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Insight Into How College Freshmen Understand Their Reading and Text Experiences

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Concordia University–Portland
College of Education
Doctorate of Education Program

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Insight Into How College Freshmen Understand Their Reading and Text Experiences

Jolie Dorrell
Concordia University–Portland
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in
Higher Education

William Boozang, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee
Catherine Gniewek, Ed.D., Content Specialist
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Concordia University–Portland

2020
Abstract

This qualitative case study was designed to add insight to the scholarly literature about how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences. Two research questions guided this study: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences, and how do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school. The researcher utilized semistructured interviews with a sample of 13 participants in a rural county in the western portion of the United States. Participants also provided textual samples from their freshman level college courses. Each participant had completed at least one semester of postsecondary education at either a community college, technical school, or four-year university. The key findings in this study were that despite warnings of increased rigor and volume, students were ultimately overwhelmed with the substantial reading requirements upon entering college. Class participation based on the course reading was rigorous and deep. The most common way to manage the amount of required college reading was to just skim the text and highlight the main ideas. Nearly all participants indicated that they completed high school with little or no reading of textbooks or prose fiction. College freshmen who attended technical schools experienced the biggest gap in preparation for the reading experiences that they faced in college. Community college students indicated the least amount of personal responsibility for their reading skills or abilities. Conversely, attendees of four-year universities shared the most personal responsibility for their learning and reading skills or practice.

Keywords: secondary education, reading, postsecondary students, postsecondary education
Dedication

This work is dedicated to Lauren, Sam, Ashley, and Allison. You four children bore the brunt of my journey from new teacher to doctoral graduate. You were also the encouragement for me when the journey became difficult. I realize that we missed time together over the years as I struggled to make things come together for the five of us; however, everything that I worked for was motivated by my drive to always be able to provide everything that we needed. This step, like prior ones, was taken with the desire to further cement my ability to be a good mother to you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This qualitative case study was designed to add insight to the scholarly literature about how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences. Many college students enter postsecondary education with limited preparation, as determined by standardized test results (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018). The lack of reading preparation during high school becomes evident in numerous ways when the students are faced with college level reading and assignments. Two research questions guided this study: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences, and how do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school.

Introduction to the Problem

By the time students receive a high school diploma, they are deemed ready for college or career level work by their high school and by society (Kokemuller, 2018). In fact, a high school diploma is thought of as a signal to students and parents that graduates are ready for the postsecondary education that lies ahead (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). But in the United States, statistics show that less than 50% of the graduates will be proficient readers (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018). Reading proficiency is defined by the University of England as readers who know what and when they are comprehending and when they are not comprehending; they can identify their purposes for reading and identify the demands placed on them by a particular text. They can identify when and why the meaning of the text is unclear to them and can use a variety of strategies to solve comprehension problems or deepen their understanding of a text. (Paris, Cross, & Lipson, 1984, as cited in Arajou, n.d., p. 1)

Reading proficiency levels remain at less than 50% of high school graduates in the United States and have stayed relatively unchanged for nearly two decades (ACT, Inc., 2018).
Despite living in a first world nation where literacy is a priority, improving reading abilities among high school students remains difficult (Balingit, 2017; Chong, 2014; Sparks, 2018). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, failed to deliver anticipated results, some of which were making sure that all students, including disadvantaged students, achieve academic proficiency (Strauss, 2015). Increased education funding has not been proven to influence academic performance (Lips, Watkins, & Fleming, 2008). Lips et al. (2008) noted that spending on public education increased 49% from 1988 to 2008, yet there was no concurrent increase in NAEP reading scale scores. This trend continues today, as spending increased from a national average of $5,001 to $11,392 per pupil in 2015 (Public Education Finances: 2015, 2017). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018), again education spending increased another 3.2% in 2016, the most recent year for which data is available. Yet, literacy levels remain stagnant.

While reading proficiency levels have not improved, college enrollment increased 14% between 2005 and 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The growth in college enrollment, contrasted with the low percentage of students who are proficient readers, creates a conundrum. College faculty and professors report that many students find the transition from high school reading to college level text challenging. Faculty note that underprepared students slow down the instructor and are unable to perform the skills required in an entry level college class. Melvin Brooks, Associate Dean of Baltimore City Community College notes, “Some [students] are so deficient, to try to include them in a credit-bearing course without that foundation would be a disservice,” (Butrymowicz, 2017, p. 1) adding that the professor and other students would also be held back by a classmate so ill equipped to keep up. Student enrollment
increases have brought both prepared and underprepared students to campus, and higher education has responded with increases in remedial education.

The challenges that students face become evident in the numbers of students who are enrolled in remedial courses in college. Remedial course work, which are required courses that do not count toward graduation credit, is required for approximately one-third of students (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016). Colleges and universities make determinations regarding the necessity of remedial courses when students arrive on campus. The decision about whether a student will be enrolled in remedial coursework is most often based on performance on placement tests. However, “there is variation in the types of tests that are used, the rules for exemption [from remedial courses] and the cutoff scores for college-level placement; it is not always clear what drives differences in these policies from institution to institution” (Bowden, Belfield, & Scott, 2014, p. 2).

Students may be shocked to find themselves placed in courses that they are required to pay for, complete, and pass prior to beginning their credit-bearing courses. Many of these students considered themselves successful high school students, if that judgment was made by high school grade point average (GPA), ACT score, course assessment scores, or other typical factors (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016). However, students who were successful by high school standards may find that college entails different expectations for success, and the transition is not as smooth as they anticipated. This may be attributed to discrepancies in placement test results. Rodríguez et al. (2014) cite research where, using information on test scores and high school performance, they estimate that one-third of English test takers, and one quarter of math test takers are incorrectly assigned. The students may be
assigned to college-level courses when they are not prepared for the rigor, or they may be assigned to remedial courses when they would likely be successful.

Students’ placement in remedial courses may also stem from the discrepancy between high school and college expectations. High school students experience one set of expectations and then find that they do not meet the new standards required to attain college success (Rodriguez, 2010; Venzia, Callan, Finney, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005, as cited in Moss, 2013). For instance, the average high school GPA has risen in the last 30 years with no corresponding increase in skill level. Thus, a GPA of 3.2 in 1980 is now equivalent to a GPA of 3.5 (Woodruff & Ziomeck, 2004) while the students are no more competent than what a 3.2 GPA indicated that they were 30 years ago. Further, when studying data provided by the Education Department and from the College Board on cohorts of students from 1998 to 2016, the average high school grade point average increased from 3.27 to 3.38 in those 18 years (Jaschik, 2017). Again, no corresponding increase in SAT scores supports this increase in GPA. In fact, during the time period of the study, SAT math and verbal scores fell from 1026 to 1002 (Jaschik, 2017). This data corresponds with the lack of increase in reading skill as noted by the stagnant NAEP scores (Lips, 2008). The gap between high school expectations and college expectations is an academic crevasse that students may fall into.

Since there is no concrete academic alignment between high school education standards and college expectations, the path between the two academic experiences is not clear. In recent years, high schools and postsecondary institutions have been working together to create kindergarten through college (K–16) programs. Creating an alignment is difficult, as noted by the results of a 2007 50-state survey conducted by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. This survey revealed several barriers to alignment, including lack of
resources, lack of policymaking ability, and difficulty collaborating across educational sectors. Some noted that cross sector alignment is time consuming and often outside an individual’s specific job description, and few states have a data system to track students through K–20 (Walsh, 2009). These challenges further the discrepancy between high school and college expectations.

Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework of the Study

Preparation for college level text begins with the first day of kindergarten. A student may attend school in multiple school districts during the education process, but one goal of all school districts is to graduate students who are proficient readers. Moving students from high school text to college level reading is the next step in the education journey for many young adults and understanding the experience that these people encounter can help educators build effective systems.

This project was conducted in a large county in a western state in the United States. This county contains several public high schools, and participants were college students who graduated from these high schools. Interviews were conducted with these individuals until data saturation was reached. The county’s total number of high school graduates each year is approximately 100. Considering the case study saturation research of Guetterman (2015), Creswell (2013), and Guest et al. (2006), the initial target number of college student participants was 12, and 13 was the final number of participants.

The 13 participants in the semistructured interviews were 2017 or 2018 graduates of the high schools in the county. The college students answered questions regarding their actual reading experiences with college freshmen level coursework. As well, all participants were asked to provide textual artifacts that represented a typical reading assignment from one of their
These reading assignments were assessed using the online Lexile text measurement tools at Lexile.com to determine their reading level and text complexity. The Lexile framework “is a linguistic theory based method of measuring the reading difficulty of prose texts and the reading capacity of students that uses sentence length and word frequency to assign reading difficulty values to passages of text” (Wilkins, Hartman, Howland, & Sharma, 2010, p. 2). This framework will provide a standardized measure for the text samples for this study. It will also enable these samples to be discussed in comparison with other samples from prior studies.

This study was guided by constructivist theory. Constructivism stems from the work of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, as well as the work of Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, and Nelson Goodman (Fosnot, 1996). Constructivist theory is based on the belief that knowledge is simply people’s interpretation of facts based on their personal perspectives. Acquiring knowledge requires people to consider facts and information and interpret this based on their experience, viewpoints, and culture. The analysis of information becomes a construct of knowledge (Fosnot, 1996).

New ideas and experiences are matched against existing knowledge, and the learner constructs new or adapted rules to make sense of the world. In such an environment the teacher cannot be in charge of the students’ learning, since everyone’s view of reality will be so different and students will come to learning already possessing their own constructs of the inductive. (Education Theory, 2018, p. 1)

Constructivism focuses on the learner, rather than the teacher, and the method by which the learner makes sense of the lesson, materials, information, or other means by which the instructor presents the knowledge that must be imparted to the students (Fosnot, 1996). Thus, for this
study, constructivism was the theory because the focus was how college freshmen themselves experience reading and texts in their courses.

Statement of the Problem

Less than half of U.S. high school graduates can read proficiently (NAEP, 2018; ACT, Inc., 2018), yet college enrollment is increasing (NCES, 2018), and when college freshmen arrive on campus they are increasingly placed in remedial reading education and professors note the lack of preparedness for college level text (Achieve, 2005; Conley, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project was to add to the information regarding how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences, using qualitative research and data analysis. This information may help teachers and school districts better align their reading preparation with the actual reading experiences that college students encounter.

The scope of this project was the analysis of how college freshmen understand their reading experiences and the differences between the reading experiences they encountered in high school versus in college. College students who graduated from public high schools in 2017 or 2018 were the participants in the study. The study was limited to students from three high schools in one rural county in the western United States. Student participants completed at least one semester of postsecondary education at a college, university, or technical school in order to be eligible for the study.

Research Questions

The goal of educators is to prepare students for college or career. Noted above are myriad reasons why students may graduate from high school and enroll in college only to find that their reading preparation was insufficient. The low literacy rates of high school graduates
(ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018), the complaints of college faculty and professors regarding lack of preparation of incoming freshmen (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016), and increasing remediation rates (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016) are factors and symptoms of the issue. Contrast these facts with data that shows that the average high school GPA has risen in recent decades with no corresponding increase in skill level (Jaschik, 2017; Lips, 2008). This information indicates a need for increased insight into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?

RQ2. How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the existing reading literature by increasing the insight into how college freshmen experience reading and text. This information may help secondary teachers understand the actual expectations and assignments that college students encounter and how these differ from high school assignments. Thus, the information gathered may help secondary teachers and administrators better prepare students for the transition to college level reading. The information may help school districts plan curriculum that is appropriately rigorous. It could also help both colleges and school districts align their expectations of reading abilities of college freshmen.

Definition of Terms

*Academic readiness*: The level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary
institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program (Conley, 2007, p. 5).

**ACT score**: The ACT is an entrance exam used by most colleges and universities to make admissions decisions. It provides one common data point from which to compare all applicants (Princeton Review, 2019).

**Advanced Placement (AP) class**: Allows students to take classes during high school that provide college credit and an entry level college experience while still in high school.

**Case study**: Suitable when the purpose is to explain a causal link, describe an intervention, or explore certain topics where there is no single output (Yin, 2018).

**College readiness**: The level of preparation students need in order to be ready to enroll and succeed without remediation in credit-bearing entry-level coursework at a two- or four-year institution, trade school, or technical school (ACT, Inc., 2006, p. 1).

**Conley’s college readiness model**: Four key cognitive strategies, which are academic/subject matter preparedness, academic behavior, and contextual skills and awareness (Conley, 2008).

**Constructivist theory**: Constructivism is the idea that learners create knowledge and meaning for themselves based on the information that they acquire or are given (Fosnot, 1996).

**Delimitations**: Specific restrictions that the researcher places on the study. The delimitations can limit the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

**GPA, grade point average**: Calculated as the total number of grade points received over a given period divided by the total number of credits awarded; typically used as an indication of a student’s academic achievement. Generally indicated on a 4.0 scale (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).
Limitations: Restrictions that are present in the study itself and are not within the control of the researcher (Creswell, 2012).

Reading proficiency: Readers who know what and when they are comprehending and when they are not comprehending; they can identify their purposes for reading and identify the demands placed on them by a particular text. They can identify when and why the meaning of the text is unclear to them and can use a variety of strategies to solve comprehension problems or deepen their understanding of a text (Paris et al. as cited in Arajou, n.d., p. 1).

Remedial coursework: Required courses that do not count toward graduation credit (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016).

SAT score: SAT is an entrance exam for college and university students. It provides one data point from which to compare applicants (Princeton Review, 2019).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

For the purpose of this study, the researcher assumed that the participants were being honest in their answers. The participants were given an opportunity to confirm their answers to the interview questions during member-checking. In member-checking, the transcribed interview was emailed to each participant. Participants were asked to make any changes, additions, or corrections that were necessary and return the updated information to the researcher via email. Only one participant provided a change and that was to correct her ACT score. After receipt of changes or none, the researcher proceeded with the analysis of the interview answers.

Study delimitations were reconsidered after the study was conducted. A delimitation of the study was that the participants were graduates of the 2017 and 2018 high school graduating classes. This selection was limited to those two years to maintain the accuracy of participants’ memory of their first year of college reading experiences. Therefore, the data collected was
limited by the reading experiences of the students who attended their first year of college after high school graduation during those two years.

Another delimitation was the selection criteria for the study participants. The participants must have graduated from one of the three high schools in the county. As well, they must have completed at least one semester at a college or university in order to participate in the study, as their insight into their reading experiences at the college level were the focus of the study. Although any type of postsecondary education (technical school, college, or university) qualified a participant for this study, the student participants must have completed at least one semester in order to be eligible for this study.

A third delimitation was the criteria for the textual artifacts. The textual artifacts that were collected from the participants were limited to text only. No video, audio, or visual artifacts were considered for this study. This is a specific distinction for this research, as the researcher was unable to determine a Lexile level for a video or visual artifact.

Finally, the list of interview questions served as a limitation and a delimitation. There certainly was more information that would have been both useful and interesting to gather, but a standard list of questions for each participant provided structure for the interviews. Participant’s answers prompted clarifying or follow-up questions that deviated from the prepared list of questions. These follow up questions allowed for rapport building to be done in order to promote greater participant comfort during the interview or more information to be gathered.

Creswell (2012) defines limitations as potential weaknesses or problems that are identified by the researcher. In qualitative studies, common limitations are loss or lack of participants or small study size. Although the data may be relevant and accurate, it is limited in
scope. Thus, in this study a limitation was the small study size and the limited number of participants.

**Chapter 1 Summary**

This qualitative study is based on two research questions. The information that was gathered is intended to add insight to the scholarly literature about how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences. Two research questions guided this study: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences, and how do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school. High school graduates have low literacy rates (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018), college faculty and professors complain of lack of preparation of incoming freshmen (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016), and colleges and universities show increasing remediation rates (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016). In contrast, the average high school GPA has risen in recent decades, yet there has been no corresponding increase in skill level (Jaschik, 2017; Lips, 2008). These facts indicate a need for increased insight into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences.

This dissertation is organized in the following manner. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, purpose, research question, theoretical framework, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of literature concerning reading proficiency, college and university expectations, and trends in remediation. Chapter 3 reports the procedures utilized in this study including the research design, population and sample, instrumentation, identification of attributes, data collection, and validation. Chapter 4 covers the presentation of the findings. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the summary, conclusions, implications, and recommendations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

Despite the best efforts of secondary educators across the United States, American high school graduates fall below reading proficiency standards. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (NAEP, 2018), a nationally recognized assessment of students indicated that in 2015, just 37% of 12th graders in the United States were proficient or better in reading. In 2015, using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15-year-old students in the United States scored 24th worldwide in their reading ability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). Further, data from the 2017 ACT assessment showed that only 47% of high school seniors scored proficient or above in reading (ACT, Inc., 2018). All these data indicate that more than half of American youth do not read proficiently when they graduate from high school.

Students anticipate college readiness when they graduate from high school. College readiness is defined as “the level of preparation students need in order to be ready to enroll and succeed without remediation in credit-bearing entry-level coursework at a 2- or 4-year institution, trade school, or technical school” (ACT, Inc., 2006, p. 1). Possession of a high school diploma implicitly conveys college readiness.

However, sometimes students find that college academic expectations are higher than what they anticipated. For instance, high school GPAs have increased in recent decades with no corresponding increase in skills, as measured by the ACT and NAEP assessments (Planty, Bozick, & Ingels, 2006). This means that academic performance at a certain GPA is lower in quality and college readiness than it was one to three decades ago. Data from the NAEP assessment shows that high school GPAs increased 0.30 on average from 1990 to 2005 (Planty et
Woodruff and Ziomeck (2004) found that high school grade point averages, one indicator to students regarding their level of proficiency, have increased approximately 0.25 on a 4.0 scale without a corresponding increase in achievement, when analyzing data from 1991 to 2003 (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Noble & Sawyer, 2004). High school GPA can be an inaccurate predictor of college success because GPA inflation gives students a false sense of security surrounding their performance abilities. Paulson and Armstrong (2008, as cited in Newton, 2012) suggest that due to a student’s less rigorous high school curriculum, coupled with grade inflation, a student avoids reading or functioning at levels comparable to college. Thus, the student is unprepared, yet appears via GPA to be a highly functioning and successful student.

The ACT reading subset scores have decreased 7%, without a change in the ACT test, from 2005 levels (ACT, Inc., 2018), indicating a decline in reading ability of students. Only 44% of high school students met the college readiness benchmark on the ACT reading subset test in 2016 (ACT, Inc., 2017). This data indicates a years-long decline in reading ability in high school graduates. Thus, a GPA of 3.0 or higher, a high school diploma, or being accepted to college does not guarantee reading proficiency.

