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Author
Her, Yer Kathy

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Exploring Charter High School English Teachers’ Perceptions of College-Ready Literacy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

by

Yer Kathy Her

2018
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exploring Charter High School English Teachers’ Perceptions of College-Ready Literacy

by

Yer Kathy Her

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Robert Cooper, Co-Chair
Professor Kathryn M Anderson, Co-Chair

Students entering college underprepared for the standards and expectations of post-secondary schooling is a persistent academic problem. More specifically, students lack college-ready literacy skills, an important skill to access multiple disciplines. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and its goal of career and college readiness for all students, it is crucial to examine how high school teachers are understanding and implementing college-readiness standards. Furthermore, if there is a gap in perception of college readiness standards between high school instructors and college instructors, it is important to find out what high school teachers define as college preparatory instruction. Using a phenomenological approach to understand the lack of college-readiness for students, teachers at independent charter high schools were interviewed and some observed to explore teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy. The study had several significant findings: teachers’ background impact their perceptions of their students’ college-ready needs; teachers support Common Core but new standards do not prepare poor students for college; teachers believe student apathy, not their
curriculum, is to blame for lack of college-readiness; teachers believe a college-ready model limits their students’ post-secondary options; and teachers are not thinking about students attending community college when thinking about college-readiness.
This dissertation of Yer Kathy Her is approved.

Richard Desjardins
Kimberly Gomez
Robert Cooper, Committee Co-Chair
Kathryn M Anderson, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2018
DEDICATION

For my parents, and all the Hmong parents and grandparents, who escaped your homeland, thank you for doing the unimaginable and making it possible for your children to seek justice for you here.
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VITA

2002-2006  B.A. Political Science  
            University of California, Los Angeles  
            Los Angeles, CA

2006-2007  M.A. Education  
            Secondary Teaching Credential, Social Science  
            Stanford University  
            Palo Alto, CA

2007-2009  History Teacher  
            South San Francisco High School  
            South San Francisco, CA

2009-2012  History Teacher  
            High Desert Middle School  
            Acton, CA

2012-Present  History Teacher  
              El Camino Real Charter High School  
              Woodland Hills, CA

2018  Platinum Apple Teacher of the Year  
      United Teachers Los Angeles  
      Los Angeles, CA

2018  Dissertation of the Year  
      Education Leadership Program  
      University of California, Los Angeles  
      Los Angeles, CA

2018-Present  Intervention Coordinator  
               El Camino Real Charter High School  
               Woodland Hills, CA
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

California’s community college system is the largest postsecondary system of higher education in the world with an annual enrollment of nearly 3 million students across its 112 colleges (Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). Community colleges across the state are inadequate in meeting the demands for a college-educated workforce. Furthermore, there are growing disparities across race lines between Black and Latino students and their White and Asian counterparts in degree or certificate attainment and transfer to four-year institutions (Green, 2006; Moore & Shulock, 2010). The impact of continued racial disparities is especially concerning for Los Angeles as the Latino population continues to grow and make up nearly 50 percent of the workforce of Los Angeles by 2020 and 60 percent by 2040 (C. Moore & Shulock, 2010). High school students are attending college at high rates, but more students are beginning college in remedial course negatively impacting their chances of attaining a degree. According to the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 72 percent of incoming community college students who took the English placement exam placed into remedial English and 38 percent placed two more levels below college-level English (Venezia et al., 2010).

Across the nation, measures of college readiness do not fare much better. National measures of college readiness such as the ACT and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show stagnant growth in readiness. Since measuring students’ progress in 1992, students reading scores have declined from 292 (0-500 scale) to 287 in 2015 (Nation’s Report Card, 2015). The scores, broken down by race and gender, are less promising. White and Asian students scored 46 and 49 percent proficiency, respectively, compared with 17 percent of Black and 27 percent of Latino students. The 2015 ACT Report shows comparable results. Across the
nation, 59 percent of students took the ACT, but only 46 percent met the benchmark for college-ready reading. According to Barnes & Slate (2014), only about half of high school seniors were reported as college-ready in reading. Conley (2007a) found that only 17 percent of students who take a remedial reading class receive a bachelor’s degree or higher. Despite the staggering number of students unprepared for college, college aspiration continues to increase. From 1980 to 2002, the percentage of tenth graders with aspirations of earning a college degree nearly doubled from 41 percent to 80 percent (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Students entering college unprepared is a systemic issue. In 1960, California adopted the California Master Plan for Higher Education with its aim of establishing the University of California as research universities selecting from the top eighth of the graduating class; the California State Universities selected from the top third; and the community colleges for any students and for all levels (general education, remedial instruction, ESL, workforce training). The level of remediation at the UC system is a cause for concern as so many students are UC eligible, but unable to read and write at a college level (Cline, Bissell, Hafner, & Katz, 2007). The CSU’s, which draws from the top third, finds that 46 percent of all first-year students require remedial education in both math and English (Conley, 2007a). At the community college level, 83 percent of incoming students place into remedial level math and 72 percent place into remedial English. While college attendance and aspirations steadily increase, the number of students requiring remedial courses also increase as percentages of students requiring pre-college level courses has not improved.

High school students understand the importance of a postsecondary education. Almost 90 percent of students plan to attend college (Kazis, 2006) and according to the NCES 2014 data, 68 percent of high school completers ages 16 to 24 enrolled immediately into college. However,
college readiness rates have been declining from about 40 percent in the early 2000’s (Nunley, Shartle-Galotto, & Smith, 2000) to about 32% of high school graduates being academically prepared for college-level work with no remediation (Kazis, 2006; Koch, Slate, & Moore, 2012). In fact, in California, about half of first-time college students are placed in developmental English courses (R. S. Brown & Niemi, 2007). ACHIEVE, a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose goals revolve around promoting college and career readiness, found in a nationwide survey that college readiness rates have been declining from 2004 to 2015. The same survey found similar levels in decline in readiness at the two- and four-year college level.

**Challenges to College Readiness**

College readiness is not a new topic in education research (G. W. Moore et al., 2010), but once again, recent reforms are now emphasizing college readiness, particularly in the K-12 setting. The need to reform K-12 to be more aligned with higher education to promote college and career readiness was the rationale for various stakeholders across the education spectrum to collaborate in adopting the Common Core State Standards (hereafter CCSS or Common Core) beginning in 2010 (Conley, Drummond, de Gonzalez, Rooseboom, & Stout, 2011; Kurlaender & Larsen, 2013). Common Core ensures students have the opportunity to learn critical thinking skills to meet the challenges of the United State’s economy and a rigorous college curriculum (Conley, 2014). A study by Conley et. al. (2011) surveyed over 1800 college instructors from diverse disciplines (in general education or career-oriented courses) on the applicability of Common Core standards in their courses and found that most of the standards were important to students’ post-secondary education success. Several other studies have been conducted to support Common Core’s higher level cognitive challenges compared to previous standards and they are consistent with national standards considered important to post-high school success.
(Conley, 2014). Though the implementation of the Common Core standards is still in its infancy, and its effectiveness difficult to truly measure, there is a push to align curriculum standards to promote college readiness.

College readiness, however, is a complex issue with an unclear definition (Porter & Polikoff, 2012) and various measures and indicators (GPA, rigor, SAT/ACT scores). College readiness is also difficult to measure. Historically, college readiness had been measured through college freshmen grade point average (GPA). This measure is efficient and crucial for a student’s overall success in college (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Clifford Adelman (2006), in two national longitudinal studies, made similar findings of the intensity (honors and AP courses) of a high school curriculum having the greatest impact on a student’s college readiness and completion rate. Adelman’s seminal research is even more pertinent as the general public is now beginning to pay more attention to not just access, but also the completion of a post-secondary degree (Spence, 2009). However, rigorous courses alone cannot predict college readiness. Readiness includes both academic and cognitive factors. For instance, GPA measures eligibility, but the value of a grade point average is not standardized (Porter & Polikoff, 2012).

Today, the generally accepted position of being college-ready is defined by the ACT and ACHIEVE as “the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed-without remediation-in credit-bearing general education courses at a 2-year or 4-year institution” (W. Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Springer, Wilson, & Dole, 2014). Conley's (2007a) definition of college readiness includes four facets: key cognitive strategies, key content, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. Students and educators alike mistake meeting minimum college entrance requirements for college readiness. Many researchers argue that a large gap exists between college eligibility and college readiness (W. Barnes et al., 2010;
Koch et al., 2012). To be eligible requires meeting minimum academic standards and does not imply that students are prepared to take on the task of college-level work. Developmental courses now have the role of filling the college readiness gap between high school and college. Barnes et. al. (2010) contends that “academic preparedness” is a better measure, as the current definition of college readiness does not consider academic and non-academic indicators.

Research Rationale

Most high school students go on to begin their college education at the community college level. The community colleges also experience a higher rate of remediation in literacy and greater racial disparities compared to four-year institutions. Most underserved students, those who are low-income, first-generation, or minorities, attend community college. High school educators have the power and ability to greatly impact college-readiness rates as a rigorous high school curriculum is one of the strongest predictors of college matriculation and degree attainment (Adelman, 2006; Green, 2006). However, studies consistently show that underserved students do not complete a college prep curriculum and are more likely to need remedial courses and remain in college longer (Green, 2006).

Most of the research on college readiness occurs outside of the high school classroom. Measures of readiness often take place in higher education settings where college instructors share their perspective of students’ levels of readiness despite the lack of explicitly defined college readiness standards for students, teachers, and parents (R. S. Brown & Niemi, 2007). With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and its goal of career and college readiness for all students, it is crucial to examine how high school teachers are understanding and implementing college-readiness standards. Furthermore, if there is a gap in the perception of
college readiness standards between high school instructors and college instructors, it is important to find out what high school teachers define as college preparatory instruction.

Though college readiness is measured in areas of reading, writing, and math, I am focusing my research on literacy. Literacy is a skill that transcends across all disciplines. Comprehension of difficult texts is often not addressed and can lead to college students choosing ineffective or inefficient strategies (Gruenbaum, 2012). Literacy skills also provide a clear bridge between the Common Core standards and college expectations. For instance, one of the reading skills in Common Core is “close reading”, or extracting meaning from the text itself. The approach stems from many students going to college unprepared for engaging in complex texts (Snow & O’Connor, 2013). Despite an increasing demand to improve literacy at the college level, there is little research on specific literacy expectations students will face in college (Armstrong, Stahl, & Kantner, 2015). With limited research of college-ready literacy in higher education, unclear communication between the two systems of education, and even less research at the high school level on college readiness, a focus on literacy readiness will help begin to build necessary cohesion.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided my study:

1. How do charter high school English teachers perceive college-ready literacy and what informs or influences their perceptions?
   a. What role, if any, does the CCSS play in influencing teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy?
   b. How do their educational experiences and background affect their perceptions?
2. How do charter high school English teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy differ for their student populations?
   a. How do students’ differing educational aspirations influence English teacher’s perceptions of college-ready literacy?
   b. How do English teachers prepare students attending community college to be college-ready?
   c. How do English teachers differentiate college-ready literacy skills across grade levels and across course levels within the same grade level? Specifically, what do English teachers’ perceive as college-ready literacy skills for students in non-honors courses?

**Research Methods and Data Collection**

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe high school English teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy skills for students planning to attend community college. The study is exploratory in nature and a qualitative approach helped to delve into teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy. For this study, data was collected from interviews and observations.

**Site Selection**

Though the site context is significant to each teacher, it is the teacher that is the unit of analysis. Teachers were selected from independent public charter schools in LAUSD and smaller districts throughout Los Angeles. Since independent charters have governance over their own organizations, this typically allows the charter school to innovate and meet the unique demands of their own students. Furthermore, charter schools are comparable in demographics to
the district. According to LAUSD’s website, a charter school “must achieve a racial and ethnic balance reflective of the District population.”

**Public Engagement and Significance**

This study is intended to gain deeper insight into teachers’ understanding of college readiness. College readiness is important for student success in their post-secondary careers. Key players in education reform stress the need for K-16 and even K-20 alignment. However, there is a gap in what K-12 educators understand to be college-ready and what college instructors demand students know before they enter their classrooms. What makes this study more necessary is the lack of engagement between these different educational sectors. With Common Core as our new educational standards, providing a common framework, but local control and autonomy in the classroom, teachers need guidance on understanding and implementing college-ready standards. Too often, K-12 teachers base their understanding of college readiness on their own college experiences. Furthermore, professional development for high school educators come from within the school or local district, even when discussing college expectations. The goal of my study is to help define that disconnect between K-12 and higher education and use those findings to enable teachers to better support their students for success in college.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Students entering college underprepared for the standards and expectations of post-secondary schooling is a persistent academic problem. More specifically, students lack college-ready literacy skills, an important skill to access multiple disciplines. Students are often unsure of what is expected of them in college and most K-12 educators do not know how to help students gain an understanding of those standards prior to entering post-secondary schooling (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). One explanation for this is that K-12 and higher education exist in their own spheres with an unclear understanding of each system’s standards and expectations. Common Core State Standards are attempting to bridge the gap between K-12 and higher education (Kirst & Venezia, 2001; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). However, stakeholders, especially K-12 educators, are still grappling with the implementation of Common Core. To ensure that students are meeting college-ready literacy standards by the end of grade 12, teachers need a clear understanding of what embodies college-ready literacy. Educational policies are enacted at the local level in classrooms and it is teachers who grapple with the pressures of one reform to another. Just as they modified their teaching practices under the high-stakes testing of No Child Left Behind, they must now be responsible for preparing high school students for college and career readiness under Common Core.

This literature review begins with an overview and definition of college readiness by leading researcher David Conley (2007b, 2007a, 2008, 2014; Conley & Gaston, 2013) to explicate its complexities and nuances. Next, a general overview of the college-readiness gap between high school teachers and college instructors is provided, since this long-standing issue is now explicitly addressed under the Common Core State Standards. The college-readiness gap is...
further nuanced by examining socioeconomic and educational barriers faced by historically disadvantaged students. In this chapter, I focus specifically on the literacy gap for two reasons: Common Core’s “college and career readiness” anchors are grounded in literacy and literacy is important for students in order to have access to multiple disciplines in college. I focus on the three specific literacy skills discussed in Common Core: text complexity, close reading, and the use of informational texts. These skills transcend all disciplines despite many non-English instructors’ belief that they are not literacy instructors. The English Language Arts reading standards are described across grade levels using California’s version of the CCSS. Last, I focus on the importance of college readiness and college-ready literacy for high school students planning to attend community college. Students attending community college receive the least outreach from colleges and are more likely to require remediation.

**College Readiness Framework**

High school students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or family income, are graduating with increasing aspirations toward postsecondary education (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009), despite the high rates of students enrolling in developmental courses. Developmental courses, sometimes called remedial, are non-credit requisite courses taken by students prior to taking credit-bearing college courses. College readiness is among the most concerning problem facing the educational system with increasing pressures on teachers to prepare students for college in order to compete in a competitive global economy (Bragg & Taylor, 2014). Over 70 percent of the fastest growing careers between 2006 and 2016 required some form of postsecondary training (Barnes & Slate, 2013). The expectations of colleges and universities, coupled with an increasingly demanding 21st-century economy, has placed immense pressure on students to be
college ready and high school teachers to prepare them for college. A closer examination of
college readiness is necessary to provide context and clarity.

One of the earliest pioneers, David Conley (2003), has been researching college-
readiness for over a decade studying the gap between high school academic content standards
and the knowledge and skills necessary for entry-level college courses. Conley’s work has
helped redefine the concept of college readiness (2007b, 2007a, 2008). Conley’s conceptual
model of college readiness has served as a framework for other researchers (Bragg & Taylor,
2014; Darche & Stern, 2013; McCormick, Hafner, & Saint-Germain, 2013; Roderick et al.,
2009).

Conley (2007a, 2007b, 2008) defines college-readiness 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 post-secondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a
baccalaureate program.” This is a shift from a more traditional measure of college-readiness:
taking courses that are college-approved, high school GPA, ACT and SAT, and AP exams.
These measures can often be misleading. High school GPAs have been increasing even as
measures of college success, which is persisting beyond entry-level courses to graduation, have
fluctuated or worsened. Colleges also rely on Advanced Placement exam scores as a measure of
college readiness. Despite its rigor and curricular requirements, this may be unreliable because
many students take the AP exam at the end of the year and this may cause teachers to align the
course with the exam (Conley, 2007a). This method of “teaching to the test” does not support
college-readiness. Even if students do not take the AP exam, courses are listed on their
transcripts and inflate the academic credentials of students.
College-readiness requires a more comprehensive definition that includes more than scores and numbers. Students who wish to be college-ready must develop a set of cognitive strategies. Key cognitive strategies refer to the intentional behavior that enables students to learn, understand, retain, use, and apply content from a range of disciplines. Close behind in importance is knowledge of specific kinds of content to understand the academic disciplines. This includes overarching reading and writing skills and core subjects like math, English/Language Art, social sciences, science, world languages, and the arts. Also contributing to student success is a set of academic behaviors such as self-management skills, attitudes, and habits necessary to engage in a rigorous college workload. Finally, students must learn the contextual skills and awareness of the college process and system in order to be successful in college (Conley, 2007a, 2008; Conley, McGaughy, Kirtner, van der Valk, & Martinez-Wenzl, 2010). These are the four facets of college readiness, none of which are mutually exclusive and must interact with one another extensively (Conley, 2007a).

**The College-Readiness Gap**

The need to improve college readiness has been a constant force in driving reform. A competitive 21st-century global economy demands workers with higher levels of education and complex skills (Conley, 2014; Darche & Stern, 2013; Jones & King, 2012), but the challenge of college readiness is not new. As college enrollment at both two- and four-year institutions continue to increase, the percentage of students academically prepared for college, those who enter college into credit-bearing courses, remained relatively low. Greene & Winters (2005), in a national study of graduation rates and college readiness, found the percentage of all students leaving high school and entering college with the necessary skills increased from 25 percent in 1991 to 34 percent in 2002. However, with graduation rates constant at 71 percent and 72
percent in that decade, the increasing college readiness rates is likely the results of increased standards and accountability. In an early study by Conley (2003) of 400 faculty members and administrators from 20 universities, the research identified the gap between high school academic standards and the necessary skills for entry-level college courses. This gap was attributed to the lack of state standards paying little attention to university requirements and identified this deficit as one strategy that can be utilized to align the two systems. The college readiness gap is troubling and even more so as the gap widens when college readiness data is disaggregated by race (W. B. Barnes & Slate, 2013; Roderick et al., 2009).

Another gap in college readiness is attributed to the “perception gap” over students’ academic preparedness between high school and college instructors (Sanoff, 2006). Many high school teachers believe that they are preparing their students for college yet many college instructors find that their students are coming to college underprepared. Defining college readiness is complicated by a lack of uniformity in high school graduation and college entrance requirements in almost all states across the nation (Barnes et al., 2010), and the lack of communication between K-12 and higher education (Venezia et al., 2003). However, students quickly realize the gap between their high school experiences and college expectations once they get to college (Conley, 2007b). The expectations that college instructors have of students require higher-level cognitive skills compared to a task-oriented high school curriculum with little cognitive engagement. For example, college students use cognitive skills of inference, analyzing conflicting documents, drawing conclusions and working at a much faster pace than high school students (Conley, 2007b). In analyzing two national surveys, Sanoff (2006) found that 84 percent of college faculty-compared with 65 percent of high school teachers- say that high school graduates are unprepared for college. The survey also revealed the misconception and
miscommunication of college-ready standards. Over two-thirds of high school teachers said they understood very well what was required for students to succeed in college even though only 11 percent say that colleges made expectations clear. In agreement with high school teachers, only five percent of college faculty actually believes their institutions make expectations clear.

In preparing high school students for college, an ACT survey conducted in 2012 found a majority of high school teachers felt that their curriculum prepared students for college while a majority of college instructors disagreed (Springer et al., 2014). A national online survey of college instructors and recent high school graduates conducted by ACHIEVE in 2015 reported similar findings of teachers’ beliefs in preparing students academically and yet actually found a decline of preparedness in the last decade. Seventy-eight percent of college instructors in 2015, compared to 65% in 2004, stated that high schools were not preparing students for the expectations they will face in college. College instructors also reported an increase in dissatisfaction in the job of public schools across all content areas surveyed. For example, 77 percent of college instructors said they were dissatisfied with public schools preparation of writing skills. This was a 15 percent jump from 2004. Additional survey data supports this gap. High school teacher generally felt students were “very well” or “somewhat well” prepared whereas most college instructors agreed that students were “somewhat well” or “not well” prepared (Sanoff, 2006).

**Addressing the College Readiness Gap Through Common Core**

As a response to the lack of college readiness and as a response to the challenges of the new U.S. economy, the National Governors Association for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSS), in conjunction with governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states and two territories, began the development of the
Common Core State Standards. By June 2010, the Common Core State Standards were released and quickly adopted by 40 states. Currently, 42 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted the CCSS (NGA/CCSS, 2010). The goal was to ensure that all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating from high school prepared for college and the beginning of their career. Although educational standards have been around since the early 1990s (Conley, 2014; Kirst, 2010, NGA/CCSSO, 2010), they have been mostly state and locally controlled until now. The first major federal reform, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), adopted in 2001, held states accountable for yearly assessments, rigorous content standards, and annual yearly progress (AYP) to ensure students became proficient by the 2013/2014 academic year (Ametepee, Tchinsala, & Agbeh, 2014; M. W. Kirst, 2010). The new Common Core State Standards are a major reform shift from NCLB’s focus on annual high-stakes, content-driven standardized tests. Instead, students are now asked to analyze texts, justify their responses, and use critical thinking skills.

The Common Core State Standards were first adopted in June 2010 and sought to establish a level of consistency across schools within the state and across states (Conley & Gaston, 2013). Borrowing from the direction of other countries, the authors of the CCSS created fewer standards to be developed more deeply and also to allow states to adapt the standards for their students (Drew, 2012). The development of the standards drew upon a decade’s worth of data including studies on the content of entry-level college courses, focus groups of instructors teaching those courses, instructor surveys of major topics taught in general education courses. Additional college readiness standards from a study conducted by Conley (2003), the ACT, the College Board, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board were used as references for the CCSS. Additional content standards from organizations such as the National Assessment
Governing Board and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and state standards also contributed to the development of the CCSS (Conley, 2014). As of 2015, 42 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories have the adopted the CCSS.

The CCSS make a strong case for focusing on college readiness. If students struggle in high school and are unable to succeed in entry-level credit-bearing courses, they are not college-ready (Tucker, 2013). The increasing number of students enrolling in developmental reading courses in college is just one indicator that K-12 educators need to align coursework, include rigorous content, and to increase academic demands reflective of other top-performing countries so that U.S. students can compete in the global economy. Along the same line, higher education also has the responsibilities to define college-readiness and develop K-12 assessments that support alignment in college placement (King, 2011). Until these policies are specifically defined by colleges and universities, K-12 educators, particularly high school teachers tasked with engaging students in more complex skills, will not have a clear understanding of college readiness. It may be a decade until we see possible benefits and effects of the CCSS (Armstrong et al., 2015) and until then, teachers will not know if students having completed a K-12 education under CCSS are going to college ready.

**Common Core’s Significance to Higher Education**

Although it is too soon to determine the effects of college-ready standards in improving postsecondary education, the goal of the CCSS is to bridge the divide of a historically disconnected education system (Armstrong et al., 2015; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). As higher education is doing the important work of preparing students with the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive market, a parallel effort is taking place in K-12 to strengthen students’ college readiness (Jones & King, 2012). Alignment is taking place as partnerships with
governors, educators, and educational leaders are contributing to the common goal of college readiness and common assessments. With this newly established alignment, students, parents, schools, and teachers will be more aware of students’ progress toward college readiness and colleges will be aware of the foundational base of their incoming students (Jones & King, 2012). Assessments aligned with the CCSS have been created through two multi-state consortia, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), to measure college-readiness by the end of the 11th grade (Jones & King, 2012; King, 2011). Both consortia are working toward the goal of having the assessments use as a placement exam at public colleges and universities for entry into credit-bearing college courses (King, 2011).

To ensure that Common Core standards are preparing college-ready students, it is important that colleges and universities agree to the standards and they are applicable to higher education. In a national study, Conley, Drummond, de Gonzalez, Rooseboom, & Stout (2011) surveyed nearly 1900 instructors with the purpose of addressing two research questions focused on the applicability of the Common Core State Standards, and if applicable, how important they were to the college course. The respondents spanned across 25 different subject areas, representing all 50 states, both public (63.9%) and private (36.1) institutions, and two- and four-year institutions of various sizes (Conley, 2014; Conley et al., 2011). In the study, all respondents were asked questions about the relevance of the standard to their courses. Standards used for this study were for grades 11 and 12. In English Language Arts (ELA), for example, only 28 percent of instructors responded that the overall Reading for Literature standard was relevant to their course, but 94 percent of ELA instructors rated the standard as applicable to their course. However, in the Language standard, where 11th and 12th graders are expected to
have a command of English grammar and usage or demonstrate an understanding of different figures of speech, 82 percent of all respondents and 100 percent of ELA instructors found this standard to be relevant (Conley et al., 2011).

**Literacy Gap**

The college readiness gap is attributed to many factors inside and outside the classroom. Here, I focus on the literacy gap because of its prominent role in the CCSS and college readiness. The reading standards of the Common Core were developed with the recommendation of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) so that more American students can meet the literacy demands of a 21st-century economy (Peery, 2013). The ability to read complex text increased students’ scores on the ACT, an indicator of college readiness and college placement (NGA/CCSSO, 2010). Claims of stagnant academic achievement among K-12 students (Fang, 2016; Williamson et al., 2014) were also made by the authors of the CCSS. In Appendix A, the authors pointed to early research by Gary Williamson, a senior researcher at MetaMetrics, the developer of the Lexile Framework. In a study conducted in 2006, Williamson’s research found a difference of 350 Lexile between the end of high school and college text. This Lexile difference is equivalent to that of the difference between grades 4 and 8 (NGA/CCSSO, 2010).

Literacy and college-readiness gaps are widening in that the increase in college readiness is not proportional to the increase in the number of students enrolling in postsecondary education (Armstrong et al., 2015). Consequently, an increasing number of first-year college students are being placed into one or more developmental reading course (Armstrong et al., 2015). The purpose of the Common Core’s college readiness is to increase college readiness by increasing the complexity of reading to ensure students graduate into credit-bearing college courses. Today, low reading achievement plays a significant role in students’ college readiness. Students
who struggle with reading continue to do so in college. According to a California study of public college and universities who regularly teach college freshman, an estimated two-thirds of entering students cannot analyze information or arguments, or cannot synthesize information from multiple sources (Fitzgerald, 2004). Remedial coursework lowers a student’s potential in earning a degree and remedial reading appears to be the most significant barrier to obtaining a degree (NGA/CCSSO, 2010).

The current reform is sounding the alarm for educators and students alike, but not without its critics. Challenging the “hyperbole of constant curricular decline,” Gamson, Lu, and Eckert (2013) analyzed a large set of elementary grades, focusing specifically third- and sixth-grade level reading textbooks from 1910 to 2000, using multiple measures including sophistication and sentence length among others. The analysis of nearly 10 million words over time found that reading levels declined nominally during the early decades, but has steadily increased in sophistication in the latter half of the century. However, the mean sentence length was much higher in the early decades and has declined since the 1930s.

Another study conducted by the National Center on Education and the Economy analyzed documents, including student assignments, tests and examinations from initial credit-bearing courses, and English composition courses, from randomly selected community colleges in seven states across eight of the most popular and diverse programs in those colleges. The study wanted to find out what kind and level of literacy is required of a high school graduate if that student is going to have a good chance of succeeding in the first year of a typical community college program. From the document analysis of the eight programs – Accounting, Automotive Technology, Biotech/Electrical Technology, Business, Criminal Justice, Early Childhood Education, Information Technology/Computer Programming, Nursing, and the General Track
(one-third of students in fields such as Liberal Arts, Science, Humanities) - the research concluded that college-level text in initial credit-bearing courses is somewhere between grades 11 and 12 for both text complexity and reading for informational text (Tucker, 2013).

**Literacy in Common Core**

Literacy, for the purpose of this research, implies the skills and expectations of the reading standards in ELA and reading for literacy in history/social science, science, and technical subjects. Though there are multiple literacies across the spectrum of disciplines (i.e. financial, digital, scientific), the definition I use refers to the reading comprehension and interpretation of texts, both informational and literature, as defined by the CCSS. For the purpose of this study, reading is used as a noun with expectations that students construct meaning and a critical interpretation of the text (Eckert, 2008).

A common challenge to defining literacy is that content area teachers (such as history, science, math) consider literacy as separate from their subject and expect students to come equipped with the necessary literacy skills for their subject (Ortlieb & Anderson, 2016). Literacy, however, is the “thread that connects all content areas and academic disciplines” (Ortlieb & Anderson, 2016) and basic reading strategies are beneficial in various content (Brozo, Moorman, Meyer, & Stewart, 2013). Outside of the English department, most programs and assignments in college are grounded in reading (Jolliffe & Harl, 2008). Furthermore, the CCSS is placing literacy at the core of each discipline beyond English Language Arts (Applegate et al., 2014; Ortlieb & Anderson, 2016; Peery, 2013) including history/social Studies, science, and technical subjects. The core skills of the CCSS Reading for ELA are text complexity, close reading, and the use of informational texts.
Text Complexity

To address the literacy and college readiness gap, reading is placed at the core of the CCSS. Literacy is key to accessing complex text in both the CCSS, at the college level, and across multiple and varied disciplines (Fang, 2016; Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2014). In the CCSS for Reading in English Language Arts, the authors of the CCSS point to a significant gap between current high school and college and workplace text complexity. If students are to continue their education or enter the workforce, they must be able to read, analyze, synthesize, and critique different types of text. The authors make a strong claim, though not without their critics, in addressing text complexity and the complexity gap (NGA/CCSSO, 2010; Williamson et al., 2014). Text complexity is defined by the NGA and CCSSO as “the inherent difficulty of reading and comprehending a text combined with the consideration of reading and task variable” (Fang, 2016; NGA/CCSSO, 2010). The three measures of text complexity are: (1) quantitative dimensions such as word length, word frequency, or sentence length; (2) qualitative dimensions such as levels of meaning, structure, knowledge demands, language clarity, or levels of meaning; and (3) reader and task consideration which include variables specific to the reader such as knowledge, experience, and motivation (Fang, 2016; NGA/CCSSO, 2010). These measures ensure that readings are challenging and appropriate as students progress to high school graduation and address the literacy gap between K-12 and college.

The authors of the CCSS argue that text complexity has declined in the last half-century, especially as students enter grades near graduation. The authors also cite the increasing text complexity in informational texts. For example, scientific journals had steadily increased in complexity from 1930 to 1990. Furthermore, students are expected to read informational texts with greater independence and less scaffolding and are often held accountable for readings done
independently. This occurs more so in college than in high school. A study by Williamson et al. (2014) analyzed the historical trends in the reading patterns of students and used these patterns to examine whether or not students would meet the Common Core’s college-ready reading by high school graduation. The study analyzed reading score data for students who completed grades 3 to 8 without repeating a grade in one state. In the one state, nearly 68 thousand student’s reading scores were measured based on the Lexile measures (200L for beginner readers and 1700L for advanced readers and text). The scores were then measured and a projected growth was used to gauge student performance in later years if reading abilities were to continue on the same path. The findings suggest that the CCSS is requiring students to read at a higher text complexity range, 1385L, which is 110L higher that previous historical reading trends (Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2013; Williamson et al., 2014). With an increasing demand in complex readings and a decline in K-12 text sophistication, the CCSS reading standards address the serious gaps that have been created from what students are able to do and then expected to do once they leave high school (NGA/CCSSO, 2010).

**Close Reading**

To prepare students for the rigor of complex texts proficiently and independently, the ten anchors standards for reading are bookended with a specific focus on Close Reading (S. Brown & Kappes, 2012). Reading Standard 1 states: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the test. Reading Standard 10 states: Read and comprehend literary and informational texts independently and proficiently (Brown & Kappes, 2012, NGA/CCSSO, 2010). Close Reading is defined as the extraction of meaning from complex texts requiring the reader to figure out the meaning from multiple readings (Hinchman
Multiple readings will help students comprehend the reading, figuring out the logical reasoning, and discover the meaning of the text so that they can read proficiently and independently (S. Brown & Kappes, 2012; Hinchman & Moore, 2013; Snow & O’Connor, 2013). Close Reading of texts is dependent on students’ understanding of the text and less on students’ background knowledge. This method was developed with equity and access issues in mind, though nearly impossible to negate students’ prior knowledge.

However, methods like Close Reading are effective reading strategies for deepening content knowledge in all academic disciplines (S. Brown & Kappes, 2012).

**Informational Text**

In addition to text complexity and Close Reading of text, the CCSS also focuses on the prominent use of informational text. Informational text is found in all four stands of the ELA standards and are implicit or explicit in the literacy standards for history/social science, science, and technical subjects (Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2013). Informational text is a broad term, but in the context of CCSS, it refers to more expository, nonfiction work, including biographies and autobiographies, books about history, science, the arts, and technical texts including directions maps, charts, or graphs (Duke, Halladay, & Roberts, 2013; Maloch & Bomer, 2013). According to the lead writers of the CCSS in ELA and literacy, about 80 percent of postsecondary readings is informational text and is relevant to people inside and outside of school. Informational text requires close, purposeful reading placing greater cognitive demands on students (Ortlieb & Anderson, 2016). The CCSS addresses the literacy gap in reading and comprehending informational texts independently and proficiently (CA Dept of Ed, 2013) and the focus of informational texts are aligned with other measures of literacy. Duke (2010) and Kern (2012) cite the lack of experience with informational text as the culprit behind the large gap in literacy.
and literary achievement between U.S. children and children in other countries in the 2001 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Informational reading is an important measure in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as well. By grade 4, the assessment is about 50 percent informational text, 55 percent by grade 5, and by grade 12, the assessment is nearly 70 percent informational (Duke, 2010; Kern, 2012).

Reading Anchors in California

The goals of the CCSS are similar throughout the states and territories that have adopted the standards; however, I use California’s version of the CCSS in explaining the College and Career Readiness Anchors for Reading in English Language Arts. The standards increase in text complexity at each grade level and until it reaches the college-ready level (Williamson et al., 2014). Central to these reading standards are complex skills like close reading, interpreting complex texts, and reading fluency. The ten reading Anchor Standards (AS) in grades 6-12 are divided into four categories: Key Ideas and Details (AS 1-3) requiring students to read closely and determine central ideas, Craft and Structure (AS 4-6) such as interpreting words and phrases and analyzing structure of texts, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (AS 7-9) addressing the integration of multiple texts and evaluating specific claims in a text, and Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity (AS 10) with a focus on reading and comprehending texts independently and proficiently. Each Anchor Standard corresponds to a specific Reading Standard for each discipline.

Close reading, mentioned explicitly in AS 1, states: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text (CA-CCSS, 2013). Students in grades 11-12 are expected to be able to “cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support
analysis” across the disciplines. In ELA, the Reading for Literature and Informational Text expect students to be able to do this with “what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (CA-CCSS, 2013).

College Readiness for Community College

A significant aspect of the community college system is providing access to a diverse pool of students. In the state of California, over 70 percent of public undergraduates attend a community college in contrast to 18% attendance in the California State system and 9% in the University of California system (Melguizo, Hagedorn, & Cypers, 2008; Moore & Shulock, 2010). With over 70 percent of students enrolling in remedial English and almost 40 percent placing two or more levels below college-level English (Venezia et al., 2010), students struggle with persistence into their second year. Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst, and Usdan (2005), in a four-state report that analyzed K-16 educational governance and policies at the state level, found that only 34 percent of students who are required to take one remedial course complete a two- or four-year degree. Students who do not require remedial courses complete a degree at about 56 percent. At the community college level, about half of first-year students do not continue on for a second year compared to about a quarter of first-year students at four-year colleges. In California community colleges, students who pass college-level English within two years complete a degree at 47 percent compared to 17 percent who did not (Moore & Shulock, 2010).

Community colleges serve an important role in the educational pipeline, especially for underserved students. Community colleges serve as an entry point for many economically disadvantaged students and play an important role in the high school-to-college transition (Green, 2006; Venezia et al., 2003). However, the increasing number of underserved students at the community college level has not experienced the same success as their White and higher-
income counterpart (Green, 2006). This leak in the pipeline is attributed to many factors such as experiencing lower expectations from educators for students attending community college, less outreach and focus on community college in high school, and the misalignment of K-12 and higher education curriculum.

A rigorous high school curriculum is one of the strongest predictors of college matriculation and studies consistently show that underserved students do not complete a college preparatory curriculum (Green, 2006). Across the nations, Black and Latino twelfth graders read and do math at about the same level as White, non-Latino eighth graders (Venezia et al., 2005). Underserved students also experience lower expectations from teachers. Green (2006) found many educators operating within a deficit model by focusing on what underserved students lack instead of what they are able to do. Instead of focusing on curriculum that taught higher levels skills of understanding, relationships, or application, teachers often focus on getting the right answer. This deficit model of teaching encourages a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for underserved student population. Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine (2010) interviewed community college students regarding assessments and placements and found that though few students felt prepared with college prep courses, most felt that the goal of their high school was to get them out and wished they were told to take challenging courses just like those planning to attend UCs or CSUs.

The Role of Teachers

High school teachers must ensure that students are ready for college as students move through the K-12 pipeline. However, as teachers move from one set of reforms to another, the deeper conversations about the meaning of college readiness and what a literate student ready for the demands of a post-secondary education may have gotten lost. The CCSS, now in full
implementation, addresses the college readiness gap and ensures a level of alignment to help students make a smoother transition to college. However, educators have been struggling with the shifts in instructional practice, curriculum development, and selection of aligned materials (Brown & Kappes, 2012). Developing literacy strategies appropriate for reading at the secondary level has been an interest of educators for over half a century (Moje, 2008). With recent reforms focused on students’ literacy skills, a renewed focus of content literacy is now at the forefront of teacher practice. However, there will continue to be a source of conflict for teachers who feel they often have to make a choice between teaching strategies in content literacy and the pressure to cover content information and concepts (Moje, 2008).

Another source of uncertainty for teachers is the need to change instruction to meet the CCSS. For instance, Close Reading is changing reading instructions and demands that teachers have a deep, substantive knowledge and understanding of text complexity and text-dependent questions (S. Brown & Kappes, 2012; Peery, 2013). Peery (2013) addresses additional concerns with teachers having to abandon previously used methods in literacy. David Coleman, one of the chief architects of the CCSS, does not support providing too much pre-reading for students and this had led to controversy. Others have countered this claim attempting to delineate between pre-reading and over-preparation. This controversy arose over the issue of Close Reading and the requisite multiple readings of a text. Before, the over-preparation was necessary as students were likely to read the text once (Peery, 2013), yet now students are expected to engage in a single text multiple times for deeper understanding.

New college-ready standards alone cannot prepare all students adequately and equitably for college. Other factors, such as a teacher’s racial and socioeconomic background, also play a critical role in educating America’s increasingly diverse students. America’s teachers are
overwhelmingly White, middle-class, and female (Gay & Howard, 2000; Goldenberg, 2014; Howard, 2007). Most teachers do not live in the same communities as their students are unaware of the potentially harmful assumptions (Gay & Howard, 2000). Change has to start with educators before it takes place with students. Students are aware of teachers who are authentic and this does not mean that White teachers are inauthentic or that they cannot teach students who are not White. However, teachers can begin with one key change. To begin to meet the needs of diverse students, teachers and other school professionals need to stop blaming students and their families for the gaps in academic achievement. Instead, educators can have the most impact in changing their own attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and practices (Howard, 2007).

High school educators are not solely responsible for preparing students, often the most underserved, for credit-bearing college courses. Students entering college unprepared and unaware of the rigor is a systemic problem. Despite this fact, high school educators have taken on the responsibility of ensuring that students are ready for college. Educators will continue to debate reform but students continue on to college regardless of the reform rhetoric. Most importantly is that college-ready reform is still a one-size-fits-all and does not differentiate for different student groups with different educational paths. High school teachers must take on the responsibility of ensuring that their students, a majority of whom are matriculating into community colleges, are prepared for college.

**Conclusion**

The goal of preparing students to be ready for post-secondary work is extremely important to address the persistent college-readiness gap and help align the K-12 and higher education system. Teachers, responsible for ensuring students meet the grade level standards, have operated in their silos away from higher education for too long to be able to fully know
what colleges are expecting. One way to help align the two systems even further is to explore high school teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy, an important component to accessing college-level courses. The current reform, Common Core, has refocused the high school curriculum to help students be college-ready. Teachers are expected to change their curriculum, focus on literacy, and alter their assessments. However, we need to know what teachers’ understanding of what it means to be college-ready and college-ready for their students’ diverse needs and educational goals. Although all educators are important in the process of preparing students for college, I am focusing on high school educators because of their crucial and unique role in students’ transition into higher education. Only then can both K-12 and higher education systems have a better idea as to how best support each other and their students in transitioning from one system to another.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGIES

Introduction

Students continue to enter higher education unprepared for the literacy demands of a postsecondary education despite historic college attendance rates. Though students taking remedial English classes occur at both two- and four-year institutions, nearly half of all students entering community college require developmental English. The lack of college preparedness ushered in a new reform, the Common Core State Standards, to address the gap between secondary and post-secondary education literacy. At the core of this reform are teachers who are expected to change their own pedagogy to align with the new goals of the CCSS.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, an examination of high school English teachers’ understanding of college-ready literacy is important to explore whether teachers have grasped the complexity of college readiness and whether their pedagogy aligns with college-ready expectations. With most high school students beginning their post-secondary education at the community college level, it is important to understand how high school teachers are preparing community college-bound students. This study could contribute to supporting the alignment of K-12 and higher education programs and support teachers in their preparation of students to possess the skills to be college-ready.

Research Questions

1. The following research questions guided my study:

How do secondary English teachers perceive college-ready literacy and what informs or influences their perceptions?

   a. What role, if any, does the shift from NCLB to CCSS play in influencing teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy?
b. How do their educational experiences and background affect their perceptions?

2. How do secondary English teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy differ for their student populations?
   a. How do students’ differing educational aspirations influence English teacher’s perceptions of college-ready literacy?
   b. How do English teachers prepare students attending community college to be college-ready?
   c. How do secondary English teachers differentiate college-ready literacy skills across grade levels and across course levels within the same grade level?

   Specifically, what do English teachers’ perceive as college-ready literacy skills for students in non-honors courses?

**Research Design and Rationale**

A phenomenological approach was used to explore secondary English teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy for students attending community college. This qualitative method is relevant to this study in order to capture the perceptions of teachers through their personal and professional experiences. I was interested in understanding the nuanced relationship between teachers’ perceptions and their enacting of these perceptions in the classroom. Because the nature of this phenomenological study is focused on capturing the lived experiences of the people involved with the issue that is being studied, the goal of the researcher was to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon- teachers perceptions of college-ready literacy for community college-bound students (Groenewald, 2004). The literature focused on the lack of literacy preparation for students entering community colleges and the research aimed to explore why.
Strategies of Inquiry

Sites and population

Charter high schools were chosen for this study because of their purpose: to establish an alternative means within the existing public school system and be a laboratory for innovative practices (Renzulli, Barr, & Paino, 2015). Because of the persistent lack of college-readiness of students entering college, especially community college, charter schools were chosen so that a closer examination of their innovative programs could help all stakeholders understand how to close the college-readiness gap.

Moustakas (1994) states that the essential criteria in selecting participants are that they have “experienced the phenomenon, is intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, is willing to participate in a lengthy interview and possibly a follow-up interview, grants the investigator the right to [record], and publish the data in a dissertation” (p. 107). Groenewald (2004), citing other qualitative researchers, regard two to ten participants or research subject as sufficient to reach saturation. A purposive sampling of twelve English teachers was selected from independent charter schools throughout the Greater Los Angeles area, with half of the participants from Los Angeles Unified School District. Each teacher met the following criteria to allow for a diverse group of teachers with varied educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. The criteria were: attended a four-year out of high school or started college at a community college and taught students across different levels of rigor (such as AP, Honors, and non-Honors/AP).

LAUSD is specifically targeted for this study because it is the second largest district in the nation and home to a large number of charter schools. The district enrolls over 640,000 students at over 900 schools and 187 public charter schools and employs over 25,000 teachers.
The district serves a diverse group of students with Latinos making up the largest group at 74 percent. About 80 percent of students also receive free or reduced lunch. Graduation rates have also increased from 62.4 percent in 2010 to a projected 77 percent for the 2015-2016 school year (laschoolreport). However, nearly half of LAUSD graduates did not meet A-G requirements and are ineligible to apply to four-year institutions.

To obtain the research participants, I contacted high school principals and English teachers at charter schools via email. Once teachers responded to the screening guide and agreed to participate, I contacted them through their preferred method of communication to set up an interview date. Teachers were able to choose the interview site. To capture the depth of the experience of the teacher, I also observed three research participants for multiple class periods. For instance, if a teacher taught AP and non-AP courses, I observed at least one period of each course. This was important as many high school teachers teach multiple courses and it was important to describe their experiences wholly.

**Data Collection Method**

Typical in phenomenological studies is the long interview in which data is collected on the topic (Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I also observed some of the participants for as many different courses as they teach. This observation helped as a follow-up to the interview and allowed the teacher to express their experiences further with a different set of questions from me. Furthermore, emails were sent to several teachers for clarification of ideas or to ensure that I was capturing their voice accurately.

Before an interview begins, the researcher engaged in the Epoche process of setting aside beliefs, judgments, and perceptions to focus on the experience. This process helped the researchers to look at the experiences of the teachers with a fresh lens as to not let their biases
impact the direct interview (Moustakas, 1994). The primary methods of gathering data was through unstructured in-depth interviews and reflective journaling or field notes (Bresler, 1995; Groenewald, 2004; Laverty, 2003). Moustakas (1994) suggest the researcher may develop a series of questions aimed at evoking a person to comprehensively recount their experiences; however, the questions cannot interfere with the research subject’s experience. The researcher must bracket, or block out the outer world and their own biases or judgments about the phenomena, in order to see the phenomena clearly (Laverty, 2003).

Interviews were crucial in allowing the participants to describe their experiences. To do this, the researcher created a safe and open environment for the person to speak openly about their experiences. Moustakas (1994) suggest the phenomenological interview begin with a social conversation to create a relaxed environment. Next, the researcher suggested the research subject to focus on the experience before describing it fully. The goal of the interview is to stay close to the lived experience and not what the person thought they experienced (Laverty, 2003). Memos or field notes were also an important data source in order to capture what the researcher heard, saw, experienced, and thought in the course of collecting data (Groenewald, 2004).

According to Maxwell (2013), the purpose of interviews is to provide “an efficient and valid way of understanding [secondary teachers’] perspectives”. Interviewing is necessary to learn how teachers are interpreting what is around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, interviews were necessary to learn about how teachers understand college-readiness for all of their students, but more importantly, how they differentiate their perceptions for the majority of students who attend community college. The goals of the initial interview (see Appendix A) of each high school English teacher was to explore their perceptions of college-ready literacy and whether the current reform has played any role in shaping their perceptions. Multiple interviews
or further communication via email took place to ensure that the research subject’s responses were comprehensive as the interview was more of a dialog engaged between both the researcher and research subjects.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and audio recorded using an iPhone and the app, Rev. Interviews were then transcribed and studied through the methods and procedures of phenomenal analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Analysis Methods**

*Phenomenological Reduction.* Using the process of Phenomenological Reduction, the researcher examined and reexamedined the words, or data, describing the phenomena so it became specific in texture- what one sees (Moustakas, 1994). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe this process as continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive meaning in and of itself. Another important dimension of Phenomenological Reduction is horizontalization, a process which treats each statement with equal weight in the initial data analysis stage (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization is the “process of explicating the phenomena [and] qualities are recognized; every perception is granted equal value, nonrepetitive constituents of the experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96). From the horizontalized statements, the meaning or meaning units were listed and clustered into common categories or themes, removing repetitive statements.

*Imaginative Variation.* After Phenomenological Reduction, meaning must be made of the data. Moustakas (1994, p. 98) explains the “aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of the experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the “what” of experience.”
Merriam and Tisdale (2016) describe this process as viewing the data from various perspectives to see different things from different angles.

*Synthesis of Meanings and Essence.* The final step in phenomenological research is to integrate the textural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole. The clustered themes or meaning are used to develop the descriptions of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

**Role Management and Ethical Issues**

My goal was to explore English teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy for all students, but especially the underserved student population. As a teacher of eleven years, and having taught in both the NCLB era and now CCSS, I understand the frustrations many teachers have with the shift in reform. As a teacher, I am constantly learning and reflecting on my own practice in making my curriculum college-ready. I can empathize with some of the frustrations teachers feel; this empathy will be problematic in potentially biasing my data although it may be helpful for probing teachers for deeper understanding. With the Common Core standards, teachers are now feeling the pressure of implementing college-ready skills. Measureable reforms are high-stakes and are a stressful topic of discussion. As a teacher doing research, I must also be cautious of expressing any of my own thoughts about controversial educational issues, such as the Common Core, if teachers engage in a conversation with me about this topic. I will express that my goal as a teacher and researcher is to learn more about how teachers understand their new role in preparing students for college. As a teacher, my role is non-evaluative and hopefully that will help quell any fears of judgment.
Credibility and Trustworthiness

There were two major threats to the credibility of my study: having a sample from a limited number of sites and reactivity as a teacher interviewing other teachers. The sample was a self-selected group of twelve teachers who were willing to volunteer their time for lengthy interviews. Teachers who participated may also be like-minded teachers who are interested in the topic and were willing to support me because they wanted to contribute to conversations around a current and controversial issue. It was also difficult to escape selection bias in my study. To help limit bias in the findings, phenomenological research requires rich descriptions of the English teachers’ lived experiences.

As a teacher researching other teachers, it was possible that teachers may have said what they think I wanted to hear. I have a level of empathy and understanding as a teacher. Therefore, internal validity is crucial for this study. Internal validity refers to the congruence of the findings to reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As an interpreter of the data, my job was to make sure that the findings captured what was visible and said during the interviews and observations. In phenomenological research, the twelve English teachers were my co-researchers in exploring my topic and questions. It is important that they validate the synthesis of the textural descriptions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

To ensure credibility, I shared the general findings with the participants. Participants knew the objectives of my study before agreeing to participate and once again during the interview and observation. All individuals were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality in the report. Additionally, I was only person who is able to access the transcriptions and files.
Limitations

The exploratory nature of this study had several limitations: the sample size was small, the charter sites and organizations are limited, and the findings reflect just one sector of public education. The findings presented in this study were not meant to be generalizable to other teachers or other school settings. However, similar student and teacher populations are also found across other public institutions. The findings from the twelve teachers will add to the larger narrative of what teachers understand about college readiness and college-ready literacy and have important implications for future research.

Summary

This study was a qualitative phenomenological interview study of twelve charter high school English teachers and their perceptions of college-ready literacy. Literacy is a skill crucial to college readiness and students entering college must have the necessary literacy skills to access the diverse areas of studies in higher education. Too often have high school teachers and college instructors operate in isolation, despite having a common goal of helping students achieve a college degree. The goal of this study was to begin to bridge the college-readiness perception gap by understanding how secondary teachers make sense of college-ready literacy.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of twelve interviews and three observations of charter high school English teachers from independent charter organizations throughout Los Angeles. The focus of this study was to explore high school English teachers’ perceptions of their students’ literacy needs in the era of college-readiness and 21st-century skills. The interviews and observations were designed to explore teachers’ understanding of literacy and the literacy needs of their students within the social and structural context of their respective schools in order to prepare their students for college. Follow-up emails were sent to specific teachers for clarification. The data in this chapter answers the following research questions:

3. How do charter high school English teachers perceive college-ready literacy and what informs or influences their perceptions?
   a. What role, if any, does CCSS play in influencing teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy?
   b. How do their educational experiences and background affect their perceptions?

4. How do charter high school English teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy differ for their student populations?
   a. How do students’ differing educational aspirations influence English teacher’s perceptions of college-ready literacy?
   b. How do English teachers prepare students attending community college to be college-ready?
   c. How do English teachers differentiate college-ready literacy skills across grade levels and across course levels within the same grade level? Specifically, what do
English teachers’ perceive as college-ready literacy skills for students in non-honors courses?

Multiple rounds of coding data were necessary during the analysis of the data. First, teachers’ responses were examined closely for themes that impacted students’ literacy skills and teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy. Close attention was paid to how teachers discussed what strategies were used in their classes and how they supported the needs of their students. In the next round of coding, common recurring themes such as students’ backgrounds, school organizational structure, and teachers’ perceptions of their students were found to be strong influencers of teachers’ understanding of their students college-readiness. What began to emerge from examining the data was that teachers’ perceptions of their students’ abilities were strongly influenced by the socioeconomic background of the students and the traditional or non-traditional structure of the school.

In this chapter, I first describe the sample and demographics in the study. Next, I present the major findings from the twelve interviews and three observations. Finally, I discuss the findings critical to educating students of color. Though this topic was not explicit in my interview protocol, many teachers discussed the difficulties of working in minority communities or the difficulty minority students have in their schools. This topic will also largely inform the implications of this study. The five key findings of this study are as follow:

- **Key Finding 1: Teachers’ background impacts their perceptions of their students’ college-ready needs.** Teachers own level of preparation for college, and subsequently who their students are once they became teachers, shaped teachers’ understanding of college-ready literacy. Though teachers discussed both habits and skills, teachers who
taught higher-level courses or in affluent areas focused more on skills and teachers who
taught non-honors/AP or in poor communities focused more on habits and attitude.

• **Key Finding 2: Teachers supported Common Core but new standards do not**
  prepare underserved students for college. English teachers spoke positively about
  Common Core standards and its purpose of college-readiness. However, teachers
  working in mostly poor communities or disadvantaged students at their respective
  schools also understand that college-ready standards are not enough to overcome
  socioeconomic and social-emotional barriers.

• **Key Finding 3: Teachers believe student apathy, not their curriculum, was to blame**
  for lack of college-readiness. Teachers believed the collaboration and alignment of
  curriculum among teachers helped to create a college-ready curriculum. However,
  teachers working in underserved communities attributed the lack of literacy growth to
  apathy from the students and parents.

• **Key Finding 4: Teachers believe a college-ready model limited their students’ post-
  secondary options.** Many teachers did not and could not take into account the differing
  educational aspirations of their students in the college-ready charter model. College-
  ready meant four-year ready to most charter high schools and many schools and
  organizations did not promote other post-secondary options.

• **Key Finding 5: Teachers were not thinking about students attending community**
  college when thinking about college-readiness. When asked directly about how to
  prepare students entering community college to be college-ready, the responses varied
  from focusing on habits, offering a trade school, and some teachers acknowledged that
  this topic was an area of growth for them.
Because some independent charter schools operate as single-site organizations and some organizations have multiple schools, the terms organization and schools will be used interchangeably for single-site charter schools.

**Sample and Demographics Background**

As discussed in Chapter Three, independent charter schools were used in this study because of their ability to innovate to meet the needs of the communities they serve. The twelve participants represented the range of charter schools: single charter school operators to large charter organizations, independent conversion schools and independent start-ups, and schools that offered many AP and Honors courses to organizations that did not offer AP courses at all. In total, the participants represented six charter organizations and eight charter high schools.

The organizational and social structures were important to explicating and analyzing the data. Both independent conversion schools (Balboa CHS and Fillmore CHS) located in affluent suburbs and independent start-ups in low socioeconomic areas followed a traditional model of course offerings (remedial, college preparatory, honors, and AP). Independent start-ups in this study included Wilson CHS, Roosevelt CHS, and Washington CHS, part Mission Schools, and Portola CHS, part of Pacific Schools. These four independent charter schools serve low socioeconomic students and the two organizations they are a part of, Mission and Pacific Schools, have over 15 schools in their organization. Lastly, Sonoma CHS and Lincoln CHS do not offer an AP or honors curriculum and are a part of small organizations of fewer than five schools serving a socioeconomically and racially diverse student population. This pattern with each charter organization or school in this study was not reflective of charter schools throughout Los Angeles. However, the social context (such as the community in which the school and students reside) and structural context (such as organizational model, vision, and staff support) of
the charter does play a key role understanding teachers’ perceptions of the literacy needs of their students. Furthermore, the data showed how the socioeconomic status of the community and the students affected teachers’ perceptions of their students and their teaching practice.

Table 1: Participants’ race and gender; organizational and social context of schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race, Gender, and College</th>
<th>Course Levels Taught</th>
<th>Grade Levels Taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Straight to 4-year after high school</td>
<td>Attended community college</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Morrison</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Collin</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Johnson</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Adam</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Dylan</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Norris</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Carter</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brooks</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Jackson</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Robinson</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 1, teachers in this study were pretty homogenous in race and college education. All but three teachers were white, and of the three non-White teachers, two came from a historically underserved minority background. Of the 12 teachers, 5 are male and 7 are female. All participants began their post-secondary education at a four-year university. However, one teacher left the four-year university to attend community college and then
completed a bachelors’ degree as a transfer student. It was important to have participants who
taught courses across grade and course level in this study. The sample in this study also reflected
the larger problem of educators in general: Rarely do teachers reflect the students they teach.

Table 2: Structural and Social Context of the School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Charter Organization</th>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>Charter Model</th>
<th>Course Offering</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Smith</td>
<td>Balboa CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Morrison</td>
<td>Balboa CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Collin</td>
<td>Fillmore CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Johnson</td>
<td>Golden Gate Schools</td>
<td>Sonoma CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Adam</td>
<td>Golden Gate Schools</td>
<td>Sonoma CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Dylan</td>
<td>Lakeside Schools</td>
<td>Lincoln CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>Lakeside Schools</td>
<td>Lincoln CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Norris</td>
<td>Lakeside Schools</td>
<td>Lincoln CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Carter</td>
<td>Mission Schools</td>
<td>Wilson CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X &gt;90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brooks</td>
<td>Mission Schools</td>
<td>Roosevelt CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X &gt;90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Jackson</td>
<td>Mission Schools</td>
<td>Washington CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X &gt;90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Robinson</td>
<td>Pacific Schools</td>
<td>Portola CHS</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Diverse means no single racial group makes up the majority of the student population

Table 2 provides additional information that emerged from the interviews about the social
and structural context of the schools that affected teachers’ perceptions of their students’ abilities
to be college-ready. Interesting descriptors that affected teachers’ perceptions were the size of
their organization, the organizational model of assessments, the community in which the school is located, and student population. Charter schools located in poor communities reflected the demographics of the surrounding community. This was not the same for charter schools in affluent neighborhoods or charters with a non-traditional structure. For example, the diversity of the student bodies in affluent charter schools did not reflect the local community since many students from the neighboring cities commute to these schools. One school’s student body came from over 100 zip codes. Regardless of the social context of the school, each organization had over 90 percent of their students enrolling in college after high school.

**Key Finding 1: Teachers’ background impact their perceptions of their students’ college-ready needs**

When asked about college-ready literacy skills, teachers who worked in schools in affluent areas or non-traditional settings were more apt to address specific literacy skills (the differences between skills and habits were discussed in Chapter Two). This was quite different from teachers who worked mainly with poor and minority who kept stressing habits over skills even when probed for specific literacy skills. Of the four teachers who work with mostly socioeconomically disadvantaged students, only one teacher, Ms. Robinson, spoke of specific college-ready and college-ready literacy skills

**Teachers’ College-ready Background**

Many teachers discussed what they believed to be college-ready literacy skills based on their own schooling and what they felt made them succeed. All of the teachers spoke positively about their rigorous academic experiences in high school. While most teachers felt their positive academic experiences carried over into college, Ms. Carter, Ms. Collin, Ms. Jackson, and Ms. Brooks experienced difficulty transitioning into college.
Many teachers who felt they were prepared for college “did the AP route in high school” which taught them study skills necessary for college. Ms. Dylan, who was on the AP route, felt more than prepared entering college and had been taught the fundamental academic habits since elementary school. When Ms. Dylan reflected on her peers in college, she said, “Everyone thinks [college] is really hard but I had a lot of good study skills in place and some of that is the executive functioning that you have to want to develop.” Ms. Robinson also felt her advanced courses in English and history from middle school to high school prepared her for college. A rigorous course load in high school gave her the confidence to feel prepared for college. Ms. Robinson’s 11th grade year in high school was crucial to her feeling ready for college. When speaking about when she realized she was ready for the higher-level thinking skills, she said,

My 11th grade year, when I took AP Language, it clicked for me. There's a bigger purpose. It's like this tiny little thing happened, which connects to all these other tiny little things that happened. How am I explaining what I see so that not only somebody else sees it, but they understand it and they agree with me?

Teachers who did not speak explicitly about AP courses but felt they were ready for college expressed the skills they felt prepared them. For Mr. Morrison, that moment of feeling ready came when he arrived to college. Mr. Morrison attended the high school he currently works, and though the school is much more rigorous than Mr. Morrison remembers, he still felt “the education [he] had in high school was really good.” Mr. Morrison discussed how he learned how to write well and learned different philosophical theories and at the time, was unaware of his privileged background. His confidence grew when he arrived to college as he “looked around [at his classmates], and was like okay, I got this.” Like Mr. Morrison, Mr. Smith’s confidence in college also came from his family supporting his love of reading since childhood. Describing himself as an “avid reader” and being encouraged by his parents to read from a young age, Mr. Smith stated how “when it came to college, staying on top of the reading was never a
problem and understanding course content and lessons was easy.” Mr. Johnson, Ms. Adams, and Ms. Norris also spoke about their own readiness for college in the same vein attributing it to the kinds of courses they took in high school or a passion for reading that gave them the confidence to be ready for college.

Every teacher interviewed for this study may have started their college career at a four-year institution, an indicator of college-readiness by meeting college eligibility, but not all felt prepared for the rigors of college. Two teachers, Ms. Jackson and Ms. Collin, were surprised by how unprepared they were despite being on the college-ready path in high school. When speaking about this, Ms. Jackson stated:

I actually did not feel like I was prepared. At the time, my school was considered the second best in education in the state. I got to college and I had no clue what I was doing. I didn't know how to do a course reading. I didn't know how to find evidence from different sources. I was a straight A student in high school. Then, I nearly dropped out after a year and a half because my GPA tanked. I went from a straight A student to D's and F’s.

Similar to Ms. Jackson, Ms. Collin also reflected on her high school experiences and her lack of college-readiness despite being on the honors track. In speaking about how she prepared her students for college now so they do not make the same mistakes she did when she entered college, she said,

Only now as an educator, I didn't understand how I was in honor courses and I tested into remedial English, but now that I look back, I never read a novel in 12th grade. They focus on your personal statements, but they don't really focus on reading and analyzing. Even when I got out of the remedial courses at [a four-year university], I still wasn't ready because I went into semester long courses where you're reading six novels in one semester and I hadn't read a full novel since the end of 10th or 11th grade.

Two other teachers, Ms. Brooks and Ms. Carter, discussed how they felt prepared for college academically but lacked the resilience to persist and follow through with a plan and the habits of being an independent person.
Teachers’ Background Shape Perceptions of Their Students’ Needs

Teachers’ definitions of college-ready literacy skills or college-ready habits often paralleled their own experiences. As discussed in Chapter two, literacy skills refer to the reading comprehension and interpretation of texts, both informational and literature, as defined by the Common Core State Standards. Habits refer to a set of academic behaviors such as self-management skills and attitudes necessary to engage in a rigorous college workload. An interesting finding, discussed in this chapter and further discussed in the following chapter, was the lack of consideration teachers had for their students. When teachers discussed what their students needed, it was their own college-ready experiences that determined what they believe their students’ own needs were. For instance, since Ms. Brooks needed to be resilient to get through college after having dropped out of a four-year university and then re-entering as a transfer student. She did not learn resilience at school but her “parents did a good job about that.” Ms. Brooks adds, “My teachers never instilled [discipline and resilience] in me. My mom told me to never give up and she was good at that.” Because of her personal experience and wishing schools taught resilience, she believed her students needed to learn to be resilient. This becomes important, and possibly even problematic, when students’ backgrounds are often very different from their teachers, especially in underserved, minority schools and assumptions of needs are made based on teachers’ personal experiences and background.

Every single teacher’s story of feeling prepared or unprepared for college shaped how they prepared their own students. Mr. Johnson, a teacher in a non-traditional setting, placed a high value on autonomy and self-efficacy because he wished that he was taught to be more proactive in high school as those were the habits he found to be useful in college. In his classrooms, he builds self-efficacy with students by giving them the “autonomy and freedom and
choice to be able to make [reading and writing] selections” but also letting his students know that he is assessing for skills and an increase in volume as students move from grades 9-12. Mr. Jones, who attended college on a football scholarship, expressed that during high school, there was not a demand to read and write and he did not love it. However, when he went to college, he felt “pulled” academically and athletically and was not prepared for the amount of reading and writing he had to do. As he continued his education at an Ivy League university, he felt unprepared for the academic challenges there as well, especially writing at the graduate level. Like any athletic skill, he kept practicing in order to improve. He brought this mentality to his freshmen English students by having students practice the same literacy skill multiple times, or what he refers to as “stick and move.” Mr. Jones describes “stick and move” as “short hits” where you consistently practice a skill and it “just grows."

Skills and habits that prepared teachers academically for college were similar to the skills and habits they taught their students. For instance, Mr. Smith, Mr. Morrison, Ms. Norris, and Ms. Robinson felt their reading and writing abilities prepared them college and tended to focus on mostly academic skills for their own students. Ms. Collin reflected on how she should have paid more attention in history because “that’s the information that’s going to change your life.” When she taught A Raisin in the Sun, she brought in historical and financial information about housing such as the history of the Federal Housing Authority. Because she was not taught how testing in remedial English in college was a financial setback, she also discussed financial literacy as much as possible to her classroom.

College-ready Literacy Different in AP and Non-AP Courses

Mr. Morrison and Mr. Smith taught mainly AP courses but started out teaching non-AP courses. Regardless of the level of the student, Mr. Morrison expressed “the most important
thing is competent writing because it’s an indication of critical thinking ability and reading ability” and believed that it “looks different for each ability level and each grade level.” For Mr. Smith, college-ready literacy is the ability to comprehend the claims and structure of a text and then be able to “contextualize it further and look at how point of view, philosophical assumptions, and personal experiences might shape the meaning of the text.” The motto of Mr. Smith’s AP course is “a mind at work” and a college-ready student is able to synthesize multiple works and create meaning from them.

Teachers who taught both AP courses and non-AP courses believed that students needed the same skills to be college-ready. Even though the goals and content are different for AP English and non-AP English, teachers believed they were still preparing students for college with the same skills and habits. Though teachers who have taught a range of courses believed that all students needed the same literacy skills to be college-ready, the approach they took in their specific courses were quite different. For example, in Ms. Robinson’s English 12 classes, she “very religiously follow[s] a lesson cycle.” Students start with a “do now” which she called an APK (accessing prior knowledge), then an EPK (extending prior knowledge), an application piece either working independently or with partners, and then the students end with a reflection. What Ms. Robinson does “in English 12 is school wide” and what she does “in AP Literature is my thing.” She said:

For my AP class, it's rare that I follow that cycle. It's much more organic in terms of "What's the big concept I want them to take away with today? What's the passage they read last night that we're going to talk about?" Maybe we're going to talk about a page for 55 minutes. I don't hand them formalized notes. I don't give them graphic organizers. It's like, "Take out a piece of paper."

Ms. Robinson, who taught only senior students, taught both AP Literature and English 12. For her English 12 class, she used a reading and writing program developed by the
California State University system called ERWC, an Expository Reading and Writing Course, geared toward college readiness. When asked about her approach to the two courses, Ms. Robinson explained Pacific Schools’ college-ready model and its belief that students should graduate high school, get accepted into college, and be successful in college. She wanted all of her students to “feel like they’re equipped to attack any text, engage with it, and come away with not only an understanding of what the author has said, but they’re response to it.” This was how she felt as a junior in high school taking AP Language when she began to see the pieces “click.”

When asked about specific skills for each class, Ms. Robinson replied how “technically, they’re the same” because all students graduate with A-G requirements. Regardless of which class, AP or ERWC English 12, each class was preparing students to be college-ready at a four-year school.

The other teachers in this study who also taught both AP courses and non-AP courses agreed that students in general needed similar college-ready skills but structured the courses differently. For instance, Mr. Smith used the précis method, a method of literary and rhetorical analysis he learned while doing an AP training, with all of his students. With his AP students, he provided a larger range of texts from John Stuart Mills’ “Liberty of Thought and Discussion” to political editorials from the Los Angeles Times and New York Times. In his non-AP college preparatory classes, Mr. Smith provided “a lot more scaffolding” and was more selective with his choice of texts. Unlike his AP students who can “hit four different levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy of summary, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis” semi-independently by the end of the year, his non-AP class still needed his guidance through the text “even at the end of year.” Mr. Smith still expected all of his students to focus on depth of understanding, but with his non-AP kids, he has “to pick things with appeal to [them] more.”
Ms. Collin, a teacher in a traditional school, had a completely different perspective compared to other teachers in traditional schools. She teaches at the same school she attended, Fillmore CHS, a high-performing school in an affluent suburb. When Ms. Collin was a student at Fillmore, she was an honors student. However, when she took the placement test for English, she was placed in remedial English courses at the CSU she attended. Though the CSUs no longer require students to take the EPT, or English Placement Test, that has not deterred Ms. Collin from building a literature class for seniors which will focused on reading multiple novels. Ms. Collin was intentional with the kind of course she wanted to build. Being one of four Black American teachers in a faculty of over a hundred, and a former student who was bussed in to a school located in a mostly White, affluent suburb, she did not want to build a class reading Shakespeare. She wanted them “reading things that are relevant…to read for understanding and purpose.” She gave an example with reading “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison and expressed how she wanted students to understand how a novel about a Black man and his invisibility was relevant still today. Ms. Collin felt that courses like this were important for non-AP students as AP students often become too concerned with passing the exam. Instead, she intended to use relevant novels to help students use the knowledge they retain from the readings and understand “how that impacts society, and how in return, that impacts [the students].”

**College-ready literacy in organizations without AP/Honors courses.** The choices of literary materials and the rationale behind the choices varied across the different schools and organizations. All seven teachers in traditional models of schooling mainly used novels or texts that students read as a whole class whereas teachers in non-traditional models focused on volume of pages read and written. Teachers in non-traditional models of schooling also stressed the importance of personal choice in selecting reading material as a college-ready skill.
Ms. Adams and Mr. Johnson both worked at Sonoma CHS within the Golden Gate Schools organization. They were aligned in how they structured their English classes. Because all English classes are grades 9-12, the focus in the class was not the grade level of the student but the stage of mastery of the student. To move from one grade or level to the next was dependent on the level of mastery of skills and the level of output in reading and writing. The justification for grouping multiple grades together was so that students can learn from one another in mastering the skills from one year to the next. This aligns with the Common Core standards in that the skills are essentially the same, while students’ ability to work independently and with fluidity increases over time. Each semester throughout all four years of high school, the students had six major outcomes such as analysis, arguments, or personal narrative. Within each major outcome, there were multiple assignments from pre-assessment to a long essay. While Ms. Adams and Mr. Johnson taught mini lessons on different texts, such as President Trump’s State of the Union Address and Joe Kennedy’s rebuttal in the argument outcome, students still had to make independent choices on the kinds of documents to research and use for their final assignment. One year, for the analysis unit, a group of “high-level students” satisfied this outcome by choosing a literary work of Kurt Vonnegut and held book club discussions.

Mr. Johnson’s expectation for his students is to read as much as possible and said that he would “never do whole-class book studies.” Mr. Johnson and Ms. Adams would tell their “students that by the time they are college freshmen, they should probably get to the place where they’re reading between 400 and 600 pages a week in all their classes.” For Mr. Johnson, reading a novel out loud or spending three weeks on it did not help students with reading fluency or volume. Instead, they “want students to have a high sense of self-efficacy to be able to give them the autonomy and freedom and choice to be able to make reading selections or topics when
to comes to writing pieces.” Regardless of grade level, each student wrote about twelve papers throughout the year increasing the number of pages to about six to eight their senior year.

In organizations that did not offer students AP courses or separate tracks like the International Baccalaureate or Honors, the content followed the Common Core standards of having the same literacy skills throughout all four years. Though the organizations where these teachers worked offer students the option to receive an “honors distinction, it doesn’t change their GPA” as noted by Ms. Adams. Mr. Johnson explained it as the following:

“Anyone in any class has the opportunity to achieve an honors designation. We basically just write “honors” on their report card…It means that they are showing mastery at an advanced level. For grades 9-10, they are working at the 11-12 level. For 11-12, they are working at a college level. So it’s kind of like I know it when I see it.”

Mr. Jones, Ms. Norris, and Ms. Dylan worked together at Lincoln CHS within the same organization, Lakeside Schools. They focused on meeting students’ needs and interests in reading and writing instead of whole class novels. While students had “page goals” and assessed for reading analysis, Ms. Norris allowed her students to “pick their own books.” When Ms. Norris did whole class novels, she felt like most of the time, she was “doing all of the work for [the students]” which led to boredom from students who were reading at a higher level of fluency and with “the low kids still struggling to understand what the text meant at all.” Mr. Jones, who taught all freshmen students, found it important to tap in to students’ interests and passions if he wanted them to read. He spoke of a student who has a passion for history, especially the Vietnam War. Though the student’s “reading level is extremely high…his accountability with doing his work [was] low.” In their News Article unit, students were to select a picture and write an article about it. Mr. Jones “purposefully put a picture of a firing squad in Iraq and [the student] just went to town on writing…That’s an example of passion.” Mr. Jones goes on further by telling me that he needed to reflect on how to evaluate this student because he
would be a student likely to fail, but he “clearly knows how to read well. He clearly knows how
to write well.”

Ms. Dylan, who taught only seniors, agreed that “critical reading is really important. The
close reading of a short text…is appropriate for 12th grade. We need to get out of the method of
thinking that 12th grade students need to be reading really lengthy, difficult work.” She stated:

I find more value in teaching them shorter pieces and then breaking down the modes that
the writers' use. We're reading an older article from the "New York Times" and he talks
about racial profiling but far more important than the content is his style as a writer. His
use of rhetoric. How he establishes a very strong and angry and sarcastic persona and
that's really what I want my students to see. If I'm bogging them down in a ton of reading
they're not going to see that. They're just going to be focused on getting through the
reading.

Furthermore, Ms. Dylan exerts:

“Very few 12th grade students go on to be English majors and then will become English
professors and need to be able to interpret ‘Beowolf.’” The problem is we have to engage
our kids where they’re at and expose them to the kinds of texts they will be reading in
order to promote the kind of literacy that will help them be successful in college and
life.”

**Literacy in Poor Communities**

Ms. Carter, Ms. Brooks, and Ms. Jackson worked toward improving students’ reading
and writing abilities and tracked students’ reading growth through monthly reading tests that
measured Lexile scores and growth. All three teachers spoke of the large range of reading
abilities of high school students. Students with Lexile scores in the 300 to 400 range (about a 3rd
grade reading level) struggled in taking an organization benchmark exam at an 1100 Lexile
reading score (about 11th grade). Ms. Brooks recalled a student who told her she could barely
tell her what the title of an article was on a benchmark exam. The organization, to close the
achievement gap and support student’s literacy abilities, had students taking two English classes
their freshmen year of high school. Ms. Brooks and Ms. Jackson also discussed the Mission
Schools’ structure of a classroom starting with an essential question, objectives, and then an activity. Skills that they want their students to accomplish included “find[ing] the central idea…evidence to support it…analyzing…understand concepts, and draw inferences.”

Ms. Brooks discussed her frustrations when she began working in Mission Schools because of the low reading abilities of students. She stated:

I think something that was really hard for me to stomach when I started teaching was that they said it's not really about the story. They're like listen, “It's not teaching To Kill a Mockingbird. It's teaching skills by using To Kill a Mockingbird.” We just got finished with Of Mice and Men. Yeah, they liked the story, great, but it was more about okay, well what is this book saying about humanity and loneliness and what people value? Do they value things or do they value connections and relationships and how do we know? Then, how does this apply to current time? I honestly don't stress so much about the text. I don't because it's not about the text.

Ms. Jackson and Ms. Carter both taught intervention courses for 9th and 10th grade students who were “way, way, way…like four grade levels below 10th grade reading” and worked on building reading stamina and fluency for students. Every day, Ms. Jackson does 20-25 minutes of individual reading. Ms. Carter also had students reading “just for fun” and along with an “audio book to hear a fluent reader pronounce the words because pronunciation is definitely an issue with students who mostly speak another language at home.” For students who were reading below grade level or struggled with the novels that were read in class, there was a lot of built-in support for students. Ms. Carter relied on “a lot on routines…[and] structure so that there’s normalcy all of the time.” For example, Ms. Carter began her class almost every day with an objective that student wrote down and then broke down, then discussed their behaviors and how to improve it before the end of the class period, and had an agenda to accomplish in a 105 minute block period.

Ms. Brooks and Ms. Jackson relied on making the text relevant to the students and visuals to capture their interests. In teaching To Kill a Mockingbird, Ms. Brooks used current
events issues like the “killing of Trayvon Martin or the case of OJ Simpson [to discuss] injustices of different races.” She also used PowerPoint for visuals because “lectures do not work.” To get students engaged and buy-in to Night, Ms. Jackson started with the Oprah and Elie Wiesel visit to the Auschwitz crematoriums and then shows clips from Sophie’s Choice, Schindler’s List, and The Boy in the Striped Pajamas. For Hamlet, students struggled with the Shakespearian language. Ms. Jackson helped to “make it real by portraying it like a soap opera.” She explained how after reading Act 1 Scene 2, “the students didn’t really get the concept of Gertrude and Claudius, but in the movie…the Mel Gibson version, Glen Close runs downstairs and kisses Claudius. [The students] were like, ‘Oh my God. Her husband just died.’” Ms. Jackson said she had to do this to get her students interested in the story. Otherwise, she would not have gotten buy-in from students to begin to teach skills such as inference and analysis.

Teachers of underserved students focus on habits over skills. Despite the literacy-focused skills occurring in their classes, when I asked Ms. Carter, Ms. Brooks, and Ms. Jackson what skills their students needed to be ready for college, their focus shifted to the kinds of habits and attitudes their students would need to be successful in college. While discussing this, there was a lot of frustration from teachers in poor and minority communities. Ms. Jackson acknowledged that she does not think a lot of her students were college-ready “because of the situations that they were born into and have been raised in and their educational background with just being passed along.” Because her students are disadvantaged, Ms. Jackson added, “What I try to relay to my kids as much as possible is you need to talk to your professors. You need to actually attend office hours, and any tutoring opportunities you have, take it.” Ms. Jackson has offered herself as a resource to her students who are now in college. Recently, she had a student reach out to her with help in organizing an essay. She told her student that it was important to
know when “you’re at a point where you don’t know if you can continue if you can do this, knowing that you have people and options to reach out to help” is important. Ms. Brooks, frustrated, also said this question of her students being college-ready “breaks [her] heart” because her students “are not college-ready. There are a few who would 100 percent be [able] to do this.”

Ms. Brooks and Ms. Carter attributed the lack of college-ready skills to the emotional trauma and anger their students face. When asked directly about the type of skills she would like her students to acquire when they graduate from high school, Ms. Brooks stated:

I'd like them to know how to communicate their emotions in an effective way. If they disagree with somebody, be able to communicate that in an effective way using evidence to support their claim. We get a lot of anger. Our kids are angry. Some of them are really angry, and I'm like you can be angry. Get angry. I'm angry, too, but you need to be able to communicate it in a way that's not going to be harmful. As soon as you start shouting expletives and what not, people are going to throw your credibility out the window. For me as an English teacher, less writing. You need to be able to communicate your thoughts in a way that will work for you.

Building relationships with students was very important to Ms. Carter because of the trauma her students face in their communities. Teachers not only serve as advisors to students outside of their classes, but they also hold office hours for students to receive help with schoolwork. She worried that her students “won’t know how to go out and find the Student Success Center or whatever it is on a college campus.” She wanted her students to be able to know how to ask for and access help.

Key Finding 2: Teachers support Common Core but standards do not prepare poor students for college.

Impact of Common Core on Teachers

Of the twelve teachers, only two teachers, Ms. Dylan and Ms. Carter, went through a teacher credential program under the era of Common Core. However, Ms. Carter used ELD
standards, or English Language Development, in her intervention courses for students who were below grade level in reading as opposed to Common Core standards because her students were often several reading levels behind or English is their second language. One other teacher, Ms. Adams, was currently going through a teacher credential program. Ms. Dylan, who is in her second year of teaching, spoke very positively of the standards and felt her credentialing program “did a really good job of interpreting Common Core in a way that made it freeing for English teachers…and what [she] loved was that it didn’t attach teachers to a curriculum; it attached teachers to skills.” Ms. Collin, on the other hand, felt apprehensive about the new standards. She stated, “Common Core is awesome but I would love to see someone who’s doing it right. A whole school. Take me to this utopian school where these kids are prepared for college.” Ms. Collin, a teacher of 10 years and a recent Ph.D graduate, did not believe “today’s teachers [were] equipped with the research knowledge that Common Core is calling for.” As the head of her department, she saw that “the most prepared teachers are the people coming out of school right now because they have the most up to date knowledge” of how to implement Common Core standards and strategies in the classroom.

The shift to Common Core had not created a major paradigm shift for most of the English teachers in this study, but had played a role in shifting the focus toward skills and using more informational texts. For example, Ms. Jackson spoke about how the “only real difference is that there’s a lot emphasis on informational texts and not so much on literature.” Ms. Brooks still used novels as her major source of texts but understood that “it’s not really about the story…It’s teaching skills by using [a novel].” Mr. Smith said his department, which Mr. Morrison is the head of, looked at them and agreed that if they are “teaching kids to read well, to write well, to engage with texts, state assessments will kind of take care of themselves.” The state assessment
Mr. Smith was referring to was the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium. This is one of two
tests states throughout the country use that is aligned to Common Core. Mr. Smith agreed that
there had not been much change as there has not been a “dichotomy in literature and non-
fiction...Good teaching and good thinking at the college level has always been able to use both
literature and non-fiction.”

Both Mr. Smith and Mr. Morrison supplemented literature in their classes with
philosophical and political theories. Mr. Morrison expressed the importance of including “some
critical theory, like different feminist, psychoanalytic, [and] Marxist viewpoints on literature
because it comes up in college level courses.” For Mr. Smith and Mr. Morrison, the importance
of including non-fiction readings or some kind of theory was to allow students to be “ready to
talk about it or at least be familiar with it so that it’s not [students’] first time being exposed to
those ideas” when they enter college. The CCSS standards does not list specific texts students
must read for each grade level although it lists multiple literary and non-fiction works, including
theoretical pieces such as Common Sense, that teachers can use to measure text complexity.
What Mr. Morrison taught his students to do with theoretical pieces was to read a text or novel
through a certain theoretical lens. For instance, Mr. Morrison has his students, many who come
“from countries that were formally colonized...look at post-colonial theory.” He says,

[There is] something in it that they get. Like a feeling of alienation or being stuck
between two cultures. If anything, it gives them a language to articulate stuff that they
might have noticed already, and then to apply it to a text. We read Persepolis and it's a
memoir about this woman who grows up in Iran and also goes to school in Europe. She
ends up with a little bit of west, a little bit of east, and criticism of the Islamic Republic.
It's relevant to a lot of our kids, even if they're not Persian. They get her conflict. They're
able to talk about the theory, and apply it to the text in a really productive way using the
theory to expose something about the text, or relate it to something contemporary, and
also relate it back to themselves. It ends up being really helpful for that. It opens the text
up, but it also brings them as readers closer to the text through the theory.
Common Core standards have shifted some teachers, especially those in a non-traditional model of schooling, to paying attention to the amount a student reads and writes and focusing more on individual needs. The issue of volume is important as Ms. Adams noted, “If you look at the Common Core rubric, it’s the same. It’s just building.” Ms. Adams was referring to the Anchor Standards being the same throughout K-12, but increased in the level of complexity as students move from one grade level to the next. Mr. Johnson agreed stating how “students need to be increasing their volume of output” so by the time students are seniors in high school, they “should be writing between six and eight pages” for each summative writing assignment. The degree of self-efficacy a student has mattered for many teachers. Common Core standards encourage more independence as students move from grades 9 to 12. Some teachers also stressed the importance of students selecting their own readings, their own method of note taking, and even self-grading as a means of reflection and metacognition.

Lastly, the shift to Common Core has moved the curriculum away from focusing on literature to literacy skills for many teachers. Though many teachers still did whole-class novel studies, others, like Mr. Johnson, disagreed with the idea of spending months on a novel because it could hinder a student’s efficacy and reading fluency. For Ms. Brooks, a self-described “big-reader” and “book-lover,” focusing on the skills and not the book itself was challenging. If she taught her students the skill of inference through a novel, she did not “stress so much about the text…because it’s not about the text.” Ms. Brooks felt this was helpful for her students who were “not college-ready” but difficult as an English teacher who wanted to share her passion for literature. Ms. Robinson also expressed frustration with the focus on literacy skills in an English class. She understood the goal of Common Core in making every teacher a teacher of literacy, but was frustrated she did not have a core content to teach literacy skill through. She said,
At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter if you remember The Awakening. It doesn’t if you ever read Wuthering Heights or The Great Gatsby. I feel like one of the frustrations is that literacy is seen the same in all the contexts. It’s literacy. I think the push that our kids have had for so long is, “What was it about?” I think that’s why we see more kids failing English and Math than we do history and science because in English and math, you can’t study for those tests.

Reading to understanding the plot is what many students have relied on and for Ms. Robinson, “it almost means nothing” now under Common Core. When she teaches Macbeth, she tells her students, “He’s going to die. It doesn’t matter that he dies. It matters what happened that got him there.” Letting go of something tangible, like knowledge of the plot, has been one of the greatest challenges for her students.

**Common Core’s College- and Career-ready in Underserved Communities**

After having taught six years and at two high schools in the Mission Schools organization, Ms. Brooks still struggled with her students’ level of preparedness when they leave high school. She said of her students when I asked about what college-readiness looks like at her organization:

> Our kids are not college-ready. There are a few who I would one hundred percent be like, “You can do this.” I don’t know a solution other than to tear this whole thing down and rebuild. I think all of us in the high school setting are waiting for whenever that new class of students comes in and they’re ready. They know the foundational skill. It hasn’t happened.

Ms. Brooks was constantly trying to reconcile college-readiness signals, such as grades or Lexile scores, for her students. When she gave a student an A, she doubted whether she should have done that because an A in her class probably was not “an A in San Diego…[and] definitely not an A in white neighborhoods.” She furthered explain stating, “My kids can’t compete so I almost feel bad because I’m telling them this is an A here but when you get to college, it’s probably equivalent to an F.” Ms. Jackson, who noted that Common Core was not very different
save the emphasis on informational texts, was “doubtful [her] kids are going to be able to answer [the question] correctly” on the Smarter Balance test using Common Core language.

A common theme among schools in poor communities was the amount of testing students were already taking to show reading growth over time. Because the reading level was so low for many high students, often multiple grade levels behind, students and teachers were inundated with measuring reading scores. As a directive from Mission Schools, Ms. Brooks’s, Ms. Jackson’s, and Ms. Carter’s students took reading tests to measure their Lexile score and benchmarks to measure student performance in addition to preparing for state-mandated assessments like the SBAC. While Ms. Jackson felt that this was “so many tests,” Ms. Brooks does not mind the assessments “because it’s data…[and] you should see improvement.” Ms. Carter pushed her students to reach for the “minimum, magic number to be successful in college, 1185.” In Ms. Robinson’s organization, students tested once a week reading articles online and answering comprehension questions using a program called Achieve 3000. This measured students’ Lexile scores with the goal of getting “over 1150” by the 12th grade.

**Key Finding 3: Teachers believe student apathy, not their curriculum, is to blame for lack of college-readiness.**

**Collaboration and Curriculum Alignment from High School to College-ready**

All teachers spoke of how they collaborated with colleagues to align their curriculum from one grade level to the next. Ms. Carter, who worked solely as the intervention teacher, collaborated with the English 9 and 10 teachers to align their curriculum. For instance, if the English teacher is doing a novel study, Ms. Carter would ask “what skills [the teacher] was using with that novel and support those.” If a teacher was not covering a skill in depth in their
classroom because the teacher is assuming or expecting students to already know it, Ms. Carter will “support that assumption by explicitly teaching it in [her] classroom.”

Whether students were in her English 12 or AP Literature class, Ms. Robinson believed that students needed to “be able to analyze the meaning of the work as a whole.” Scaffolds were built in as students moved from 9th to 12th grade. For example, in the 9th grade, the focus was around using academic language to identify the author’s claim by using textual evidence. Ms. Robinson discussed a method of getting students to do this with “say, mean, matter.” Students worked on identifying what the author is saying, what the work means, and why it mattered in during the 10th grade. By the 11th grade, teachers were “taking away the scaffold of the sentence stems of say, mean, matter” and told students that “say, mean, matter equals analysis. When [she] says analysis, that’s what she expects students to do and be able to hit all three points.” By their senior year, students should be able to analyze a text and make their own well-argued claims. To be college-ready, Ms. Robinson believed it was the “transference of skill to any text…In English, it’s skills based and not content-based. It shouldn’t matter what text [she is] choosing to use…it comes back to analyzing the author’s purpose and identifying, explaining, and supporting the tone it’s creating.”

For Mr. Morrison and Mr. Smith, their English department worked hard at being both rigorous and cohesive to challenge and support a competitive student body. With almost 80 percent of students meeting CSU/UC requirements, 60% enrolling in a four-year school and 39% in a two-year school, it was important to maintain a level of rigor for students. Mr. Morrison, who was the department chair, spoke of how “last summer, [they] sent 8 teachers to the AP training even if they’re not teaching AP this year. Every teacher in 9th and 10th grade needs to understand, for [their] student body, that they need to treat the class as a pre-AP kind of class.”
Mr. Smith attributed the level of rigor to the level of competitiveness in the school and also amongst colleagues who wanted to improve their teaching practice. One way the administration has encouraged this was to foster a culture of “more and more observations”. At the same time, teachers believed in “having an open-source mentality to teaching” and shared assignments or lessons “with the whole department and then invited feedback.”

This kind of vertical collaboration was also seen other organizations. Ms. Norris, Mr. Jones, and Ms. Dylan spoke of the large amount of collaboration time they have with each other as coming from structured time and informally. There were delegated goals for each grade level. Mr. Jones, who taught 9th grade, understood his role as the foundational course. During a discussion, English teachers noticed a “hole as far as students not truly knowing how to research.” As a department, they broke down the different research skills to teach by grade level. Students learned search terms and MLA formatting in the 9th grade, but by 10th grade, “they’re going off into journals because in their senior year, they have a senior project that requires deeper research.” Despite having clear articulation across grade levels, Ms. Norris felt like she was constantly “triaging.” Ms. Norris added,

I get kids that come in with all these variety of needs and I know ideally what 10th grade writing should look like and what I need them to be doing to be the best prepared for college, but I have a lot of kids who don’t know how to identify a noun versus a verb. It’s trying to identify what are the glaring, gushing things that need to be addressed right away and how can I provide you with positive feedback that’s going to make you feel successful and want to keep trying, while at the same time also being authentic in terms of what your levels are.

Having designated time to collaborate with colleagues was definitely important for teachers in this study to share ideas and vertically align their courses across grade level. When teachers spoke about the factors that prepared students, they attributed this to the methods
described above. When we discussed why students were not-college ready, teachers rarely took ownership of that.

**Barriers to College-readiness Stem from Home.**

The data from this study showed a few trends when looking at literacy, particularly with reading level of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. In communities with the highest needs, teachers expressed more barriers to literacy. The community in which the school was located also contributed to the readiness of the students. In general, teachers working in underserved communities felt the biggest barrier to student achievement came from students’ home and their communities.

Conversations about the home and communities being barriers to student learning did not arise for teachers outside of the Mission Schools. Being located in an affluent area helped with the level of rigor and college preparedness at Balboa CHS. As Mr. Morrison notes, “I think it has a lot to do with class…the economic level of the students coming in, it is a wealthier neighborhood and students have access to a lot of instruction outside of school.” However, Mr. Morrison also went on to explain that the AP participation rate is over 75% and that participation came “across all economic levels.” At Mr. Morrison and Mr. Smith’s organization, 49 percent of the students are identified at socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Mr. Johnson’s organization is about 33 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged and about 3 percent are English Learners. For Mr. Johnson and his organization, language was the biggest barrier to success for his students. Because students were grouped across grades and there were only two English teachers at the organization, it was much easier to support students who struggled with literacy. According to Mr. Johnson, a student who was four to five years
behind in reading is an “outlier”. Students who were “outliers” usually came from families where English is not their native language.

Ms. Robinson, whose organization is about 73% socioeconomically disadvantaged, Ms. Collin’s organization is about 31 percent, and Ms. Dylan, Ms. Norris, and Mr. Jones’s organization is about 43 percent, agreed that the biggest barrier to literacy was the students not reading at grade level. For Ms. Norris, mastery-based grading was supportive of students who can reassess to show mastery, but it became an issue when “somebody is reading at a fourth grade reading level and then they fail.” The “holes” with Mr. Jones’s 9th graders was not knowing parts of speech when it came to writing or not having enough stamina with reading, but Mr. Jones was quick to point out that “of the 65 kids that [he has, he] is talking about maybe 15.” Ms. Robinson’s students were mostly reading at grade level. As the only 12th grade English teachers, she stated that of her students, “75 [percent] are on grade level or above, maybe 15 [percent] are in that high school range, maybe eighth through 10th grade, and then less than 10 percent is less than eighth grade.”

Though each teacher discussed barriers to literacy, teachers working with the largest population of socioeconomically disadvantaged attributed those barriers to the students’ home and community life. In communities and schools with the highest needs, the literacy struggles that existed at other organizations are also present. However, what became an interesting trend was the high amount of blame teachers placed on students and their families in the communities high the most needs. Schools in the Mission Schools organization serve populations with the highest needs: 97 percent of the students are Black and Latino, 94 percent are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, and 20 percent are English Learners. When I asked Ms. Carter to discuss what she saw as the barriers to literacy, she said:
One particular challenge that I face, and this might be particular to my area, it might be something about my school culture, or it might just be like a shift or something about Los Angeles, is the sheer amount of apathy. And an apathy that also borders on aggression. I get a lot of "I'm not fucking doing this today" and like "That bitch can't make me."

Ms. Carter’s main role as the intervention teacher was to support students’ literacy growth. Though she sees growth for many students, for others, “the apathy is too much or what’s happening at home is too much and they just don’t buy it.”

Ms. Brooks and Ms. Jackson worked at two different schools just two miles away from each other within the same organization. Both felt that their organization’s push to promote college (discussed in the next section) did not focus enough on the “external stuff going on.” Ms. Jackson discussed how they have had a recent increase with students “getting jumped because they were wearing earrings and necklaces.” She went on to say,

> Our kids have to deal with getting jumped, or getting mugged, or getting raped, or dealing with gang banging, or whatever it is, and then having to come to school and sit in a classroom for eight hours and dealing with food that's maybe not the best in the world. Some of them, that's the only food they're going to get that day but it looks disgusting so they don't want to eat it, and having to deal with all the outside stuff. Some of my seniors have jobs and they literally just got off at 4:00 am and then have to come sit in class for eight hours. I think a lot of it is just there's so much external stuff going on and we don't focus enough on that. Our school, in particular, is college, college, college.

Ms. Brooks believed it was the students’ pride that gets in the way of their learning. As an organization, she felt they did a “good job of trying to figure out what interests [their] kids and then intertwining that with the curriculum” even if her students “can’t compete” with more affluent students. Despite having a relevant curriculum and a college-ready vision, Ms. Brooks explained:

> I think the missing piece here, because the kids are so quick to blame everything except for looking within themselves and saying, "When am I in control?" This is what I tell my kids. You can only be in control of you. You can't control what your teacher says, what your friend says, what society says. You have to look inside of yourself and say, "What am I worth? What am I willing to do in order to succeed and be something?" When they complained about the food, I'd be like, "Guys, this is a perfect caloric and nutritional
meal that's free. Now what are you willing to do in order to succeed today? Are you willing to man up and own the fact that you're taking this meal so that you can perform, so that you can be something later? Or, is your pride going to get in the way?" That's the number one problem is our kids' prides get in the way, because the pride is more valuable than the education. Simple as that. A kid would rather come in late with the wrong uniform so that they look cool than come to school wearing a uniform so they can get their education. You know? I don't know how to sell it. No idea.

Ms. Jackson saw the food as “disgusting” but still felt parents were also to blame for enabling behaviors that hurt student achievement when parents brought outside food for their students or brought their students to school late because they went to pick up food. Ms. Jackson explained how “half of her class doesn’t come in until 30 minutes before the class is over” in the morning and how some students would “rather take 30 minutes out of class to go pick up McDonald’s to get food then eat the lunch that’s there.” This occurred on a daily basis which meant that “30,40 kids [were] not getting the curriculum.” Ms. Brooks also stated how parents who “refuse to come to parent conference night, refuse to answer [her] phone calls” allowed their “kid to come late 30 minutes every day because [the parents] bought them a frappuccino.” Ms. Brooks has worked at two schools with the “same population” within the organization and she contributed parent involvement to greater student success. For her students who needed the most support, parent involvement “made a world of difference. Their parents don’t know what to do with them anymore, but they answer the phone and that makes a difference. I’m haven’t been blocked by any parents.”

Key Finding 4: Teachers believe a college-ready model limits their students’ post-secondary options.

College-ready Model: High Graduation and High College-entry Rates

Teachers from all of the independent start-up and conversion charters schools in this study spoke of college readiness as part of their organization’s founding mission. What college-
readiness meant varied from school to school: Balboa CHS has a highly competitive college culture with over 99 percent enrollment to college with nearly 80 percent meeting A-G eligibility and 60 percent enrolling in four-year schools; Fillmore CHS has a high graduation and college enrollment rate with 58 percent of their students graduating with A-G eligibility and 56 percent enrolling in four-year schools; in the Mission Schools organization, schools vary in A-G eligibility from over 70 percent to around 30 percent; and for Pacific Schools, the organization’s graduation requirements are the same as A-G requirements.

At Pacific Schools, a college-ready model meant students followed the “high school graduation, college acceptance, college success” path. All graduates have met minimum CSU/UC eligibility in their A-G courses with “at least 85 percent acceptance to a four-year school.” For Ms. Brooks’, Ms. Jackson, and Ms. Carter, in the Mission Schools, the guiding principal is that “every student can learn, every student should have access to supports that get them to college, leadership, and life.” However, Ms. Brooks believed that some schools “have an easier time following it” and Ms. Jackson believed “some schools have more resources and some schools are in a neighborhood that doesn’t have as many issues.” At Ms. Carter’s school, the graduation rate was 99 percent in the last academic year with 90 percent college enrollment. The problem at Mission Schools, as Ms. Carter explained, “is that our students don’t make it to day one of their second year…It is across the entire [organization’s] district which is made up of 12 [high] schools.” At Sonoma CHS, to be college-ready was equated to the volume of reading and writing of an “incoming freshman.” Students had an entire semester’s worth of work in an “outcome tracker” and Ms. Adams believed in this method because students had to “pace themselves. It’s like a syllabus.”
Balboa CHS and Fillmore CHS were once a part of the school district and petitioned to become an independent charter. Both schools are located in affluent suburbs in the Greater Los Angeles area and have students coming from all over Los Angeles. Both schools have an extensive waitlist year after year. At Fillmore CHS, the school offers busses for students traveling from across over 100 zip codes at $180.00 per student a month. A high college-going rate, especially to four-year institutions, and a “huge reputation of excellence” has attracted students and families outside the school boundaries to these two schools. At Balboa CHS, “they have a lot of students go to a four-year universities…[with] very few who don’t wind up going to get some kind of advanced or higher education.” Mr. Smith added that the college culture has been very strong with competitive students and the school has does a good job with supporting students’ college endeavors through events and workshops by the College Center. Teachers recently had professional development workshops “[with] an admission officer from Stanford…about how to write effective letters of recommendation.” This workshop was “one of the most effective things [Mr. Smith has] done.”

**Remastery is not College-ready**

One major component of a college-ready model was the concept of remastery. Remastery or reassessing, as Ms. Robinson explained, was the idea that teachers are “reteaching the same standards throughout the year and circling back, and so students could reassess and how continued improvement.” Remastery is used in Golden Gate Schools and Lakeside Schools and was used in Pacific Schools for over ten years. Ms. Dylan felt Lakeside Schools “really prepares [students] well for the workplace…[to be] really good collaborators in creative fields or in law or business” but not “really training them to sit in a lecture hall.” College-readiness is defined by Lakeside Schools as “habits of mind and 21st century skills…they include habits of quality,
communication, critical thinking, and use of technology.” Students who had graduated and were enrolled in college would come back and tell Ms. Dylan that they are really engaged in their courses but struggled with “mid-terms, finals, [and] sitting down and doing an exam.” Though teachers spoke positively about mastery-based grading, but Ms. Dylan felt that this skill was helping more to “prepare [students] to do well once they get past college.” One of the structural components that hindered college-readiness for Ms. Dylan, and for other teachers in this study, was the “concept of re-mastering.”

Ms. Adams uses mastery-based likes the flexibility it gives students to move forward if they are showing mastery and also does not believe a student should be “punished” if they have mastered a skill. For example, if a 10th grader wants to “go back to [their] 9th grade argument essay and fix it, [Ms. Adams] will change the grade on their transcript because they have the skill now…they’ve mastered it.” Ms. Adams is the anomaly. On the other hand, Ms. Robinson’s agrees with the recent change from mastery-based grading. Pacific Schools used to use mastery-based grading and allowed students to reassess and recently changed it to “college-ready grading.” She felt this system ingrained in her students the ability to reassess if they did poorly or if students did not study. Ms. Robinson says of reassessments:

The reason we did away with that, is because our graduates came back, and they were like, "I don't know how to do it the first time, because I always just waited to do it." Yeah. They were like, "Reassessments are stupid. There's no reassessing in college." The reason we switched and stopped doing that is because so many of them came back and was like, "That's not what we do in college. I'm not prepared for college, because I'm trying to reassess." They didn't do well the first time. "And my professor won't let me do it again."

This move away from reassessments has been challenging for Ms. Robinson. With the recent shift to “college-ready grading [where] quizzes make up 50 percent of the grade, exams are 20, projects are 20, and homework is 10,” assessments of students has changed with specific
points tied to an assignment within a category. With this new model of assessing students, Ms. Robinson had “35 out of 130 kids not eligible to graduate because they didn’t pass English 12.” She felt pressure from her administrators to ensure that students’ grades were a true reflection of all assessments and assignments. Ms. Robinson “had to go back and say, “Oh, you didn’t take the quiz. Here you go, take it now. Oh, you didn’t do this. Here you go, do it now.”” Because Ms. Robinson is in an administrative program, she understands the politics of numbers are especially important for charter schools but also feels it is “morally degrading and that’s not social justice.”

For Ms. Dylan and Ms. Norris, re-mastery has its pros and cons at Lincoln CHS. For Ms. Norris, mastery-based grading increases the academic rigor and moves students away from “just turn[ing] stuff and pass[ing].” Students have to demonstrate mastery. Ms. Dylan sees re-mastering as one of the structural roadblocks to her students college-readiness especially when students who “didn’t do well the first time…or didn’t study enough…can just study for another week and take another version of the test and do better.” When Ms. Norris “first started [at her organization] there was no such thing as a hard deadline. [Students] could turn in anything whenever and [teachers] would be expected to grade it.” One change their organization has made is having a hard deadline and pushing the “habit of being able to do [an assignment] with a wealth of evidence.” For Ms. Dylan’s 12th graders, the time between the first time and re-mastery is now only a week.

**Lack of Post-secondary Options**

For students uninterested or not ready for college, teachers were frustrated by the lack of resources from the schools to promote or educate students of other options. Ms. Carter does not feel “there’s enough discussion of the worth of a trade school” for her students who are
“apathetic…don’t want to take the SAT…don’t want to go to college…[whose] mom’s is
making [them] go to this high school because she wants [them] to go to college.” Ms. Carter,
who discussed the lack of persistence across the organization, does not believe her students are
“going to make it and they’re not going to make it after having racked up $15,000 of debt.”

Ms. Robinson and Ms. Brooks also express similar sentiments about the idea of schools
being a college-ready model. Ms. Robinson disagrees with her organization’s college-ready
mission to an extent. She says,

College isn't the right fit for every kid. When we look at the needs of our society as a
whole right now, people are graduating college, and they're not finding a job, and they're
in a lot of debt. There's all these booming industries that don't have people to go into
them, because they feel like they have to go to college. Then I look at kids that are super
passionate about cars. They just want to be a mechanic so they can spend all of their time
working on a car. I need you to get a high school diploma, but do you have to go to
college for that? No. That's where I miss the line with [my organization]. I really agree
that what we're offering them is strong critical thinking skills and life skills, to be critical
consumers of their society, to be just, critical thinkers in a very complex world. That's
what I agree with, but when I think of this mission of, "All kids are going to college," it
just doesn't seem right. I always focus on the career. College or career ready.

Ms. Brooks, who feels her students are not college-ready because of the many issues her students
face at school and in their communities, would also like to see more options for her students. She
recently approached the school counselor asking about getting “military folks in [the school] to
talk about career opportunities. She was “bothered quite a bit” at her organization being “so
anti-military because they believe that the military tends to prey on minority groups…the
military gives skills and discipline. Discipline is the number one thing that a lot of [her] students
need.”

Of the six different organizations, only one organization, Lakeside Schools, offer a
program for students not ready to fully commit and enroll in college. Treated as an extension
program after high school graduation, students take online courses and earn college credits while
gaining work experience through internships with local partners. Local partners that offer internships include technology-based companies, and both non-profit and for-profit organizations. Ms. Norris states that “the target population is first-generation” students who are less “likely to be successful if they go straight to a four-year university…[or] the kind of kid that would get trapped in community college and never end up transferring.” According to Ms. Dylan, “more than half of [their] students who graduated last year did [the extension program].”

**Key Finding 5: Teachers were not thinking about students attending community college when thinking about college-readiness.**

**An Area of Growth**

Toward the end of each interview, after having discussed each teacher’s educational background, their college-ready beliefs and practices, student work, and so on, I asked each teacher how they differentiated college-ready skills in their classroom for students who were two-year bound. Most teachers struggled with this question. Some teachers did not directly answer the question, answered it in a roundabout manner, or paused a while (as opposed to the dynamic conversation happening prior to this question). Two teachers, Ms. Robinson and Ms. Dylan, argued that the basic skills to be ready for entry-level college are the same. As Ms. Dylan stated, “101 professors in community college and 101 professors at a four-year ask the same things of their students.” At one of the professional development trainings Ms. Dylan attended, she remembered being handed different prompts for an entry-level history class and asked to identify which prompts “came from a community college and which ones came from a four-year university…And I guess wrong on all of them. The community college ones were just as hard or harder.”
Unlike Ms. Robinson and Ms. Dylan, who were quick to answer that “college is college” and that all students should have the same literacy skills, most teachers focused on non-academic skills for community college-bound students. For students attending community college, Mr. Jones saw his “role as far as helping students like that [was] exposing them to something that helped] them realize their gift, their passion for something.” Several teachers in this study focused on students maintaining academic habits as they enter community college. Ms. Adams wanted students entering community college to know “what type of learner they are” and know when they are “going to need to go to those office hours or go to tutoring.” When I asked Mr. Johnson about how to prepare his “outlier” student for college, and most likely community college, he said,

Hopefully he's able to get things together and go, but we're talking about four grade levels behind. No, five years behind. So there's some major gaps. It probably started at a very early age. That's where some of the remedial writing classes in college, maybe then that can ... you know? Or maybe he goes to a trade school or something like that. Maybe he finds something that he's interested and he's really skilled at, and tries to master that. Becomes a master plumber, makes more money than I do. Like you know, whatever the case.

Ms. Carter wanted students entering community college to learn the value of setting long-term goals and was trying to instill this habit in her students. She would tell her students:

There's a big difference between "I'm going to go to El Camino and then, in two years, I'm going to transfer to CSU" and "I'm going to go to El Camino and in two years, I'm going to transfer to CSU Long Beach, and I'm going to fill out that transfer application by this day."

Other teachers spoke of the importance of students knowing their options and understanding the different pathways to college. Knowing what it takes to transfer by seeking out advisor is crucial to the community college experience, but some teachers felt it is still up to the student “to initiate that whole process.” This is one reason, according to Ms. Dylan, “why community college sometimes is not always the ultimate idea in our minds because it’s so easy to get distracted in a
class where you’re surrounded by people who maybe aren’t as motivated as you.” Mr. Smith felt his organization did “an okay job of providing students with as many pathways as possible…letting them know that attending a two-year college and then transferring to a UC or CSU as a viable option.” Even though Ms. Brooks saw community college as “an extension of high school…[she] tells them to go to community college as much as possible” because she wished she would have taken more time to gain academic confidence instead of the pressures of a four-year university. Ms. Jackson also tried “to push the community college on them.” She told her students,

This is going to be a great option for you. It allows you to explore your options. If you want to take more classes, it's also a lot cheaper. Then, you can transfer to wherever. Transferring, especially within California, from a community college to like a CSU or a UC is really easy.

Ms. Jackson spoke of the ease of transferring from community college to a four-year institution, but also stated: I’ve been teaching seniors basically for five years [and] out of what, 500 kids, I think maybe 50 of them have stuck it out and graduated.

For Ms. Collin, where students go to college is an issue of equity. With a history of bussing poor students of color from across Los Angeles, many teachers and counselors at Fillmore are still “ignorant” of their students’ backgrounds. The College Center would “push upon [to students] what they think students can afford.” The College Center often pushed local community colleges, such as Santa Monica College, for Black and Latino students. Ms. Collin definitely felt what was being fed to students of color was problematic. Most of the Black and Latino students who attended Fillmore CHS were the students who came from “over 100 zip codes.” When Ms. Collin was a student at Fillmore, she was bussed in with other Black and Latino students who were like her: poor and hoping for a better quality education in an affluent area. Today, it is a “mixture of Black and Brown students, socioeconomically wise.” While
some of the Black and Latino students “may not be the same socioeconomic status as the locals, you’re still getting the more upper middle class,” Ms. Collin added. Many of the Black students she knows have parents who are educated and live in “million dollar homes” but the local schools are not as competitive as Fillmore. She added that this student population dynamic made Fillmore feel like “it was two school in one.” This has changed the way Ms. Collin approaches her English curriculum. Instead of specific literacy skills, Ms. Collin might focus on the financial aspect of not being college-ready. When she attended a CSU straight out of high school, placement tests were still given and she encourages students going to community college to “take the [placement] test seriously.”

Even in a highly competitive school like Balboa CHS, with 60 percent matriculation to four-year schools, about 39 percent of students still attend a two-year school. For Mr. Morrison, who teaches mostly AP and IB courses, he “did not end up doing anything different with them.” Twelfth grade teachers, according to Mr. Morrison, expect high quality work such as a senior research project as part of their graduation requirement regardless of where they plan to attend college. Mr. Morrison acknowledged that indentifying and supporting community college bound students “is a growth area” for him. He added,

I often don't even know who those students are in my class. Part of the school culture [is] that a lot kids don't feel comfortable articulating what their post college plan is, if they don't find themselves on that 4 year college track. I don't know if I have the best answer for that. I think what I would want them to be able to do, would be similar. I would still want them to be able to write competently and be ready to participate in a writing class or and English class at a reasonably intelligent level.

Preparing students who plan to attend community college to be college-ready should be the same for students who are four-year bound or eligible, but students do not graduate with the same skill sets. Many students who must begin their college path at a two-year institution are also not taking rigorous courses, such as Honors or AP courses. Ms. Collin saw this as “problematic
because white students testing and passing [AP] tests are entering college with college credit” and this only “widens the huge gap.”

Summary

When teachers used the word “college” or when I asked them about “college-ready” related issues, “college” became synonymous with only four-year colleges. During the interview process, teachers were not explicitly discussing community colleges. That could have been due to various factors: all teachers began their college career at four-year schools, the organization promotes A-G readiness, or even the stigma of community colleges in high schools. The discussion about college-readiness for students attending community college shifted drastically for most teachers when I asked directly about community college. Most teachers did not make any references to the multiple skills and habits we had discussed prior to being asked directly about community colleges.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study aimed to explore whether teachers believed all students, regardless of their background, can be taught to be ready for the academic challenges of college. The exploratory nature of the study permitted for deeper understanding of high school teachers’ perceptions of college-readiness in literacy for their students. The in-depth conversations allowed me to attempt to capture how teachers see their students’ abilities to matriculate to and persist through college successfully. Teachers tend to base their idea of college-ready literacy on what they know, what made them successful, and the kinds of institutions they attended. The data from this study also showed that the communities where students come from and the communities in which the school reside affected teachers’ perceptions of students’ college-ready abilities.

In this final section, I summarize the findings, tying them to the college-readiness framework as defined by Conley (2007a), Conley et al. (2010), and the Common Core standards. Next, I discuss the limitations of the research. I spend the majority of this chapter discussing the implications for educators, schools and organizations, partnerships with higher education, and future research. I end with a reflection of this research journey as it has challenged my role as a high school teacher on many levels.

Summary of Key Findings

The five key findings of this study are as follow: teachers’ background impact their perceptions of their students’ college-ready needs; teachers support Common Core but new standards do not always prepare underserved students for college; teachers believe student apathy, not their curriculum, is to blame for lack of college-readiness; teachers believe a college-
ready model limits their students’ post-secondary options; teachers are not thinking about students attending community college when thinking about college-readiness.

The purpose of Common Core’s college- and career-ready standards was to close the readiness gap of students between high school and college. However, schools like Balboa CHS and Fillmore CHS were experiencing higher graduation rates, higher A-G completion rates, and higher college-going rates compared to the school in the district prior to the adoption of CCSS. It is not a coincidence that these schools are located in affluent communities and draw large waitlists to attend their schools. Balboa and Fillmore have a different challenge: they draw large population of students, many of whom are poor and students of color, commuting from all over the Greater Los Angeles area hoping to find success and a better future if they attend these schools with possibly different academic needs than local, more affluent students. Ms. Collin, an alumna of Fillmore and now a teacher there, attested to this. As a young Black student taking the bus two hours each way to and from school, her parents, like many Black and Latino parents today, feel that attending Fillmore CHS is a great improvement over attending the local neighborhood school. However, at Fillmore CHS, as in many other racially-mixed schools, AP and honors courses are mostly White and Asian students and the college-readiness gap continues to widen between White and Asian students and Black and Latino students.

The problem with college-readiness is not just the state standards itself. Fillmore CHS and Balboa CHS were experiencing similar rates of success before Common Core. Schools in poor communities do not produce more college-ready students just because new college-ready standards have been adopted. Furthermore, some of the teachers even felt the practices of the school (such as promoting college or reassessing for a higher grade) were doing students a disservice because the message of the school was college-readiness but once students attended
college, they felt unready or did not persist. The college-ready standards set by Common Core does not address other factors that are necessary to changing teachers’ practice or differentiate for schools with high needs. Teachers at Mission Schools spoke honestly at their frustrations with students’ home life and issues in the communities that hinder college-readiness. All three teachers from the Mission Schools were frank with stating that their students were not college-ready. There were too many family and community barriers that students brought with them to the classroom making it challenging to focus on learning. Additionally, the reading skills of many students were so low that teachers spent most of the year trying to help students catch up. Because of the various external factors students faced, teachers from the Mission Schools did not discuss at length, even after much probing, how they implemented CCSS literacy skills in their classrooms.

Skills and Habits.

According to Conley (2007a) and Conley et al. (2010), the four facets of college-readiness are cognitive strategies such as reasoning, research, analysis; the “big ideas” of each content area; academic behaviors such as time management, study skills, awareness of one’s own performance, persistence; and knowledge of the college culture with all of its complexities. Teachers’ discussion of skills and behaviors touched upon the four major facets of college-readiness. However, it became clear that teachers had very different interpretations of college-ready skills for their AP students compared to non-AP students. The higher-level critical thinking skills that teachers felt prepared them for college were taught in AP courses more so than in non-AP courses. Even for schools that did not offer AP courses, students who were able to perform higher-level cognitive skills were given an honors demarcation. It was challenging to determine whether teachers’ perceptions of their students’ college-ready literacy skills were a
reflection of the existing college-readiness gap or whether teachers’ perceptions and the different skills taught to different groups of students contributed to the widening readiness gap.

So much of what teachers believe dictate students’ educational opportunities and their high school and college trajectory. Students in poor communities are seen as not college-ready even before coming to high school and once in high school, teachers do not believe they will become college-ready. The teachers who work in poor communities in this study felt this way even though most of their students continue onto college. The implications of teachers’ perceptions of poor, minority students’ abilities to be college-ready dictated the structure of their classrooms by focusing on students’ attitudes and habits. Having strong habits are necessary to be college-ready, however, teachers who felt the most prepared for college did not attribute their own college-readiness to having strong habits, but having strong reading and writing skills.

Teachers’ perceptions of their students’ ability to be college-ready was also heavily dictated by the affluence of the school. In schools located in more affluent neighborhoods, teachers spoke confidently about the academic skills they were teaching their students and why those skills were college-ready. High poverty and low achievement impacted teachers’ perceptions of poor students’ abilities to analyze, make inferences, or read a novel. Teachers in poor and minority communities often used a student’s background to contextualize a question regarding pedagogy to discuss the lack of academic skills of the students or the struggles they have in the classroom. This kind of thinking does not align with the deficit model of teaching that occurs in many classrooms where students of color are being educated. To believe that students from certain backgrounds are not college-ready as soon as they begin high school means is even more harmful.
In schools with high A-G graduation and four-year college matriculation rates, teachers could not differentiate what college-readiness meant for students who were not four-year bound. The competitive climate of the school pushed teachers and students to want to teach advanced skills and take a rigorous course load, but it also led teachers to neglect a significant population of students who were not academically ready for a four-year school or entry level college courses. Just because a student begins their college education at a community college does not mean that they are not college-ready, but most students who do so need additional academic support. Teachers from all schools had a difficult time explaining what college-ready skills students who must begin their college education at a community college might need to be able to persist and transfer onto a four-year school.

**Common Core in the Classroom**

I focus this section on the three teachers who work in Mission Schools because their organization serves mostly poor Black and Latino students with a college-ready mission, but all three teachers did not believe their students were ready for college. Unlike the other teachers in this study who discussed how they felt about Common Core standards and how those standards play a role in their curriculum, teachers working in the most underserved schools dealt with so many issues of “trauma, anger, and apathy” that the standards were unimportant. Because their students were either so far behind in reading, student engagement with novels required more visuals.

As I dissect the interview data of Ms. Brooks, Ms. Jones, and Ms. Carter, it was sometimes challenging to draw parallels to the work they do in the classroom and the ten reading Anchor Standards (AS) defined by the Common Core State Standards. AS 1-3 requires students to read closely and determine central ideas, AS 4-5 asks students to interpret words and phrases
and analyzing structure of texts, AS 7-9 concerns the integration of multiple texts and evaluating specific claims in a text, and AS 10 focuses on reading and comprehending texts independently and proficiently. Ms. Jones and Ms. Carter shared how they had students reading silently every day (AS 10), sometimes using audiobooks, for the habit of enjoyment. Books students chose to read did not have to be grade level texts. The teachers just wanted students to get in the habit of reading. With grade level texts, Ms. Brooks would bring up current events issues, like the killing of unarmed Black men, to tie it to *To Kill a Mockingbird* to get buy-in from students. Similarly, Ms. Jones would use a variety of visuals to supplement *Night* instead of using multiple texts.

Ms. Brooks, Ms. Jones, and Ms. Carter are doing what they feel is best to garner student buy-in and to make their curriculum relevant for their students. However, the lack of focus on improving the literacy skills of students is not preparing students for college. Furthermore, Ms. Brooks, as quoted in the previous chapter, spoke honestly about how it is difficult for her to give students A’s in her class because an A in her class or at her school is not an A elsewhere. The college-ready obstacles students in poor communities face continue to compound. Teachers do not believe poor and minority students are ready for college even though the college matriculation rate is high. It if very likely that the same socioeconomically disadvantaged students make up the population of students needing remedial English courses in community college and consequently, are less likely to transfer to a four-year school.

This is the reality for students in poor communities. Ms. Brooks’ students cannot compete with students in Mr. Smith’s or Mr. Morrison’s students even though all students are educated in a college-ready model and are taught using college-ready curriculum standards. Mr. Smith is able to tackle most of the reading standards with an assignment like the précis. The précis model requires students to articulate verbally and in writing the author’s thesis (AS 1 and
2), understand the structure of the thesis, (AS 4-6), discuss the purpose of the text (AS 7-9), and for most students in his AP courses, students complete multiple précis with little support (AS 10). Students in Mr. Smith’s and Mr. Morrison’s class are using the précis model for multiple texts from literature to editorials and even philosophical works.

**College-readiness Gap**

No two high schools are alike in demographics, mission, or governance. However, what is common across high schools is that students aspire a college education at high rates. Students who are tracked in lower level courses or those who attend schools in poor communities are at a disadvantage when they graduate high school. A high school diploma does not erase those disadvantages and entry into college unprepared only exacerbates the educational inequalities. Barnes et al. (2010) and Venezia et al. (2003) urge that a lack of uniformity in high school graduation and the lack of communication between K-12 and higher education complicate closing the readiness gap. The evidence from this research shows that the lack of uniformity in high school graduation varies so greatly that this issue needs to be addressed with more than just common standards. A one-size model approach is not the answer, but when poor students and students of color continue to be marginalized in a “college-ready” model, we need to be honest about preparing them for success at the college level.

Teachers from the Mission Schools organization spoke frankly about the lack of college-ready literacy skills of their students, who are almost all Black and Latino and socioeconomic disadvantaged. What is challenging to accept are the consequences this has especially when teachers are aware that students who graduate from Mission Schools also face challenges with college persistence. Most of the students graduating from Mission Schools attend community colleges and teachers’ evaluation of their students aligns with the data on
community college persistence. Moore and Shulock (2010) found that at the community college level, half of first-year students do not continue to their second year. In California community colleges, only 17 percent of students who cannot pass college-level English within two years complete a four-year degree. As a teacher, it often appears that those same 17 percent of students are mostly the A-G high school graduates or students who were able to choose between a two-year or four-year school.

The literature, and evidenced from the participants of this study, show that the college-readiness gap is high in community colleges. Articulation and partnerships between high schools and colleges is challenging due to several factors (such as geography, purpose, public policy, or governance), but community colleges have a much clearer purpose: to serve the needs of the local high school graduates. Unlike four-year colleges and universities where students come from a much more diverse geographic background, community colleges serve mostly local students. The pattern we see from the extant research and from this study suggest that the college-readiness gap needs to be reexamined. Understanding the college-readiness gap at four-year colleges compared to community colleges can help teachers reexamine the skills their students need. Furthermore, teachers can also begin to think of how to close the readiness gap for their students beyond Common Core standards and toward meeting the college needs of students. For instance, if knowing that students who enter community college ready for credit-bearing courses are almost three times as likely to complete a degree, this can shift the mindset of high school teachers and organizations away from graduation and college-matriculation as measures of college-readiness to one of college persistence and transfer rates. Measures of college-readiness are inequitable: when we measure college-readiness for more affluent students, we use measures such as AP course, high school GPA, or college-entrance exams such as the SAT or
ACT. For students entering community college, the college-ready measure is graduation. This is where we can begin the challenging work of closing the college-readiness gap.

**Limitations of the Study**

Because of the exploratory nature of this research, the goals were not to make conclusive statements about what is happening in the minds of the teachers or in their classrooms. Instead, the purpose of this research is to explore and describe teachers’ perceptions of college-ready literacy so that researchers can begin to understand why gaps in college-readiness continue to persist despite the reforms in content standards (CCSS) and the structural changes to the educational landscape (rise of charter schools).

Despite the relevance and significance of this study, there are several research limitations that must be acknowledged: the explicit focus on charter schools, the small number of teacher participants, the demographic representation of the research participants, and the positionality of the researcher. Although the schools and organizations in this study reflect the various charter models, it is not a truly representative sample of all charter schools. The use of charter schools also limits the generalizability of the study to other public schools. Even though charter schools and charter organizations are public entities, they are in the unique position of having independent governance.

The participants in this study also pose a limitation because of their lack of representation demographically and lack of diverse college experiences. For two of the twelve teachers, getting involved as a research participant gave them insight on academic research because they plan to pursue research in the future. Nine of the twelve teachers in this study are White while White teachers make up about 40 percent of teachers in LAUSD. All twelve teachers also began their college career at a four-year institution limiting the diverse college
experiences that shape teachers’ perceptions. Only one teacher attended a community college, but this was after three years at a four-year university. Therefore, it was challenging to explore how attending a community college might have changed teachers’ perceptions. As the evidence shows in this study, teachers’ college experiences definitely impacted what skills and habits they felt their students needed for college.

An additional potential limitation that may have created bias in this study is my role as a both a teacher and a researcher and the felt to have to shift lenses in which I analyzed the data. Like the participants, I teach high school students and this created a unique dynamic. Immediately, I felt at ease with the participant and they felt at ease with me. We both spoke “teacher talk” and there is a lot of empathy for fellow teachers. However, because of my role both as teacher and researcher, the participants were more willing to disclose information about students that they might not have with researchers who have never been in the classroom. In gathering the data, my position as a teacher was definitely a strength of the study. They knew I understood their issues and spoke freely about their students, their school, their organizations, and even their administration.

Implications

Teachers

As discussed in the literature review, there is a need to increase the diversity of teachers through teacher education programs and teacher educators. Additionally, as the demographics of the United States continues to shift, an increasing minority student population will make up a large portion of the 21st century workforce. Many schools are already engaging in culturally responsive practices and teachers, in an increasingly polarized society, must grapple with issues of race.
The teachers in this study, especially the White, female teachers, spoke passionately about issues of social justice. They grappled with connecting with Black and Latino students and their parents. They were frustrated that their organization was not doing enough in providing services to meet the needs of their students. They connected literature to current issues of racial injustice. The White, female teachers tried to capitalize on the resilience of their students. These teachers were intentional with their actions and met students where they were at, even if that was at the third or fourth grade reading level. These are all suggestions that have been made by researchers in the past two decades. However, what teachers continue to do, and it was evidenced in this study, is blame students and their families for the lack of academic achievement.

In the field of education, there has been a plethora of ideas to bridge and build community in the classroom and schools: multicultural education, culture sensitivity, diversity training, and today, ethnic studies and required literature from authors of color. Like the researchers who have done extensive work on teacher beliefs and teacher education programs, I also believe that White teachers can educate all students, including students of color. Furthermore, an increase in teachers of color will not solve these pressing issues. However, urgent work needs to be done in helping educators truly understand what it means to come from the culture of power rooted in racial inequality and racial inequities. In this current political climate of blatant racism and xenophobia, it has become apparent what historical ignorance can breed and its insidiousness is no longer subtle. Education, not policy, and the teachers who interact with children are the means to a more inclusive and democratic society.
Charter Organizations and Schools

With a promise of innovative education to meet the diverse learning needs of students who have been failed by the public school system, the charter school system is growing. However, what we are beginning to see after several decades since the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1991 is how “traditional” charter schools are becoming. Charter schools, in its various missions and methodologies, still adhere to laws and educational codes that govern traditional public schools. Charter schools are still bound to the same measures of all public schools. As the evidence in this research shows, a different organizational model does not change teachers’ beliefs about their students’ abilities to be college-ready. Moreover, K-12 charter schools are innovating almost to a fault. Until the higher education system innovates to meet the learning styles of innovated high schools, students, like the ones in Ms. Robinson’s class, will go to college and realize they were not prepared for the routines of college.

Partnerships between High Schools and Colleges

Having clear articulation between high schools and two- and four-year colleges and universities will help to close the knowledge gap for high school teachers, students, and parents. Students and parents depend on high schools to provide pertinent information about college, but not about college-ready academic skills and habits. Instead, high schools tend to provide information about the college application process, and if students plan to attend community college, they are usually shut out of the limited conversations about college in high schools. The area that needs the most growth and can serve the most students is to focus on having clear articulation between high schools and community colleges. The partnership is already there. Local community colleges have a presence at their feeder high schools, administer placement
tests, and facilitate the enrollment process at high schools. Some high schools even have dual enrollment programs for students with courses taught by college instructors.

Colleges and universities already engage in work to help close the college-readiness gap. Many colleges and universities provide academic programs for high school students. During the school year, however, when colleges have a presence in high schools, it is usually in the form of outreach and informing students about the college itself. Colleges and universities who engage in the important work of outreach are especially significant because they tend to provide services for underserved students. The presence of colleges during the school day can play a tremendous role in helping close the readiness gap and not just the college information gap if these programs were to shift their focus from awareness of college to academic support. The teachers who work in poor communities felt their students knew about college because it was drilled in them that they are going to college, but they still felt their students lacked the academic skills ready for college. A shift in outreach programs to focusing on college-readiness skills can have a lot of potential for underserved students.

The problem that needs to be addressed is larger and cannot be solved alone by these technical, surface changes that appear to address the issues. The college-readiness gap must be attributed to more than skills and habits that students learn and carry over into college. The college-readiness gap may also be attributed to pedagogical gaps that call for professional development at both the high school and college level, especially community colleges. To teach in a public K-12 school, teachers must enroll in a credentialing program and obtain a credential through various exams and apprenticeship as a student teacher. A similar program focused on pedagogy and practice does not exist in higher education. This inconsistency in how educations are trained have negative consequences such as high school and college instructors developing
their own theory of what college-readiness entails. High school teachers should know what is expected of students once they enter college and college instructors should be aware of the skills their students.

**Future Research**

Because of the exploratory nature of this study, there is much room to further explore or scale the research. This same study can be replicated for teachers in traditional public schools to compare perceptions of teachers working in an a traditional school districts without the ability of independent governance. The charter school movement set to address the unmet needs of students in a failing public school system. If teachers at a large charter organization serving students with high needs also feel that they are not preparing students for college, further research must explore the consequences of reinventing public school systems that produce similar outcomes.

More research must also be done for different charter organizations that choose a non-traditional route. Not offering AP courses, as Lakeside Schools and Golden Gate Schools practice, may create more equitable outcomes in college admissions (students are not penalized for not taking AP courses if the school does not offer them), but future research must explore if the college-readiness gap narrows or widens as AP courses are an indicator of college-ready rigor. The move toward mastery or performance-based assessments will also be important to further explore. When Pacific Schools began as an organization over a decade ago, they used mastery-based assessments so that students can re-assess if they have learned a skill. However, Ms. Robinson, along with teachers at Lakeside Schools, felt this practice led to poor time management habits to form. Pacific Schools eventually changed their assessment practice because students felt the ability to reassess did not prepare them for college.
Finally, as more students graduate under the era of Common Core, researchers and educators at the K-12 and higher education levels need to revisit the college-readiness gap. With a focus on reading and writing skills, and a larger focus on informational text, the college-readiness gap may stay the same or narrow. Common Core standards’ focus on skills may exacerbate the lack of readiness for underserved students and if that is the case, much will need to be reexamined. It will also be important to also look at how teachers and college instructors have shifted their practice to ensure that students are acquiring the skills laid out in the Common Core standards.

Reflection

I embarked on this research process after teaching for over a decade and constantly doubting if my classroom practices were preparing students for college. I too had prepared students for college based on my own background as a first-generation daughter of refugees. My college experiences at a prestigious university would shape my perceptions of college-readiness. Like Ms. Collin, I took rigorous courses in high school that made me a strong candidate but my writing not college-ready. I would tell my students, “This is important for college,” despite never having had a professional conversation with a college instructor. In high school, we innovate to capture students’ interests by utilizing best practices to make learning “fun” and engaging. Teachers scaffold complex skills and differentiate with strategies that will meet the needs of diverse learners. I hardly remember any of my professors doing that in college. At my alma mater, UCLA, the only collaborative assignments I had were group essays. What made college such an amazing experience was listening to passionate experts discuss their life’s work. I loved going to lectures and discussions. As a high school teacher, lectures do not work.
A majority of the teachers, including the four who work in poor communities, were explicit in discussing teaching as a means for social justice. However, some of the conversations I had with the teachers felt problematic to me. Teachers spoke passionately about being aware of the historical injustices in underserved communities and students of color, yet the onus of improving the literacy skills in those schools was placed on the students and families. Many teachers spoke passionately about working in underserved communities, but blamed students and parents for the lack of literacy skills and lack of academic rigor. Some of the teachers in this study claimed credit for their students’ success but did not take ownership of students who were not performing at grade level or at the college-ready level.

The politically correct point of view that many teachers have, in this study and in my own experiences, is to believe that all students can achieve the same and deserve the same education. This belief in equality for all students, however, can have damaging effects. In this study, one of the most competitive charter high schools in the Los Angeles area (both in its extensive waitlist and academically rigorous culture) has such an intense focus on high A-G graduation rates and four-year enrollment that this kind of climate led to teachers not being able to identify students who were planning to attend community college (39 percent of them). Worst, it created a culture where Mr. Morrison felt his students who were planning to attend community college could not even speak about it. It is also damaging to build schools around having 99 percent college-attendance in poor and minority communities yet the teachers themselves do not believe these students are college-ready. When the successes of high schools are measured by college attendance and graduation, it is too soon to truly measure if a student is ready for the next phase in their life be it college or career.
This research study became a personal journey for me. I felt myself identifying with or empathizing with every teacher who participated in this study. I felt strongly that if anyone was going to research teachers, I felt strongly that it should be another teacher. Too often, teachers are researched and represented by those who have never been in a K-12 classroom at all or for very long. This unfriendly disposition is also commonly felt among my colleagues toward legislators who believe sweeping reforms can shift teachers and schools to meet the needs of all students. Finally, in an era of increasingly polarizing political views on Common Core, charter schools, school vouchers, race, and immigration, it is important to consider that students most affected by the political intersections of these educational issues are poor and minority students who still aspire to attend college and contribute to society.
Appendices

Appendix A: General Topic Guide

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<th>Subject/Course:</th>
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Introductory Protocol:

With your permission, I would like to record our conversation today. I will be the only person privy to this interview and you can be assured that all information is confidential. This interview will take about an hour. If at any time you want me to stop the recording, I will stop recording the interview.

The purpose of this interview is to explore your understanding of college-ready literacy. The study is an exploratory study in nature and does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences.

1. Tell me about your educational background.
   a. Where did you go to college? What were your experiences like?
   b. How long have you been teaching?
   c. When you went to college, did you feel prepared? What made you feel that way?

2. Tell me about the courses you teach. What do you want your students to get out of your class?
3. Tell me about your thoughts on Common Core. How do you feel about the goal of these standards? Are they good standards to support students’ transition into college? Why or why not?

4. Were you a teacher during NCLB? What do you think are the major changes from NCLB to Common Core?

5. How would you define your role in preparing students for college?

6. How do you differentiate and scaffold the CCSS for your students? Where do you see the most need or need for support in your classes?

7. The new standards promote college readiness. What do you think it means to be college-ready? What does it take for students to be college-ready?

   a. Probe for what informs their definition
Appendix B: Observation Protocol

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<td>Courses observed:</td>
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<td>Subject/Course:</td>
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Pay attention to actions/language that can help probe further ideas of college-ready literacy and/or differentiation between courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AP/HONORS</th>
<th>NON-HONORS/AP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Objectives:</td>
<td>Learning Objectives:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy Skills used in teaching and learning:</td>
<td>Literacy Skills used in teaching and learning:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common Core Literacy Standard(s):</td>
<td>Common Core Literacy Standard(s):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence of college-ready literacy:</td>
<td>Evidence of college-ready literacy:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evidence of student understanding:</td>
<td>Evidence of student understanding:</td>
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<td>Topics to discuss for second interview:</td>
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<td>Observer comments:</td>
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Appendix C: Follow-up Interview

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<td>Date:</td>
<td>Courses observed:</td>
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1. Tell me what your goal was for each class (with this lesson). What objective(s) did you have for Class A and Class B?

2. What are biggest challenges to teaching Class A this skill? Class B?

3. Tell me about the long-term goals you have for your students? (probe for college-readiness)

4. What student needs do you take into consideration when preparing them for your class and beyond?
   a. When you are working with students who are not four-year bound, what is your goal for them as their teacher?
   b. How do you assess what skills they need to pass English?

5. How do you decide what to teach each class?

6. Tell me how your own educational background shapes what you do in class (probe for college experience is not brought up).
References:


