THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO SELF-IDENTIFY AS READERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Michael J. Romick

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and better understand the lived experiences of what it means to be a reader as a high school student. The literature revealed a plethora of studies and articles on various aspects of reading and many pieces from teachers, researchers, and academics' perspectives, but there are virtually no studies that have explored what being a reader means from the high school reader's perspective; no studies that have explored the lived experiences of what being a reader means to high school students. The central question guiding this study asked, "What is the lived experience of a self-identified reader?" I discussed and explored the lived experiences with 11 high school juniors and seniors in three high schools in a small city in the northeastern United States. The theory that guided this study was Vygotsky's social constructivism theory; this theory is predicated on the belief that development and learning are socially situated. The three main elements of this theory, social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development, all are related to students' learning to read and developing as readers and are therefore related to the study's focus. This study collected data in four ways: personal interviews, text and email messages, protocol writing, and reader-inspired photographs, pictures, and images. Data were analyzed using lean coding, thematic analysis, and phenomenological reflection.

Keywords: reader(s), reading, lived experience of readers, self-concept of reading, self-confidence, hermeneutic phenomenology, van Manen

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Dedication

With eternal thanks and appreciation, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. First to my late wife, whose tenacity, determination, and never-ending belief in me were a constant inspiration and whose passing is still felt. Next to my children, whose patience, kindness, and support meant and continue to mean everything. To my sister, who began her doctoral journey and successfully navigated it before me and served as an inspiration and motivation for me to begin and continue with my quest; and finally, to the Lord for always being there, for always being my rock and my salvation.

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I would like to express my appreciation to my chair, Dr. James Swezey, for providing guidance, help, and support throughout my dissertation journey, and to my committee member Dr. Randall Dunn for his support, recommendations, and guidance. I was fortunate to have both of these fine gentlemen as professors during my summer intensive classes and they proved to be an inspiration. I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge my sister Deborah and my children Meggie, Shane, and Kate for serving as sounding boards and for listening to me “think out loud” during this journey.

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List of Abbreviations

American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALAOIF)

Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX)

More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)

National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement (NRCELA)

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

Young Adult (YA)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The paramount importance of reading to students' intelligence and academic performance is widely recognized and well documented in the literature: reading and writing have been noted as the basis of the educational system since its beginning (Whitten, Labby, & Sullivan, 2016); reading substantially increases and improves students' reading abilities (Merga, 2015; Parsons et al., 2018; Spichtig et al., 2016); reading helps students across the curriculum (Bano, Jabeen, & Qutoshi, 2018; Koon & Petscher, 2016; Merga, 2015; Young & Potter, 2013); and reading is foundational to all knowledge and a critical and fundamental life skill (Bano et al., 2018; Jerrim & Moss, 2019). Additionally, and perhaps just as importantly, reading provides an important means of helping students develop and grow emotionally, socially, and morally (Gallagher, 2009; Hertzel, 2018; Ingraham, 2016; Miller, 2009; Perkins, 2013; van Manen, 2016). Despite these well documented points, reading and reading comprehension among adolescents have been declining for years (Gallagher, 2009; Jang & Henretty, 2019; Parsons et al., 2018; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). And yet, schools seem to be de-emphasizing reading and its importance in favor of spending time on tasks designed to improve students' scores on standardized tests (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Gallagher, 2009; Parsons et al., 2018; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016; Scogin, Kruger, Jekkals, & Steinfeldt, 2017).

Given this information, it is rather surprising that there is a dearth of studies from a high school student perspective on reading. This lack of attention and information has inspired this study. This study aimed to discover what it meant to be a reader from the perspective of a high school student, by exploring and discovering the lived experiences of high school students who self-identify as readers. This journey has helped shed light on what it truly means to be a reader,

and it is hoped that this information may help shape students, teachers, and school administrators' views and practices on reading and readers.

This introductory section continues by providing background information; my motivation for wanting to conduct this study; the philosophical assumptions that I brought to this study, an important element in a hermeneutic phenomenology approach; the problem statement; the purpose statement; a discussion on the significance of the study; the research questions; definitions; and a summary.

Background

In order to properly introduce the study, it is important to provide some background information. What follows is a brief description of the historical, the social, and the theoretical aspects pertaining to the study.

Historical

Historically, the creation of the Federal Department of Education in 1867 led to the first gathering and reporting of literacy rates in 1870 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1992). Reading and reading comprehension discussions followed and have been debated since at least 1908 with the publication of E. B. Huey's *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in which Huey complained that too much educational effort was being spent on reading aloud and not enough effort was being extended on understanding and comprehension (Spichtig et al., 2016). In 1917, Thorndike expressed similar sentiments in his piece "Reading as Reasoning," when he noted that students' oral reading rate was good, but students often did not understand what they had read (Spichtig et al., 2016). Citing several earlier studies, Stedman (1996) claimed that students' reading abilities improved from early in the century through the 1960s but started to show a decline in comprehension in the 1980s. The realization of America's

students' decline in academic performance seems to have begun in earnest with the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. Many changes and promised improvements were enacted due to this report, but more recently, many have reported that reading and reading comprehension among high school students in the U.S. is declining (Parsons et al., 2018; Spichtig et al., 2016). In a 2007 report by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) on American reading, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, the NEA traced a historically consistent decline in the time teens spend reading beginning in 1984, noting that less than one third of 13-year-old students read on a daily basis and over a 20-year period, and the percentage of 17-year-old students who do not read for pleasure at all has doubled (p. 7). The report strongly suggested that these trends have led to a consistent decline in reading comprehension rates among older teens. This decline can be seen most poignantly in the data of senior high school students whose percentage of students reading at or above the proficient level fell by 13% from 1992–2005 (NEA, 2007, pp. 12–13).

According to *Monitoring the Future*, a decades-long study by the University of Michigan, one third of high school students do not read for pleasure and fewer than 20% of high school students read on a daily basis (as cited in Hertzel, 2018). Some experts have suggested that this decline in reading and reading comprehension may be due to an increasing emphasis being placed on standardized test results; this standardized testing movement may have caused many people in educational leadership roles to de-emphasizing reading and instead concentrate schools' resources and teachers' efforts on other areas (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Scogin et al., 2017; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation first enacted in 2001 increased the focus on students' reading performance and sought to measure growth by mandating tests each year in Grades 3 through 8 and once in high school; the Every Child

Succeeds Act passed in 2015 to replace NCLB lessened consequences for schools whose students did not perform well, but did not seem to have deterred the emphasis on testing which continues today (Wexler, 2018).

Social

Even though the literature provides overwhelmingly wide support for the importance of reading and reading comprehension (Koon & Petscher, 2016; Kropp & Shupp, 2017; Spichtig et al., 2016; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014), many schools are dismissing or de-emphasizing reading and its importance and are instead concentrating their efforts on what they believe will best prepare their students for standardized tests (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Scogin et al., 2017). This de-emphasis or concentration on only what can be assessed on a standardized test is harmful and counterproductive (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016), and has led to a "literacy crisis" (Krashen, 2009, p. ix), the need for "an endangered species act for literacy education" (Pearson, 2007, p. 145), schools committing "readicide" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 2), and a misplaced focus on external goals that do not transfer (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016).

School is where many students learn to read, learn to become readers, and build and develop social relationships that help shape their views on reading (Harste, 2014; Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Retelsdorf, Schwartz, & Asbrock, 2015). Adolescents seem to be particularly influenced by their peers as it relates to books and reading; when it comes to reading, school is a student's milieu (Evans, 2017). Van Manen's (2015) "lived other" (p. 104), one of his four fundamental existential themes, includes the relationships students maintain with others that give them a sense of purpose; it also includes "the interpersonal spaces (e.g., classrooms) that we (students) share with others" (Evans, 2017, p. 316). Reading for high school students is rooted in social contexts (Evans, 2017). When schools ignore the many benefits of reading noted throughout the literature

and instead concentrate their efforts only on standardized test performance, they are in danger of not only eliminating the social aspects that go into the creation and development of readers but are also discouraging students from reading (Gallagher, 2009; Krashen, 2009).

Theoretical

The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky's social constructivism theory. This theory is predicated on the belief that development and learning are socially situated (Miller, 2011; Palincsar, 1998). The three main elements of this theory are social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development (Miller, 2011). Social interaction, the interaction that one has with peers, family members, and others, leads to development and learning (Palincsar, 1998). The more knowledgeable other (MKO) is any other individual (peer, teacher, parent, or community member) who has a higher ability level or knowledge level than the student (Palincsar, 1998). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is "the distance between a child's actual development level . . . and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Miller, 2011, pp. 174–175). Vygotsky's theory stresses the importance of peers and others and the social interactions that take place as crucial to the development of students (Daniels, 2016; Palincsar, 1998). Students' reading self-concept, how students perceive themselves as readers, is formed and defined by their environment and the responses of "significant others" (Boerma, Mol, & Jolles, 2015, p. 550). Reading has a social element (Singh, 2015), and a sociocultural nature (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). These theories all are related to students' learning to read and developing as readers and are therefore related to my study's focus.

Situation to Self

The decline in students' reading and reading abilities, and the shift of emphasis away from the importance of reading in high schools (Gallagher, 2009; Krashen, 2009; Parsons et al., 2018; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016; Spichtig et al., 2016) is what motivated me to want to undertake this study. A comparison study published in 2016 that examined comprehension-based silent reading efficiency in the U.S. and compared it to that of students in 1960 found that "silent reading efficiency of U.S. students, especially older students, is declining, stagnant, or at least inadequate to meet the current literacy challenges faced in schools and the workplace" (Spichtig et al., 2016, p. 256). As a high school English teacher and adjunct English professor, I have seen first-hand the lack of attention and focus that reading and its importance is currently receiving in high schools. This runs counter to the literature's overwhelming support for the benefits of reading (Koon & Petscher, 2016; Kropp & Shupp, 2017; Spichtig et al., 2016; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014).

There is a strong philosophical component to phenomenology, and "an individual writing a phenomenology would be remiss to not include some discussion about the philosophical presuppositions of phenomenology" (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). Van Manen (2016) went as far as to state that "phenomenology is originally and essentially a philosophical discipline" (p. 22); since this study was phenomenological, I would be remiss if I did not mention the philosophical assumptions that influenced my approach. The ontological philosophical assumption I hold recognizes that there are multiple realities. I believe that being a reader influences and affects people in myriad ways, and no two individual readers perceive being a reader the same way. I must also mention my axiological assumption, for I recognize that my phenomenological study

has a value-laden nature; I have tried to identify my positionality in all parts of my study and report my values and biases.

It is also important for me to note the paradigm that guided my study, which was social constructivism. I believe that learning and knowledge are influenced by and reliant on social interactions. I also believe that reading has a strong social component and that becoming a reader is strongly influenced by interaction with others. My being a reader is one reason that I was motivated to begin this study, and I understand that my background as a reader somewhat shaped my interpretation. I have identified my positionality throughout all parts of this study.

Problem Statement

Reading has long been held to be vital to students' learning and development and a crucial component of academic success (Coleman, 2012; Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Spichtig et al., 2016; Whitten et al., 2016; Young & Potter, 2013). However, reading and reading comprehension have been declining among American students for more than a decade (Jang & Henretty, 2019; Parsons et al., 2018; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). Some claim that this decline may be due to an increased demand for assessments showing academic performance improvement, which has led many schools to de-emphasize reading in favor of focusing on tasks that they believe will help students score better on standardized tests (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Gallagher, 2009; Parsons et al., 2018; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016; Scogin et al., 2017). Given the importance of reading and the strong support for its importance in the literature, this de-emphasis of reading is at the very best counterproductive (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). There is a need for more research on reading and its importance, especially among high school students (Cantrell et al., 2017; Herrera, Truckenmiller, & Foorman, 2016).

Research on the essence of what it is to be a reader as a high school student and its possible influences have not been sufficiently explored. Studies from high school readers' perspectives are especially difficult to find. In a search of several of the leading educational databases (Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Teacher Reference Center) in late June and early July of 2018, and again in June of 2019, looking over the last five years, research on what being a reader is from a high school student's perspective is nearly nonexistent. Perhaps as a result of this lack of inquiry, high schools are not concentrating enough efforts on reading, which is arguably the most important activity in influencing students' academic ability and success across the curriculum (Akbasli, Sahin, & Yaykiran, 2016; Byrd, 2015). The problem is exploring the lived-experiences of high school students who identify as readers. So little is known and, seemingly, so little is being done to learn about what it means to be a reader from a high school student's perspective. This is the very reason that I needed to undertake and conduct this study. I wanted to explore and better understand what it means to be a reader to high school students. I discovered much.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student. I explored these experiences with 11 high school juniors and seniors at three high schools in one small city in the northeastern United States. For the purposes of my study, I defined a reader as one who "identifies as a reader" (Clark & Teravainen, 2017, para. 5) or describes oneself as a reader and "thinks positively about reading" (Clark & Teravainen, 2017, para. 5) and "a person who chooses to read" (Barone & Barone, 2016, p. 48) even when he or she does not have to.

The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky's social constructivism theory. This theory is predicated on the belief that development and learning are socially situated. The three main elements of this theory are social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development. Reading is widely regarded in the literature to be a social practice and process (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Harste, 2014), as having a social element (Singh, 2015), and as having a sociocultural nature (Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016).

Significance of the Study

A recent thorough exploration of the lived experiences of high school students who identify as readers does not exist in the literature; this is what made this study significant and necessary. The importance of reading and the beneficial aspects of reading are well documented (Spichtig et al., 2016). Several noted the importance of reading to students' success in all subjects (Koon & Petscher, 2016; Young & Potter, 2013). Others stressed the benefits of reading to leadership (Coleman, 2012), the benefits of reading to success in math and science (Akbasli et al., 2016), and the economic benefits of reading (Collin, 2018). Also frequently mentioned as benefits of reading especially fiction were the social and emotional benefits, the improvement in social skills, and the ability to experience empathy (Dickerson, 2015; Emert & Rodriguez, 2019; King, 2014; Miller, 2009). The benefits of reading and of being a reader are rather well supported. However, exploration of the lived experiences of high school students who identify as readers is not. Conducting this study as a hermeneutic phenomenological study, a study based on exploring the lived experiences (van Manen, 2015) of readers, has made the results empirically meaningful and significant. Many in the literature have called for more attention and consideration on reading and what it may mean for students (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Huddleston & Lowe, 2014; Scogin et al., 2017). With the overwhelming support for the benefits

of reading and its importance to students in all areas, more research needs to be done that explores the lived-experience of what it means to be a reader. Vygotsky's social constructivism theories guided this study. The intent was to explore how and if social interaction affects development and improvement in reading and in becoming a reader. This would prove to be theoretically significant in that social interaction, the interaction that one has with peers, family members, community members, and others leading to development and learning, is one of the main tenants in Vygotsky's social constructivism theory (Miller, 2011; Palincsar, 1998). Though there is agreement in the literature about reading being a social practice, this is a somewhat recent acknowledgement (Harste, 2014).

In addition to providing both theoretical and empirical significance, this study provided practical significance, in that it gave voice to the underrepresented population of high school students who identify as readers. It offered a needed exploration of the lived-experiences of what it means to be a reader from the perspective of high school students. Cantrell et al. (2017) echoed the need for such a study, arguing that literature from a student's perspective is "a dimension often missing, yet much needed" (p. 68). The students directly involved in the study, the participants, enjoyed taking part and in their personal reflection and exploration on what it means to them as students and people to be readers. In a broader view, high school teachers, administrators, students and those who develop standardized tests for high school students should benefit from the first-hand accounts of what it means to be a reader from the students themselves. It is also my hope that this study will inspire researchers to further explore what it means to be a reader to students of all ages and even perhaps examine ways that will help more students become readers.

Research Questions

One central question and three sub-questions helped guide my study.

Central question: What is the lived experience of a self-described reader? Lived experience is at the very heart of phenomenology. Van Manen (2016) wrote, "Phenomenology always asks those sorts of questions: 'What is the nature and meaning of this or that experience-as-we-live-through-it?'" (p. 385). By exploring the first-hand accounts of those who are members of this seemingly shrinking group, I hoped to deepen my understanding of their lived experiences.

Sub-question one: What meaning do students who identify as readers ascribe to being a reader? True to the nature of phenomenological studies, I wanted to make visible, or shine the light on the "deeper sources of meaning" (Padilla, 2003, p. 415), by examining the students' way of viewing themselves as readers.

Sub-question two: How does being a reader affect the student participants' feelings of self? This research question helped truly delve into the lived experience, the essence of what effect being a reader has on high school students, how being a reader colors or influences how they see themselves. Van Manen (2016) explained lived experience as "this active and passive living through experience" (p. 39).

Sub-question three: How did students who describe themselves as readers become readers; do students who describe themselves as readers attribute their becoming a reader to an event, time, incident, or relationship? This research question helped illuminate the origin and social aspects and nature of reading and being a reader. Krashen (2009) noted, "Sometimes one positive reading experience can create a reader" or one "home run book" (p. 82). Many in the

literature have noted the social nature and social aspects of reading (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Harste, 2014; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016; Singh, 2015).

Definitions

To help the readers better understand some of the terms and words used in this study that they may not be familiar with, I have included a list of words and phrases and their definitions.

1. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology* – a method (the way or view of approaching a phenomenon) of tempered reflection on the "basic structures of the lived experience of human existence" (van Manen, 2016, p. 26).
2. *Home Run book* – a single very positive reading experience that can create a reader (Krashen, 2009, p. 82).
3. *Lifeworld*—the world as it is immediately experienced, not as it is recalled upon reflection (van Manen, 2015).
4. *Lived Experience* – phenomenology focuses on recognizing human experience (the phenomenon being explored) as it is lived through or as it is experienced, thus lived experience is the term used (van Manen, 2016).
5. *Readicide* – "the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (Gallagher, 2009, p. 2).

Summary

The importance of reading is well documented and supported throughout the literature as is the decline in reading and reading comprehension among secondary students. With these two related points being well supported, it is rather surprising that more research has not been done on what it means to be a reader. However, little is known and seemingly little is being investigated about the lived experience of high school students who identify as readers and how

being a reader affects the students' feelings of self and the meaning that students ascribe to being readers. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student. One central question and three sub-questions guided this study; the central question asked, What is the lived-experience of a self-described reader? The three sub-questions asked, What meaning do students who identify as readers ascribe to being a reader? How does being a reader affect the student participants' feelings of self? How did students who describe themselves as readers become readers; do students who describe themselves as readers attribute their becoming a reader to an event, time, incident, or relationship? Answers to these questions and insights provided by high school student readers should help to guide future curriculum planning, pedagogy, and teaching focus, as well as encourage and empower students and teachers in emphasizing reading.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Reading is a complex process that is autonomous and yet social, it is contextualized, developmental, psychological, and a fundamental life skill (Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). Reading and its importance have wide support in the literature as this literature review will demonstrate. This review will also delve into the complexities of what the literature has to say about what it means to be a reader to high school students who self-identify as readers. The discussion revolves around several important aspects: what being a reader means, the benefits of reading, the misplaced emphasis of educators and others, the self-concept of reading, reading as a social process, motivational forces, reading is reading, and gaps in the literature. This literature review begins with a discussion of Vygotsky's social constructivism, the theoretical framework that guided this study, and this chapter concludes with a summary.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's social constructivism. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist whose work was not translated until the 1960s, rejected the widely-held theories put forth by Piaget that children learn and develop autonomously, with little help from others (Barrs, 2017; Overall, 2007). Vygotsky believed that all higher psychic functions in children's development first appear as collective, social activities (Barrs, 2017). Social constructivism holds that learning happens or is constructed in social settings, occurs within particular contexts, and that learning is an ongoing state of mind (Vaughn, 2019). Vygotsky believed that all of the, what he called "specifically human characteristics of consciousness that develop in the child" (as cited in Barrs, 2017, p. 350), are based on collaboration with others or imitation of others. Social constructivism maintains that students

learn through social interactions and that the environment in which students learn is also influential (Wright, Franks, Kuo, McTigue, & Serrano, 2016). Vygotsky saw learning as a collaborative activity within a social environment; he was most concerned with the "socialized person who emerges from the whole education process" (Smagorinsky, 2018, p. 254). Vygotsky's theory was appropriate for this study because it provided a valuable lens through which the students' experiences can be viewed and better understood. There are three main elements to Vygotsky's theory, and each can be directly linked to various aspects of reading:

- Social interaction – the interaction one has with peers, family members, and others. In learning to read and in developing as a reader, teachers, parents, and perhaps most importantly peers heavily influence and affect students and their developing reading habits and practices (Daniels, 2016; Miller, 2011). There is strong support in the literature for peer cooperation and interaction being important in the development and motivation of reading and in students becoming readers (Farkas & Jang, 2019). Vygotsky held that the very act of learning to read is social and is reliant on interaction with others (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).
- The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) – any other individual who has a higher ability level or knowledge level than the child. Again, MKOs can be teachers, parents, and peers. The benefits to the developing reader are many, but so too are the benefits for the MKO (Daniels, 2016; Miller, 2011). There is wide support in the literature for the importance of the MKO—peers, teachers, and parents—in students' learning to read and in their becoming readers (Boerma et al., 2015; Farkas & Jang, 2019; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016).

- The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – the distance between a child's development level and his or her higher level of potential development with guidance from an MKO (Daniels, 2016; Miller, 2011). The ZPD is the difference between what a child can do alone and what a child can do in collaboration with others. What a child can do with help from others in one situation, he or she will be able to then do independently on another occasion (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). The ZPD is directly related to learning to read and students' progression as readers, from simple beginning-reader books to chapter books and beyond. Teachers, parents, and especially peers play an important role in students developing as readers (Boerma et al., 2015; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016).

There is wide agreement in the literature about reading being a social practice. This recognition or embracing of reading as a social practice was viewed by one as a "breakthrough in our understanding of literacy and literacy learning" (Harste, 2014, p. 90). Many noted the way young children use written language and how they learn to read as a social and cultural process (Bloome & Kim, 2017: Farkas & Jang, 2019; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). Many also hailed the social practices of reading, especially by students (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Harste, 2014; Farkas & Jang, 2019).

Related Literature

This section contains a review of the literature on several main aspects related to reading and readers. The discussion and review helped frame the study as well as show why this study was needed. The aspects reviewed and discussed include what being a reader means, the benefits of being a reader, the misplaced emphasis of educators and others, the self-concept of reading, reading as a social process, motivational forces, reading is reading, and gaps in the literature. This section concludes with a summary and a discussion of the need for this study.

What it Means to Be a Reader

This study was composed of participants who describe themselves as readers; however, describing or defining exactly what a reader is, is somewhat difficult. In her exploration of existing literature on what makes a reader, a reader, Frankel (2017) discovered that students who identify as readers formed their reader identities both inside and outside of the classroom. Others found that the home literacy environment, the expectations of others (parents, teachers, peers), and an encouraging reading environment at school were important in helping to develop children's attitudes towards reading (Boerma et al., 2015). The literature provided widespread agreement that those who consider themselves readers find reading an enjoyable experience (Barone & Barone, 2016; Frankel, 2017; Merga, McRae, & Rutherford, 2018). Being lost in a book or escaping into a book was frequently cited as being an important part of being a reader (Auyoung, 2013; Barone & Barone, 2016; Kilgallon, 2017; Perkins, 2013). Others, in describing a seemingly similar sensation experienced while reading, called it an "immersive drift" (Mendelsund, 2014, p. 307), or the flow (Gallagher, 2009; Krashen, 2009), or "metaphoric transport" (Auyoung, 2013, p. 180). "Enjoyment was seen as both a key purpose of reading and a required reading experience" (Perkins, 2013, p. 298). Readers are those who see reading as a "positive enjoyable experience" that features a "physical, an intellectual, and an emotional location" (Perkins, 2013, p. 300). Readers are those who are "full participants in the making of a narrative" (Mendelsund as cited in Kilgallon, 2017, para. 4).

Possibly the most direct and simplified definition of what a reader is was provided by Barone and Barone (2016): "a person who chooses to read" (p. 49). Tracking a class of fifth-graders for nearly a year, Barone and Barone recorded the students' definitions of what it means to be a reader. Throughout the course of the school year, the students named the seven essential

characteristics of what it means to be a reader. Readers read for fun, usually finish the books they start, talk about books, often select a specific type or genre of book, relate to the characters in a book, spend time reading, and read lots of books (Barone & Barone, 2016, pp. 49–50). Many of the characteristics that the students named can be seen repeated in the literature (Cantrell et al., 2017; Frankel, 2017; Groenke, 2017; Merga et al., 2018; Perkins, 2013).

There were also several theoretical perspectives on reading mentioned in the literature; two that were mentioned somewhat frequently were Rosenblatt's responsive reader or transactional theory, first outlined in 1978, and Langer's envisionments first proposed in 1995 (Martin, 2016; Schaefer, 2017; Zapata, Sánchez, & Robinson, 2018). Interestingly, both of these theories see reading as an active and creative process, and both contain a social component (Schaefer, 2017). Rosenblatt's responsive reader theory views reading as consisting of two stances: the efferent, which is focused on the knowledge or content that readers take from the text, and the aesthetic stance, which is focused on the vicarious experiences the reader has while reading; the theory holds that reading is an act of construction, the forming of a new experience in the transaction between reader and text (Schaefer, 2017). Rosenblatt's theory sees the two stances as part of the same continuum, and each has a public and private language component; each is reliant on the particular cultural or social context and the particular time (Martin, 2016). The importance of social aspect was well-defined by Beach, Falter, and Whitley (2017), who explained that as part of the response to literature, students engaged in open and flexible peer interactions, which comprised "collaborative participatory sensemaking" (p. 209). Langer's theory focuses on what the reader envisions while reading. Langer (2011) described envisionments as "text-worlds in the mind that differ from individual to individual. They are a function of one's personal and cultural experiences, one's relationship to the current experience,

what one knows, how one feels, and what one is after" (p. 10). Langer initially named four stances, adding a fifth in 2011 (Zapata et al., 2018). Envisionments, literary meaning making, takes place even after readers have closed the book, by continued thought and reflection and discussions with peers and teachers; it is a fluid process (Schaefer, 2017; Zapata et al., 2018). Langer (2011) took what she called "a social view of learning" (p.66) and advocated the taking of an overview of literature lessons as an activity in a "Vygotskian sense" (p. 100), which she explained as students being involved in reading, discussing, and other reading-related tasks working towards developing their own understanding through "collaborative support" (p. 100) from peers and teachers. Langer and Close (2001) noted the social component, peers and teachers, as being an important part of students' developing their envisionment building. The authors also recognized Vygotsky's scaffolding as an important part of helping students in and through various reading stances: "effective instructional scaffolding also allows students to develop skills for supporting, challenging, and shaping thinking" (Langer & Close, 2001, p. 16). Both Rosenblatt's and Langer's theories recognized the importance of reading and the benefits that reading brings to those who read (Schaefer, 2017).

> It is through reading, thinking, and discussing literature that students find alternative ways to gain knowledge and solve problems. Through sharing of understandings, they learn not only important content, but also cognitive, critical, and social strategies needed for success in academic courses, work, and life. (Langer & Close, 2001, p. 6)

The Benefits of Being a Reader

The benefits of reading and being a reader are many and are well supported by the literature: "reading is the skill that makes virtually all other learning possible" (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019, p. 3). There is a substantial body of evidence in the literature supporting the

assertion that students reap substantial benefits from recreational reading (Merga, 2015). The importance of reading was underscored by President Obama's belief that literacy was a means to help solve problems: "I believe that if we want to give our children the best possible chance in life . . . then one of our greatest responsibilities . . . is to ensure that every American child can read and read well" (Obama as cited in Reutzel & Cooter, 2019, p. 7). It is no mistake that the oldest university in the English-speaking world, Oxford, has for centuries described its graduates as reading their chosen subjects (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). The agreement on the importance of reading and reading comprehension is widespread throughout the literature (Aslan, 2016; Kropp & Shupp, 2017; Ricci, 2015; Schoor, 2016; Spichtig et al., 2016). It is no surprise that reading benefits students in English and language arts classes. Many reported how independent reading or reading outside of class helped improve reading, reading comprehension, and vocabulary (Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Merga, 2015; Whitten et al., 2016). Studies from the United Kingdom (UK) showed that students who read for pleasure outside of the classroom are 13 times more likely to read above the expected level than those who do not read outside of class (Merga, 2015, p. 198). However, the benefits of reading also extend to other areas as well. There is a strong relationship between reading and academic achievement (Bano et al., 2018). Several asserted that reading contributes to student success in all academic areas, all across the curriculum (Koon & Petscher, 2016; Merga, 2015; Young & Potter, 2013). Qutoshi (2018) called reading an instrument of learning that is priceless, and, citing McPike, called reading the "gateway to all other knowledge" (p. 43). Akbasli et al. (2016) echoed these thoughts, stating that "reading is one of the most powerful sources of learning" (p. 108) and agreed that there is a connection between reading and students' success in other subjects, particularly mathematics and science.

Some noted that reading will become even more important as our use of reader-reliant technology continues to grow (Conradi, 2014; Schoor, 2016).

Reading fiction. Additional benefits of reading and being a reader, especially of fiction, have long been noted; Aristotle was perhaps the first to speak of the cathartic effect of reading literature in his *Poetics* where he wrote that reading literature helps to train one's emotions (Prior, 2018). John Steinbeck (1962), in his acceptance speech for receiving the 1962 Nobel Prize for literature, claimed that literature grew out of humans' need for it, and he expressed his belief that literature can sustain and help people through hard times. A number of studies reinforce the benefits of reading fiction and show that reading fiction seems to increase the quality of empathy in the people who read it, suggesting that reading fiction helps readers to see through another person's eyes and helps the reader to consider others' perspectives (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Ingraham, 2016; Prior, 2018; Ricci, 2015). Alsop (2013) posited that the benefits of reading fiction in secondary classrooms cannot be ignored and claimed that "literary fiction or fictional narratives can result not only in critical thinking, close reading, and analytical writing, but also in personal enjoyment, cognitive engagement, and in an increased ability to empathize or relate to others" (p. 182). Others showed that reading fiction was a "significant predictor of adolescent reading comprehension and summarization skills" (McGeown, Duncan, Griffiths, & Stothard, 2015, p. 563). Prior (2018) summed up this thinking quite well: "reading literature, more than informing us, forms us" (p. 22). King (2014) called reading "a way to explore new worlds and grow as a human" (p. 8). In their "Literature Review: The Impact of Reading for Pleasure and Empowerment," BOP Consulting (2015) demonstrated that reading for pleasure helped to increase a reader's empathy and also helped to improve the reader's relationships with others and helped improve readers' wellbeing throughout their lives.

Expressing similar thoughts, Langer (2011) wrote, “Through literature students learn to explore possibilities and consider options; they gain connectedness and seek vision” (p. 2). In writing about the reading of fiction Langer (2011) also stated, “Literature plays a critical role in our lives, often without our notice. It sets the scene for us to explore both ourselves and others—to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be” (p. 5). John Green (2012), in his popular YouTube web series Crash Course, stated that “reading is always an act of empathy; it is always an imagining of what it’s like to be someone else.” Through interviews conducted with at-risk youth, Dickerson (2015) found the following:

> Reading is actually linked to a number of protective factors that contribute to resilience: the establishment of future goals, an internal locus of control, optimism, a sense that one’s problems are trivial, open mindedness, the need to take responsibility, the ability to empathize with others, strong communication skills, and the ability to focus. (para. 6)

Reporting on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an assessment given to 15-year-old students in over 70 nations, Jerrim and Moss (2019) wrote of a “fiction effect” (p. 182). This fiction effect refers to the benefits that students reap from reading novels. The benefits include increased focusing and concentration abilities and deeper thinking and reflection capabilities. Books can make one more tolerant and help to open one’s mind (King, 2014). In what started as a blog post, but then was published in the *ALAN Review*, King (2014) wrote that reading enabled her to make better and smarter decisions while she was growing up; she learned from the characters in books she had read who had made mistakes, thus preventing her from making some mistakes. Literature has power: “the power to awaken us, change our views, and transform our understanding of the world” (Emert & Rodriguez, 2019, p. 9). Living through a literary

experience involves exploring meanings, interpretations and perspectives while maintaining an openness to future possibilities (Langer & Close, 2001). Waxing poetic, Miller (2009), author of *The Book Whisperer*, described it thusly:

> Reading changes your life. Reading unlocks worlds unknown or forgotten, taking travelers around the world and through time. Reading helps you escape the confines of school and pursue your own education. Through characters—the saints and the sinners, real or imagined—reading shows you how to be a better human being. (p. 18)

There were also claims that reading provided economic benefits (Collin, 2017), and that reading is important in helping students develop as people (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Perkins, 2013). Bemoaning the steady decline of reading by teens, Hertzel (2018) summed up the benefits of reading rather well:

> All of the clichés and platitudes about reading are true. It *does* help you cope with your own life. It does show you how huge and diverse the world is. It does make you empathetic. It does entertain you. It does teach you all kinds of new things. It does inspire you. (para. 14)

There was also wide support for reading being essential and beneficial to writing (Hanski, 2017; Maciulewicz, 2016; Rief, 2017). Two respected, award-winning, contemporary writers touted the benefit of reading as the foundation to good writing. Writing in his book on the craft of writing, Stephen King (2000) wrote that if one wants to be a writer, the two most important things to do are to read a lot and to write a lot. He noted that writers must first experience the thrill of reading a transformative or enthralling book before hoping to be able to write a book which is capable of transporting others. In his book on writing King (2000) further stressed the importance of reading to writing: “The real importance of reading is that it creates an ease &

intimacy with the process of writing. . . . The more you read, the less apt you are to make a fool of yourself with your pen or word processor" (p. 150). John Green (2012), in addressing the importance of reading, said that besides making you more empathetic and giving you a fuller understanding of others, "reading critically and attentively can give you the linguistic tools to share your own story with more precision." Good writing is not possible without reading (Hanski, 2017).

Misplaced Emphasis

High-stakes standardized testing has been one of the main areas of focus in education for a number of years; these efforts at improvement can be traced back to the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, issued by the U.S. Department of Education (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). This report sounded the alarm that the United States' education system was at risk. Dintersmith (2018) traced the increased emphasis on standardized tests back to a February 6, 1992, article in the *New York Times* that published international test-score rankings. Quoting Doug Lyons, Dintersmith (2018) related, "This was education's Sputnik moment. Given our hypercompetitive nature, we jumped into a standardized test race with both feet. February 6, 1992, marked the start of our educational Groundhog Day" (p. 15). The increase in high-stakes' testing and the amount of importance given to those tests increased dramatically with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Scogin et al., 2017). With the passage of NCLB, "standardized testing in public schools became the law of the land" (Deming, Cohodes, Jennings, & Jencks, 2016, p. 71). Boatright and Allman (2018), referring to a 2003 piece, stated that the US is now in "The Standards Period" (p. 7). Stotsky (2016) claimed that the emphasis on standardized testing started even earlier: "Schools have coped with an abundance of mandated testing since the early 1990s" (p. 287). The problem with this increase in standardized testing is that the additional time

and focus spent on preparing for the tests by schools and teachers, and therefore students, may be time and focus taken away from reading and reading comprehension (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Merga, 2015; Scogin et al., 2017). Hudson and Williams (2015) reasoned that even though the time students spend reading books continues to be the most reliable indicator of both students' reading achievement and growth, "this practice of giving students time to read is often left out of many classrooms and instead replaced with test preparation activities" (p. 531). Some suggested that due to the importance of test results, schools are not emphasizing the importance of reading (Sinclair, 2018; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014). Taking it one step further, Malo-Juvera and Scherff (2017) declared this misplaced emphasis on standardized tests a pandemic, calling it "standardized censorship" (p. 91). This teaching to the test mentality has led to teachers using shorter length canonical pieces which not only robs students of longer and more diverse literature, but does not improve their performance on standardized tests (Malo-Juvera & Scherff, 2017).

This shift in focus and attention may be contributing to the decrease seen in students' reading and their reading comprehension (Spichtig, et al., 2016). Dedicated teachers are better at identifying struggling students and in helping them improve, especially in their reading and writing: "No standardized test improved schools, and no standardized test made any difference in the quality of teachers" (de Vinck, 2015, p. 27). In his often-cited article "An Endangered Species Act for Literacy Education," Pearson (2007), decried the No Child Left Behind legislation: "In our quest to move every child ahead, we have fallen behind" (p. 145). Krashen (2009) claimed that American student readers were undergoing a literacy crisis and stated that "the true path to higher test scores is reading" (p. 151). In his highly regarded book *Readicide*, Gallagher (2009) claimed that many schools were committing readicide, which he defined as

"the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools" (p. 2). Referring to developmental reading students heading for community colleges, Flink (2017) declared that reading and reading comprehension are "the most significant challenges" (p. 87) and that "there is a lack of attention and research on how to best improve students' actual reading" (p. 87). Literacy standards and policies that are principally cognitively based and achievement driven may actually contribute to "reluctant and resistant readers" (Jang & Henretty, 2019). Many in the literature bemoaned the persistence of students' low reading proficiency rates and students' lack of improvement in reading and reading comprehension (Herrera et al., 2016; Merga, 2017). Citing a 2017 Scholastic study, Jang and Henretty (2019) noted that 86% of U.S. students aged 6–17 believed that being a good reader was very important to their future, but only 58% of these students liked reading books for pleasure. The authors noted that this disengagement continues into the students' adult years. Focusing only on high stakes standardized tests can rob students of the joy and many benefits of reading (Schaefer, 2017).

The poor performance in students' reading and comprehension continued to be evident in the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card. The NAEP is the largest continuing and nation-wide measure of academic achievement trends and has been active since 1969; it was created and is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is located in the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2019). The newest report released in October of 2019 charted results from nearly 300,000 students and found that students' reading scores, their reading proficiency and reading comprehension, declined compared to those scores reported in 2017 (NCES, 2019). Green and Goldstein (2019) called the results dismal and noted that eighth-grade students'

reading proficiency fell from 36% in 2017 to 34% in 2019. Further investigation into the reports' numbers also show that the disparity of reading proficiency between richer and poorer students continues to grow and that students in the bottom 10% of reading achievement lost more than those students in the middle and at the top (Green & Goldstein, 2019). Given the strong support for reading and its importance in learning and academic performance in addition to the continued decline in students' reading abilities, more attention needs to be given to helping increase students' ability in reading.

Self-Concept of Being a Reader

There are a number of factors involved in considering oneself a reader. Learned, Morgan, and Lui (2019) found that although many students mentioned that their reading identities in high school were "situated in years-long experiences" (p. 214), for those labeled as struggling or poor readers, changes and improvements are "within reach" (p. 214), with the proper environment and teacher contributions. According to the expectancy-value theory, "a person's self-concept is shaped not only by his or her previous achievement but also by a variety of social and cultural factors" (Retelsdorf et al., 2015, p. 186). Similarly, Bandura's social cognitive theory holds that functioning is a product of "personal, behavioral, and environmental influences" (Butz & Usher, 2015, p. 49). The social comparison theory, comparing one's reading performance to others has also been shown to affect the perception of one's own abilities (Pulford, Woodward, & Taylor, 2018). There is also some support in the literature for Weinreich's identity theory which holds that home environment, peers, and school practices all figure into students' forming their self-concept as readers (Glenn, Ginsberg, & King-Watkins, 2018).

As noted in the theoretical framework section, perhaps the most relevant theory is Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, which stresses the importance of the social interactions

and relationships students have with peers and other community members as being paramount to one's development, including learning to read and becoming a reader. In discussing Vygotsky, Daniels (2016) wrote that all human actions, including thinking, are "social in essence" (p. 30). Butz and Usher (2015) reported that students in their study indicated that their reading teachers "played an important role in boosting their sense of efficacy" (p. 55), meaning that effective teachers can help students build their self-confidence as readers which may lead to them considering themselves as readers. Farkas and Jang's (2019) study indicated that a high school curriculum incorporating social constructivism helped students improve their reading comprehension and reading motivation. Similarly, Taylor, Dimino, Lampi, and Caverly (2016) showed success in an integrated reading and writing course in two community colleges by grounding the courses in Vygotsky's social constructivism. Schaefer (2017) noted the importance of the "exploration of self as a reader" (p. 253) through peer interactions and classroom discussions.

Some held that considering oneself a reader was more about choice and that there is a clear distinction between assigned reading and reading by choice (Barone & Barone, 2016; Morgan & Wagner, 2013). Some maintained that one's identifying as a reader is more dependent on the contexts or situations and environment in which the person reads (Frankel, 2017; Schaefer, 2017). Hall (2016) demonstrated that middle school students could enhance their identity as readers in classes designed to improve self-concept. Others showed that students' expectancy of success influenced their self-concept as a reader (Learned et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2018). Perkins (2013) explained that reader's identities are somewhat more reliant on emotional reactions and personal connections made to books. Auyoung (2013) seemed to agree:

> Something about the phenomenology of novelistic experience prompts readers and critics alike to reach for metaphors of physical transport, but the precise nature of the relationship that novels forge between readers and implied fictional worlds has long seemed resistant to critical examination. (pp. 180–181)

Van De Wal and Ryan (2014) concurred: "The significance of adolescent literacy and the learners' identity has been noted by many scholars" (p. 4). The social component of reading is related to the self-concept of reading, with many scholars believing that identities are social (Frankel, 2017; Harste, 2014; Smith, 2017). Glenn et al. (2018) noted that "others can and do determine how adolescents see themselves as readers" (p. 307). Learned et al. (2019) also noted similar findings, writing that students, in discussing their identities as readers, were aware of how they were viewed by others in class and that the "social nature of valuing and feeling valued" was affected by "their teachers and peers' reactions to them" (p. 205).

Reading as a Social Process

There is agreement in the literature about reading being a social process, having a social component, and/or being socially situated (Frankel, 2017; Harste, 2014; Learned et al., 2019). A shift is called for in the way people view reading, from an autonomous model to a social-practice lens: "Anytime one uses language (including reading) one is simultaneously constructing relationships with others" (Bloome & Kim, 2017, p. 393). Perkins (2013) reported that the one feature of reading that all students mentioned was "the role of other people" (p. 299). All of the students perceived reading as "being related to others" (p. 299). Taking for granted that reading and literacy are socially situated, Learned et al. (2019) claimed that reading is not just the skill of decoding and understanding words, but rather "the enactment of multiple skills and identities mediated by participation in literacy practices through particular social and cultural contexts"

(p. 197). Reading experiences are rooted in social conditions and surroundings where students share their feelings and beliefs with others; students learning to read and improving their reading skills and comprehension are embedded in social interactions and social contexts (Evans, 2017).

Brandt's sponsors of literacy theory recognized the importance of others in literacy practices; the theory is one that is mentioned somewhat often in the literature (Brandt, 2015; Franzak, Porter, & Harned, 2019; Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016; Lawrence, 2015). Brandt's theory posits that most people's learning to read and write experiences are influenced by sponsors: "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (Brandt, 1998, p. 166). Writing more recently, Brandt (2015) clarified her concept of sponsors of literacy by emphasizing the last part of her definition: "and gain advantage by it in some way" (p. 330), adding that sponsors are those "who need our literacy as much or more than we do" (p. 331). Franzak et al. (2019) explained that "the economic and social context of literacy acquisition fundamentally shapes who, what, and how literacy is learned" (p. 3), asserting that sponsorship often functions to promote the sponsor's values and agenda. Several in the literature seemed to take a wider, more positive view of the influence of sponsors (Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016; Lawrence, 2015). In a study that focused on students who had earned advanced degrees and whose parents did not attend college, Knoester and Plikuhn (2016) noted that the vast majority of participants identified sponsors of reading, people who had positively influenced their ability and desire to read. Parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, church leaders and members were among those mentioned most frequently. Touting the social aspect of reading, the authors wrote "literacy practices can be viewed as part of the strategic, deepening, or maintaining of relationships with family members, friends, and others" (p. 113). Knoester and Plikuhn (2016)

found that the participants in their study "each developed strong habits of independent reading and were able to name specific models or sponsors of reading in their lives" (p. 118).

Pulford et al. (2018), in their report on social comparisons as it relates to academic performance and identity, discussed the social comparison theory, which maintains that the way students perceive the abilities of others can affect the perception of their own abilities, impacting their self-confidence. This confidence has been shown to positively affect incentive and motivation. A study exploring literature circles found that the social aspect that literature circles provided aroused students' desire to read, boosted self-confidence, and increased the desire to read of students; literature circles were especially effective with male students (Karatay, 2017). The social aspect was also found to affect reading online; several studies reported that adolescents' literary practices in online environments help shape students' identities as readers and writers in positive ways (Frankel, 2017).

Relaying results of a family literacy nights study, Dennis and Margarella (2017) noted the positive experiences of the events which revolved around reading being a social event. Harste (2014) enthusiastically called the acceptance of "literacy as a social practice" a "breakthrough in our understanding of literacy and literacy learning" (p. 90). Harste also emphasized the importance of reading and discussing books inside the classroom, adding, "I like to think of these social practices in terms of opening up new spaces in the classroom" (p. 100). In a somewhat unconventional social situation, Kropp and Shupp (2017) found that students who took part in animal-assisted literacy programs "demonstrated increased self-confidence, oral fluency, and overall motivation to read" (p. 11). Perhaps Perkins (2013), writing in her study on student teachers' perception of reading and teaching reading, said it best: "For some, reading was

perceived as an essentially private activity, for others it was a social event, but for all it was perceived as being related to others" (p. 299).

Motivational Forces

Motivation is an important element for students to read and for students to consider themselves readers. Boulhrir (2017) defined reading motivation as "the will, the desire, the urge, the intention and/or the decision to engage (or not engage) in a certain reading activity" (p. 57). Cantrell et al. (2017) called motivation that part of reading engagement that drives students to take part and continue. Some classified reading motivation as a complex construct complicated by several factors including ability, age, and gender (Farkas & Jang, 2019; Malloy et al., 2017). Byrd (2015), citing a 2009 piece by Boushey and Moser, stated that motivation is an important factor in students' becoming readers, and that "students who are motivated readers will read more often" (p. 128). In their meta-analysis on reading self-efficacy, Unrau et al. (2018) agreed, going as far as to claim that motivation drives not only reading but learning and that readers who are motivated read more and read more effectively. Gilson, Beach, and Cleaver (2018) listed choice and access to high interest materials as two "key factors influencing adolescent reading motivation" (p. 506). Mackey (2014) argued that choice and autonomy in student choice were important motivational factors. Choice of reading material and autonomy in reading and the social aspect were often mentioned in the literature as being motivational (Barone & Barone, 2016; Merga, 2017; Morgan & Wagner, 2013; NCTE, 2018; Smith, 2017). Several also noted the research-supported reading workshop model as being motivational (Calkins, 2010; Ginocchio, 2018; Hudson & Williams, 2015; Stevens, 2016). First brought to national attention in 1987 with Atwell's *In the Middle,* reading workshop uses three main components to engage and motivate students to read: choice, time, and the combination of response, community, and structure

(Hudson & Williams, 2015). Project LIT, a recent grassroots movement designed to promote reading in classrooms and communities, also cites choice, time, and peer interaction as the components necessary to motivate students to "become skilled lifelong readers" (Amato, 2018, p. 32).

Choice of reading material. Many in the literature championed the benefits of students being able to choose at least some of their reading materials (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Dickerson, 2015; Gaffney, 2014; Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; King, 2014). So important is student choice in selecting reading material that The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) included it as one of their original council statements. Now a NCTE position statement titled *Students' Right to Read*, it was first published in 1981 and was revised in 2009 and again in 2018. As part of their position statement, the NCTE (2018) included an open letter to the country which powerfully emphasized their belief in student choice:

> The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways, education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large. (para. 12)

Choice has been recognized as an important motivational factor for more than a century; Boatright and Allman (2018) traced student choice back to the early writings of John Dewey and claimed that Dewey understood the empowering possibilities that choice grants students. Miller (2009) claimed that students need to be given absolute autonomy in selecting books: "It is only

through such autonomy and agency that students can begin to own the reading process" (as cited in Boatright & Allman, 2018, p. 2). Butz and Usher (2015) noted that classroom interventions that were designed to encourage student choice of reading material and promote autonomy "could be useful for increasing motivation and achievement" (p. 56). Some noted that student interest in reading and their motivation to read tend to decline during middle school and continue through high school (Parsons et al., 2018; Stevens, 2016), but several also noted that choice of reading material seems to help increase students' desire and motivation to read (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Parsons et al., 2018; Stevens, 2016; Williams & McDaniel, 2017). There seemed to be agreement in the literature that motivation heavily influences student reading achievement (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).

Censorship. Many in the literature agreed that care and consideration must be used in suggesting and promoting reading material in schools and recognized that the experts, or most knowledgeable adults to help guide students in the selection, are the teachers and school librarians (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Dickerson, 2015; King, 2014; NCTE, 2018). Importantly, many also noted that throughout modern history there have been pressures from a variety of groups and individuals to limit or censure the choices in student reading material (Dickerson, 2015; Gaffney, 2014; King, 2014; NCTE, 2018). Some claimed that the teachers and school librarians are being usurped by groups, community organizations, and parents who are often pushing an agenda in their limiting student reading material (Gaffney, 2014; Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; NCTE, 2018). The NCTE and others (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Dickerson, 2015; Gaffney, 2014) likened the over-zealous restrictions often placed on reading materials in schools to censorship. The NCTE (2018) called this censorship "arbitrary and irrational" (para. 1). In their position statement, the NCTE (2018) noted that this censorship can give students a

misleading and less than adequate picture of the values, ideals, and problems of their country and culture. Continuing, the NCTE (2018) argued that the long-range effects of censoring student choice create an educational system that is "hostile to critical inquiry and dialogue" (para. 7). King (2014) reasoned that teachers are helping students learn how to be adults and part of this maturation is giving the students more responsibilities and autonomy; King concluded, "Hiding things from teenagers is a known fail" (p. 12).

Often the books that are being challenged or objected to are newer young adult (YA) books; books that feature teen protagonist and often deal with timely, difficult topics and situations, and portray "the diversity of the teen experience" (Gaffney, 2014, p. 732), which sometimes includes non-traditional views on gender, sex, and other topics (Gaffney, 2014). According to the American Library Association's 2016 report, in the last decade there were over 5,000 YA literature challenges reported to the Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALAOIF), with a total of 275 books reported to have been challenged or banned (Greathouse, Eisenbach, & Kaywell, 2017). Given the large number of schools, books, and students, these numbers may not seem substantial, but the ALAOIF noted that for every challenge they received there are four or five that are not reported (Greathouse et al., 2017). It is curious, to say the least, that calls for censorship and banning of YA literature seem to be increasing at the same time that the quality, diversity, and level of respect given YA books is also increasing (Cart, 2017; Gaffney, 2014; Kitchener, 2017; Roxburgh, 2015).

YA literature. Beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the present, YA literature reached a new golden age (Cart, 2017; Goodnow, 2007; Roxburgh, 2015). Some noted that the phenomenon started with the unprecedented sales of Harry Potter books and continued with the Twilight series (Cart, 2017; Goodnow, 2007). These record-breaking sales helped spur an

increase not only in the number and variety of YA books, but also saw an increase in the quality and more diverse and sophisticated writers writing in the genre (Roxburgh, 2015). Gaffney (2014) pointed out that the 1990s and 2000s saw "an explosion of YA literature in a variety of genres and subgenres and were characterized by increased diversity of teen protagonists" (p. 732). Others noted that YA literature, with its increase in quality and depth, also appealed to adult readers; Kitchener (2017) noted that 55% of today's YA readers are over the age of 18. The recognition of the stature and increased importance and quality of YA literature was confirmed when the National Book Foundation added a Young People's Literature category in 1996 and in 2000 the American Library Association created the Michael L. Printz award for excellence in YA literature (Cart, 2017; Goodnow, 2007). Roxburgh (2015) hailed the emergence of YA literature as the "most significant development in publishing in the last forty years" (para. 1).

YA literature is important to high school student readers because it gives them a voice, an opportunity to be reassured that they are not alone and that others have and will continue to experience some of the same problems and frustrations that they now face (Anderson, 2019; Greathouse et al., 2017; Kitchener, 2017; Peck, 2018). Many YA books feature a coming-of-age experience or experiences. These help students navigate their own challenges and are one of the reasons that adults still enjoy YA books; people never stop coming of age (Kitchener, 2017).

Giving students the opportunity or the choice to read YA books can help motivate and engage reluctant teen readers and help foster students' social-emotional development (Greathouse et al., 2017). Contemporary YA books have helped change students' lives for the better and even saved some lives (Greathouse et al., 2017). YA literature empowers students by allowing them to read novels that reflect their lived experiences; students felt that they had a voice and their voice mattered which caused them to be more engaged and willing to take

academic risks (Boatright & Allman, 2018). Contemporary YA literature can serve as a dress rehearsal or dry run for situations and problems that teens are going to face in the world, and it helps them to be better informed so they can deal with real world situations (Greathouse et al., 2017; Malo-Juvera & Scherff, 2017). YA literature offers students the opportunity to self-reflect, which promotes connectivity, curiosity, and empathy (Batchelor, Ramos, & Neiswander, 2018). Contemporary YA literature allows teens to explore and discuss, in a non-threatening environment, those important issues that they face, and using YA literature in the classroom helps teachers promote what Freire called a spirit of conscientization, an understanding of the world and its many political and social contradictions (Babino, Araujo, & Maxwell, 2019). In 2008, Michael Cart, in discussing the importance of helping to educate and motivate students to the fullest extent, summed up an important benefit of encouraging students to read YA literature:

> One value of young adult literature is its capacity for fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives—exterior and interior—of individuals who are unlike the reader. In this way, young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who—if not for the encounter in reading—might forever remain strangers or—worse—irredeemably "other." (as cited in Batchelor et al., 2018, p. 33)

Contemporary YA literature motivates students to read because it is reflective of their world by exploring many of the issues that teens are facing like the dangers of social media, body shaming, drugs, and immigration (Corbett, 2019). YA literature motivates students to read because it allows them to see that people their age can be sources of strength and it allows them to better connect with what they read (Nguyen, 2019). YA literature motivates students to read more and to view reading more positively; it also has been shown to help students perform better

on achievement tests and can serve as a bridge to the classics (Glaus, 2014; Turkyilmaz, 2018). Students more easily engage and appreciate YA texts because YA texts "link to their lived experiences and [also] provide scaffolding towards more complex texts" (Elish-Piper, Wold, & Schwingendorf, 2014, p. 567). Some YA books also offer counternarratives to the prevailing classic canon which provide important alternative views that help counter "the misconceptions and misrepresentations of Blackness and Black people" (Tulino, Krishnamurthy, Fall, & Browne, 2019, p. 36). Many YA works contain the same literary elements that are found in classic and canonical texts, but the difference is that YA books are often found to be more engaging and interesting by teens, thus helping to increase their motivation to want to read (Glaus, 2014; Moskal, 2019). Anderson (2019) championed the combination of YA literature and the strength and influence of peers as a reading motivational force. The pairing of YA books and student discussion groups "allowed students to process complex ideas and deep themes in a low-stakes environment where they did not feel uncomfortable or fear judgment" (Anderson, 2019, p. 25).

The social aspect. The social aspect was another often-mentioned cause of motivation. Several sources listed peer interaction as one of the key components to motivating and engaging students in reading (Amato, 2018; Hudson & Williams, 2015; Williams & McDaniel, 2017). Merga (2017), in singing the praises and benefits of reading, related that research supports that "adolescents' attitudes towards recreational book reading may be influenced by the attitudes of their friends, educators, and families" (p. 2), meaning that these relationships can prove to be influential and motivational. Williams and McDaniel (2017) wrote that "peer recommendations can motivate students to want to read and increase their reading achievement" (p. 77). In a study researching reading motivation among adolescents, Neugebauer (2017) found that social

interaction was positively and significantly correlated to reading motivation. Smith (2017) noted that most students, when asked about becoming a reader, attributed their being readers to being encouraged by a person, not a program. Farkas and Jang (2019) agreed: "A large body of research points to the importance of peer tutoring and peer cooperation in the development and motivation of lifelong learners and readers" (p. 306). Thompson (2014) cited high school English teachers as one of the most influential and motivational forces in advocating students to become readers. Groenke (2017) named both social aspects and teachers as key motivational forces in students' reading. Sinclair (2018) extolled the benefits and motivational factor of making reading a social experience by promoting dialogue between students about reading: "Reading, as dialogic, lived experience, invites the reader's knowledge of and experience in the world into meaning making" (p. 27).

Reading Is Reading

Similar to the reported benefits of allowing students to select their own reading material, the literature supported recognizing non-traditional reading, the reading of texts other than traditional books, as reading. Conradi (2014) postulated that encouraging and supporting the reading of non-traditional texts can improve students' perspective of reading and give rise to their motivation to read: "By acknowledging all types of reading as reading, we have the opportunity to affirm and improve students' self-concepts" (p. 55). In a two-year, in-class experiment Dickerson (2015) learned that students do need to be guided towards texts that interest them and resonate with them and that they need to be given the freedom to explore those texts. As a result of her experiment, Dickerson (2015) assembled five rules that have made her students successful in their reading. Her first rule is that a book is a book.

Comic books, graphic novels, and manga. Considering comic books and graphic novels as reading has been a topic of debate for years (Marshall, 2018). Their acceptance as true literary forms does appear to be happening in recent years (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017; Marshall, 2018). Respect for graphic novels as a true literary form certainly increased with the awarding of a Hugo Award for the graphic novel *Watchmen* in 1988 and a Pulitzer Prize to the graphic novel *Maus* in 1992 (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017). McGrail, Rieger, Doepker, and McGeorge (2018) noted that many teachers and professors are already using comics and graphic novels in class. They added that it is no longer a question of if teachers and professors should be using comics and graphic novels but how they should use them and for what purposes. Many in the literature extol the benefits and worth of reading comics and graphic novels, including manga, as an appealing aid to learn to read and as a lure to get young and reluctant students to want to read (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017; Krashen, 2009; Marshall, 2018; McGrail et al., 2018). Comics and graphic novels not only help students learn to read, but many contain sophisticated dialogue, complex plots, universal themes, and all the literary elements found in other literature (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017; Krashen, 2009; Marshall, 2018). The language acquisition theory holds that providing pictures along with text, as in comics and graphic novels, helps provide clues that can shed light on the meanings of unfamiliar words and grammatical structures; this can be especially helpful to beginning readers and readers learning a new language (Krashen, 2009). There are also a number of studies that indicated reading comic books and graphic novels leads to reading other types of books: "There is strong evidence from case studies that comics can serve as a conduit to book reading" (Krashen, 2009, p. 110). Teachers' acceptance of comics, graphic novels, and manga as literature has been shown to help build quality learning environments (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017). Reading comics and graphic novels has also been

shown to help students increase their reading comprehension and help students learn to navigate multimodal texts, an academic requirement in most states and one advocated by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in multiple subject areas (Jiménez, Roberts, Brugar, Meyer, & Waito, 2017).

Digital texts and e-books. The explosion in technologically advanced devices that present people with the opportunity to read digitally was addressed by many scholars; most voiced their approval. Some noted that with the ever-expanding array of devices that enable students to read that the very definition of the "act of reading has been broadened to include the visual, analytical, and technological skills necessary to acquire information from digital video, handheld data assistants, computers, wireless reading devices, cell phones, or other technological learning devices" (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019, p. 9). Cardullo, Zygouris-Coe, and Wilson (2017) noted that technology is driving change in both the form and function of literacy. These authors went as far as to claim that readers reading hypermedia were more engaged because hypermedia offers a more "active role to reading" (p. S193). Morgan and Wagner (2013) found that using new or non-traditional texts together with "canonical literature" (p. 665) helped to increase not only students' reading but their motivation to read. In a study of students reading e-books conducted in schools across the UK, Picton and Clark (2015) reported several positive results. Students participating in the study showed a significant increase in their enjoyment of reading, commented that they thought reading was cool, and fewer students said they found reading difficult or could not find things to read that interested them. Dierking (2015) found that students using electronic reading devices appreciated the "convenience, novelty, escape, privacy, and flow" (p. 411) that the devices offered. Using an electronic device to read a book allows the reader privacy in that no one else can tell what the reader is reading. This was especially

important to adolescents who read books that their peer group may not approve of (Dierking, 2015). MacDonald and Walsh (2014) extolled the positive responses of using social media in college composition classes for both reading and writing. Frankel (2017) reported that students forged their own literate identities and influenced others to do the same through "online literacy practices" (p. 502). Picton and Clark's (2015) e-book study also reported practitioners' reactions: "84.6% of practitioners felt that their e-books project had increased pupils' reading enjoyment and motivation, and 7 in 10 felt it had increased pupils' reading skills" (p. 6). The literature certainly seems to support the recognition of nontraditional texts.

Gaps

The largest gap in the existing literature appears to be the lack of studies from the high school student reader's perspective, studies that explore what it means to be a reader examining the lived experiences of students who identify as readers. There is no shortage of literature from the perspectives of teachers, professors, and administrators, as discussed above (Akbasli et al., 2016; Bloome & Kim, 2017; Collin, 2018; Harste, 2014; Koon & Petscher, 2016; Scogin et al., 2017). What is missing, however, clearly seems to be a comprehensive exploration of what it truly means to be a reader and how being a reader affects one's sense of self, from the teen student reader's perspective. McGeown et al. (2015) noted that there was a significant body of research on childhood reading, but significantly less on adolescents' reading. Cantrell et al. (2017), in their study exploring how to improve struggling readers' reading and comprehension, stated that studies from a student's point of view are "a dimension often missing, yet much needed" (p. 68). Neugebauer (2017) wrote in the abstract to her study on reading motivation that "research on methods for accurately assessing adolescent reading motivation is still uncommon" (p. 131). Herrera et al. (2016), in their summary of 20 years of research on adolescent literacy

programs, also noted the gap, writing, “None of the programs and practices identified as having positive or potentially positive effects has been examined in a high school setting, suggesting a clear gap in the literature” (p. 6). Evans (2017) stated simply that “more examination of adolescent reader’s experiences is necessary” (p. 317). Farkas and Jang (2019) agreed, noting that there was a clear absence of the voice of adolescent readers in the literature. There is a true lack of research exploring what it means to be a reader from a high school student perspective. This study was designed and undertaken to help address that gap.

Summary

This literature review examined several important aspects of reading and readers that are apropos to this study. It began with an examination on what it means to be a reader, which the literature defined as someone who enjoys reading (Barone & Barone, 2016; Frankel, 2017; Merga et al., 2018), chooses to read, even when not required to (Barone & Barone, 2016), and often finds reading to provide an escape, or the experience of being lost in a book (Auyoung, 2013; Kilgallon, 2017; Mendelsund, 2014). Next, the review briefly touched on two reading theories; both saw reading as an active and creative process with a social component and both recognized the many benefits of reading (Schaefer, 2017). The review then explored the benefits of being a reader. The literature contained wide support for the paramount importance of reading and reading comprehension to all areas of learning (Aslan, 2016; Kropp & Shupp, 2017; Merga, 2015; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). Important benefits of reading fiction, which included helping in the development of empathy and several areas of social development, were also found (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Ingraham, 2016; Prior, 2018; Ricci, 2015). Support for reading being influential in developing writing skills was also noted (Green, 2012; Hanski, 2017; King, 2000; Maciulewicz, 2016; Rief, 2017).

The numerous benefits to a wide array of developmental areas and learning made the next area explored—misplaced emphasis—rather difficult to understand. It appears that many schools and school districts are focusing on standardized testing at the expense of focusing on reading (Dennis & Margarella, 2017; de Vinck, 2015; Spichtig, et al., 2016). The literature showed that the emphasis on standardized testing began in the 1980s (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019) and has been exasperated by more recent educational legislation (Scogin et al., 2017).

Next the review explored the self-concept of reading. Several theories abound in the literature as to the factors involved in considering oneself a reader. Some held that environment was important (Butz & Usher, 2015; Glenn et al., 2018). Others asserted that previous achievement and school practices were important (Retelsdorf et al., 2015). The aspect that seems to have received the most attention and study is the social aspect: the importance of peers, family members, and others; the social environment associated with reading, sharing books and talking about reading; and teacher interaction and encouragement (Frankel, 2017; Glenn et al., 2018; Harste, 2014; Smith, 2017). The social aspects that contribute to readers' self-concept led to exploring reading as a social process. The literature seems to have embraced reading as a social process (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Dennis & Margarella, 2017; Harste, 2014; Pulford et al., 2018) and noted that this is a somewhat recent acknowledgement whereas reading was historically seen as more of an autonomous pursuit (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Perkins, 2013).

Motivational forces, the forces that encourage and drive one to read and to become a reader, were examined. Choice of reading material and the relatability of reading material were often mentioned (Barone & Barone, 2016; Butz & Usher, 2015) as adding to students' motivation to read, with a large number of authors and researchers extolling the benefits of YA literature (Babino et al., 2019; Batchelor et al., 2018; Gaffney, 2014; Greathouse et al., 2017;

Nguyen, 2019; Turkyilmaz, 2018). Teacher relationships and teacher encouragement were also mentioned as sources of motivation (Merga, 2017; Thompson, 2014). Not surprisingly, one of the most frequently mentioned sources of motivation seemed to be the social aspects (Farkas & Jang, 2019; Merga, 2017; Sinclair, 2018; Smith, 2017; Williams & McDaniel, 2017).

The last area of reading explored in the literature was what sources of text or information are considered reading. The literature was supportive of a wide variety of technological devices for reading and saw the new devices as additional opportunities for students to read (Cardullo et al., 2017; Picton & Clark, 2015; Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). Some also noted new benefits that digital reading devices offered students such as increased privacy and convenience (Dierking, 2015). There was also support for non-traditional printed texts which included comic books, graphic novels, and manga (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017; Krashen, 2009; Marshall, 2018; McGrail et al., 2018). The point seemed to be that reading is reading.

The last topic covered and the one that leads to the need for the study is the gaps in the literature. The largest gap, one that was mentioned a number of times in a variety of sources, was what it means to be a reader from a high school reader's perspective (Cantrell et al., 2017; Evans, 2017; Farkas & Jang, 2019; Herrera et al., 2016). While there is an abundance of reports and studies chronicling reading from the perspective of teachers, professors, and others (Akbasli et al., 2016; Bloome & Kim, 2017; Collin, 2018; Harste, 2014; Koon & Petscher, 2016; Scogin et al., 2017), what is missing is an exploration of what it means to be a reader from a high school reader's perspective, studies that delve into the lived experience of what it means to be a reader to high school students (Evans, 2017; Farkas & Jang, 2019). It is this gap, this rather large area that is in desperate need of attention, that this study addressed. This study explored what it means to be a reader and what being a reader means to a student's sense of self from high school

students' perspective. It is hoped that the results of this study will help recognize, shine a light on, and lend an ear to the voice of the adolescent reader, a voice that is listened to far too infrequently (Evans, 2017; Farkas & Jang, 2019).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student. This is an area not fully explored in the existing literature. This methods section discusses and details the design of the study, including a brief historical perspective; the setting of the study; the participants; the procedures, including data collection and analysis; trustworthiness; ethical considerations; and concludes with a summary.

Design

To explore and better understand the lived experience of high school students who identify as readers, I chose a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods' strengths are many and are fitting when one wants to explore the experiences from the perspective of the participants. Qualitative methods are preferred for researchers who are seeking to fully explore behaviors, feelings, perceptions, and understanding (Rahman, 2017). Further, I chose a hermeneutical phenomenological approach for this study. A brief look at the evolution of phenomenology will help illuminate why I chose to undertake a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to this study.

Philosopher Immanuel Kant used the term phenomenology to describe understanding on the basis of experience (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Phenomenology was first established as a discipline by mathematician Edmund Husserl in the early 1900s (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). At its heart, phenomenology is a form of inquiry and research that attempts to "grasp the exclusively singular aspects (identity/essence/otherness) of a phenomenon or event" (van Manen, 2016, p. 27). Husserl's approach has evolved into what is now termed descriptive

phenomenology or what the leading contemporary proponent, Moustakas, calls transcendental phenomenology (Alase, 2017), and includes the researchers' bracketing or setting aside their perceptions and biases (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, disagreed with certain tenants of Husserl's phenomenology, most notably bracketing, believing that prior experiences and understandings of the researchers can be beneficial in the interpretation and analysis phases (Bynum & Varpio, 2017; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Heidegger felt that the observer or researcher could not remove himself or herself from "the process of essence-identification" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1297). Heidegger developed interpretive phenomenology using hermeneutics, the "philosophy of interpretation" (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018, p. 96). The word hermeneutic comes from the Greek god Hermes, whose job was to interpret and make clear messages between gods (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology was further developed by Max van Manen, who identified the four areas that make up the life-world, which help define and interpret lived experience (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). In the human sciences and in education, van Manen has become a leading contemporary proponent of hermeneutic phenomenology (Alase, 2017; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology is "a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of other, the whole, the communal, or the social" (van Manen, 2015, p. 7). By choosing to conduct a hermeneutic phenomenology study, I hoped to better understand what it means to be a reader from a high school student's perspective and how being a reader contributes to one's sense of self. I hoped to then be able to communicate my understandings and interpretations so that others will benefit as well from this work. I am convinced that this design is well-suited and the best approach for my study. Hermeneutic phenomenology "describes how

one interprets the texts of life" (van Manen, 2015, p. 4). This qualitative approach seeks to offer understanding and interpretation to the researcher, the participant, and those who read the researcher's reflections on the essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced, as it is lived (van Manen, 2015). I can trace my inspiration to van Manen's (2015) description of what causes researchers to select to conduct a phenomenology: "The method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (a parent or teacher) in the first place" (p. 2). Van Manen (2016) described this approach as one "driven by pathos" that aims to "grasp the exclusively singular aspects (identity/essence/otherness) of a phenomenon" (pp. 26–27). Hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology provides "the best opportunity to give voice to the experience" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1294). It is for these reasons that I chose a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for my study.

Research Questions

Central question: What is the lived experience of a self-described reader?

Sub-question one: What meaning do students who identify as readers ascribe to being a reader?

Sub-question two: How does being a reader affect the student participants' feelings of self?

Sub-question three: How did students who describe themselves as readers become readers; do students who describe themselves as readers attribute their becoming a reader to an event, time, incident, or relationship?

Setting

The sites for my study are three high schools located in a small northeastern city in the United States (all school names are pseudonyms). Wallop and Abbott High School, Northern

High School, and The Academy. The schools' populations reflect the demographics of the city where they are located: Wallop and Abbott is the only public high school in the city and has an enrollment of approximately 1500. Northern is the only Catholic high school, and its enrollment is approximately 300 students. The Academy is the only other private high school in the city, and it has an enrollment of approximately 450. The population in the city is predominately White, near 90%, and middle to lower-middle class economically: per capita income is below $30,000 with a median household income of over $35,000. The population is less ethnically diverse than the national average, and the per capita and median household incomes are lower than national averages (Neighborhood Scout, 2018).

The three schools were selected to gain a variety of participants drawn from the public high school, a Catholic high school, and a private academy. The location of the schools was purposely selected due to my living and teaching in the area. I therefore had easy access to the participants. By having my participants come from several different schools, both public and private, I hoped to gain a somewhat more diverse group of participants than if I were to have selected students from just one school.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to identify participants for the study from the three schools discussed above. In phenomenological studies, the participants need to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question (Corby, Taggart, & Cousins, 2015; Creswell, 2007). Participants were those students who self-identified as readers. Specific criteria on determining this is discussed in the procedures section below. After receiving permission from all parties concerned, as detailed below, I enlisted the help of English teachers from each school to help select students who self-identify as readers. My goal was to have a minimum of 10–20 students

participate. Participants were a mix of male and female, junior and senior students who ranged in age from 16–18 years old. The unifying feature is that the participants have experienced the phenomenon: they identified as being readers.

Procedures

After applying for and receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix H), I undertook to recruit participants for my study. I contacted the superintendents (see Appendix D) and then after gaining their permission, contacted the principals of each school. I then enlisted the help of English teachers from each school to identify readers, sharing with them a flyer that I had originally intended to hang in schools (see Appendix A). This was made somewhat more difficult as face-to-face meetings in school had been suspended due to the COVID-19 crisis. I shared my definition of a reader (see the three-point definition below) with the English teachers and asked for their help in identifying possible students who were readers who might be interested in participating in my study. Readers were defined as those who (a) identify as a reader or describes themselves as a reader, (b) "think positively about reading" (Clark & Teravainen, 2017, para. 5), and (c) "a person who chooses to read" (Barone & Barone, 2016, p. 48) even when he or she does not have to. After assembling a list of possible student participants, I then performed the necessary steps of getting permission from the participants or from the participants and their parents/guardians, as some of the participants were minors. I sent potential participants or their parents/guardians a consent form which included information on the study; I took care to follow all of the guidelines and rules set forth by Liberty University and the IRB in recruiting and gaining permission of participants. There were two consent forms: one for minors which the parents/guardians had to sign as well as the minor participant (see Appendix C), and one for participants who were adults, 18 years old (see Appendix B). After

gaining all of the required and necessary permissions, I began collecting data in four ways: interviews; emails and texts; written reflections which van Manen (2015) called protocol writing; and reader-inspired photos, images, and pictures.

The Researcher's Role

As the human instrument conducting this study, both observing and interpreting, several things must be revealed. I am currently a full-time high school English teacher at one of the schools from which I recruited participants. I did not recruit any individuals whom I currently had as students so as to eliminate any conflict of interest or possible influence. I only teach students who are juniors, so it was not difficult to recruit students who were not in my classes at the time of the study. I have been a teacher in this school for five years after teaching in Missouri and in Virginia. I returned to this school after teaching in those two other states for a total of 10 years; a great number of years ago I graduated from the school where I now teach.

I am also a reader; I have been a reader for as long as I can remember. I come from a family of readers. Reading has provided me with many benefits, has positively affected my life, and is partially responsible for my vocational choice. I know what being a reader means to me and how it has helped me to weather difficult times, be a better person, learn, and better express myself, but I am not sure if my experiences are unique or if they are shared by other readers. I am reasonably sure that other readers share some of my experiences and effects; I am also sure that there are many readers whose experiences are different from mine and that is what I hope to learn from this study: what is the lived experience of a reader? Themes and experiences generated from this study have the possibility to not only help me and other teachers, but to also shed light on the importance of reading and what effects being a reader has on students. Accepting my love of reading and its formative effects, I purposely chose to undertake a

hermeneutic phenomenological study as this approach somewhat rejects the idea of reduction and suspending personal feelings and opinions and uses an interpretive, narrative description in relating participants' thoughts and experiences (Kafle, 2013). Van Manen (2015) asserted that it can be useful for a researcher to use personal experiences as a starting point in studying a phenomenon (p. 54), and being aware of one's own life experiences of a phenomenon may "provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus all the other stages of phenomenological research" (p. 57). Bynum and Varpio (2018) went so far as to state that hermeneutic phenomenology "requires that researchers acknowledge their own past experiences and existing knowledge as embedded in and essential to the interpretive process" (p. 252). It is my belief that my being a reader will help me better understand the experiences, beliefs, and thoughts of students who identify as readers.

Data Collection

I collected data in four ways. My primary source of data was personal interviews, and I augmented and enhanced these interviews with emails and texts. I also asked participants to describe their experiences in writing, a process van Manen (2015) called protocol writing, and I used reader-inspired photos, images, and pictures (either hand drawn or digitally produced) as data; the details of data collection are explained in more detail below.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews via Zoom with each of the participants; in-depth interviews are usually the first and primary data collection source in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007; LaSala, Wilson, & Sprunk, 2016; van Manen, 2015). According to van Manen (2015), hermeneutic phenomenology interviews serve two specific purposes: (a) to explore and gather information from people who have experienced the

phenomenon, and (b) as a way to develop a conversational relationship with participants about the meaning of their experience. Alase (2017), citing several sources, called the qualitative interview a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 15). The interviews consisted mainly of open-ended questions and helped determine clusters of meaning and themes. I video-recorded the interviews on Zoom and recorded all interviews using the iPhone app Just Press Record. Just Press Record provided a transcription feature that, while not perfect, was certainly helpful. During the interview I also took notes, and after each interview I transcribed the recordings and made notes while the interview was fresh in my memory. Van Manen (2015) also considered this writing to be the beginning of the analytical process. The following list includes the 10 open-ended interview questions asked of the participants:

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. What types or genres of books do you like best? Please explain why these are your favorites.
3. What are your three or four favorite things about reading? Please describe them in detail.
4. Please describe anyone else who is a reader, friends, peers, teachers, who may have influenced you to become a reader.
5. What is being a reader like?
6. Tell me about the earliest time that you identified or realized you were a reader?
7. How may your family members' reading habits have influenced you in becoming a reader?
8. Please describe some of the reasons you read.
9. Please fill in the blank: My being a reader makes me feel like _____.

10. Selfies, photos, and pictures can sometimes help express ideas, feelings, or thoughts in a creative way. Have you ever expressed what reading is, or what being a reader means to you, other than in words? Perhaps in selfies or pictures or artwork? If you have indeed expressed yourself in one of these ways, can you describe it for me now? And, would you be willing to share these photos or pictures with me?

Question 1 was to help the participant feel at ease and was used as an ice-breaker of sorts. I first gave a brief introduction as to why I was conducting the study and offered some pertinent details. I then asked the first question to get the participant to begin talking. It was important to put the participating students at ease before asking them about their lived experiences (Alase, 2017). By asking Question 2, I hoped to explore some of the main reasons each of the participants reads. Their experiences allowed me to better understand their perspectives on what reading means to them and the joys or other benefits that it brings. This also added to the existing literature the somewhat seldom-heard voices of the high school student readers on the reasons they read. Exploring the reasons students read is paramount to understanding the reasons high school students read (Jang & Henretty, 2019). Question 3 helped the participants focus on one or more concrete moments in which they lived the experience (Van Manen, 2016). Question 3 helped me in determining some of the reasons the participants attributed to becoming readers and why they became readers. Question 4 sought to discover the social significance of the participant becoming a reader. This question helped to illuminate the social constructivism theoretical framework of this study and either added to the support in the literature for reading being a social practice (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Harste, 2014; Perkins, 2013) or contradicted it. Question 5 goes to the heart of the phenomenon being studied. Phenomenology explores the meaning of the phenomenon (being a reader) as it is lived through (van Manen, 2016). Question 6 sought to have

the participants reflect on when they first realized that they were experiencing the phenomenon. In interviews, it is helpful to "elicit a specific experience" (van Manen, 2016, p. 299). Question 7, similar to Question 4, sought to discover the social significance of the participant becoming a reader. This question helped to illuminate the social constructivism theoretical framework of this study and either added to the support in the literature for reading being a social practice (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Harste, 2014; Perkins, 2013) or contradicted it. Question 8, similar to Question 2, helped me to explore some of the main reasons each of the participants reads. Their lived-experiences allowed me to better understand their perspectives on what reading means to them and the joys or other benefits that it brings. Also, like Question 2, their experiences added to the existing literature the somewhat seldom-heard voices of the high school student readers on the reasons they read. Exploring the reasons students read is paramount to understanding the reasons high school students read (Jang & Henretty, 2019). Question 9 afforded the students the opportunity to give voice to how being a reader affects their sense of self (one of my sub-questions) and helped shine additional light on what the lived experience of being a reader is (my central question). A phenomenological study needs to gather students' stories as they think back and reflect on their lived experiences (Evans, 2017). Question 10 served as an introduction of sorts for the collection of photos, images, and pictures as data. My hope was that it might also act as inspiration for the student to take or create images. After receiving images from those participants who shared them, we discussed the images they shared, and I asked them to name or title their images (see Figures 1–19). Photos and pictures allow individuals to more easily share their thoughts and opinions (Wallace, 2015).

Emails and Texts

After the first interviews, I communicated with the participants via email and welcomed them to reach out to me via email and/or text messages. I used these emails and texts to clarify information from the interviews and to ask questions that came up after the interview. Padilla (2003) used emails in her study to "obtain an exhaustive description of the experience" (p. 416). Given the culture and age of the participants, I believed that some may prefer and feel more comfortable communicating via computer, tablet, or phone. Thus, these modes of communication could potentially provide information not garnered in face-to-face interviews. It is important to give participants the opportunity to provide additional details or expand on information given in the initial interview (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). All of the participants communicated with me via email, sending information, asking questions, adding additional information or commenting on images, and several students sent me information or asked questions via text messages. All participants seemed to be quite comfortable communicating via their computers or cell phones.

Protocol Writing

A third way that I gathered data was through protocol writing. Van Manen (2015) described protocol writing as simply asking participants to write down their experiences. "The most straightforward way to go about our [hermeneutical phenomenological] research is to ask selected individuals to write their experiences down" (van Manen, 2015, p. 63). Van Manen (2015) termed this writing *protocol writing*, citing the meaning of protocol from the Greek referring to the original draft. In other words, having participants write their lived experiences down is close to the original experience itself. Written narratives provides a deep exploration of a phenomenon (Paone, Malott, Pulliam, & Gao, 2018). Protocol writing, in addition to interviews,

helps to “maximize the depth of participant’s description of their lived experience” (Sweet & Parker, 2019, p. 67). I asked the participants to write their experiences down in response to four open-ended questions:

1. What is your favorite book? Why is it your favorite book?
2. What were the one or two particular things, events, or incidents, or relationships, that led to you becoming a reader?
3. Please describe the feelings or sensations that you associate with reading.
4. How would you describe the benefits of reading to a friend whom you were trying to convince to become a reader?

Question 1 helped participants focus on a concrete moment of their lived experience (van Manen, 2016) and helped illuminate or give voice to some of the reasons they enjoy reading and perhaps why they identify as a reader. Question 1 also provided the opportunity to bring to light the existence of a “home run book” (Krashen, 2009, p. 82), that one book which led to them becoming a reader. Question 2 was created to shed some light on how the student became a reader and to help the student reflect back on any possible people, events, or incidents that led them to become readers. This presented the opportunity to discover if an MKO was an important motivator in becoming a reader, which would support the importance of the social interaction component that is well supported in the literature (Boerma et al., 2015; Farkas & Jang, 2019; Sarroub & Pernicek, 2016). Question 3 helped the participants express their feelings about reading. These expressions of emotions helped them (the participants) and me (the researcher) gain a greater sense of “nearness and intimacy with the phenomenon” (van Manen, 2016, p. 249). Question 4 casts the participant as an MKO, a person with more knowledge or a better understanding of a particular process, in this case reading. The MKO is a key part of Vygotsky’s

social constructivism theories (Cicconi, 2014). I asked the participants to write as though they were addressing a friend in the hopes that it would cause them to more closely examine some of their own experiences so as to share them, thereby providing some detailed and rich descriptions (van Manen, 2015).

Selfies, Photos, and Pictures

Many high school students take selfies and pictures on a somewhat regular basis. By asking participants to share selfies, pictures, photographs, and images that have a reader connection, that depict reading, that were inspired by reading, or that communicate what being a reader means, I hoped to access new and valuable insights about the essence of the phenomenon. I broached this subject with the participants during the initial interviews, as noted above, and then, when necessary, followed up via emails to schedule a second photo, selfie, image, or picture sharing interview. Most students who shared pictures, images, and photographs discussed them with me during the initial interview. After the students shared the images with me, we discussed them either in a second interview/conversation, or via emails and texts. These additional discussion/interviews and email and text discussions provided valuable addition data. There is growing interest in visual data, pictures, videos, and drawings, as being rich and descriptive data sources (Flick, 2013; Rodriguez & Smith, 2018). Pictures are a form of dialogue in a visual world. They serve as a viable alternative and a creative form of communication (Paone et al., 2018). Elliot, Read, and Baumfield (2016) called taking photos “a personal, creative, collaborative, and reflective mode of meaning-making through visual construction, often to communicate one’s innermost thoughts and feelings” (p. 482). Sharing and discussing reader-inspired selfies and pictures is a newer approach that has the potential to elicit unique and descriptive data from an emic perspective on what it means to be a reader. This data helped me

as the researcher share in the participants' experiences; van Manen (2016) asserted that "new experiences may grant us unexpected encounters with significances that we did not know before" (p. 18). This newer type of data helped participants better express themselves, thereby giving a voice to their lived experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014) in a non-traditional method that many of them are comfortable using and use to communicate on a daily basis (Flick, 2013). By combining the sharing of the images with a conversation/interview, I was able to explore the images more fully and ask questions as to the images' meanings. I encouraged the participants to verbally title or caption each image and describe what each one meant to them. This combination of image and discussion/interview clarified meaning and specificity and allowed participants to better express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Elliot et al., 2016).

Shortly after this picture sharing and discussion/interview process, I transcribed the conversations/interviews and matched up the pictures with their titles and descriptions that were provided by the participants. Miller (2018) used transcriptions of interviews together with photographs collected during her photo-sharing study before using thematic analysis as part of her data analysis procedures and found photo sharing to be a process that can be used to "balance power between individuals" (p. 143). Several viewed photos and pictures as unique and creative ways for people to communicate (Flick, 2013; Paone et al., 2018), and ways that people use to communicate private and personal meaning and feelings (Elliot et al., 2016). After transcribing the interviews and grouping the pictures per the transcripts, I analyzed the data along with my data collected in the initial interviews, emails and texts, and protocol writing following the procedures described below.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data really began as I started collecting the data. Data analysis was a constant, ongoing activity throughout the study, beginning with the first interview (Moghadam, Ghiyasvandian, Shahbazzadegan, & Shamshiri, 2017). In qualitative studies data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not separate and distinct steps in the process: they go on simultaneously (Creswell, 2007). I transcribed all of the interview recordings shortly after the interviews took place and I grouped all of that data with the data gathered from texts and emails, protocol writing, and the selfies, photos, and pictures; Stuckey (2015) called transcribing interview data and organizing qualitative data the first step in data analysis. I then began my analysis process following the procedures detailed below.

Lean Coding

I used lean coding, a process in which the research begins with a short list of five or six categories with brief labels or codes; some researchers call this using prefigured codes or pre-existing codes, or a priori codes (Creswell, 2007; Stuckey, 2015). By beginning with a short list of categories or codes I had a starting point and could then expand it as my review and re-review process continued. By beginning with a short list based on the literature and my own experience as a reader, I was adhering to van Manen's (2015) advice that it can be useful for a researcher to use personal experiences as a starting point in studying a phenomenon. I devised a short list of codes to help with the formation of themes. This procedure helped to limit the elaborate list of codes many beginning researchers start with, though one must allow for expansion or evolution of codes as the research dictates (Creswell, 2007). This coding process helped me group the data into manageable parts with the aim of constructing a "storyline" (Stuckey, 2015, p. 10). Coding helped me as the researcher organize data into themes (Tavşanlı & Kaldirim, 2017). Stuckey

(2015) described the coding process as containing three main steps: "1. Reading through the data and creating a storyline, 2. Categorizing the data into codes; and 3. Using memos for clarification and interpretation" (p. 7).

My beginning or working list of codes consisted of the six that follow: (a) definitions (what it means to be a reader), (b) self-concept/identity as reader, (c) social aspects, (d) motivations, (e) genre or piece, and (f) format. Using both my own personal experiences as a reader (van Manen, 2015) and the literature as a starting point in the formation of codes helped me group my data into more manageable parts in the process of constructing my study's storyline (Stuckey, 2015).

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is the process of discovering the theme or themes embodied in the data from a qualitative study. Boström (2019), citing Braum and Clarke, posited that thematic analysis should begin with repeated readings of the data; one then sorts the codes into potential themes. Van Manen (2015) stated that themes can be understood as "the structures of experience" (p. 79), and further explained that when a phenomenon is analyzed, "we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (p. 79). Themes are terms or phrases that represent some of or the whole of an experience, and help the researcher unify raw data into a more meaningful whole (Moghadam et al., 2017). Van Manen (2015) wrote that "theme gives control and order to our research and our writing" (p. 79). Van Manen (2015) also explained that theme is needed in order for the researcher to make sense of something and that theme is an openness to something and helps "give shape to the shapeless" (p. 88). Themes can be looked at as written interpretations of participants' lived experiences which help the researcher to discover meaning (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). I used van Manen's

(2015) three approaches to discover themes: (a) the wholistic approach, in which one looks at the text as a whole; (b) the selective or highlighting reading approach, the researcher reads or listens to the text several times to discern which statements or phrases are particularly revealing or essential; and (c) the detailed or line-by-line approach, in which the researcher examines each line or sentence and ponders what it may reveal about the phenomenon. Boström (2019) called the thematic analysis a creative process in which the researcher finds connections, or links, or associations between the different parts. I used thematic analysis to identify themes across the data. This included all of the different types of data collected, from interviews; emails and texts; protocol writing; and images, photos, and pictures. From the second discussion/interviews (the selfie, photo, picture sharing discussion/interviews), I performed thematic analysis on both the transcribed texts of the interviews and the images. This enabled me to develop themes from the collective whole of the data (Plunkett, Leipert, Olson, & Ray, 2014).

Phenomenological Reflection

The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to "try to grasp the essential meaning of something" (van Manen, 2015, p. 77). Admitting that the meaning or essence of the phenomenon is never simple, nor one-dimensional, van Manen (2015) explained that it can only be described in the writing of texts through analyzing the phenomenon's thematic aspects. After discerning themes, I reflected on them in writing, while also considering my own experiences, and then I reflected and wrote again. I jotted down notes on and about all of the different types of data collected and I journaled every step of the way. This ongoing writing process took place in "continuous iterative cycles" (Bynum & Varpio, 2018, p. 253) and helped me develop an "increasingly robust and nuanced analysis" (Bynum & Varpio, 2018, p. 253). Van Manen (2015), citing Sartre, wrote that writing and rewriting "aims at creating depth: constructing

successive or multiple layers of meaning" (p. 131). Van Manen (2015) explained that writing is a hugely important part of hermeneutic phenomenology for it is a reflexive activity that incorporates both the mental and the physical. To write phenomenologically is the "untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself" (van Manen, 2015, p. 132). Van Manen also instructed that researchers need to continually remember to consider how all of the themes and parts contribute to one's understanding of the experience of the phenomenon overall. The end product of hermeneutical analysis is a thick and rich descriptive text of the phenomenon that connects the readers to the lifeworld of the participants (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). "Writing and rewriting is the thing" (van Manen, 2015, p. 132). "Writing does not merely enter the research process as a final step or stage . . . human science research *is* a form of writing" (van Manen, 2015, p. 111). Phenomenological reflection helped shape my understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon of what it means to be a reader to high school students.

Trustworthiness

To help assure the validity and trustworthiness of this study, I incorporated three strategies that are detailed below. By using multiple types of data (interviews, emails and texts, protocol writing, and images, photos, and pictures) I employed triangulation, which is a way to establish validity and trustworthiness (Flick, 2013; Schwandt, 2007). Flick (2013) maintained that triangulation is mainly in the data collection phase, and by collecting different types of data, one increases the trustworthiness.

Credibility

I used member checks, which is a process in which the researcher presents initial findings to the participants and discusses emerging themes and thinking and gets feedback. I did this via emails and additional conversations with the participants. This feedback helped guide the writing

and further data collection. Member checks are an important process in assuring the quality of the data (Moghadam et al., 2017). These member checks and participant feedback are vital to a phenomenological study in that they help validate the findings with the participants and includes the participants' remarks (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using member checks provides credibility by ensuring that the participants' voices are presented and that they are presented accurately and correctly. Creswell (2007) noted that Lincoln and Guba called member checks "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 208). Member checking is one of the tools that helps assure a study's data and findings are credible (Alase, 2017).

Dependability and Confirmability

To assure dependability of this study and its findings I used memoing and an audit trail. Memos are short thoughts, phrases, or concepts that occur to the researcher while reading or looking at visual data. Memoing is important in that it helps researchers quickly note ideas or concepts, and it encourages synthesis and the development of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing or keeping a researcher's journal is one way to ensure rigor and validity in phenomenological research (Corby et al., 2015). This process can also be an important start to creating an audit trail. An audit trail is a written record of the researcher's thinking and the evolution of themes and findings. Journaling is a good way to provide a map or decision trail throughout the process (Spence, 2017). It is important because it can be used as a validation strategy for "documenting the thinking processes that clarify understandings over time" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). The audit trail can also be used by the researcher to obtain feedback from participants in their member checks. I used this in follow up emails and texts. I used the audit trail to serve two purposes. First, I used it as a way of managing my record keeping and encouraging reflexivity about the procedures I used. Second, I enlisted the help of

trusted peers to act as a third-party examiner to verify the dependability and confirmability of my procedures and findings (Schwandt, 2007).

Transferability

Transferability is achieved by providing sufficient (thick) descriptions and details of my findings and by providing specific detailed descriptions of my procedures and analysis procedures. Transferability can be accomplished if the researcher provides sufficient details (Schwandt, 2007). The end product of hermeneutical analysis is a thick and rich descriptive text of the phenomenon that connects the readers to the lifeworld of the participants (Bynum & Varpio, 2018). “Creating a phenomenological text is the object of the research process” (van Manen, 2015, p. 111).

Ethical Considerations

Since this study’s participants were high school students, some of whom were minors, extreme care had to be taken in protecting the participants’ information and their location. I password-protected all digital data, protected all written and physical data, keeping them in a locked file cabinet, and described locations and sites only generally.

I gained permission to use students’ identities, thinking that many of them would provide selfies or pictures showing the participant’s faces, but this turned out to be unnecessary, as many did share pictures, photos, and images, but none shared pictures showing their faces. I masked participants’ names by assigning pseudonyms. All original pictures, images, and photographs were kept on a password-protected and locked laptop and/or a password-protected and locked iPhone. Individuals’ identities were protected as participants were assigned pseudonyms known only to the researcher.

Summary

This methods chapter began with a discussion on the selection of a qualitative, hermeneutical phenomenological study. This approach is best when one wants to explore and understand lived experiences; thus, it is the best approach for this study which sought to explore and better understand the lived experiences of high school students who self-identify as readers. This study was guided by one central question and three sub-questions. The participants were recruited from three high schools in one small city in the northeastern United States. Purposeful sampling was used as all participants must have experienced the phenomenon (identifying as readers).

The chapter continued with my detailing the four methods of data collection: interviews; emails and texts; protocol writing; and images, photos, and pictures. Then, I described the three methods of data analysis that I used: lean coding, thematic analysis, and phenomenological reflection. Next, I discussed the trustworthiness of the study; this discussion included the study's credibility, dependability and confirmability, and transferability. I concluded the chapter with a look at the ethical considerations; this is especially important since this study used high school students as participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student; this chapter presents the key findings of the study. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was best in that the goal of the study was to explore and understand the lived experience of high school students who self-identify as readers; van Manen (2015) called hermeneutic phenomenology "the interpretive study . . . of lived experience in the attempt to determine the meaning embodied in them" (p. 38). This chapter begins with a portrait of each of the 11 high school reader participants. It continues with a discussion on the collection of the data from each of the four methods used: interviews, emails and texts, protocol writing questions, and pictures, photos, and illustrations. Next, the chapter discusses how the data were coded; included in the description is a discussion on how the beginning list of codes grew and changed. The chapter continues by describing how those codes evolved and developed into themes, and then demonstrates how the data and themes addressed and answered the central research question and three sub-questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

Participants in this study were junior and senior high school students who self-identify as readers from three area high schools: Wallop and Abbot High School, the only public high school in a small northeastern city, Northern High School, the only Catholic high school in the same city, and The Academy, a small private high school in the same city which has a small number of their students boarding there. Of the 11 participants, eight were students at Wallop and Abbott, two were students at Northern, and one was a student at The Academy. Seven of the participants were male and four were female. All of the participants were either juniors or seniors

in high school and were 16–18 years old. Following is a brief portrait of each of the study's 11 participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

Lilly

Lilly was a senior at Wallop and Abbot High School. She was captain of the debate team, president of the history club, and already knew where she would attend college next year to study politics and law in hopes of becoming a lawyer. Lilly's favorite genres of books are dystopian novels, "they show us what our world can be and the stark realization that we face," and fantasy novels, "I love escaping into a lot of worlds that I couldn't possibly imagine." Lilly views reading as "pursuing the truth" and first realized that she was a reader when she was enthralled by the *Hunger Games* in fourth grade and identified with the female protagonist, Katniss, because she too was an outsider. Books are important to Lilly, and she has a special chair that her late father purchased when she was born. She now calls this chair her reading chair and she shared a picture of it (see Figure 1) as well as sharing a picture of her piano which now serves as her bookshelf (see Figure 2). Lilly says being a reader makes her feel "indescribably wonderful, fulfilled," and "at home."

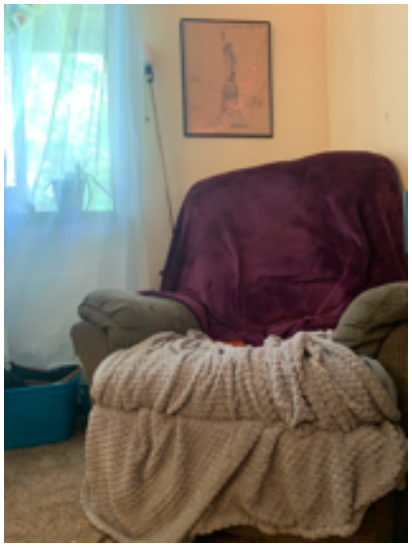


Figure 1. My reading chair. A photograph of Lilly's reading chair.

Figure 2. My bookshelf/piano. A photograph of Lilly's piano covered with books.

Holden

Holden was a senior at Wallop and Abbot High School. He took AP English courses and is "a bookworm." Holden likes adventure books, comedy stories, science fiction, and fantasy books; he also likes to read biographies and autobiographies. He recalled first identifying as a reader at age 10 or 11: "I remember that I was really happy when I first learned how to read." Before he learned to read, he used to hold books and pretend: "I truly wanted to be a reader because I knew that it was important." His favorite thing about reading is "the total immersion when you are reading." Holden also likes real books: "I like to hold them in my hands, I like the smell of the pages. I like new books' smell and old books' smell." When asked what being a reader is like, Holden responded that it makes one "more intuitive and self-aware" and "more in-tune with themselves, like not detached from the world . . . but aware of what's going on inside and they're very good at expressing their thoughts." Holden stated that being a reader makes him feel like "a genius."

Conner

Conner was a senior at Wallop and Abbot High School. His favorite types of books are biographies, auto biographies, fantasy, particularly Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings*, and "a little bit of horror now and then." Conner's favorite things about reading are "it's a good de-stressor; . . . it helps me think, when I read my mind has time to slow down and think and it helps me solve my problems." It makes him a better writer, and reading makes him "more intelligent, more well-versed." Conner credited friends and his mother for helping to make him a reader, fondly recalling his mother reading Dr. Seuss books to him and his siblings, and always making sure he had money so he could buy books at the school's Scholastic Book Fairs and then talking to him about books. He and his friends often take pictures of quotes from their favorite books, be they inspirational or informative, or celebrating the joy of reading, and then share them on social media or via texting (see Figures 3, 4, and 5). Conner reads for enjoyment, entertainment, and to educate himself. He says that being a reader makes him feel like "I can learn new information every day."

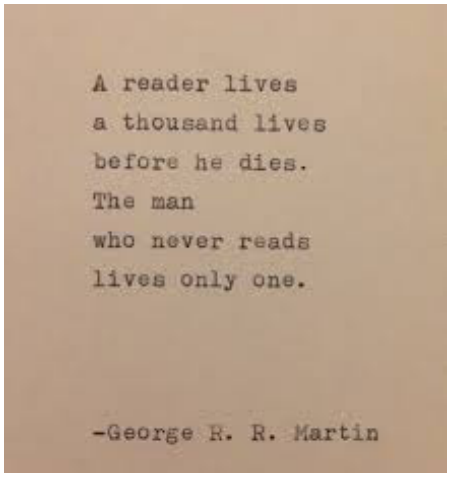


Figure 3. Martin book quote. A Martin quote Conner shared with friends and posted on social media.

Figure 4. Cooley book quote. A Cooley quote Conner shared with friends and posted on social media.

Figure 5. Anonymous book quote. An anonymous book quote Conner shared with friends and posted on social media.

Vince

Vince was an 18-year-old, graduating senior at Wallop and Abbot High School. He is a reader and a video game fan, who credited part of the reason for his becoming a reader to his love of playing video games, particularly with his brother. Vince said that his favorite genres of books are fantasy and sci-fi. “I just enjoy crazy tales . . . they were the first books I read, and I’ve

played a lot of video games where the themes were kind of the same as the books and that's what got me interested in reading." Vince realized he was a reader in seventh or eighth grade: "I would rush through all of my work for all of my classes and then sit there and read . . . that was probably when I realized I like to read." His other family members are also readers, and Vince believes that helped underscore the importance of reading. Vince shared several pictures of the full bookcases in his home, noting that they were an example of just how much he and his family read (see Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9). When asked what being a reader is like, Vince responded, "It's good!" He reads for fun, enjoys reading, and believes that frequent reading helps his comprehension and ability to read more difficult texts. Vince believes that being a reader helps him in "every subject imaginable" and that being a reader makes him "a smarter person."

Figure 6. Bookshelves in my house I. The first photograph of bookshelves Vince shared.

Figure 7. Bookshelves in my house II. The second photograph of bookshelves Vince shared.

Figure 8. Bookshelves in my house III. The third photograph of bookshelves Vince shared.

Figure 9. Bookshelves in my house IV. The fourth photograph of bookshelves Vince shared; this one is a close-up of three bookshelves.

Leah

Leah was a graduating senior at Wallop and Abbot High School who already knew what university she would attend in the fall. Leah's favorite types of books are fantasy and historical fiction. She finds that fantasy books offer "an escape from the real world." About historical works, Leah noted that her favorite book, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and her trip as part of a Holocaust seminar "changed my life, and made me want to pursue a career in Holocaust/genocide education and awareness." Leah finds reading to be "a whole experience," "a lot of fun," and stated that she has learned a lot about herself through reading: "You know, like, I find myself in characters all the time." Leah credited a middle school friend with helping her to become a reader: "She started talking to me about books . . . and I realized that I should probably read more again, and that it wasn't a weird thing to do." When asked what being a reader is like, Leah responded, "I've always thought about it as like I have this life that I live and

you know it's great, but I just feel like being a reader, I am someone who gets to experience other lives." Being a reader makes Leah feel like "a more creative person." After putting a lot of effort and time into decorating her bookshelf, she shared two photos of it (see Figures 10 and 11); the pictures attest to her love of fantasy books, especially the Harry Potter series.

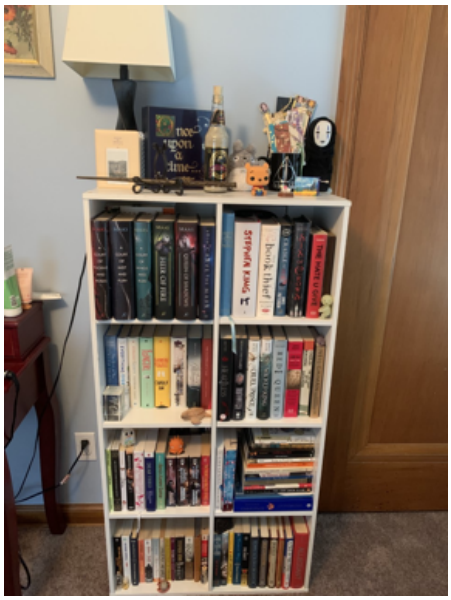


Figure 10. My main bookshelf. A photograph of Leah's bookshelf.

Figure 11. My main bookshelf II. A close-up photograph of Leah's bookshelf showing some of her book-inspired collectables.

Alexander

Alexander was a junior at The Academy who likes reading, computer science, and breeds lizards as a side business with his family. Alexander has what he called his "two types." One side likes to read non-fiction and what he called "success books." The other side of him likes to read for enjoyment and entertainment, so he likes classic fiction, and mentioned Orwell and Fitzgerald as two favorite authors. Alexander believes that reading "gives you context to see all the different possibilities." He also stated that he likes reading because it helps one "relate to the world in a different way." Alexander credited teachers and friends with helping him to become a reader and noted that he has been a reader ever since he stopped reading just because he was required to and realized that he enjoyed it, which happened in eighth or ninth grade. His deeper appreciation of reading happened just this past school year with his learning about symbolism, analogies, and Shakespeare. He also recently developed a love for poetry and feels that "poetry gives us the language we need to express our feelings." Alexander cannot imagine what it would be like to not be a reader and said that being a reader makes him feel "complete" and that it makes him "feel empathy in real life."

Diana

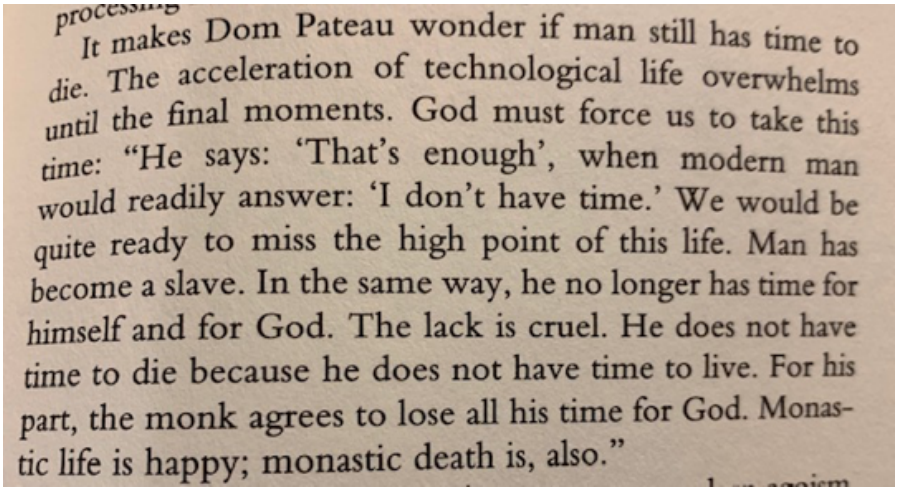
Diana was a junior at Northern Catholic High School who believes that "a good book can change your life." Diana enjoys reading realistic fiction, teen romance and fantasy books, "werewolves and vampire stuff." She also appreciates classic literature, naming *Of Mice and Men* as her favorite book due to "the symbolism of dreams." Diana values reading because it is "calming and thrilling at the same time, it can be an adrenalin rush while also being a great way to wind down." She credited her family, a sixth-grade math teacher who was also the school librarian, and her friends with being a big influence on her becoming a reader. Diana recalled

that all of the girls in her class started reading the Divergent series and their math teacher/librarian went out and bought an extra set of the books so that more of the girls could read them at the same time. “She really just started really harboring that love of reading in me.” In describing the reasons that she reads, Diana stated that reading is “ a way to connect to other people,” explaining that “when you read a book, you then like join this community of people, other people who have read and love the book.” Diana stated that being a reader makes her feel “good” and makes her feel “whole.”

Zack

Zack was a graduating senior at Wallop and Abbot High School who enjoys reading. Zack had already decided which university he would attend in the fall and planned to take courses that enable him to become “either a psychologist or a priest of some sort.” He noted that his career ambitions have influenced the types of books he reads, stating that his favorite genres are religious and psychological, and his favorite books are the *Douay-Rheims Bible* and *The Great Divorce* by C. S. Lewis. He also noted that he likes to read lighter or escapism books in between “heavy-hitter books.” Zack attested to the fact that reading helps him learn new things, understand different concepts and ideas, and have deeper and more meaningful conversations with others. He credited a church friend and his teachers with being influential in his becoming a reader, as well as his mother taking him to the library when he was quite young. His earliest recollection of being a reader was in elementary school when other students commented that he was a good reader and he remembered it being “like a sense of self-confidence thing, like look, I can do this.” Zack’s being a reader “makes me feel content. It makes me feel productive.” Zack likes to share with his friends statements or passages from books that are particularly inspiring or moving, so he will take pictures of these passages and text them or post them to social media

(see Figure 12). Some of his recent religious readings have also inspired Zack to draw pictures of icons and saints, one of which he shared (see Figure 13).



processing

It makes Dom Pateau wonder if man still has time to die. The acceleration of technological life overwhelms until the final moments. God must force us to take this time: "He says: 'That's enough', when modern man would readily answer: 'I don't have time.' We would be quite ready to miss the high point of this life. Man has become a slave. In the same way, he no longer has time for himself and for God. The lack is cruel. He does not have time to die because he does not have time to live. For his part, the monk agrees to lose all his time for God. Monastic life is happy; monastic death is, also."

Figure 12. Important passage. A photograph of a passage from *A Time to Die* by Nicolas Diat that Zack shared with friends.

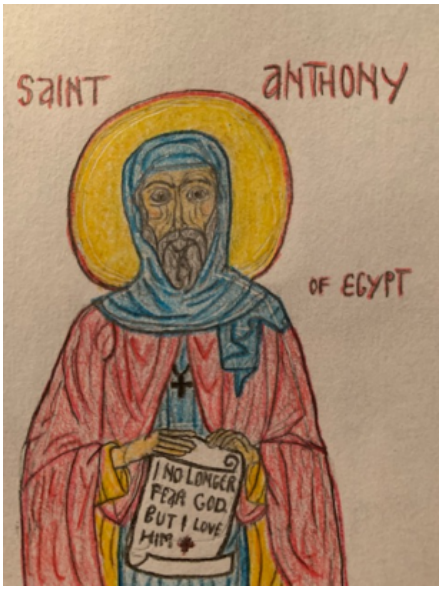


Figure 13. St. Anthony of Egypt. An illustration of St. Anthony of Egypt that Zack was inspired to draw after reading about him.

Basha

Basha spent her junior year at Wallop and Abbot High School as an exchange student in the Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX). FLEX is a government program that provides merit-based scholarships to students from Europe and Eurasia, enabling them to spend an academic year in the United States. Basha is from a small city in southern Europe. Her favorite genres of books are memoirs, autobiographies, historical novels, and fiction. Basha related that she likes reading because "I just transfer into a whole new world, like a whole new realm." She also noted the educational benefits of reading and stated that reading is both relaxing and calming, but also causes "alertness and intensity" depending upon the book one is reading. Basha credited mainly her family with influencing her to become a reader, but also said that friends and teachers played a role. Basha recalled seeing her mother read and remembers picking up a book to imitate her even though she could not read. She thinks that she first realized that she was a reader in third grade when it dawned on her how quickly she was reading a series of detective books and how much she enjoyed it. Basha said that reading gives her a sense of confidence and being a reader makes her feel like "a thinking person." She shared that she has a "study desk/reading fortress" (see Figure 14) and sent a picture.

Figure 14. My study desk/reading fortress. A photograph of Basha's study desk/reading fortress.

Bennett

Bennett was a junior at Northern Catholic High School who loves dogs, reading, and playing soccer. His favorite types of books are "thriller books," with Stephen King and Graham Green being two of his favorite authors. Bennett noted three main reasons he likes to read: to help learn more, especially about future career choices (he has been reading up on psychiatry lately); it engages and fuels his imagination, "it opens up an entirely different world to you . . . it forces you to think on a more imaginative level"; and reading helps him better express himself in writing. Bennett first realized he was a reader in fourth grade when he discovered how entertaining reading was. He fondly recalled a family friend giving him and his sister Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* for Christmas one year: "I remember reading from that a lot!" He also noted that a recent soccer injury gave him more time to rediscover his love of reading. Bennett credits his mother, friends, YouTubers, and his religion teacher for helping inspire his love of reading. Bennett said that reading gives him a sense of accomplishment and being a reader makes him feel "unique." Bennett mentioned that on occasion he will take pictures of particularly impressive passages from a book and then share them with friends via texts. He also expressed that he appreciates the "aesthetic of how books like line up on my shelf," and he shared four pictures of some of his books (see Figures 15, 16, 17, and 18).

Figure 15. My books I. An overhead photograph of some of Bennett's books.

Figure 16. My books II. A straight-on photograph of some of Bennett's books.

Figure 17. My books III. A straight-on photograph of some of Bennett's books.

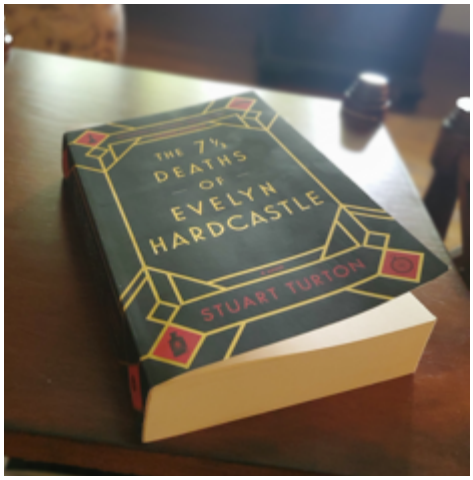


Figure 18. My books IV. A close-up photograph of *The 7 ½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*.

Sawyer

Sawyer was a junior at Wallop and Abbott High School. He likes politics, philosophy, and debate, and will be the captain of the debate team during his senior year. Sawyer likes martial arts and likes to read about moral and political philosophy. In addition to reading philosophy, Sawyer likes to read fantasy books: "fantasy just combines a lot of world building with a really creative way to deliver interesting messages." He finds reading a constant and continuing world of discovery, where one book leads to another, and another, and so on. He also likes to discuss books with friends and sometimes reads books along with friends stopping at frequent intervals to discuss them. Sawyer first identified as a reader in sixth grade, after finishing the series of fantasy books Heroes of Olympus by Rick Riordan. "I was very proud of myself; I finished the last two books in the series in about a weekend." He credits his parents (both academics), his brother (who inspired him to "not read sluggishly"), and his girlfriend for helping to inspire him to be a reader and to continue to read. Sawyer reads to "be a well-read and knowledgeable person" and because he wants to be someone who can "have a conversation on a large range of topics . . . and who can provide something interesting and valuable to a conversation." Being a reader makes Sawyer feel "more intelligent . . . like I am spending my time wisely . . . it makes me feel like I am exercising my brain." Sawyer is sometimes struck by the sheer majesty of how well a passage is written, "when you read a sentence that is so well written that you have to stop reading and stare at the wall for a couple of minutes and just think how well written that particular sentence is." Sawyer has a dry-erase board hanging in his room where he has written "some of the best quotes from things I read," and he shared a picture of his board (see Figure 19).

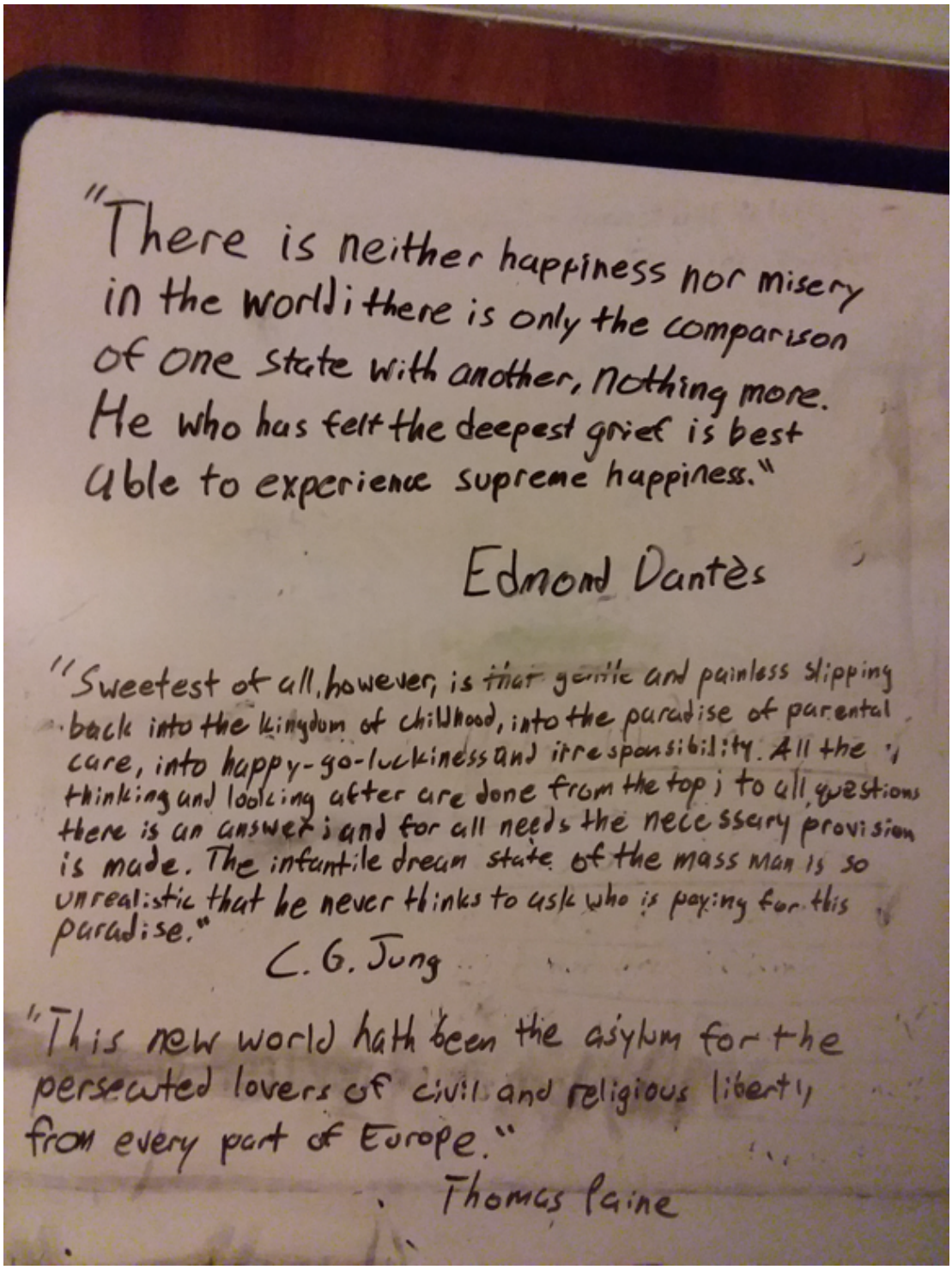


Figure 19. The best quotes. A photograph of the board featuring three of the best quotes from things Sawyer has read.

Results

This section details data collection from each of the collection methods, the development of codes, and then how those codes formed themes. This section then discusses how those themes addressed the research question and each of the three sub-questions. Examples are provided and participants' statements are included to help provide a rich, full, and more accurate glimpse into the participants' lived experiences.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected in four ways: individual interviews, consisting of 10 open-ended questions; protocol writing questions, a series of four questions that participants answered in writing; emails and texts; and the sharing of pictures, photographs, and illustrations. Each of the interviews was conducted face-to-face, but via Zoom, a cloud-based, video communication application tool, due to COVID-19. The interviews consisted of 10 open-ended interview questions, as detailed in Chapter Three, but as each interview progressed, I often asked for clarification, further explanation, or more details so that I could be sure to understand the participant's experiences. Near the end of each interview, I asked the participant if he or she had ever expressed what reading is, or what being a reader means other than in words; this was the tenth question and opened up a dialogue for them to share selfies, photographs, pictures, and illustrations with me. Eight of the 11 participants shared either pictures or photographs with me, and one participant shared an illustration.

After conduction the interviews, which I recorded on Zoom and on the iPhone app Just Press Record, I personally transcribed them. At the end of each interview, I told the participant that I would be sending a series of four protocol writing questions to be answered in writing and then returned to me. I also told each participant to feel free to text or email me any questions

and/or to add any information that they did not cover in our interview. After ending the interview with a thanks, I emailed the participants the protocol writing questions along with an email thanking them for participating and encouraging them to send me any pictures, photos, or illustrations as discussed above.

Each of the participants either emailed his or her protocol writing answers to me or texted them to me. I waited for 5–7 days after sending the questions via email to send reminders if I had not yet received their answers. Most participants were responsive, but five participants needed reminders before sharing their answers.

Each of the participants communicated with me via email and text. The number of emails and texts ranged from 11 to more than 20 for each participant. The emails and texts consisted of questions, additional information, comments on their protocol writing question answers, and the submission and descriptions of pictures, photographs, and illustrations.

The eight participants who shared pictures, photographs, and/or illustrations, did so either via email or text. Many included a description and/or name/title of the image. I communicated with each of the eight who had shared images, asking questions, requesting additional information, and seeking clarification. These second interviews were relatively short and took place via phone, text, and email. Each of the participants who shared images had informed me that they would be doing so during the initial interview, so not much further clarification or explanation was needed.

Coding and Code Development

After transcribing the interviews, I printed out the transcripts, the answers from the protocol writing questions, and the pictures, photographs, and illustrations that the participants had shared with me. I also gathered important information from emails and texts and printed that

out as well. I then re-read all of the data from all of the different collection methods to start to gain a holistic view (van Manen, 2015).

As described in Chapter Three, I began my study with a series of six codes. Beginning with a series of codes is called lean coding, or some researchers call this using prefigured codes, pre-existing codes, or a priori codes (Creswell, 2007; Stuckey, 2015). By beginning with a short list of categories or codes, I had a starting point that I could then expand, change, and evolve as I reviewed and re-reviewed the data. I assigned each of the beginning codes a different color from a box of 12 erasable colored pencils. My initial codes were (a) Definitions (orange), (b) Self-Concept/Identity as Reader (yellow), (c) Social Aspects (blue), (d) Motivations (red), (e) Genre or Piece (violet), and (f) Format (black). I then re-read all of the data, circling, underlining, and bracketing with the colored pencils according to the code to which the statement, phrase, or sentence belonged; van Manen (2015) called this the selective or highlighting approach.

From the very start, the data began to reinforce nearly all of the beginning codes and demand that I add several new ones. There was very little support for my initial definition of the code "format." I had thought that this would be an important and often mentioned issue, but it was not. I soon found that the importance of books would be a more apt description, so I changed the title so that it was more inclusive and more descriptive of my data. The necessity of this change is well illustrated by Holden who said, "I don't like reading e-books. I like to hold them [books] in my hands, I like the smell of the pages." Similar sentiments were echoed by several participants: Diana stated that books were a big deal in her family; Bennett, Zack, and Lilly spoke fondly of stacks of books and bookcases, and how the arrangement of books or stacks were attractive. Of the 19 images that participants shared with me, 11 of them prominently feature books or are of books and bookcases.

As I read through the data several more times, looking at each line, completing what van Manen (2015) called the detailed or line-by-line approach, I found that I needed to add several new codes, so I did, assigning each new code a colored pencil. I added Benefits of Reading (green), Empathy (light blue), Origin (brown), and Place to Read (red-orange). The benefits of reading were frequently mentioned by the participants. Many noted the escapist quality of reading; Lilly related, "I love escaping into a lot of worlds," Diana stated that reading "takes me out of the hectic world," and Leah posited that reading helps her "escape the stresses of life." Other benefits like learning, improved writing, and better communication skills were also noted.

Empathy deserved its own code due to several participants alluding to an increased or improved ability or appreciation for empathy and three participants mentioning empathy by name. Alexander stated that when he is reading, he can see things from the perspective of others and feel empathetic for them: "when you are exercising that ability to feel empathetic with these characters . . . it helps you to feel empathy in real life." Lilly expressed similar sentiments, and Holden also spoke of empathy; when asked what being a reader is like, he responded, "I feel like to be a true reader is to be good with empathy, to truly empathize with nonexistent people, that makes you a better person."

The addition of Origin was necessary due to the frequency of its mention and the importance the participants seemed to give it. All 11 participants noted when they remembered realizing they were a reader and/or when they identified as a reader. All 11 participants spoke of the instances, people, and circumstances that surrounded their origin as a reader. Besides looking back at the different coded passages and sections, one way that I noted the frequency of each code was which pencils I had to sharpen. I needed to sharpen the brown pencil, the color identifying Origin, first.

The addition of Place to Read came about when two of the participants spoke passionately about the importance of where they read and both shared photographs of their reading place. Basha described her reading place as a "fortress," stating that "I have a cozy spot to read in, like a fortress that I read in." Lilly described a chair that her late father bought when she was a baby as her "reading chair" and shared a picture, which she titled "my reading chair."

Theme Development

Table 1

Theme Development

Themes	Codes
What It Means to be a Reader	Definition
	Self-Concept/Identity
	Origin
Benefits of Reading	Benefits
	Social Aspects
	Empathy
Books and the Act of Reading	Motivation
	Genre or Piece
	Importance of Books
	Place to Read

After I coded all of the data, I again re-read everything, looking at how I had circled, underlined, and bracketed statements, phrases, sentences, and passages. I then wrote short, bullet-point descriptions on post-it notes for each of the initial interview transcripts. I did the same for each type of data collection; I used different colored post-it notes for my notes on each of the different types of data (pink for initial interviews, yellow for protocol writing, green for images, and purple for emails and texts). I also journaled about my steps and thought process. I

jotted down points I wanted to remember, wrote of my thought process, and made lists. As van Manen (2015) stated "specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself" (p. 125). When I re-read the data again, I saw that there were many instances where I had noted the existence of more than one code, where I had noted that a sentence or passage actually represented or was a representation of more than one code. This was the point when I started to identify themes. According to van Manen (2015), themes can be understood as "the structures of experience" (p. 79). When a phenomenon is analyzed, van Manen (2015) explained, "we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (p. 79).

Thematic analysis is a creative process in which the researcher finds connections, or links, or associations between the different parts (Boström, 2019). Even though themes can be rather abstract constructs (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), through the re-reading and close examination of data in all forms, I noted many connections and similarities. Three overall themes, made up of combinations of the codes, presented themselves (see Table 1 above). The participants' comments in the interviews, their written responses to the protocol writing questions, the images they shared, and their texts and emails were all coded, and the codes showed three overall themes. The first, What it Means to be a Reader, included the codes Definition, Self-Concept/Identity as a Reader, and Origin. Looking at the data, many phrases, statements, and passages were coded both Definition and Self-concept/Identity. Origin too had many overlaps with Definition and Self-Concept/Identity. The statements, answers, and images that were identified by each of these three codes all seemed to play an important part in what the participants saw as the components that they identified with what it means to be a reader.

The second theme, Benefits of Reading, consisted of the codes Social Aspects, Benefits, and Empathy. This theme consists of the data identified by the three codes that participants all noted as being beneficial results of their reading and being readers. The code Benefits morphed into the theme Benefits as it was an apt description with how the participants expressed the positive attributes of reading and being a reader. The Social Aspects of reading were always framed positively and beneficially by all 11 participants, and Empathy was viewed as a benefit that resulted from reading especially fiction. Many of the data collected from all of the various methods had overlapping codes of Benefits and Social Aspects, Empathy and Benefits, and Social Aspects and Empathy.

The third theme, Books and the Act of Reading, consisted of the codes Motivation, Genre or Piece, Importance of Books, and Place to Read. This theme presented itself in that the data codes showed an enormous amount of overlap. Data coded Motivation often was also coded Genre/Piece, as the book or genre of the book was often mentioned as an important motivation to reading it. The Importance of Books coded data overlapped many times with Genre or Piece and Motivation. Data coded Places to Read also overlapped with Motivation and with Importance of Books.

What it means to be a reader. This first theme emerged as participants defined what it meant to them to identify as a reader, how being a reader figured into their identity and self-concept, and as they described the origin of their becoming a reader. Each of the 11 participants reflected fondly on what it meant to be a reader. Sawyer recalled his realization that he was a reader "a rite of passage," noting that it was an important time in his family life. Vince stated that his identifying as a reader was when he started to read for the enjoyment of it, not when it was an

assignment. Diana said that being a reader to her meant that "I'll always have something that I can go to." Zack agreed and added that being a reader made him more aware.

All 11 participants also expressed positive sentiments concerning how being a reader figured into their identity and self-concept. Zack said that being a reader makes him feel "content" and "productive." Bennett said that being a reader makes him feel "special," "accomplished," and "unique." Diana expressed that being a reader makes her feel "whole" and "smart." Several other participants mentioned that being a reader makes them feel more intelligent or smart, and Holden stated that being a reader made him feel like a "genius." Lilly said that being a reader makes her feel "fulfilled," and Leah claimed that being a reader makes her feel "more creative." Sawyer stated that being a reader has added to his self-confidence and made him more confident in engaging others in conversation. Lilly also expressed that her reading-improved communication skills helped give her more confidence in speaking with others. Basha, Lilly, Zack, and Holden all expressed that reading and being a reader added to their self-confidence. Bennett expressed a sense of pride in his being a reader, and Lilly said that "turning the page of an excellent book, I feel truly alive." Both Diana and Leah recalled how books had changed their lives for the better.

All 11 participants recalled the origin of how they became a reader. The influence of parents and having books in their homes was mentioned often. Diana stated that "growing up around books truly helped ignite the flame." Holden, Zack, Basha, and Conner all noted the their parents reading to them and with them when they were young contributed to their becoming readers themselves. Vince shared several pictures of the bookcases in his home to show that his family's collection of books was an important part of his becoming a reader (see Figures 6–9).

Leah and Zack both mentioned that libraries helped contribute to their becoming readers, and Diana mentioned the importance of a school librarian in helping her to become a reader.

Benefits of reading. All 11 participants viewed reading and being a reader as beneficial. The three codes that made up this theme—Benefits, Social Aspects, and Empathy—were all mentioned as being beneficial. Many benefits were expressed by the participants with four benefits being named by at least eight of the 11 students. Ten participants stated that reading or being a reader made them smarter or increased their intelligence. Sawyer noted the increased knowledge benefit that comes from being a reader and stated that "reading is almost like exercise for the mind." Holden expressed in his protocol writing that reading "increases your intelligence significantly." Ten students also noted that reading offered an escape as a benefit. Diana stated that "it [reading] gives me time to just like be peaceful," and Basha wrote that reading "offers an escape from the daily routine and a break from the fast pace of everyday life." Eight participants named fun and the entertainment value of reading as a benefit. Leah wrote of the benefits of reading, "It's just a lot of fun," and Holden, in describing the reasons he reads, stated, "I guess the big reason is it's fun really." Eight participants also noted the benefit of reading or being a reader making them better communicators, both verbally and in writing. Conner wrote that "when I write I am able to describe things better," and Lilly stated that reading has helped her "become more eloquent" and being a reader has taught her "a lot about speaking and explicating what I mean to other individuals."

The Social Aspect was discussed by all 11 of the students, and it was always described as being beneficial. Relationships with friends, parents, teachers, and others were noted as being important and beneficial ingredients of being a reader. Diana wrote that "I had a really good friend re-spark my love of reading recently," and Lilly spoke of having a "reading coalition"

where she and a friend read the same book at the same time and then "argue and talk about it." Sawyer, Diana, Zack, Basha, Alexander, Conner, and Leah also mentioned the benefits of discussing books with friends. Diana claimed that reading was "a way to connect to other people." She likened those who read and loved the same book to "a community." Conner demonstrated the social aspect in the reader-related images of quotes he shared stating that "a lot of my friends and I like to take quotes from our favorite books and our favorite plays . . . and we . . . post them on social media or like send them to one another" (see Figures 3–5). Alexander, Zack, Diana, Basha, Lilly, and Bennett mentioned that interactions with teachers about reading were beneficial. Bennett wrote that a teacher "was a big help in finding books I would like," and Alexander stated that a recent teacher had "really just changed my outlook on reading." All 11 students mentioned that interactions with their parents and families were beneficial to their being and/or becoming a reader; Lilly cited her whole family as being an inspiration, and Conner spoke of his mother not only giving him and his siblings money to buy books at the school Scholastic book sales, but then also "she would ask us what books we bought and she would want us to like give a summary of it and describe what parts we liked." Both Basha and Zack mentioned that their parents were not readers, but they still encouraged them to be readers.

Six of the students noted empathy or the qualities making one empathetic as a benefit of being a reader or reading. Holden related that "if you know how a character is feeling, you are more apt to know how someone else in real life is going to feel." Alexander stated that learning to empathize with characters in books "helps you to feel empathy in real life." Lilly also reflected on how reading made her more empathetic:

> I empathize with a lot of the characters and I think that I learn a lot through the cultivation of that empathy, about other people and about their situations, and I think that

> I have learned a lot more about the people that I am around because I sort of understand what they are going through and I think that, that is honestly been due to the help of the fantasy genre.

Books and the act of reading. This third theme revealed itself through data that was coded Motivation, Genre or Piece, Importance of Books, and Place to Read. Like the first two themes, Books and the Act of Reading is comprised of the codes that shared a substantial amount of overlap, data that were coded with more than one code. Motivation often overlapped with Genre or Piece and the Importance of Books. Additionally, Genre or Piece frequently overlapped with Importance of Books and Place to Read overlapped with Motivation. All 11 participants expressed in their interviews or in their written answers to protocol questions, or their emails and texts, and/or in their shared images positive thoughts and feelings about their motivation, their ideas and preferences for genres and titles of books, the importance of books and reading to them as readers and/or becoming a reader, and several touched on where they read and the importance of their reading place. This theme shows the connection between the motivation to read, particular genres of books and particular favorite books, the importance of reading and books themselves, and where participants read.

Most participants (seven) noted entertainment as one motivation for reading. Vince related that reading causes him to use his imagination, which he finds entertaining, and Holden stated he was continually motivated to read because "I feel more entertained by books than movies." Five participants noted that they are motivated to read by the intellectual stimulation books provide, with four, Zack, Bennett, Lilly, and Alexander also noting that they are motivated to read to prepare themselves for career choices, college, and school activities. Lilly described one of the things that motivates her to read as follows:

> I am entering college and so I sort of want to, not necessarily have a leg up on other people, but I sort of surround myself by people that read and because of that I want to make sure that I am remaining relatively on par with them intellectually.

Alexander, Sawyer, and Vince mentioned competition as being a motivational factor. Vince stated that his brother's early reading accomplishments motivated him to read. Alexander noted being motivated to read in order to "keep up" with his father, and Sawyer mentioned being motivated to read because he wanted to compete with his parents in their quest for knowledge. Zack, Lilly, and Alexander also mentioned being motivated to read because reading helped prepare them for future books and helped their reading comprehension.

All 11 participants spoke of their favorite genres or types of books, and all 11 named their favorite book or books. Often their descriptions of the genre of books they read and their favorite books also reflected other codes within this theme, especially their Motivation to read and the Importance of Books. Their writings and discussions on Genre and Piece also reflected the other two themes, What it Means to be a Reader and Benefits of Reading. Often the participants mentioned more than one genre when asked to name their favorite. Seven participants named fantasy as being among their favorites or their favorite genre. Lilly appreciated the "escapist elements," and Leah stated, "I like fantasy because honestly it's just pretty much an escape from the real world." Sawyer noted the "world building" and acknowledged that fantasy books "are an interesting way to deliver interesting messages." Three participants named memoirs/biographies/autobiographies as being favorites. Basha's picture of her "study desk/reading fortress" (see Figure 12) shows only one book and it is an autobiography. Basha stated that memoirs and biographies "seem really interesting . . . what is so special about their lives to make them worth writing a book about?" Three participants named

thriller/adventure as a favorite genre; Bennett noted the excitement usually found in thriller books as the main reason he "loves them." Three students named poetry as a favorite genre, three named classics, two named horror (both mentioned Stephen King), and realistic fiction, dystopian novels, and psychological books were each mentioned once by participants. In discussing genres, the Harry Potter books were mentioned by five participants and Harry Potter book-inspired collectables were prominently featured in the two photographs that Leah shared (see Figures 10 and 11). In naming their favorite books, something I asked them to do as part of their protocol writing, five named classics: *Of Mice and Men* (Diana), *Catcher in the Rye* (Alexander), *Night* (Leah), and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Lilly and Sawyer). Two students, Zack and Conner, both named the Bible as their favorite, two named fantasy books or series, Vince named the fantasy series *Wheel of Time* as his favorite, and Holden named the classic fantasy novel *The Hobbit.* Basha named *Moonlight Sonata,* a poetry book, as her favorite, and Bennett named the realist thriller *The Power and the Glory.*

All 11 participants touched on the importance of books in the interviews, answers to the protocol writing questions, in their emails and texts, and/or in the images they shared. Of the 19 images the participants shared with me that express what reading is or what being a reader means to them, 11 of them are photographs of books and bookcases. Bennett reflected that he surrounds himself with books and "I just like the aesthetic of how books line up on my shelf"; all four of the images Bennett shared are of books (see Figures 15–18). Alexander mentioned the importance of his bookcase and its arrangement. Diane spoke of a "giant bookshelf" in her mother's room and how books were "a big gift in our family." Vince shared four photographs of full bookcases (see Figures 6–9) and stated that "our house is basically like a library." Leah's two shared images (Figures 10 and 11) are of her bookcase and include the Harry Potter

collectables mentioned earlier. Lilly too shared a picture of her books which cover her keyboard (see Figure 2). All 11 participants mentioned physical books while only two mentioned e-books or audiobooks, and both of these comments were negative. Holden mentioned, “I don’t like reading e-books, so that’s why I read regular books, like, I like to hold them in my hands.” Alexander related that he sometimes listened to audiobooks, but stated, “I like to actually have the book because there’s something different about that experience.”

Three participating students mentioned where they read as being important. Leah wrote in her protocol writing that she associated reading with a “feeling of warmth” because she usually reads at home with a blanket and a cup of hot tea. Lilly shared that she reads most often in a chair in her room. The chair, which she called her “reading chair,” was purchased when Lilly was a baby by her late father. She shared a photograph of the chair (see Figure 1). Basha also shared a picture of where she likes to read (see Figure 14); it is a spot in her room, and she called it her “study desk/reading fortress.”

Research Question Responses

In seeking to explore and better understand the lived experiences of what it means to be a reader as a high school student, this study was guided by one central research question and three sub-questions. The participant-supplied data and the themes that developed from the data in all of their forms provided answers to these questions.

Central question. The central research question asked, “What is the lived experience of a self-described reader?” Lived experience is the very heart of phenomenological research. “The notion of ‘lived experience’ . . . announces the intent to explore *directly* the originary or prereflective dimensions of human existence: life as we live it” (van Manen, 2015, p. 39). All three themes addressed this central question. Participants spoke and wrote about their lived

experiences as readers, and they expressed their lived experience as readers in images that they shared. Participants defined what being a reader meant to them and how being a reader helps define them. All of the participants agreed that being a reader adds important and valued elements to their lives, that reading affords them benefits that are not as accessible through other means, and that books are an important part of their lives.

Participants described being a reader as someone who is well informed, smart, inquisitive, and better able to communicate verbally and in writing. Lilly stated that "to me, being a reader is pursuing the truth." Holden's comments further illuminated the points shared by many:

> Being a reader, I think makes you someone who is more intuitive and self-aware. I guess more in-tune with themselves, like not detached from the world, but they are also very aware what's going on inside and they're very good at like expressing their thoughts.

Participants described being a reader as one who has a ready form of entertainment and experiences joy while reading. Diana related a sentiment shared by many participants: " Being a reader means that I'll always have something that I can go to when I'm bored or when I just need a little peace and need to escape reality." Conner also expressed the joy element of the lived experience of being a reader:

> Readers enjoy what they do, they enjoy reading. Reading gives you a sense of pleasure . . . it opens you up to a whole new world, a wealth of information, or it opens you up to a whole new world of magic, the possibility that anything can happen.

These self-described readers also put into words the lived experience of being a reader as one that makes them feel a sense of fulfillment, a sense that they are one who is engaged in a meaningful endeavor, and one who is at peace. Participants shared that their being a reader and

reading made them feel “whole” (Diana), “complete” (Alexander), “content” (Zack), and “at home” (Lilly).

The second theme, Benefits of Reading, informed the central question by offering a multitude of benefits the participants reaped due to their being readers. Participants described that being a reader made them better informed and more intelligent; Conner stated that the benefits of being a reader included “the art of being well cultured and well read.” Participants also frequently discussed the beneficial and entertaining sense of escapism they experienced as readers; Vince described it as “it’s easy to get lost in them [books], it takes a lot off the mind and when you are reading a good book you can focus solely on the book and just drowned everything else out.” Students also frequently noted the importance their being a reader had on their relationships with others, and that their being a reader helped them better express themselves and made them better at understanding other people and themselves. Lilly spoke of her being a reader making her more empathetic and stated that being a reader has helped her in “understanding and relating to her peers.” Holden added that “I feel like to be a true reader is to be good with empathy.”

The third theme addressed the central question by describing what motivated the participants to become readers and to read and by discussing the importance of books and reading. Participants noted that wanting to gain knowledge and intelligence was a motivation for reading and that there was a social aspect of motivation in that participants were motivated to read in order to emulate family members and friends and so that they could engage in higher level conversations with peers. Conner voiced his recollection of having a friend who was quite intelligent and read widely: “He really impressed me . . . and that encouraged me to want to read more, thinking that if I read more, I would understand things better.” Lilly also mentioned one of

her motivations to read was “so that I remain on par with my peers.” Participants also related that favorite genres of books they first were drawn to and specific books played an important part in their being and/or becoming readers; the fantasy and science fiction genres (some readers viewed these two genres as one) were the most frequently mentioned. Books were noted as an integral part of the lived experience of being a reader. All of the students mentioned books and spoke and wrote of books favorably, and the majority of images participants shared prominently feature books. Some spoke of their fondness for the sensation of holding books, some appreciated the smell of books, many enjoyed having stacks of books and bookcases or bookshelves around them, and several implied that they approve of *tsundoku*, the Japanese term for buying or owning more books than you could ever read. Zack expressed his love of books and admitted, “I have hundreds of books that I haven’t read yet, but you know.”

Sub-question one. The first sub-question asked, “What meaning do students who identify as readers ascribe to being a reader?” This sub-question was addressed mainly by the first theme, What it Means to be a Reader. Participants described how their being a reader means that they are someone who wants to learn and relishes the benefits that reading provides (those benefits are further explored in the second theme). Sawyer expressed this stating that one of his favorite things about reading is that when he learns something new while reading, “[it] is really intriguing which makes you want to read more stuff.” Students described that being a reader means that they are someone who has a broader, more well-rounded perspective; they have a “deeper and better understanding” (Conner). Alexander stated that being a reader “changes your perspective on things.” Lilly explained being a reader “makes me more aware of my surroundings,” and Vince related that being a reader helped make him “more analytical.” Participants also expressed that being a reader has made them more imaginative and more

creative, and that being a reader means they have a way to calm down and relax. Basha stated that being a reader means that "I use my imagination instead of having things just handed to me," and Conner related that being a reader "allows me to slow down and think and it help me solve my problems."

Sub-question two. The second sub-question asked, "How does being a reader affect the student participants' feelings of self?" This sub-question too was mainly addressed by the first theme, What it Means to be a Reader, though the second theme, Benefits of Reading, also offered insights. Participants described their lived experience of being readers as greatly affecting their feeling of self. Their descriptions most frequently mentioned were that being a reader made them smarter and more well-informed and improved or gave them self-confidence and a feeling of accomplishment. Vince stated that being a reader made him feel like "a smarter person," and Holden said being a reader made him feel like a "genius." Holden described the feeling of being a reader as "enlightenment," and Zack said being a reader made him "able to further understand the world." Lilly expressed that being a reader made her "eloquent" and "mentally sharp." Participants also emphasized that being a reader made them more confident. Sawyer said that being a reader gave him "self-confidence" and gave him the courage to engage with his more "well-read peers." Basha said that "being a reader has given me confidence," while Zack recalled that others' recognizing him as a reader gave him a "sense of confidence" and Bennett said being a reader made him "accomplished" and made him feel "unique."

Participants also frequently noted that being a reader improved their abilities to be self-aware. Alexander explained that "different stories help you find your place in different experiences you're going through." Sawyer related that books "perfectly touch on important things in your own life." Leah noted that "I learned a lot about myself through reading." Holden

said that his being a reader made him "more intuitive and self-aware." Basha related that "reading definitely makes me look at myself" and added that characters in books often offer "life advice."

Most participants also noted that being a reader made them happy and content. Bennett stated that being a reader made him feel "happy" and "proud." Conner added, "Readers have a sense of enjoyment, they have a sense of joy." Three other participants spoke at length of how being a reader made them happy and gave them a sense of fulfillment: Zack stated that being a reader made him feel "content," Alexander described it as "complete," and Diana said that being a reader made her feel "whole."

Sub-question three. The third sub-question asked, "How did students who describe themselves as readers become readers; do students who describe themselves as readers attribute their becoming a reader to an event, time, incident, or relationship?" This sub-question was mainly addressed by the first theme, What it Means to be a Reader, which included the Origin coded data, though the second theme which included Social Aspects, and third theme, which included Importance of Books, also added relevant information. Nine of the 11 students discussed or wrote about their mother, father, or both parents influencing their becoming readers. Several spoke about their mom or dad reading to them at night when they were younger as being influential. Conner's comment that "my mother would read to us kids every night, so that is where the first seed was planted," was similar to experiences that Holden, Lilly, and Basha described. Two participants, Zack and Leah, both mentioned the library as being influential. Zack stated that "my mother taking me to the library . . . was essential in my life as a reader." In addition to citing the library as an influence, Leah credited a friend as being her biggest influence in becoming a reader. Diana also credited a friend as an influence but added that "growing up

around books truly helped ignite the flame." Vince shared four photographs of full bookcases in his home, and he credited his brother and a series of books based on a favorite video game as being his main influences in becoming a reader. Bennett credited a high school religion teacher as his biggest influence in becoming a reader, and other participants also mentioned teachers as helping them become readers by engaging them in discussions about books, including reading books as assignments and suggesting high interest books to them.

Summary

This chapter began with an overview which included the purpose of the study. The chapter then presented a portrait of each of the 11 self-described readers who participated in the study to help present a more personal depiction of those who shared their lived experience of being a reader. Next, the chapter reported the results of this study. The results section began with a detailed description of the data collection from each of the methods employed: interviews, protocol writing questions, emails and texts, and image sharing. Next, the chapter discussed the coding of the data collected and then described how those codes formed three main themes. The results section concluded by demonstrating how those themes answered the central research question and three sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore and better understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student. This fifth chapter, Conclusion, consists of six sections including this overview. After the overview is a summary of the study's findings, which provides a summary by looking at how the data and themes answered the central research question and three sub-questions. Next is a discussion of the study's findings and implications, taking into consideration the literature reviewed in Chapter Three and the theoretical framework that guided this study. Following that is an implications section which discusses the methodological and practical implications of this study. The next section is an outline of the delimitations and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and then a summary.

Summary of Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of what it means to be a self-described reader as a high school student. The exploration was undertaken by interviewing 11 students, having those students write about their experiences, communicating with the students via email and texts, and the students sharing images that expressed what reading is or what being a reader means to them. A concise summary of the findings can be best shown by reviewing how the data and themes generated by the data answered the central research question and three sub-questions.

Central Question

"What is the lived experience of a self-described reader?" Being a reader has helped define who these students are as people. Being a reader adds value to their lives, it has made them smarter and more intelligent; well-informed and well-read; better able to communicate,

both verbally and in writing; and more understanding and empathetic. Being a reader means that they always have an engaging and enlightening way to entertain themselves, a way they can escape worries and stress and calm down. Being a reader means that reading brings a sense of joy, a sense of fulfillment, and a sense of contentment.

The experience of being a reader means being connected and engaged with others. Readers become readers with other people and with the help of other people. Readers identify with one another, share their love of books and all things reading with one another. Being a reader makes them a better person and makes them interact with others and treat others better.

Sub-question One

"What meaning do students who identify as readers ascribe to being a reader?" Identifying as a reader means that they are someone who has a certain hunger for knowledge and someone who wants to understand things. Being a reader means that reading helps build their knowledge and intelligence while simultaneously encouraging and enticing them to read more. Because they are a reader, they have experienced, vicariously, many other characters' and people's experiences, which helps them to be well-rounded and gives them a broader perspective. Being a reader means that they use their imagination and they are creative.

Sub-question Two

"How does being a reader affect the student participants' feelings of self?" Being a reader improved the students' self-confidence. Due to the increased knowledge and intelligence that reading provided, readers are more confident. This confidence has helped them feel good about themselves and has helped them build and strengthen relationships with others, which helps give them a sense of belonging. Being a reader has also improved their abilities to be self-aware. They learned about themselves and learned ways to deal with situations by reading about others. Being

a reader made them proud and gave them a sense of accomplishment. Being a reader made them feel happy, whole, and complete.

Sub-question Three

"How did students who describe themselves as readers become readers; do students who describe themselves as readers attribute their becoming a reader to an event, time, incident, or relationship?" The majority of students named a parent or parents as being very influential in their becoming readers. Many fondly recalled the experiences of being read to as a child and reading together as a family. Many also noted that teachers had been influential, and friends were also cited for their influence. Going to the library and getting a library card were discussed as important, and growing up around books was mentioned as being important; the majority of images that were shared bore this out. Also noted as being influential were specific books and book series.

Discussion

The discussion section is made up of two parts: the first is a discussion on how this study's findings extend or reinforce Vygotsky's social constructivist theories. The second is a discussion on how this study's findings confirm, expand, and sometimes disagree with the empirical literature presented in Chapter Two.

Theoretical Discussion

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's social constructivism. Vygotsky held that all higher mental functions in children's development first appear as social and collective activities (Barrs, 2017). Social constructivism maintains that learning happens or is constructed in social settings, occurs within particular contexts, and is an ongoing state of mind (Vaughn, 2019). Vygotsky believed that what he called "specifically human characteristics

of consciousness that develop in the child" are based on collaboration with others or imitation of others (as cited in Barrs, 2017, p. 350). Social constructivism has three main elements: Social Interaction, MKO, and ZPD. All three elements were shown to play a role in the participants' learning to read and becoming readers.

Social interaction. The interaction one has with parents, family members, peers, and teachers influences and affects the development of reading habits and practices (Daniels, 2016; Miller, 2011). All 11 participants shared during their interviews, their written answers to the protocol questions, their emails and texts, or their shared photos that social interaction was important in their lives as readers. Perhaps most importantly, in recalling how they became readers, each of the participants spoke or wrote about how their becoming a reader was due to their interaction with others. Students frequently named their parents as being influential. Holden spoke of "us [his family] all together reading" as helping him become a reader. Many mentioned their parents reading to them at night when they were young children, noting the importance of that interaction with their parents as being influential in their becoming readers. Several students named their interaction with friends as being important. Lilly mentioned both interactions with her parents and her boyfriend as important, while both Basha and Vince named interactions with their siblings as being important. Several students also named teachers and their discussions and interactions with them as being part of what made them readers. Diana noted that a teacher/school librarian's taking the time to interact with her and her friends and discuss books was important to her becoming a reader.

MKO. The more knowledgeable other can be a parent, a friend, a teacher, or a peer; it is any other individual with a higher ability level or more knowledge that the student. Obviously, parents and teachers served as the MKO when students learned to read, but the MKO was also

cited as being important in students' identifying as readers, reading new genres of literature, and continuing in their reading practices. Both Basha and Holden recalled imitating their parents by holding books and pretending to read before they knew how. Sawyer, when asked who may have influenced him to become a reader, spoke of his father:

> The fact that he was always much more knowledgeable than I was on basically everything makes you want to be able to compete with you know, your parents. And I would have conversations with him and then it started paying off too because the more you read, the more you're able to engage in a discussion with my dad. So, I would say that he has a pretty big impact on the fact that I read now.

Conner spoke of a friend being an influence: "One of my best friends . . . is way more intelligent than me . . . and that really encouraged me." Leah too spoke of a friend who in middle school helped her rekindle her love for reading through their discussion about books. Alexander spoke of a friend being the one to inspire in him a love for poetry, something that he had not explored before his friend discussed it with him.

ZPD. The distance between a student's development level and his or her higher level of potential development with guidance from an MKO is the Zone of Proximal Development (Daniels, 2016; Miller, 2011). Several students spoke of their growth experiences in reading due to the help of a sibling, peer, or teacher. Sawyer recalled his brother discussing with him the importance of consistent reading and reading at a good pace, which helped him to become a good reader. Zack spoke of a friend in his religious community who through conversations helps him better understand "different books and different subjects and different ideas about religion and psychology and our society." Bennett described his religion teacher as being a big help by answering reading and book questions via email and by discussing different books and ideas and

recommending new books and authors. Alexander described the teacher of his literature and composition course as “changing my outlook on reading.” He noted that “I would say my biggest shift with who I am as a reader actually happened this year.”

Empirical Discussion

The existing literature, as explored and discussed in Chapter Two, explored seven main aspects of reading and being a reader. This discussion is arranged to show how each of those aspects was addressed by this study.

What it means to be a reader. The existing literature showed wide support for several aspects of what it means to be a reader. A reader is someone who finds reading an enjoyable experience (Barone & Barone, 2016; Frankel, 2017; Merga et al., 2018); being lost in a book, or escaping into a book was frequently mentioned as important (Auyoung, 2013; Barone & Barone, 2016; Kilgallon, 2017; Perkins, 2013); readers are engaged, involved, and participate in the reading experience (Kilgallon, 2017); and two frequently mentioned theoretical perspectives agreed that readers see reading as an active and creative process (Martin, 2016; Schaefer, 2017). Participants in this study self-identified as readers. The working definition of a reader used for this study was based on the existing literature and contained three points: (a) identify as a reader or describe themselves as a reader, (b) think positively about reading, and (c) a person who chooses to read even when he or she does not have to.

This study confirmed each of the points shown in the literature as to what it means to be a reader. Since it comprised part of the definition, it was not surprising that all 11 participants found reading to be an enjoyable experience, although the joy that the participants found in reading and being a reader was noteworthy. Both Basha and Leah described reading as “fun.” Conner said that reading gave him “a sense of happiness,” and “I read when I want to have a

good time." Both Bennett and Conner also used the word "joy" in describing reading and in being a reader. Lilly said that being a reader made her feel "indescribably wonderful." The participants also confirmed that being lost in a book or escaping into a book was valuable. Sawyer described the enjoyable experience as being "sucked in" to a good book, and Conner described it as being "engulfed in a fictional world." Basha's statement epitomizes the feelings of many of the students: "reading offers an escape . . . a break from the fast pace of everyday life." Being engaged and involved in reading and viewing reading as active and creative were also frequently discussed by the participants. Lilly stated that reading made her feel "truly alive." Vince expressed that reading made him more "analytical"; Conner likes to read to "enjoy the world the author's created"; Basha and Vince spoke of appreciating using their imaginations while reading, and Leah stated that "I like to read to experience . . . to just, you know, to really engross yourself in a novel and you sort of like think you are in it almost, I have had that happen to me a lot."

The benefits of being a reader. The benefits of being a reader and of reading are many and were fully supported in the literature. Many called reading a vital and important source of learning (Akbasli et al., 2016; Qutoshi, 2018). Reading was recognized as not only necessary and invaluable to the skills and abilities needed for language arts such as reading, reading comprehension, and vocabulary (Jerrim & Moss, 2019; Merga, 2015; Whitten et al., 2016), but was also noted as contributing to students' success across the curriculum (Koon & Petscher, 2016; Merga, 2015; Young & Potter, 2013). Specific benefits were also noted for reading fiction. Several studies suggested that reading fiction seemed to increase the quality of empathy (Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Ingraham, 2016; Prior, 2018; Ricci, 2015).Reading fiction was also noted as helping readers grow and mature (King, 2014), and helping to make readers better people

(Miller, 2009). The literature also supported reading as being beneficial to writing (Hanski, 2017; Maciulewicz, 2016; Rief, 2017). Reading was recognized as foundational and as providing the tools needed to become a good writer (Green, 2012; King, 2000).

Each of these benefits was corroborated by this study's participants; however, there were also a few benefits noted by the participants not covered in the literature or not noted as being a benefit of reading or being a reader. Ten of the 11 participants specifically noted that being a reader or reading made them smarter and more intelligent. Holden related that reading had helped increase his intelligence "significantly," while Sawyer said that reading was "like exercise for the mind." Students noted the improvement in what are commonly considered language arts skills like reading and comprehension. Holden related that "reading speeds comprehension," and Leah claimed that reading "broadens your vocabulary." Alexander noted that reading made him "a better reader" and helped him "interpret things differently." Participants also touted the cross-curriculum benefits. Zack named one benefit of reading as "being able to further understand the world," and Conner noted that benefits of reading included "better process of thoughts and ideas" and "higher cognitive function." Vince stated that "reading helps you in every subject imaginable."

Empathy or an increased ability to feel empathy was noted as a benefit by six participants. Basha stated that reading about characters taught her how to "relate to them and feel what they feel." Though he seemed to have perhaps mixed his metaphors, Alexander's meaning can be understood when he spoke of empathy:

> You read different experiences and you can, as you're reading, you can look through the shoes of different characters and feel empathetic for them. When you are exercising that

> ability to feel empathetic with these characters . . . you feel empathy in real life, and you are able to empathize with others.

This new ability or improved ability to feel empathy was noted as a benefit that helped the participants to be better people. Holden noted that to be able to empathize "makes you a better person." Sawyer explained his growth as a person by noting the importance of "poignant moments in books that really appeal to something personal" because they "perfectly touch on important things in your own life." Other participants noted that being a reader was beneficial in that it made them better writers. Bennett said being a reader has heled him write essays and helped him to form better sentences. Leah also stated that being a reader "helps you become a better writer."

Participants also discussed several benefits of being a reader that were not called out in the literature. One benefit was that being a reader had made them better conversationalists and had helped them better communicate with their peers. Lilly frequently noted that her being a reader had helped her in debate and in communicating with classmates and friends. Sawyer too noted that being a reader had helped him in debate and he also stated that being a reader had made him "a better conversationalist." Zack remarked that reading had made him "think more," which had made him better at conversations. Being able to better connect with people as a result of reading and being a reader was also noted as a benefit by the participants. Zack spoke of an increase in the people he conversed with due to his having read certain books, also noting that these book discussions had led to the forming of friendships. Diana too noted that reading certain books had connected her to a "community of people." Several students—Bennett, Zack, Sawyer, and Conner—mentioned that they enjoyed being a reader and celebrate their being readers with like-minded friends by sharing passages from favorite books and quotes about reading via

texting or posting on social media. Zack, Sawyer, and Conner shared some of these passages and quotes (see Figures 3–5, 12, and 19).

Misplaced emphasis. The literature showed that high stakes testing had been a main area of focus in schools and education for a number of years (Deming et al., 2016; Scogin et al., 2017). Because of that focus, many suggested that schools have shifted their attention, and that of their students, away from the importance of reading and reading comprehension (Malo-Juvera & Scherff, 2017; Sinclair, 2018; Van De Wal & Ryan, 2014). This shift may bear at least some of the responsibility for the decline in student reading and reading comprehension (Jang & Henretty, 2019; Schaefer, 2017).

This aspect of reading was only somewhat corroborated by the participants in this study. Bennett discussed that being a reader made him feel unique in that many of his friends are not readers. He observed that reading "is like dying in like popularity lately." Conner reflected on the experiences of being a high school student:

> Everyone's busy in this day and age and speaking for a high schooler, it is incredibly hard to find time to read for pleasure while pursuing an education and extracurriculars that may follow. Then factoring in the world of technology to a kid's life makes the process nearly impossible.

Though the focus by some decision-making people in education has shifted away from reading and its importance, the participants in this study overwhelmingly showed that there are still many teachers who continue to focus on reading and its importance. Many participants noted how teachers had been instrumental in their becoming readers, not just in teaching the students to read, but in helping them establish practices and habits that made them readers. Diana told of a teacher/librarian that "started really harboring that love of reading in me." Zack, in recalling

those who had influenced him to become a reader, spoke of his speech and theatre teacher being encouraging, and stated that "he [the teacher] had a couple of talks with the speech team about the importance of reading for entertainment and for educational purposes." Holden, Alexander, Basha, Bennett, and Lilly all named teachers as being influential in their becoming readers. Lilly named four teachers individually by name who "have been huge helps in influencing me to read."

Self-concept of being a reader. The literature showed that considering oneself a reader is built on several factors. Some noted that readers' identities were based on experiences over a number of years (Learned et al., 2019). Many noted that the self-concept of being a reader has social, cultural, and environmental factors (Butz & Usher, 2015; Retelsdorf et al., 2015), and several noted that considering oneself a reader is somewhat reliant on books and the connections students make to them (Auyoung, 2013; Perkins, 2013).

The students in this study confirmed that their self-concept of being a reader did consist of the factors noted in the literature. Two students noted that their identifying as readers took place over a period of time. Conner recalled "multiple instances" of identifying as a reader over a period of years. Bennett named two phases of identifying as a reader that took place over six years. All 11 participants noted some social, cultural, and/or environmental factors in their descriptions of what being a reader meant to them. Zack recalled that his identifying as a reader was aided by classmates recognizing and being impressed by his reading abilities. Holden stated that he knew reading was important because of his family, and that helped him want to identify as a reader and be proud to identify as one. Diana noted the influence of a teacher/librarian, her group of friends reading the same books together, and importance of the book series they read. Sawyer remembered a series of books being influential and that recognizing that he was a reader

was a “rite of passage” in his family. Lilly fondly remembered first feeling like a reader when she read the *Hunger Games* and truly related to Katniss, the main character. Connections to people in books was also shown in the photograph Basha shared of her study desk/reading fortress, which showed only one book, *I am Malala*.

The participants also resoundingly noted that identifying as a reader, being a reader made them proud and more self-confident, and helped define who they were; this extends and adds to the existing literature. Alexander seemed to not be able to fathom what it would be like to not be a reader; when asked “What is being a reader like?” he responded, “I guess my question would be what’s it like not being a reader?” Conner wrote that being a reader gave him a sense of “pride and happiness,” adding in his interview that being a reader gives him “a sense of joy.” Bennett wrote that being a reader gave him “an overall sense of accomplishment.” Zack, Bennett, and Sawyer noted that being a reader made them more confident or gave them a feeling of self-confidence. Several students indicated that their being readers, their identity as a reader, was linked to their identity as a student and a person. Basha said that being a reader meant that she is “a thinking person,” Sawyer described that because he is a reader he has “the desire to know things,” and Lilly stated that “to me, being a reader is pursuing the truth.” Others added that being a reader made them “more intuitive and self-aware” (Holden), “content” and “whole” (Diana), “creative” (Leah), and “complete” (Alexander).

Reading as a social process. There is agreement in the literature about reading having a social aspect, either being a social process, having a social component, and/or being socially situated (Frankel, 2017; Harste, 2014; Learned et al., 2019). A number of studies showed that reading and considering oneself a reader are somewhat reliant on others and influenced by others (Bloome & Kim, 2017; Perkins, 2013). Several widely discussed theories support the assertion

that reading is social in nature and/or has a strong social component (Knoester & Plikuhn, 2016; Pulford et al., 2018), including Vygotsky's social constructivism, discussed earlier in this chapter.

The students in this study widely concurred with the literature that reading and being a reader has a strong social element and is strongly tied to and influenced by others. As noted in the theoretical discussion section of this chapter, all 11 participants noted the importance of social interaction to their learning to read and to their becoming readers. Nine participants spoke or wrote about the interactions with their moms, dads, or both parents as being heavily influential to their becoming readers. The importance of interactions with siblings was discussed by Vince and Sawyer, and interactions with teachers were noted as important by many, with Bennett and Alexander being perhaps the most outspoken. Alexander credited his interactions with the teacher of his literature and composition class as helping to bring about "my biggest shifts with who I am as a reader," and stated that the teacher "really just changed my outlook on reading." Bennett, when asked to describe what helped influence him to become a reader, described his interactions with his religion teacher: "I just talk to him a lot at school about what he's reading and what I'm reading . . . he introduced me to some of my favorite books." Interaction with friends was also noted as being important, especially by Leah and Diana. Leah recalled, "My friendship with a girl in the sixth-grade influenced me becoming a reader because she introduced me to many books." Diana wrote that "I had a really good friend re-spark my love of reading recently." The importance of the social aspect of being a reader was also underscored by participants sharing with their friends important or poignant book passages and book-related quotes through texting or posting on social media (see Figures 3–5, 12 and 19).

Motivational forces. Motivation was seen as an important element in students reading and in considering themselves readers; motivation was described as the will or desire for students to take part in reading and to continue (Boulhrir, 2017; Cantrell et al., 2017). Several motivational forces were noted as being important and influential. Choice of reading material was widely discussed as being a motivational force both in getting students to read and to keep them reading (Boatright & Allman, 2018; Dickerson, 2015; Gaffney, 2014; Jaaskelainen & Deneen, 2018; King, 2014). Within choice, many noted the importance of providing and promoting YA literature as being a motivational factor (Anderson, 2019; Greathouse et al., 2017; Kitchener, 2017; Peck, 2018). The social aspect of reading—students interacting with their peers—was often noted in the literature as being a key component of motivating and engaging students in reading and becoming readers (Amato, 2018; Hudson & Williams, 2015; Merga, 2017; Williams & McDaniel, 2017).

Participants in this study confirmed that both choice and the social aspects of reading were important motivational factors. The social aspects of reading have already been noted earlier as being important and valuable. Participants noted that social aspects are also motivational. Lilly stated that she is motivated to read "to stay on par with my peers," and Diana is motivated to read because it helps her "connect with other people." Sawyer noted reading books at the same time as a peer as causing him to read more and both Zack and Diana described reading with friends and discussing books as reasons they read. Most participants stated or insinuated that their being able to choose the books they read as being a motivation to read. Most participants' favorite genres of books are not those commonly taught or assigned in high school: fantasy was the most frequently named genre with seven mentions, Harry Potter books were mentioned by five students as being among their favorites, and thriller books and horror books

were also mentioned. Lilly expressed that her choosing to read *The Hunger Games*, a YA book, was instrumental in her becoming a reader. Several participants mentioned that being guided and supported in choosing books helped. Bennett was somewhat surprised and pleased that a teacher supported his reading a Stephen King book. Diana fondly recalled her teacher/librarian supporting her and her friends' choice of reading the Divergent series.

Diverging somewhat from the literature, many participants noted that they are motivated to read because it helps them to learn and grow; participants also voiced their opinions that they are motivated to read because it offers a good form of entertainment and relaxation, a welcomed respite from the worries of their lives. These last motivational factors were not widely discussed in the literature. Conner stated that he read "to learn new things." Leah, Sawyer, and Zack also listed learning and growing as motivations to read. Lilly stated that she was motivated to read "to make sure I am keeping myself in the reading loop." Alexander explained, "Part of my motivation for reading is to understand the connections that will happen when I read another book"; he then described how he was able to better understand *Catcher in the Rye* because he had first read *The Great Gatsby*. The majority of participants also noted that they are motivated to read because of the relaxation, entertainment, and escapist qualities reading provides. Participants described reading as calming, relaxing, and peaceful. Leah said that her favorite thing about reading was that "it's like my own time. I can take the time and go into my own little space and, you know, escape the stresses of life." Vince related, "When you are reading a good book, you can focus solely on the book and just drown everything else out."

Reading is reading. This last aspect of reading discussed how the literature supported recognizing non-traditional texts, texts other than traditional books, as reading. Several noted that encouraging and supporting students' reading of non-traditional texts can be motivational

and engaging (Conradi, 2014; Dickerson, 2015). Comic books, graphic novels, and manga were shown as having gained new-found acceptance and respect and as appealing to reluctant readers (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2017; Krashen, 2009; Marshall, 2018; McGrail et al., 2018). Digital books and e-books were also discussed and were mainly found to be motivational and engaging (Cardullo et al., 2017; Picton & Clark, 2015).

Participants in this study barely mentioned non-traditional texts. As noted in the code and code development section of Chapter Four, I had originally thought that "format" would be an important and often mentioned issue, so much so that I had started with "format" as one of my original codes. As I noted, I found very little support for my initial definition of the code "format." Instead, the participants showed an overwhelming amount of support for traditional books. This caused me to change the "format" code to "importance of books" which then became part of the theme Books and the Act of Reading. Only two participants mentioned non-traditional books. Alexander described that he sometimes listened to audiobooks of self-help or success books but said that he preferred to "actually have the book, because there's something different about that experience." Holden described his dislike for e-books and his love of traditional books:

> I don't like reading e-books, so that's why I read regular books. Like I like to hold them in my hands, I like the smell of the pages. I like old book smell and I like new book smell. I bought an e-book because I could not get the actual physical book and I don't like it because the brightness hurts my eyes and it's not the same.

Participants' preference for physical books was also expressed in the images that they shared. Of the 19 images, 12 prominently feature books or are of bookshelves and stacks of books. Books seemed to be an important part of the participants' identifying as readers.

Implications

This study produced findings that have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This section addresses those implications of this study and provides recommendations to stakeholders including parents, teachers, school administrators, and education decision makers.

Theoretical

This study was guided by Vygotsky's social constructivism. Vygotsky's theory maintains that learning is constructed or happens in social settings, occurs within particular contexts, and is an ongoing state of mind (Vaughn, 2019). Vygotsky believed that all of the "specifically human characteristics of consciousness that develop in the child" are based on collaboration with others or imitation of others (as cited in Barrs, 2017, p. 350). There are three main elements to Vygotsky's theory: social interaction, MKO, and ZPD.

The implications of this study indicated that Vygotsky's social constructivism provided an ideal lens with which to view the data and results of this study. The three main themes that were produced by the data in the study—What it Means to be a Reader, Benefits of Reading, and Books and the Act of Reading—all contain social components and all reinforce the ideas and theories of social constructivism. When participants in this study described what it means to be a reader, they noted the importance of their interactions with others, especially parents, teachers, and peers, to their becoming readers. They described how parents, teachers, and peers helped them to learn to read, how more knowledgeable others helped guide their progress as readers, and how that help and guidance sometimes opened up new genres and books and ways of thinking to them. When the participants discussed the many benefits of reading, many had a social component. Reading was noted as creating or improving empathy, the ability to truly understand others. Readers were also described as better conversationalists, better at

communicating with others. When the participants discussed books and the act of reading, being a reader was also recognized as facilitating new friendships and helping to strengthen existing ones. Zack and Diana noted that reading certain books had helped them forge new friendships and connect to people.

Recommendations. This study's findings strongly supported the importance of social interaction and Vygotsky's social constructivism. The main tenets of his theory were noted as being important in learning to read, continuing to read, and in becoming a reader. Based on these findings, it is recommended that parents and teachers continue to recognize the importance of social interaction in teaching children to read, encouraging students to continue to read, and in becoming readers. Parents, teachers, and peers were shown as important MKOs, vital to helping students reach and surpass the ZPD. This study's participants unanimously supported the social aspects of reading as being important to their lives as readers and becoming readers. All of those involved in the teaching and nurturing of children can benefit from continuing to recognize and embrace this information.

Empirical

This study provided research to support the existing literature in many instances, but also provided some additions and marked differences. In the exploration of what it means to be a reader, this study confirmed the working definition, a definition based on the literature, but also showed that being a reader is so much more. Being a reader and reading gave the participants a sense of joy; it made them feel creative and imaginative and, as Lilly expressed, "feel truly alive." The implication is that reading is not only enjoyable, it is a joy and makes readers happy.

The findings of this study also supported the many benefits discussed in the literature that reading and being a reader provide: increased and improved reading comprehension, increased

intelligence, growth and maturity, increased empathy, and better writing skills. This study's findings corroborated these benefits but also noted several more. Of particular interest was the participants' description of how being a reader made them better conversationalists and better able to talk to peers, which led to new friendships and strengthened friendships. Several participants mentioned that being a reader helped them to make connections with others. Reading as a social process was supported in the literature, and this study's findings unabashedly reinforced that. All of the participants spoke of others as being important to their learning to read and to becoming people who identify as readers. Being a reader was also celebrated with other readers by the sharing of book passages, statements, and quotes through texts and social media. The importance of others was also noted as being part of the participants' self-concept as readers. This study's results supported the existing literature on the self-concept of being a reader, but the data generated by this study showed that high school readers also get a sense of contentment from reading and being a reader and that reading makes them feel complete. The implication is that being a reader and the sensations and feelings that being a reader provide are a part of their identity.

Motivation to read and to continue to read was also widely discussed in the literature; like nearly every other aspect of reading, motivation was noted as having a social aspect. Additionally, choice of reading material, including YA literature, was noted as being motivational. This study's results agreed that social interaction was important to motivation. Participants noted their motivation to "stay on par with my peers" (Lilly) and to read books at the same time with friends and then discuss them. This study's findings also supported that choice and YA literature were important motivational factors. Adding to the existing literature, this study's findings showed that the escape, relaxation, and comfort that reading provides was a

motivation to read, and that students' desire to learn and grow were also motivations to read and to continue to read. The implications are that high school readers read to better themselves and to entertain themselves, often with others or in association with others.

The last aspect of reading reviewed in the literature for this study was the recognition of non-traditional texts, comic books, graphic novels, digital and e-books, as reading. As discussed earlier, I had expected this to be a fairly important issue in this study, but it was barely mentioned. This is not to say that the literature is wrong or that this study disputes the importance of recognizing non-traditional texts as reading. What this study's findings do indicate, however, is that high school readers find books to be an important part of their being readers. Books are preferred, relished, and even seemed to be a part of their identity as a reader. High school readers were proud of their books, liked the way their books looked—"I just like the way books like line up on my shelf" (Bennett), and shared pictures of their books and bookshelves.

Recommendations. This study's findings widely supported most of the existing literature, while also extending it and adding some additional and new data to it. The implications of this study support three main recommendations. The first is to continue to recognize reading as a way to build intelligence and reading and writing skills while at the same time recognizing that reading and being a reader provide the additional benefits of broadening one's perspective, give one a sense of joy, and offer a wonderful escape and form of entertainment. Second is that choice and access to high interest books (YA and contemporary titles) are a motivational factor and that being able to identify or relate to characters in books is important. Third, is it is important to recognize, appreciate, and understand that reading, being a reader, and becoming a reader are social and connected to others.

Practical

I undertook this study to explore and better understand the lived experience of high school students who identify as readers. I hoped that this study, including the data and the themes that it generated, would help shed light on the importance of reading and the effect being a reader has on high school students. I envisioned that information to be valuable to me as a high school English teacher and to other teachers. I hoped too that the data would help inform policies and decisions of school administrators, school officials and education policy makers.

While this study's results have supported the theoretical framework and existing literature, practical implications can be best discussed by reviewing the three themes generated by this study: What it Means to be a Reader, Benefits of Reading, and Books and the Act of Reading. Each of these three themes offered practical implications not completely covered by the theoretical implications and the empirical implications sections.

What it means to be a reader. This study showed that what it means to be a reader is more than just someone who identifies as a reader, thinks positively about reading, and a person who chooses to read even when he or she does not have to. Being a reader makes them special, being a reader means that they are "important" (Sawyer), "productive" (Zack), "more creative" and "connected" (Leah), "confident" (Basha), and "unique" (Bennett). Being a reader helps to define who they are as people; it is part of their identity. "Being a reader, I am someone who gets to experience . . . other lives" (Leah). The implications are that being a reader sets them apart, makes them feel special, and helps to define them.

Benefits of reading. This study demonstrated that readers overwhelmingly find reading to be beneficial with a number of benefits being named. Ten participants specifically mentioned that reading made them smarter or more intelligent. Lilly repeated what she called a favorite

quote from George R. R. Martin that she said summed up her thinking on reading: “A mind needs a book, like a sword needs a whetstone.” Ten noted the escapist qualities of reading as beneficial, and eight mentioned that being a reader had made them better communicators, both verbally and in writing. The majority of participants also described how reading and being a reader had made them better at being empathetic and understanding others. Alexander described that learning to be empathetic with characters in books “helps you to feel empathy in real life.”

Eight also noted that reading was fun and entertaining, noting that was a benefit. These students enjoyed reading, not just liked it, but found joy in it. Conner described reading fiction as filling him with “a sense of wonder and possibility” and described reading non-fiction as giving him a sense of “pride and happiness.” All of the high school readers in this study described one or more of the social aspects of reading as beneficial. Lilly spoke fondly of forming “reading coalitions,” and Diana remarked that reading helped her join a “community of people.” The implications are that readers recognized that reading offered intellectual, emotional, and social benefits.

Books and the act of reading. The findings of this study certainly suggested that high school readers find physical books to be not only important, but part of their identity as readers. All 11 participants spoke, wrote, and/or shared pictures that reflected the importance of books. Lilly stated, “If you want a travel-sized home you can carry with you wherever you go, pick up a book.” She also proudly shared a photograph of the keyboard in her room covered with piles of books. Vince shared four different photographs of the overflowing bookcases and bookshelves in his home, Zack spoke of having probably more books than he would ever be able to read, and Bennett shared photographs of his carefully stacked books. Interestingly, fantasy or fantasy/sci-fi was noted as the favorite genre by the majority of students; this genre is not frequently part of

high school English assigned reading. The social aspect was also a part of this theme as students noted social interaction, peers, and others as being part of what motivated them to read and in discussing their favorite genres of books and favorite books. The implications are that books are an important part of what being a reader means and that others are an important part of reading.

Recommendations. Much can be gleaned from the data provided by this study. The findings lead me to offer several recommendations. For parents, this study offered ample proof of the important role they play in helping and encouraging children to read and become readers. Participants reflected on the importance that their parents' reading to them when they were children and taking them to the library had on their becoming readers. Due to all of the benefits noted of being a reader, parents would be well served to help encourage their children to become readers. Besides the additional intelligence noted by the majority of participants as being a direct benefit of reading, reading was described as offering help and guidance in personal growth and in the development of empathy, the ability to see and understand the feelings of others. By parents' suggesting and recommending books to their children, they can help them to grow and mature, and books can help facilitate discussions on important issues.

For teachers, this study offered overwhelming support for the importance of helping students discover reading, stick with reading, and become readers. Being a reader was shown to help improve reading and comprehension, and many students noted that being a reader helped them in other subject areas as well. Teachers should engage in conversations with their students about books, recommend books to their students, and teach books in class. Teachers should be readers themselves and should read at least some books that their students read so as to be able to converse knowingly about books that interest their students. Teachers too should note the importance that the social aspect played in all things reading. Literature circles, book

discussions, reader's journals, and more can all be used to help tap into the importance that peers and others play in becoming and being a reader. Many teachers do these things and more to help inspire their students to read; I hope that this study has provided at least some information or ideas to help teachers continue in the important job that they do.

For school administrators and education policy makers, this study prompted several recommendations. One is to allow and promote reading as a worthwhile and beneficial activity both in and outside of school. The results of this study indicate that reading helps academic performance, relaxation and contentedness, and promotes maturity and growth. As educators, one of the goals is to help students reach their potential and to help them become good citizens and good people; this study indicated that reading helps to do all of this and more. I am not claiming that reading is a cure-all for the entirety of education's woes, but the benefits that these high school readers attribute to their being readers cannot be denied. Additionally, school libraries and/or classroom libraries are still needed; this study attested to the importance of books in helping students to become readers and keep reading. Schools need to make high interest books available to their students. The high school readers who have told of their lived experiences as readers in this study have testified to the fact that reading and being a reader is a wonderful thing and has brought them many benefits and provided them with happiness and contentment. School administrators and education policy makers should do everything within their power to help to promote and encourage their students to become readers.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study was designed to fill a gap in the existing literature by exploring and seeking to better understand the lived experience of self-described high school readers. A hermeneutic-phenomenological study was selected as it provided "the best opportunity to give voice to the

experience" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1294). The delimitations included limiting participants to only juniors or seniors in high school and limiting participant ages to between 16 to 18 years old. In phenomenological studies, participants must have all experienced the phenomenon in question (Corby et al., 2015; Creswell, 2007); in this study, all participants self-identified as readers. Participants also had to be students at one of the three high schools included in the study (Wallop and Abbott, Northern, or The Academy), as I used convenience sampling.

There are several limitations of this study. One is that all of the participants in the study were from the same, small city located in the northeastern United States, although participants came from three separate schools. The small number of participants, 11, can also be seen as a limitation, thought the small number is common in phenomenological study and is within the range recommended (Creswell, 2007). Another possible limitation is that of the study's 11 participants, seven were male and four were female; this was somewhat surprising as participants were volunteers and a more equal number of males and females was anticipated. One other possible limitation was that I performed all of the data analysis personally. To help alleviate this being a limitation and to aid transferability, I strove to provide thick descriptions and details of my findings. Transferability can be accomplished if the researcher provides sufficient details (Lincoln & Guba, as cited in Schwandt, 2007). To help assure validity and trustworthiness, I employed triangulation by collecting data in four ways. By using multiple types of data, I established validity and trustworthiness (Flick, 2013; Schwandt, 2007).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to give voice to an underrepresented group—high school students—in an exploration of what it means to be a reader. As noted in the review of existing literature, there are a number of studies exploring other ages of students, but what was missing was a

comprehensive exploration of what it means to be a reader from a high school student's perspective (Herrera et al., 2016; Farkas & Jang, 2019). Though this study presented data that corroborated much of the existing literature, it also extended some understandings and offered some new insights. However, it is only one study, and it was conducted using students from just one geographical location. There are several recommendations for future research.

There need to be similar studies to this one conducted in other geographical areas of the United States. Similar studies should be conducted in areas where the population is more diverse, as the geographic area in this study is more predominantly White than the U.S. average. Studies need to be conducted in areas that are more affluent, as the area in this study is of lower socioeconomic standing than the U.S. average. It would prove useful too, to conduct a similar study outside of the United States to compare and contrast results.

Additional studies using other qualitative research methods are also needed. A hermeneutic phenomenological study was fitting for exploring the lived experience and interpreting the texts of life (van Manen, 2015), but other types of studies are needed to either confirm, contradict, or both confirm and contradict this study's findings. As noted, there is a dearth of studies from a high school student's perspective, so additional studies employing various methods are needed.

Various findings noted in this study also bear further study and research. One interesting finding of this study that contradicted the existing literature somewhat was the almost complete disregard for non-traditional texts and the embracing of traditional books. One possible reason that bears further investigation is that the participants were confirmed readers and it could be that non-traditional texts appeal more to those who do not identify as readers. Possibly, students that prefer non-traditional texts may not identify as readers. It would also be interesting and

beneficial to further explore the sensations and feelings that readers experience while reading as this was just touched on in this study. Further exploration of the social aspects of reading seems to certainly be called for since social interaction and social aspects seemed to color every aspect of this study.

Summary

This fifth chapter began with an overview followed by a summary of the study's findings. The summary demonstrated how the data and themes generated by this study answered the central research question and the three sub-questions. Following the summary was the discussion section which discussed the study's findings in relation to the theoretical literature on Vygotsky's social constructivism. The discussion section also discussed the empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two and how this study's results confirmed, extended, and in some instances diverged from its findings. The chapter continued by addressing the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. After each of the three implication sections recommendations were made.

Two of the most important points that this study revealed were that the readers in this study considered their being a reader an important part of their identity; it was important in their self-concept and to their self-confidence. Lilly related that "I use the term 'reader' to distinguish myself." Reading made them satisfied, content, and whole. Two student readers claimed that being a reader or reading had changed their lives. The second point this study revealed was how the social aspects and social interaction permeated every facet of reading and being a reader. Students learned to read with and because of others, began to really read with and because of others, and they became and identified as readers with and because of others. Participants spoke fondly of parents reading to them and with them as children and of teachers supporting and

encouraging their reading, and of friends being made and friendships strengthened because of reading and being a reader. Reading helped connect them and made them a part of a community.

After the implications section and recommendations, the chapter continued with an examination of the delimitations and limitations of the study. These were followed by several recommendations for future research and the chapter concluded with this summary.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

What it Means to Be a Reader

- Do you consider yourself a reader?
- Are you a junior or senior in high school?
- Would you be willing to be interviewed and to answer a few questions in writing?

If you answered **yes** to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a reading research study.

The purpose of this research study is to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student. Participants will be asked to be interviewed, answer a short series of questions in writing, and to share pictures, drawings, or selfies that depict various reader qualities. Participants will be entered in a raffle to receive one of three, $25 Target gift cards.

The study is being conducted at [redacted]

Mr. Michael Romick, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Mr. Michael Romick at mromick@liberty.edu for more information.

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX B: Adult Consent Form

Title of the Project: The Lived Experiences of High School Students Who Self-Identify as Readers: A Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Mr. Michael Romick, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University, English Teacher WAHS

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 16-18 years of age and an eleventh or twelfth grade student who identifies as a reader. (You have been identified as being at least 18 years old, so you are receiving the consent form rather than the parental consent form) Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be conducted via web-conferencing software or, if it is safe, face to face. Interviews will be recorded on the iPhone app Just Press Record.
2. Participants will be asked to answer a short series of questions in writing via email. This will take approximately 30 minutes.
3. Participants will be asked to share pictures, drawings, or selfies that depict various reader qualities; this will take approximately 10 minutes.
4. Participants will be asked to participate in member checking, a review process in which the participant reviews data for the sake of accuracy and validity; this will take approximately 30 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society, in a broad view, may include high school teachers, administrators, students and those who develop standardized tests for high school students benefitting from the first-hand accounts of what it means to be a reader from the students themselves. It is also my hope that this study will inspire researchers to further explore what it means to be a reader to students of all ages and even perhaps examine ways that will help more students become readers.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

It is unlikely, but possible that this research could reveal information concerning child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others. As a teacher in the state of Northeast, Mr. Romick is required by law to report such information.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject, unless a participant submits and permits the researcher to include a self-identifying photo in the study. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected as part of this study may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from the participants is shared, any information that could identify them, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential and interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Hard copy data will be stored in a locked file cabinet, digital data will be stored on a password-locked computer and/or password-locked iPhone. Data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and hard copy records will be shredded.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer and/or password-locked iPhone for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- All original selfies will be kept on a password-locked computer and/or a password-locked iPhone.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. However, participants will be entered into a drawing to win one of three $25 Target gift cards.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as a teacher at [redacted] To limit potential or perceived conflicts no current students of Mr. Romick will be eligible to participate. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on her or his decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [redacted] If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Mr. Michael Romick. You may ask any question you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at mromick@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. James Swezey at jaswezey@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and/or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.
☐ The researcher has my permission to use selfies/photographs/pictures/drawings of me/ provided by me for this study.

_____ _____

Printed Subject Name Signature and Date

APPENDIX C: Parental Consent Form

Parental Consent

Title of the Project: The Lived Experiences of High School Students Who Self-Identify as Readers: A Phenomenological Study
Principal Investigator: Mr. Michael Romick, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University, English Teacher

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be 16-18 years of age and an eleventh or twelfth grade student who identifies as a reader. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to allow your child to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I would ask him or her to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview. Interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be conducted via web-conferencing software or, if it is safe to do so, face to face. Interviews will be recorded on the iPhone app Just Press Record.
2. Participants will be asked to answer a short series of questions in writing via email. This will take approximately 30 minutes.
3. Participants will be asked to share pictures, drawings, or selfies that depict various reader qualities; this will take approximately 10 minutes.
4. Participants will be asked to participate in member checking, a review process in which the participant reviews data for the sake of accuracy and validity; this will take approximately 30 minutes.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Benefits to society, in a broad view, may include high school teachers, administrators, students and those who develop standardized tests for high school students benefitting from the first-hand accounts of what it means to be a reader from the students themselves. It is also my hope that this study will inspire researchers to further explore what it means to be a reader to students of all ages and even perhaps examine ways that will help more students become readers.

What risks might participants experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life.
It is unlikely, but possible that this research could reveal information concerning child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others. As a teacher in the state of Northeast, Mr. Romick is required by law to report such information.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject, unless a participant submits and permits the researcher to include a self-identifying photo in the study. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected as part of this study may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from the participants is shared, any information that could identify them, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential and interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Hard copy data will be stored in a locked file cabinet, digital data will be stored on a password-locked computer and/or password-locked iPhone. Data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy data records will be shredded.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer and/or password-locked iPhone for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- All original selfies will be kept on a password-locked computer and/or a password-locked iPhone.

How will participants be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. However, participants will be entered into a drawing to win one of three $25 Target gift cards.

What conflicts of interest exist in this study?

The researcher serves as a teacher at [redacted] To limit potential or perceived conflicts no current students of Mr. Romick will be eligible to participate. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to allow your child to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on her or his decision to allow his or her child participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your or his or her current or future relations with Liberty University or [redacted]. If you decide to allow your child to participate, she or he is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should be done if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw your child from the study or your child chooses to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw her or him or should your child choose to withdraw, data collected from your child will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Mr. Michael Romick. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at mromick@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. James Swezey at jaswezey@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child as part of his/her participation in this study.
☐ The researcher has my permission to use selfies/photographs/pictures/drawings of my child/provided by my child for this study.

_____
Printed Child's/Student's Name

_____
Parent's Signature Date

_____
Minor's Signature Date

APPENDIX D: Superintendent Permission Request

15 April 2020

Mr. or Ms. Name
Superintendent
Northern High School
1234 Main Street
Small City, NE 98765

Dear Superintendent:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is The Lived Experiences of High School Students Who Self-Identify as Readers: A Phenomenological Study, and the purpose of my research is to explore and understand the lived experience of what it means to be a reader as a high school student.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct part of my research with select Northern High School students. With your permission I will contact your principal, Jane Kindwoman, to help in identifying potential participants. I am an English teacher at Wallop and Abbot High School, and I am attempting to include students from several different area high schools in an effort to get a broader representation of student participants.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. In addition to the interview, participants will be asked to answer a short series of questions in writing, share pictures, drawings, or selfies that depict various reader qualities, and participate in member checking, a review process in which participants review data for the sake of accuracy and validity. Participating students and their parents/guardians will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request; if you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval and send it to me either via email or to the address below. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Michael J. Romick
mromick@liberty.edu

APPENDIX E: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. What types or genres of books do you like best? Please explain why these are your favorites?
3. What are your three or four favorite things about reading? Please describe them in detail.
4. Please describe anyone else who is a reader, friends, peers, teachers, who may have influenced you to become a reader.
5. What is being a reader like?
6. Tell me about the earliest time that you identified or realized you were a reader?
7. How may your family members' reading habits have influenced you in becoming a reader?
8. Please describe some of the reasons you read.
9. Please fill in the blank: My being a reader makes me feel like _____.
10. Selfies, photos, and pictures can sometimes help express ideas, feelings, or thoughts. In a creative way. Have you ever expressed what reading is, or what being a reader means to you, other than in words? Perhaps in selfies or pictures or artwork? If you have indeed expressed yourself in one of these ways, can you describe it for me now? And, would you be willing to share these photos or pictures with me?

APPENDIX F: Protocol Writing Questions

Open-Ended Protocol Writing Questions

1. What is your favorite book? Why is it your favorite book?
2. What were the one or two particular things, events, or incidents, or relationships, that led to you becoming a reader?
3. Please describe the feelings or sensations that you associate with reading.
4. How would you describe the benefits of reading to a friend whom you were trying to convince to become a reader?

APPENDIX G: Sample Interview Transcript

Lilly Interview May 8, 2020.

1. **Please introduce yourself to me.**

   I am Lilly XXXXXXX, I am currently the captain of the high school debate team and I am also the president of the history club and I'm going to (Name of) University to study politics and law and I want to be a lawyer, so…

2. **What types or genres of books do you like best and please explain why these are your favorites?**

   Can I pick two? Dystopian-novels and fantasy. Dystopian novels because they show us what our world can be and the stark realization that we face, like, like 1984, like, people are holding up signs like "make Orwell fiction again" and things like that; that's why I think that dystopian novels are so important because I think that they say a lot about our time. And of all of the fictitious genres I think that dystopian novels have the largest degree of an ability to change the world that we live in today. And, this will transition me into my second answer which is fantasy because I think that fantasy is, it appeals to me because of the escapist elements of it. You know, we are currently living in an unprecedented time and so I love escaping into a lot of worlds that I couldn't possibly imagine. I think that Isaac Asimov is a really a good explanation of the combination of the two. Because I love his foundation novels and they talk so much about not only where we are today but it's also living in this pseudo-scientific world and it's stuff like that, sci-fi fantasy, that genre, because I get to sort of escape and have a lot of fun.

3. **What are your three or four favorite things about reading? Please describe them in detail.**

I would love to. O.K. I would say that my first favorite thing about reading is that I learn a lot and that I have become more eloquent and been able to elucidate what I really mean a lot of the time and that has been especially helpful whenever I am debating, and that is my number one thing, is I learn a lot about speaking and explicating what I mean to other individuals. And that is really important because I have a lot of thoughts going on up here all of the time (pointing with both hands to her head) and like I have to get this out. My second thing is I like, I know that this is impossible, but I think that it makes me more aware of my surroundings and of who and what I'm dealing with because I learn a lot about, like I empathize with a lot of the characters and I think I learn a lot through that cultivation of empathy, about other people and about their situations and I think that I have learned a lot more about the people that I am around because I sort of understand what they are going through and I think that that is honestly been due to the help of the fantasy genre. Another thing, the third thing I guess, is just expanding my knowledge base in general. I also read a lot of non-fiction and one of my favorite sort of (air quotes) self-help, non-fiction, psychology books is *12 Rules for Life* by Jordan Peterson because he writes not only beautifully, but he really clearly explains a lot of what went wrong in the past and where we are now and how we can change that. Not only on the individual scale but also on the global scale. I also read a lot of history books, because I'm the president of the history club and I like to remain up to date and stuff like that so I would say, learning how to convey myself and I think more effectively, learning more about understanding and relating to my peers as well and learning more about life in general.

4. **Please describe anyone else who is a reader, friends, peers, teachers, who may have influenced you to become a reader?**

Oh my gosh, the list literally goes on for so long. O.K. the number one person is my father, for sure. The only reason that I tried out for debate and I would say that that is where my interest in reading really piqued. He would always play chess with me and had libraries upon libraries in his house and he would do a crossword with my sister and play a game of chess with me every Sunday night, we had our own separate things and I don't know if you know, but he owned his own restaurant, (Name) Café, and, which he would say "nourishment not only for the mind but for the body." And, second probably would be my boyfriend. I met him on the debate team and he also read, and I sort of read at the same time and we sort of formed this uh, coalition where we would read the same book and argue about it and talk about it and stuff like that. So, we have been doing that forever. I know that you have seen us at (Coffee Shop name) all the time, well that's him (laughs) And three teachers (names them) have been huge helps in influencing me to read (names another teacher) and others, a ton of people.

5. **What is being a reader like?**

   To me being a reader is pursuing the truth, I would say. And to respond philosophically to a relatively philosophical question, one of my favorite quotes is "a mind needs a book like a sword needs a whetstone," because I read to stay polished, I read so that I can learn and so that I can remain relatively eloquent. Just so that I can remain up to date and relatively sharp I think.

6. **Tell me about the earliest time that you identified or realized you were a reader?**

   O.K., this is a relatively embarrassing story, I have not told anyone this, but um, I first realized that…, I sort of use the term 'Reader" to distinguish myself from other people. When I first realized that, I remember, I was reading *The Hunger Games*, that was the series I was reading at the time, and Katniss is the main character, clearly, and she sort of, uh, an

outsider and she doesn't really relate to a lot of her peers, and I sort of felt that way too because I was going to (school name) and the specific event that I remember is that we were taking the state test and I was the first to finish by like leagues and I remember being like really bored and I was just sitting there, so I started reading and the teacher was like "what are you doing?" and I was like "I'm reading, what do you mean?" and she was like "Why?" (laughs) "Why are you asking me why?" And then after the test was over everyone went outside and was like playing on the playground and I was just sitting on the steps and I was just reading still, and she (the teacher) was like "why don't you go play?" and I was like "I am." So I would say that, that was the moment, in fourth grade.

7. **How may your family members' reading habits have influenced you in becoming a reader? You touched on your dad earlier**

So, yes, my mom actually has a published book, and my dad, he wrote for the (name of big city newspaper) as a columnist for I think six years. My mom I think is signed with a publisher now, and the people that I am dog-sitting for, my sister and her husband, I don't know if you can see, but I am sitting in their study now, and he is a lawyer, so my whole family has inspired me since I was born to write and to read. I wish you could see my house, I mean we are living in a small apartment now, and I have my own room but it is pretty small, and I have not only a book shelf but a piano, it's more like a keyboard, but over time that keyboard, I mean it's covered in books, I mean like all the way, like five stacks like this (motions with her hands two-feet high or more) I mean so many books, but I don't have enough room to put another book shelf in so I just keep piling them up across the wall. I wish I could show you, but yea it's ridiculous.

8. **Please describe some of the reasons you read.**

Well, other than what we have talked about already, a slightly more fruitful and topical reason that I read is because I am entering college and so I sort of want to, not necessarily have a leg up on other people, but I sort of surround myself by people that read and because of that I want to make sure that I am remaining relatively on par with them intellectually. So, I read the books that they talk about and I make sure that I am keeping myself in the reading loop, if you will. I would say another reason is so that I remain on par with my peers.

9. Please fill in the blank: My being a reader makes me feel like _____.

Um… I'm thinking really hard. Can I say indescribable? Seriously, indescribably wonderful and um, fulfilled, yes, fulfilled maybe. At home. At home is another reason.

10. Selfies, photos, and pictures can sometimes help express ideas, feelings, or thoughts. In a creative way. Have you ever expressed what reading is, or what being a reader means to you, other than in words? Perhaps in selfies or pictures or artwork? If you have indeed expressed yourself in one of these ways, can you describe it for me now? And, would you be willing to share these photos or pictures with me?

Yea, I can't send you a picture right now, but, because it's in my house. I don't know if this counts but, not only would I send you a picture of my keyboard, because it's covered in books, but, I don't know if this counts, but I have this one green like armchair. And that armchair, my dad bought it for himself when I was little, like I was a little tiny baby, I mean I was like just born and he bought it for himself so he could like hold me and we started watching movies in it every Saturday night because that was when I would go up to visit him because my parents divorced when I was like one, so I would go up and visit him and we would always watch movies in that chair. And then I got older and I would always play chess games with him in that chair and I would always sleep in that chair and that chair has been

with me forever. And recently, like in October, my dad passed away so that was the one thing I took. I was like I need my green chair. So I brought the green chair with me and that's where I sleep now. Which is not economical because I have a bed right next to me, but it is way more comforting both physically and spiritually. And so, I read in that chair, I do homework in that chair. I would say that that chair is the one thing that describes me as an object most effectively.

[We talked briefly about Lilly sending some pictures and then discussed protocol writing and next steps. I thanked her and we agreed to talk again after she sends pictures.]

APPENDIX H: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 30, 2020

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY19-20-225 THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO SELF-IDENTIFY AS READERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Michael Romick, James Swezey:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: April 30, 2020. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB.
These submissions can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office