classes were boring and this could have resulted from the fact that teachers came ill-prepared. This was evidenced by the fact that classroom activities did not go beyond the traditional methods of reading, writing and explaining , when there was clear evidence that different intelligences existed within the class. They felt that practical, hands-on tasks would have been better suited to them .

Furthermore ,they felt slighted by their lack of input in the selection of academic subjects, especially when the relevance of these subjects to their future careers seemed insignificant. What compounded the situation was the fact that academic support was not readily available to them. Students' personal interest was also identified as having a contributing influence on their interest in academic work, while psychosocial issues relating to their need for autonomy, peer pressure and family matters also featured in their interest /lack of interest in academic work. In short, there were internal and external influences which determined students' level of interest in academic work.

In Chapter Five, these findings are discussed and recommendations linked to each finding are made.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A wide range of responses indicated that several sources of influence have accounted for students' perceptions of their interest /lack of interest in academic work. From a broad perspective, these included students' characteristics , teachers' characteristics , motivational and psychosocial issues. These were in sync with the research literature and also supported the conceptual framework , which presented the micro system of home, school and peer group, as suitable for understanding how these systems interact to influence the academic interest of young persons.

#### **Students**

Students expressed interest or disinterest in the particular subjects. One liked English , another HSB, while some did not like any. Interest / disinterest in academic work is usually explained from the point of view of personal and situational interest. Hidi & Harackiewicz (2000) and Hidi and Renniger (2006) contend that personal interest emanates from an intrinsic/ innate desire to understand particular subjects or topics. Chances are that personal interest in a particular subject can change over time or be absent in a student. The responsibility then falls on the teacher to generate situational interest through the use of appealing stimulus (Mitchell ,1993). In the absence of one or the other, disinterest will surface.

Aside from this intrinsic interest, participants disclosed other aspects of their personalities which contributed to their interest /disinterest in the academics . Some students spoke of different ways of learning “some ah dem does do a ting better in dey hands dan in dey brains” Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences reminds us that students bring with them different attributes, among

them , different ways of learning . Unfortunately, of the eight intelligences that might be present in the classroom, most schools recognize only two - linguistic and logical/ mathematical skills. Teele puts it this way “not all students can learn in the same way and on the same day (Teele ,2000,p. 48 ). As a consequence, when the individual is not adequately catered for, students usually lose interest or their attention gets diverted elsewhere,

### **Teachers**

This calls into question the pedagogical competence of the teachers. Students in the study complained of too much talking and writing , which are the hallmarks of traditional teaching methods. The fact that we are all different , with different learning styles should remind teachers of the need to vary instruction, since “no instructional strategy will be preferred by all students.” Eggen & Kauchak, (2010, p132).Indeed, in all classrooms , this is the reality. Goodlad (2004 ) also noted that there is a part of the brain, known as Magoun’s brain, which is stimulated by novelty,(p.150) and when “There is no fresh stimulation”, he believes that “The accompanying lassitude of many students is to be expected.” (Goodlad, 2004,p .129).

Looking at teacher competence from another point of view, students have remarked that some teachers are unable to explain the work properly, while others simply do not teach or teach “once in a blue moon.” This would have caused some of the students not to show interest in those subjects. This is supported in the literature by Eggen &Kauchak (2010) who declare that teacher modeling can have a powerful impact on students’ interests . In keeping with Bandura’s social learning theory , teachers who model distaste or disinterest in their subject are hardly likely to attract interest in their subject , but genuine interest can induce in students a feeling that the

information is valuable and worth learning and so generate feeling of interest .Eggen &Kauchak (2010).

Along with pedagogical competence, students also identified aspects of the teachers' personality which played a significant role in determining their interest levels . Teachers' quarrelsome nature ,their tendency to embarrass students ,stay aloof, and show open favoritism, to express low opinion and expectations of them are among their biggest grouses This certainly does not encourage the warm, caring environment needed to help nurture the interests that some students may already possess or even attract the interest of others. Kohn (2005) as cited in Slavin (2003) found that students "who felt unconditional acceptance were more likely to be interested in and to enjoy challenging academic tasks" (p. 328). Furthermore, Ungood -Thomas in his vision of the good school ,cites respect and justice as two of the most important characteristics. Where this is lacking, he believed students' personal and learning needs are unlikely to be met (Ungood-Thomas, 1997).

### **Psychosocial issues**

From a psychosocial viewpoint, adolescence is generally regarded as a difficult period in the life of the young person (Santrock, 1998) . Students expressed issues with parents , friends and teacher that have been particularly stressful on them, thus making it difficult for them to focus on academic work. Adolescents are struggling to establish a sense of independence and autonomy and this can be manifested in different ways such as challenging the authority of the teacher.( Newman & Newman, 2003 )

Some of the participants recognized that their peers influenced the level of interest they displayed in their academic work, while others said they did not. This contradictory position is

reflected in the literature. It is well-known that during the adolescent period, the peer group virtually replaces the family as the most important persons in their lives. The amount of time they spend with peers increases and peer relations contribute dramatically to how adolescents think. According to Erikson's developmental theory, adolescents are searching for membership and the central question for them at this point is "Who am I, and with whom do I belong?" Newman & Newman (2003, p.319). These writers also argue that since teenagers do not want to risk being alienated, they accept the group norms to achieve that sense of acceptance. While peer influences can be either positive or negative, it is not uncommon for older students to discourage one another from actively participating in school. Bishop (1989) refers to it as peer pressure against studying.

### **Motivation**

Students' source of motivation could also help us to understand their interest/ disinterest in pursuing academic subjects. Some of the participants openly admitted that they don't do "no big set ah studying", even before an examination. Another said they prefer to learn the work just by seeing it or listening to the teacher. This approach to academic work can be explained through the achievement goal orientation. Turner and Patrick (2004) posit that the goals students have selected for themselves, will determine the interest they show in certain subjects. Most of the students see themselves in a career, using the skills from the practical subjects, not the academics, so they are either not trying or doing the barest minimum in the academic subjects. This clearly is the mark of a student who has adopted performance rather than mastery goals. More importantly, it has been observed that performance goals increase as students progress through school ( Eggen & Kauchak 2010 ). This could very well explain why the fifth formers at

this school have chosen to shut down rather than fight to obtain some CSEC passes. Persevering in spite of the obstacles is something that a person with mastery goals would quicker do.

Whereas some sources of motivation are internal , others could be external . Therefore support from significant others can have a substantial impact on adolescents' interest in academic work, overall academic performance, and other aspects of school. Some students mentioned they got academic support but others did not. For example, they said “yuh mdder eh home, yuh fadder eh home,nodody eh home” the teacher “wouldnt come and show yuh how to figure it out” , and their friends ‘doh really budder wid yuh.” This situation could have contributed to their lack of interest in their work . Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010,) is important in reminding us that learning is a social activity. The frustration that an individual may experience when working independently can be alleviated with the assistance of others and so provide the necessary scaffolding to get them to the next level . Otherwise they could easily decide to give up.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Having examined the findings, I would like to make the following recommendations, in regard to the chronic problem of student lack of interest in academic work at South Side Secondary:

1. Teachers should be monitored more closely in the classroom . There is a saying that people do not do what is expected, but what is inspected . I think insisting that teachers show evidence of using some of the strategies provided in the SEMP Secondary School Curriculum handbook is an easy way to start. Teaching resources should be pooled per department and sharing and peer teaching should be encouraged, utilizing more authentic tasks and evaluation strategies .It would

help too, if Clinical Supervision were taken more seriously , under the direct supervision of the Principal and Vice- principal, in conjunction with the HOD's in the initial stages, until its seriousness becomes firmly established .

2. Teacher professionalism has to be addressed firmly at the staff level, and individually if necessary by the Administration. Professional development workshops should be arranged as also to emphasize how concerned the administration is about the harmful effects that un-professionalism conduct is having on students .

3. While reaching the parents is always a challenge for schools as the one under study, it is nonetheless critical. From my experience , Parents' Days, where students' work and talent are put on display , tend to be more productive and better attended. Therefore the message to impress upon parents the seriousness of the problem , may have to go out on a phased basis.

4. External or school groups could be invited to role-play scenarios that do arise from both student and parental interest/disinterest, to be followed up by intense discussion. Inviting past students who have done well can serve as motivation/role models for both students and parents. The school boasts of a talented group of past students, including television personalities such as Joseph Lopez and Larry Lumsden (Channel 4) , Peter C. Lewis (executive producer at Synergy TV), Farmer Nappy, (soca artiste), and these are just a few of the gems of inspiration who could be invited to give back to their old school.

5. Scaffolding students' efforts also has to be addressed seriously. It behooves us to create more opportunities for group work and class co-operation. This however must be encouraged in an atmosphere where students' egos are shielded, otherwise they are unlikely to avail themselves of



the opportunity. Furthermore, it is highly recommended that these efforts begin in the earlier stages before students begin to despair.

6 . Reviving the Student Council would also be a nice idea so that students can voice their concerns in a safe, protected environment . This could also provide them with a sense of autonomy and opportunities to increase their decision –making and problem-solving skills.

7. At the national level, I think it would be worthwhile for the Government to examine the Barbadian model which, according to the research, instills the intrinsic value of education in its young. This would require a national vision so that the importance of obtaining a good education could be entrenched in the psyche and culture of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

## **CONCLUSION**

Disinterest in academic work is prevalent in many countries, as it is in Trinidad and Tobago . It presents a great concern to us all, especially since the situation seems to be worsening, at my school. From my standpoint, students continue to be subjected to teachers who are ill-equipped personally and professionally to adequately meet the needs of this diverse body of students.

Teachers who mirror disinterest indeed find disinterest reflected back at them. The students as adolescents bring myriad concerns in regard to their parents, their friends and their own developmental issues to the classroom, which affect their levels of interest in academic work.

The interests of many students do not seem to be in line with those of school and they sometimes adopt unhelpful practices to deal with issue .The results of this study concur with

what has been found internationally, thereby confirming that it is a global problem. It therefore makes the call for attention that more urgent. This matter requires commitment and serious attention of all concerned to arrest the decline in the academic standard of our youths and in so doing, help them realize their fullest potential.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

1. What do you like about school ? why?
2. What do you dislike about school ? Why?
3. How do you feel about the different subjects and teachers?
4. Which are the your favorites/ least favorite and why ?
5. What part do your parents/ family play in how you feel about your school work ?
6. How do your friends feel about the subjects that they are doing ?
7. What role do they play, in regard to how you feel about your school work?
8. What would you change about your approach to your academic work if you could ?
9. In what ways do you think this school has contributed to how you have approached your school work?
10. What do you think about the fact that some teachers may think you are not performing as well as you should?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to add concerning what we have been speaking about?

### APPENDIX B (i)

TABLE 1

#### S.E.A. SCORES

STUDENT	MATH	LANG ART	ESS
DG	47	51	10
SH	50	47	9
GM	64	45	10
RB	48	49	12
WC	55	48	9
NH	48	55	10

TABLE 1 shows THE S.E.A. scores , that participants had gained on entering South Side Secondary School

### APPENDIX B (ii)

TABLE 2

#### FORM ONE- END OF TERM GRADES

STUDENT	TERM1	TERM2	TERM3
DG	C	C	D
SH	D	C	C
GM	B	C	C
RB	C	D	C
WC	B	C	C
NH	B	C	C

TABLE 2 shows the grades that participants had gained on during their first year at South Side Secondary School

TABLE 3

**FORM 5 PARTICIPANTS' END OF TERMS GRADES-  
TERM 1 - DEC 2012 & TERM 2 -MARCH 2013**

STUDENT	ENG A	MATH	SOC ST	HSB	CVQ	INT SC	HOME MGT	F&N			
DG	ABS	18	ABS	20	ABS						
	II	ABS	14	ABS	73						
GM	ABS	20	ABS	ABS	72						
	21	13	19	33	77						
RB	20	24	31	24	59						
	34	14	28	15							
SH	24	22	26	ABS	65						
	30	20	30	54							
WC	33	21	35			32	ABS	32			
	34	6	40			30	64	59			
NH	ABS	19	ABS	19	N.A.						
	ABS	ABS	19	40	ABS						

Table 3 shows participants grades for the two terms in Form 5.

Line 1 represents Term 1 and Line 2 represents Term 2

**CVQ (Caribbean Vocational Qualification) is a 2yr skills based programme for Forms 4-5**

## APPENDIX C

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Kindly answer these questions .

**DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME**

1. I live with my \_\_\_\_\_
2. I have \_\_\_\_\_ brothers and \_\_\_\_\_ sisters living at home .
3. My father/ step father attended school up to :
 

(a) primary school	(b) secondary school	(c) university level
--------------------	----------------------	----------------------
4. My mother/ step –mother attended school up to :
 

(a) primary school	(b) secondary school	(c) university level.
--------------------	----------------------	-----------------------
5. My father/ step- father has a
 

(a) permanent job	(b) works sometimes	(c) does not work.
-------------------	---------------------	--------------------
6. He works as \_\_\_\_\_
7. My mother/ step mother has a
 

(a) permanent job	(b) works sometimes	(c) does not work
-------------------	---------------------	-------------------
8. She works as \_\_\_\_\_
9. I get **extra** help with my school work from \_\_\_\_\_
10. The academic subject I like the most is \_\_\_\_\_  
because (a) \_\_\_\_\_  
(b) \_\_\_\_\_
11. The academic subject I like the least is \_\_\_\_\_  
because (a) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(b) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. The job that I would like to do is \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Thanks for your time*

**APPENDIX D**

The Principal

Dear Madam,

My name is Vickey Thomas and I am a teacher/Dean at the above school.

I am a final year student at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, currently reading for the Masters of Education Degree (with concentration in Youth Guidance).

In partial fulfillment towards the award of this Degree, I am required to complete a research project , investigating an educational phenomenon of concern to me. This would entail interviewing students as well as examining school and student records.

My study is entitled: Exploring fifth formers' perceptions of their interest / lack of interest in academic work at a five-year government secondary school in South Trinidad.

I hereby request your permission to conduct this research at the school.

I assure you that the identity of the participants and the school will remain confidential.

Thanks for kind consideration.

Respectfully,

-----

VICKEY THOMAS  
DEAN

**APPENDIX E**

Dear Parent / Guardian,

My name is Vickey Thomas and I am a teacher/ Dean at the above school. I am currently pursuing the Masters of Education (Youth Guidance) Degree at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

As partial fulfillment of the award of this Degree, I am required to complete a research project, which entails interviewing students of this school.

The research seeks to explore fifth formers' perceptions of their interest/ lack of interest in academic work.

I hereby seek your permission for your child to participate in the study. You can rest assured that all information received will be treated with the strictest confidentiality, including your child's name, and the name of the school.

Kindly indicate your approval by signing your name in the space provided at the end of this letter.

Please note that your child reserves the right to refuse to participate in the study or to withdraw at any time.

I thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Respectfully,

-----

VICKEY THOMAS

(DEAN)

-----

Parent's Signature

**APPENDIX F (i)****JOURNAL ENTRY 1**

Today is the day of the first focus group interview. I have to admit that I was nervous. It was a very rainy and cold morning. I started to worry and prayed that all the student students would come out but I had decided to go on with who ever showed up . I did not have the luxury of time. At that time, I realized how much I needed these children who otherwise I would not be concerned whether they came to school or not. It makes us realise that we really are selfish, even if we don't want to admit it. If it were not for the good nature of these children, we couldn't do our projects that are a part of all these professional courses for teachers. And yet we are not grateful to them after we use them.

We took a little time to get started, one person was delayed. During that time we engaged in light conversation- how they planned to after school etc. I reminded them that this was a person project that I was working on and it had nothing to do with the principal or the school.

The interview started off a bit shaky, some a little hesitant in their responses , seeming to be uncertain of how to proceed kind of waiting for the other person to say something before they did. I think the presence of the voice recorder tend to have that effect.

.At certain points, I had to ask questions directly to individuals to bring them in the conversation. All in all ,at the end of it, I was pleased with the effort and I think they were too. They couldn't wait to reach the cafeteria and I was more than happy to treat them.



**APPENDIX F (ii)****JOURNAL ENTRY 2**

Researching this topic has been like a refresher course for me, similar to doing the dip ed. It has really opened my eyes to the power that teachers really do possess without knowing it- the power to make a difference in the lives of these children for all my 25yrs in the service , it has been the norm to blame children for not showing enough interest in their work but after researching the many dimensions of “interest” I realize teachers have to take a lot of the blame .

While doing the Dip Ed and Teachers Diploma, I understood that you had to do a Set Induction to start your lesson. Over the years I have not done that consistently enough. But I am thinking now about the younger , untrained teachers who don't have a clue about that. Students are really at the mercy of teachers and when they get frustrated we say it is their fault. I believe this topic of interest should be explored at the Ministry level, not just running workshops in teaching strategies , but sessions where the whole idea of students interest could be addressed in a way that we as teacher understand the crucial role we must play in reducing the level of disinterest in our school children. However we must first understand the philosophy that drives it.

## APPENDIX G

## AUDIT TRAIL

First week of Term III (Start)  
 Audit Trail - during Methodology Stage

1. Approval from Principal
2. Access school documents → consult lecturer as to whom should comprise group.
3. Consult with teachers - make final selection.
4. Prepare Questionnaire
5. Prepare Protocol for interview - seek input from lecturer
6. Talk to students - inform of study
7. Letters to parents → issue → remind students to return
8. Voice-Recorder → meet Mr. R. → change batteries
9. Remind students of date/time + venue for interview
10. Check room (A.C. seating, organize refreshments).
- \* Thursday — day for interview
11. Set tentative date for follow-up
12. Review tapes orally, listen for gaps.
13. Remind person to attach listening device to computer
14. Start coding data
15. Seek advice from colleague - peer reviews.

## APPENDIX H

### A SECTION OF THE COLOR- CODED TRANSCRIPT

I: So how yuh feelings about the cvq different from yuh feelings about the academic subjects ?

