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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH

by

Richard C. Casey Jr.

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Instruction and Curriculum Leadership

The University of Memphis

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ABSTRACT

Casey, Richard C., EdD. The University of Memphis. December, 2010. A Phenomenological Study of High School Students' Perceptions of English. Major Professor: Dr. Jeffrey Byford, Ph.D.

The purpose of the study was to explore high school English students' perspectives regarding the value associated with English and literature classes. The primary questions addressed in this study were focused on perceptions and attitudes toward literature and real world value.

The participants in this study were 15 high school seniors from a rural, public school and 15 high school seniors from an urban, private school. A phenomenological study was designed to gather information on the following related questions: a) How does teaching style affect the perceptions that students have towards their English class? b) Do students see any real world value or application in their study of English at the high school level? c) What are the suggested changes that students would make to their English class? and d) From a student perspective, what is the most effective teaching method for the typical high school English or literature class?

The study revealed two themes expressed by both private high school students and public high school students. These themes are: (1) Indirect methods of instruction including large amounts of discussion led to a positive view of English, and (2) Teacher interest and enthusiasm added utilitarian value to student views of their English classes. The study revealed one theme that was unique to private high school students and their public school counterparts. While both private and public high school students indicated that their overall quality of life would suffer without the skills acquired in English class, public school students indicated a potential loss in future earnings if essential skills were not acquired

throughout their English classroom experiences. These students stated that they were more likely to have lower paying jobs and salaries. Contrary to public high school participants, private school students stated that the quality of their lives would suffer based on lack of college-related opportunities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Currently, 36 states and the District of Columbia require that all high school students take a minimum of four English courses to graduate; however, because English course descriptions are ill-defined and vary from state to state, it is difficult to determine the rigor of the courses and the content taught (Achieve, 2004). Without well operationally-defined courses, it is also difficult to discern the reasons that students fail English courses, claim not to enjoy the material, and take only the minimum number of required courses. The facts that a majority of high school students take an English class in each year of high school and these courses are a graduation requirement in most states suggest that there is some intrinsic value or, at a minimum, an extrinsic reward in taking these classes from the governments' perspective (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). However, the students are our constituents, and there is little data concerning what students feel about their English classes. One could deduce that the students' perspectives should play a role in the design of the courses or, at a minimum, the nature of the delivery of instruction or pedagogy. It also stands to reason that if one could get students to perceive real world value in the course, the level of intrinsic value that they place on English would rise. Rafalides and Hoy (1971) observed this same phenomenon over three decades ago, and we are still searching for answers as to how to get a student to perceive value in the classroom activities and content. In this 1971 manuscript, the authors referred to a classroom experience where *no value* is perceived as a meaningless experience. The authors defined such a classroom as one where students see no utilitarian

value in the classes or activities, and they do not believe that these classes will have a positive impact upon their future (Rafalides & Hoy, 1971).

As a result of meaningless classroom experiences, students often want to know *why* they have to take the classes that they do during their early academic careers. This desire to understand why is echoed in phrases such as “I’ll never use this again...” or “This has no application to the real world...” These phrases can often be heard in the hallways and classrooms of middle schools and high schools across this country (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the question, “Do students find value in their English classes?” should be probed to offer possible remedies to what some students may consider an effort to remedy the meaningless classroom experience.

Through remediation, we, as a society, may also be able to decrease the overwhelmingly high rate of illiteracy that has gone unchanged for over two and half decades. In 1983, approximately 23 million American adults were functionally illiterate, 13% of all 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate, nearly 40% of all 17-year-olds were unable to draw inferences from written material, and only 1/5 could write an essay (Nation at Risk, 1983). Today, little progress has been made in spite of strong mandates, with 75% of the nation’s eighth graders scoring at the basic level—not proficient or advanced— in reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009) and 88% scoring at the basic level in writing (NAEP, 2007). These statistics reveal that the current trend is not supporting national goals and not moving in the favor of America’s youth. Without research to guide decisions as to how English courses can be improved and how their intrinsic value can increase while decreasing the “meaningless” classroom experience, the future will be stagnant at best.

Eliminating the Meaningless Classroom Experience

According to Nystrand (1997), most instruction in secondary English classes is “monologic” in nature. More simply stated, this means that the teacher presents material to the class in lecture form to the extent that it resembles a monologue. The class is so teacher-dominated that student creativity and original thought are oftentimes squelched. Typically, monologically run classes are very structured (Nystrand, 1997), and there is usually not a great deal of dialogue and debate between students. Instead, it reflects a traditional lecture-style method. This too is not new, as the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Nation at Risk, 1983) stated that the dominant critique of the school systems has been “their failure to impart enough academic skills and knowledge to their pupils” (p. 2), and this is partly the fault of ineffective pedagogy and lack of student buy-in. In efforts to combat this problem that continues to plague schools today, Finn (2002) listed seven elements. These elements range from lack of student-centered issues, such as pupil motivation, to obsolete notions of teaching and learning (e.g., the monologic classroom) on part of the teachers. Finn’s elements identify fault at both the teacher and student ends of the spectrum and also imply overlap, or a circular effect, occurring between the two systems, as instructional modes that are considered boring have not changed, and a continued decline in student motivation persists. We are left to ponder which came first, boring classes or lack of motivation on the part of the student. While it is easier to scapegoat the students as “not motivated” or “unruly,” it may be time to re-engineer the entire classroom or at least the pedagogical practices in the classroom, in hopes of increasing student motivation.

The polar opposite of a monologic classroom is the “dialogic” instruction model. Nystrand (1997) defines this as a more student-centered learning environment, in which open dialogue between students and teachers exist. The dialogic model is a form of inquiry. Instead of teaching the correct answer, students are able to search for an answer that they can create, justify, and then defend. According to Nystrand (1997), this type of instruction is more engaging from a student perspective, and thus, more conducive to learning.

Nystrand (1997) espouses that dialogic learning is considered a key component in high-quality instruction. Therefore, there is a level of student validation associated with this particular method. Students are engaged, allowed to formulate their own opinions, and able to search for depth within a particular question or problem instead of simply the “correct” answer. The interaction between teacher and student is important, but the interaction that occurs within the group of students is equally important . In the dialogic model, the teacher serves as a guide who attempts to promote deep discussion rather than as a classroom lecturer who simply desires a specific answer without regard to the overall deductive process. It is the inquiry process that is important in the dialogic model. Due to these student-centered attributes, dialogic classrooms tend to contribute to higher levels of student satisfaction in terms of the curriculum covered and the lessons taught. “The more involved a student is with the creation of a lesson, the more value he or she will derive from it” (Applebee, 1996). In summary, creation is directly correlated to inherent value.

Hess (2001) believes that teaching through student-involved discussions and allowing opinionated feedback is essential to helping students maintain a positive

classroom environment. In turn, this helps students learn. Past studies of students' perceptions of writing have been published. In a study conducted by Takala (1987), students wrote a friendly letter of advice to a new student at their school about how the student could improve in the area of writing.

According to Purves (1973), a focus on writing can historically be traced to issues in American education that emanated from the Cold War period. With the U.S. and the Soviet Union embroiled in a heated contest for world domination and ideology, certain skills, specifically math, science, and writing, gained a tremendous amount of favor within the U.S. educational system. Since this time, writing skills have been held in high regard within our public education system. The study of writing has received differing levels of favor throughout the years, but one constant is the fact that it has been widely studied and researched as a skill set. This being said, there have been virtually no studies on students' perceptions of English and literature classes at the secondary level (Hartman, 2008), with the exception of a handful of quantitative survey-based studies that do not detail the richness of the data obtained, rather, they simply report the numerical value associated with the individual's response (Langer, Applebee, Mullis, & Foertsch, 1990; Li, Purves, & Shirk, 1991; Purves, 1973). This paves the way for qualitative research in this area.

Why Student Perceptions Matter

The perceptions of teachers, test-makers, and outside observers are used to create classroom curriculum, while researchers should be concentrating on the perceptions of the actual students taking the classes (Applebee, 1990; Brody, Demilo, & Purves, 1989; Marshall, 1989). Agee (1997) states that it is illogical to design a class in which those

embroiled in the day-to-day operations of it find no value. It should seem natural to design the curriculum of an English class around the students, who have the most invested in the class. This is not to disregard the expert opinion or the educational background of the administration or faculty, but the framework should be constructed using the guidance of faculty and administrators, with gaps filled in based on student needs. If presented in this manner, the curriculum may serve the needs of the student and bring value to the classroom experience instead of serving up facts that will be regurgitated on a standardized test.

By analyzing the instructional models present in today's English classes, previous research that exists on student perceptions (Applebee, 1990; Brody et al., 1989), current writing research, and the typical standards of curriculum design in English and literature classes, a detailed picture should emerge that lends justification to this study. The intent of examining previous instructional models in English classes is not only to study what is being done, but also to formulate ideas that may enhance student satisfaction. The notion that student perceptions of English and literature classes are mentioned emphasizes the importance of tailoring the curriculum to students' wants, needs, and desires (Agee, 1997). It should also serve as a reminder to teachers that student realities and perceptions can be different from those in authority, including teachers, administrators, and test developers.

The existing literature demonstrates the advancements in curriculum reform and the continuing need to enhance secondary curriculum (Robinson, 2003). Since modern American English classes all consist of reading, writing, and literature elements, an ample amount of research is available in each of these fields. As a result, by analyzing

current English and literature curriculum designs, various perceptions can be discovered and modifications can be made.

Purpose of the Study

The lack of recent and consistent findings with respect to high school students' perceptions of English is one of the springboards for this study (Adelman, 2002; Agee, 1997). A second driving force are the astounding rates of poor readers and writers, according to the NAEP (2007, 2009), despite the regulations to teach English in every grade at the high school level. The third driving force is a desire to uncover why students do not find value in English classes (Ray, 2003). Thus, this study is designed to gain insight into high school students' perceptions of English. It is the role of English educators to meet student needs and bring students up to a level that meets the needs of the secondary classroom so that students are prepared for post-high school education. Previous literature (Fisher & Fraser, 1984) states that teachers are able to elevate student perceptions of the classroom environment and implies that the role of the teacher, within the realm of the classroom, is potentially greater than that of academic course material presented in the text.

The purpose of this study is to explore high school students' experiences in their English classes and to query the value they associate with these classes. Special emphasis will be placed on individual and group perceptions from both a public and private, or independent, school settings. With these diverse student variables, the current study will suggest ways to modify the potential negative perceptions of English from a student's perspective and alleviate the "meaningless classroom experience."

Significance of the Study

Three decades have passed since it was said that finding value in a subject is directly linked to amount of effort (Rafalides & Hoy, 1971); however, there is a lack of rich, qualitative data to provide understanding of value and meaning in the classroom. The same seems to be true regarding level of enjoyment of English classes—a void exists on how to improve pedagogy so that the classroom is enjoyable. The current study will fill in gaps in the literature by providing data from high school students from two diverse settings, both groups taking mandated English courses with varying pedagogy, expectations, and school-allocated resources. The findings will promote the current status of English classes by utilizing data from current students that asks direct questions aimed at answering the question of why meaningless classrooms still exist and how teachers can remedy the current status and link student value back to the classroom.

Scope and Limitations

This study has been designed to gain further insight into the perceptions that high school students hold with respect to English classes. The researcher's intent is to provide classroom teachers, administrators, and test-makers with useful information. To achieve this goal, 30 total participants from two high schools will be interviewed over a 2-month period. Great care will be taken to ensure that the research has been designed and conducted properly; however, there are some limitations.

In Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's *The Good High School*, it is readily admitted that her own biases and assumptions are present in her study of six different high school cultures. She goes on to state that that is simply part of qualitative research and that is important to embrace this fact (Lightfoot, 1983). In the current study, the researcher also

readily admits that he is an integral piece of the research process, and, like Lawrence, the attempt is to make the approach work with his research and not against it with the hope that biases and assumptions do not invalidate the research process or data. The researcher will take steps involving triangulation to limit bias within this study.

Variables both inside and outside the school may have had an impact on this study. Variables other than the quality of classroom instruction or the overall quality of the school attended may have influenced possible negative attitudes that students have towards English and literature. Sample size, regional and community influences, the school district, socioeconomic factors, family situations, and peer relationships may also have influenced the data. School variables, such as positive or negative interactions with previous English teachers or the experience level of the teachers, may have influenced the data as well.

Definitions of Terms

The terms used in the study and their definitions are as follows:

Humanities: The integrative study of society, ideas, and the arts. They are typically composed of literature, fine arts, philosophy, and history (San Francisco State University, 2009)

Phenomenology: The study of structures of consciousness, as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality and its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2008).

Purposeful sampling: Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research, in which the researcher selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in a study (Cresswell, 2007).

Qualitative interview: Conversations between an interviewer and the interviewee conducted in one of the following formats: in depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured conversations, serendipitous conversations, or elicited conversations (Bhattacharya, 2007).

Qualitative study: An inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting (Creswell, 2007).

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will chronicle previous historical studies that are related to the general perceptions that high school students have towards the study of literature in an academic setting. The studies discussed will have direct relevance to this particular study, As they have set the groundwork for the research that will be discussed in later chapters.

The purpose of this chapter is two-fold. First, it is based on the research question, “What are public high school students’ perceptions and attitudes regarding the required English and literature classes taken at the secondary level?”, as public high school students’ perceptions of English and literature are often associated with the classroom teacher, parental support, and the textbook that is used in the classroom. These factors may have a direct or indirect influence on public school students’ attitudes or opinions in the classroom. Thus, the first part of this chapter will provide an overview of previous historical studies related to secondary English in a public school setting (Hidi, 1990). In addition, findings illustrate that students have negative attitudes towards the study of English and literature.

Second, it is based on the research question, “What are private high school students’ perceptions and attitudes regarding the required English and literature classes taken at the secondary level?”, as private high school students’ perceptions of English and literature are often associated with academic rigor, gender bias, and the future aspirations of the student. These factors may have a direct or indirect influence on private school students’ attitudes or opinions in the classroom. Thus, the second part of this chapter will provide an overview of previous historical studies related to secondary

English in a private school setting (Carroll, 2004). These two guiding questions provide a foundation for the current study conducted by the researcher.

Public High School Students' Perceptions of Literature

In a 1959 study, C.P. Snow noted that “the intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups”; he described these two groups as “literary intellectuals” and scientists (Snow, 1993). Prentice and Elmore (1998) noticed that students held negative impressions of certain disciplines within the liberal arts at the university level and that these negative perceptions trickled down to the public secondary level. Basically, these negative perceptions were that the fields of English, social studies, sociology, psychology, art, and music were less challenging fields of study than the math and science disciplines. The other widely held negative perception was that the humanities were less helpful to society than the math and science fields (Prentice & Elmore, 1998). These two negative student views permeate the study of English and literature at the secondary level in American public schools.

An early study by Curry and Hughes (1965) questioned over 900 11th grade students in Nashville, Tennessee, in an attempt to rank their favorite five school subjects. The students listed their top five favorite subjects as (1) physical education, (2) English, (3) science, (4) social studies, and (5) mathematics. Physical education was generally mentioned to be a “fun” class, and thus most popular. English classes were very popular among girls, and both English and science were seen by students as being “practical.” Social studies and math were considered *dull*, *boring*, and *pointless* by a large majority of students. These results indicate that female students showed a substantial preference to

English classes and that both male and female students viewed English and literature classes as practical and valuable.

In a similar study, Schug, Todd, and Beery (1982) interviewed 23 students in 6th grade level and 23 students in 12th grade in a Midwest state to determine their views on the classes that they were currently enrolled in. A little over half of the interviewees were male, and the number of female respondents was slightly less than half. Two of the research questions asked were: (1) What do you think is the most important subject you study in school? Why?" and (2) What is your favorite subject in school? Least favorite? Why?

Schug's et al. study revealed the following results: 30% of students listed mathematics as their favorite subject, followed by English and literature at 22%, and social studies, science, art, and the industrial arts followed. The top reasons given by students as to why they enjoyed their favorite subjects were as follows: 57% said that "it was enjoyable," 30% stated that they were "good at it," 20% enjoyed "new learning," and 7% liked subjects that were "challenging." Schug et al. went on to ask students what their least favorite subject was. One-third of students responded that mathematics was their least favorite subject. This was followed by English, social studies, science, and music. The reasons given for selection of their least favorite subjects were as follows: 50% stated that it was a "difficult subject," 22% "disliked the subject matter," 20% stated that it had "no purpose or was boring," and 15% "disliked the teaching methods." The results indicate that students either greatly enjoyed English and literature classes or strongly disliked them. There was not much of a middle ground, which shows that students were very opinionated towards English and literature.

When students were asked what subject was most important, 31% listed English and literature. Mathematics was the second most important, followed by social studies and science. The major reasons listed by students as to why certain subjects had more value are as follows: “career preparation,” they taught “life skills,” and they were “enjoyable” (Schug et al., 1982). Again, the indication is that even students who dislike English and literature classes do perceive some value in them. Students viewed English as important because it offered valid skills that could be utilized in their careers in later life.

While there has been negativity within the classroom as it relates to English and literature instruction at the secondary level, there has also been some scholarly interest in the subject. Applebee (1993) attributes this to three factors: (1) the call for a return to cultural heritage and the values associated with literature instruction (Hirsch, 1987), (2) attempts to enhance the academic standard (Bennett, 1988), and (3) teachers questioning the different teaching methods and approaches that they use in teaching writing and teaching literature. The first of Applebee’s factors, the call for a return to cultural heritage and values as associated with literature instruction, indicates that there is distinct desire to use literature within the academic arena as a tool to teach diversity, cultural awareness, and values. The second factor, enhancing the academic standard, involves raising the academic expectations for students. This raising of the bar can be done by the classroom teacher, parents or guardians, and society in general. Higher expectations raise the standard. And finally, teaching methods have a direct impact on student satisfaction (Applebee, 1993). When good teachers find that their personal teaching style is not conducive in a specific class or with specific students, they often attempt to adjust it so

that it meets student needs. According to Applebee (1993), teachers must make this adjustment when student satisfaction and other academic goals are not met.

Reed (1994) surveyed 226 public high school students in Alabama, grades 9-12, to determine their favorite high school class. Of the respondents, 29% listed math as their favorite subject, followed by English or literature, science, and social studies. On the contrary, Reed found that when asking students to list their least favorite subjects, math was listed first, with 38% of respondents identifying it as their least favorite. English or literature was listed by 21% as their least favorite, followed by social studies and science. Once again, students either enjoyed English or they disliked it. These findings are similar to those of Schug et al. (1982) and Applebee's (1993) studies, in which the opinions towards English and literature classes were very strong in both positive and negative levels of enjoyment.

According to the United States Department of Education, in the year 2000, there were 45,366,227 public school students. The number of private school students at that time stood at 5,262,849. That translates to 75.7% of U.S. students in public schools and slightly under 25% in private schools. Knapp, Unghire, and Frew (2007) contend that an overwhelming number of students in the American public school system and the mismanagement of educational money and resources allow the classroom environment to suffer. This has a direct negative impact on public school students' academic drive. More specifically mentioned is the lack of motivation to read in English and literature classes and the lack of motivation to delve into complex forms of mathematics. According to Knapp et al. (2007), poor classroom environments directly correlate to low student drive in academic situations. This, in turn, leads to low levels of satisfaction. According to the

Georgia Department of Education (2009), student achievement is directly influenced by their perceptions of the public school classroom environment. This can involve the actual classroom set-up, the school culture, the teacher's influence, and peer relationships. Meeting individual student's needs in a structured climate, distinct student roles within the classroom, and shared group sanctioned norms are all effective factors that contribute to student achievement (Georgia Department of Education, 2009).

Adelman (2002) states that even though academic intensity and the quality of one's high school curriculum both play critical roles in determining academic success and allowing for a smooth transition to college, factors such as parents, friends, enthusiasm shown by high school teachers, and academic advisors all have a huge impact on success at the high school level. Adelman stated that there is a direct correlation to positive relationships with the aforementioned individuals and academic success.

In 2001, the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans (HAA) compiled a report concerning several elements on the state of education in the United States. Nearly 87% of the students that took part in this study were public school students, 10% come from private schools, and the remaining 3% came from either from home-school or some other type of school environment. A focal point of this study was the favorite classes of the students involved. The HAA asked students to rate their classes as (1) one of my favorites, (2) one of my least favorites, (3) somewhere in between, (4) not offered at my school/don't take that class, and (5) not sure. English was listed at "one of my favorites" by 42% of the respondents, "somewhere in between" by 34% of respondents, "one of my least favorites" by 23% of respondents, and "not offered at my school/don't take that class" by 1% of respondents. Physical education topped the

favorites list at 55%, followed by art, music, or drama, and history or social studies. English ranked fourth, coming behind the aforementioned classes. The fact that nearly half the students responded that English was one of their favorite classes indicates a level of enjoyment associated with the class. Nearly a quarter listed it as a least favorite class, indicating that there was a strong dislike towards English by a significant portion of the interview sample. Once again, the perceptions toward English within the classroom environment were either *very positive* or *very negative*, with little middle ground.

Previous Studies of Student Perceptions

Ray (2003), citing a 2003 national Gallup Poll survey of 1,200 students, found that among high school teens between the ages of 13 and 17, math was the favorite academic subject, with 23% of respondents listing it as such. Science followed, and history or social studies and English or literature tied for third place. The importance of this study is centered around gender as it relates to English and literature. Ray (2003) goes on to state that within this study, twice as many girls as boys listed English and literature as their favorite subjects. One female respondent said that:

My favorite course in school is English because it is fun (at times) reading the novels. I also enjoy the open discussions. In my opinion, out of the four core classes, English is the subject that will be used the most later in life. Applying proper English in your life can aid you and help you to succeed.

In a springboard study, Robinson (2003) surveyed 1,007 high school graduates at the national level and asked them what high school subject they valued the most. Nearly 34% of respondents stated that math was the most valuable subject, followed by English or literature, history, science, and business. There are some interesting demographic differences that shed more light on this issue. Americans with postgraduate degrees are

more likely to place higher value on English and literature (36%) than math (16%). The higher the education level of those surveyed, the higher the importance placed on English and literature, and consequently, the emphasis on mathematics as an important subject declined. According to these studies, students perceive both math and English as having high levels of real-world value.

In 2008, the South Dakota Department of Education interviewed 20 high school males and 20 high school females from the state's public school system to determine what subjects South Dakota students preferred. The researchers hypothesized prior to the study that (1) the overall favorite subject would be science and (2) that males would prefer math and females would prefer English and literature. The results of this study showed that math was the overall favorite subject of all students, and it was preferred by both males and females as their favorite singular subject. English literature was the second favorite subject overall, but 83% of those who listed it as their second favorite subject were female, with only 17% of males ranking it second. This shows that the female participants in this study greatly enjoyed English and literature, as compared to their male counterparts. Once again, the data showed that English is a very popular subject among female high school students, not nearly as popular among male students, and perceived to be a very valuable subject by both genders. Again, the data supported previous studies indicating that students possess strong attitudes towards their English and literature classes with views either being very positive or very negative with little middle ground.

The Classroom Teacher

According to Caferty (1980), in high school English classes at, the better the match between the teacher's teaching style and the student's preferred learning style, the higher the student's grade point average. As this match-up drops, so does the student's grade point average. Copenhaver (1979) discovered that students maintained more positive attitudes when they enjoyed the teacher's teaching style and when a wide variety of styles were used in the classroom. Agee (1998) noted that teachers should be both empathetic and tolerant when attempting to teach literature. Students felt more comfortable in classrooms in which the teacher was tolerant of student needs and ideas and empathetic to student mistakes.

Hidi (1990) stated that although most teachers agree that individualized instruction is a desirable goal in their classrooms, very few teachers have the time and resources that individualized instruction requires. The result is increased monologic instruction, which Hidi mentions as being an unpopular method of instruction among high school students. Monologic instruction is teacher-centered and involves a great deal of lecture and information transfer and very little student inquiry. This form of instruction is viable for certain courses in which a great deal of information must be passed on quickly, but it is weak when the goal is to foster deep thought and problem-solving skills. These more intuitive and thought-provoking forms of study are better nurtured under dialogic forms of individualized instruction.

Furthermore, in an attempt to describe what makes a good teacher, Miller (1997) identified three major factors that students identified with good teachers: (1) flexibility, (2) clear communication skills, and (3) sense of humor. Students further stated that

teachers who possessed all three of these traits kept their attention within the classroom. Students also felt that they learned more from teachers who exhibited these qualities. Flexible teachers were seen as more caring toward their students, which in turn makes students want to work harder and perform better academically. When thoughts, ideas, and directions were communicated clearly to students, their work also became more clear and understandable. Teacher goals were more easily met, and the overall level of student comfort rose dramatically. Sense of humor within the classroom was mentioned several times as a simple and enjoyable way to set a positive tone in the classroom. Students greatly enjoyed teachers who had a sense of humor, preferred to be in their classrooms, and tended to communicate more effectively with these teachers (Miller, 1997).

Renzi (2005) stated that the greatest influences on the study of literature at the secondary level are the teacher and the teaching methods that are incorporated in the classroom. The perceptions that students will hold toward the subject matter are directly related to the manner in which the subject is presented. There are numerous methods and tools that teachers utilize to teach literature in the classroom. A teacher can incorporate learned strategies that allow students to engage the text by making it relevant to the students' experiences, which can be done by emphasizing personal experiences. Other teachers prefer to return to the text during discussion intervals for critical analysis in order to search for and evaluate specific themes. Some teachers incorporate a central question and push their students to search for alternative perspectives. Classic critical perspectives, such as those of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, can be used as tools to generate different views of the text as well (Miller, 2009).

As mentioned by Hidi (1990), dialogic models of instruction are very student-centered. The dialogic model includes thought-provoking and opinion-driven instruction by incorporating skills such as posing questions, elaborating on personal thoughts and feelings, seeking evidence to support beliefs, and constructing coherent interpretations or evaluations and searching the text to help enhance that stance (Miller, 2009).

Sain (2007) found that students desired a teacher who was a catalyst, which refers to one who set things in motion in the classroom and then made sure that the results met certain expectations. Students also longed for the opportunity to be creative and wanted a teacher who was excited about teaching. Sain (2007) further stated that a passive teaching style produced passive students.

Parental Support

In a 2005 study, Lemaire and Arce stated that the influence that parents have on their children's future plans and perceptions is very strong. In this study, nearly 7 out of 10 public school students listed their parents at the number one influence on their lives when looking at English and literature as majors at the college level. Harpham (2009) studied the recent economic crisis that has affected the American economy and noted that parents push their children towards more "logical" pursuits, such as math, science, and business, when the economy is down. This influence by parents directly affects the manner that students perceive literature at the secondary level because parents do not necessarily consider it a practical degree. Harpham stated that high school students who might be interested in literature while in high school start to shift to other money-making academic interests due to this parental push.

Harpham (2009) goes on to state that along with teachers, parents have the most impact and influence on the decisions that students will make concerning their attitudes towards academic subjects, including English. The emotional bond between child and parent naturally lends credence to this claim. The desire to please parents often pushes students to focus more on a class such as a mathematics or a business course, which is deemed more practical from the parent perspective. Again, the recent economic downturn has shifted the goals of many parents, which in turn has a direct impact on the perceptions and goals of their children/students.

The Textbook

Students often find classroom textbook reading laborious and uninteresting (Kinder & Bursuck, 1992). Part of this lack of enthusiasm is due to an inherent lack of knowledge about adolescent literature at the secondary level in many schools (Ouzta, Taylor, & Taylor, 2003). According to Richards (1994) many teacher-preparation programs at the collegiate level do not provide adequate and in-depth instruction on implementing literature into the secondary curriculum. With a greater emphasis placed on the text within the literature classroom, increased reading level and reading for pleasure are the desired outcomes. The problem is that many textbooks are perceived to be dry, unimaginative, and out-of-touch with the minds of today's youth. Students want to read creative stories with rich character development and exciting plot twists that are action-packed (Ouzta et al., 2003). There is a distinct desire to avoid reading a textbook that is chock-full of classics that are boring and outdated. Students typically do not mind reading older material as long as it fits the aforementioned criteria—it must be creative and exciting. Unfortunately, most literature textbooks fail in this area.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a boom in the young fiction-writing industry. Since many of these works are supplements for high school literature textbooks, the hope was that there would be an increased interest in reading within the public school system, specifically in literature textbooks. Unfortunately, this was not the case (Hine, 2004), even though studies did show that youth readership of non-textbooks did increase.

Galda, Ash, and Cullinan (2001) found that public school students tended to prefer narrative pieces within their textbooks that contain lively action, humor, and nonsense. VanSledright and Brophy (1992) found that most textbooks used at the secondary level were inadequate and that a great deal of supplemental materials had to be incorporated into the lesson to keep students engaged and interested. Effective supplemental material once again stressed the preferred elements of creativity, excitement, and humor.

Private High School Students' Perceptions of Literature

Recent studies have shown more academic rigor in private schools in America when compared to their public counterparts (Carroll, 2004; Koch, 1996). Studies also directly correlate higher levels of rigor to increased academic performance and increased academic satisfaction. According to the Council for American Private Education (CAPE) (2005) both student perceptions and academic rigor within the classroom directly influence performance in private schools. In an independent study conducted by CAPE, 90.6% of private school students at the high school level felt that their literature teachers were good teachers. While still high, that percentage at the public school level was lower, at 79.8%. This seems to indicate that the vast majority of private school students enjoy the teaching style and classroom demeanor of their English teachers.

Private school students generally outscored their public school peers on the English and reading sections of the ACT by nearly a full point. This indicates that private school students are more adept at these skills and take them slightly more serious than their public school counterparts (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 1998). However, according to Lucier (2003), private education is not as elite as it once was. With more educational choices becoming readily available due to federally funded voucher programs, charter schools, and magnet programs, students have options other than to simply attend a private institution.

Carroll (2004) claims that private school curriculum, especially in the areas of English, literature, reading, and mathematics, is superior to public school curriculum. Carroll goes on to state that this advantage gives private school students an edge in the college admissions process. It also translates to much higher levels of student satisfaction in those academic classes, English included.

Koch (1996) conducted an extensive study of private school students in grades 4 to 12 at a New York City school. She surveyed 192 male students and asked them what their two favorite subjects were. Forty-six percent listed physical education as one of their top two favorite subjects. Math was second, followed by history, English or literature, art, science, and languages. English and literature class was consistently listed fourth among the favorite classes of males.

In Koch's (1996) study, when listing academic pastimes or subjects that students felt they were very good in, 62.5% of males listed sports in their top two choices. Math was second on the list, followed by reading, writing, science, drawing/painting, and finally performing. Typically, male students seem to prefer math and athletic endeavors

over other pastimes, including those skills associated with English and literature classes, namely, reading and writing.

When asked to list their top two choices of what they would like to be better at, 53% of males attending private school mentioned writing. Thirty-seven percent mentioned drawing/ painting, followed by math, reading, science, performing, and sports. There seemed to be a sincere desire to improve in the area of writing, but another major skill found in English and literature classes, namely, reading, was fourth on the list.

One stereotype associated with high school males is that they do not care for English or literature classes because these classes are discussion-driven. In Koch's study (1996), when asked how often they participate in classroom discussion, 57% of private school males said "often," 38% said "sometimes," and 5% said "infrequently." When asked how often they would like to participate in classroom discussions, 68% of private school males said "often," 27% said "sometimes," and 4% said "infrequently." It is interesting to point out that the desired participation among males is rated at a higher level than the actual participation. When Koch further delved into this facet, she found that males attending private school did not participate because they were "afraid to be wrong," were "unprepared," and were "shy" or "reluctant."

Koch (1996) also studied 170 female students from private schools and asked them the same questions as their male classmates. When asked to list their 2 favorite subjects, 46.5% of the girls listed art. English was mentioned by 31.2% of the female respondents, followed by math, history, physical education, science, and languages. This study corroborates past studies (Johnson & Newton, 2003; Millard, 1998) that found a very strong preference for English by females students.

When asked to list 2 things that they were very good, 57.1% of female students in private schools listed writing. This was followed by reading, math, drawing/ painting, performing, sports, and science. When asked about the 2 areas that they would like to become better in, 40.1% of female students in private schools mentioned writing. This was followed by science, math, sports, drawing/ painting, performing, and reading (Koch, 1996). Once again, it seems that female high school students are very fond of English and literature classes, which is almost double when compared to their male counterparts. Female students also tend to feel more comfortable in these classes and tend to have a stronger desire than males to improve their performance in these classes. The reading and writing skills that are necessary for a strong performance in English classes are typically talents that high school girls gravitate toward and high school boys prefer to ignore.

Academic Rigor

There is no standard curriculum in American high schools. Instead, each state and countless local school districts create their own educational content. While there are state standards and generic national standards, the amount of rigor that is actually present in English lessons varies greatly (Dermon & Hogan, 2003). Whether or not the student attends a public or private school is another factor that plays a part in the rigor that is involved in the academic life of a student is. The general stereotype is that private or independent schools are more rigorous in terms of the curriculum that they present to their students than public institutions. Chen (2007) states that the overall rigor is typically greater at a private institution; however, public magnet and charter schools often offer a competitive education, and the difference when compared with a private counterpart is negligible.

According to Chen (2007), when pondering the type of school to send their children, parents consider the following factors to be the most important: academic reputation, class size, safety, special programs, costs, religious instruction, location, and ideology. Of these factors, Chen states that the three most important, according to parents are cost, religious instruction, and academic reputation. Since public schools are free and private schools are tuition-driven, the cost factor is a fairly simple one. Private schools are at a disadvantage in this area. Religious instruction typically involves parents sending their student to a school of similar religious faith or one where multiple faiths are welcomed. Here, private schools have an advantage over public schools. Of these three important factors mentioned by Chen, academic reputation is the most debatable. What makes one school more academically desirable than a competitor?

Chen (2007) states that private school students outperform their public school counterparts on national standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT. Private high school graduates were also more than twice as likely to have completed a bachelor's degree by their middle 20s (52 % to 26%) when compared to public high school graduates. These major advantages in the academic arena attract many students to private institutions.

Even though there are many exceptional public schools, zoning regulations mandate that a student attend the public high school within their district. If the high school is not academically sound, in most cases, the student suffers. Private schools, on the other hand, do not discriminate according to geography.

Chen (2007) contends that the English and literature education, along with other liberal arts-based curriculum, is much stronger in private schools than in public schools. The academic rigor that is found and the emphasis on the importance of reading and

writing skills in private schools produces students who are stronger in these areas, who greatly enjoy reading and writing, and who will utilize these skills within the workforce by gravitating towards professions that incorporate a great deal of reading and writing skills into the job.

Gender Bias

Gender differences have been studied to see why high school students perceive literature classes positively or negatively. Johnson and Newton (2003) suggest that the decline of interest in literature classes is directly related to gender. In their study (Johnson & Newton, 2003), they found that male students have less interest in the typical literature class than female students at the secondary level. The unfavorable attitude of males increases even more when the author studied in the literature class is female.

According to Millard (1998), unlike females, males are not encouraged to read at an early age. Overall, boys at all grade levels do not read as much as their female counterparts. Boys have less experience reading fiction and are not as adept at understanding character, theme, or motivation. This trend increases with age, so the disparity between the sexes widens (Johnson & Newton, 2003).

Koch (1996) states that teachers call on boys in class more frequently than they call on girls, they coach boys for correct answers, they ask boys higher order questions, and they generally have greater expectations for boys' academic achievement. She goes on to say that boys take up much more of the teacher's time at all grade levels, which could possibly be due to academic or disciplinary purposes. Both elementary and high school teachers engage boys more actively in classroom discourse, oftentimes as a classroom-management technique (Koch, 1996).

According to Davies and Brember (1994), the negativity that boys felt toward literature was the most distinct academic difference between male and female high school students. Bleach (1998) sees the problem as one associated with role models. A majority of elementary and middle-school teachers are female. Bronzo and Schmelzer (1997) state that this statistic stands at 85% to 95%. The other literature-related role model that many males see is their mother. Thus, reading and literature, in general, are often perceived as feminine pursuits. This is viewed as a negative to high school-aged males.

Johnson and Newton (2003) state that adolescent males associate reading assigned in school as an activity that does not connect with the stereotypical portrayal of a masculine pastime according to popular culture. Males, therefore, often do not see the relevance that literature has towards their everyday lives. They do not associate a real world value with reading or literature in general.

In 2001, the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans (HAA) conducted a study in which it found that English was rated the most important class for future success by female high school students. Eighty-two percent of female students rated English as “very important” to future success, while 69% of males responded similarly. Math was the highest rated subject by males in terms of importance to future success with 77% of males reporting that it was “very important” to future success. Seventy-five percent of females responded similarly. Computer skills were closely ranked with an equal number of male and female students reporting that they were “very important” to future success. Logically, females perform at a higher level within their high school English and literature classes and have a higher level of enjoyment in these classes because they find them to be more important to future success than their male

counterparts. Since high school males regard these classes as less important, their enjoyment level and performance within these classes is drastically lower than their female counterparts.

Future Aspirations

The study of the future educational aspirations of secondary students has been an ongoing area of inquiry since the 1950s. This type of study initially focused on white male students (Blau & Duncan, 1967) but eventually branched out to cover the societal spectrum. These early studies were the foundation on which this type of research was subsequently built. Many of these studies were based on the contention that public school youth had lower occupational and educational aspirations than private school youth and, as a result, could not compete effectively for college scholarships and job openings (Odell, 1986). A direct correlation exists between a student's aspirations and those of his or her parents. Subsequently, many private school students are enrolled in more challenging academic institutions because their parents have high aspirations for their children's future (Odell, 1986). Many parents make great financial sacrifices to send their children to private schools where future success is seen as a more tangible goal.

In a 1994 study, Fedirko hypothesized that students who perceive their parents as having high educational attainment will have high educational aspirations for themselves. He also found that parents of private school-educated children were more likely to hold a graduate-level college degree than their public school parent counterparts. According to Fedirko, private high school graduates who go on to major in English or literature at the college level find a great deal of value in these classes at the secondary level. The value that is found at the high school level serves as a springboard to future success.

Enjoyment of English and literature classes at the high school level translates into tangible skills that, in turn, have real-world value in the form of a sustainable career.

In 2005, Lemaire and Arce surveyed 8,100 high school seniors in Vermont and New Hampshire to determine what was in the future for these soon-to-graduate seniors. Eighty-one percent of public school students and a staggering 96% of private school students stated that they would enroll in college in the fall of 2004. Lemaire and Arce (2005) stated that there was a direct connection between the desire to attend college and the enjoyment level that was found in three basic high school courses, more specifically, English, math, and science. When students found merit and enjoyment in these three types of required high school classes, they overwhelmingly made the decision to attend college and, in most cases, were better prepared to do so.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH AND DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore English students' experiences in their high school literature classes and the value that students associate with these classes. The lack of recent literature discussing secondary students' attitudes in the content area of English, the inconsistent findings respective of high school students' perceptions of literature, and the results of a pilot study investigating private students' perceptions and attitudes (Casey & Byford, 2010) were the impetus behind conducting this study. A qualitative study was used to investigate students' individual perceptions of secondary English and literature curriculum in both the private and public school arenas. A phenomenological design was used in this study. It is important to understand students' feelings about their literature classes at the high school level so that their academic needs can be met. Instructional strategies and teaching methods can be altered if students' needs are not being met and those needs are voiced (Bray, 2009). The rationale for choosing a phenomenological study over other types of studies was based on the idea that the researcher wanted to focus on the students' experience and their interpretations of the experience (Merriam, 1998).

The focal point of a phenomenological study such as this one is the essence of the experience and the assumption that the experience is shared. As Creswell (2007) states, the choice of a phenomenological format allows the researcher to write about a combination of objective reality and individual experiences. The focus on the experience of the interviewee and the reality that is derived from that experience was vital to this study and was composed of two components. These two key components, objective

reality and individual experiences, were important to the researcher. In order for each individual's reality to be given value, it must first be shared. Since each person's reality is unique based on the individual and that individual's thoughts and experiences, the researcher honored each reality by attempting to tell the story in a phenomenological context. Individuality was also vital to this particular study. The primary focus of this study was to investigate how students' perceptions and attitudes differ between public and private schools in regard to the required English and literature classes taken at the secondary level. The research questions were designed to investigate this proposed difference between the public and the private sectors.

Research Questions

The primary research questions are:

1. How does teaching style affect the perceptions that students have towards their literature class?
2. Do students see any real-world value or application in their study of literature at the high school level?
3. What are the suggested changes that students would make to their literature class?
4. From a student perspective, what is the most effective teaching method for the typical high school English or literature class?

To answer the research questions, six interview questions were created to be used with both groups (i.e., public and private school students; see appendix A). Table 1 highlights how each interview question (corresponding questions) assisted in answering the research questions posed in the study.

Table 1
Research Question Matrix

		Research Questions			
		How does teaching style affect the perceptions that students have towards their English class?	Do students see any real world value or application in their study of English at the high school level?	What are the suggested changes that students would make to their English class?	From a student perspective, what is the most effective teaching method for the typical high school English or literature class?
Interview Questions	Suppose you did not take any English/ literature classes in high school. How would that affect your quality of life in the future?		X		
	Some people might argue that studying English/ literature in high school does not teach skills that can be applied to real life situations. What do you think?		X		
	How would you rate your English class using a scale of favorite to least favorite? Please explain.				X
	How do you think the ideal high school English/ literature class should be taught?	X			X
	How important are teacher interest and enthusiasm in your English class?	X			
	If you could be principal for one day, what would you change about the way that English is taught at your high school?			X	

Site of Research

The study was conducted at two separate schools in two different southeastern states within a 50-mile radius of each and similar demographic profiles across the school. While the demographic data varied more in the senior class, this is consistent with both public and private school demographic data from each respective state. Each school site is described below, followed by a description of the teachers interviewed at each site.

The Private School

The first school is a private school and is a member of the Independent School System in Tennessee. It is accredited by the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS) and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The high school serves 400 students, of which 20% are African American, 75% are white, and 5% are classified as other. The senior class from which the data was collected is 5% African American, 90% white, and 5% other. English content that is covered in the high school curriculum includes classical literature, medieval or world literature, American literature, British literature, Russian literature, rhetoric and composition, creative writing, and Southern gothic literature.

The private high school utilized in this study is one of a dozen private schools located in the community, and there are many English courses offered at this school. All of these courses are diverse and can be taken as electives, which are taken in addition to the required English course for the grade. This allows students to choose elective courses other than fine arts classes. Students in 9th grade are required to take classical literature; 10th grade students are required to take world literature with a focus on medieval

literature; and 11th and 12th grade students are required to enroll in American literature and British literature, respectively.

The exact site of the interviews at this school was a conference/study room on a quiet wing of the library. The room itself is simple yet comfortable. Interruptions were nonexistent, as this room is private and has to be reserved to be used.

The private school does not require its students to take any type of standardized state test to display proficiency due to the fact that it is a private school. With a high school faculty of 45, the instructional program attempts to meet the expectations eschewed by the administration and the Committee of Curriculum Standards that is composed of academic department heads and select classroom teachers. The staff is divided into departments based on academic subject. It is also divided into grade-level teams, which are composed of teachers from different academic departments who teach at the same grade level. Teams consist of a team leader and core teachers. Each team has an administrator who works directly with that grade-level team. The team leader serves as a liaison between the team and the administrator. This school identifies its English curriculum at the secondary level as classic literature, medieval literature, American literature, British literature, Russian literature, creative writing, rhetoric and composition, and Southern gothic literature. The school mandates four years of English as a graduation requirement, and the required classes are classic literature, medieval literature, American literature, and British literature. This school does not have to adhere to the standards set forth by the Tennessee Comprehension Assessment Program (TCAP) because it functions as an independent or private school that does not accept state and federal funds.

The Public School

The public school in this study is a member of the public school system of Mississippi. It is accredited by SACS and the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Accreditation. The high school is one of two public schools located in this particular county. (There is also one private school within this county.) The high school has a student population of slightly over 600 students, of which 45% are African American, 50% are white, and 5% are of another ethnicity. The demographic data of the senior class is similar to the class averages.

With a faculty of 70 members, the instructional program attempts to meet the expectations set forth by the local school district, state curriculum guidelines, and federal mandates. The staff is divided into departments based on academic subject. Grade level teams consist of a team leader, core teachers, and special education teachers. Each team has an administrator who works directly with that department. The team leader serves as a liaison between the team and the administrator. English courses are relatively standard, allowing students to choose elective courses at the junior and senior levels. Students in 9th are required to take general literature; 10th grade students are required to take world literature; and 11th and 12th grade students are required to enroll in American literature and British literature.

The English component of the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT) must be passed during the sophomore year of high school for a student to be able to move on to the next grade level and subsequently graduate. The state-mandated MCT focuses on a sample of questions that reflect a vast body of knowledge associated with English, literature, reading, and writing skills. Test questions and criterion measures are designed

at the state level specifically for the public school students of this state. Recall questions are prolific throughout the test, with less emphasis placed on higher level question types that focus on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Local school districts, typically divided by county and city, are charged with correlating English curriculum, goals, and teaching strategies to the MCT test.

The interview site at this school was a conference room located in a low-traffic area of the school branching from the school library. Because the comfort level of the students was important, the researcher emphasized the ability to conduct interviews in a setting in which the participants are familiar and comfortable.

Teacher-Participant Descriptions

The two teachers that participated in this study were relatively similar in terms of length of experience but different in terms of teaching techniques and experience in varying teaching settings. This unique difference in pedagogy and varied experience provide additional insight into the responses provided by each student and was necessary and advantageous in qualitative data analysis.

Heidi (pseudonym used to protect participant's identity) teaches English IV and Advanced Placement (AP) English IV at a private school in Tennessee. With 9 years of experience, she has taught a variety of English courses over her teaching career at 3 different schools. Heidi's lessons often entail some direct instruction combined with hands-on activities and discussion. Her AP classes incorporate more direct instruction due to the quantity of information that must be passed on to her students. In Heidi's class, there is an emphasis placed on writing, deep meaningful reading interpretation, discussion, and debate.

Ray (pseudonym used to protect participant's identity) teaches English III, English IV, and elective classes American Novels and Short Stories at a public high school in Mississippi. He has taught for 8 years at the high school level at the same school. Ray considers himself a student-centered, more progressive teacher as compared to more experienced teachers in his department. Developing lessons utilizing a variety of teaching methods including a great deal of hands-on activities and discussion with some direct instruction, Ray varies his lessons to fit his students' learning needs.

Selecting Participants

For the purpose of this study, the researcher selected 15 senior English students from a college-prep high school in a private school system and 15 senior English students from a medium-sized public school system in a rural environment and interviewed them on their perceptions about literature classes.

One private school and one public school was used to provide a comparison between the two groups in terms of demographics, socioeconomic levels, class size, and classroom resources. Both the 12th-grade level and the participants were selected for the study for two main reasons. First, Sylwester (2000) and Bosowski (1981) concluded that the human brain typically stops physically growing during the 9th grade, or freshman year of high school. The 9th grade, according to Bosowski, is the last crescendo of a progression of cognitive brain development that typically occurs during grades 3, 6, and 9. High school seniors studying English and literature at the 12th-grade level are all beyond this critical point of brain development.

Second, 12th grade students have also been exposed to 3 or more years of English and literature classes at the high school level. This gradient of experience allows high

school seniors to have formed a personal opinion of their English and literature classes over the course of their secondary academic careers. It was assumed that their perception of the subject would be broad, rich, and insightful due to the sheer amount of time that they have been exposed to English and literature within the realm of the classroom.

The participants in this study were selected in a nonrandom manner, with the intention of creating a type of “purposeful sample.” Purposeful sampling is derived from the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight from the sample. According to Merriam (1998), the researcher must select a sample from which the most information can be learned.

Within the private school setting, which consists of a senior class of approximately 100 students, every seventh student was selected. The study itself consisted of a nonrandom, systematic sample of 15 students. An alphabetical list of all 100 of the student names was obtained. To guard against bias, the researcher placed the numbers 1-100 into a hat and drew 1 number that was used as a starting point. The researcher then selected every seventh student until the sample reached 15 participants. Every seventh student was chosen because the desired sample size was 15 of the 100 total students, thus allowing every student the statistical possibility of being included in the study.

In the public school setting, which consists of a senior class of approximately 150 students, every 10th student was chosen. The study itself consisted of a nonrandom, systematic sample of 15 students. An alphabetical list of all 150 of the student names was obtained. To guard against bias, the researcher placed the numbers 1-150 into a hat and drew 1 number that was used as a starting point. The researcher then selected every tenth

student until the sample reached 15 participants. Every tenth student was chosen because the desired sample size was 15 of the 150 total students, thus allowing every student the statistical possibility of being included in the study.

This form of nonrandom sampling is referred to as systematic nonrandom sampling. It is purposeful since the researcher is limiting the population being studied to seniors at each particular school of choice. It is systematic because every seventh (at the first site) and tenth (at the second site) student was chosen to participate. This method of selecting subjects gave the researcher 15 students from each setting.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

In the conduct of a phenomenological study, the focus is on the essence or structure of an experience, and the assumption that there is a shared experience. Phenomenological research, therefore, stresses experience and interpretations (Merriam, 1998). Interviews were conducted with 15 students in each school setting, and there was a total of 30 interviews. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers interview 5-25 participants who have all shared a common phenomenon. The researcher split the difference, deciding that a core group of 15 students from each school will be a sufficient base group. A basic tape recorder was used to record the interviews.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to explore in more depth English students' experiences in their literature classes and the value that they associate with these classes at the high school level. The first group of 15 students was interviewed in a private school in the suburb of an urban area with a wide selection of both public and independent school choices. The second group of 15 students was interviewed at a public school in a rural area with one other public school in the immediate area and one

independent academy nearby. Data were collected through the use of interviews, field notes, and focus groups.

This phenomenological study contains two bound systems. The methods that were used in the collection of data were identical. Both employed the use of interviews, field notes, focus groups, and audio recordings. The interviews were transcribed over the course of a high school semester, or half of a school year, for both the private school and public school participants.

The researcher conducted interviews, took notes, and recorded the interviews from each session. Interviews were conducted from March to May of 2010, and all interviews were transcribed over the course of a 2-month period. Rather than use predetermined items, a set order of questions derived from previous studies and literature were used initially to guide the interviews (see Appendix A). All participants were asked the same questions in order to maintain continuity.

The community in which the private school is located has a population of approximately 600,000 permanent residents. The community, considered a major suburb of an urban area, has historically not supported education. A large state university and several smaller private universities are located within the community as well.

Permission to conduct interviews was granted by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Memphis (see Appendix B), the local school district in Mississippi, and the private school's institutional director. A release form was signed by each interviewee and his or her legal guardians before each interview took place. Each student interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Demographic information was collected from each student prior to the interview process. The tone of the interviews conducted was

informal with the intention of eliciting rich and significant responses in a relaxed environment. Each participant was asked a set order of questions, and responses were dissected and clarified for comprehension. Personal responses centering on self-perceptions of the topic at-hand were encouraged. The basic design of the interviews revolved around uncovering the perceptions that students held toward their English and literature classes at the secondary level. The interviews, as in other qualitative studies, included general comments that focused on social issues, school, and life in general.

To assure accuracy, all interviews were tape-recorded. Subsequently, each interview was transcribed. Further accuracy was sought as the researcher listened to the recorded interviews while reading the documentation. Themes were noted after all of the interviews had been singularly coded; themes were established within the first bound system (private school students) through triangulation with field notes. The same process was followed for the second bound system (public school students). Afterwards, both bound systems were compared, and differences and similarities between the two were noted. To ensure that researcher bias did not affect the outcome of the study, the researcher interviewed students with whom there was no working relationship (Calloway & Knapp, 1995).

Interviews

Participants were interviewed from April to May of 2010. Interviews were conducted at the participants' school site and were generally 30 minutes in length. Prior to each interview, demographic data were collected from each student. During the interviews, a set order of questions was asked of each participant. Student responses were

probed and clarified for comprehension, while personal and self-perceptions were encouraged.

Interviews were conducted using a standardized open-ended interview style. Interview questions were predetermined with the sequence of order and questions asked the same for all interviewees. The interview questions were patterned after Patton's (1990) six general types of questions that can be asked during interviews. The six types of questions are: (1) background or demographic questions, (2) knowledge questions, (3) experience or behavior questions, (4) opinion or values questions, (5) feelings questions, and (6) sensory questions. To shed further light on or to clarify student responses, informal exploratory questions were asked. All interviewees were asked the following interview questions:

1. Suppose you did not take any literature classes in high school. How would that affect your quality of life in the future?
2. Some people might argue that studying literature in high school does not teach skills that can be applied to real life situations. What do you think?
3. How would you rate your English class using a scale of favorite to least favorite? Please explain.
4. How do you think the ideal high school literature class should be taught?
5. How important are teacher interest and enthusiasm in your English class?
6. If you could be principal for one day, what would you change about the way that English is taught at your high school?

These interviews were transcribed over the course of a 2-month period. To honor triangulation, field notes and focus groups were added to the interviews. These two additional forms of data collection served to solidify themes that emerged from the data.

Field Notes

Field notes were utilized and served to keep track of observed student actions and to allow quick and easy reference to these observations. Field notes were also taken based on the dialogue or participant responses to the research questions. These notes were utilized as a quick and easy means of jotting down simple bits of information. These small facts or observations helped fill in the gaps of the interviews and set the stage for the in-depth information that was elicited from the focus groups. Field notes also enhance overall qualitative research reliability. Oftentimes, things that are initially viewed as trivial end up becoming important pieces of useful information (Silverman, 2005).

Focus Groups

A focus group was put together at each school setting, equaling a total of two focus groups. Each focus group consisted of the same 15 students who were interviewed at each site. These focus groups helped shed more light on students' perceptions. The hope was that the groups would be highly informal and relaxed so that students would feel free to speak openly and honestly. Effort was made by the researcher to make the focus group atmosphere more secluded and secure so that students would feel more comfortable sharing their views. According to Silverman (2005), focus groups are an excellent tool to further strengthen the overall validity of a study. The focus groups served as a key component in the development of the themes that were elicited from the

data. With that being said, it also gave itself to the pattern that should develop from these themes.

Analysis

Based on the interviews, the analysis examined the students' perceptions of their English and literature classes at the high school level. There was also a focus on these perceptions in both the public school and private school arenas. Over the course of the study, the student interviews and the notes taken during the interview process were reviewed daily by the researcher. The data from each bound system was coded individually. After each interview was coded by the researcher, a theme was developed and analyzed so that each individual student's perceptions toward English and high school literature could be examined.

A special focus was placed on data that appeared to challenge previous studies. Each category from the first bound system (private school students) was then be compared to the second bound system (public school students) to determine if students' attitudes towards high school English and literature classes vary according to the school experience.

After the data was transcribed, themes were searched for and analyzed. According to Patton (1990), themes reveal patterns (as stated above) that allow the researcher to gain insight into the perceptions that students possess, in this case, perceptions toward high school literature classes. This allowed modifications to be made so that those classes could become more conducive to student learning and so that more student value could be taken from those classes.

After all of the data was collected, it was sifted through and themes were searched for. Any patterns that developed from the collection of themes were analyzed, and conclusions were drawn at this point. The researcher formed certain hypotheses before the data was even analyzed.

Ethical and Political Considerations

Even though all interviewees were 18 years of age, parental consent was still sought for the interview process. Thus, there was no breach of IRB considerations. Standard IRB processes were followed.

Great care was taken to ensure the privacy of the participants. This safeguarded privacy was vital to the integrity of the study. To guarantee this privacy, interview settings were remote, written records and tape recordings were sealed and secured, and student names and other personal information was protected. Tapes, field notes, participant answers to research questions, and written responses from the focus groups were stored in a safe place and meticulously guarded. This information was destroyed in a timely manner so that the participants were as protected as possible.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As previously stated, this study examined students' perceptions of English at the high school level in both a private school setting and a public school setting. This study has been designed to gain further insight into the perceptions that high school students hold with respect to their English and literature classes.

Research questions for this study were derived from previous literature stating that perceived value of the subject matter (Creswell, 2007) and the nature of the delivery of the content are essential components to a successful classroom. Specifically, the aim of the research questions was to explore the students' perception of teaching style (Nystrand, 1997), ownership of classroom content and pedagogical practices (Applebee, 1996), value of material outside of the classroom (Nation at Risk, 1983), and overall student impression (Hartman, 2008; Ray, 2003). From these research questions, the interview questions were developed. Each interview question was posed to each of the students. Thus, both private school and public school pupils received the same interview questions in the same order. This continuity in questions and delivery of questions allowed for an accurate comparison by controlling for extraneous variables (e.g., order of questions, type of questions) that may have affected individual responses thereby inadvertently affecting the resulting themes.

Public School

The public high school where fieldwork was conducted belongs to the public school system of Mississippi. It is accredited by SACS and the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Accreditation. English courses are relatively standard, allowing

students a choice in elective courses at the junior and senior grade levels. The 12th grade students who participated in this study were currently enrolled in British literature. These students had already completed general literature, world literature, and American literature at the high school level. The analysis of the 15 public school participants focused on the students' perceptions of high school English. Following are the student responses to the four initial research questions and their corresponding interview questions.

Research Questions and Answers

Research Question 1

Research question 1 was, "How does teaching style affect the perceptions that students have towards their literature class?"

The corresponding interview question was, "How do you think the ideal high school English class should be taught?"

Seven out of 15 students believed that the ideal high school English class should be taught using a great deal of classroom discussion. Students mentioned enjoying English classes in which they were allowed to offer their own opinions freely, discuss the previous night's reading and other themes from lessons, and debate. Students also stated that they disliked their textbooks and preferred readings that were posted online, in handout form, or in form of a short novel.

Kim, who thought for several minutes, described a classroom in which discussion was utilized as a teaching tool to keep everyone engaged in the lesson.

The ideal high school English class should be taught so that everyone is involved, the readings are able to keep the student interested, and in a way that students will remember what they read. Discussions in class are the best way to accomplish this. That way, everyone has a chance to participate, to share their personal points of view, and debate differing opinions.

When asked how discussions help keep students involved, Kim noted that students are more likely to read or complete other homework assignments if they know that they will be expected to discuss them the next day in class.

This year in English, we had discussions on a daily basis that were based on the previous night's reading. Knowing that you were going to be talking about the reading made more students read so that they would be able to contribute during discussions and not feel out of place. Classroom discussions also help me to remember the material better than when my teacher simply lectures to the class."

Ryan agreed that discussion is important in an English classroom that strives to keep students interested in the lesson at-hand. He also noted that teachers must grab the attention of students at the very beginning of class.

English can be a really boring subject if not taught properly. By keeping the class open and starting off with a thought provoking topic, the teacher can keep everyone's attention. I like classes where we keep a journal and then discuss what we wrote. I also like class discussions that center on what we read the night before. The less we use the textbook and the more we debate, the better I seem to remember things.

A balance between reading, writing, grammar, and discussion was mentioned as desirable by 6 out of 15 participants. Students stressed that English teachers should not place an extraordinary emphasis on one of these skill-sets over the others. Balance was seen as important in order to keep the classroom fresh, lively, and interesting. Hannah,

who professed a sincere love of English, said that balance in the classroom is very important.

The perfect English class needs to teach some grammar or vocabulary, have diverse readings, writing, and should prepare the students for whatever the next level (of English) might be. Balance is the most important thing. I hate it when a teacher only focuses on one thing within the classroom and neglects others. I also like to read from different sources. I use my Kindle a lot now when I read on my own. It is much better than our textbooks.

Katie, who spent a few minutes thinking things over, agreed, but was more specific in terms of her ideas of balance within the classroom.

In my mind, the ideal high school English class would be 25% vocabulary, 25% grammar, 25% literature or reading, and 25% writing papers. I think the teacher should be interesting and should stick to a balanced lesson plan instead of focusing on what he likes to teach. Too many teachers spend too much time on what interests them instead of what the students find interesting, oftentimes neglecting some specific skills that they need to spend time on. I see a lot of English teachers teaching reading instead of writing because they tend to like reading more.

As a result of student feedback, it was found that most students favor English classes that utilize classroom discussions. Students enjoy expressing their opinion in an open environment and feeling that their opinions are valued in that forum. Students also suggested that balance is important in an English classroom. Students specifically mentioned that there should be a balance in time spent covering reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and debate and discussion. Sain found that students desired a teacher who was a catalyst, one who set things in motion within the classroom and then made sure that the results met certain expectations. According to Sain, students longed for the opportunity to be creative and wanted a teacher who was excited about teaching.

Sain (2007) also stated that a passive teaching style produced passive students and that a creative and innovative teacher produced students who possessed those traits.

The second corresponding interview question for research question 1 was, “How important are teacher interest and enthusiasm in your English class?”

Out of 15 participants, 14 indicated that teacher interest and enthusiasm were very important factors in their English classes. The overwhelming viewpoint expressed by students was that if the teacher shows that he or she cares, then the students are more likely to care about that particular class. The one student who did not state that teacher interest and enthusiasm were important in her English class stated that she did not care about the teacher’s interest, that the student interest is more important than that of the teacher.

Jim, a gifted student athlete discussed the importance of teacher enthusiasm as it pertains specifically to his English classes. Hugh stated:

I think that enthusiasm in English is more important than in any of my other classes. English teachers have to be enthusiastic or students will not want to learn the material. Sometimes the readings are boring, but teacher enthusiasm can make a class much more interesting. Simple enthusiasm from the teacher can make you, as a student, want to work and pay attention.

Josh, who listed English as his second favorite class following science, agreed with the assessment that teacher enthusiasm is especially important in an English class. He also stated that without it, he would not enjoy English as a subject.

Teacher interest and enthusiasm is very important in English class. English could be extremely boring if it were not for a captivating teacher. If the English teacher sounds interested and invested in their teaching, the students will buy in and be interested as well.

Sally agreed that teacher enthusiasm was very important in her English classes. She described teacher interest and enthusiasm as a way to break the monotony of the same thing day-in and day-out in her academic life.

In my English classes, the teacher's interest and enthusiasm help greatly with the everyday activities of the English class. If a teacher has no interest in class then the class experience will be no fun at all. The enthusiasm of the teacher makes the class fun and exciting. If the teacher did not act like they wanted to be there, then the class would be a drag and no one would enjoy going.

Laura was the only student that suggested that teacher interest and enthusiasm were not that important in her English classes. When asked to clarify her position, Laura thought for a minute and then responded:

I really don't care about teacher interest in whatever subject that they teach. My interest in that subject is more important. If I like it, then I am going to work hard and put out effort. If they're not enthusiastic about it, it doesn't matter to me.

The opinions expressed by 14 of the 15 participants were similar to the results found when Adelman (2002) surveyed students regarding the importance of positive factors that help students enjoy class and find academic success. Adelman (2002) stated that there is a direct correlation between positive classroom influences such as teacher interest and enthusiasm and academic success. With 14 participants describing teacher interest and enthusiasm as very important factors in their English classes, the students agreed with Adelman's findings.

Research Question 2

The second research question was, "Do students see any real-world value or application in their study of literature at the high school level?"

The first corresponding interview question was, “Suppose you did not take any English/literature classes in high school. How would that affect your quality of life in the future?”

Out of 15 students, 14 agreed that their future quality of life would suffer if they did not take any English courses in high school. Only one student said that his quality of life would not change if he did not take English at the high school level. Of the 14 students who stated that their quality of life would suffer without high school English courses, 6 said that they would be less intelligent or intellectual in their everyday life. Four students stated that they would have a worse job without the skills that they learned in their English classes. Three students mentioned that without high school English classes, they would expect to make less money later in life. Two students said that they would not be able to get into the college of their choice, and that once in college, they would be poorly equipped to succeed.

Courtney, who considers English as her favorite class, spoke at length about her belief that she would not be as intellectual without her English classes. She specifically mentioned that her knowledge of other cultures, as well as her reading and writing skills, would greatly suffer. Courtney said:

If I did not take any English or literature classes in high school, I think my perspective on many things and how I understand those things would be a lot different. I would not know as much about the world, different cultures that we learned about through exploring literature, and other people’s perspectives. I feel that I have become more knowledgeable and intelligent by reading things like *Dante’s Inferno* and *The Odyssey*.

When asked if she had learned any other skills in her English classes that she considers important to her future quality of life, Courtney mentioned how the focus on reading and writing will help her later in life.

In English class we spend a lot of time on reading and writing skills. When we were younger, we focused on grammar and spelling. Now that we are older, we read a wide variety of works and write a lot of papers in many different styles. I think that the emphasis placed on reading and writing will definitely help me later in life.

Nearly half of the public school students interviewed said that they would have worse jobs or lower paying jobs and be making less money without the skills that they have learned in their English classes.

Katie, who was very interested in her future, said that if she had not taken English in high school, she would not be able to acquire a high level job. She mentioned that she would not have the skills necessary to do well in a job interview or adequately perform in most high level jobs. Katie stated:

English classes are very important later in life. Without solid reading, writing, or speaking skills you are not going to be able to get a good job. An interviewer is not going to want to hire someone who is not polished.”

When asked what she meant by the word “polished,” Katie explained her point-of-view in further detail:

By polished, I mean that the person seeking the job has to be able to present themselves in a professional manner. In order to get a good job, you have to speak well and use proper grammar. You also have to be able to demonstrate superior reading and writing skills. If it is obvious to the interviewer that you don’t have these skills, you will probably not get the job. That translates to less money in the long run.

Ryan, who stated that one of his goals in life is to make a lot of money, described how his high school English classes can help him attain that goal. According to Ryan:

If I did not take any English classes, I would basically be illiterate. Best case scenario, I would not be able to read very well. That would make me look dumb to other people. It would also be embarrassing if you could not spell or write well and you mispronounced words when you talked. My quality of life would dramatically change without my English classes. I would basically be illiterate and not be able to obtain a good and high paying job.

The second corresponding interview question was, “Some people might argue that studying English/literature in high school does not teach skills that can be applied to real life situations. What do you think?”

Twelve of the participants stated that English was a class that teaches skills that can be applied to real-life situations. Students said that English classes improved their reading and writing skills. They viewed these two skill-sets as extremely important in real-life situations and agreed that these skills are used on a daily basis.

Students related the skills that they learned in their high school English classes to their lives and saw them as important in preparation for future careers. Students also saw English as an important teaching tool that imparts skills that they will be able to use to get into college and later on at the college level.

Bryan, who states that college is a personal goal, describes the skills that he has learned in his high school English classes as important to his goal and beyond.

I think that English definitely teaches useful skills that can be used in the real world. Most careers and jobs that are worthwhile require some type of reading and writing. It is nearly impossible to find a high paying job where you don't use these skills. English class teaches you these things. These skills also allow you to get into the college of your choice, and allow you to succeed once there.

Bruce, an aspiring businessman, stressed the importance of his English classes to his goal of one day running his own business in the automotive industry. He said:

I feel that English is an essential part of real life. If you do not take English classes to broaden your horizon, improve your grammar, improve your vocabulary, and open your mind, then you will fail in the business world. I think the business world qualifies as a real life situation. When I am a part of it, I will use my reading, writing, and speaking skills that I learned in English class to communicate more effectively and succeed within my company.

Mary agreed that English classes do teach real-life skills that can be applied later in life. Mary stated that her English classes have broadened her mind and expanded her general knowledge base. She also made mention of their importance to the college acceptance process and potential job prospects.

I think that English is definitely needed in real-life situations. I think that literature broadens your thoughts and ideas and I feel as though an English course helps with grammar. English helps you articulate your thoughts and this is extremely helpful in the college process when you are interviewing for scholarships. The skills that I have learned in English will also help me later in college and then help me obtain the right job.

Whit, an avid reader, was one of three students who did not state definitively that English skills can be applied later in life to real-life situations. When posed with this question, Whit thought deeply and responded:

I'm not really sure if my English classes have taught me anything that I can use later in life. I already know how to read and write and I use these skills in other classes, so I could probably get by without English. I do think that we use critical thinking skills in English class and that could help me later in life.

When the researcher asked Whit what high school class he believed teaches skills that are the most applicable in the real-life situations, Whit mentioned math, further saying:

I think that math classes, and then probably science, teach the most real-life type of skills. I'm not sure what I want to do professionally later in life, but I bet that I will use math more than anything else. I think math and science will help me make the most money later in life.

Whit's response is similar to the results found when Robinson (2003) surveyed 1,007 high school graduates at the national level and asked them what high school subject they valued the most. Nearly 34% of respondents stated that math was the most valuable subject and that it taught skills that would be used later in life more often than skills learned in other classes (Robinson, 2003).

Research Question 3

Research question 3 was, "What are the suggested changes that students would make to their literature class?"

The first corresponding interview question was, "If you could be principal for one day, what would you change about the way that English is taught at your high school?"

Out of the 15 students, 5 recommended very limited or no changes to their English classes. These students believed that the content, teaching methodology, and format of their English classes was acceptable. These students gave little feedback and criticism. Four of the five who stated that they would not change much did mention that creativity, self-expression, and hands-on activities were needed in the English classroom. These four students stated that these things were present in the classes and that a little more of each would be acceptable. One student said that he would not change one thing about how his English classes have been taught.

Out of 15 students, 10 did recommend that they would make significant changes to their high school English classes. All 10 mentioned that they would add more

discussion to the classroom experience and keep the amount of teacher lectures to a minimum. Students admitted that lecture is needed at times, but stated that it was used as a teaching method too extensively. This opinion that students dislike lecture in the classroom is similar to the results found when Hidi (1990) stated that direct instruction that utilizes large amounts of lecture is an unpopular method of instruction among high school students. Hidi found that lecture was capable of teaching students large basic facts in a short period of time, but that it was not a good method for searching for deeper, more analytical thought. Students prefer being able to express opinion, discuss, and debate, and lecture does not allow these things to occur on a large scale.

Josh, who seemed contemplative and relaxed, described what he would change about his English classes if he had the opportunity to be principal for a day.

If I were principal for the day, I would like to make all English classes collaborative and discussion-based. I would try to limit the amount of times lectures are given and notes are taken because these are boring and the students do not learn best from these types of classes. I would make sure that the teacher that I hired was interesting and that the students responded to the teacher well.

Mary shared Josh's sentiment that English classes should rely more on student-led discussion and less on teacher lecture. She felt that discussion makes the classroom experience more meaningful. Mary said:

I think that we should use more creative ways in class to learn. I think that we should focus on meaningful conversation in class and discuss many important things that are connected to the reading. I think that classroom discussion is better when people are able to share their different views and opinions too.

While 10 of the 15 participants did state that they would add more discussion and limit the amount of lecture, other changes were also recommended. Laura advocated an increased level of continuity from one English class to the next

I think that I would make English classes more fluid from teacher to teacher. Every year the class and material is so different that sometimes it doesn't even feel like the same subject.

When asked to clarify what she meant, Laura offered the following:

I think that teachers should get together and collaborate on what they are teaching and the methods that they are using. That way it would seem like an English class and not be so different from year to year. It seems like each teacher wants to do their own thing and that just seems confusing.”

Two students described their desire for more writing and peer-editing opportunities within the English classroom. They felt that there was too much emphasis on reading and not enough emphasis placed on improving writing skills. A third student said that there should be more creative writing taught at school.

Bruce expressed his desire for more focus on writing and peer-editing within the English classroom.

If I could be principal for a day, I would make English classes write more and peer-edit more. I learn from my mistakes and peer-editing is a low-key way to correct our papers. In my mind a fun English class would have a heavy emphasis on writing, peer-editing, and then sharing our writing with the class. I especially like creative writing and wish that we did more of that in the classroom.

Jim agreed with Bruce concerning adding more creative writing to the high school English curriculum. He described his ideal English class as follows:

I would incorporate an English class into the schedule that was all short story writing. This would make students use their imagination and enhance their writing skills. I wish our school had a class where students could just make up stories. If I was the principal, I would add such a class.

Research Question 4

Research question 4 was, “From a student perspective, what is the most effective teaching method for the typical high school English or literature class?”

The first corresponding interview question, “How would you rate your English class using a scale of favorite to least favorite? Please explain.”

The 12th grade students did not overwhelmingly consider English as the dominant and most important subject with the school curriculum. Out of 15 students, 6 considered English as their favorite subject, with the remaining 9 students stating a preference for mathematics, science, history or social studies, foreign languages, or the arts.

Of the 6 public school students who stated that English was their favorite subject, 4 of them were females. Two other females said that English was their second favorite subject, and the remaining two public school females in this study said that English fell somewhere in the middle of their list of favorites.

Laura, when asked about her favorite classes, stated that English was her overall favorite. Laura, who considers herself an individualist, described why she liked English more than her other classes:

English was always the class that I looked forward to the most because it usually allowed me to express my opinion. That was always fun. English classes always encouraged debate and discussion and this helped me with those skills. I like to talk and tell others what I think, and this was always a good forum for that type of thing. It all helped me debate in a more reserved and formal manner instead of simply arguing or yelling. English helped me with that skill too.

Courtney, who admitted that she liked most of her classes, agreed with Laura that English was her favorite class. Courtney also said that she enjoyed the ability that she was afforded in her English classes to express herself through debate, discussion, and writing. Courtney said that:

English has always been my favorite class throughout high school. I loved how we wrote journals in class and were able to express our opinions about different topics. I really liked expressing myself through my writing. We did this, as I said, with our journals and with creative writing assignments. I really like being able to write a paper from my personal perspective. That is really cool when we are able to do it.

Bryan, who likes to be challenged within the classroom, said that he found his English classes challenging, rewarding, and enjoyable. When asked to rate his English class using a scale of favorite to least favorite, Bryan also said that English was his favorite class. Bryan said that:

Throughout my high school career, English has been my favorite class. I would give it a 9 out of 10 in those terms. It is usually the most enjoyable class and is never a push over. I mean that it is usually challenging in multiple ways. My English classes tested my memorization, my vocabulary, my understanding of readings, helped me learn how to analyze stories, and improved my reading skills.

When asked what he enjoyed the most about his English classes, Bryan went on to say the following:

As I said before, I like a class that presents a challenge and one that also gives me something that I can use. English does this by focusing on reading and writing skills. These are things that I will use later in life no matter what I do for a living. I use reading and writing every single day now. I am sure that these skills will translate well into my future career.

Out of 15 participants, 5 stated that math was their favorite and the most important subject. With 11 out of 15 students espousing a preference for English and math, these opinions are similar to the results found when Robinson (2003) surveyed 1,007 high school graduates at the national level and asked them what high school subject they valued the most. Over half of the respondents stated that math and English or literature were the most valuable high school subject areas. According to these studies,

students perceive both math and English to have high levels of real-world value. Students also said that they enjoyed both of these subject areas because they were demanding yet valuable classes.

Ryan was 1 of 5 students who ranked math as their favorite and most important class. He ranked English as his second favorite class and stated that he considered it the second most important class for his future. When asked to rate his English class Ryan, who wants to be an engineer, gave the following description:

English is my second favorite class after math. I see math skills as ones that will be slightly more beneficial to my future. Since I want to be an engineer I will need to use a great deal of mathematics, from Algebra to calculus. Without math skills, I couldn't do that. I think that what I've learned in English will help me in my career as well, mainly the reading, writing, and overall communication skills that we covered extensively. I like science too and think that it's important, but I read a lot in my spare time, so I prefer English to my science classes.

Zach agreed with Ryan, stating that:

I really like math out of all of my classes. English is probably my second favorite class. I think that I will probably use math later in life. I can see using it in my career after college. I think that English is important too. I will definitely use reading and writing later in life, most likely in my career too.

When asked what he wanted to do for a living, Zach was undecided. He said that his goal was to make a lot of money and that both math and English could help him attain this goal. He offered the following explanation:

I'm not sure what I want to do later in life. One of my main goals is to make a lot of money, so I'm probably going to have to go to college. After that, I may go into the business world or something like that. I know that I will use the reading, writing, vocabulary, and debate skills from my English classes. I will also rely heavily on my math skills to keep track of my accounts and those types of things.

Private School

As previously stated, the private school is a member of the Independent School System in Tennessee. It is accredited by the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS) and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The private school used during the research study is one of a dozen private schools located in the community. The private school site does not require its students to take any type of state test to display proficiency due to the fact that it is a private school.

The school mandates four years of English as a graduation requirement. The required classes include: classic literature, medieval literature, American literature, and British literature. This school does not have to adhere to the standards set forth by the Tennessee Comprehension Assessment Program (TCAP) because it functions as an independent or private school that does not accept state and federal funds. The analysis of the 15 private school participants focused on the students' perceptions of high school English. Student responses to the four initial research questions and their corresponding interview questions follow.

Research Question and Answers

Research Question 1

The first research question was, "How does teaching style affect the perceptions that students have towards their literature class?"

The first corresponding interview question was, "How do you think the ideal high school English class should be taught?"

Of the 15 respondents, 10 believed that the ideal high school English class should be taught using a great deal of classroom discussion. Students mentioned enjoying

English classes in which they were encouraged to offer their own opinions freely, discuss the previous night's reading and other themes from lessons, and debate.

Carol, who aspires to a career as a criminal lawyer, described how classroom discussion helped her retain information in class and how it made class more enjoyable.

I think that the perfect English class is one where students are not simply allowed to discuss and debate, but are encouraged to do so. I really like debating my point of view and find it interesting to listen to the views of my classmates. Debate and discussion make the classroom more entertaining and energetic. It really keeps my attention focused on what we are doing. When a teacher simply lectures all day long, I find myself daydreaming throughout the class period. Classroom discussions allow me to voice my opinion and keep me plugged into the conversation.

Carol's opinion is similar to that espoused by Applebee (1993) who stated that teaching methods have a direct impact on student satisfaction. Applebee found that students prefer indirect teaching methods, such as discussion and debate, and that good teachers adjust their teaching methods to meet the needs of their students so that students are more engaged. According to Applebee (1993), students have a higher level of satisfaction when teachers use debate and discussion within the classroom and when they adjust their teaching strategies to fit student needs.

Michael, a self-proclaimed athlete, described the ideal English class as one that encourages discussion and debate and one that follows a set routine. Michael said:

I like English classes that have a productive agenda. Not every class that I take has been productive. I typically enjoy classes that have a set routine that we follow, but I want that routine to allow for discussion in class. I hate it when a teacher does nothing but lecture all class period. At some point, I usually zone out. When we talk about what we are studying as a class, I am usually more tuned in. I think that I am able to remember things better when we talk about them as a class rather than listen to a lecture and simply take notes.

Sara agreed that student interaction is important to the classroom environment.

I think that the ideal English class should be one with a lot of student interaction. I like classes where the students lead the lesson. I don't think that the teacher should simply teach and the students should just take notes. Students need to contribute more than note taking in class. I think teachers should pose questions in class and allow students to solve these questions together through discussion. I find these types of classes more enjoyable.

The second corresponding interview question was, "How important are teacher interest and enthusiasm in your English class?"

Aside from students' views of teaching methodology, students expressed an overwhelming interest in and placed great importance on teacher interest in the material and enthusiasm for teaching. All of the 15 students indicated that teacher interest and enthusiasm are very important to their English class. Adelman (2002) stated that factors such as parents, friends, enthusiasm shown by high school teachers, and academic advisors all have a huge impact on success at the high school level. Adelman further stated that there is a direct correlation to positive relationships with the aforementioned individuals and academic success. Furthermore, teacher-related factors, such as enthusiasm shown in class, love of subject taught, and interest in student success and well-being, were highly related to students' attitudes. A student, Christie, explained that no matter what the focal point of a lesson is, the attitude that the teacher has towards the subject and students is important.

I think teacher interest and enthusiasm are very important during class. When the teacher poses questions to the class and actually listens to what the students have to say, that makes the students more engaged in what is going on. Teacher enthusiasm can make a boring topic interesting and if a teacher is energetic and has a positive attitude it sets a good example for the students and they are more likely to be energetic and positive too.

Taylor, who considers herself a perfectionist, summarized how teacher enthusiasm is just as important as the curriculum that is covered.

It is very important for a teacher to be enthusiastic during class. If the teacher is not enthusiastic about the readings and the general, everyday class work, the students will not be enthusiastic either. The best teachers are the ones who bring enthusiasm and energy to class even when the subjects are boring or dull. Sometimes only an enthusiastic and caring teacher can make certain subjects interesting. Teachers who love what they do make students want to go to class and learn. I do not enjoy going to classes where the teacher cares less about the material than I do. Teacher enthusiasm is just as important as curriculum.

Michael agreed that teacher enthusiasm is important in the classroom, but he added that interest and enthusiasm from the teacher make students feel like they are not forced to learn, but rather, they buy in and want to learn.

I feel that if a teacher is excited to teach and willing to improve the minds of his or her students, it creates a stress free learning environment. With an enthusiastic teacher, the student is not forced to learn something, he or she is willing to do so because they want to. Having a teacher interested in helping his or her students will have a much bigger impact on those students than anything else that can be done in the classroom.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 was, “Do students see any real-world value or application in their study of literature at the high school level?”

The first corresponding interview question was, “Suppose you did not take any English/literature classes in high school. How would that affect your quality of life in the future?”

All 15 of the students agreed that their future quality of life would suffer if they did not take any English courses during high school. Of these 15 students who stated that

their quality of life would suffer without high school English courses, 6 said that they would not get into the college of their choice or that they would have trouble succeeding in college once admitted.

Six other students stated that they would have a worse job without the skills that they learned in their English classes. The remaining three students said that they would be less intelligent or intellectual in their everyday life. All three of these students specifically mentioned that their reading skills would suffer dramatically without their English classes and that this would hurt them in their everyday life.

Christie, a college-bound senior, described that her future plans would be completely different had she not taken English in high school.

The quality of my life would be greatly affected if I had not taken English in high school. Not only would I not be as well educated as others, but it would also affect my ACT and SAT scores. This would change the likelihood of getting into the college or university of my choice and could alter the quality of the rest of my life. During future job interviews and work presentations my speaking skills, vocabulary, and writing skills would be inferior without what I have learned in my English classes up to this point. Because of English, I have become more literate, a better writer, and someone who has an edge on other potential college bound students.

Sara, an admittedly quiet student, thought for a few minutes and then agreed with Christie's statement that her college plans would be affected if she had not taken English in high school. Sara said:

I don't think that my future life would be the same without the education that I have received in my English classes over the last four years. If I had not taken English, I would not be able to write legitimate essays for the college application process, would not interview well, and if I could get into a second rate college, I doubt that I would succeed once there. I know that without my English skills, I would not get into the colleges at the top of my list.

John agreed and believes that even if he were accepted into college, he would not succeed once he got there without the skills that he learned in his English classes:

My English classes have all given me a wealth of knowledge that I plan to use later in life, but for the time being, I plan on using these skills to get into a top notch university. Without the reading, writing, debate, and oratory skills that I have learned in English, there is no way that I would succeed at the next level. When I think about the critical thinking skills that I have picked up in my English classes, I know that I have been given tools that I can use to get into college, do well once there, and then work my way up the career ladder.

The private school students that participated in this study showed a high level of interest in college and in the skills that they believed would improve their chances of being accepted into the college or university of their choice. These students believed that the skills learned in their English classes would help them in the college admission process and would also help them once enrolled in college. According to Chen (2007), private school students typically show more interest in attending college and more interest in entrance exams, such as the ACT and SAT, than their public school counterparts. Private high school graduates were also more than twice as likely to express interest in college, to apply to college, and to have completed a bachelor's degree by their mid-20s (52% to 26%), as compared to public high school graduates (Chen, 2007).

As previously stated, six of the private school students interviewed said that they would have worse jobs or lower paying jobs and be making less money without the skills that they learned in their English classes.

Brenda, who thought deeply when asked this question, said that if she had not taken English in high school, she would have difficulty getting a job once she got out of

school. She mentioned that she would not have the skills necessary to do well in the interview process and that once on the job she would be behind her fellow co-workers.

If I didn't take any English classes in high school, I probably wouldn't read as much as I do now. Because of that, my reading skills would be weaker than they are now. I would also have more difficulty finding a job because you use reading, writing, and speaking skills in the interview process. Without English, my vocabulary would not be as strong, I'd be less worldly and well rounded, and once I was competing with others for jobs, I would be at a disadvantage.

Michael also felt that he would have trouble in an ever-competitive job market once he finished school. According to Michael:

If I was not required to take any English classes in high school, I feel that it would make me miss out on certain job opportunities later in life. My career choices would be limited because my reading, writing, and conversation skills would be weaker. My vocabulary would also be weaker, giving other people the impression that I am not as well educated as I could be. That image would hurt my job chances with potential employers. If I was lucky enough to land a decent job, I might have trouble working my way up the corporate ladder due to my previously mentioned weak skills.

The remaining three students said that without their high school English courses, they would be less intellectual, with all three specifically mentioning that they would be worse readers. Tate, who likes English but admits to struggling with it at times, stated that without English his reading skills would definitely suffer.

If I had never taken any English or literature classes in high school I would be a much worse reader. I struggle with reading as it is, but I am a stronger reader because we focus on it so much in class. Without English, I wouldn't have any analytical skills, my study skills would be worse, and I wouldn't have any of the knowledge about other cultures or the classics that we have read about in class. Because of English class, I am now able to read with a purpose.

When asked to expand upon what he meant by “read with a purpose,” Tate added the following:

By reading with a purpose, I mean that I now know how to read with a goal in mind. Sometimes in class we analyze the actions or language of a character. Other times, we look for symbolism or metaphors. Before we learned about these things in English class and the best way to approach them, I was lost. Now I am able to do them fairly well. I guess you could say that English class has given me more confidence with my reading.

In a 2003 study, Johnson and Newton found that the decline of interest in English and literature classes is directly related to gender. In their study, they found that male students have less interest in the typical literature class than female students at the secondary level. Johnson and Newton also argued that high school-aged males often do not see the relevance that literature has toward their everyday lives. They do not associate real-world value with reading or literature in general.

With all 15 private school students in this study—including all 7 male students—stating that their high school English classes teach valuable skills that they will use later in life, the results in this study contradict the findings of Johnson and Newton (2003). Within this study, high school male students did find value and enjoyment in their English classes.

The second corresponding interview question was, “Some people might argue that studying English/literature in high school does not teach skills that can be applied to real life situations. What do you think?”

All 15 of the participants stated that English was a class that teaches skills that can be applied to real-life situations. Students specifically stated that English classes improved their reading and writing skills and helped them become more articulate, more

specifically, with their debate skills. Students also mentioned that the skills they learned in English have allowed them to interpret the news and other forms of media in a more educated way. They viewed these skill-sets as extremely important in real-life situations and agreed that these skills are used on a daily basis.

Students related the skills that they learned in their high school English classes to their lives and saw them as essential to preparation for their future careers. Students consider English an important teaching tool that imparts skills that will be useful in gaining acceptance into their top college choice. They also consider these skills helpful once in college. Students mentioned that college is an important goal and that parental support and expectations fuel the idea of going to college.

Samuel, an avid videogame player, argued that studying English in high school teaches skills that can be applied to real-life situations.

I would argue that English is very valuable later in life. When you look at what English class consists of, namely grammar, reading, vocabulary, writing, debate, and verbal interaction, these all seem to be skills that are used in everyday life no matter who you are or what you do. I believe that I will certainly use the things that I have learned from my English classes later in life. I plan on using them in college, probably grad school, and then in my future career. If you really think about it, I'll probably use these things on a daily basis no matter what I'm doing.

Andrew, who aspires to have a career in medicine, agreed with Samuel's assessment that the skills learned in English can be applied later in life. Andrew said:

I disagree with those who claim that studying English does not teach real life skills. I have already used my literary knowledge and some skills that are related to it. I spend a great deal of time with adults and the friends of my parents. They are generally high performing, high income, wealthy, well educated individuals who have a vast array of interests. I have learned specifically how to carry on a conversation with these educated folks from my English classes throughout the years. I have also learned some debate and

arguing skills that come in handy when discussing politics, global issues, religion, and current events. I feel that these skills have made me more intelligent and well educated and let me display these talents. I plan on going to medical school one day, and the interview process is very cut-throat, so these skills will come in handy. They may also, one day help me land a lucrative and high paying job.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 was, “What are the suggested changes that students would make to their literature class?”

The first corresponding interview question was, “If you could be principal for one day, what would you change about the way that English is taught at your high school?”

Out of 15 students, 6 recommended limited or no changes to their English classes. These students believed that the content, teaching methodology, and format of their English classes was acceptable. These students gave little feedback and criticism. Two of the six who stated that they would not change much did mention that more contemporary reading assignments were needed in the English classroom. The two students stated that these things were present in the classes and that a little more of each would be acceptable. Two students said that they would not change one thing about how their English classes had been taught. One student said that she would like more Advanced Placement class offerings. One student who enjoyed class discussions stated that she would like to see continued discussions in class but that she wouldn't offer many changes.

Out of the 15 respondents, 9 did recommend that they would make significant changes to their high school English classes. One student stated that she wanted more discussion in her English classes. When asked about the amount of discussion that was present in their English classes, the other private school students stated that discussion

occurred on a daily basis within English class, that they enjoyed this discussion, and that they wanted to maintain the current level of discussion and debate. All 15 private school students said that they disliked large amounts of lecture in class. The opinion that students indeed dislike lecture within the classroom is similar to the results found when Hidi (1990) stated that direct instruction that utilizes large amounts of lecture is an unpopular method of instruction among high school students.

Of the other students who would make changes to their English classes, three wanted more student choices built into the curriculum. These students wanted to have a choice in the reading and writing assignments that the class completed. Two students wanted to add more writing to the curriculum. Two students wanted to read more poetry in class. Finally, one student wanted to alter the way that notes were taken in his class.

Meredith, one of the students who advocated that more student-led choices should be applied to the curriculum, said that she would like to see more group work, in-class collaboration, and theatrical readings or productions. She stated that she had a sincere dislike of lecture-based classes and felt that she did not learn much from strict lectures.

If I could make changes to my English classes, I would give students a choice in how they run their class. I would like to focus more on plays. Instead of simply reading *Macbeth* or *Othello*, I would find it more exciting to divide the parts in class and actually put on a full scale production of the play. I would also like to add smaller theatrical readings that could take the place of note taking and lectures. Lectures put me to sleep and it seems that I never remember what the teacher told us. When we work in groups or collaborate on a project, I feel that I remember things much more easily. That's why I think we should make English class more theatrical. It would help students' memory and energy levels.

Brenda agreed that students should be offered reading and writing choices in their classes instead of having the teacher make these choices for them. She stated that:

I would make English class a pass/fail class so that if you read or did your homework, you would be rewarded. I would also like to see students given more choices in terms of what we read in class. I'm tired of reading things simply because they are considered a classic. Sometimes the classics are not any good. I would like to see students invest more in their classes by choosing to read stories that they find interesting. That way, they will be more likely to read, their grade will be higher, and they will enjoy class more. I know that I would. I think that the same can be said for writing. I want to write about topics that interest me. If I was able to do that all of the time, I would have no problem sitting down and cranking out a paper. I would be much more motivated.

Research Question 4

Research question 4 was, "From a student perspective, what is the most effective teaching method for the typical high school English or literature class?"

The first corresponding interview question was, "How would you rate your English class using a scale of favorite to least favorite? Please explain."

Out of 15 students, 5 stated that English was their favorite subject. Another eight students said that English was their second favorite subject. Only two students ranked English lower than second favorite, with one saying that it was his least favorite subject and another student stating that it was her third or fourth favorite. In a similar study, Schug et al. (1982) interviewed 23 students at the 12th grade level in a Midwest state and asked them to rank in order their classes from favorite to least favorite. The results in Schug's et al. study indicated that students either greatly enjoyed English and literature classes or they strongly disliked them. There was no middle ground, indicating that students were very opinionated towards English and literature.

John, who thought quietly for a minute before answering, stated that English was his favorite subject because his English classes have allowed him to express himself in an oftentimes restrictive environment. According to John:

English is my favorite subject. I have really liked my English classes here because I like to express myself. I have been allowed to express my opinions in class and most of my peers seem pretty comfortable sharing theirs as well. I am not sure that English would be my favorite subject if I went to another school because it might not be taught the same way. Here we are allowed to write what we believe without watering it down. I really like the fact that I can express my honest opinion in class without getting in trouble or having my opinion shot down or considered inaccurate.

Samuel agreed that English was his favorite class and also liked the self-expression and discussion aspects of class.

English is by far my favorite class. I have always enjoyed writing, especially when the assignments are creative and I am allowed to express myself. Writing about topics that I am interested in are always more fun than something that I am forced to write about. I am also an avid reader and enjoy discussing what we have read in a group setting. My high school English classes have also usually been a forum for debate and discussion of current events. When students are allowed to debate and argue about issues that matter to them, then the class will be more enjoyable.

Kelton said that English is her second favorite class, falling behind history. She mentioned that she enjoyed a balance between reading, writing, and hands-on projects.

Kelton said:

I really enjoy English. I like classes that are relaxed and comfortable with a good balance between class work and homework. I like the idea of journaling everyday to get our brains working. I also like to read a lot on my own and I usually like the things that we read in class. All of the English projects that I have ever had to do have been really fun. Call me crazy, but I like the research papers that we have done in class too. Really when you get down to it, I like to read and write, so English is right up my alley.

In a 2005 study, Lemaire and Arce surveyed 8,100 high school seniors in Vermont and New Hampshire to determine what the future held for these soon-to-be graduating seniors. Eighty-one percent of the public school students and a staggering 96% of the private school students stated that they would enroll in college in the fall of 2004. Lemaire and Arce (2005) stated that there was a direct connection between the desire to attend college and the enjoyment level that was found in three basic high school courses, more specifically, English, math, and science. When students found merit and enjoyment in these three sets of required high school classes, they overwhelmingly made the decision to attend college, and in most cases, were better prepared to do so.

Within this study, all 15 private school students stated that college was in their future. With 13 of 15 students saying that English was either their first or second favorite class and with the desire to attend college so high among the participants, the results from this study support Lemaire and Arce's 2005 study.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of English at the high school level in both a private school setting and a public school setting. To accomplish this, 15 students from a local public high school and 15 students from a local private high school were chosen as the major participants of this study. During this investigation, qualitative research methods were utilized as the research paradigm. These participants provided valuable information, intriguing ideas, important insights, and truthful feelings that were impressive to the researcher.

Specific questions were raised in this study hopes that they could be answered, namely, (a) How does teaching style affect the perceptions that students have towards their English class?, (b) Do students see any real value or application in their study of English at the high school level?, (c) What are the suggested changes that students would make to their English class?, and (d) From a student's perspective, what is the most effective teaching method for the typical high school English or literature class?

Prior to the research portion of this study, the researcher anticipated that public high school students and their private high school counterparts would have similar perceptions about their English classes. The researcher hypothesized that both sets of high school students would find value in their English education particularly with their reading, writing, debate, and analytical skill sets. The researcher also anticipated that students would express a strong dislike towards lecture and other teacher centered methods of instruction.

Considering teaching and learning variables, previous forms of research, and research questions, developed several themes were developed that related to the analysis of the information provided by the public and private high school students. Themes were determined using terms, concepts, and categories that the researcher interpreted from the data, and they were designed to answer the research questions and to be neither static nor mutually exclusive. Themes were developed based on the frequency of student responses and the unique quality of student feedback. As each bound system was analyzed, two dominant themes emerged that were shared by both sets of students. These themes are: (1) Indirect methods of instruction including large amounts of discussion led to a positive view of English, and (2) Teacher interest and enthusiasm added utilitarian value to student views of their English classes. There was also one dominant theme that was different between public and private school students. While both groups of students believed that their future quality of life would suffer had they never taken English classes in high school, public school students focused more on future monetary loss, while the main concern of private school students pertained to the lack of admission into the college or university of their choice and then lack of success once in college.

Over the course of their academic careers, both the public school students and private school students have gained experience and knowledge in their English classes. These traits have helped students form attitudes and perceptions related to English as an academic subject. Their comprehensive insight comes from four years of high school English classes and exposure to numerous forms of teaching methodology, a wide variety of content, and multiple types of academic evaluations.

Most students were realistic and expressed both a level of enjoyment with and utilitarian value from their English classes. Minor issues, such as lack of contemporary reading literature, not enough emphasis on writing, and lack of theatrical productions, did not greatly impact students' overall perceptions of English. Rather, students' most pressing concern with their English classes was focused on teaching methodology and lack of interest from their teachers. As a result, students spent a great deal of time describing both the experiences and possible recommendations for change.

Utilizing classroom observations, recorded interviews, casual conversations with the students, and focus groups, the researcher identified two themes that are shared between the two groups; one theme that is unique to each group is also evident. During the interviews, students expressed the importance of participating in the learning process. Indirect methods of teaching, including incorporating large amounts of discussion into classroom lessons, provided students with a positive, favorable impression of their English classes. Students advocated the use of discussion as a means of sharing ideas, debating the importance of certain topics and themes, and allowing their opinions to be expressed and valued.

One public school student, Kim, shared that:

The ideal high school English class should be taught so that everyone is involved, the readings are able to keep the student interested, and in a way that students will remember what they read. Discussions in class are the best way to accomplish this. That way, everyone has a chance to participate, to share their personal points of view, and debate differing opinions. This year in English, we had discussions on a daily basis that were based on the previous night's reading. Knowing that you were going to be talking about the reading made more students read so that they would be able to contribute during discussions and not feel out of place. Classroom discussions also help me to remember the material better than when my teacher simply lectures to the class.

Students from both the public school and the private school expressed a strong dislike toward English classes when the primary teaching methodology consisted of direct instruction with excessive amounts of lecture and note-taking and little time for student interaction and expression. In an interview with Carol, a private school student, it was stated that:

I think that the perfect English class is one where students are not simply allowed to discuss and debate, but are encouraged to do so. I really like debating my point of view and find it interesting to listen to the views of my classmates. Debate and discussion make the classroom more entertaining and energetic. It really keeps my attention focused on what we are doing. When a teacher simply lectures all day long, I find myself daydreaming throughout the class period. Classroom discussions allow me to voice my opinion and keep me plugged into the conversation.

Both public and private school students indicated a need for a variety of methods of instruction in the classroom. While students did not completely dismiss lecture as a form of instruction, they expressed dislike when it was the primary means of instruction. Students mentioned a sincere desire to express themselves in class through the use of discussion, debate, group work, group projects that utilized time in class and outside of class, individual research projects and presentations, and theatrical productions. Students regularly viewed direct instruction as repetitive, predictable, and boring.

Both public and private school students noted that they did not feel as if they learned and retained information well when lecture and excessive note-taking were the primary means of classroom instruction. Students indicated the other indirect methods (i.e. class discussions, group work, projects) were needed in the classroom to transmit information effectively and to help students remember and retain information. The students' opinions reflect Nystrand's (1997) belief that teachers need to incorporate

multiple teaching styles within the classroom in order to fully meet the diverse needs of all learners. Nystrand (1997) also stated that monologic or direct instruction methods, when used as the lone method of instruction, did not engage students with the lesson at-hand and left students bored and uninterested. The students in this study expressed dislike for English when they did not enjoy the teaching methodology of the classroom teacher. When teachers incorporated multiple teaching styles including student-centered instruction and student-focused activities, students found greater value in their English classes, and their enjoyment levels increased as well. This reflects Sain's (2007) belief that multiple teaching styles are needed within the classroom to accommodate the needs of all students and that too many teachers rely solely upon direct instruction methods that overemphasize lecture and note-taking.

The researcher believes that both public and private high school students prefer discussion and other indirect classroom methods because they are more engaging and thought provoking. Lecture is not an engaging teaching method and therefore does not appeal to young minds.

Both public and private school students expressed that they derived utilitarian value from their English classes. Students mentioned real-life skills that they acquired from classes that they would use later in life, including reading and writing skills, debate skills, a multifaceted vocabulary, polished speaking and presentation skills, and the ability to listen effectively. Both male and female students claimed to find value in their English classes at similar rates. This refutes Johnson and Newton's (2003) study that found that young males do not enjoy English and literature classes and that they do not

find value in such subjects. Rather, high school students derived direct value from their English classes regardless of their gender.

It was not surprising that students valued many of the skills that they learned in their English classes. It was also not surprising that students felt that they would use their reading, writing, debate, and analytical skills later in life on a daily basis. The researcher believes that these skills translate well into many professions and that students feel that they will use these particular skills on a daily basis.

Students also indicated the importance of teacher interest and enthusiasm within the classroom. Student opinions corroborated Renzi's (2005) belief that teacher interest and enthusiasm were vital to student satisfaction within the classroom. Both public and private school students expressed an overwhelming desire to have teachers who were not only interested, but passionate as well about the subjects they taught. Students also felt more value toward their English classes when their teachers showed a genuine interest in student success and expressed that interest within the classroom. Teacher interest and enthusiasm within the classroom led to high levels of student enjoyment.

One private school student, Taylor, reported that:

It is very important for a teacher to be enthusiastic during class. If the teacher is not enthusiastic about the readings and the general, everyday class work, the students will not be enthusiastic either. The best teachers are the ones who bring enthusiasm and energy to class even when the subjects are boring or dull. Sometimes only an enthusiastic and caring teacher can make certain subjects interesting. Teachers who love what they do make students want to go to class and learn. I do not enjoy going to classes where the teacher cares less about the material than I do. Teacher enthusiasm is just as important as curriculum.

The opinion expressed by both public and private school participants is similar to the results found when Adelman (2002) surveyed students regarding the importance of

positive factors that help students enjoy class and find academic success. Adelman (2002) stated that there is a direct correlation to positive influences such as teacher interest and enthusiasm and student interest in a class followed by academic success. With 29 of 30 participants describing teacher interest and enthusiasm as a very important factor in their English classes, students tended to be in accord with Adelman's (2002) findings.

While the researcher was a little surprised at how popular English was as a subject, it is believed that students value teacher interest and enthusiasm because generally speaking, people respond positively to energy and a positive attitude. In most walks of life, people prefer to surround themselves with positive energy and avoid negativity.

Both public high school students and private high school students agreed that without English and the skills that English classes have taught them, their perceived future quality of life would suffer. There was, however, one major disparity in the perceived change in students' belief about their future quality of life, including their comfort level, potential salary, and educational level. Public school students indicated a potential loss in future earnings if essential skills (i.e.,) were not acquired throughout their English curriculum experiences. These students stated that they were more prone to have lower paying jobs and salaries.

But contrary to public high school participants, private school students stated that the quality of their lives would suffer based on lack of college-related opportunities. Private school students unanimously indicated their eagerness to continue their education. Furthermore, such participants believed that effective grammar skills, writing skills, and knowledge of English literature were important attributes in the college admissions

process. Private school students also stated that without their English classes, even if they were admitted to a less prestigious university, there was doubt that they would be able to succeed and eventually obtain a degree.

Katie, a student from the public school, stated that:

English classes are very important later in life. Without solid reading, writing, or speaking skills you are not going to be able to get a good job. An interviewer is not going to want to hire someone who is not polished. By polished, I mean that the person seeking the job has to be able to present themselves in a professional manner. In order to get a good job, you have to speak well and use proper grammar. You also have to be able to demonstrate superior reading and writing skills. If it is obvious to the interviewer that you don't have these skills, you will probably not get the job. That translates to less money in the long run.

Contrary to the opinions expressed by public school students, who were more focused on making money later in life, private school students appeared more concerned with the college acceptance process and success at the university level once enrolled in college. Sara, a student from the private school, said that:

I don't think that my future life would be the same without the education that I have received in my English classes over the last four years. If I had not taken English, I would not be able to write legitimate essays for the college application process, would not interview well, and if I could get into a second rate college, I doubt that I would succeed once there. I know that without my English skills, I would not get into the colleges at the top of my list.

The findings support Lemaire and Arce's (2005) study where it was determined that private high school students, on one hand, were more focused on college and more likely to attend college than their public school counterparts. The researcher believes that private high school students are more concerned with college aspirations because their parents are more likely to have attended college and the expectation is that these students will do the same. Private school parents also pay a great deal of money in tuition and

because of this, they set higher expectations for their children, namely a college education. Public school students, on the other hand, were more concerned with how much money they would make after school. The researcher believes that public school students are more concerned with future earnings because a large number will go straight into the workforce. Generally speaking, public school students come from families with lower incomes than their private school counterparts, and money is more of a day to day concern. The researcher also thinks that public schools simply push for graduation in many cases, while private high schools set their standards higher. The academic rigor associated with private schools and the expectations that the vast majority of students will go to college make this expectation become factual. Lemaire and Arce (2005) went on to state that there was a direct connection between the desire to attend college and the enjoyment level that was found in three basic high school courses, specifically, English, math, and science. When students found merit and enjoyment in these three sets of required high school classes, they overwhelmingly made the decision to attend college and, in most cases, were better prepared to do so.

Over the course of the interview process, it became clear that both public high school students and private high school students had a variety of perceptions toward school and toward English as an academic course. Both sets of students expressed unique ideas, as well as their likes and dislikes, about school and English class. Students' perceptions were viewed as complex, informative, and positive in nature. Even though most students have taken the same English classes, each student has had a unique experience.

Implications

Based on the questions stated in Chapter 1, students found utilitarian value in their English classes. While English was not an overwhelming choice as the favorite class among students, it was listed along with math as the most enjoyable and most valuable class offered at the high school level. Factors such as teacher interest and enthusiasm, previous classroom experiences, and teaching methodology were all influential in the development of student choices.

Even though students viewed English as a class with direct utilitarian value, classroom teachers must continue to improve the teaching methodology employed in the English classroom. Students overwhelmingly voiced a desire for more student-centered methods of instruction. Students specifically mentioned that they enjoy classroom discussion, debate, projects that involve group work, theatrical simulations, and the use of contemporary topic matter and themes in class. Students stated that they dislike direct instruction methods that include large amounts of lecture and note-taking in which there was very little input from the students. Students identified such passive teaching methods as boring, not mentally engaging, and one-sided. These methods do not allow for much student-teacher interaction; instead, they rely heavily on the teacher to lecture and transmit large amounts of information over a relatively short amount of time.

Previous studies (Agee, 1997; Nystrand, 1997; Robinson, 2003) have illustrated that students' attitudes can be measured in terms of personal thoughts, attitudes, and perception toward high school English classes. These studies have looked at the popularity of English as an academic class and, in some instances, the value that students feel that they have derived from English. When student attitude has been measured, it is

important to realize that factors such as teacher interest and enthusiasm and the connectivity that teachers share with students are very important elements in establishing a positive classroom rapport and a positive attitude toward English as a class. When teachers use differentiated teaching methodologies that incorporate direct instruction methods and an array of indirect instruction methods, it is believed that a positive perception of English and literature will increase. The implications of failing to implement a wider variety of teaching methodology may lead to a decline in the overall value and perception of English as an academic class. In efforts to avoid this outcome, English educators should continue to research effective teaching methodologies within the classroom, such as those based on indirect instruction, that utilize a great deal of discussion and student input, and they should continue to implement a variety of teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of all students.

Directions for Future Research

Although it is believed that the experiences of the participants depicted in this study represent what could happen to any public or private high school student, additional research is needed to add or to refute the conclusion(s) of this study.

As a result of the findings from this study, possibilities for additional research arose. First, this study identified that the individuals from both private schools and public schools shared similar views about a teacher's style of teaching and the use of English in terms of real-world value. While these findings highlight adolescent viewpoints from two very different groups and show the shared experiences regardless of the educational setting, future research should look into this phenomenon across different regions. It is possible that these findings are limited only to the region in which the study was

conducted. Geographic location can change perceptions, as it plays a role in what the individual views as necessary and needed to be a successful and self-sufficient adult. Because regional location can “color” one’s thoughts, if the findings from other regions were similar, then the findings from the current study would be stronger, as strength would come from the findings being consistent across geographic locale, despite the city, state, or region. Having findings that are unique to a specific area of the U.S. are important, but when data is able to be generalized across a population a national trend is found.

Second, this research is qualitative in design. By adding quantitative data, a broader perspective could be seen, as more participants could be studied. While the data would not be as rich, the numbers would increase, as would the ability to draw more inferences from the data. Quantitative data would strengthen the findings by having numbers to support themes that were identified in this study.

Third, future research should investigate the role that the “unidentified” demographics play. For example, looking deeper than race, gender, socioeconomic status, and region studied would provide more insight into the subgroups that are present in both private and public schools across the nation. Looking deeper would consist of segregating the data by exceptionalities, such as gifted students or students with diagnosed learning disabilities like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or dysgraphia. Each of these unique student characteristics are present in the classrooms, as learning disabilities, including giftedness, do not discriminate across gender, race, socioeconomic status, or geographic lines. Because private and public schools both contain students with diverse learning needs, this study did not address the variables related to learning styles or

learning accommodations needed to succeed in the classroom. In other words, it can be assumed that the individuals in this study represented the normal distribution of student intellectual abilities, but because such data were not collected on this, it cannot be certain. Further investigation of student exceptionalities would add to the field of overall student perceptions of the English classroom, while encouraging other disciplines to do similar research on learning differences and how these play a role in individual perceptions of the teacher, the classroom, and the real-world value. It is a fact that as classrooms become more and more heterogeneous in terms of intellectual abilities, the demands placed on the teacher will shift and the style of teaching may potentially have to shift as well. Unveiling the hidden differences in students and confirming the truths across all students as it relates to their perceptions of the English classroom will only add to the pedagogical strategies that reach all students, regardless of their innate learning abilities.

Having analyzed the data for this study, the complexity and difficulty of being a student could never fully be described by the researcher. The true success of being a student does not fall solely on the student's shoulders. The burden is shared by his or her teachers, parents or guardians, the school system, and community in which the student resides. Further studies, therefore, are vital to provide further insight on the essence of these factors and other related issues, which in turn will be important in further understanding students' perceptions of English.

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Appendix A

Interview Research Questions

1. Suppose you did not take any English/ literature classes in high school. How would that affect your quality of life in the future?
2. Some people might argue that studying English/ literature in high school does not teach skills that can be applied to real life situations. What do you think?
3. How would you rate your English class using a scale of favorite to least favorite? Please explain.
4. How do you think the ideal high school literature class should be taught?
5. How important are teacher interest and enthusiasm in your English class?
6. If you could be principal for one day, what would you change about the way that English is taught at your high school?

Appendix B

October 23, 2009

Dear, _____:

In this letter, I, Cort Casey, a graduate student at the University of Memphis and teacher at St. George's Independent School, am requesting your consent to participate in my research project entitled "High School Students' Perceptions of English and Literature Class".

High school students often have very solidified perceptions and beliefs about the academic subjects that they take in school. It is not often that students are allowed the opportunity to express and explain their reasons for these beliefs. As a high school senior, who has completed the required English and literature classes at the secondary level, it is important that your perceptions of these classes be recorded. The interview will only take thirty minutes. Your identity will remain completely confidential in the presentation of the finding of this study. A pseudonym will be assigned and all identifying places and names within this report will be changed. The interview tapes, transcriptions, and other notes will be stored in a locked cabinet when not being used and destroyed upon completion of this study. There are no perceived risks in this study. Your participation in this study will help teachers and administrators improve high school English and literature curriculum. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please call the Office of Research Administration at (901) 678-5071 or email at slhayes@memphis.edu

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign below.

Sincerely,

Cort Casey
Graduate Student
University of Memphis

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

Student Signature

Date

Parent Signature

Date