Meanwhile, as scores are decreasing, college enrollment is increasing. Between 2000 and 2015, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions rose by 30%. By 2026, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 19.3 million students (NCES, 2018). A greater than ever number of students are enrolling in college, with lower than ever abilities to produce the work needed to graduate. This increase in student enrollment is relevant to this study because this creates a proportional increase in the number of students who enroll with a lack of reading readiness. The lack of student ability is exhibited in the college classroom where students find that college level work is more challenging than anticipated.
According to an Achieve (2005) study, college professors estimate that 42% of students are not adequately prepared for college, and 70% of college instructors report having to devote some of their class time to reviewing content they feel should have been learned in high school. Only 28% of college instructors believe that public high schools adequately prepare students for the challenges of college (Conley, 2007). Blanchard (2009) conducted a study at American River College, a mid-sized community college. In this study the college faculty felt that 52% of students in their transfer level classes were academically unprepared for college level academics. Upon querying the staff regarding actions they take when students are struggling with assigned reading, writing, or language in their classes, 70% recommend remedial work. Blanchard (2009) notes that 64% of the faculty feel that they cannot assist struggling students because they do not have time in the curriculum for remediation. Egan (2006, as cited in Moffett, 2013) found that 53% of the college professors surveyed indicated that they provided extra tutorials and supplementary materials for students. These materials were provided to help students attain the skills and knowledge they lacked so that they could complete their courses.

Adding to the lack of preparedness, research shows that there is a large disparity between the difficulty and complexity of texts used in high school and the texts used in college (Newton, 2012). “A high school student whose reading expectations are limited to a novel or two per year does not experience a fraction of the reading expectations they face upon entering college,” (Newton, 2012, p. 12). Linderholm (2006) also notes that college students must read different types of text than typical high school prose fiction. Students will struggle if their first exposure to texts at college-level rigor is their first day of college. Newton (2012) suggests that if high school graduate proficiency may not be enough for college success, then even students deemed proficient by high school standards would enter college underperforming.
Problem Statement

College enrollment is increasing (NCES, 2018) despite the fact that less than half of U.S. high school graduates can read proficiently (NAEP, 2018; ACT, Inc., 2018); when college freshmen arrive on campus they are increasingly placed in remedial reading education and professors note the lack of preparedness for college level text (Achieve, 2005; Conley, 2007).

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a discussion of the conceptual framework that is used as a base for this study. Following that is a review of the current literature and research findings surrounding reading experiences and texts of college freshmen. A discussion regarding how this study is intended to add to the current research closes the chapter.

Conceptual Framework

In light of the myriad research around remedial education, underprepared students, and low reading levels of high school graduates, the purpose of this study was to gain insight into how college freshmen describe and understand their reading experiences and how they can compare them to their high school reading experiences. This is significant because 29% to 41% of students are placed into remedial coursework upon enrollment into college, with the percentage hovering around one-third of students required to take remedial English courses (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016). The percentage of students in remedial reading courses is financially costly for colleges and students. It lengthens a student’s time spent in college by adding additional courses for which the student does not receive credit toward graduation but is required by the college or university to pay for and complete. Remedial classes reduce the likelihood that a student will graduate, and on-time degree completion rates of students who take remedial courses are consistently less than 10% (Jimenez et al., 2016). Thus,
enrollment in remedial coursework can be helpful, yet comes with potentially detrimental outcomes.

The juxtaposition between the low reading proficiency of American high school graduates, which hovers at approximately 44% based on the 2016 ACT reading sub-test (ACT, Inc., 2017) and America’s increasing college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) inevitably asks for additional insight around reading expectations of students who enroll in college. Results were focused on how college freshmen experience reading texts and how students reflect upon their high school reading experiences compared to their freshman year of college reading encounters.

Qualitative Research

Toward that end, this study utilized qualitative research. Qualitative research was appropriate because this type of research elicits data that is not in the form of numbers (McLeod, 2017). Rather, data were gathered via interviews of participants based on a standardized list of questions. Using an interview format allowed participants to offer their original thoughts as opposed to pre-determined answer choices. Each participant was also asked follow-up questions based on their initial answers to gather more information during the interviews. These probing questions were based on participant answers and were determined as the interview progressed.

Constructivist Theory

In a traditional education, teachers were determined to be masters of certain domains of knowledge, and their job was to transmit their expertise in these domains to students. Students were expected to learn the facts and concepts of the learning domain, largely by memorization, and practice its skills until they had mastered them. They then had to demonstrate that mastery in appropriate tests.
An alternative educational theory is constructivism. This research project was based on the theory of constructivism. Constructivism is the idea that learners create knowledge and meaning for themselves based on the information that they acquire or are given. The act of constructing the meaning is learning, and this theory focuses on the learner rather than the teacher, the subject, or the material that is being taught. One premise of constructivism is that learning is not the act of development, it *is* development. Constructivism seeks deep understanding and cognitive development rather than behaviors or skills as the goals of instruction (Fosnot, 1996). Another tenant of this theory is that knowledge does not exist without the meaning given to it by the learner. Further, the knowledge, past experiences, values, cultural background, etc. that each learner possesses are different and translate into varying knowledge created for each learner (Fosnot, 1996). Thus, learning is unique to each individual and is shaped by each person’s prior experiences.

Constructivism demands that students think and create a meaning for themselves. They “have to think for themselves, not wait for the teacher to tell them what to think . . . to revisit and revise constructions” (Airasian & Walsh, 1997, p. 448). Students must learn how to form their own product from knowledge that they are given. The perspective has shifted from the product of learning to the process itself. In constructivist learning theory, information is provided, and the learner creates meaning based on the life experiences, which is the only framework from which to create meaning.

Merrill (1992) critiqued constructivist learning theory, stating that it might be troublesome for some students. He cited weaker students who might not be as goal-oriented, especially when the subject matter is very complex. He noted that some students may not seek out a framework for understanding if they were unable to provide one from their own
experiences. In a similar vein, some have criticized constructivist theory for not allowing for student’s level of proficiency at the beginning of their learning (Dick, 1992). Without proper scaffolding, students may not have the ability to adhere to new thinking.

Constructivist learning theory contends that teachers are facilitators who help students construct their own understandings by carrying out challenging tasks (Brooks, 1990). These tasks provide opportunities to create answers for themselves. When utilizing Constructivist learning theory, measuring student outcome consists of looking at how students address problems related to knowledge construction. This can be difficult for the teacher to determine. Questions such as, “Are there varying degrees of success?” emphasize the subjective nature of this approach. In traditional education, knowledge remains isolated in the form of memorized facts.

In summary, several elements are essential to a constructivist learning environment. Essential to those elements are that learning is an active and constructive process. Learning must be related to and built on prior knowledge. Class environments should leave room for hypothesis formation and learner activity, where the instructor has the role of facilitator and supporter. Knowledge is transferable to new situations and experienced as relevant by the learner (Müller, 1997). These elements allow for learners to explore and construct knowledge pursuant to both their prior knowledge and experiences and suitable to the new learning experiences that are created by the teacher in the learning environment.

Considering the focus on learning and the learner, this theory was a fit with this study due to the emphasis on the students’ experiences with reading and texts. Rather than study what the students have previously learned or their current reading levels or abilities, the study sought to understand their lived experiences with college freshmen-level reading itself. This research
project did not involve assessments of student skill. Consequently, constructivism informed the study with a framework of seeking understanding rather than measuring performance.

**Descriptive Case Study**

This project entailed a descriptive case study. Robert Yin (2018) states that the purpose of a case study is to explain a causal link, describe an intervention, or explore certain topics where there is no single output. In this situation, there was no single output and no single causal link between seniors in high school and college freshmen and their reading experiences. Yin (2018) explains that case studies are preferred when the investigator has little control over events. Using a case study to examine and determine how college freshmen understand their reading experiences yielded both the data and the personal experiences of students. Mesec (1998, as cited in Starman, 2013) elaborates, noting “a case study is a description and analysis of an individual matter or case…with the purpose to identify variables, structures, forms, and orders of interaction between the participants in the situation” (p. 31). Sagadin (1991, as cited in Starman, 2013) states that a case study is used to analyze

- each person individually, (his or her activity, special needs, life situation, life history, etc.),
- a group of people (a school department, a group of students with special needs, teaching staff, etc.),
- individual institutions or a problem (or several problems), process, phenomenon or event in a particular institution, etc. in detail. (p. 31)

A case study is an in-depth exploration that comes from multiple perspectives and should not be a method itself (Simons, 2009). A case study allowed for in-depth and personal reflection around college reading experiences and evaluation of the texts.

**Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**
Current literature around literacy informed this study. Specifically, a review of United States high school graduate reading readiness, remedial courses at colleges and universities, academic rigor in high school and alignment of K–16 education will begin Chapter 2. Next, a discussion of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research as well as the limitations of the current literature is included. A critique of current literature will close the chapter.

**Reading Readiness in the United States**

Current literature indicates that significant numbers of students graduate from high school unprepared for the rigors of higher education. The 2015 NAEP data showed that just 37% of U.S. seniors in high school were at or above proficient in reading (NAEP, 2018). According to the New York State Education Department, in 2009, only 47% of all students who took the Regents exam passed the reading comprehension section. Yet, when these same Regents exam students were asked what their plans after high school were, 80% reported that they would be attending some form of higher education institution (Office of State Assessment, 2018). Further, based on daily interaction with students, just 28% of college instructors feel that students are adequately prepared for college (Conley, 2007). There is a discrepancy between student ability based on test scores and student expectations of their abilities.

**Determining Academic Readiness**

College or academic readiness is defined by Conley (2007) as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (p. 5). According to a 2014 nationwide survey (Kirst, 2014), approximately 50% of recent high school graduates report gaps in preparation for life after high school. Boser and Burd (2009) explain that college admittance is not a sign of academic
readiness, as the nation’s education system is adept at moving students forward with little accountability. It is important that high schools be honest with students regarding their level of preparation for college or career. Vinaja (2016) stresses when high schools “inflate grades or uphold only the minimum standards required for high school graduation . . . [students] assume incorrectly that they are ready for college-level courses” (p. 29). This assumption on the part of the students and lack of clarification on the part of the high school creates a disconnect that becomes evident as college freshmen struggle in their studies.

There are indicators that can forecast with some likelihood the level of academic success of incoming college freshmen. When taken together, ACT reading subset scores and GPA are accurate indicators of student success in college. For instance, Noble and Sawyer (2004) found that considering the two numbers in conjunction serve as a better predictor of first-year success than considering either variable alone. The College Board (2014) also recommends that colleges consider both the applicant’s SAT score and GPA as a reliable combination of predictors for postsecondary success. Using multiple measures to determine the likelihood of future student success, as opposed to relying on any single indicator to attempt to predict a student’s likelihood of postsecondary success.

High school GPA alone is not an accurate indicator of reading readiness. Strong students in high school (3.0 or higher GPA) do get placed in reading remediation courses. According to Schmidt (2008), four out of five students enrolled in remedial coursework had high school GPAs at 3.0 or greater. Tomko (2011) noted that students who were 3.0 GPA students, and therefore it could be inferred that were proficient readers in high school, still ended up in remedial English courses in college. Tomko’s studies revealed several reasons why these presumably proficient readers were appropriated to remedial courses. One possible reason is variability in the level of
preparation of students since they came from different high schools. However, yet all the high schools deemed their graduating students academically prepared for college level work. As well, many students do not realize the significance of college placement tests and do not take the tests seriously (Tomko, 2011). They may rush through the tests or approach the tests in an overconfident manner, assuming that they will be fine due to their high school academic success.

Students also have responsibility in this situation. Newton (2012) stated, “For many students, struggling with text begins with a basic reluctance to open the books” (p. 13). Even when students did receive information that their grades were inadequate for college entrance, most students did not alter their behavior (Tierney & Garcia, 2011). The result of this is that unprepared students are placed into remedial coursework before they can begin their college-level work (Conley, 2003). Regardless of the cause, the outcome upon college enrollment is the same. Underprepared students end up in remedial coursework.

**Remedial Courses**

To offset the lack of preparation of college freshmen, remedial courses are offered at community colleges and four-year universities. “Colleges continue to admit underperforming students, lament their poor preparation, and offer remedial coursework to compensate for their weaknesses” (Parsad & Lewis, 2003, as cited in Newton, 2012, p. 12). These remedial courses are designed to treat the influx of underprepared students. According to Boser and Burd (2009), more than 60% of the 40,000 freshmen admitted to the California State University system in 2007 needed some form of remediation in English or math. The work of Di Giacomo et al. (2013) supports the above findings, noting that in 2007, 25% of students who enrolled at four-year public universities had to take a remedial course before proceeding to their degree-seeking coursework. Additionally, Sandy Shugart, President of Valencia Community College, one of the
nation’s largest two-year colleges, indicated that 70% of the freshmen who enroll require some type of remediation (Tracy, 2009). Therefore, remediation services become a necessity for colleges to attract and retain students. However, Moore (2014) noted that multiple factors further impact the success of remediation, including a student’s motivation, family background and support, and a student’s ability to connect with peers and faculty members. Nationwide increases in remediation are college and universities’ attempts to support underprepared students and keep up with the national demand for a college educated workforce.

Remediation is costly for students, their families, and taxpayers. “When a student who needs remediation receives financial aid for college, taxpayers pay twice: once for the student’s high school education and again when federally subsidized student loans are used to fund remedial coursework” (Boser & Burd, 2009, p. 7). The cost of remedial coursework may deflate students’ college savings before they advance to credit earning courses. Further, students are much less likely to make it to their credit bearing courses, much less complete a degree program, if they are initially enrolled in not-for-credit remedial courses (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Adelman, 2006; Bailey, 2009; Complete College America, 2012, as cited in Long & Boatman, 2013). Bailey et al. (2009) note that less than 50% of students who were placed into remediation complete the entire sequence of developmental courses to which they were assigned, and that 50% decreases further for men, older students, African American students, part-time students, and students in vocational programs.

**Academic Rigor**

Prevention of enrollment in remedial coursework must begin long before students enter college. Academic rigor is a significant indicator and predictor of success in college (Di Giacomo et al., 2013). “Due to a lack of rigor in high school courses and corresponding grade
inflation, students are not required to read or function at levels comparable to college” (Newton, 2012, p. 12). Contrary to what one might think, 62% of college students report they would have taken more challenging courses in high school in at least one content area if they had realized how difficult and challenging college was going to be (Di Giacomo et al., 2013). Attewell and Domina (2008) noted that a more rigorous high school curriculum benefitted all students, even non-college bound learners. The lack of preparation in high school can be attributed to one main reason: students are simply not being asked to meet specific, rigorous reading standards (ACT, Inc., 2006). Thus, increasing academic rigor and imparting the belief in students that meeting challenges in high school will benefit them in the future is essential for their success.

Alignment of K–16 Education

Many note that the K–16 pipeline needs to be streamlined with greater collaboration and understanding between high school and colleges. These two entities have been treated, and treat one another, as separate. “Parents, students, teachers, and counselors do not always know what colleges expect from their applicants” (Vinaja, 2016, p. 35). Creating a seamless transition from high school to college is essential for increased student success in higher education (Obama, 2010, as cited in Matteson, 2013). Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) found that in most cases there is little communication between high school teachers and college professors. Venezia et al. (2003) continued, noting that this lack of alignment in coursework and assessment contributes to the inability of high school graduates to complete college level work. As with any situation where there is little communication, assumptions are made by both parties. Boser and Burd (2009) maintain that colleges and universities have done a “poor job of communicating the skills they expect their incoming freshmen to have” (p. 5). Another issue is the lack of coordination between high school and colleges. Moss (2013) explains that in the past, postsecondary
institutions have developed college preparatory curriculum designed to prepare students for college admission, and secondary schools have created the high school curriculum designed to prepare students for college itself. Thus, the two institutions are not aligned in purpose. “Therefore, high school students enter high school under one set of standards and expectations only to discover they do not meet the ‘new’ standards required to attain college success” (Venzia et al., 2005, as cited in Moss, 2013, p. 39). This lack of consistency between high school academic standards and college academic standards costs students time and tuition funds as they begin their postsecondary education.

Review of Methodological Issues

Numerous studies have been conducted around the reading readiness of incoming college students and related issues, such as remediation of underprepared students. Depending on the focus of the study, different methodologies, strategies, or plans of action that link methods to outcomes have been employed in the search for more information (Creswell, 2013). Regardless of the type of study, the literature does agree on a few premises.

First, high school students are at an alarmingly low level of reading preparedness for college. Fewer than 45% of high school students met the reading readiness benchmark on the 2016 ACT reading sub test (ACT, Inc., 2018). This literacy problem begins early in the education of children in the United States. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, an international reading assessment administered to fourth grade students worldwide every five years, showed declining results for the United States in the two most recent assessments. In both 2016 and 2011, the United States dropped in the international rankings and was outscored by statistically significant margins. The United States fell from fifth in the world in 2011 to 13th in
2016 (Balingit, 2017). This study is consistent with the results of other reading studies, as noted above.

Second, the inability to read well enough is cited as a strong predictor of success or failure in postsecondary education. This may be measured in several ways, including ACT reading readiness scores. ACT’s College Readiness Benchmark for Reading (ACT, Inc., 2006), represents the level of achievement required for students to have a high probability of success (a 75% chance of earning a course grade of C or better, a 50% chance of earning a B or better) in such college courses as Psychology or U.S. History, which are first year courses generally considered to be typically reading dependent. (p. 2)

Finally, remedial coursework is required for 41% of students at public 2-year colleges and 29% of public 4-year universities (Chen & Simone, 2016). Bailey et al. (2010) indicate that of 250,000 students who enrolled at nearly 60 two-year colleges in the U.S., one third were required to take remedial English. This remedial coursework is not a guarantee of success. Chen and Simone (2016) noted that the relationship between student completion of remedial courses and college outcomes varies based on the level of preparedness with which the student arrives at college. Weakly prepared students who receive remediation have higher rates of degree completion; those who do not successfully complete a remediation course are not likely to complete their degrees. Comparatively, moderately to strongly prepared students tend to have successful postsecondary experiences regardless of whether they need and/or complete a remedial course. Further research shows that placement into remedial courses significantly decreases a student’s odds of completing a degree in the forthcoming years. Vandal (2017) estimates that only about 25% of students who are placed into remedial education earn a degree within 8 years of beginning their program. It seems that it is not the remedial course placement,
but the level of preparedness for college that may determine a student’s odds of degree achievement.

**Qualitative Studies**

Per Creswell (2013), qualitative research is 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” (p. 2). The qualitative approach includes constructivist knowledge claims, ethnographic design, and observation of behavior (2013). Much of the focus group selection in qualitative research has been driven by the same demographic or criteria as in quantitative research. For instance, student participants were selected based on GPA, ACT scores, socioeconomic status, gender, or many combinations thereof. Instructors at the high school or college levels have also been queried regarding the successful matriculation of students into college. Identifying the perceptions and experiences of these individuals related to reading, either as a student or instructor, have yielded varying yet similar data.

For example, Tomko (2011) studied high achieving high school students who were placed into remedial reading courses upon entering college. These students had high school grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. Tomko’s (2011) research relied on anecdotal evidence from a specific group of students. He found that each student in his study had attained a sufficient level of knowledge to be successful in college. However, other perceived factors caused the students to do poorly on the basic skills exam and thus be forced to take a remedial English course load. Examples of these factors include not understanding the significance of the basic skills tests, rushing through the tests, or not taking the tests seriously.
This is similar to Moffett’s (2013) research, which also included higher achieving students and their enrollment in remedial courses. Moffett (2013) interviewed students who had high school GPAs of 3.0 or higher but were deemed “under prepared” by Conley’s College Readiness model measures. The College Readiness model consists of four elements. Those are key cognitive strategies, academic/subject matter preparedness, academic behavior, and contextual skills and awareness (Conley, 2008). Although data about the students, specifically high school GPA, indicated that they were college ready, through interviews other factors were revealed. Necessary academic and nonacademic skills to be considered college ready were lacking, thus they were enrolled in remedial courses.

Similar qualitative work has been done regarding reading readiness while querying professors and instructors. Marr, Nicoll, von Treuer, Kolar, and Palermo (2013) researched what constitutes a student that is prepared to complete college level reading and academic tasks. One of the results was early intervention for low-achieving students while in high school, prior to a student’s college career, to boost skills that would be necessary for postsecondary success.

**Quantitative Studies**

Quantitative data abounds regarding American students and their progress toward high school graduation and postsecondary endeavors. Given any combination of demographics, test scores, or achievement results, projections of student success can be made. Studies exist that compare any combination of these data pieces regarding American postsecondary academics (ACT, Inc., 2006; ACT, Inc., 2017; NAEP, 2018). The amount of quantitative data available provides ample opportunity for review and analysis.

Analysis of the data indicates the reading proficiency, or lack thereof, of high school students. Reading and literacy data can be evaluated numerous ways; however, in every way
American high school students are unprepared for college level text (ACT, Inc., 2018; Di Giacomo et al, 2013; Parsad & Lewis, 2003, as cited in Newton, 2012). Regardless of how the data is organized, many students in the United States continue to lack the necessary reading skills for success in college.

Identifying and defining college readiness is difficult because of the lack of consistency between high school and college academic standards (Rodriguez, 2010; Trei, 2003; Venzia et al., as cited in Moss, 2013). High school teachers believe they know what students need to be college ready, but when pushed they have no concrete evidence (Conley, 2003). High school emphasizes coverage over depth. University faculty assert that students who develop strong reading, writing, problem solving, and critical thinking skills will do better in college (Conley, 2003). The differences in beliefs and lack of a clear path for students contributes to the challenges that students face as they enter college.

**Limitations of Research Methods**

The limitations of these research methods are similar. Creswell (2012) defines limitations as potential weaknesses or problems that are identified by the researcher. Common limitations are loss or lack of participants or small study size, particularly in qualitative studies. Gathering the perceptions of fewer than a dozen students provides a limited view of the issue. Small study size may limit the insights to one high school, college, or demographic. Thus, a meta-analysis of current literature must be conducted, amassing the data into one generalized understanding. Numerous studies have been conducted that consider only one graduating class, one school, or one state’s students reading readiness data. Although the data may be relevant and accurate, it is limited in scope and thus possible discrepancies or inaccuracies may exist when generalizations are made.
Synthesis of Research Findings

Secondary teachers prepare students for transition to college and careers. Multiple researchers note that no common set of expectations exist for high school graduates, despite attempts dating back as far as 1893. At that time, 10 of the top private universities enacted the same admission standards and recommended a curriculum for high schools to prepare students for college (Cabrera & Burkum, 2001). Today, the Common Core State Standards have been adopted for use by 45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). Even with this attempt at standardization of expectations, though, there is no way to guarantee that every student is similarly prepared. Further, no common set of expectations exist that define college ready. Connolly, Olson, Durham, and Plank (2014) studied indicators of college readiness and found that a student’s readiness is determined by the college where the student enrolls. Determinations regarding placement into remedial coursework are made on a college or university basis.

Research abounds around rigor in college preparatory work during high school. ACT, Inc., (2006) research documents the strong positive impact of completing additional coursework in math, science, and English. Students who finished the basic high school core curriculum were not prepared for college. Despite these students’ completion of additional coursework, Julie Todaro, Ph.D., president of the American Library Association. Todaro, also dean of library services at Austin Community College, notes, “I see this every day—people who are not only coming from high school unprepared, but are really unprepared in terms of critical thinking skills and the use of technology.” Todaro says that many first-year students have not grasped the concept of critical thinking and can’t distinguish between fake and real news. “Whether they are
born digital or returning to college, many students don’t know how to read and interpret information,” (Williams, 2017, paras. 7–8). Newton (2012) adds that the biggest predictor of eventual college success is the academic preparation a student receives in high school. ACT, Inc., (2006) found, because of its distinct pattern of performance increases relative to the ACT College Readiness Benchmark, performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not. And this is true for both genders, all racial/ethnic groups, and all annual family income levels. (p. 6) Adelman (2006) notes that academic intensity is the most important factor in preparing students for a successful collegiate experience.

There are thousands of trade schools, colleges, and universities worldwide. While expectations are relatively similar, a surprising range of abilities could be considered college ready depending on the college the student enters. However, being accepted to college does not mean that a student has been determined “college ready” by the college. Community colleges have open-door policies, meaning they often accept nearly every applicant. “College admission requirements do not equate with college readiness” (Newton, 2012, p. 11). Newton (2012) continues with an example from a nearby university. If an in-state student has a high enough GPA, a student’s actual ACT score does not matter for admission. If the student’s GPA is less than 2.75, an ACT score of 20 is required. This places the content area subset scores far below the ACT college readiness benchmarks determined by ACT. The ACT content area benchmark test scores for college readiness are Reading, 22; Math, 22; and Science, 23. A college that requires only a 20 on the ACT in is openly admitting unprepared students.
Colleges and universities encounter increasing numbers of underprepared students (CCCSE, 2016). Aiding students helps meet the institutions’ goals of “maintaining enrollment, increasing financial viability, and meeting standards of excellence” (Stewart, 2010, p. 1). Remediation services are offered at 98% of community colleges and up to 80% of public four-year universities (2010). Community colleges bear the brunt of remediation due to their open-door admission policies, lower costs, and proximity to student populations. Thus, they encounter greater percentages of students who need educational support than four-year universities (Schneider, 2010). When considering only reading remediation, the Alliance for Excellent Education focused on additional earnings that would be realized if remediation was reduced. Approximately $2.3 billion annual earnings would be earned from by college graduates whose contributions were delayed by taking remedial courses in reading (Amos, 2006). This figure does not include the cost of the remedial course work itself, which adds to the total.

**Critique of Previous Research**

**Quantitative Studies**

There is a great deal of quantitative information and statistics around college enrollment, remediation, course completion, and the likelihood of success given various factors. The plethora of quantitative data allows comparison of postsecondary graduation results for students of any gender, race, or socioeconomic status who attempted, completed, or failed a remedial course in nearly any subject. These data pieces are ACT scores, high school GPA trends, college placement test scores, achievement results, etc. Studies exist that compare any combination of these data pieces regarding American postsecondary academics (ACT, Inc., 2006; ACT, Inc., 2017; NAEP, 2018). Comparisons of students by race, gender, socioeconomic status, state, curriculum path, and even by whether they live in the United States or one of the other dozens of
PISA participant nations exist (ACT, Inc., 2018; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). This information provides data points but does not tell of the lived experiences of the students. The students’ stories are not captured, even though researchers have multiple data points on each individual. Beyond the data are individuals who have experienced the progression through the K–16 education system and can provide detailed insight.

Part of these individual’s experience is their firsthand knowledge of the lack of consistency between high school and college academic standards (Rodriguez, 2010; Trei, 2003; Venzia et al., as cited in Moss, 2013). Conley (2003) claims that many high school teachers believe they know what students need to be college ready, but when pushed they have no concrete evidence. High school college preparation emphasizes coverage over depth; however, college professors assert that students who develop a greater understanding in fewer areas, as well as strong reading, writing, problem solving and critical thinking skills will do better in college (Conley, 2003). There is a discrepancy between the beliefs of high school teachers and the beliefs of college professors in terms of how students would be ideally prepared for college. These differences in beliefs and lack of a clear path for students contributes to the challenges that students face as they enter college. Quantitative research provides data but ignores the personal experiences and stories that provide greater dimension and understanding for researchers.

**Qualitative Studies**

Qualitative studies provide information about student lived experiences and perspectives. This information is useful but is limited to specific situations as defined by each study’s parameters. For instance, all the quantitative, numerical data does not inform schools, teachers, parents, or students regarding what the lived experience will be like as students transition from high school to college and are faced with college level reading assignments.
Harnish and Lunch (2005) conducted a qualitative study around high school students who increased their rigor by completing dual enrollment courses. Dual enrollment courses are those courses that count for both high school and college credit and are completed while the student is still enrolled in high school. Qualitative results showed that attending dual enrollment classes positively changed students’ perceptions about college. Student success in dual enrollment classes made students believe in their ability to succeed in college (Harnish & Lynch, 2005). Another finding from this qualitative study was that students were less likely to ask for withdrawal from a dual enrollment class (Harnish & Lynch, 2005). In another study, students who enrolled in dual enrollment classes in high school indicated that they felt more prepared to succeed in college and complete a postsecondary degree (Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013).

Although these qualitative studies provided valuable insight into the literature, they provide information in a narrow band regarding college readiness. Unlike quantitative data, which can be assessed and analyzed in a variety of ways, this qualitative information is specific to a narrow subset of student experiences. Their high school experiences cannot be easily applied to other situations.

**Chapter 2 Summary**

This project examined how college freshmen understood and described their reading experiences, particularly in comparison with their high school reading experiences. There is a significant disconnect between high schools and colleges and their alignment of academic expectations for students (Boser & Burd, 2009; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). This lack of communication creates difficulty for students who are preparing for a large commitment of time and money in postsecondary education.
Current research informs the project with much quantitative data around reading readiness scores (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018; OECD, 2018). These reading readiness scores indicate a lack of reading ability of high school graduates in all demographics, with reading proficiency hovering between 30% to 50% of graduates (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018; Office of State Assessment, 2009; OECD, 2018). A lack of reading proficiency follows high school graduates to college, where college instructors and professors notice a lack of preparation in students, expressing frustration in having to use class time to reteach material that students should have learned in high school (Blanchard, 2009; Di Giacomo et al., 2013; Egan, 2006, as cited in Moffett, 2013).

Significant numbers of students are enrolled in remediation courses at colleges and universities. These remedial courses cost students time and tuition money as they do not count toward degree completion yet are required by the college or university prior to moving forward toward graduation.

There are opportunities for improvement in reading readiness research. The most evident gap is in the area of qualitative research of teachers, instructors, and students. Analyzing differences in high school senior reading experiences and texts versus college freshmen reading experiences and texts will attempt to fill a portion of that gap by querying freshman college students regarding their reading experiences.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The work of secondary teachers plays a large role in how smoothly students transition from high school to college academics. Students face many new challenges as they enter college and lack of academic preparedness need not be one of them. However, some high school students enter postsecondary education only to find their lack of reading readiness that was not apparent in high school becomes significantly more obvious in college. For instance, some incoming college students who take college placement exams are placed into remedial reading courses. Better grades in high school do not guarantee college readiness, according to the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2016). The organization notes that 40% of respondents who report a high school GPA of “A” also report placing into one or more areas of remediation. Several academically strong students find themselves in remedial reading and math courses. A 2015 study of 911 2- and 4-year colleges revealed that at least 209 of those schools placed more than half of incoming students in at least one remedial course (Butrymowicz, 2017). Research shows that from 40% to 60% of freshmen students require remediation in English or math (Jimenez, Sargrad, Morales, & Thompson, 2016). Other students progress into college level courses and find that they are less prepared than they anticipated. This is reported by both faculty and the students themselves, as the expectations of both parties may fail to match.

It is a dilemma seen at many universities. Students pass state tests, have excellent grades in high school, and receive high school diplomas that imply that they are proficient enough to move forward, but colleges consider them unprepared to do higher-level work (Obstashevsky, 2016). According to a study done by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, nearly 60% of students attending 2-year colleges end up in remedial courses before they can proceed to college-level classes (Community College FAQs, 2018). Some of the
students are so deficient in skills that placing them into a traditional classroom does them, as well as the professor and their classmates, a disservice. They slow the entire class down in their attempts to keep up (Butrymowicz, 2017). Student responses to a large national survey indicated a disconnect between their perceptions of college readiness and their actual preparedness (CCCSE, 2016). This points to the lack of alignment that exists between expectations for high school graduation and expectations for college readiness. According to standardized reading assessments, between 40% and 45% of high school graduates do not read proficiently (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018). This study aims to further the research around how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences.

This chapter will provide an overview of the purpose and design of the study. Next will be a detailed description of the target population and data collection and coding procedures. The chapter will close with a review of the data analysis procedure. A chapter summary will follow.

**Statement of the Problem**

Current research indicates that from one-third to well over half of high school students who enroll in college are placed in one or more remedial courses despite having received a high school diploma (Boser & Burd, 2009; Di Giacomo et al., 2013; Obstashevsky, 2016). For instance, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education revealed that more than one third of high school students who scored “proficient” or higher on the Massachusetts state graduation test and enrolled at a Massachusetts public university or college also were required to take a remedial course prior to progressing into credit bearing courses (Ostashevsky, 2016). At Baltimore City Community College in the fall of 2015, 87% of students were placed in remedial English or math classes (Butrymowicz, 2017). Four-year universities also see the need for remediation of students. More than 40% of incoming freshmen in the California State University system were
determined unprepared for college-level work in at least one subject in 2014 (California State University, 2015). Butrymowicz (2017) reports that between 25% and 30% of students in Colorado, Montana, and Arkansas’s 4-year schools were placed in remedial courses in 2014. These studies indicate an overall lack of readiness in students, evident in numerous studies conducted at myriad universities.

College instructors experience firsthand students’ lack of readiness as students struggle in the college classroom. According to Krupnick (2016) nearly 80% of university and college faculty report that incoming freshmen are unprepared to read and understand complex information. High school students receive repeated warnings that college will be more challenging than high school (Rosenbaum, n.d.). Yet, the reading experiences of high school seniors may not prepare students for the experiences that lay ahead in college.

Research Questions

The research questions focused the study around how college freshmen experience and describe their reading experiences and texts.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?

RQ2: How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?

Purpose and Design of the Research Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to seek insight into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences and can understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school. This is significant because 29% to 41% of students are placed into remedial coursework upon enrollment into
college, with the percentage hovering around one-third of students required to take remedial English courses (Bailey et al., 2010; Chen & Simone, 2016). The percentage of students in remedial reading courses is financially costly for colleges and students. It lengthens a student’s time spent in college by adding additional courses for which the student does not receive credit toward graduation but is required by the college or university to pay for and complete. Remedial classes reduce the likelihood that a student will graduate, and on-time degree completion rates of students who take remedial courses are consistently less than 10% (Jimenez et al., 2016). Although remedial courses are intended to help college students move toward a degree, they often cost time and money that a student did not anticipate.

American high school graduates have a low reading proficiency, hovering at approximately 44% based on the 2016 ACT reading subtest (ACT, Inc., 2017). This can be considered with America’s increasing college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This juxtaposition inevitably asks for additional insight from college freshmen who enter college after experiencing preparation for college level reading in their secondary education experience. Results are focused on how college freshmen describe their reading experiences and texts.

This study was based on qualitative research. Qualitative research seeks to inform the how and why a phenomenon or behavior operates as it does in a particular environment (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative approach was suitable because interviews of participants allowed information to be expanded upon with greater flexibility and deeper understanding. Interviews, as opposed to surveys with predetermined answer choices, allowed participants to offer their frank and original thoughts in answers. More genuine and thoughtful answers were given when the participants were not provided with pre-determined answer selections from
which they had to choose. Follow up and probing questions garnered additional information in
the interviews. Simply explained, “Qualitative research is empirical research where the data are
not in the form of numbers...involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter”
(McLeod, 2017, p. 1). McLeod explains that qualitative research came about as the result of the
dissatisfaction of some psychologists with the scientific study of people. Qualitative research
aims to understand the social reality of people, groups, and cultures (McLeod, 2017). Per
Creswell (2013), a qualitative approach is one “in which the investigator explores a real-life,
contemporary bounded system . . . through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple
sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews . . . documents and reports)” (p. 97).
Creswell notes that qualitative research is carried out to enhance understanding of human
experiences and situations and to develop theories that describe these experiences.

To gather these results, a descriptive case study was conducted. Per Yin (2018), a case
study is the preferred method of conducting research when a situation has no single output, the
researcher has little control over the events, and the phenomenon is a real-life context. Using a
descriptive case study to examine and determine how first year college students understand and
experience their reading and texts assignments yielded both the data and the personal
experiences of students. Mesec elaborates, noting “a case study is a description and analysis of
an individual matter or case . . . with the purpose to identify variables, structures, forms, and
orders of interaction between the participants in the situation” (1998, p. 383 as cited in Starman,
2013). Sagadin states that a case study is used to analyze and describe individuals; groups of
people; or separate institutions, problems, processes, phenomena or events in detail (1991, as
cited in Starman, 2013). A case study is an in-depth exploration that comes from multiple
perspectives and should not be a method itself (Simons, 2009). A case study allowed for in-
depth and personal reflection around college freshmen and how they experienced and described their reading experiences.

Yin (2003) differentiates case studies into three types. They are separated into exploratory case studies, descriptive case studies, and explanatory case studies. Yin (2003) notes descriptive case studies are used when the case study is intended to describe a phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred. Explanatory case studies seek to answer the how and why questions in research. Exploratory case studies are used to define questions and hypotheses for a further piece of research, such as a large-scale survey. Neither exploratory nor explanatory case studies fit this study’s focus and intended research outcome. The research questions in this study were focused on describing student experiences. Therefore, this study warranted a descriptive case study.

**Research Population and Sampling Method**

The following section will detail the research population, participation selection, and data sources. After an initial screening, the final number of participants was 13. Data were collected from the participants during personal interviews and through textual artifacts that the participants submitted.

**Population**

This study occurred in a large county in the western portion of the United States. According to the World Population Review (2019), in 2019 the county had a population between 10,000 and 20,000. The population consisted of 94% white (not Hispanic or Latino). Education levels in this county show 95% of the population has a high school diploma, 24% has a bachelor’s degree, and 7% has a professional or advanced degree. The median home price is 1.29 times higher than the national average. Home ownership is 8% higher than the national
average. Median income for the county is 1.37% of the national average. This can be explained by the large presence of oil and natural gas industry in the county, which employs many of the residents. This high paying industry creates a segment of the county population that has an inflated income in comparison to the rest of the county, skewing the county data. It also creates a conundrum for teachers.

An educational challenge facing this county is that students have opportunities to make a living by working in the natural gas and oil fields right after high school graduation. Consequently, particularly for boys who are drawn to the oil fields, interest in pursuing higher education wanes as the promise of immediate employment for $18 per hour presents itself. Young men may be drawn to and acclimate better to the working conditions in the oil fields than young women. The working conditions are incredibly male dominated, the winter conditions and snow exist from October through May at the county’s elevation of nearly 8,000 feet above sea level, and the nature of the tasks require significant bodily strength. Young women in the county rarely enter the oil or natural gas fields; however, some may work in an oil or natural gas company office setting rather than out on a rig or well (see Appendix A).

One challenge is that the starting roustabout positions for eighteen-year olds without any further training are the same jobs that they will remain in for years. The young people that seek training to run or manage natural gas and oilfield technology are the ones who will have jobs for the long term, particularly as the industry continues to become automated. However, these young adults see their relatives or neighbors successfully employed in the natural gas fields. The youth assume that since their acquaintances were financially successful, they will also be successful. What they fail to realize is that as the years pass, increasingly responsible and higher paying jobs will go to those with the technology training necessary to keep the natural gas line
and oil rig technology pumping. Teachers and high school counselors try to combat the lure of “the patch” by encouraging young people to seek postsecondary training, but the immediate gratification of wages at nearly $20 an hour is often too tempting for them to turn down.

The high school graduation rate in this county differs between the high schools. One high school graduates 90% of its students while another graduates 98% of its students. All three are comprised of similar ethnic makeups. Economic disadvantage data differs among the high schools, from 23% to 35% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. Reading proficiency also differs considerably, with 35% of the students at one high school ranked as proficient or advanced while 49% of students at another high school ranked proficient or advanced (U.S. News and World Report Education, 2019).

Participants

Participants in this study were college students. To enroll student participants, this study was advertised on social media (Appendix B). Interested student participants encountered a prescreening list that determined their eligibility for the study. Participants must have graduated from one of the three high schools in the county during 2017 or 2018 and completed at least one semester at a college or university. Those participants who meet the qualifications responded electronically, signaling their willingness to participate.

Prescreening Qualifier

A brief screening qualifier was included in the social media advertisement for participants (see Appendix B). This informed potential respondents regarding their eligibility for participation in the study. As noted above, participants encountered a list of requirements in order to participate in the study. They needed to have graduated from one of the three high schools in the county in the years 2017 or 2018 and have completed at least one semester of
postsecondary education. If respondents meet those criteria, as determined by themselves, then they were invited to reply to progress further in the process.

The target enrollment was twelve participants, based on data saturation research. Data saturation occurs when interviews reveal no new information (Guest et al., 2006). Until the interviews were underway, a final saturation point could not be determined. Based on research regarding case studies and data saturation, four to twelve interviews were the target (Creswell 2013; Morse, 1994, as cited in Guetterman, 2015). Four to 12 interviews had shown to be the range of interviews where saturation begins to occur, therein little to no new information was gathered from participants. Creswell (2013) indicates that saturation is the principle in qualitative research where, based on the data that has been collected and analyzed, further data collection would not be necessary for the project. Interviews were conducted with participants until data saturation was reached. Another consideration for the pool of participants was an equal mix of male and female students and a balanced number of representatives from each high school.

**Stratified Sampling**

This was a stratified sampling process. Stratified sampling is a probability sampling technique where the researcher divides the entire pool into different subgroups, called strata. From the strata final subjects are randomly selected proportionally. Stratified sampling can ensure representation of certain strata of a population for inclusion in the study. It reduces sampling error by first selecting an appropriate subset of the population that meets the study criteria and then randomly selecting a enough participants from that strata (Maheshwari, 2017). For instance, this study population was divided into specific groups that the researcher sought to
research. These groups are called strata. Then, a simple random sample was drawn from each group.

In this case, the simple random samples were the participants who represent the high schools in the county. If the pool of participants was not divided into groups from which final participants representing all three high schools were selected, then participants might have only represented one of the three schools. Additional effort was required to gather a stratified sample than a random sample, as researchers must verify, in this case, the eligibility for inclusion for each participant (Stratified, 2008).

Instrumentation

Interviews

Semistructured interviews were the instrument for this descriptive case study. Semistructured interviews are suitable when the researcher interviews each participant one time (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This type of interview structure can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Recording of semistructured interviews is recommended since semistructured interviews often contain open-ended questions and discussions may diverge from the interview guide (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Having a prepared list of questions ensured that each participant was asked a foundation of the same questions and the questions were prepared ahead of the interview. This allowed the interviewer to remain focused during the interview. Semistructured interviews also allow participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms. Participants were asked a specific set of questions created around their role and experiences with reading as college freshmen (see Appendix E).

Questions in a semistructured interview are designed and carefully ordered to guide the interview but are not intended to orchestrate a rigid question and answer session. In a
A semistructured interview, participants are encouraged to elaborate and follow up, and clarifying questions are asked in order to gain a complete understanding of the participants’ experiences (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). In this research, each participant was asked the same questions in the same order. However, the interviews were all unique in that clarifying questions and discussion around the topic yielded additional comments and information from both the participant and the researcher.

**Artifacts**

Participants were asked to provide a text artifact for the study. The artifacts were limited to text examples as opposed to video, audio, or visual examples of classroom assignments. Students were asked for a piece of text that represents their typical reading assignment in a freshman level college class. The purpose of these text artifacts was to add additional insight to the study by evaluating the actual texts that the students were assigned during their freshman year. By linking the Lexile score of the reading texts to the participants’ demographics and answers to their interview questions, more could be learned about the participants’ experiences.

The text artifacts were gathered from participants on paper or electronically. Electronic copies of the artifacts were stored with the interview transcripts on a password protected laptop. Paper copies of the text artifacts were stored in the locked filing cabinet with the other paper associated with the research study and will remain in locked storage for 3 years post-study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in early 2019. Student participants completed a consent form electronically, using Qualtrics survey management software to electronically produce their signature for consent. Each participant completed the consent form prior to any data collection, and participants were advised that they could leave the study at any time if they chose to.
Personal interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on the location of the participant in the county and state. The county covers nearly 5,000 square miles, thus ease of participation via video conferencing was imperative for securing the college students’ participation around their classes and jobs.

The interviews were conducted in a private, one-on-one setting. If the interview was conducted via video conferencing, the participant was also in a private setting such as a dorm room. The interview began with a confirmation that a consent form (see Appendix C) was on file. The participants listened to the student interview introduction script (see Appendix D) read aloud to them by the researcher. An ordered list of questions (see Appendix E) guided the session to ensure consistency. Interviews were conducted on an appointment basis with approximately 60 minutes set aside for each meeting. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy of the data collected. Recording the session also eliminated frantic note taking by the researcher, which may have distracted the participant. Factory installed recording software on a cell phone recorded the interview and transposed the speech to a written document. This software needs a laptop computer to be open and the software activated prior to the interview. Then, the computer captured the text and typed the words during the interview. After the interview, the researcher compared the audio and written files to ensure accuracy. Thus, there were two forms of recording of the interview. One device provided an audio record of the interview and one device provided a transcription of the interview. Again, participants granted permission to record the interview using the consent form on Qualtrics.

Prior to administering the surveys, a pilot study was conducted with a college student who had aged out of the parameters of the study. This preview of the interview script and protocol corrected confusing wording errors in the interview questions prior to their
administration to actual participants. This also determined how much time should be estimated for each interview.

In addition to the interviews, each participant was asked to provide a sample text from one of their freshman textbooks or other assigned reading, such as fiction. These texts were submitted electronically. This request was done at the time of the interview. Most participants were about to comply immediately. A few participants took one to three days to provide the materials. There were five participants who did not provide a sample text at all. Once the texts were all received, they were evaluated for text complexity using Lexile.com, a free program that provides analysis of the Lexile score for text samples.

Identification of Attributes

Participants were queried regarding their reading and text experiences during their first year of postsecondary education. Information that was sought included details about the text that they encountered, such as assignment load and reading expectations in college. They were also asked to share their perspectives about their ability to comprehend and master the text. Finally, they were asked to reflect on their high school preparation for reading at a college level.

Data Analysis Procedures

In the data analysis, the interviews were transcribed. Then member checking was conducted with the participants. Finally, the data were coded with descriptive coding, sometimes referred to as attribute coding, followed by structural coding.

Transcribing the Interviews

Following the interviews, the interviews were transcribed. Recordings were deleted from the cell phone immediately following an accuracy check of the Speech to Text transcribed file. The transcribed interviews were stored on the Google drive on a personal laptop and any paper
associated with this study was locked in a file cabinet in a home office. This data will be preserved for three years post study, at which point it will be destroyed. Only the committee members, Institutional Review Board, and the researcher will have access to the data.

**Member Checking**

After the interviews were transcribed, interview transcripts were emailed to each participant for member checking. Each participant had a chance to review the transcript of the interview and make additions or corrections. If any changes were necessary, the participant could have made those additions or changes via email. One participant responded and made a change to her ACT score.

**Coding the Data**

After member checking, the researcher began coding the interviews. The first type of code that was applied to the data set was attribute coding. Sometimes referred to as descriptive coding, this type of coding captures the basic description of the participants, their demographics, the format, and the date and location of the data gathering (Saldaña, 2013). Pseudonyms were assigned at this time. Essential information on each participant was organized and detailed. Pseudonyms were in place during this process and the participants were undefined to the researcher.

Following the attribute coding, structural coding was utilized. Per Saldaña (2013), structural coding is effective for qualitative studies involving multiple participants and semistructured data-gathering methods, which describes this study. In structural coding, “broad topics are identified and can be dissected into more specific topics. Structural coding applies a content-based . . . topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview” (MacQueen et al., 2008, in Saldaña, 2013, p. 124). Thus, structural
coding was suitable for this project based on the interview style research. Once the data were
coded using structural coding, then the similarly coded segments were collected together for
more detailed coding and analysis. Structural coding was used as a categorization technique and
basis for further qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

Structural coding is a coding method where codes are not applied in the margin of the
transcripts but are applied on a question by question basis. When all the questions are coded,
then the data is grouped by question for further analysis of the responses and the codes that
emerged. Themes or patterns can be accessed from there. The patterns that emerge from
grouping the question/responses together will then be subcoded.

A subcode is a “second-order tag assigned after a primary code to detail or enrich the
entry, depending on the volume of data you have or specificity you may need for categorization
and data analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 61, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 77). Subcoding
is used when the initial coding scheme is determined to be too broad. The general tag is called
the “parent” while the second order, or subcodes, are called the “children;” additional subcodes
are called siblings if they share the same tag (Gibbs, 2007, in Saldaña, 2013). In this study, for
instance, a parent subcode was “READING ASSIGNMENT” while children and siblings
subcodes were “READING ASSIGNMENT-HIGH SCHOOL,” “READING ASSIGNMENT-
COLLEGE.”

The student data were coded using structural coding; however, one more type of coding
was reserved as a final type of coding. This was in vivo coding. This was useful due to the
nature of this type of coding. In vivo coding refers to words or short phrases that appear
verbatim in the interview transcript (Saldaña, 2013). This type of coding was particularly useful
with student data in terms of teasing out the nuances of their messages. Per Saldaña, “in vivo
coding is particularly useful in educational ethnographies with youth. The child and adolescent voices are often marginalized, and coding with their actual words enhances and deepens an adult’s understanding of their cultures and worldviews” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). In vivo coding is done by using the participant’s own words and is done by placing recurring and significant words in quotation marks at the end of the lines or margins of the page. Saldaña (2013) suggests capturing words that would require bolding, highlighting, or other emphasis if spoken out loud in order to complete the code. In other forms of coding, quotation marks are not used, but the difference with in vivo coding is that the participants’ own voices and words are captured, thus the quotation marks to distinguish the actual quotes. Using in vivo coding was part of the research plan due to the youthfulness of the research participants.

**Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design**

Both limitations and delimitations were noted with this research. Limitations are the restrictions that are present in the study itself and are not within the control of the researcher (Creswell, 2012). Delimitations are the specific restrictions that the researcher places on the study. The delimitations can limit the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

**Limitations**

Limitations that are placed on research studies are the restrictions that are inherent in the study itself. These are things that the researcher has no control over. One limitation of this research project was the small size of the study. The study size encompassed a large county in a state in the western United States. Despite the large size of the county, which covers 5,000 square miles, there are only three high schools in the county. Together they graduate just over 100 high school students each year. This small participant pool limited the study size. Another limitation was the very rural environment from which the data were taken. The data were not a
conglomeration of urban, suburban, and rural students’ perceptions but was specific to this location. The participants had significantly rural backgrounds and life experiences.

The interview questions themselves served as both a limitation and a delimitation, depending on how they are considered. The questions, by their nature, may have limited the responses. Although the questions were open ended, the questions may have guided or triggered certain responses from participants. As well, the responses reflected students’ perspectives from one county in one state and can inform, but not be generalized, to students in all locations.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations of a study are those limits that a researcher places on the study. A delimitation of the study was that the student participants were graduates from 2017 or 2018 graduating classes. This selection was limited to these two years to maintain the accuracy of participants’ memory of their first year of college reading experiences. Therefore, the data collected was limited to the experiences of college students who graduated from high school during those 2 years.

Another delimitation was the specific parameters for the student participants. The student high school graduates graduated from one of the three high schools in the county and must have attended at least one semester at a college or university in order to inform the research study regarding their reading experiences at the college level. Although any type of postsecondary education (technical school, college, or university) qualified a student for this study, each participant completed at least one semester in order to be considered for this study.

The text artifacts that were gathered from the participants were limited to text artifacts only. No video, audio, or visual artifacts were considered for this study. This was a specific distinction for this research because it would have been very difficult to accurately assess the
Lexile level of video, audio, or visual artifacts. In order to maintain consistency in this reading study, artifacts that required reading were requested.

A final delimitation of the study was the list of interview questions. A standard list of questions for each participant provided a designated structure for each interview. These questions were determined by the researcher and were based largely on the literature review and current literature. Each participant’s answers prompted clarifying or follow-up questions that added to the prepared list of questions. These follow-up questions added information to the project and caused each interview to be slightly different from the others. However, each participant was asked the same questions, in the same order, with follow-up or clarifying questions interspersed throughout the interview.

Validation

Credibility is the base of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. A researcher strives to demonstrate the truth of the study’s findings. The researcher uses confirmability, which is the degree of neutrality the researcher exhibits. The researcher provides a transparent audit trail of the decisions that were made in the process of the study. The researcher also provides rationale to establish that the findings are without bias. Providing transparency and bias-free reports establish trustworthiness and credibility through tangible and intangible processes in the progression of the research (Creswell, 2000).

An additional goal of the researcher is dependability, which is the extent to which the study could be replicated by other researchers with consistent, similar findings. The research report should provide detailed information for another researcher to obtain similar findings if the study was repeated. The description provided by the researcher should enable others to replicate the entire process successfully (Creswell, 2000)
**Triangulation**

Triangulation occurs when more than one method is used to collect data. This increases the validity of research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this project, information was collected from college students and textual artifacts from student participants. As well, the students came from three different high schools, and the students attended myriad different colleges and universities.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is a technique where the interview data is shared back to the participants so that they can clarify the information, correct any errors, and provide additional information if they choose to (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checking establishes credibility and helps to ensure the accuracy of the data that was collected. In this study, member-checking was established as follows. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed into text. The recording was done through a text to speech software, where the software captured the words of the interview and transcribed them into a text file. Concurrently, the interview was also audio recorded as a back-up to the transcribed file. The transcribed interview was emailed back to the participant for verification that the notes were their accurate answer. The participant emailed any corrections or additions to the transcribed interview to the researcher.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the extent to which the study results can be generalized from a sample to a population (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This makes the results fruitful or useful for others to apply to their situations. Providing rich details and thick description of the information increases transferability. This enables readers to understand the context of the information and for the
study to become meaningful to an outsider. Additionally, by providing thick description, the study results can be applied to another situation, thus making the study details come alive and become useful to another’s situation.

Exploring how college freshmen describe and understand their reading experiences can be transferred or replicated. A group of teachers could benefit from meaningful excerpts of transcripts and accurate details of the interviews. Emotions, personal explanations, experiences, and facts will enable the reader to gain a complete understanding of the study. Transferring the information to another’s situation will enable the study to be overlaid into additional research. Replication of this study can be made possible only if details are carefully recorded.

**Expected Findings**

The researcher expected to discover that college freshmen entered college expecting their reading experiences to be like what they encountered in high school, as in they expected to be fully prepared for college level reading. The researcher expected the participants to have similar stories of transitioning to college, expecting students to choose their postsecondary education institution based on their ability level. Thus, the most prepared students would align themselves with the four-year universities and would have little difficulty transitioning to college level text. The students with moderate skills would enroll in community colleges or technical skills, matching themselves with the reduced academic challenged offered at those institutions.

**Ethical Issues**

Participant confidentiality was maintained at the college, district, teacher, and student level. The focus of the study was college student reading experiences rather than reading preparation by district or by student, or teacher performance. Participation was voluntary and participants may have opted out at any time.
Conflict of Interest Assessment

Conflict of interest is always a consideration when researchers conduct studies and report on their endeavors. Transparency is one way to ensure that readers know the complete situation. The researcher was a teacher in one of the school districts in the study. The high school graduates included in the study were not past students of the researcher due to the ages of the students. In no way were the results of this study used by the employing school district to further nor hamper employment or compensation. Any professional benefits from completion of this study would be related to the completion of the doctoral degree itself, in which completion of this research project is one part.

Researcher’s Position

As a language arts teacher, the researcher has a vested interest in preparing young people for life beyond secondary education. The researcher’s interest lies in high school graduate reading proficiency and the experiences of college freshmen when they encounter college reading text. Since ACT data shows that only 45% of students nationwide are proficient readers (ACT, Inc., 2018) and college enrollment is at an all-time high (NCES, 2018), the researcher was curious about how students experience reading, how they feel about their level of preparation for college level text, and what students face when they arrive on campus.

Ethical Issues in the Study

No research began until Concordia University’s Institutional Review Board granted approval. In order to uphold ethical principles, all participants reviewed, had an opportunity to ask questions regarding, and signed consent forms prior to any data collection. Names of student participants were replaced with a number. Pseudonyms were used in the text of the dissertation. These corresponding names and numbers were saved on a password protected personal computer.
in a home office. This process served two purposes. First, it guaranteed confidentiality for participants. Second, it removed any differences between the three school districts and kept the focus on how college freshmen experience and describe their reading experiences. School districts were unidentifiable. This means that in the study results, the school districts were indistinguishable from one another. This data will be destroyed 3 years from the completion of the study. As part of the consent forms and interview conversation, participants were made aware that they had the right to leave the interview at any time and decline to answer any question. As part of the credibility of this study and the member checking process, participants received a transcript of their interview via email. They were asked to review and clarify their answers. If they had no changes, then they did not respond. If, however, they felt that they needed to clarify or change an answer, they emailed the researcher corrections or clarifications. Changes could have been made to a transcript of an interview until the data were coded.

**Chapter 3 Summary**

The intention of this project was to determine how college freshmen describe and understand their reading experiences and texts. College students completed an interview intended to gather information regarding their reading experiences. Text artifacts were gathered from participants. The results and analysis inform secondary teachers, school districts, college faculty, and others regarding how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences. Further, this information can be used to help the above prepare high school students for the transition to college level text.

Factors that drive this project included the low reading proficiency level of American high school graduates, reported by several testing services to be approximately 40% (ACT, Inc., 2017; ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018). Compounding the situation was the increase in college
enrollment, particularly in community colleges (NCES, 2018). As well, remedial courses both offered and required by colleges and universities have increased, serving students who enroll in college with less than proficient reading skills (Blanchard, 2009; Di Giacomo et al., 2013; Egan, 2006, as cited in Tracy, 2009). Thus, further understanding of how college freshmen describe and understand their reading experiences may be beneficial.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

The purpose of the descriptive case study was to examine how college freshmen understand and experience their assigned reading in comparison to their high school reading experiences. High school graduates have a low reading proficiency throughout the United States. Student ACT scores indicate that students are not prepared for postsecondary reading. According to the 2016 ACT test, reading component, only 44% of United States high school graduates read proficiently (ACT, Inc., 2017). The ACT reading component results were similar in 2018, which indicated that just 47% of students read proficiently (ACT, Inc., 2018). This data shows that more than half of American high school graduates cannot read proficiently upon graduation.

At the same time, college enrollment in America is increasing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Seventy percent of 2016 high school graduates were enrolled in college, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017). Thus, high school graduates have reading proficiency levels below 50%, yet increasing numbers of students enroll in college. This juxtaposition of facts led the researcher to seek insight from students regarding their actual reading experiences during their freshman year of college.

The research questions for this study were as follows.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?

RQ2: How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?
This chapter includes discussion of the themes, consistent with qualitative research using a case study grounded in the research questions. Text artifacts that were collected from the participants further informed the study and that analysis is included as well. This chapter also contains demographics from the study. The process used to analyze transcripts of the 13 participants’ interviews is explained in detail. Multiple levels of coding were completed during evaluation. Participant quotes highlight key ideas and are presented in this chapter.

Description of the Sample

There were several mandatory prerequisites in this descriptive case study. First, participants were required to be 2017 or 2018 high school graduates from any one of the three high schools in the study county. Participants must have completed at least one semester of postsecondary education. The postsecondary education must have taken place at a four-year university, a technical school, or a community college. The county where these institutions are found comprises 5,000 square miles in a rural setting in the western United States. Participants were sought via social media calls for study participants. Specific Facebook and Instagram pages that serve as the county information hubs were utilized to disperse the information. These Facebook and Instagram pages have thousands of visitors and serve as news outlets for this rural county. Respondents that met the criteria for the study responded to the social media calls for participants (see Appendix B), as the study criteria were listed in the advertisements. Each person that responded met all the study criteria. Sixteen qualified people replied to the social media posts, and 13 qualified participants were utilized in the study.

The sample size of 13 participants included students from all three high schools in the county. There were eight females and five males who completed the interview process.
Participants included one Hispanic student, one African American student, and 11 Caucasian students.

The ACT score range for the participants was 19 to 34. The participant GPA range was 3.0 to 4.0. Nationally, the average ACT composite score was 20.8 in 2018. In that same year, the state average ACT score was 20.0 (ACT.Org, 2019). Participants were students from a variety of postsecondary education opportunities, including universities, technical schools, and community colleges.

Table 1: Participant Postsecondary Course of Study and Participant Academic and Table 2: Advanced Coursework Detail, reveal the participant demographics. Pseudonyms replace participant names. Appendix F also provides a Description of the Sample.

Table 1

*Participant Postsecondary Course of Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Type of postsecondary school</th>
<th>Area of study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Nursing and business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greyson</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>Diesel mechanics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevin</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>Satellite communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kami</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trisha</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>Civil engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryne</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>Equine studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lys</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>African American studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>Sports medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keri</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>Business</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Participant Academic and Advanced Coursework Detail, includes additional demographic information about the participants. This provides academic information, like data regarding GPA, ACT score, and participants’ completion of higher-level academic courses, such
as Advance Placement or college classes while in high school. Seven of the students had taken college classes while in high school and six had not. Similarly, eight participants completed Advanced Placement classes in high school, while five did not. There was some overlap of the students who took college classes or Advanced Placement classes in high school, but not a complete overlap, meaning that some students took the college classes while others took Advanced Placement courses, while a few took both types of challenging coursework.

Table 2

*Participant Academic and Advanced Coursework Detail*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Type of postsecondary school</th>
<th>College classes in high school</th>
<th>Advanced Placement Classes</th>
<th>ACT Score</th>
<th>High School GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greyson</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevin</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kami</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trisha</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Technical school</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryne</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lys</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keri</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

*Summary of Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Postsecondary Institution</th>
<th>Average High School GPA</th>
<th>Average Composite ACT Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical School</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Summary of Participant Demographics, summarizes the average GPA and the average composite ACT score for the participants by type of postsecondary institution that was attended. This summary table is a compilation of the numeric data in Table 2: Participant Academic and Advanced Coursework Detail. Attendees of universities scored the highest in both categories. Community college attendees scored the lowest in both categories.

**Research Methodology and Analysis**

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to gather details regarding how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences, and how these participants understand the difference between the reading experiences they had in high school versus their college reading experiences. To facilitate this gathering of information, semistructured interviews were conducted using a scripted interview (see Appendix D) and a list of questions (see Appendix E), and text samples of college level text that were gathered for analysis.

**Conceptual Framework and Methodology**

This study is based on constructivist theory. Constructivist theory notes that through their lived experiences, learners create knowledge and meaning for themselves based on the information that they acquire. Constructivism focuses on the learner rather than the teacher, content, or material (Fosnot, 1996). Another premise of constructivism is that the knowledge, past experiences, values, cultural background, etc. that each person possesses are different and translate into varying knowledge that is unique to each learner (Fosnot, 1996). Thus, learning is unique to each individual and is shaped by each person’s prior experiences. Nothing has meaning until each learner gives it meaning for themselves.

The framework is appropriate due to the objective of the study. The aim of the study was to gain insight regarding how freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences, and
how they describe the difference between the reading experiences they had in high school and their college reading experiences. The semistructured interviews contained questions that allowed the students to describe their experiences. Although the participants attended myriad postsecondary courses of study, when the data were coded themes arose from the hours of interview transcripts.

The research questions elicited qualitative information, or data that is not in the form of numbers (McLeod, 2017). Insights, opinions, recollections, and other descriptive information was gathered from the 13 participants during the interviews. When a participant shared information that needed clarifying, the researcher asked follow-up questions that were not on the interview script. These follow-up questions caused every interview to be slightly different than the one prior.

Constructivist theory was the foundation of this study based on the focus on student experiences with reading and texts. Student reading levels or abilities were not assessed. Descriptions of experiences were sought and then coded and analyzed to add insight into how college students describe and understand their reading experiences. Therefore, constructivism was a foundation for the study with a framework of seeking understanding rather than measuring performance. In order to gather the descriptive information, a descriptive case study approach was utilized.

Descriptive Case Study

A case study was appropriate this type of research, as Yin (2018) states that the purpose of a case study is to explain a causal link, describe an intervention, or explore certain topics where there is no single output. Yin (2018) notes that case studies are the preferred method of data collection when the researcher has little control over events. The qualitative data gathered
through the interview process contributed to a descriptive case study around how college freshmen experience and understand their reading assignments in college.

**Interview process.** Prior to participating in an interview or providing a text sample, each participant completed a consent form that was provided by Concordia University and administered via an online link to Qualtrics. Participants completed the consent forms online. Completion of the consent forms was verified and reviewed with the participant prior to proceeding with the study.

Semistructured interviews with the participants produced rich information around participants’ reading experiences. These interviews were conducted in early 2019. Each participant was asked the same 18 questions in the same order (see Appendix E). Follow up questions often stemmed from the respondent’s answers, eliciting clarification and additional information. Not every interview contained the same follow up questions, as the follow up questions were necessitated and developed on a case-by-case basis.

Interviews ceased at 13 participants when the information that was gathered became repetitive, reaching the point of saturation (Guest et al., 2006). The initial participant projection for the study was eight to fifteen interviews, based on data saturation research (Karamustafaglou, 2009, as cited in Guetterman, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Early estimations in planning the study were accurate based on data saturation at 13 participants. All the interviews were conducted by the researcher, which created consistency in the question and answer technique and data gathering. The data analysis was performed by the researcher as well.

**Data management.** The interviews were audio recorded so they could be transcribed after the interview. The transcription process was begun during the interview using a speech to text app, which created a textual account of the conversation. This served as an additional source
of verification and expedited the transcription. Using this method streamlined the transcription process considerably. Immediately after the interviews were transcribed, the audio recordings were deleted from the recording device. The interview transcripts were emailed to the participants for member checking and verifying the information, as is best practice in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, after the transcribed interviews were shared back to participants via email, one participant responded and clarified her ACT score information from the interview. As noted in Chapter 3, all paper associated with this project is stored in a locked filing cabinet. The interview transcripts are stored on a password protected laptop.

Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants. Other identifying factors such as high school and college attended were separated from the transcripts. Using pseudonyms and removing identifying characteristics created a situation where specific participants were difficult to identify. This reduced the potential for bias. The pseudonym and deleted information were kept linked to the actual participant name on the original transcripts and stored in the filing cabinet for later reference if necessary.

**Coding of Data**

To facilitate coding, the researcher identified the research questions on each section of the transcripts. Questions were numbered on the transcripts so that the questions could be sorted and coded by question, by participant, or by participant demographic, such as type of postsecondary institution the participant attended. The researcher made several copies of the transcripts and was able to sort the data numerous ways while retaining the original format as needed.

**Descriptive coding.** Next, the transcripts underwent descriptive coding, which captured basic information about participants’ high school and college experiences. For instance, ACT
score and high school GPA information was noted. Completion of college classes or Advanced Placement classes in high school and type of postsecondary institution was also coded. This descriptive information provided informative details about the participants which became helpful as the analysis progressed. A summary of this information is available in the Description of the Sample (above) and in Appendix F.

**Structural coding.** Second, structural coding was employed. The interviews were organized by participant, and the questions were coded in order. Major topics were identified. These major topics are termed as adults (Saldaña, 2013) in the structural coding model. Examples of topics that evolved from this coding are ACADEMIC CHALLENGES IN COLLEGE, READING EXPERIENCES IN COLLEGE, READING CHALLENGES IN COLLEGE, HELPFUL READING SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL, and LEAST HELPFUL READING SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL. The secondary level of the structural coding process, known as children (Saldaña, 2013), produced topics such as TIME MANAGEMENT, HEAVY READING LOAD, and OUTLINING.
A second round of structural coding was employed where the transcripts were divided into the individual questions. Next the answers were grouped together by question number. For instance, all participants’ answers to question three were grouped together. The answers were read and reread and coded. This second utilization of structural coding generated the same types of themes as before. For example, when coding question number five, which reads, “How did the preparation that you received in high school match up with or differ from what you encountered when you got to your college classes?” the answers were largely consistent.

Finally, the participant transcripts were further analyzed by dividing them by question number and then by type of postsecondary institution that participants attended during their freshman year; specifically, a university, community college, or technical school. The transcripts were coded once more to find any threads that may not have already appeared. This grouping produced the most consistent pattern of feedback among participants. The answers to questions matched significantly, adding validity to the responses. The type of postsecondary institution
that the participant attended proved to impact participant answers more than other factors in the gathering of the data.

**Textual Evidence**

Participants were asked to electronically submit an example page from one of their freshman year’s reading assignments. The purpose of gathering textual artifacts was to gain additional information about the reading experiences of the students. The text examples allowed comparison between the average reading level of college text nationally to the participants’ assigned college texts and readings. This additional information added insight into the Lexile reading levels of texts as well as other information. For instance, the researcher could compare the Lexile level of texts for students who attended various types of postsecondary institutions with the answers the participants provided to interview questions. These additional insights provided another layer of understanding to the study.

Numerous participants provided an example page of text that they were assigned to read during their freshman year of college. These examples were taken from a variety of different sources including textbooks and novels that were assigned by instructors. Some participants were unable to provide a piece of text because they did not have their freshmen materials any longer. The textual artifacts were then assessed through Lexile.org to determine the reading level of the text.

In an article titled “College and Career Readiness: Through the Lens of Lexiles,” Gina Massengill (2013) indicates during the first two years of postsecondary education, texts have an average Lexile level of 1355L, with university texts scoring 1395L and community college texts scoring 1295L. The L after the score indicates that the number is referencing a Lexile range.
Summary of the Findings and Themes

Ultimately, six themes evolved through the analysis of the transcripts (Table 4). Themes evolved that support how college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences. As well, the themes support how first year college students understand the difference between college level reading and their high school reading experiences.

Table 4

Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Thematic Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>College reading experiences are greater and require more participation than high school text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Participation for college was not equally effective for students, and technical school students were least prepared for postsecondary reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>College students felt that their high school teachers warned them too vigorously of the rigors of college, yet they still were overwhelmed by college academics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Students felt that they did not have to read to complete high school, and many students did not read enough or at all in high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Skimming the text is the only way to get through the volume of reading in college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Community college students took the least personal responsibility for the reading ability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presentation of the Data and Results

The following research questions were addressed by the data that was gathered.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?

RQ2: How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?

Themes evolved from the data when the responses were grouped by type of postsecondary institution that the participant attended. For instance, the responses provided by the students who attended a four-year university had similar themes. Likewise, the responses
provided by students who pursued a technical certificate were much alike. The textual evidence added additional insight to the themes that evolved from the interviews.

**Textual Evidence Results**

The textual artifacts were evaluated using Lexile.com to determine the text complexity level. Each document was assigned a Lexile level, noted with an L after the number. Next, the Lexile number of each document was evaluated based on the Lexile Measure Norms for Reading by Grade (Lexile.com, 2019) information in Table 4 and the Lexile Score of Grade Level Students information in Table 5 (below). This evaluation determined the text’s approximate grade level in relation to two different rating scales. One table determined appropriate text complexity for grade level students and the other determined text complexity for students who scored up to the 90th percentile.

The Lexile Score of Grade Level Students (Scholastic, Inc., 2007), Table 5, provides additional information regarding Lexile scores and student achievement. This table shows Lexile score by grade for proficient, grade level students. These students were considered on grade level. They did not fall into the “below grade level” or “above grade level” categories in the study. The Lexile range band is narrower for these grade level students. Positioned alongside this data is the text evidence data from this study. The text evidence data is noted in several ways; as an average, divided by type of text, and divided by type of postsecondary institution attended.
Table 5

Scholastic Reading Inventory Lexile Score of Grade Level Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Grade Level Scores</th>
<th>Study Results-Text Artifacts Average</th>
<th>Study Results-Text Artifacts by Type of Postsecondary Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>100L-299L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>300L-499L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>500L-599L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>600L-699L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>700L-799L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>800L-849L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>850L-899L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>900L-999L</td>
<td></td>
<td>950 L Technical School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1000L-1024L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1025L-1049L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>1050L-1300L</td>
<td>1050L Textbooks</td>
<td>1116L Community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1100 L average Lexile Score</td>
<td>1125L University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1183 Novels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6, titled the Lexile Measure Norms for Reading by Grade (Lexile.com, 2019) shows the results of the MetaMetrics’ study of students from all 50 states and the U. S. Virgin Islands who were administered tests that determined Lexile measures. This study was conducted from 2010 to 2016 and involved 3.5 million students who were tested in the spring of their school year. These results show the Lexile scores of students reading in the 50th through 90th percentiles by grade level (Lexile.com, 2019). These students were considered proficient or advanced readers.
Table 6

50th to 90th Percentile Student Lexile Measure Norms for Reading by Grade (Lexile.com, 2019)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>50th–90th Percentile Scores</th>
<th>Study Results–Text Artifacts Average</th>
<th>Study Results–Text Artifacts by Type of Postsecondary Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>165L to 565L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>425L to 790L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>645L to 980L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>850L to 1155L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>950L to 1255L</td>
<td>1050 L Textbooks</td>
<td>950L Technical School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1030L to 1335L</td>
<td>1100L Average Lexile score</td>
<td>1116L Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1183 Novels</td>
<td>1125L University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1095L to 1405L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1155L to 1465L</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1205L to 1515L</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1250L to 1605L</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–12</td>
<td>1295L to 1605L</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further breakdown of the submitted artifacts revealed that the textbooks averaged a lower text complexity, or Lexile level, than the text from assigned novels. The average Lexile level for the textbook excerpts that participants provided was 1050L. Excerpts from assigned novels were also assessed. The average Lexile level from those texts was 1183L (see Appendix G).

In the interview process, participants did not distinguish between or observe the level of difficulty between their textbooks and their class novels in college. They referred to their reading in general terms without differentiating between types of text. There was also no specific question in the interview script that asked participants to consider the difference between their textbook reading and the assigned fiction in college.

The exception to this was the technical college students, one of whom mentioned that he did not have any literature in his certification program. All three technical school students noted that their text overall was detailed and “scientificy,” per Trevis. These technical school students stressed the level of detail in their reading. Yet, the technical school text artifact scored the
lowest Lexile score at 950L. The technical school students noted the need to read closely and slowly in order to gather all the essential information. They found their postsecondary reading to be more challenging than they expected and significantly more challenging than the reading they encountered in high school.

Analysis of the textual examples indicated that technical school participants experienced a lower Lexile level of text than the literature indicated is typical in a freshman college course (Massengill, 2013; Wilkins et al, 2010). However, the technical school participants shared that they found the text challenging both in the amount of reading that was required and the difficulty level of the text. Per the research questions, this description of their postsecondary reading assignments was a general description. It was also valid in comparison to their high school reading assignments, which they felt were “voluntary” or “not required.”

Another outcome of the analysis of the textual artifacts was the comparison of GPA and composite ACT scores to the Lexile levels for the three types of postsecondary education. The university participants averaged higher GPA and composite ACT scores than the community college and technical school students. The difference in GPA was almost half of a point, at 0.44 points higher GPA than the community college students. The 4-year university students’ average composite ACT score was 7.2 points higher than the community college participants.

The textual artifacts also indicate a difference in the Lexile level of the postsecondary reading assignments for the university students and the community college students. When analyzed using Lexile.com, the textual artifact samples from the community college students averaged 1116L as compared to the 4-year university artifacts, which scored a negligible difference at 1125L. Both scores are within the average, mid-grade level range for high school grades 11 to 12.
Based on the textual artifacts, the Lexile levels of the texts that the community college students and the university students encountered upon entering college were nearly identical. However, there is a significant difference in the high school GPA and the ACT composite score between university and community college students. Participants from both types of postsecondary education noted similar frustrations with the increase in difficulty in the amount and rigor of college level reading. The ability of the community college students to read, as recorded by their average ACT scores, was lower upon entering college. These students would have struggled with the higher Lexile level texts to a greater extent. Considering the difference in ACT composite scores, the community college students would have felt the increase in rigor and amount of reading substantially more than the university students.

The analysis of the text complexity of the artifacts using Lexile.com was designed to add insight to the participants’ reading profiles. As the themes are discussed below, the text complexity details are included where they are relevant. These details add insight into the research questions around how freshmen college students understand and describe their reading experiences and how they describe the difference between their college and high school reading experiences.

**Theme 1: College reading expectations are greater and require more participation and deeper thinking than high school text**

All 13 participants indicated that their reading assignments became more challenging and longer in duration once they entered college. Susie noted that she spent a great deal more time reading specifically from textbooks in college than she did in high school. In literature classes, the reading was “more in-depth and ethical reading” according to Sean, a business major at a university. He also noted that he spent at least twice as much time reading in college than he did...
in high school. This was seconded by Amy, who noted that she has “texts that are considered
challenging now that I’m in college. I have to spend more time trying to understand. In high
school it was more like short stories or To Kill a Mockingbird, which really isn’t that difficult.”
Lys explained, “It’s a much bigger picture now, such as how do the books apply to modern
times. It’s much harder. It’s not so much based on plot or symbolism as broader techniques.”
Students explained that they were focused on getting the meaning out of the reading. “[In high
school] we didn’t really look into how to understand what’s being stated,” added Amy, also a
business major at a university.

The analysis of the textual examples that was supplied by the participants add
information to this theme. The average Lexile reading level of first year posts-secondary texts is
1355L, per Massengill (2013). The average reading level of the text examples provided by the
participants was significantly lower, at 1100L. Yet even then, the students described their
reading assignments as “challenging,” “overwhelming,” and “difficult.”

Many of the participants expressed surprise at the amount of in-class participation that
was required of them in their college classes. These students found that the reading was
expected to be completed prior to coming to class and that a great deal of the class credit was
based on participation in a discussion of the text. Several students commented on both the depth
of the discussion and the required participation level during class discussions. Sean, a business
student at a four-year university, summarized it as follows.

The biggest difference between high school reading and college reading was expectations
post-reading. In high school you may or may not take notes, you might just skim through
it real quick before class or not even read it at all and then it's a mediocre conversation
following, if that. If you talk about it maybe a quiz and then you move on to stay on
track . . . you could come to this class and skate by and not really do much and still have a 4.0 [GPA].

Lisa, who studied business at a four-year university, seconded that sentiment. She shared,

[In high school, there was] not a lot of discussion. The kids were not made to behave well enough to have decent discussions. If the principal came in, the teacher would be different and the kids would be different, but on a normal day it was kind of a free for all. No one really cared.

Numerous students shared that in college, participation was mandatory and sometimes a portion of the grade was based on the quality of the student’s contributions. Sean continued, citing the lack of reading requirements in high school and the intensity of the reading response required in college, “We could not just sit without participating in a meaningful way. You didn’t have to actually read to participate in high school, right? In college that’s not possible. You are forced to participate at high intensity.”

Trisha had a similar experience and offered, “In college, you weren’t counted as present unless you participated, and you have to say something useful.” Finally, Kami, a student at a different university, cited the same experience regarding participation and reading, saying, “You have to participate. You get points for participating. They want you to participate so you have to have read it or you can’t participate.” Participation at a high level was carried into students’ grades at some institutions, which was a difficult adjustment for at least one student. “There’s so much [sic] participation grades. We didn’t do that in high school. One of my classes 50% of the class is quality [participation],” complained Keri, an education major.
Theme 2: Preparation for college was not equally effective for students, and technical school students were least prepared

Students described their high school and postsecondary reading experiences, respectively, using the word “guided.” The word guided was applied at both ends of the spectrum, explaining how their reading experiences differed. High school reading was described as significantly guided, whereas postsecondary reading was described as independent or less guided. Several students compared their college reading to high school by using phrases such as “not as guided.”

High school reading was done either aloud and together in the classroom or read by the teacher as the class followed along. “We read it together and then talked about it,” noted Kami, a nursing major. Angie, studying at a community college, described her high school reading experiences this way,

“It took a long time to finish a book when you talked about it as a class. It wasn’t a ton of reading in high school, but it was in-class reading as well, so you’re kind of like supported while you read.

Another student had similar comments, bringing to light the amount of teacher support and guidance that the students received during their high school reading. Lisa noted, “We knew the teacher would take the whole class through the text anyway.” The amount of teacher support that students received during high school reading accustomed students to reading at a slower pace than what they experienced in college.

In comparison, nearly all the participants made some type of reference to their postsecondary reading experiences as independent or “on your own.” “It’s a lot more rigorous than high school,” seconds Lys, who is studying at a four-year university. Greyson elaborated with,
They expected you to put in a lot more time and it was also a lot more in-depth that it was in high school. There’s a lot more detail and more thinking about what it meant, then in class we had to know what it all meant, so you couldn’t get by with just skimming.

Finally, Keri, studying education at a four-year university, noted, “When I got to college you had to actually interpret an answer, right there. It was more analytical if that makes sense.” Angie concurred with the other participants, “We had to read a chapter before we came to class . . . it’s all up to you. If you didn’t read and like actually pay attention then you would have no idea on its content from the text.” Greyson, pursuing a diesel mechanics certification at a community college, shared, “[In college] you couldn’t get by with just skimming. You actually had to do all of the assignment well enough to get by in the classroom with everyone else.” The immediate transition to faster paced, independent work proved challenging to many students. This sentiment was shared by Trisha, attending a four-year university, who said “[In college] we couldn’t get away with not doing reading at all or anything like that.”

Students who pursued a technical certificate, such as diesel mechanics or satellite communications, did not feel that the preparation was a sufficient match for their postsecondary reading requirements. To summarize their responses, they felt that they were not prepared for the detailed and technical reading that they were required to do for their programs of study. Each student pursuing a technical field of study mentioned something to this effect, such as, “It’s more technical. You have to know what you are reading about to understand anything about it,” per Trevin, studying satellite communications. He noted, “[It was hard to] divide the ideas out and keep track of all of my classes. Staying organized with all of my thoughts.” Greyson, studying diesel mechanics, concurred, stating, “It wasn’t like what they told me. I felt like I was just coming into college without any preparation. The transition was tough and then just the amount
of work for each class was hard to get used to.” Finally, David, pursuing a civil engineer technician certification, said,

My preparation in high school compared to what happened [in my college reading] didn’t match up with what you needed with the technical stuff. I don’t have any fiction in my program. It’s all technical . . . it’s incredibly dense and eats up a lot of your time.

Additionally, two of the three technical school students mentioned that they sought help during their freshman year from instructors regarding organization of text and reading materials. None of the other participants mentioned seeking or needing help with their reading or academics. Trevin explained how the reading in his technical program differs from his high school reading,

I had to have an instructor help me get organized but once that happened it got better.

What is different is my reading now is a lot of acronyms and it’s more technical . . . because it’s definitely bigger words and more ‘scientificy’ if you know . . . if that’s even a word. So that is hard because of the big words, for me.

David also mentioned his journey with seeking help from the teaching assistants at his college. “At first I thought ‘they are my age, what can they teach me?’ , but TAs are really smart, you know, they’re TAs for a reason. I go to office hours two hours at a time to get help.”

Students at community colleges or four-year universities did not cite difficulties with the type of text that they encountered. Nor did they report attending help sessions, seeking help, or using the TAs for support at the rate that the technical school students did during their freshman years.

Theme 3: College students felt that their high school teachers warned them too vigorously of the rigors of college, yet they still were overwhelmed by college academics
A common theme was that students felt that high school teachers warned them too vigorously about how difficult college academics were going to be. Dire warnings were issued by high school teachers, counselors, and other staff on what was reported to be a regular basis. Participants reported being “tired” of the “constant” warnings during their high school years. Yet, after experiencing their freshman year academics, many participants reported conflicting information. They indicated that college level reading was both overwhelming, yet not as hard as they were warned it would be. In exploring how college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school, relating to RQ2, the participants shared narratives around finding their true ability level. The students also noted that the warnings had an unintended consequence.

As a result of the warnings of the difficulties of college, some students initially lacked confidence in their abilities to complete college level work. However, upon arriving at college, they found that they were able to be successful. Keri, an education major at a four-year university, explained that her initial feeling was that college would be too hard for her, based on the warnings of high school teachers. Keri said:

A lot of high school is about how hard college is going to be. Like I was told that college is going to be so difficult and you can’t do this and you have to make sure you’re working hard, and then when I actually started tests in this course I was like ‘yea’. don’t know if it’s really matching up. College is not hard. It’s not bad. I wonder if more kids would try college if there wasn’t the pressure there, the hype, hype, hype it’s going to be so hard, you got to be ready?
Other students indicated that the increase in difficulty was not as significant as they were led to believe it would be by high school teachers. They acknowledged the challenge but said that it was not as hard as they were expecting. For instance, Lisa noted,

It [the difficulty level of the coursework] maybe went up once or twice as hard. College students tell you it’s going to be a little harder, but teachers tell you it’s going to be five or 10 times harder in terms of more and harder reading texts.

Keri continued in her interview with the statement, “You’re told and told that it’s going to be so different, you know, super intense.” Greyson and Bryne experienced the same thing, and noted, respectively, “Don't worry about it too much cuz [sic] it's not as bad as teachers or parents tell you it would be,” and “Once you were there things weren't as bad as you were expecting. Like that's what I thought. I thought it’s gonna be so, so horrible, but they weren't.”

Trish had an upbeat attitude about her experience.

A lot of people definitely told me a lot of stories but it wasn't really scary. It didn’t scare me away from college but I felt like when I went in I was expecting it to be harder and I wasn’t really sure how much harder, but it was it was manageable. I just noticed a lot of people that took it very lightly and I'm just really glad that I didn't. I was nervous about college and I think that everyone should be cuz [sic] if you think it’s going to be easy then you're going to be really surprised, but if you go in thinking that it's going to be difficult but fun that's exactly what it is. It's not too difficult. It doesn’t have to be scary.

However, students seemed to agree with the warnings of their high school teachers. When participants were asked about their biggest postsecondary reading challenge, they shared consistent reports of the rigors of college. The common verbiage among nearly all participants was that in college there were greater expectations across the board; in particular, in the depth
and amount of reading, just as the high school teachers had predicted. The students who attended the four-year university were most likely to note a significant increase. Sean felt that “reading old literature . . . maybe not really old but things like Locke and Thoreau, and some of the more meaningful pieces that you have to break down beyond the surface level,” was the most difficult reading challenge for him. Other students cited the deeper meanings that were sought in college level text, such as, “it takes a little bit to understand more of what the author is trying to say, like ‘is this a political statement, a religious statement?’” asked Amy, studying business at a four-year university. Keri, an education major, noted that the biggest challenge was “really understanding the deeper meaning, analytical reading, interpreting nonfiction, stuff like that.” “It’s not so much plot or symbolism as broader techniques. It’s a much bigger picture now, such as how do the books apply to modern times. It’s much harder,” shared Lys, an African American studies student. Amy expounded on the idea, noting,

[College reading is] a lot more rigorous, a lot more reading just in terms of the amount that you have to read and [you] have to take your time. You have to read a little slower. You have to actually really understand, you have to make sure that you grasp what’s being said and you have to make sure that you catch on to as many little things as you can. You only really understand if you read the text right.

Bryne explained her experience this way:

The reading chapters in my equine breeding class we were supposed to read were very, very long and intense and very in-depth, so they’re almost too hard to continue reading cuz [sic] half the time you don’t, you really weren’t sure what they were talking about. The vocabulary and a lot of reading so you just skipped it.
Thus, participants felt that the significant warnings that grew tiresome in high school did have merit, and in retrospect nearly all acknowledged their validity. As well, the students found that academic reading in college was challenging, required diligence and stamina, and increased classroom participation. This information informs RQ2: ‘How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?’ where students easily made comparisons between the two institutions and their experiences therein.

**Theme 4: Students felt that they did not have to read to complete high school, and many students did not read enough or at all in high school**

One participant noted, “[In high school] very rarely did I read.” Bryne said that in high school, she “could get away with not reading . . . [you would get information] with talking with your friends, but in college you are kind of more on your own and you actually have to do the reading.” Lisa commented, “[In high school] most kids didn’t read because there was no reason or consequence for not reading.” Lys admitted, “I didn’t have a lot of reading experiences in high school. I never had to read a whole book for a class until I took AP English my senior year.” Kami seconds this sentiment, “So in high school I didn’t do much of (sic) reading for in-class things.” Angie was blunter with her assessment of high school reading when she noted, “I didn’t have to do anything in high school to get by, so I didn’t read.” Trevin, a technical college student, admitted that he did not work very hard in high school. “[Students should] do more of what they say instead of just skim through and fake your way through high school. Like I didn't even do certain parts.” One student noted, “In college, my biggest challenge was time management, because you know in high school you can kind of cheat by.”
**Theme 5: Skimming the text is the only way to get through the volume of reading in college**

Most students admitted that they did not, simply could not, read all their college reading assignments. In order to attempt to keep up, they skimmed what they felt was important for the class.

For the honors colloquium we had to finish one book every two weeks at least so it was pretty heavy and it was definitely a little overwhelming. It was like a high-speed book club . . . I rarely actually do the full like 17 pages of reading that they’ve provided. admitted Trisha, studying communications at a four-year university. David shared that he is assigned 20 hours of reading a week on top of his time in class and other homework. “I skim most of it,” he admits.

Several students cited the preparation they received from taking an Advanced Placement English or literature course during their senior year of high school. The higher level of expectations in this course was a good segue way into reading at the college level. Trisha offered, “I think taking that AP English class did help me get a feel for what an honors program would do.” Lys simply stated,

AP Lit in high school prepared me for college . . . I never even had to read a book for a class until I took AP English my senior year. He made sure we were prepared for college, how to handle literature, that sort of thing.

Sean concurred that Advanced Placement classes were the greatest preparation he received for college reading experiences. “I took as many AP and college classes as I could, so I was used to intense reading and big words. My reading didn’t change when I got to college.”

Participants reported on the reading skills they were taught in high school that were the most and least helpful in postsecondary education, respectively. Reading skills that surfaced in
both categories were highlighting, outlining, increasing reading speed, underlining, memorizing the Greek and Latin word parts, diagraming sentences, and determining the main idea of the text. Reading stills that were deemed most helpful by some were noted as least helpful by others, and vice versa.

One combination of reading skills was noted slightly more often as most helpful. Three of the 13 participants mentioned skimming the text to find the main points as an essential, helpful skill in their college reading. However, these students applied the skimming technique for different reasons. Bryne, a community college student in equine studies, skimmed the text because it was too difficult for her to comprehend. She answered, “[I would] just skim the [college] text to get the gist of it. I had to do that because I didn’t get it anyway and I glanced at the reading at best.” Susie, a nursing major at a 4-year university, noted that skimming was helpful to her to save time. She said, “[I had] to effectively skim an article and pick out what’s important, the big stuff.” Finally, Lys, a 4-year university student studying African American studies, shared,

Find the main idea, write it down, move on. This has saved me so much time because there is not enough time to get through all of the reading that I have to do. So I skim through it and get the basics and go on.

**Theme 6: Community college students took the least personal responsibly for their reading ability**

Community college students showed the least amount of personal responsibility for their academic success. They made references to others needing to take responsibility for their work completion. Kami shared, “The fact that I never read outside of class [in high school] was kind of bad. It would have been good for them to have made me do it.” In this quote, Kami
references *them* as teachers who should have made her read in high school. Angie said of her community college experience, “We had to read a chapter book for one of my classes for First Year Success, but no one asked you to read it. They can’t remind you at all, like I expected.” Angie also noted, “I don’t like highlighting. They didn’t teach me to highlight right.” Angie references a “*they*” that she feels should have reminded her to read and taught her to highlight correctly. Angie added,

> In English [class], so teachers tried to get you to take notes, and read the subheadings, and pay attention to the big ideas. They told us like you’re going to have a lot of reading. They made us take notes but other than that they didn’t really try [to ready students for college reading].

Again, Angie feels that her teachers should have done even more than they did, which is quite an extensive list, to prepare for college reading. Bryne similarly refers to *they*, referencing her instructors, in her comment about “*they* not caring” if the reading is too hard for students. Bryne noticed, “In college they don’t care if the reading is hard.”

> In contrast, students who attended a four-university sprinkled their interview transcripts with comments that alluded to their personal commitment to their own learning. Some of these comments included the following.

> [High school reading preparation was] a starting point on what to do, but in terms of everything I figured out now, it was just something I had to sit down and figure out on my own. I think it was just kind of the base platform of ideas of things, what to do and everything from there in terms of learning I learned on my own when I was a freshman. described Susie, a nursing major. Susie refers to herself as the person who needed to “sit down and figure it out on my own,” indicating personal responsibility for her learning. Sean stated,
I think most of (high school name) students don’t appreciate it. I think you can be challenged if you want to be and it’s kind of up to you to be prepared for college. I know it offers all of those resources and tools and it’s up to you to take advantage of them to be OK.

Finally, the students offered advice to high school students regarding reading. Across the board, participants stressed the importance of doing the assigned reading, practicing reading, and mastering reading skills. When the data were coded, some differences arose between students who took attended four-year universities versus students who attended community colleges or technical schools. The students who attended four-year universities offered advice specific to building reading skills. Sean, Amy, and Trisha, all students at four-year universities, stressed the importance of building reading skills through practice. Notes Sean,

Do a lot of general reading. Pick up a magazine and read it, read the news to make the connections to the story so that you make it so you more thoroughly understand the article or whatever it may be make sense.

Students should “go for breadth over depth. Learn to really process what you are reading, don’t just skim over things and expect to be able to get by in college. Really learn to do the work,” said Amy, a business major. In addition, high school students should “do the reading. Even if you don’t enjoy it take the time to learn it and get good at it,” offered Trisha, a communications major. In the same spirit, Keri noted that students should, “Read books that they enjoy instead of spending all their time watching TV. In the long run and the speed at which they can read it’s worth it.” These students, all of whom are attending four-year universities, focused on skill improvement in high school, which would benefit them in college.
In contrast, the students who attended community colleges or technical schools offered advice that was more focused on getting through high school rather than skill building. For instance, Greyson, a diesel mechanics major, offered the following advice: “Spend time reading when they tell you to (emphasis added).” Trevin shared that students should, “Take everything they give you and absorb it like a sponge.” Finally, Bryne, studying equine studies at a community college, stated that students should, “Just skim it [the reading]” in high school.

Chapter 4 Summary

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to add insight into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences and the differences between college level reading and the reading experiences that they had in high school. This chapter contains the results of the data collected from interviews and textual artifacts of 13 participants in the study. All participants were 2017 or 2018 high school graduates who attended postsecondary education through either a technical school, a community college, or a 4-year university. The study was conducted in one rural county, although participants attended postsecondary education in many different states.

The transcribed interviews were coded with descriptive coding and structural coding. Themes support how college freshmen understand their reading experiences and describe and understand their high school reading. The six themes that resulted from the coding: (a) college reading expectations are greater and require more participation and deeper thinking than high school text; (b) high school preparation was not effective for all students, particularly technical college students, who were least prepared; (c) college students felt that their high school teachers warned them too vigorously of the rigors of college, yet they ultimately found themselves overwhelmed by college academics; (d) students felt that they did not have to read to complete
high school, thus many did not read; (e) skimming the text is the only way to get through the reading in college, and (f) community college students took the least amount of personal responsibly for their reading ability.

Additional data on the similarities and differences discovered across the types of postsecondary education institutions that students attended is found in this chapter. As well, Lexile reading levels of student text from four-year universities, community colleges, and one technical school were scored using Lexile.com. The results of the analysis of these texts in relation to the interview data is included in this chapter. Following is Chapter 5, which includes an in-depth summary and discussion of the findings and how the results compare to the literature review.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to add insight into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences. The study utilized semistructured, individual interviews with college freshmen to discover how the participants were able to understand and describe the reading experiences that they had in high school and college. The participants also provided text samples from their college freshman level reading assignments. These textual artifacts were analyzed using Lexile.com to determine the text complexity of the writing.

Chapter 5 presents the results of this study in relation to practice, policy, and theory. The key findings from the study will be assessed in consideration with the literature review presented in Chapter 2. The theory that grounded this study will also be considered. Chapter 5 will close with recommendations for further study.

Summary of the Results

This study was guided by two research questions. The research questions for this study were as follows.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?

RQ2: How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?

The findings indicated several things. College freshmen can effectively describe their reading experiences and can identify how their college reading experiences differ from their high school reading experiences. Students who attended postsecondary technical schools experienced the greatest disconnect between their high school and college reading experiences. Specifically,
the technical school students did not feel prepared for the reading that they encountered in their technical school assignments.

All participants agreed that postsecondary reading experiences were more challenging in duration and content. Yet, the participants noted that they were not required to read “much” or in some cases “at all” to get through high school. Therefore, their college reading experiences would seem greater and more difficult to them.

Respondents shared that the course participation requirements were greater in college. The quality of the comments and insights that they contributed in class was expected to be much higher than it was in high school. They found that they needed to make thoughtful contributions that showed evidence of having read and considered the course materials. In some ways this conflicted with another comment shared by nearly every one of the participants. The large amount of reading that was required in college is prohibitive to its completion. Thus, students found themselves skimming the text or skipping large sections in order to finish the reading prior to class.

Analysis revealed that the average Lexile level for the freshman level text samples was 1100L. When divided by type of text, textbooks scored 1050L and assigned novels scored 1183L. Further division by type of postsecondary institution showed that the one technical school text scored 950L. Three community college artifacts scored 1116L when averaged, and four four-year university artifacts averaged 1125L. The community college and four-year university Lexile levels were nearly identical. Per Lexile.com (2019), these scores were grade level for 11th to 12th grade students of typical ability.
Discussion of the Results

The results of the research study informed both research questions. The questions explored how college freshmen understood and described their reading experiences and how college freshmen describe the difference between their high school and their college reading experiences. Some of the themes (Table 4) were relevant to both research questions. Other themes were more aligned with one or the other research question.

Results: Research Question 1

Research Question 1, regarding how college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences, was informed by several of the themes that developed from analysis of the data. Theme 2 indicated that reading preparation in high school was not equally effective for students, particularly technical college students, who reported being least prepared for their reading assignments. The type of college that the participant attended determined how prepared the participant felt for the reading assignments. The researcher was able to determine that technical college students felt least prepared for the academic reading required in college. The awareness of lack of technical reading skills was acute in the technical school students.

The textual artifact provided by the technical school student scored a Lexile level of 950L. This was the lowest score of the text artifacts in the study. However, the Lexile text complexity measure does not consider the purpose of the text. For instance, technical school reading may be detailed step-by-step directions. The words may or may not be difficult to read, but the concepts and ideas may be challenging to imagine and put into practice. The technical school students shared that they were unprepared for the difficulty of their reading and overwhelmed by the complexity of the material. These participants were clear in their
description of their frustration with their technical college reading assignments. They were able to identify what aspect of the reading experience was most challenging for them.

Theme 3 addressed the repeated warnings that participants received during high school regarding the difficulty of college reading. Participants reported being warned during high school that postsecondary reading would be challenging. They felt that these warnings from teachers and counselors became redundant and tiresome. Most claimed that in high school they felt that they did not need repeated warnings. Reasons for this included they had been warned enough, they felt that they would be able to handle college reading, they did not want to hear any more warnings regardless of whether they needed warned or not, there was nothing they would change about their reading preparation even if they could, and so on. Many recalled that they felt prepared and that the warnings must apply to other students.

Ultimately, the participants were overwhelmed by the amount and difficulty of the reading that they were assigned when they arrived at college. The warnings that they had received months prior had proven accurate. The participants were able to describe their postsecondary reading experiences in detail, including types of assignments and genres, lengths of texts and amount of participation required in response to reading, and methods they found to manage the amount of reading that they encountered. Theme 3 evolved from this data, indicating that students were both surprised and dismayed by the volume and rigor of the assigned reading in college. No amount of warning had sufficiently prepared them for the academic challenge that they encountered when they began their freshman year, regardless of their type of postsecondary education.

As participants described the increase in amount and rigor of postsecondary reading, they included details about how they learned to manage their time. Interview analysis showed that
participants managed the volume of college reading primarily by skimming the text. Theme 5 was the result of participant interview analysis where skimming the text surfaced again and again as the best way to manage the volume of reading. Capturing only the main ideas by highlighting, outlining, or underlining proved to be the fastest way to accomplish the task. In comparison to high school, where the participants admitted to not doing the reading, the students found that they had to read in college and could not rely on classmates for information. Research Question 1 was informed by Theme 5, where skimming the text was described as the most common way that participants were able to manage their college course load.

Continuing to inform Research Question 1 was the information gathered around high school reading experiences. Theme 4 evolved from the information gleaned around high school reading experiences. None of the participants indicated that their high school reading assignments were too challenging. In fact, most of the participants indicated that they did not read their high school assigned reading. Furthermore, from their perspective, they were not held accountable for reading in high school. Several factors appeared to contribute to this. Participants described their reading experiences as follows. First, the teacher would go over the assigned reading in depth, so it did not matter if a student had read the text or not. The students knew that the material would be covered in class, so prior reading was unnecessary. Second, the teacher might have the class read the text aloud together during class. This was done out loud with different students taking turns reading. Alternatively, the teacher would read the assigned text to the class, so once again, the students knew they could skip the assigned the night before. Finally, students were able to ask their classmates what the reading was about and would then have enough information to provide answers to questions that were asked in class. One
participant shared that the questions that were asked in the high school class were “surface level” and could be easily answered to give the appearance of having read the text.

High school teachers may have a different perspective regarding holding students accountable for completing their reading assignments. The participants’ former teachers may feel that they did hold students accountable. Regardless, if the students did not feel accountable for completing the work, and therefore did not complete the work, then whatever methods the teachers were using in the three different high schools were ineffective. Students also explained that the high school teachers used several teaching methods to cover the text. These methods included reading the book out loud and together as a class, discussing the text as a class where participation was not required, and allowing general comments to count as participation and appear as if a student had read the text prior to class. Participants did not feel as if they had to read prior to class when the reading was covered together. Theme 4 highlights the lack of reading and the lack of accountability around reading assignments in high school. However, not all participants blamed the school for not holding them accountable for reading.

Theme 6 revealed that the attendees of different types of postsecondary institutions showed different levels of personal responsibility for their learning. Taking personal responsibility for work completion and learning differed among the types of postsecondary institution that participants attended. Community college attendees showed less personal responsibility for their learning and reading ability than students who attended technical schools or four-year universities. The greatest personal responsibility for their own learning and reading ability was indicated by students who attended a four-year university. In addition, 4-year university students understood that their commitment to completing the assigned tasks and reading the text was essential to their success. This was evidenced by comments made by
participants at either type of institution. Four-year university students shared their commitment to their success in ways that were nearly opposite of the comments made by community college attendees.

Community college students regarded tasks of others as key to their success or lack thereof. For instance, one community college student said, “It would have been good for them to have made me do it,” indicating this student felt the school should have made her do her assigned readings. Conversely, a four-year university student commented,

I think you can be challenged if you want to be and it’s kind of up to you to be prepared for college. I know it offers all of those resources and tools and it’s up to you to take advantage of them to be OK.

Four-year university students took greater personal responsibility around their reading and academic preparation for postsecondary education, while community college students described others as having a large part in their reading success, or lack thereof. Additional information around the difference between community college and four-year university participants was evidence in the textual artifacts, high school GPA, and composite ACT score averages for these two groups. The four-year university participants averaged higher GPA and composite ACT scores than the community college and technical school attendees. The difference in GPA was nearly half of a point, at 0.44 points higher GPA than the community college students. The composite ACT score was 7.2 points higher than the community college participants.

Textual artifacts also indicate a difference in the Lexile level of the postsecondary reading assignments for these two groups of students. Upon assessment using Lexile.com, the textual artifact samples from the community college students averaged 1116L. The 4-year
university artifacts scored a negligible difference at 1125 L. Both scores are within the average, mid-grade level range for high school grades 11 to 12.

Although there is a significant difference in the high school GPA and the ACT composite score between four-year university and community college students, the Lexile level of the texts that they faced upon enrolling in college was nearly identical. Yet participants from both types of postsecondary education noted a similar level of frustration with the increase in difficulty with college level reading. Considering the difference in ACT composite scores, the community college students would have felt the increase substantially more. Their ability to read, as recorded by their ACT score, was lower upon entering college. These students would have struggled with the higher Lexile level texts to a greater extent.

**Results: Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was “How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?” Several themes resulted from the data and informed the research question.

The data supported the general understanding that college reading expectations are greater and require more participation and deeper thinking than high school text. Theme 1 developed as the data were coded. Students compared their high school reading experiences with their college experiences. This was designed to give context to their explanations of increased rigor and participation expectations. College students received participation credit based on the quality and insightfulness of their oral participation in class. Their grade was based on having prepared for class by reading the material. Sean, a business major at a four-year university, may have summarized it most eloquently when he said,
The biggest difference between high school reading and college reading was expectations post-reading. In high school you may or may not take notes, you might just skim through it real quick before class or not even read it at all and then it’s a mediocre conversation following, if that. If you talk about it maybe a quiz and then you move on to stay on track...you could come to this class and skate by and not really do much and still have a 4.0 [GPA] . . . [In college] We could not just sit without participating in a meaningful way. You didn’t have to actually read to participate in high school, right? In college that’s not possible. You are forced to participate at high intensity.

Theme 3 stated that college students felt that their high school teachers warned them too vigorously of the rigors of college reading. However, the participants were still overwhelmed by college academics. Theme 3 informed both Research Questions 1 and 2. Participants shared that they were routinely warned in high school regarding how difficult college would be. Much of these warnings were around college reading and the amount of work the students would soon encounter. Several participants hypothesized that the warnings were designed to motivate them into doing more work or to get serious about their academics. However, at the same time, participants indicated that they felt no consequences for not reading in high school. The participants did not increase their reading or change their behavior after being warned. Reasons for not changing their academic behavior varied among the participants. Some shared that they felt the warnings did not pertain to them because they were confident in their ability to read well enough for college. Others felt the warnings were simply a scare tactic and inaccurate. Yet others reported being unwilling to change their behavior regardless of whether they were prepared for postsecondary reading or not.
Theme 4 also informed Research Question 2. Participants revealed that reading felt largely voluntary in high school. The participants’ experience with little reading in high school established a foundation for comparison for their college experiences. Numerous students noted that they did not have to read or complete work in high school. This was explained in various ways. For instance, “not having to read” meant that students felt they could get away without reading and still be academically successful, students were not assigned reading, and students were not held accountable for reading. The word “voluntary,” used by some participants in comparing high school reading to college reading, illustrates a divide in how reading in the two education levels was perceived by the participants.

Participants were clear in their discussion of the differences between high school and college reading experiences. Besides noting the lack of required reading in high school and their perception of reading assignments being voluntary, participants most often noted the volume of reading that is required for college classes. The most common method that they cited for covering the text in preparation for class was skimming the text. Per Theme 5, the skill of skimming the text was reported by nearly all participants as necessary in order to get through the required reading. This was not a skill that the participants mastered in high school. Therefore, many reported having to learn to effectively skim text upon their arrival at college.

To summarize the results, this descriptive case study included 13 participants who had completed at least one semester of postsecondary education. Their choice of institution may have been a technical school, a community college, or a four-year university. There were two research questions in consideration.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?
RQ2: How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?

These research questions were addressed based on constructivist theory framework. Constructivism is the belief that learners create knowledge or understanding for themselves based on the information that they are given or that they acquire (Fosnot, 1996). In this situation, the reading and text experiences that the participants encountered created their knowledge and understanding of first-year college student reading. Constructivism focuses on the learner rather than the teacher or subject matter. Thus, interviewing the participants to gather their perspectives was appropriate.

This project utilized a descriptive case study, using qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with the participants. These interviews gathered the personal insights around how reading and texts differ between high school and college and how first year college students understand and experience their reading assignments. Probing questions during each interview extended the amount of information that was gathered from each participant.

Current literature indicates that less than 50% of students in the United States graduate able to read proficiently (ACT, Inc., 2018). The ACT, Incorporated testing organization is not the only entity that has this type of data. The 2015 NAEP reading data showed that 37% of the students could read proficiently (NAEP, 2018). These reading challenges become significant when these students pursue postsecondary education. College enrollment in the United States has increased while reading scores lag other first world nations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). This struggle to read is evident to college faculty. Based on interaction with students, just 28% of college instructors feel that students are adequately prepared for college (Conley, 2007).
Another symptom of the inability to read well enough to process college level text is the number of remedial courses offered at community colleges and four-year universities. These remedial courses do not provide credit toward graduation, but cost students money and time as they move toward their degree. Remedial coursework is required coursework, often based on entrance placement exams. Students may become discouraged before they reach their intended degree plan or may deplete their savings paying for courses that they had not planned to take. One example is the state of Minnesota, where 28% of college students were enrolled in remedial coursework at the onset of their college careers, according to the state’s Office of Higher Education. Most of those students (85%) attended a community college (Smith, 2015).

Students receive stern warnings from high school teachers and counselors regarding the reading challenges that college entails. Participants in this study acknowledged receiving the warnings and found them tiresome. Yet, when faced with college level reading, they indicated that the volume and the complexity of freshman level reading was overwhelming. They could not read it all in the time allotted and found it very difficult to manage. Technical school students found a gap in their reading preparation and the expectations upon entering their course of study. They found the technical reading to be far more difficult than what they were prepared for. Another difference that participants noted was the amount and quality of class participation that was required in the college classroom. More than one person noted that attendance was based solely on the participation of the student. Finally, community college students and four-year university students indicated different levels of personal responsibility for their learning. Four-year university students took greater personal responsibility for their learning, as evidenced by their remarks about work completion and seeking out knowledge. Community college students also shared their insights about knowledge and work completion. These students shared
insights that pushed blame onto a vague “they” that had, in their minds, failed to teach them or hold them accountable for basic skills or fulfilling tasks that would help them perform at high levels.

**Discussion of the Results in Relationship to Literature**

The literature indicated that less than 50% of United States high school graduates are proficient readers (ACT, Inc., 2018; NAEP, 2018). These reading proficiency levels have remained relatively unimproved in the most recent decades (ACT, Inc., 2018). Some studies show that reading proficiency has decreased when measured in slightly different ways. For instance, the ACT reading subset test scores have decreased 7% without a change in the ACT test, from 2005 levels, which shows a decline in reading ability of students (ACT, Inc., 2006). Relative to this study, college enrollment has increased in recent decades (NCES, 2018). Therefore, greater numbers of nonproficient readers are entering college than ever before. This juxtaposition of lower skilled readers entering postsecondary education was the impetus for this study, where the purpose was to add insight into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences.

Students who obtain a high school diploma believe that the diploma conveys college readiness (Kokemuller, 2018). However, high school GPAs have increased in recent decades with no corresponding increase in skills, as measured by the ACT and NAEP assessments (Planty et al.; Woodruff & Ziomeck, 2004). This means that a student with a high school diploma and a high GPA may be falsely confident of the abilities that were instilled in high school (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Noble & Sawyer, 2004). The student may be unprepared for reading at a college level yet appears by GPA to be a well-prepared high school graduate.
This addition of nonproficient readers to the pool of college attendees creates a strain on faculty and school resources. It also creates an educational burden on students in financial cost and time. Faculty report having to devote some of their class time to reviewing content they feel should have been learned in high school (Achieve, 2005). Students are required to take remedial courses if they are deemed unprepared by placement tests upon entrance to college. These remedial courses reteach skills with the intention of preparing students to be successful as they progress to freshman level courses. The remedial courses cost tuition and take time. They do not count toward graduation credits. Students can become discouraged and financially drained when they take courses that do not count toward their graduation. However, the true cost of remedial coursework may be in the high college dropout rate of students who are placed in remedial courses. Remedial classes reduce the likelihood that a student will graduate. On-time degree completion for students who are placed in remedial courses is consistently less than 10% (Jiminez et al., 2016).

Another false indicator of college readiness is mere acceptance to college. Community colleges have open door policies, which means that they accept nearly all applicants. Newton (2012) explains that college admissions requirements do not equate to college readiness. Accepting greater numbers of students and then providing remediation services for those students who do not have the skills necessary to begin at a college freshman level helps meet the institutions’ goals of “maintaining enrollment, increasing financial viability, and meeting standards of excellence” (Steward, 2010, p. 1). Greater numbers of students are enrolled in remediation courses as college enrollment increases. However, college graduation statistics do not show that students are completing their degrees successfully (Jiminez et al, 2016). Students who are placed in remedial coursework are less likely to complete their degree.
This study revealed that students encountered more challenging texts in college than in high school. Newton (2012) explained that a high school student whose extent of reading was one to two novels per year did not experience near the reading expectations that will be encountered in college. The types of reading are different as well. While prose fiction may be a staple of high school reading, more academic reading is expected of college students (Linderholm, 2006).

The textual evidence samples that the participants provided were analyzed for text complexity using Lexile.com. The text artifacts indicated that the participants encountered texts that were not as difficult as the average first year college reading level (Massengill, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2010). The participants provided texts that averaged at a Lexile level of 1183L. This included textbooks and fiction together. Textbooks scored 1050L while prose fiction scored 1183L. In further breakdown, community college students encountered texts that scored 1116L, four-year university students scored texts that scored 1125L, and technical school students encountered texts that scored 950 L.

There was a negligible difference in Lexile score between the textual artifacts provided by the community college students and the four-year university students. However, there were much larger differences between the composite ACT score and high school GPA averages of the participants who attended community college and participants who attended four-year universities. Per Massengill (2013), community college students encounter texts that average 1295L while four-year university students are assigned texts that are approximately 1395L. A study by Wilkins et al., (2010) reviewed over 12,000 texts used in the Texas college and university system. This research revealed an average Lexile level of 1200 for first year college
students. Both studies placed the average Lexile level of college text higher than what the textual artifacts scored in this study.

High school preparation was not effective for all students. High school GPA was not the best indicator of success in college. Strong students in high school (3.0 GPA or higher) do get placed in remedial coursework. Schmidt (2008) explained that four out of five students placed in a remedial course had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. There are several possible reasons for this. Students come from different high schools, and all high schools deem their graduating students academically prepared for college level work. However, high schools have different academic standards. Other students do not realize the significance of the college placement tests and do not take them seriously. They may have a false sense of confidence due to their high school academic success (Tomko, 2011).

Technical college students were least prepared for postsecondary reading. According to a 2014 nationwide survey, approximately 50% of high school graduates report gaps in preparation for life after high school (Kirst, 2014). The technical college students in this study all indicated a gap in their reading preparation for college. They found that they were unprepared for the detailed, technical reading that was required for their field of study.

Related to this is that college readiness determined by the college where the student enrolls. Determinations regarding placement into remedial coursework by the college are made on a college or university basis. (Connolly, Olson, Durham, & Plank, 2014). Thus, in theory, a placement exam at a technical college may test different things than a placement exam at a liberal arts university. However, all the technical college students found that the reading in their course of study was challenging. It is important to note that these students attended different
high schools and different technical colleges yet shared the same sentiment regarding their college reading experiences.

College students felt that their high school teachers warned them too much. ACT, Inc., (2006) documents the strong positive impact of completing additional coursework in math, science, and English. The biggest predictor of eventual college success is the academic preparation a student received in high school (Newton, 2012). Adelman (2006) notes that academic intensity is the most important factor in preparing students for a successful collegiate experience. In practice, however, this study revealed that students felt that they did not have to read to be successful in high school. Many students commented that they got through high school without doing the assigned reading, whether the readings were from textbooks or fiction. This lack of reading failed to develop an important skill for the participants, which was the ability to handle large amounts of text. When faced with the volume of text that is assigned in college classes, the participants all shared that they were overwhelmed by the amount of required reading in their college classes.

Despite the repeated warnings of their high school teachers, the participants were astounded by the amount of required reading in the college classroom. Most cited skimming the text as the only way to get through the amount of reading. One group of students had a particular struggle with the challenges of college academics. Community college students took the least amount of responsibility for their learning. Across the board, the students who attended community colleges indicated that someone else, often referred to as a vague “they,” was at fault or responsible for academic challenges or failures. Examples such as, “They didn’t teach me to highlight right” or “In college, they don’t care if the reading is hard” indicate a lack of taking responsibility for their education. In contrast, attendees of four-year universities made comments...
such as, “Read books that you enjoy instead of spending all your time watching TV” or “Do the reading. Even if you don’t enjoy it take the time to learn it and get good at it.” This resonates with Newton (2012), who noted “for many students, struggling with text begins with a basic reluctance to open the books” (p. 13).

The literature alluded to some of the results of the study. However, other revelations were new. The literature review created a foundation of current research to inform the creation of the study.

**Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the sample size. The sample size was 13 participants. The interviews continued until the data became saturated, per Creswell (2013). This served as a limitation because research protocol was followed wherein interviews ceased at the point of data saturation. Yet this small sample size did serve as a limitation to the data that was gathered. The sample size also impacted the text artifact gathering for the study. The number of text artifacts that were gathered and assessed was small. Not every participant volunteered an artifact. The total number of texts that were evaluated was eight, leaving five participants who failed to provide exemplars. This was a limitation of the study. In a replication of this study, one may want to gather the textual evidence prior to conducting the interview to ensure that the artifact is gathered.

Another limitation of this study was the rural cultural environment from which the participants were gathered. The county covers over 5,000 square miles and includes three high schools yet graduates only 100 high school students each year. The data were not a mixture of urban, suburban, and rural students’ perceptions of their high school reading experiences. However, these rural high school students dispersed to a myriad of colleges as freshmen. They
chose colleges both in and out of the state, and they moved to both small and large metropolitan areas. For most of these students, their college experience was the first time they had attended school with more than the few students with whom they graduated high school.

The interview questions themselves were a limitation. The questions were open ended but may have elicited certain responses from participants. Follow-up questions were asked of each participant to garner additional information as needed. No two participants received the same exact interview due to the follow up questions that each person received. Those follow-up questions were determined by the context of the interview. As well, as with any study, the responses cannot be over generalized to students in all locations.

Finally, because the researcher was the only person who interacted with the participants and analyzed the data, another limitation would be the researcher’s inexperience which had the potential to influence the interpretation of the results (Merriam, 1998). The researcher kept detailed and diligent records and treated the participants without bias, yet researchers can make mistakes without malice, which can alter the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 1998). The researcher adhered to the doctoral candidate guidelines of Concordia University–Portland throughout the process and made every attempt to remove potential for bias or judgment.

This research study could have been improved in several ways. One area of improvement may be to track the participants from high school to their first year of college. The researcher could gather real time data regarding reading experiences from the participants during their senior year of high school. Then, the researcher could gather information from the participants during their freshman year of college. This would provide more accurate information about high school reading experiences. It would be more accurate than relying on participant memory.
The participants in this study were limited by their extremely rural location and background. The participants have remarkably similar life experiences and upbringings. The similarity of the participants created a unique set of participant experiences that may be different if three high schools from a more populated county were utilized. In a replication of this study, using suburban or urban youth might produce different results.

Finally, only eight of the participants provided text artifacts for evaluation of text complexity, as expressed in reading level using Lexile.com. These text artifacts were sample pages from their freshman textbook or reading assignment. If this study were to be replicated, a researcher may want to gather the artifacts prior to conducting the interview in order to ensure that the artifact is provided by the participant. This could be part of the qualification process prior to scheduling an interview.

**Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The results of this study can add to the body of literature around preparation of high school students for the transition to postsecondary education. Educators, district leadership, and college faculty can use these results in slightly different ways. First, secondary educators could utilize the results of this study to inform practice in the classroom. This study indicated that students in a technical college felt least prepared for the reading that they were required to complete. Adding reading practice and skills training with a technical skills objective would benefit all students. The results of this study also reinforce the notion that increased academic rigor benefits students, yet also restated that a lack of effort on the part of the student creates a skill deficiency. These results were noted in the literature review and held true in this study. In practice, navigating these for students would build skills that could situate them immeasurable well for postsecondary education. Finally, educators can hold students more accountable
regardless of the rigor of the coursework. Students revealed that they were able to easily fake their reading and that teachers did not ask high level questions. Asking higher order thinking questions would have created a more stimulating classroom environment, created more accountability for students to have read the passages, and better prepared them for postsecondary education.

District leadership could utilize the results of this study in ways similar to the teachers. Creating higher expectations from a top-down approach and providing professional development resources are two ways that district leadership could use this information. District leadership could recognize that technical school-bound students may need supplemental reading support in order to be successful. Adding specific reading instruction to classes such as welding, woods, shop, agriculture, etc. might be one place for district leadership to begin. The recommendation is *reading instruction* rather than reading expectations, as reading in this content area is different than reading fiction. These students need *technical reading* support.

In theory, holding teachers to high expectations for class discussions and student assignments creates an effective learning environment. Constructivist theory indicates that students will create their own meaning from the text, based on their past experiences and prior knowledge (Fosnot, 1996). If a student does not read the text or comes to class similarly unprepared, for instance having only parts of the information from friends, then the student cannot create a meaning. If the text is too difficult or too long for the student, the same situation can occur. The student does not create a meaning from the text. Moving forward, the results of this study inform educators, who can consider holding students accountable, possibly in different or more effective ways.
Recommendations for Further Research

A researcher can and should reflect on the research practice in the study. Areas for improvement and recommendations for future research can be considered. An area of improvement might increase accuracy or detail of answers. A recommendation for future research may contain suggestions for additional research that continues to add to the body of knowledge around the topic.

This study was carefully designed and recorded in order to provide a blueprint for others to replicate. In order to repeat this research, a researcher may choose to focus on a similar, related demographic or improve one aspect of the design in order to add additional data to the field of research. An example of this might be studying participants who attended just one type of postsecondary institution. Considering the results of the technical school attendees, additional study of that demographic might be warranted. These students showed the greatest lack of preparation for the specific type of text that they encountered in their postsecondary studies.

The Lexile levels of the text artifacts of the community college participants and the four-year university participants were nearly identical, yet the average ACT composite scores and high school GPAs were quite different. The community college students had significantly lower scores on their ACT and GPAs. A recommendation for further study might be additional research around this issue. Although there was no discernable difference in the participants’ level of frustration with the difficulty of college text, additional research may reveal other issues that were not captured by this study.

Conclusion

This dissertation presented an examination into how college freshmen understand and describe their reading experiences. Chapter 4 provided the data as gathered through
semistructured interviews, which were conducted with 13 participants. These participants must have graduated from high school in 2017 or 2018. They also must have attended at least one semester of postsecondary education at either a community college, technical school, or 4-year university. The results were coded and revealed themes that informed the research questions. Those questions were as follows.

RQ1: How do college freshmen understand and describe their educational reading experiences?

RQ2: How do college freshmen understand the difference between college level reading and the reading experiences they had in high school?

Chapter 5 provided a discussion of the results as related to the literature, the study’s limitations, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The themes that emerged from this study reflect both current literature and possible trends in education today. Despite warnings of increased rigor and volume, students were ultimately overwhelmed with the substantial reading requirements upon entering college. In addition, class participation based on the course reading was rigorous and deep. In some cases, course attendance was based on the level of participation that students performed. Therefore, not only did students find that they needed to complete the reading, but they had to understand and be reading to act on what they read. The most common way to manage the amount of required college reading was to just skim the text and highlight the main ideas. High school reading requirements paled in comparison to their college reading experiences. Nearly all participants indicated that they could get through high school with little or no time invested in reading textbooks or prose fiction. This data surfaced among all participants.
However, some information was specific to attendees of certain types of postsecondary education. College freshmen who attended technical schools experienced the biggest gap in preparation for the reading experiences that they faced upon enrollment in college. These students felt that they were least prepared for reading in their course of study. In a similar vein, community college students across the board indicated the least amount of personal responsibility for their reading skills or abilities. Conversely, attendees of four-year universities shared the most personal responsibility for their learning and reading skills or practice.

The themes discovered in this study suggest several things. High schools and colleges may have an opportunity to improve communication when creating a transition for college bound students. Students, despite repeated warnings regarding the impending increase in reading rigor in college, are youthful, and often must learn for themselves. Participants indicated that they grew tired of being warned in high school regarding how difficult the reading would be in college. Subsequently, they also admitted being overwhelmed by the amount of required reading in college. Holding students more accountable for reading in high school may better prepare them for reading at the college level.

It is important to recognize that participants were able to adapt to their increased academic load by utilizing or learning text management skills. Each participant found a way to move forward and be successful using the abilities that were instilled during high school, new skills that were acquired, and reserves of motivation and enthusiasm for the pursuit of a goal.
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Appendix A: Oil and Gas Industry Wage Information

Average Roustabout Hourly Pay

$17.62

BONUS

$660

The average pay for a Roustabout is $17.62 per hour.

Hourly Rate  $8.95–$24.93

Overtime    $8.49–$36.70

Bonus       $0.00–$6,040

Profit Sharing $660

Total Annual Pay

$19,154–$69,612

Country: United States

Currency: USD

Updated: 13 Dec 2018

Individuals Reporting: 89

Job Description for Roustabout

A Roustabout assists crew members on an oil rig, which may be onshore or offshore. Some duties that may be performed by a Roustabout include cleaning up the work area, operating hand and power tools, cleaning equipment and transporting items from place to place. The Roustabout may also be trained to operate and maintain certain pieces of equipment. This job is physically strenuous, and the tasks involved may require the Roustabout to walk and stand for long periods of time, climb, bend and stoop. The work environment can often be noisy, and the Roustabout
may work under adverse weather conditions such as rain or high heat. Hours vary depending on
the shifts available; day, night and/or weekend hours may be required, and Roustabouts may be
stationed for multiple consecutive days in an offshore rig environment.

Gender

Female  4%    Male  96%

Years of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–4 years</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9 years</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–19 years</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 years or more</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common Health Benefits

Medical: 66%    Dental: 50%    Vision: 50%

Retrieved December 13, 2018 from
https://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Floorhand/Hourly_Rate
Appendix B: Participant Qualtrics Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Research Study Title: Secondary Teachers’ Perceptions of College Students’ Reading Readiness

Principal Investigator: Jolie Dorrell

Research Institution: Concordia University, Portland

Faculty Advisor: Bill Boozang

Purpose and what you will be doing:
The purpose of this project is to determine how teachers’ understanding of reading readiness differs from the experiences of college freshmen. We expect approximately 40 volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment on August 15, 2018 and end enrollment on October 15, 2018. To be in the study, you will either be a language arts or reading teacher at the secondary level or you will be a high school graduate from the years 2016, 2017, or 2018 who has completed at least one semester of college. In this study you will be asked a series of questions related to reading instruction and reading experiences in the classroom, from your perspective as either a teacher or a student. This will take less than 20 minutes of your time.

Risks:
There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption or locked inside my home filing cabinet. When we or any of our investigators look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. We will refer to your data with a code that only the principal investigator knows links to you. This way, your identifiable information will not be stored with the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

Benefits:
Information you provide will help high school teachers better prepare students for their college reading experiences.

Confidentiality:
This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us abuse or neglect that makes us seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety. Any interviews that are conducted will be recorded and then immediately deleted after confirmation of the information.
**Right to Withdraw:**
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions.

**Contact Information:**
You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Jolie Dorrell, at email [redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

**Your Statement of Consent:**
I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jolie Dorrell</th>
<th>June 23, 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigator</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investigator Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Investigator: Jolie Dorrell   email: [email redacted]
c/o: Professor Bill Boozang
Concordia University – Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon  97221
Appendix C: Interview Script

Researcher says:

Thank you very much for your participation in this research study. I appreciate the time you are offering to help me gather information. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the reading readiness of college freshmen and their real experiences with college level reading. I want to know if college level reading is what students thought they would experience and what they are ready for.

I have a list of questions about reading preparedness and experiences that I would like to ask you. None of your information will be linked to any identifying characteristics about you, your school district, this county, or even the state of Wyoming. This will be completely anonymous. Your data will be stored on my password protected laptop and in a locked filing cabinet.

At any time, you can decline to answer or even stop the survey. As well, if you decide in the future that you do not want your answers included in the final analysis, you can let me know. Up until September 15, 2019, your data can be eliminated. After that data, the writing will be finalized and published.

Do you have any questions about this reading survey so far?

Thank you again. Please be as honest and as detailed as possible.
Appendix D: List of Interview Questions

Researcher reads:

When we talk about reading during these questions, I am referring to class assignments, both in a reading or language arts class and other classes where reading was assigned, rather than reading for pleasure.

1. What type of college did you attend?
   
   community college (2 year program)
   
   technical school (welding, cosmetology, etc.)
   
   university (4 year program)

2. Thinking about reading, when you moved from high school to college, did your academic reading experiences change?

3. How would you describe your high school reading experiences?

4. How would you describe your college reading experiences?

5. Can you describe the way your high school teachers readied you for college reading?

6. How did the preparation you received in high school match up with or differ from what you encountered when you got to your college classes?

7. Please explain what you found to be the biggest READING challenge you faced during your first year of college.

8. What was the biggest difference between your high school reading and college reading experiences?

9. What reading skills that you learned in high school are most helpful in college?

10. What reading skills that you learned in high school are LEAST HELPFUL in college?

11. What was your high school GPA?
12. Were you required to take a remedial (basic review, doesn't count toward your degree program) reading or English class in college?

13. What was the biggest ACADEMIC challenge overall that you faced during your first year of college?

14. What advice would you give to high school students regarding reading?

15. What was your COMPOSITE score on the ACT test? (Total score)

16. Did you take any college courses while you were in high school?

17. Did you take any Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school?

18. What other comments can you provide regarding the transition from high school to college, related to academics and reading?
Appendix E: Description of the Sample

Sample size: 13

Gender division 8 female students, 5 male students.

Participant racial makeup: Hispanic – 1

African American – 1

Caucasian - 11

The ACT score range: 19 - 34

GPA range: 3.0 - 4.0.

Completion of college classes in high school – 7

Completion of Advance Placement classes in high school - 8

Postsecondary majors of study: business, nursing, education, satellite communications, diesel mechanics, sports medicine, African American studies, equine studies, communication, and civil engineering, with duplicates in business and nursing.
Appendix F: Student Text Submission Lexile Scores

Four-year university student submission
Lexile® Measure: 1100L - 1200L
Mean Sentence Length: 18.60
Novel

Community college student submission
Lexile® Measure: 1100L - 1200L
Mean Sentence Length: 14.17
Novel

Four-year university student submission
Lexile® Measure: 1100L - 1200L
Mean Sentence Length: 19.17
Textbook

Technical school student submission
Lexile® Measure: 900L - 1000L
Mean Sentence Length: 16.11
Textbook
Four-year university student submission
Lexile® Measure: 1200L - 1300L
Sentence Length: 20.00
Novel

Community college student submission
Lexile® Measure: 1200L - 1300L
Mean Sentence Length: 20.25
Textbook

Four-year university student submission
Lexile® Measure: 900L - 1000L
Mean Sentence Length: 17.00
Textbook

Community college student submission
Lexile® Measure: 900L - 1000L
Mean Sentence Length: 14.75
Textbook

Average Lexile level for community college student submissions (3): 1116L
Average Lexile level for four-year university student submissions (4): 1125
Average Lexile level for technical school student submissions (1): 950
Novels average readability: 1183L

Textbooks average readability: 1050L
## Appendix G: Lexile Levels and Grade Equivalent Chart

50th to 90th Percentile Student Lexile Measure Norms for Reading by Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>End-of-Year Student Measures, 50th to 90th Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>165L to 565L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>425L to 790L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>645L to 980L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>850L to 1155L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>950L to 1255L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1030L to 1335L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1095L to 1405L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1155L to 1465L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1205L to 1515L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1250L to 1605L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 &amp; 12</td>
<td>1295L to 1605L</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These student norms are based on a MetaMetrics’ study that included a sample of 3.5 million students from all 50 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands who were administered tests that reported Lexile measures from 2010 to 2016. The Lexile student measure ranges show the 50th through 90th percentiles by grade level for spring testing.

Students in the 50th percentile were at the midpoint of all the end-of-year reading test takers.

Half of the test takers scored better than they did, and half of the test takers scored worse.

Students in the 90th percentile were at the high end of all the end-of-year reading test takers.

These students scored better than 90% of the test takers.

Appendix H: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.
Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University- Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

   Jolie Dorrell

   Digital Signature

   Jolie Dorrell

   Name (Typed)

   October 10, 2019

   Date