RB: it make yuh feel more intristed in de subject- yuh does want to de cvq

i: why?

RB: Well Miss, yuh choose to do dat , so yuh doesn' feel lazy to do it. But dem odder subject you didn choose dat . In a way, yuh jus have to do it,

SH : But de Maths important eh, it help yuh to learn how to measure and ting

GM : But in cvq , yuh using yuh hands

DG: Yuh learning new skills, plenty new skills and yuh seeing what yuh doin, like in we class we take ah old cupboard and fix it up,and if yuh see it, it like new.

I: So yuh doh be learning skills in de other classes too

GM: Miss dat eh real skills we eh using dat when we start to wuk.

WC: Miss and yuh does learn faster in de practical dan in theory

I: Why?

WC because yuh enjoyin de practical part

I: so what about de academic subjects?

Wc : It boring. Dem teachers and dem (shakes head slowly, with a half- smile) dey doesn make de work sound intristing . Only ah set ah talking, talking

NH: so why dey cyar put someting more practical in dem subject too

SH: like de numeracy skills and all dem tings ,making yuh feel better

Rb: I find English and Maths – yuh doh really have to use all dose tings after school

dem subjects is like torture . too much writing

I: So, what you would prefer?

GM: see it.

I : you think you would really understand it that way?

GM : and listening to de teacher.

I : and how it does feel listening to the teacher?

WC: boring

I: why

RB : when yuh young yuh eh taking on nobody yuh want to have yuh own way

I: what you mean by dat

GM well miss we is big man arready so sometimes yuh does feel yuh eh bong to listen to no teacher nah Miss. So yuh might come to class late, go in de toilet, jus to get out ah de work nah.

SH : Miss, but it have some ah dem does do ah ting more better in dey hands dan dey brains. they better in using dey hands.

I: what yuh mean by that

SH: like we so nah Miss, we build for de concrete

I : so how you know that

SH: well miss we accustom to dat, we does do dat part ah de time.

I : so as you mention part time what job you all would like to do when you finish school

SH: construction is a ting Miss, everybody billin house nowadays, so yuh sure yuh go get a wuk

WC: working on de cruise ship – cooking

NH: I want to be a nurse, I like little children

RB: Miss, to tell yuh de trute, me eh really like school, I does only come to school to get meh certificate and go out dey and finish up, do de nex level, get certify and get a wuk somewhere. In some mechanical area.

I : so what about the other subjects?

RB : dat doh intris me

I : And suppose de teachers try to make it intristing

RB: I go try too, is to see if I go learn it. When I revising I go forget.

DG : No miss, I like cvq and I like English. I come and try to do a little of every ting

I: What is it about English that you like

DG ; It does help yuh to to understand more nah ,Miss a little more bout de question and ting yuh does have to face , help yuh to explain yuhself better

I :And what about the others

GM I like HSB-to learn about de body, how dey work

I :So what about your friends how they feel about school

Wc ; Some ah dem doh really like it nah too much bacchanal and confusion and ting

I ; What about de work

WC ; According to de subject .Dey doh really do maths and English

I :Why

WC Because dat English teacher- he jus makes no sense- he doh really do tings to intrist yuh. De Maths teacher – he jus boring kind a way doh really talk to nobody- he choose to talk to he people- have he favorites.

I ; Are you one of his favorites?

WC : Nah!

I : How does that make you feel

WC :Bad

I : What yuh mean bad

WC: He make me drop asleep fast

I: So what kind of teacher you would prefer then

WC: Somebody more lively. Somebody who does smile and make alittle joke not sour sour

I :Does your friends' approach to their work affect you

WC : No I doh take dem on

GM : Yes sometimes if yuh want to learn in class, dey does disturyuh from learning and take yuh opportunity to learn from yuh

SH : Yuh get carried away

DG : Yuh lose focus

RB : And yuh join in

I : How do your friends respond, NH

NH : Miss dey doh respond to no class dey go come take out dey blackberry bbming .Teacher go tell dem stop and who doh feel to stop walk out ah de class.

I : Does your friends' behavior affect you

NH : No miss I does do meh work

## APPENDIX I

THE THEMES HAVE EMERGED FROM THE DATA AND COLOUR CODED:

teacher personality

teacher competence

choice of subject

relevance to future

different abilities

feelings to defy teachers

assuming adult roles

support from others

peer pressure

romantic interest

gender bias

family problems

pride/ ego

view of ability

personal choice (personality)

sense of failure

lack of effort

THEMES HAVE BEEN COLLAPSED INTO BROAD CATEGORIES:

RED – STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

BLUE- MOTIVATION

PURPLE- PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES

GREEN - TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS