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# High School Students' Perceptions of Geography: A Study on the Influences of Life Experiences

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High School Students' Perceptions of Geography: A Study on the Influences of Life Experiences

Kenzi Valadez

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### **Abstract**

Geography is often viewed as a subject that breeds a variety of perceptions by those who take it as a classroom subject. Understanding factors that influence these perceptions is a paramount aspect that many classroom teachers fail to consider. At the time of this study, the researcher was a graduate student completing a year-long clinical teaching placement. The researcher sought to understand what factors influence how students view the subject of geography. The aim of the study was to examine how students perceive their life experiences influencing their view of geography as an academic subject. For this study, the researcher collected data through the use of a survey, focus group interviews, document collections, and observations alongside field notes. Qualitative data was analyzed using the constant comparative method. The author found that common influences behind student perceptions of geography included travel, relationship to a geographic location, relevancy, worldview, and student interest.

## **High School Students' Perceptions of Geography: A Study on the Influences of Life Experiences**

“When will I use this in real life?” Hunter said, seemingly frustrated at our day’s lesson (all names have been replaced with pseudonyms). As I walked around the room during independent practice on the topic of religion in the Middle East, I heard various comments from, and conversations amongst, my students. “It’s important to understand people’s actions and what they practice so that you can understand them,” Felix asserted. “What other people do have nothing to do with you. I mean, it has nothing to do with me,” Isaac claimed. The comments made by my students reasserted a few questions that I have been pondering for quite some time. Why do students have these varying perceptions of geography, and what factors contribute to these perceptions?

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine how students perceive their life experiences and worldview influencing their view of geography as an academic subject. As I began my teaching placement in the geography classroom, I began to notice a trend in student perceptions of the subject. During lecture, classroom activities, or side conversations with peers, I noticed that students had varying opinions on geography, its importance, its relevance, the level of interest associated with it, etc. This variety piqued my curiosity and got me wondering what factors influence these varying perceptions. This study addressed the following research question:

**Research Question:** In what ways do students perceive their life experiences influencing their view of geography as an academic subject?

This action research study took place when I was a graduate student fulfilling a year-long clinical teaching placement. My placement was in a ninth-grade, Pre-Advanced Placement geography classroom at Sale High School. Sale High School is a Title I school located in West Texas. Sale High School includes students from ninth to twelfth grade. At the time of this study, there were 1,777 students enrolled at Sale High School; 62.6% enrolled were ethnic minorities (39.2% were Hispanic, 13.8% were Black, 5.6% were of two or more races, 3.3% were Asian, 0.7% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.1% were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander), and 60% qualified as economically disadvantaged (51% qualified for the free lunch program, and 9% qualified for the reduced-price lunch program).

### **Literature Review**

There are not a significant number of studies that exist on the topic of student perceptions of geography as a result of life experiences or worldview; however, there are a few that have solely explored student perceptions of geography. Understanding the aspects of students' lives that impact their view of geography can have a significant impact on how educators understand and teach their students (Leydon et al., 2016).

### **Considering Worldview when Measuring Perception**

As geography is the study of the world, worldview has the potential to play a significant role in how students define and/or relate to geography. Worldview can be defined as the set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality that ground and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing (Funk, 2001). To understand one's worldview, there must be an understanding of the experiences that shape it. By understanding student experiences and perceptions of geography, teachers will be better able to understand their students and how to

implement sound educational practice pertaining to the teaching of geography (Leydon et al., 2016).

Including the factors of worldview and life experience in this study to gauge the perceptions of students on geography as a classroom subject will strengthen the field of education, as well as the data collected in this study. Worldview and life experiences influence qualitative data in a positive way. Including these factors in surveys and interview questions can yield more authentic results (Clifton & Carrasco, 2018).

### **Existing Research**

A study conducted by Aydin (2010) examined the perceptions of high school students related to the concept of geography. Using student generated metaphors, this study revealed how students understand and relate to concepts in geography class. Aydin (2010) coded the student-generated metaphors into categories that reveal how students perceive geography. These categories included geography as an expression of place, knowledge, life, eternity, value, change and development, guidance, and obligation. However, this study does not explain why these students associate their chosen metaphors and themes with geography.

Many studies have revealed that student opinions of geography were consistent with themes such as people and environment (Hopwood, 2007), futures (Bowlick & Kolden, 2013), space and place, interest, and relevance (Aydin, 2010). Similarly, a study conducted by Fatima (2016) found that students have clear perceptions of the nature, themes, and concept of geography through certain associated themes. These studies did not reveal an explanation for these chosen themes and how they relate to their students' lives or perceptions.

### **Future Practice and Contributions of This Study**

A common theme amongst research is that the quality of teaching and learning has a significant impact on how students view geography, which correlates to their life experiences. Studies have shown that a traditional approach to instruction negatively impacts student learning (Sozen, 2019). Traditional instruction, such as the use of textbooks and filling in blank maps, contributes to negative perceptions and emotions correlated with geography as a classroom subject (Weeden, 2007). Understanding what factors impact student perceptions on geography can help teachers to appeal to student interest, leaning away from these seemingly ineffective, traditional teaching practices (Weeden, 2007).

From research, it is evident that student choice to study geography is directly influenced by factors such as interest, usefulness or success in the subject, individual interests, aptitudes and aspirations that reflect their life history and experiences (Weeden, 2007). Family, peers, the wider community, and other outside influences such as the media and literature are important, either implicitly or explicitly, to understanding student perceptions of geography. Existing research has provided the field of education with insight into how students perceive geography; however, most research has failed to address factors behind student perceptions of geography that explain why they bear those perceptions.

Leydon et al. (2016) emphasized that “future research should engage with high school teachers and students through more interactive methods (focus groups and interviews) in order to gain a better understanding of student interest in geography and how best to stimulate and nurture this interest” (p. 84). In alignment with this suggestion, I collected data in this study through focus group interviews to gain a better understanding of why students have positive, neutral, or negative perceptions of geography (see Appendix A). There have yet to be studies that address how student life experiences influence their view of geography as a classroom subject.

My study has aimed to fill this gap by providing the reasons behind student perceptions of geography and how they can potentially play a role in the positive, neutral, or negative views that they have on the subject.

### **Methods**

The following sections describe my action research study that took place in a ninth-grade, Pre-Advanced Placement geography classroom in a small West Texas town. Due to the fact that I had previously completed a semester in my placement at the time of this study, I had built and developed meaningful relationships with my students. This allowed my students to feel more comfortable as I collected data for this study.

### **Participant Selection**

The participants of this study were the students in my sixth period Pre-Advanced Placement geography class taught in my clinical teaching placement at Sale High School. As school records indicate, this class had 31 students, 20 of them male and 11 of them female. These students also had diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds; twenty-two students were Caucasian, five students were Black, three students were biracial, and one student was Asian. Of the 31 students, eight were of Hispanic ethnic backgrounds. Aside from their racial and ethnic diversity, these students also showed a diversity in learning. Of the 31 students, eight had been identified as gifted and talented, and five students received special education services. The diversity in this pool of students proved useful for the purpose of this study.

All assenting students who had provided their signed parental consent forms and assent forms participated in the initial survey. In this study, I had eight male and two female participants for a total of 10; eight were Caucasian, one was Black, and one was Asian. Of these participants, two were of Hispanic ethnic backgrounds. I used purposive sampling to select a

range of 9-12 students to participate in focus group interviews (Patton, 1990). I identified the students who were to participate in focus groups based on a survey with Likert scale and open-ended questions that gauged their general perceptions of geography (Hubbard & Powell, 2003). For this study, students were divided into three groups for focus group interviewing: one with positive perceptions of geography, another with neutral perceptions of geography, and the last with negative perceptions of geography. These students, along with those not participating in focus groups and had signed parent consent and assent forms, participated in all other areas of the study.

### **Data Collection**

For the purposes of this study, I used qualitative methods of data collection. This included a survey with Likert scale and open-ended questions, interviews in the form of focus groups, anecdotal records, headnotes, and artifacts typically generated by students in a ninth-grade geography class. The survey was implemented at the beginning of the study. The survey conducted at the beginning of the study was used to place students into positive, neutral, and negative perception groups. Using a 1-5 numbered scale, students' answers were tallied, and they were provided with a score. The students with the highest scores were placed in the positive group, students with median scores were placed in the neutral group, and students with the lowest scores were placed in the negative group.

Contingent on survey data, I divided the participants into three groups for the focus group interviews using purposive sampling: those with positive perceptions were placed in one focus group, those with neutral perceptions placed in another, and those with negative perceptions were placed in another group (Patton, 1990). Each focus group, depending on the

answers to the survey, had about 3-4 students each. These interviews lasted anywhere between 15-20 minutes. The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The next modes of data collection used were anecdotal records and headnotes based on classroom observations taken throughout the study period (McFarland, 2008; Hendricks, 2017). The anecdotal notes were taken quickly during classroom observations throughout the entirety of the study period (McFarland, 2008). These notes were fleshed out into field notes, as described by Hendricks (2017), which are more detailed descriptions of the observations made throughout the study.

The next mode of data collection used was artifacts produced by students. This included journals with provided prompts. Student artifacts also included illustrations and compositions that were assigned to them once a week. Regardless of the students' original perception of geography, each student was provided with the same journal prompts. There was one journal prompt per week implemented for the duration of the two-to-four-week study period. These prompts served to help me gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the participants' perceptions, including what factors and/or past experiences have shaped their perceptions. Student work aligned with the lessons and TEKS, or the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, being covered during the unit of study for each week.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected for this study was qualitative in nature. This data was analyzed using the constant comparative method, which compares data with existing findings both throughout the study and after data is collected (Hubbard & Power, 2013). Through this method, I was able to initially code my data then create hierarchies of supporting codes. These codes surfaced emerging themes throughout my data that helped me to organize my findings.

As I began to analyze the first 20% my data, I began by identifying 15-20 level 1 codes. According to Tracy (2013) this is “a descriptive code that shows data’s basic content and processes, requires little interpretation, and focuses on ‘what’ is present in the data” (p. 202). I used these initial level 1 codes to code the remaining 80% of the data. From here, I generated 3-5 level 2 codes, which are “codes that serve to explain, theorize, and synthesize data; they include interpretation and help the researcher identify patterns, rules, or cause-effect progressions” (Tracy, 2013, p. 202). I kept a codebook throughout the coding process to organize my findings (see Appendix B), which was a display of data that lists key codes, definitions, and examples that were used in my analysis (Tracy, 2013). In addition to a codebook, I kept analytic memos. I wrote a memo for each of my level 2 codes to describe the meaning, significance, and connections among my data. In addition, I used the data analysis method of indexing. This method allowed me to narrow my focus through “listing the categories I noted as well as the pages [...] where they occur” (Hubbard & Power, 2003, p. 93). Essentially, I created an index with common themes and occurrences in order to identify key patterns within my data, which helped me to both organize and analyze it more efficiently.

The numerical data from the Likert scale questions on the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The nine Likert scale questions were based on a numerical scale that allowed me to calculate a score for each participant. The scores from the Likert scale questions were totaled to attribute a perception level to each participant based on their answers. The numerical data from this survey was charted in a bar graph to visually represent and describe the findings from the survey.

### **Findings**

Analysis of qualitative data led to the discovery of four major themes: impact of travel on perception, relationship to a geographic location, factors that impact perception of geography, and a grander scale. Analysis of the quantitative data from the survey revealed student perceptions of geography that allowed me to use purposive sampling to separate participants into positive, neutral, and negative perception groups (Patton, 1990). To visually present my findings, I utilized poetic transcriptions for my qualitative data and a bar graph for my quantitative data. Poetic transcriptions are a type of found poetry the researcher creates from the words of participants to convey key findings from qualitative data (Glesne, 1997). For each poetic transcription, I used student quotes from the short answer questions on the survey, field note quotes, focus group interviews, and student artifacts to create poetry that personified students' perceptions about geography as a classroom subject. One poetic transcription was created for each of the four major themes found in my data, and they represent a culmination of student words. Essentially, each poetic transcription conveys the words of multiple participants that fall under a specific code or theme.

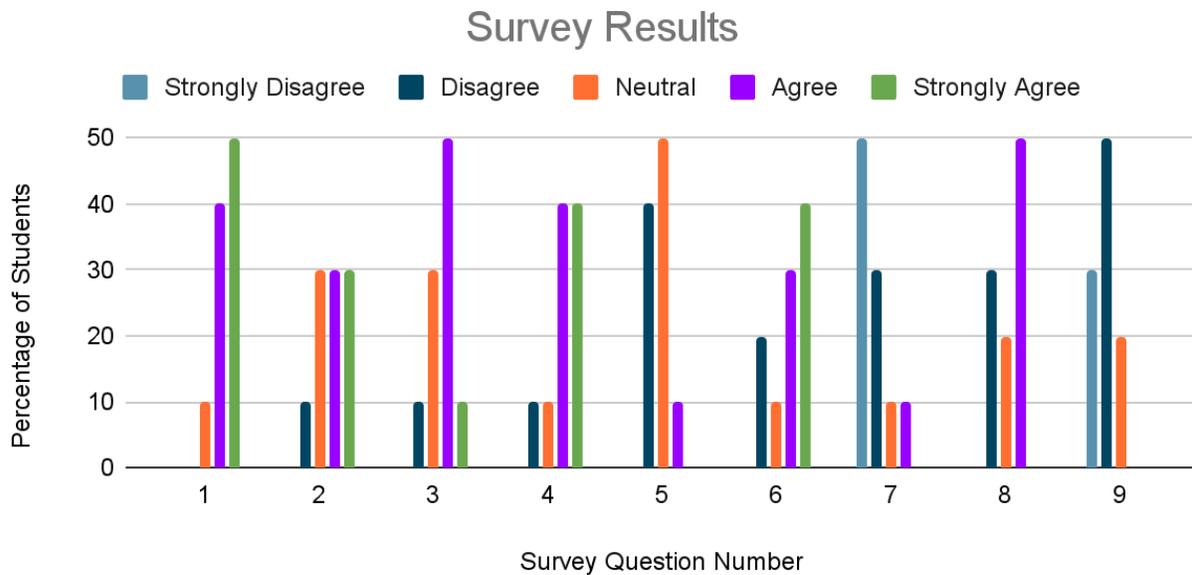
### **Quantitative Findings**

The implications from the survey were revealed as I further analyzed student perceptions through focus group interviews, student artifacts, and classroom observation. The survey results are depicted below. As Figure 1 indicates, an interesting finding from the survey was that students did not tend to answer strongly disagree. The exception to this was questions 7 and 9, which appeal to a more negative perception (see Appendix C). Upon further analysis of the survey results, it can be indicated that students did not have strong, negative feelings towards geography as a subject. Although there were three students in my negative perceptions group, none of them felt too strongly about their dislike for geography as a classroom subject. There

was always something, whether that be a certain topic discussed in geography or a personal interest, that kept them from strong, negative perceptions of geography.

### Figure 1

#### *Quantitative Results from the Conducted Survey*



Another conclusion that was drawn from my survey findings was that the idea of geography being relevant to their lives was indifferent; there were equal responses of strongly agree, agree, and neutral (question 2). Only one student strongly disagreed by stating that geography had no relevance to his life. This conveyed to me that relevancy in geography as a classroom subject varies greatly from person to person. The reasons behind their perceptions of the relevancy of geography, as well as geography as a classroom subject, were found in the following major themes derived from my qualitative data.

**Impact of Travel on Perception**

I travel a lot.

So, it's important to educate yourself.

When I travel places, I want to be aware of the customs,  
the traditions,  
and everything else there.

Traveling and going other places influence  
how I see the world around me.

We can use geography when we travel to other places.

Realizing that there is more out there,

More than what we have already seen or see.

It's something you just have to experience for yourself.

I wouldn't travel; I'm content to just stay here in West Texas.

I've been out of Texas a few times,

Not outside of the United States.

Well, I mean,

If I want to learn about another place,

I can just research it.

Well, I mean,

It's very dangerous to travel.

Well, I mean,

Travel can be expensive at times.

So, if I was on a budget,

I would just research a place.

Well, I mean,

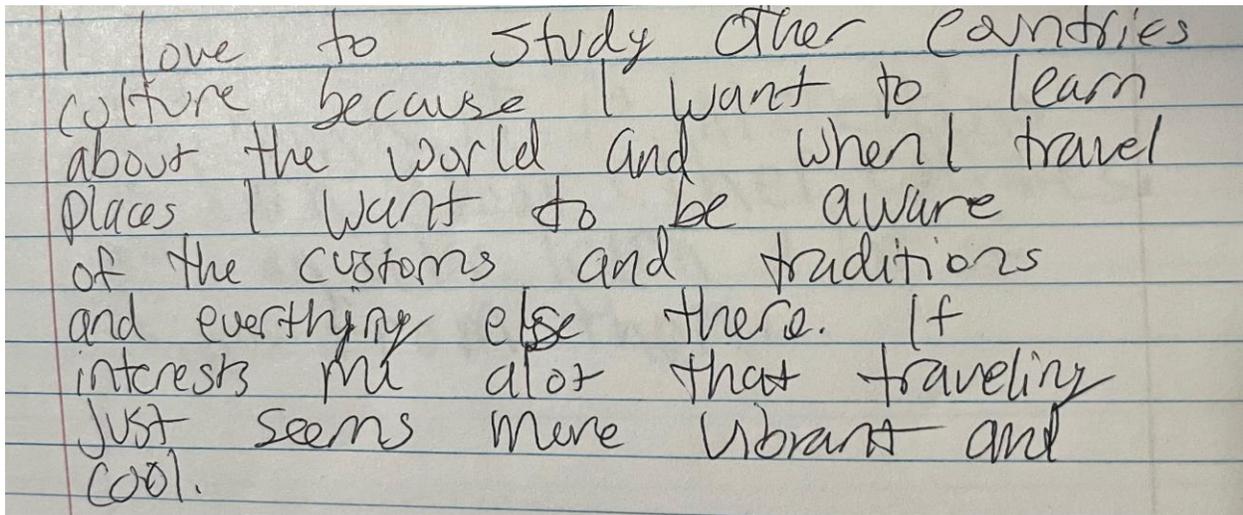
We can just Google something, and it tells us information.

One of the more recurring themes amongst my data was the impact of travel on how students perceive geography. This theme was present amongst every perception group; the pattern I noticed was that the positive and neutral groups had done more travelling or had more

of a desire to travel than the negative group. The following Figure 2 was a journal entry from Bryan, a student in the positive perception group.

### Figure 2

*Bryan's Journal Prompt Four Entry*



*Note.* Bryan's response to prompt number four that states, "I love to study other countries culture because I want to learn about the world and when I travel places, I want to be aware of the customs and traditions and everything else there. It interests me a lot that traveling just seems more vibrant and cool."

Based on the data collected from my participants, it was revealed that a student's desire to travel, lack of desire to travel, and experience with travel all contributed to how they perceived studying the geography of the world in a classroom setting. A common theme amongst the negative group was their minimal experience with travel and lack of desire to do so. They suggested to me in their interview that travel is expensive; however, even if provided the funds and opportunities, two out of the three showed little interest in doing travelling even if this barrier was nonexistent. In our interview, Hunter stated, "I don't really have anywhere (I'd like to travel) because I'm content just to stay here in West Texas." Based on these findings, I think

that an implication of the theme of travel is that a student's lack of travel experience can also contribute to a narrower worldview. Without experience of a world outside of West Texas, it can be difficult for students to realize its relevance to their lives and the study of the world around them.

### **Relationship to a Geographic Location**

I have a connection to it; I'm Colombian.

I was born in the Philippines.

I was born in South Dakota.

I was born in Washington D.C.

I was born in Florida.

I was born in Canada.

I have a connection to it.

I was born there or lived there.

I was born in West Texas.

Not going to lie, our town is a little place.

If you live here, there's really not that much to do.

But it's not the worst place,  
not the worst place at all.

There are worst places.

Even though we live in a little place, that's not the *whole* world.

It's *important* to learn about where we originate from—  
the history of our earth.

It's *good* to know where we came from  
so that we're prepared to realize there are other different things in the world.

Our ancestors aren't all from Texas.

Another major theme that was present in my data was a student's relationship to a geographic location. This theme mostly contributed to a more positive perception of geography,

even amongst the negative group. The more connected a student felt to a geographic location, whether through familial ties or experience, the more positively they perceived geography as a subject. Below is a transcript from the neutral perception group that indicates how this relationship can affect student perceptions of geography:

Daniel- Well my family is from England and Germany, so I- Europe. I would love to go to Europe, just to go explore more about those cultures. Just go see what they do and just, yeah, just explore more about myself and my family's history.

K- Okay! So, I think I'm hearing that you both have some sort of connection to where you want to go.

Daniel- Right.

K- And you want to learn more about the people, the culture, right? Am I hearing that right?

Daniel- Yes ma'am.

The same interest that is sparked when students can relate to a place or concept in world geography was present within all groups. Although Hunter in the negative group did not indicate any connections to a geographic location, both Isaac and Jacob showed interest in studying about Europe and Canada, respectively, as a result of previously living there for a short period of time and having family there. Every student who had positive and neutral perceptions had lived somewhere outside of West Texas within their lifetime. Two of the three students in the negative perception group had lived outside of West Texas, but do not remember it because they were so young. Hunter was the only participant that had never lived anywhere outside of West Texas and expressed his content in remaining there.

**Factors that Impact Perception of Geography**

There's more cultures and worlds other than mine.

Culture is so vibrant,

It's just so cool.

It's eye opening.

I don't mind learning about the culture,

It's the religion that I hate;

I think it's so boring.

I think it's interesting to learn about other people's religions.

No one should be stuck in one worldview.

Well, I like to learn about physical geography,

I like to see all of the mountains and lakes.

I like elevation because I learned it when I was 10,

So, I think it's important to be able to read and understand maps.

I love to study other countries culture,

I just want to learn about the world.

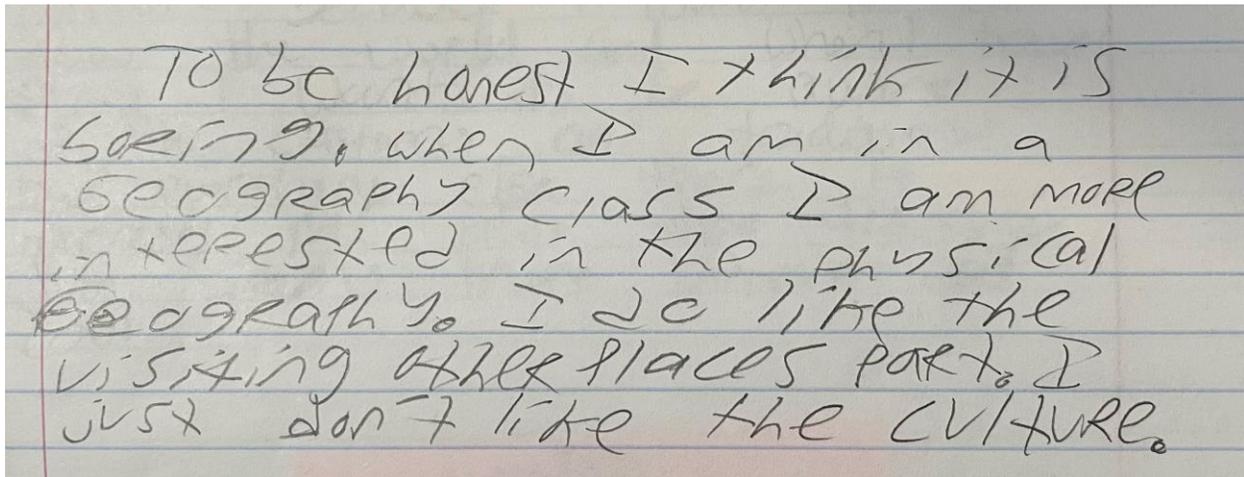
Although there were many factors that could contribute to a student's perception of the study of the world, this level 2 code highlighted the most present factors that were occurring within my data. The umbrella theme of factors that impact perception of geography appeared throughout every data collection method I analyzed. The level 1 codes present in this theme included the following: positive student-teacher relationship, relating to student interest, background knowledge/ personal experiences, impact of culture, and feelings about geography as a subject. Among these factors, the impact of culture occurred the most.

The placement that I conducted my research study in approached the study of geography through a humanitarian and cultural perspective. This means that, instead of solely focusing on the physical environment studied in traditional geography classes, our classroom heavily

incorporated the study of the people that inhabit the earth. This approach to world geography could possibly present itself as unattractive to students who are not interested in cultural or humanitarian studies. This concept was evident amongst the negative perception group. The following Figure 3 depicts Jacob's response to journal prompt four (see Appendix D).

### Figure 3

*Jacob's Journal Prompt Four Entry*



*Note.* His response reads, "To be honest I think it's boring. When I am in a geography class, I am more interested in the physical geography. I do like the visiting other places part. I just don't like the culture."

Since Jacob was not interested in learning about people and cultures and this was the approach of our classroom, this lack of interest contributed to his negative perception of geography as a classroom subject. Students with positive and neutral perceptions all expressed the importance of studying other cultures and verbally expressed having a positive attitude about studying geography as a classroom subject. Another theme that emerged through this code that supported my research question was that student interest in geographical concepts varied amongst participants. Students in positive, neutral, and negative groups had a personal interest,

or expressed having background knowledge about a concept in geography. For example, the following quote is from Hunter during my focus group interview with the negative group: “I like elevation because I learned it when I was 10. In Boy Scouts when I learned about it- it’s kind of like when you draw circles on your hand and close it like a fist, and it pops out like mountains do on a map.” He expressed his excitement when learning about maps in geography the first semester. Thus, students from every group had some degree of personal interest that increased their positive perceptions of certain topics in geography, but not necessarily the subject as a whole.

### **A Grander Scale**

West Texas is a bit limited as to what we’re exposed to,  
Everything else just seems more grand.

Family, friends, news, people around me and school,  
It opens my eyes.

It’s very important to learn about geography  
because our lives aren’t just West Texas.

I like learning about a lot of countries,  
not one in particular so that I’m educated.  
I like to know what people are talking about.

Geography gives us a way bigger understanding of how different we *all* are from each other.

All  
Across  
The  
World.

Being trapped in one worldview can be dangerous.  
We are *all* citizens of the world.

Geography is something that not only people going into that field can use,  
Instead, everyone should learn.

It brings us *all* closer to one another.

In the future,  
it could be more important to be culturally aware.

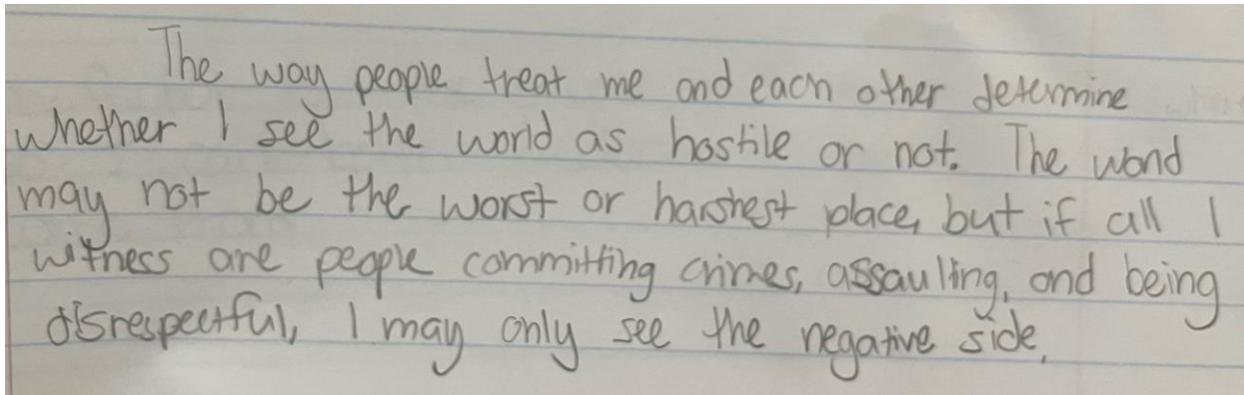
But, I mean we are young, so-

The theme titled a grander scale represents how students see the world around them. As geography is the study of the world, this level 2 code helped me to identify specific factors that influence how students see the world around them through the study of geography. The four level 1 codes that support this level 2 code include the following: pertaining to their worldview, relevance to future/life, lack of life experience, and being aware of the world around you.

There were many factors that supported students' positive, neutral, and negative perceptions of worldview. One of the most recurring themes under the level 2 code of a grander scale was the code "pertaining to worldview". This code was consistent across all perception groups. Each of the participants identified factors that influence how they see the world around them; these factors included the media, friends, family, culture, bias, and relationships. Students also indicated factors within their worldview that contributed to both positive and negative perceptions of the world around them. Negative factors included bias in portrayal of people and events in the media, social media, and the way that people around them act or treat one another. The following Figure 4 conveys Adam's belief in what affects his worldview:

**Figure 4**

*Adam's Journal Prompt Two Entry*



The way people treat me and each other determine whether I see the world as hostile or not. The world may not be the worst or harshest place, but if all I witness are people committing crimes, assaulting, and being disrespectful, I may only see the negative side.

*Note.* Adam's response reads, "The way people treat me and each other determine whether I see the world as hostile or not. The world may not be the worst or harshest place, but if all I witness are people committing crimes, assaulting, and being disrespectful, I may only see the negative side."

Another theme that was present amongst this level 2 code was the awareness of the world around them. Although this code presented itself within each of the groups, the highest presence of this code was amongst the positive and neutral perception groups. Each of the students in these groups expressed the importance of learning more about the world around them. The difference between their reasoning was that the positive group wished to do so for travel, while the neutral group wished to expand their cultural awareness and world knowledge for when they come into contact with different people, as well as solely for the sake of knowledge.

Students with negative perceptions correlated their worldview, or perceptions of the world, on lack of experience due to age. This code, lack of experience, was only present within the negative perception group's data. This revealed to me that students in the negative group felt that they had not yet established a worldview due to their lack of experiences. Additionally, through the code relevance to life and future, I was able to see that the negative group did not see a relevance between what they learn in geography and their everyday lives. The belief in lack of experience and knowledge pertaining to worldview, in correspondence with the lack of relevance

to them, both contribute to why students with negative perceptions of geography bear those perceptions.

### **Limitations**

Prior to conducting this study, I had a few biases that I had to address. First, after formulating my research question, I was quick to assume the factors that impact a student's perception of geography that I believed would be present in my data. These preconceived factors included travel and seeing the world, knowing people from other places, and having an interest in learning about other places. Even though the data yielded these factors to be present in itself, I believe that this internal bias could be considered a weakness of this study, even after confronting these preconceived notions and biases prior to conduction.

An additional weakness that should be noted within this study pertains to the survey that was conducted at the beginning of this study. I noticed that only one student indicated in their short answer that they did not see geography as an important subject to study; however, as data collection proceeded, more students revealed this belief through our interviews and journal prompts. So, I would argue that the nature in which I administered the survey could have caused students to choose a more "acceptable" answer choice. On the other hand, an alternative explanation for this could have been that students could have simply changed their perspective as self-reflection was occurring throughout the study.

### **Implications for Teachers**

Despite these possible weaknesses, I learned from my data that there are many life experiences and factors of worldview that can impact how a student perceives geography as a classroom subject. Although this may not pertain to all students who perceive geography positively, those within my study had travelled, experienced the world outside of their

hometown, view world issues as relevant to them, and have a personal interest in specific and/or general topics covered in a geography classroom. I learned that students who are neutral about geography have done some travel, see issues in the world as relevant and important to learn about, and wish to learn more about the world around them in order to remain educated for the sake of other people and knowledge itself. Additionally, I learned that students who perceive geography negatively have done little to no travel, see world issues and other places around the world as irrelevant to their current lives and futures, and have little interest in topics that are covered in a typical world geography class. Although these themes were common amongst my students, this does not mean that they apply to all students. However, I do believe that the patterns that my data revealed about factors that influence student perceptions of geography could be common amongst many students.

One thing that was made clear to me as I was studying student perceptions is that I was not the only one who was exploring these perceptions; the participants in my study were able to reflect about their personal outlook on our class in a deeper way. There were times that I would ask students questions, and some would reply, “I have never thought of that”, or “I guess I never knew that’s why I thought that!” As a teacher, one of the most rewarding things is seeing students grow in their understanding of both themselves and the subject you teach. A way to do that is through self-reflection, which is a task I recommend that teachers do with their students. This not only allows the students to get to know themselves better, but helps the teacher understand their students’ way of thinking, interests, and justifications for beliefs. In turn, this two-way understanding can help educators teach their students in the most effective and personalized ways possible.

Alongside reflection in the classroom, there are many other implications for educators that I have concluded from my study. A practice that helped me better understand what factors influenced how my students perceived geography was appealing to their interests. This not only helps you get to know your students, but it allows you the avenue in which to teach them in ways that are both helpful and engaging for them. Regardless of a student's perception of geography as a subject, students learn best when they are engaged; engagement is at its highest when students connect through some level of interest.

Once I learned some of the interests my students had in geography, I was able to use them to relate to my students and pique their learning interests in the geography setting. For example, Hunter, a participant in the negative perceptions group, expressed his interest in topography as a result of his time in Boy Scouts. He told me that his troop had to use topographic maps in order to find the best campsites, so this was a topic of conversation that I could use to engage him. Although we had moved past the unit on studying types of maps, I could use this common ground to build a better relationship with him. Another example would be Cesar, a member of my positive perceptions group. During our interview he expressed his interest in flags; he mentioned that he plays a flag guessing game with other students in our class in their geometry classroom. I was able to use this knowledge to incorporate information about flags into a lesson just two weeks later, and this got a positive reaction from students in all groups.

As a teacher, it is crucial to understand that students come from various backgrounds, life experiences, and worldviews. This means that our best practice has to be suited to meet them where they are in their life and learning journeys. From this research, I was able to gather that I cannot control the external factors that influence a student's perception of my classroom subject, such as travel and lack of life experience; however, I do have the power to control the factors

that occur within my classroom. By appealing to student interests, understanding the common factors that impact their worldview, helping them to find relevancy in my curriculum, and fostering a positive relationship with students, I can help to boost student perceptions of my classroom subject.

The research question of this study was answered well through my findings; however, I am still left wondering more for future studies and areas of research. What impacts does social media have on how students perceive geography? The impact of social media was hinted at by my students through the factors that may impact their worldview, but I was not able to investigate it further within this study. I believe that future studies would benefit the world of education by investigating this further as social media and technology play a significant role in our students lives, both inside and outside of school. Additionally, I wonder if there are any interventions that could be attempted in the classroom that could possibly gauge the changes in student perceptions of geography. I believe social studies educators could benefit greatly from knowing what form of interventions could possibly increase positive student perceptions of their classroom subjects.

Conducting this study not only helped me to understand my students, but it helped me to understand myself as an educator. The findings of this study have heavily impacted my teaching practices, both as I conducted the study and in my future practice. Through this study, I was able to see how students perceive their life experiences influencing their view of geography as an academic subject through the impact of travel, relationship to a geographic location, relevancy to life experiences, and their worldview. As I continue in the journey of educating children, I will always ensure to take with me the lessons that I have learned from this study, both in the near future and in years to come.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. What is your favorite book/movie? Why?
2. If you would go anywhere in the world, where would you go? Why?
3. What places have you lived before? If you've only lived in Abilene, where have your family members/ancestors lived?
4. How do you think living in Abilene influences how you think about the world?
5. In what ways do you think that studying geography is relevant to your life?
6. Tell me about an experience you've had that has changed or influenced how you see the world.
7. In what ways do you think that your perceptions of the world around you have on your thoughts or feelings about geography?
8. Of all the topics that we have covered in geography thus far, which was your favorite to learn about? why?
9. In what ways do you think that your life experiences shape how you think about the world?
10. How do you feel about having to take a geography course as a freshman?

\*Questions may vary and additional questions may be asked depending on the answers of the participants.

## Appendix B

## Data Codebook

Code	Level	Definition	Example
Impact of Travel on Perception	2	This code represents both positive and negative impacts that travel has on student perception of geography.	“It’s something you just have to experience for yourself.”
Personal Experiences with Travel	1	This code represents a student’s personal experience with traveling.	“I would visit Okinawa, Japan again just because I’ve been there for like half a year, but I never really got to experience it that much.”
Desire to Travel	1	This code represents the desire of a student to travel outside of West Texas.	“Yeah, I want to visit Jerusalem.”
No Desire to Travel	1	This code represents a student's lack of desire to travel.	“Uh, I don’t really have anywhere because I’m content just to stay here in West Texas.”
Factors that Hinder Travel	1	This code represents factors that keep students from traveling.	“Travel can be expensive at times.”
Relationship to a Geographic Location	2	This code represents the relationships that a student has to a location that is related to travel or places of origin.	“My family is from England and Germany, so I- Europe. I would love to go to Europe.”
Connection/Tie to a Place	1	This code represents a personal connection that a student has to a place that they would like to travel to.	“I have a connection to it; I’m Colombian.”
Living Somewhere Outside of West Texas	1	This code represents locations that a student has lived outside of West Texas.	“I lived in Washington D.C.”
Feelings about West Texas	1	This code represents the positive, neutral, and negative feelings that students have about West Texas.	“Our town is a pretty like closed off town, I feel.”

Knowing Your Roots	1	This code represents a student's desire to travel to or learn about a place in geography as a result of learning more about oneself.	"It's good to know where we came from, so we're prepared to realize that there are other different things in the world."
Knows People from Other Places	1	This code represents when a student knows people from places outside of West Texas.	"Some of my family's friends are missionaries and they were at Ukraine for about 20 years."
Factors that Impact Perception of Geography	2	This code represents the positive and negative factors that impact how a student perceives geography as a classroom subject.	"The subject provides greater support when it comes to solving issues like politics and everyday problems that we go through."
Positive Student-Teacher Relationship	1	This code represents the positive student-teacher relationship present between researcher and participants through humor.	"So, uh, is that bucket of water of there for torturing?"
Relating to Student Interest	1	This code represents student interests that can have an impact on their perception or feelings about geography.	"I like to learn about physical geography because I like to see all of the mountains and lakes and stuff."
Background Knowledge/Personal Experiences	1	This code represents topics in geography that students have background knowledge on, or personal experiences with, that impact how they view the topic in a geography class.	"In Boy Scouts when I learned about it- it's kind of like when you draw circles on your hand and close it like a fist and it pops out like mountains do on a map."
Impact of Culture	1	This code represents how culture impacts student perceptions of geography.	"There's more cultures and worlds other than mine."
Feelings about Geography as a Subject	1	This code represents how students feel about geography as a classroom subject.	"Geography is important. I feel like everyone should take it, or have some sort of education about the religions, and the geography and just geography in general."
A Grander Scale	2	This code represents how students see the world around them.	"Everything seems more grand."

Pertaining to their Worldview	1	This code represents the various factors that influence or pertain to a student's worldview.	"Family, friends, news, people around me, and school."
Relevance to Future/Life	1	This code represents how topics in geography are perceived to be relevant, or irrelevant, to a student's future or daily life.	"When will I use this in real life?"
Lack of Life Experience	1	This code represents how a student perceives lack of life experience as	"I mean we are young."
Being Aware of the World Around You	1	This code represents a student's belief in importance both cultural and world awareness.	"Others should take the time to learn about other cultures and geography in general. No one should be stuck in one worldview."

## Appendix C

### Survey

Read the following questions and answer them by rating your response from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Answer honestly; your answers will not be shared with anyone other than Ms. Valadez.

1. I have been to a few places outside of Abilene, TX.

Strongly Disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly Agree



2. I feel that geography is relevant to my life.

Strongly Disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly Agree



3. Learning about geography in the classroom is helpful to my life outside of school.

Strongly Disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly Agree



4. I think that my life experiences, like where I have lived and encounters with other people, have an influence on how I see the world around me.

Strongly Disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly Agree



5. Geography is one of my least favorite subjects to learn about in school.

Strongly Disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly Agree



6. If I had the opportunity, I would travel to learn more about other peoples and places in the world.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

7. I often don't think of geography as an important subject to learn about in school.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

8. Geography is one of my favorite subjects to learn about in school.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

9. I feel that geography is not particularly relevant to my life.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

10. Circle one of the words in the parenthesis and explain your choice by finishing the sentence stem in your own words:

I think that geography is (important/ not important) to learn about in school because

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## **Appendix D**

### **Journal Prompts**

1. Do you think that other people's cultures can affect your own? Explain.
2. What are some things that can influence how you see the world around you?
3. Do you think that social media helps or hurts how we see the world? Explain your choice.
4. What is your opinion on studying other cultures and places?