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Summit Learning and Rural Montana Teacher Efficacy, a Phenomenology

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Abstract

Following the global COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the United States experimented with online learning platforms. Prior to that, hundreds of schools adopted the Summit Learning platform, meant to supplement face-to-face learning with digital instruction and curricula. This study is a qualitative phenomenology exploring the lived experiences of teachers in two rural Montana schools that have adopted the Summit Learning platform and maintained its use into the pandemic. Participants of this study taught core courses, such as math, science, and history. Results of this study indicate a high level of curriculum modification and support from leadership. Participants reported modified changes to the Summit Learning curriculum ranging from slight changes to significant changes based on individual participant's perception of what students should and should not learn. Additionally, all participants reported the importance of leadership supporting curriculum changes and general classroom autonomy throughout the adoption and employment of Summit Learning. The results of this study inform the growing scholarship related to online learning platforms.

Keywords: cognitive ability, content knowledge, college readiness, curriculum, experiential education, formative assessment, habits of success, individual assessment, interdisciplinary, personalized learning, quantitative assessment, teacher efficacy, workforce readiness

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The pursuit of two terminal degrees is questionable. That is to say, when people heard that, after completing a PhD, I was seeking an EdD, they had questions. The most common was simply, why? Throughout the process I honed by response based on the competitive nature of higher education, my own intellectual interests, and personal ambitions. Throughout this process, however, my wife did not once question my motives. Rather, she embraced my own pursuits as a matter of fact and supported me in every imaginable way. Doctoral studies are inherently time consuming. The time spent on coursework and research, thus, is time lost with friends and family. I cannot thank my wife, Jenn, enough for her ongoing support and enthusiasm from beginning to end. She never once complained or questions why, she simply supported me at every opportunity. She is my favorite person and I cannot thank her enough for her support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of teachers at two public high schools that have adopted the Summit Learning platform in Montana. Participants have experienced the Summit Learning platform as the sole content delivery modality at their high school. This study is comprised of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the study by defining the problem statement, purpose of the study, central question, limitation and delimitations, and the significance of the study. Chapter Two clearly reviews the literature relevant to this study. Chapter Three outlines this study's methodology, including any gaps in the literature described in Chapter Two. Chapter Four describes data analysis used in this study. Chapter Five concludes this study with findings and implications as well as recommendations for further research. To reiterate, this study researched the lived experience of teachers, all of whom taught in Montana using the Summit Learning platform.

Problem Statement

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), 83% of United States high school seniors graduated in the 2014/2015 academic year. While this rate of graduation is at an all-time high, public schools continue to modernize content delivery by utilizing current and emerging pedagogy. Increasingly, critics of public education question the traditional model of content delivery. Oftentimes criticism comes without scientific evidence, but nevertheless is disseminated to the public. According to Hood (1993),

we not only fail to hold individual students accountable for poor performance, we have also failed to hold the entire government-controlled school system accountable for its performance since at least World War II. Public education is itself a failure. Why shouldn't individual students follow its example? (para. 2)

Criticism of public education has resulted in massive policy reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signed into law by President Bush in 2002, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law by President Obama in 2015 (Klein, 2015). NCLB “effectively scaled up the federal role in holding schools accountable for student outcomes” (Klein, 2015, para. 2) In other words, students should not only graduate, they should have a consistent level of abilities and skills that will equip them to succeed in the workplace and in higher education.

Standardized assessments are used as an accountability system that is, “typically at the state level, in which scores on state tests are used to both measure student achievement on state educational standards” (Bandalos et al., 2011, p. 155). Many, however, question the efficacy of standardized assessment. According to Conley (2014) in *A New Era for Educational Assessment*, an important force to consider when viewing the current landscape of assessment in U.S. schools is the rising weariness with test-based accountability systems of the type that NCLB has mandated in every state. Although the expectations contained in NCLB were both laudable and crystal clear – that all students become competent readers and capable quantitative thinkers – the means by which these qualities were to be judged led to an overemphasis on test scores derived from assessments that inadvertently devalued conceptual understanding and deeper learning. (p. 7)

In other words, Conley points out that standardized assessments did not assess the student holistically. Rather, student assessments have tended to emphasize math and reading aptitude. According to Conley (2014), these types of assessments are not adequate indicators of whether or not students are college ready:

This body of research has reached remarkably consistent conclusions about what it means to be ready to succeed in a wide range of postsecondary environments. And the key

finding is one that has far-reaching implications for assessment at the high school level; In order to be prepared to succeed in college, students need much more than content knowledge and foundational skills in reading and mathematics. (p. 8)

The foundational skills that Conley discusses include cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills (Conley, 2014). By limiting the assessment to math and reading, many suggest that secondary education has been forced to forego other, equally valuable, educational outcomes. Referencing Jack Jennings, the former staff chief of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, Tucker (2014) asserts “that there had been almost no improvement in student performance at all in the decade following passage of NCLB” (p. 11). Tucker (2014) recognizes the fact that there may be some positive correlations, that “it would be hard to argue so far that test-based accountability of the kind mandated by NCLB had had a positive effect on student achievement” (p. 11).

For many, the assessment-based nature of educational legislation beginning in the 2000s resulted in a diminished emphasis on other skills necessary to make students college and workforce ready. Among many proposed solutions, Summit Learning has emerged as a potential remedy to this particular educational problem. Summit Learning has been presented to the public education system as a tonic to schools in America that “do not create the conditions to nurture the talents of every child, especially those whom systematic racial and socioeconomic inequities have failed” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 5). Summit Learning has quickly emerged as a new educational delivery model that can be adapted by public schools, which engages students individually by means of personalized learning. Summit Learning relies on historical educational models, modern scientific research, and technology to address the shortcomings discussed earlier

based on standardized assessment. Summit Learning sums up their philosophy on the educational process by stating,

Over the past 25 years, scientists have made dramatic advances in the neurological underpinnings of learning. The burgeoning field of learning science brings exciting advances in neuroscience, social psychology, cognitive development and behavioral economics to the field of education. We have derived insights from education research across the spectrum, from experimental studies in cognitive science to large-scale analyses of workforce readiness. The most prominent national and international curriculum frameworks also inform our approach. (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 9)

As of early 2019, 380 schools across America have adopted Summit Learning (Summit Learning, n.d.). Teachers are on the front line of the Summit Learning, yet there is little to no literature discussing teacher efficacy of Summit Learning. Summit Learning is attempting to change the means by which content is delivered, and therefore the way students are assessed. And, while Summit Learning heavily emphasizes the value of teachers in the Summit Learning arena, there is no basis found in the literature regarding teacher efficacy of the Summit Learning model. The lack of literature on Summit Learning means that school leaders, teachers, and parents only have information provided by Summit Learning to gauge its success. As the nation weathers a global pandemic and schools across the country continue to engage in remote/online learning, Summit Learning will likely expand its reach. Educators and parents alike deserve to have a deeper understanding of Summit Learning's successes and shortcomings in order to make informed decisions.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers teaching at selected rural public school in Montana that have adopted Summit Learning. Or, as Moustakas (1994) puts it, “to determine what an experience means for the person who have had the experience” (p. 13). According to Lin (2013), “phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology. It is inspired by the branch of philosophy which concerns the phenomenon of human consciousness” (p. 469). A phenomenological design is a preferred qualitative approach when researchers seek to uncover the “meaning” of an experience (Creswell, 1998). This approach explores the essence of human consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Citing Sanders (1982) and publications by Heinrich in 1995 and Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves in 2000, Lin (2013) states, “Intellectually, phenomenology is powerful when the study goal is to explore a concept loaded with social and cultural meanings especially when the topic does not render itself easily to quantification, and when new and fresh perspectives are needed” (p. 470). According to Creswell (2007), “a phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals” (p. 62). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers teaching at selected rural public school in Montana that have adopted Summit Learning.

Central Question

The aforementioned problem necessitates investigating the lived experience of teachers who have taught utilizing the Summit Learning. “Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional” (Creswell, 2013, p. 138). The central question for a phenomenology should be broad and have a component of “meaning” (Creswell, 2013).

Foundational to qualitative research is the establishment of a central question. As a means of inquiring upon the phenomenon of teachers utilizing Summit Learning in Montana, the central question for this study was as follows: Do rural Montana teachers teaching in schools that have adopted Summit Learning believe in its efficacy?

Literature germane to student assessment and content delivery was heavily utilized in the creation of sub-questions and participant interview questions used to answer the central question of this phenomenological study. Sub-questions were used “as a means of subdividing the central question into several parts” (Creswell, 2013, p. 140). Established sub-questions and the justification for each sub-question are addressed in Chapter Three.

Definition of Terms

Readers will find below a “definition of terms that readers will need in order to understand a research project [and] terms that individuals outside the field of study may not understand and that go beyond common language” (Locke et al., 2014, p. 17).

Cognitive ability is “the ability of an individual to perform the various mental activities most closely associated with learning and problem solving. Examples include verbal, spatial, psychomotor, and processing-speed ability” (National Council on Measurement in Education, 2017, para. 14)

Content knowledge is “a set of vocabulary, ideas, events, concepts, properties, and details related to a given academic discipline” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 37).

College readiness is “the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (Conley, 2012, p. 5).

Curriculum consists of “the lessons and academic content taught in a school or in a specific course or program” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2005, para. 1).

Experiential education is “a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (Association for Experiential Education, n.d., para. 1).

Formative assessment refers to the gathering of information or data about student learning during a course or program that is used to guide improvements in teaching and learning. Formative assessment activities are usually low-stakes or no-stakes; they do not contribute substantially to the final evaluation or grade of the student or may not even be assessed at the individual student level. For example, posing a question in class and asking for a show of hands in support of different response options would be a formative assessment at the class level. Observing how many students responded incorrectly would be used to guide further teaching (Carnegie Mellon University, 2005).

Habits of success are “the dispositions, mindsets, and behaviors that students need to be successful in college and career” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 50).

Individual assessment uses the individual student, and his/her learning, as the level of analysis. Can be quantitative or qualitative, formative or summative, standards-based or value added, and used for improvement. Most of the student assessment conducted in higher education is focused on the individual. Student test scores, improvement in writing during a course, or a student’s improvement presentation skills over their undergraduate career are all examples of individual assessment (Carnegie Mellon University, 2005, p. X).

Interdisciplinary methods constitute a mode of curriculum design and instruction in which individual faculty or teams identify, evaluate, and integrate information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of knowledge to advance students' capacity to understand issues, address problems, and create new approaches and solutions that extend beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of instruction (Rhoten et al., 2006, p. 3).

Personalized learning is tailored "instruction, expression of learning and assessment to each student's unique needs and preferences." (Howton, 2017, para. 1).

Quantitative assessment "collects data that can be analyzed using quantitative methods" (Carnegie Mellon University, 2005, para. 14).

Teacher efficacy is "the belief or judgment that a teacher's own abilities will bring about positive changes and desired outcomes of student engagement and learning even among students who may be difficult to work with or who lack motivation" (White, 2014, p. 31).

Workforce readiness is a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management. (National Association of Colleges and Employers, n.d.)

Delimitations

Delimitations "define the parameters of the research study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 113). The parameters of the study allow readers a clear understanding of the study. This study was delimited to high school teachers in Montana who currently teach in a publicly funded high school that has adopted the Summit Learning platform.

Limitations

Qualitative researchers necessarily impact the outcomes of their research as the researcher is, to some extent, face to face with participants. According to Creswell (2013), the researcher's presence during data gathering interviews may impact the participants' responses. This study relied upon the recollections of its participants. As a result, there is the potential for false recollections or emotionally driven alteration to memory that could impact each participants response. There was also the possibility of participants not providing truthful responses for personal or professional reasons. Depending on the duration of time Summit Learning has been utilized, teachers may have differing perceptions of its functionality and effectiveness. Cultural backgrounds of each school is a potential limitation to the study as well. The two schools participating in this study are small, rural schools. As each school has its own unique culture, and Summit Learning relies heavily on technology, individual school culture may impact how teachers view Summit Learning. Lastly, the extent to which school administration has committed to Summit Learning will be a limitation to this study, as administrator commitment will have positive or negative impacts on teacher efficacy of Summit Learning.

Significance of Study

Increasingly, critics of public education question the continuation of traditional content delivery. While scholarly research plays some role in the devaluation of public education, much criticism comes in the form of media outlets such as the *Washington Post*. In July of 2016, Strauss wrote a piece for the *Washington Post* titled "A Surprising Truth About American Education." In it, Strauss discussed Diane Ravitch, who some call the architect of No Child Left Behind and a former assistant secretary of education. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind,

Ravitch has openly repented over her role in the creation of the law. In *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch (2000) states,

Worst of all was Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's devout belief in evaluating teachers by student test scores. Social scientists long recognized that home and family, especially family income, had a much larger effect on test scores than teachers. On every standardized test, students from the richest families had the highest scores and the students from the poorest families had the lowest scores. Some rich kids got low scores, and some poor kids got high scores, but every standardized test in the nation ultimately functioned as a family wealth index. (p. 263)

The concerns by those at the very top of the decision-making pool over the current legislation regarding public education has resulted in authors such as Strauss writing articles that cast doubt on the public education system. The concerns of public education critics may be resolved through the use of content delivery platforms such as Summit Learning. While Summit Learning is primarily a content delivery platform, it promotes itself as much more than that based on the multi-faceted approach and in-depth philosophy. School participation in Summit Learning is growing with more than 380 schools in 30 states (summitlearning.org). As the number of schools adopting Summit Learning increases, there must be equally increased scrutiny on its value and impact in the public education arena. This study adds to that scrutiny by exploring teacher efficacy of Summit Learning in Montana. The selected Montana schools that have adopted Summit Learning (Darby High School and St. Regis High School) are primarily seen as rural schools. The study is a qualitative inquiry on teacher efficacy of Summit Learning in Montana. The significance of this study will be adding to the scholarly body of knowledge regarding Summit Learning. The results of this study can be used by Summit Learning administrators,

school administrators, parents, and teachers when choosing whether or not to adopt Summit Learning.

Summary

Public education continues to transform over time. With the introduction of legislation that places added emphasis on student assessment, workforce and college readiness, and content delivery, some argue that public education is not fulfilling the needs of students to the extent possible (Hood, 1993; Conley, 2014). One response to critics of public education has been the creation of Summit Learning. Summit Learning has introduced a specific content delivery mode based on a philosophy of developing cognitive skills, the acquisition and retention of content knowledge, fostering habits of success, and cultivating a sense of purpose among students (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 10). The use of technology and experiential learning is nothing new to public education. But, the extent by which Summit Learning insists on leveraging technology and providing experiential learning opportunities might be seen as a radical departure from traditional public education philosophy. As teachers are the primary conduits of knowledge for students, and are relied upon highly for implementing Summit Learning, it is imperative that educational leaders fully understand the teachers' efficacy of this particular mode of content delivery. This qualitative phenomenological study inquired upon teacher efficacy of Summit Learning in two schools that have adopted the platform in the state of Montana. The results of the proposed study will aid decision-making among school administrators, teachers, and parents when choosing whether or not to opt in to Summit Learning.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on school reform, the Summit Learning platform and its components including cognitive learning, content knowledge, habits of success, sense of purpose in learning, experiential learning, self-directed learning, student assessment, personalized learning, and teacher efficacy. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers teaching at selected rural public school in Montana that have adopted Summit Learning. This chapter will adhere to Boote and Beile's (2005) five criteria for a quality literature review: coverage, synthesis, methodology, significance, and rhetoric. Coverage refers to the extent by which this literature reviews relevant literature. While thorough, the researcher of this study sought synthesis through concise reporting of the literature. Third, in reviewing the literature careful consideration was taken to identify differing methodologies of research in the field under inquiry and assessed them for advantages and disadvantages. Next, this literature review focused on the significance of its content without reporting insignificant or unrelated literature as well as noting gaps in the literature. Finally, every effort was made to write this literature review in a manner that is clear, concise, and easily read. This chapter will begin with a comprehensive history of school reform. This portion of the chapter is relevant as Summit Learning can be seen as a school reform movement, despite being adopted locally by individual school districts. Next, this literature review will discuss the individual components of Summit Learning that are seen as critical components to the Summit Learning model; cognitive learning, content knowledge, habits of success, and sense of purpose in learning (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Next, the literature review will discuss experiential learning and self-directed learning as a means of engaging students in the learning process. Following experiential and self-directed learning, this chapter

will then discuss personalized learning, which is a key component of Summit Learning. Finally, this literature review will consider teacher efficacy and criticism of Summit Learning.

School Reform

1775–1850

For generations, public and private education has been under scrutiny in the hopes of improving the learning process and refining the ultimate purpose of education in the United States. Education has been widely regarded as fundamental to the success of individuals and society in general. While there have been many champions of the education system, schooling in America has largely been a function of the US government. This charge has been primarily carried out by states and individual school districts. A watershed moment for this phenomena was an argument provided by Thomas Jefferson following the American Revolution. Jefferson contended that as an independent nation, America would require an education system, supported by taxes, that would exceed basic skills (Comer & Gates, 2004, p. 149). According to Comer and Gates (2004),

Jefferson was calling for a kind of education that was more than knowledge of basic skills, the classics, or even science. He wanted a public education system that would enable the average person to understand political, economic, and social issues, their relevance to their own lives, and what was needed to improve and to sustain democracy. (p. 149)

Despite Jefferson's early appeals, there was no widespread adoption of tax funded schools in the early republic. Rather, "a dual system of public and private schools, often religious, emerged" (Iorio & Yeager, 2011, p. 3).

Not long after Jefferson's suggestion of a tax funded school system, Massachusetts passed a law requiring a college education to serve as school masters. Massachusetts, however, was in the minority as most states had little to no requirements for teaching. Throughout the early republic, schools remained mostly religiously run institutions. This reality was changed as a result of western expansion. Early settlement throughout western expansion, in the plains and along the coast, resulted in one-room school houses scattered throughout the west. The advent of one-room school houses in the west was paralleled by a growth of students in urban settings (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). Massachusetts, an early leader in public education, passed the nation's first compulsory education law in the mid nineteenth century, followed closely by New York (*The History of Public Schools*, 2011). According to Comer and Gates (2004), public school numbers increased dramatically, but with widely varying disciplines and curricula. As schools in America matured, a central mission of preparing students for citizenship emerged. In addition to the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic) schools were increasingly including the sciences, geography, and disciplines that would now be known as the humanities (Bohan & Null, 2007).

Simultaneously, Booker T. Washington opened the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama for African Americans (Thornbrough, 1969). His goal was to train African Americans for the trades. On the contrary, W. E. B. Dubois argued that African American students should be educated in a similar fashion as white American students. His stance was that the Tuskegee model equated to racial discrimination, a stance that would carry through the Civil Rights movement of the 20th century (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). Over the next 100 years, the American court system would debate the issue of segregated schools in court cases such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education*.

1850–1950

During the mid-nineteenth century, while issues of Native American and African American education were being debated, the education community at large began to solidify its purpose. According to Church (as cited in Iorio & Yeager, 2011), “the Common School Movement had three goals: 1) To provide a free elementary education to every white child living in the United States 2) to advance some form of state control over local schools, and 3) to create a trained educational profession” (p. 6). Consequently, the National Education Association was formed as a means of “professionalizing teaching and advancing education” (Iorio & Yeager, 2011, p. 6). As had been previously the case, Massachusetts led the way by increasing the length of school years and teacher salaries. One result was an overwhelming number of women becoming teachers, with as many as 90% of all teachers being female (Brinkley, 2009). The advent of public normal schools meant for training teachers soon spread throughout urban America. At its onset, the threshold for admission to a public normal school was an eighth grade education (Ogren, 2005).

By the late nineteenth century, the industrial revolution was well underway, which led to an increasing number of Americans moving to urban settings. According to the US Census, by the 1920s more Americans were living in urban settings than rural settings, which meant that more students were attending school. As education provided by the state became more prevalent, compulsory education ultimately followed as a state mandate in all states (Bankston & Caldas, 2009). The movement to make education compulsory was quickly followed by the growth of high schools, which allowed students to continue with their education, ultimately gaining a diploma after twelve years of education (Goldin & Katz, 2003). All of the aforementioned school

reform history led to a watershed moment that pitted the progressive education movement against the constructivist education movement.

Contrary to constructivists, the progressive movement included early thinkers such as John Dewey, the father of experiential education. Progressive education took on holistic characteristics meant to teach the child as an individual through kinesthetic education. This type of education led to philanthropists participating in the education system (Karier et al., 1973). Philanthropists saw progressive education as a means of alleviating national problems such as poverty and ineffective government. The result was an education system that began to focus on trades based education for males and homemaker education for females (Ravitch, 2000).

As the education system progressed, an emphasis on memorization was replaced by an emphasis on more experiential classrooms, critical thinking, and collaborative learning (Knoll, 1997). This shift in educational practices led to a need for more extensive education among teachers, resulting in a move from two-year credentialing programs to four-year degree programs for would-be teachers (Harper, 1970). Still, however, Dewey lamented that the progressive education movement had not yet been widely adopted (Cremin, 1959).

1950–Present

Following World War II, President Eisenhower's administration created a cabinet level position that had a partial focus on education. This served to advance widespread education to the point that the majority of American youth were enrolled in public education and seeking a High School diploma (Fitzpatrick & Turner, 2006). The creation of a Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare coincided with economic growth demanding more white-collar workers than blue-collar workers (Ravitch, 2000).

Recognizing the role of education during the Cold War Era, advocates of opposing mindsets were pitted against each other. At first, according to Karier et al. (1973), the progressive movement was welcomed. An early proponent of Dewey's philosophy, James Conant advocated for increasing funding for education as a means of responding to social issues. Conant's advocacy would eventually lead to forming a system that puts students on a track toward college, trade schools, or the workforce (Darling-Hammond, 2011). The purpose of education was not the only debate taking place that would shape the American education system. In 1955, Friedman wrote an essay advocating for freedom of choice for parents wishing to send their children to better schools. Friedman suggested a voucher system that could be utilized by parents on their children's behalf. Friedman's argument, however, was but one part of an overall question of school segregation (Friedman, 1955). Prior to 1954, states had autonomy to choose whether or not schools would be segregated. This debate was "settled" with decision by the US Supreme Court in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. With a 9-0 vote in favor, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was in violation of the US Constitution (Wishon, 2004). From that point on, schools were required by law to integrate, despite the obvious challenges this ruling would create (Rivkin & Welch, 2006).

While settling issues of segregation and the purpose of education, Americans were also in the midst of the Red Scare. To make matters worse, at the height of the Red Scare, the Soviet Union successfully launched a satellite into space, sparking a national concern over whether or not American students were receiving adequate education in what are now known as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) subjects (Leiding, 2009). To address this new concern, the National Defense Education Act (NADA) of 1958 was passed to increase federal support of education nationwide (Urban, 2010). An early outcome of NADA was increased

requirements for teachers including advanced degrees from universities (Morey et al., 1997).

This created a requirement within the education system that professionalized teaching as a means of formalizing the education process and increasing its quality and function.

For the next quarter century, the education system remained largely status quo. But in 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published a report titled *A Nation at Risk*. In it, the commission detailed a dire situation in which students lacked adequate education due to a “rising tide of mediocrity” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5). The report itself was flawed in many ways. As Berliner and Biddle (1995) stated,

To illustrate, in 1983, amid much fanfare, the White House release an incendiary document highly critical of American education. Entitled *A Nation at Risk*, this work was prepared by a prestigious committee under the direction of then Secretary of Education Terrel Bell and was endorsed in a speech by President Ronald Reagan. It made many claims about the “failures” of American education, how those “failures” were confirmed by “evidence,” and how this would inevitably damage a nation. (Unfortunately, none of the supposedly supportive “evidence” actually appeared in *A Nation at Risk*, nor did this work provide citations to tell Americans where that “evidence” might be found.) (p. 3)

Lack of evidence did not stop policymakers from acting on the information provided in *A Nation at Risk*. The commission’s concern over education regarding the information age happened to be very timely, as technology and information would become exponentially more accessible over the next three decades.

By the year 2000, the federal government had continued to make efforts to reform education. The Clinton Administration extended federal authority by signing into law Goals 2000. Goals 2000 required significant additions to student requirements prior to graduation such

as additional math, English, science, and computer science classes (Goals 2000, 2018). Few states had the resources to implement such changes, which resulted in most states not meeting the targets set by Goals 2000.

In 2002, the Bush administration signed into law No Child Left Behind. According to Iorio and Yeager (2011), the sweeping legislation required extensive education reform. Substantial new funding was provided to support achievement of these objectives. The Act requires states to develop assessment in basic skills to be administered to all students in grades three through eight annually and once during high school, if those states are to receive federal funding for schools. (p. 25)

NCLB was not without criticism. Among others, Ravitch, wrote frequently regarding her own criticism, culminating in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (Ravitch, 2016). At the height of this criticism rose a new model for education; Summit Learning.

Summit Learning

Summit Learning, established in 2003, focused “on understanding individual student goals and impact of strong mentor relationships” (Summit Learning, 2018, p. 18). This learning philosophy was predicated on four primary principles; students must cultivate cognitive skills whilst in the educational setting, the acquisition and retention of content knowledge must take place at an individual pace in order to effectively demonstrate proficiency, habits of success must be cultivated in order to succeed, and students must develop a sense of purpose (Summit Public Schools, 2017). The founders of Summit Learning state,

Our current American public education system is based on a specific set of values, beliefs, economic needs, and cultural forces of the 20th century Progressive Era school

reformers.^[1] The reformers carefully designed a system that would produce a skilled workforce for industrial America, preparing the majority of students for factory jobs and a minority to become managers and elites. Underlying the industrial model was a very specific belief system about the capacities of different groups of students to succeed. (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 10)

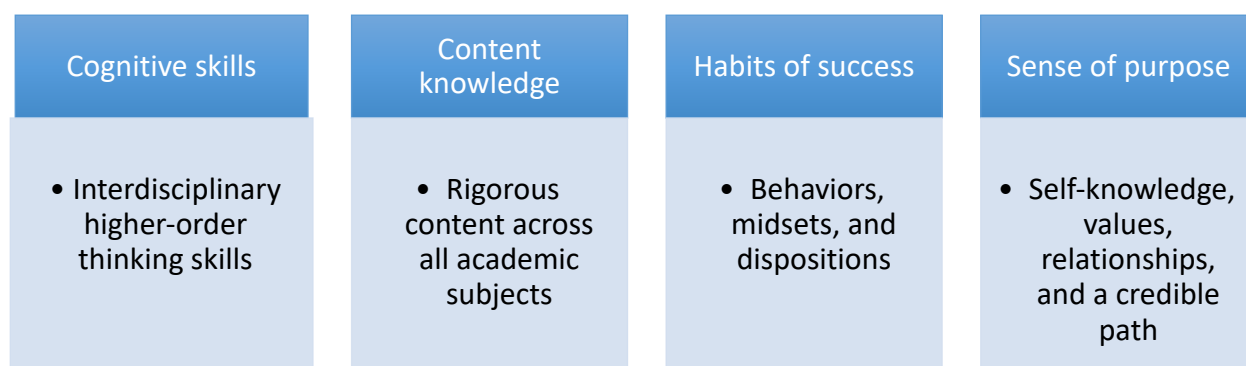
Summit Learning is considered by its founders to be in opposition to the industrial model for education. Its creation, at its root was meant to provide an alternate model for education that is relevant in today's context (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Summit Learning describes it as an Aligned School Model Framework used to “articulate a school model that consistently and reliably predicts success for all students when implemented effectively — one that is aligned with the school's articulated purpose of education and grounded in evidence” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 11). The model has six steps; (a) articulate values and realities (b) define the purpose of education (c) determine measurable outcomes (d) derive evidence-based principles (e) detail key design choices (f) and assess alignment and coherence of design. The Aligned School Model Framework is meant to clearly define the context of the educational process in a specific community.

Summit Learning is predicated on the belief that every child should graduate from high school equipped with the skills, knowledge, and habits to lead a fulfilled life; one that is filled with choice, financial independence, community engagement, strong relationships, and health. We believe that for adults to thrive and live such a life, they need to have a Sense of Purpose, which involves self-knowledge, the ability to set and meet goals, and the critical skill of persisting in the face of inevitable challenges. (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 13)

These core beliefs were coupled with the belief that teachers and families are critical in the educational process. In order to make these beliefs a reality, Summit Learning focused on four student learning outcomes (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Summit Learning's Four Student Learning Outcomes



The instructional approach differs from traditional school settings in that it is competency-based, rather than based on seat time. Summit Learning has three primary components in the classroom. First, teachers serve as mentors for individual students, facilitating a one-on-one check-in weekly. Second, classes are project-based, allowing students time in the classroom to work on projects, but also allowing students the opportunity for internships and the pursuit of individual interests. Finally, student learning is self-directed, which is intended to help students establish the ability to set and carry out goals.

Summit Learning classrooms are project-based and student learning is self-directed. Summit Learning hopes to have created classrooms that allow teachers to teach real world skills through collaborative, team projects (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Mentorship is meant to establish deep, meaningful relationships between teachers and students with the result of teaching students habits for success. Summit Learning believes in the opportunity for each

individual student to discover individual capabilities. In doing so, it is expected that students will not only establish habits of success, but also a clear understanding of strengths while setting goals for life following secondary education. This is done through working at their own pace and relying on one on one mentorship from an individual teacher. Finally, all of this is meant to support family and home life.

The Summit Learning platform was made available to any public school interested in adopting a new educational model. Summit Learning requires that all schools adopting the platform follow federal guidelines for English and create individualized education plans (IEPs) for students. In Montana, two similarly sized schools have adopted the Summit Learning model; Darby School District and St. Regis, both class C schools (Montana High School Association, 2017). Both St. Regis School District and Darby School District were the focus of this qualitative study.

Cognitive Skills

According to Summit Learning, students need to do more than retain or apply information; they have to process and manipulate it, assemble and reassemble it, examine it, question it, look for patterns in it, organize it, and present it. They need intentional patterns of thinking to draw on as they complete work after high school.

According to the National Research Council, cognitive skills are interdisciplinary competencies that require higher-order thinking (National Research Council, 2012). In the public school sphere, the National Common Core Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards encourage the teaching and learning of cognitive skills (Common Core State Standards, 2010; NGSS Lead States, 2013). Summit Learning relies heavily on “Evidence Based Principles” as defining the need for cognitive skills acquisition among students. Reasoning begins with the

belief that students must acquire cognitive learning skills as a means for college admissions and workforce readiness (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 26). This assertion is backed by a 2012 National Research Council report stating, “Cognitive competencies have been more extensively studied than intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, showing consistent, positive correlations (of modest size) with desirable educational, career, and health outcomes. Early academic competencies are also positively correlated with these outcomes” (p. 65). Summit Learning builds on the idea that cognitive learning skills improve educational and professional attainment by stating that “in the 21st century, proficiency in skills at the end of high school is more valuable than proficiency in the content of any given subject matter” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 29). In other words, the overall learning that takes place at Summit Learning schools is more important than learning specific to individual academic disciplines. In order to develop cognitive skills, they “must be accessed within each student’s zone of proximal development” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 29).

In order to facilitate cognitive skills acquisition, students must be engaged in authentic and inquiry-based learning (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Summit Learning schools focus on inquiry-based active learning for student learning retention and cognitive growth. Active learning will be discussed later in this literature review. But, it is important to note that inquiry-based learning is closely related to active learning, also known as experiential learning. In Summit Learning schools, teachers are expected to have the resources necessary to provide authentic learning experiences. According to Barron and Darling-Hammond (2011),

The research highlighting the benefits of authentic learning, together with a growing interest in providing students with more engaging, thought-provoking learning opportunities, has prompted teachers at all grade levels to experiment with incorporating

inquiry-based learning into their curriculum. But interest alone does not make for effective implementation of new models. Indeed, “learning by doing” has a somewhat checkered track record, in part because teachers often lack the information, support, and tools necessary to fully integrate and support this alternative approach to teaching and learning. (p. 3)

This type of inquiry-based learning lends itself well to experiential and project-based learning (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Summit Learning is deeply rooted in project-based learning and operates under the belief that this type of learning environment is necessary for students to gain cognitive learning skills that transcend a single academic subject. To put it another way, “Cognitive Skills extend beyond traditional disciplines; the same skill can be applied in multiple disciplines” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 29).

In order to appropriately assess the acquisition of cognitive skills, Summit Learning has implemented a rubric that identifies 36 cognitive skills, all of which fall into seven categories; (a) textual analysis (b) using sources (c) inquiry (d) analysis and synthesis (e) composing and writing (f) speaking and listening (g) products and presentations. Students are graded based on this rubric, and “must score a 6 on a 0-8 point scale to demonstrate college and career readiness” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 30). This score is more heavily weighted in a student’s overall grade due to the importance Summit Learning places on cognitive skills. “Students refine and improve their Cognitive Skills through project-based learning” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 30). In this model, students work for extended lengths of time on issues that are complex and engaging, requiring a heightened level of examination, leading to deeper learning that can be extended across academic disciplines (Summit Public Schools, 2017). All projects provided by Summit Learning have embedded lessons meant to aid in student cognitive skills growth.

Summit Learning suggests that teachers and administrators work together to focus on content knowledge and cognitive skills adjacently. In doing so, students will not only learn discipline specific knowledge, they will also understand how to apply cognitive skills to a variety of disciplines, regardless of context or content. However, it is important to note that neither is considered a priority over the other.

Content Knowledge

The Summit Learning model uses content knowledge acquisition as a means of establishing and building cognitive skills. They define content knowledge as including “a set of vocabulary, ideas, events, concepts, properties, and details related to a given academic discipline” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 37). Content knowledge in Summit Learning schools is specific to individual academic disciplines, while cognitive skills are developed across disciplines. At the heart of Summit Learning’s evaluation of content knowledge is the development of critical thinking skills:

The acquisition of basic familiarity with the language, details, procedures or terms of a given discipline, and the retention of that knowledge in long-term memory, aid the urgency and expertise with which individuals can practice a given discipline moving forward. (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 37)

Table 1 gives cognitive skills and their relative association with each category.

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Table 1

Cognitive Skills by Category

Category	Cognitive skills
Textual analysis	Theme/central idea Point of view/purpose Development Structure Word choice
Using sources	Selecting relevant sources Contextualizing sources Synthesizing multiple sources
Inquiry	Asking questions Predicting/hypothesizing Designing process and procedures

Analysis and synthesis	Identifying patterns and relationships Comparing/contrasting Making connection and inferences Critiquing the reasoning of others Justifying/constructing an explanation Interpreting data/information Modeling
Composing and writing	Argumentative claim Narrative Counterclaims Informational/explanatory thesis Selection of evidence Explanation of evidence Integration of evidence Organization (transitions, cohesion, structure) Introduction and conclusion
Speaking and listening	Discussion/contribution Preparation Norms/active listening
Products and presentation	Style and language (tone, academic language, syntax) Oral presentation Multimedia in written production Multimedia in oral presentations Conventions Precision

Summit Learning cites Recht and Leslie (1988) on background knowledge and its impact on comprehension of content. The study by Recht and Leslie involved students being tested and categorized as good readers or poor readers. Following this test, teachers incorporated a reading portion about baseball. Students who had previous knowledge of baseball scored consistently higher, “regardless of whether they had been considered poor or good readers more generally” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 37).

Summit Learning takes a similar approach to content knowledge as they do with cognitive skills regarding college and career readiness, stating “In order to be successful in college and careers, students must master rigorous Content Knowledge in each of the academic

disciplines” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 38). According to Conley (2012), content knowledge is the “foundational content and ‘big ideas’ from core subjects that all students must know well, and an understanding of the structure of knowledge in core subject areas, which enables students to gain insight into and retain what they are learning” (Conley, 2012, p. 2). Conley (2012) further explains that content knowledge may refer to skills and technical expertise related to professional ambitions, as well as how students reason mastery or failure of grasping content. Content knowledge relies heavily upon individual interests and how those interests relate with a given discipline. Conley’s (2012) assertion is a driving factor in Summit Learning’s connection of content knowledge and college and career readiness (Summit Public Schools, 2017).

Another core belief regarding content knowledge is that it is built upon existing content knowledge (Summit Public Schools, 2017). According to a report by Deans for Impact (2015), “teachers can ensure that students have sufficient background knowledge to appreciate the context of a problem” (p. 6). Furthermore,

to learn, students must transfer information from working memory (where it is consciously processed) to long- term memory (where it can be stored and later retrieved). Students have limited working memory capacities that can be overwhelmed by tasks that are cognitively too demanding. Understanding new ideas can be impeded if students are confronted with too much information at once. (Deans for Impact, 2015, p. 3)

This extends the Summit Learning belief that students can more easily capture and retain knowledge when content builds upon previously established and retained content knowledge. Summit Learning further suggests that content knowledge is best acquired when presented in different modalities such as “visual, auditory, and/or kinesthetic” (Summit Public Schools, 2017,

p. 38). This is premised in the belief that no student has a specific learning style. Rather, all students learn in different and multiple modalities, which must be addressed by content delivery. Moreover, Summit Learning contends that certain information can be committed to long-term memory, which “working memory resources and illuminating contexts in which existing knowledge and skills can be applied” (Deans for Impact, 2015, p. 5).

Building on Rose’s (2016) *The End of Average*, Summit Learning suggests that not all students learn on a similar timeframe. This contention will re-emerge during the portion of this literature review discussing personalized learning. With regard to content knowledge, the basic argument is that not all students will acquire content knowledge at the same speed, depth, or breadth as their peers (Summit Public Schools, 2017). In order to accommodate this, according to Summit Learning, content must be delivered based on individual student abilities to acquire and retain knowledge.

In order to encourage the appropriate level of content knowledge, as prescribed by standards-based education, Summit Learning schools implement focus areas and power focus areas (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Focus areas are meant primarily to align content knowledge with standards set forth by “the Common Core Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 39). This is meant to ensure that all Summit Learning students are meeting the minimum guidelines for graduation and college admissions. According to Summit Learning (2017), once focus areas are mastered, all Summit Learning courses reach college-level Advanced Placement standards. These courses are referred to as power focus areas. Student progress through focus areas and power focus areas with multiple learning modalities and at their own pace.

Summit Learning openly acknowledged that there is a natural “pendulum” that occurs in education. This pendulum, according to Summit Public Schools (2017), pivots from the belief that hands-on learning is superior to content knowledge, and vice versa. However, Summit Learning takes a strong stance on this by stating,

We have carefully studied the history of these pendulum swings, and in taking stock of the evidence at our disposal at this time, we have concluded that Summit Learning will adopt an approach that focuses on both the acquisition of Content Knowledge and the development of Cognitive Skills. (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 40)

Summit Learning asserts that the acquisition of content knowledge and the development of cognitive skills is central to teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom. By provided opportunities for self-paced acquisition of content knowledge in individual subject matters, ultimately leading to cognitive skills, teachers can more effectively educate students than by “lecturing whole groups about facts” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 40). Summit Learning believes that by educating students in this manner they are able to understand what students are learning and how they learn it (Summit Public Schools, 2017).

Habits of Success

In addition to the acquisition of cognitive skills and content knowledge, Summit Learning believes that students must develop habits of success to aid in academic pursuits as well as future professional pursuits. “After a careful review of existing frameworks, Summit Learning has adopted the *Building Blocks for Learning* framework developed by Dr. Brooke Stafford-Brizard on behalf of Turnaround for Children” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 47). The framework acknowledges that students begin the development process at individual places based on distinctive backgrounds. Additionally, higher-order skills must be built upon a foundation of

lower-level skills for appropriate socio-emotional skills to develop. Habits of Success in Summit Learning schools are broken down into five categories; a) healthy development b) school readiness c) mindsets for self and school d) perseverance e) independence and sustainability.

The Summit Learning model habits of success are considered to be dynamic, relevant to an academic setting, allow for social learning, and align with child development throughout the educational process. With an understanding that each student learns differently based on the context of their past, Summit Learning expects learning to be responsive to cultural individuality, rather than as a one size fits all, which can be referred to as “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Dee & Penner, 2016, p. 1). Dee and Penner (2016) conducted a study in the San Francisco United School District that implemented an ethnic studies class for students hailing from historically marginalized groups. By all quantitative measures such as attendance, GPA, etc., students’ academic performance improved, “indicating that culturally relevant pedagogy can be extraordinarily effective in supporting the academic progression of struggling students” (Dee & Penner, 2016, p. 25).

In addition to culturally relevant pedagogy, Summit Learning considers a cohesive curriculum a necessary component of the model for students to gain habits of success. A cohesive curriculum alongside a sense of belonging in school creates an environment where students “feel socially connected, supported, and respected. They trust their teachers and their peers, and they feel like they fit in at school” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 49). Part and parcel to creating this environment is the assessment of habits of success. However, Summit Learning makes it quite clear that habits of success assessment should not be used for grading purposes. Rather, it should be leveraged as a device for allowing student growth and development with the guidance of teachers in their respective schools. As teachers guide students

through growth and development of habits of mind, they must also demonstrate behavior that can be used as learning opportunities for students. “Habits of Success must be modeled within the school environment: in adult interactions; within school routines, celebrations, policies, and procedures; and as part of ongoing professional development for educators” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 49).

Summit Learning uses the following design choices to reinforce habits of success; (a) individualized weekly monitoring (b) self-directed learning (c) project-based learning (d) professional development for teachers (e) home-school connections, belonging in a community (f) restorative practices, and (g) assessment. Individualized weekly monitoring “is focused on setting goals, developing action plans, and reflecting on progress” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 50). Teachers at Summit Learning schools are typically responsible for a single subject arena, but are also responsible for mentoring students and their overall academic and social experience. “Mentor time” is spent in a 1:1 setting allowing for individual students to work with their teacher mentor to reflect on the overall Summit Learning experience and make adjustments when and where necessary. Throughout this process, students engage in self-directed learning as a means of acquiring habits of success and cognitive skills. This is compounded by the use of project-based learning that are germane to subject and grade level. Teachers are equipped to prepare students for self-directed learning and to create projects that are relevant due to Summit’s teacher professional development opportunities available to all Summit Learning teachers.

In addition to in-school design choices, Summit Learning heavily emphasizes out-of-school design choices such as home-school connection and community belonging. “It is critical to celebrate a student’s home culture, language, and perspective as an asset to our learning

community” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 52). Summit Learning students engage in regular meetings with parents and teachers. This allows students’ families to understand goals and academic challenges, while simultaneously offering teachers a better understanding of home life, informing decision-making. Students also engage in community building activities such as volunteerism and group excursions to reinforce community belonging. “Through both projects and expeditions, teachers create a myriad of opportunities for students to interact with local community organizations and business leaders” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 52).

Throughout this process, teachers use a restorative process to maintain positivity and healthy student growth while assessing habits of success to inform decision-making.

Sense of Purpose

Summit Learning defines student sense of purpose as “an understanding of their interests, values, and skills, and the articulation of a credible path after high school for translating those interests, values, and skills into fulfilled lives” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 59). Summit Learning considers this a clear sense of direction immediately following high school that students, teachers, counselors, and their families understand and are supportive of. According to Summit, sense of purpose has five components: self-awareness a) values b) relationships c) credible path toward long-term goals d) and transition. Self-awareness applies to a student’s understanding of ability, opportunities, and interests during and following the educational process. A natural dovetail to self-awareness is complete understanding of values and how they must make trade-offs in order to maintain a clear vision of personal values. Summit Learning recognizes the fact that some relationships are merely transactional. In order to transcend transactional relationships, students must be able to identify, establish, and maintain relationships with others who have the best interests of the student in mind. Students can leverage self-

awareness, values, and relationships to establish a credible path forward following high school. This path forward will include a specific plan for transition from high school to the next step in their life.

Summit Learning strives to develop a sense of purpose in all of their students. Damon (2008) described the purposeful student as exhibiting “high degrees of persistence, resourcefulness, resilience, and capacity for healthy risk-taking” (p. 59). Summit Learning cites Seligman et al. (2013) as stating “that three interrelated factors are essential to identifying purpose: 1) understanding of one’s strengths and skills; 2) understanding of one’s interests and passions; and 3) understanding of what the world needs” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 60). Damon (2008) further stated that those with a strong sense of purpose are more likely to persist beyond frustrations and obstacles. Dweck (2007) suggested that students who engage in short- to long-term thinking are more likely to achieve their own personal sense of purpose. Summit Learning furthers this assertion by stating, “Deep, hands-on exploration of a diverse array of subject areas, professional fields, and work-settings not only helps expose students to new experiences but also develops self-knowledge and supports an emergent Sense of Purpose” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 61). Romero (2015) stated that

students with a sense of belonging in school feel socially connected, supported, and respected. They trust their teachers and their peers, and they feel like they fit in at school. They are not worried about being treated as a stereotype and are confident that they are seen as a person of value. (p. 1)

Students develop a sense of purpose through three design choices: a) goal setting b) mentor community c) expeditionary learning. “Setting short-, medium-, and long-term goals in nearly every aspect of Summit’s instructional approach” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 62) is

meant to be dynamic and ongoing as students set and realize goals. This process connects long-term goals, such as post-secondary aspirations, with short-term goals that will ensure the achievement of long-term goals. Over the course of the high school experience, students at Summit Learning schools are constantly made aware of, and respond to, connections between immediate behaviors and future outcomes.

As members of a heterogeneous mentor group, students are exposed to fellow students with differing ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds in order to challenge personal biases based on their own backgrounds. In order to build on this, each year begins with a meeting among students, mentor teachers, and family to discuss the past, present, and future for each student. These meetings aid students in goal setting and planning for the upcoming school year and future ambitions beyond secondary education.

Finally, students engage in expeditionary education, allowing for immersive and real-world experiences outside of the classroom. This allows students to “experience in-depth, authentic, project-based learning for two weeks at a time” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 63). Expeditionary learning takes place for a total of eight weeks each year, equating to a total of 32 weeks over the course of a high school career. These immersive courses are elective and designed to challenge students while simultaneously exposing them to new ideas and opportunities for the future. These courses cover a variety of academic disciplines. Additionally, they offer students the opportunity to explore potential colleges including application and financial aid opportunities.

Students are assessed throughout the process of identifying a sense of purpose. Summit Learning acknowledges that they have yet to determine the best means of assessing sense of purpose. But they are exploring three distinct possibilities; portfolio, personal advisory board,

and oral defense. “Evidence in the portfolio comes from the Summit Learning Platform, peer testimonials, mentor testimonials, and outside-of-school artifacts” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 64). The student portfolio is created with the guidance of each student’s mentor.

Portfolios are evaluated by personal advisory boards. Advisory boards are comprised of family members, teachers, and mentors who have been pivotal in the student’s educational process.

Portfolios are accompanied by oral defenses. Oral defenses not only discuss student achievements; they also discuss future plans for transition out of high school.

Experiential, Self-Directed, and Personalized Learning

A significant portion of the Summit Learning model includes experiential and self-directed learning. According to Brookfield (1995), self-directed is when students “take control of their own learning, in particular how they set their own learning goals, locate appropriate resources, decide on which learning methods to use and evaluate their progress” (p. 2). In order to fully understand the concept of self-directed learning, one must understand the theory of andragogy. Andragogy is the belief “that as individuals mature, their need and capacity to be self-directing, to embrace life-long learning, is critical to effective learning and that methodologies must be examined and revised to meet the unique needs of adult learners” (Turner, 2007, pp. 14–15). Self-directed learning describes a process “in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). Summit Learning schools fully embrace the notion of self-directed learning.

Coupled with self-directed learning, Summit Learning considers experiential learning to be highly important in the educational process. Early advocates for experiential learning, such as

Dewey (1938), recognized hand-on learning as critical for students to fully grasp lessons being provided in schools. More recent literature has reiterated Dewey's claims. "In general, experiential learning enhances conceptual understanding, increases student ability to apply abstract concepts, and involves greater opportunities for general learning (e.g., communication, cooperation and teamwork, leadership skills) than traditional lectures, readings, and examinations" (Crabtree, 2008, p. 26). While Summit Learning does not outwardly espouse experiential learning, its concepts thread throughout the general educational ethos. Student experiences such as expedition learning fall squarely within the realm of experiential learning: "The personalized learning platform's pedagogical model aims to tackle the decline of rational, strategic and mindful thought processes, the ability to strategically deal with and organize escalating amounts of information, and a sense of self and well-being" (Jones, 2018, p. 23).

According to Aviram et al. (2008), personalized learning

insists on the need for developing self-regulated reflective learners who are able to make informed choices, thoughtfully and strategically direct and plan their own learning as well as tailor the learning process according to their own needs, interests and preferences.

(p. 1)

The Summit Learning model includes multiple opportunities for personalized learning. First, project-based learning allows students to personalize projects that align with their individual goals and hoped-for academic outcomes. Second, Summit Learning students each have focus areas. "Focus areas are the concepts and content knowledge that students need to master in order to have a base level understanding of a given subject area" (Summit, 2016, p. 3). Summit Learning students navigate focus areas at their own pace, allowing them time to learn at a pace that is unique to each student. Rose (2016) "found that students need the ability to explore

academic content at their own interest and pace” (p. 3). Rose described three principles of individuality: the jaggedness principle, the context principle and the pathways principle. Rose (2016) described the pathways principle in this manner:

There is not a single, normal pathway for any type of human development biological, mental, moral or professional. This means that in all pathways of life and for any given goal, there are many, equally valid ways to reach the same outcome and that the particular pathway that is optimal for you depends on your own individuality. This important notion is that although there are many pathways, many still can be identified as ‘webs of development’ meaning to describe several pathways and their interrelations in order to support various people in their development. (p. 94)

Vitcoy and Bloom (2010) argue that by insisting upon students learning at a single pace, educators are stifling the growth of many students. Summit Learning considers personalized learning as a core concept of their educational philosophy as a matter of equity (Summit Public Schools, 2017). The process of personalized learning that includes individual pace and interests allows for students to learn in the most effective timeframe and in areas they consider valuable for reaching short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

Teacher Efficacy

There is little to no literature specifically regarding teacher efficacy and the Summit Learning platform. In a general sense, however, teacher efficacy has been researched for decades, including studies conducted by the RAND corporation in 1976 (Armor et al., 1976; Bandura, 1977; Berman et al., 1977; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; White, 2014; Wolters & Daughterty, 2007). For the purposes of this study, teacher efficacy is defined as “the belief or judgment that a teacher’s own abilities will bring about positive changes and desired outcomes of

student engagement and learning even among students who may be difficult to work with or who lack motivation” (White, 2014, p. 31).

Teacher efficacy is an extension of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy influences how much effort people put forth and how resilient they are in dealing with failures (Finnegan, 2013). The teacher efficacy construct is comprised of two dimensions; general teaching efficacy and personal teaching efficacy (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). General teaching efficacy is the belief that teachers have in their ability to effectively teach even with challenging students (Cerit, 2010). General teaching efficacy takes into account outside factors such as home-life, socio-economic status, personal and family relationships, and other negative influences (Nir & Kranot, 2006). This is germane to Summit Learning as a large portion of the philosophy takes into account home-school relationships and other outside factors. Unlike general teaching efficacy, which takes a broad view of teachers’ ability to impact learning, personal teaching efficacy is a direct belief in one’s individual ability to positively impact the learning process (Allinder, 1995). Typically, this is discipline specific and relative to each teacher’s personal course content (Raudenbush et al., 1992; Weasmer & Woods, 1998). Teachers with high levels of personal teacher efficacy perform in a manner that boosts their view of themselves as an effective teacher (Finnegan, 2013). Contrariwise, teachers with low levels of self-efficacy have a propensity for lower performance when preparing and delivering instruction (Tollefson, 2000). In many ways, both high and low self-efficacy result in self-fulfilling prophecies. Teacher self-efficacy has the potential to greatly impact teaching and learning.

As teachers’ careers develop, their corresponding expectations of self-efficacy develop as well. Consequently, as teacher self-efficacy solidifies itself as high or low, individual teachers’ success in the classroom is consequently impacted. Thus, as instructional practices are improved

or diminished, student outcomes will trend similarly (Brophy & Good, 1970). According to Finnegan (2013), teacher self-efficacy is influenced by four sources of information obtained by the teacher: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion and psychological and emotional states. These four sources aid teachers in building belief in themselves as teachers. As such, “attention to building these beliefs from educational leaders through various means will improve teacher effectiveness and student achievement” (Finnegan, 2013, p. 19).

Mastery experience refers to a teacher’s ability to master a new skill in the classroom. In developing and mastering a new skill, teachers gain the confidence necessary to tip the scales of self-efficacy toward the high mark. When faced with similar situations later, they are able to rely upon past successes, making them more resilient in the face of challenge. Naturally, they have improved expectations for future performances. On the contrary, with each perceived failure, motivation and efficacy diminishes. According to Ross and Bruce (2007), “more effective teaching should increase the likelihood of teachers obtaining mastery experiences, the strongest predictor of self-efficacy” (p. 52). Mastery experiences typically go on to encourage positive classroom experiences in the form of improved learning environments established by the teacher. Teachers who demonstrate high levels of teacher self-efficacy also demonstrate high quality planning and organization in teaching (Allinder, 1995). Additionally, these teachers demonstrate greater levels of enthusiasm for teaching (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Teaching successfully relies on a host of variables, not the least of which is how student characteristics impact learning. Issues of socioeconomic status, home life, and personality traits can have substantial effects on a student’s ability to learn, and a teacher’s ability to teach. For teachers who do not feel prepared to teach students with diverse backgrounds, self-efficacy can be negatively impacted. In these instances, as with many other scenarios, teachers’ self-efficacy

was bolstered by watching others within their profession be successful. Witnessing a challenging task being successfully undertaken offers one a sense that challenges are possible to overcome. This, however, is only the case when the teacher witnessing the success can identify with or relate to the successful teacher. In cases where the teacher feels different in some way, their sense of self-efficacy can be diminished (Finnegan, 2013).

The vicarious experience is not always possible. As teachers spend the majority of their teaching time in their own classroom, not observing their colleagues, there can be little opportunity for vicarious experiences to occur. For this reason, pre-service and in-service training can be particularly useful. Finnegan (2013) points out that veteran teachers can be less flexible in their teaching, leaving their level of self-efficacy rigid. On the other hand, new teachers have the propensity to be more malleable. For this reason, pre- and in-service training can be particularly useful for enhancing teacher self-efficacy.

Another factor for building teacher self-efficacy is support for teachers from outside sources. An example of this might be positive feedback on teaching performance by other teachers. Similar to other sources of teacher self-efficacy, positive and negative feedback has the ability to enhance or lower self-efficacy, depending on how trusted the colleague is (Finnegan, 2013). An extension of this includes parental support and feedback. This can take the shape of a loop. As a teacher with high levels of self-efficacy interacts with parents, they are perceived as better teachers, resulting in positive feedback, which increases teacher self-efficacy (Garcia, 2004). In fact, according to Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007), levels of parent involvement are directly connected to levels of teacher self-efficacy.

As this literature review discusses, teacher self-efficacy stems from a variety of sources and has a direct link to teacher success in the classroom. Teacher efficacy allows teachers the

confidence to maintain motivation and positivity in the classroom. Cheung (2008) states, “There is no doubt that teacher efficacy is a very important factor for the improvement of education in every part of the world” (p. 103). This sentiment is echoed throughout the literature (Bryant & Yan, 2010; Ross, 1994). The impact of teacher efficacy on student learning is reiterated throughout the literature. While the Summit Learning does not directly discuss teacher efficacy, it remains a powerful component in order for the Summit Learning platform to be successful.

Summit Learning Criticism

Much criticism about Summit Learning exists. However, most is anecdotal in the form of media reports, blogs, and complaints by teachers and parents. There is a significant lack of scholarly research criticizing Summit Learning. However, a recent report by Boninger et al. (2020) for the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) takes aim at Summit Learning and acknowledges outright the lack of scrutiny faced by Summit Learning. The crux of the NEPC report is that, while there has been little scholarly research on Summit Learning, there is also a significant lack of evidence of its success outside of what has been reported by Summit Learning itself. As seen earlier in this literature review, Summit Learning considers its curriculum and personalized learning approach to be science-based. According to Boninger et al. (2020), when discussing Summit Learning’s claims of student success, “we found no evidence in the public record that confirms it’s claims” (p. 3).

The report mentions on multiple occasions that Summit Learning is well-known for keeping a very tight lid on the science in which it is based. This presents a problem for researchers as much of Summit Learning is not available in the public sphere:

Leadership maintains a careful public face, and assiduously avoids providing more or different information than it has chosen to share as part of that public face. Our own

experience researching SPS and Summit Learning offers a case in point. It also mirrors that of district officials and parents who have tried with limited if any success, to obtain information about their schools' use of the Summit Learning Program. (Boninger et al., 2020, p. 9)

Critics are concerned by how little information regarding Summit Learning is available.

However, it is no secret that Summit Learning has a vast marketing apparatus. Summit Learning has significantly increased their marketing during the Covid-19 outbreak (Boninger et al., 2020). As many schools chose to go online as a safety measure, the allure of a free, off the shelf online learning platform was tempting to many schools. At present there is no data available showing how many schools have chosen to adopt Summit Learning since the onset of Covid-19. But, there is reason to believe that more schools have signed on in 2020 (Boninger et al., 2020).

The authors of the NEPC report were most concerned about two critical components of Summit Learning. First, Summit Learning claims its students are 100% eligible for 4-year colleges (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Using the California Department of Education standards for college eligibility, Boninger et al. (2020) list the following eight criteria:

1. Pass the Grade 11 Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments in English Language Arts (ELA)/literacy and mathematics with a score of 3 or higher;
2. Pass two Advanced Placement (AP) exams with a score of 3 or higher;
3. Pass two International Baccalaureate (IB) exams with a score of 4 or higher;
4. Receive a State Seal of Biliteracy and pass the Grade 11 Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment in ELA with a score of 3 or higher;
5. Pass the "a-g" courses required to apply to schools in the University of California or California State University systems with C minus or better and complete one of the

- following: pass Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments with a Level 3 or higher in ELA and at least a Level 2 in mathematics, or Level 3 or higher in mathematics and at least a Level 2 in ELA; complete one semester/two quarters/two trimesters of College Credit Courses with a grade of C- or better in academic/career and technical education (CTE) subjects where college credits are awarded for each course; score of 3 on one AP exam or score of 4 on one IB exam; or complete a CTE Pathway;
6. Complete a Career Technical Education (CTE) pathway and complete one of the following: pass Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments with a level 3 or higher in ELA and at least a level 2 in mathematics, or level 3 or higher in mathematics and at least a level 2 in ELA; or complete one semester/two quarters/two trimesters of College Credit Courses with a grade of C- or better in academic/CTE subjects where college credits are awarded for each course;
 7. Complete two semesters, three quarters, or three trimesters of college coursework with a grade of C- or better in academic/Career Technical Education subjects where college credits are awarded;
 8. Complete two years of Leadership/Military Science, score of Level 3 or higher in ELA and math, and Level 2 “Standard Nearly Met” or higher in other subject area.

This somewhat complicated criteria means that there are multiple avenues students can take in order to be college eligible. When Boninger et al. looked at five Summit Learning schools in California, they found that college readiness ranged from 56% at the lowest to 74% at the highest. This is a far cry from the 100% claimed by Summit Learning. As Summit Learning does not make public information such as cognitive skills rubrics, it is nearly impossible to glean an accurate picture of how Summit Learning arrives at the statistics it reports for success.

Secondly, Boninger et al. (2020) show concern for the privacy of students at Summit Learning schools. The contract signed between school districts and Summit Learning allow Summit Learning to use data collected on its platform in perpetuity. There is language included that requires data to be “deidentified.” According to Boninger et al. (2020), “computer scientists and data experts have known for years that complex de-identified datasets – such as the student datasets held by [Summit Learning] – can easily be re-identified” (p. 18). They further express their concern by noting that Summit Learning and its associated entities such as Facebook, are businesses and believe it’s reasonable that they will have an interest in monetizing collected data.

The NEPC study is the most conclusive, and by far the most academic, criticism of Summit Learning. But, there is another recently published study that focused on a school district that had adopted Summit Learning. In 2019, the Institute for Education Policy of John Hopkins University published a study conducted at the request of the Rhode Island Department of Education Commissioner. The report, entitled *Providence Public School District: A Review*, was not focused on Summit Learning specifically, but did make note of it twice. In its entirety, the report was a scathing review of the Providence Public School District. With students rarely reading “at or near grade level,” and demoralized teachers, and leadership unable to lead, the school district was clearly in peril (Institute for Education Policy, 2019, p. 2). The Institute for Education Policy (2019) described Summit Learning in the Providence Public School District as follows:

We witnessed significant problems in the use of the Summit Learning Platform. In one school, Summit was the major mode of mathematics instruction; in other classrooms, it seemed to be used for supplemental (e.g., remedial or practice) instruction. When we observed students using Summit, they were not engaged with the software in optimal

ways. Instead of watching videos or reading tutorial texts, students went straight to the exam and attempted to answer questions. When they answered incorrectly, corrective text popped up, which students did read; they then tried again with the next question. Even if students progressed according to plan, their learning would be limited to how to answer problems in the format presented by the Summit exam. (p. 31)

The use of Summit Learning in the district was haphazard at best. Authors of the report noted teachers rarely engaging in whole class instruction and students off topic while using Summit Learning. The report described one classroom using Summit Learning by stating,

Four students were working on history, one student stalled on an index screen, one stalled on a choice screen, one focused on a screen with other (non-math) content, two doing mathematics well below grade-level work, and two doing mathematics at, or close to, grade level. (Institute for Education Policy, 2019, p. 32)

The report summarized its understanding of Summit Learning as a low-rigor platform that did not meet the needs of its students. The damning report makes clear that the entire school district was in disarray. With regard to Summit, it did not mention a single positive outcome of the district's use of the platform.

Other criticism of Summit Learning includes blog posts, media reports of local school districts, and other anecdotal complaints. As stated earlier, both criticism and support for Summit Learning is scant in the literature. This is partially due to how little Summit Learning is willing to provide to researchers.

Conclusion and Synthesis

This literature review has discussed the literature relevant to Summit Learning platform, a unique, online educational platform specifically designed for adoption by public schools.

Chapter two began by discussing the history of school reform. The Summit Learning philosophy is, at its core, a reform movement based on new research and a natural evolution of traditional education in America. It is important to place Summit's arrival in the context of historical reform movements, as it can be seen as an extension of earlier movements with modern components. Next, the literature review examined the core elements of Summit Learning; cognitive learning, content knowledge, habits of success, and sense of purpose. Summit Learning is predicated on these four core beliefs as hallmarks of quality educational outcomes. Following core elements of Summit Learning, this chapter covered experiential and self-driven learning. These two components of Summit Learning can be considered action items utilized to effectively acquire cognitive learning skills, content knowledge, habits of success, and a sense of purpose (Summit Public Schools, 2017). Part and parcel to experiential and self-driven learning, personalized learning was discussed. This literature review then discussed teacher efficacy, which is the focus of this proposed study. Finally, chapter two discussed criticism of Summit Learning.

Cognitive skills are necessary for students wishing to gain access to the workforce or college (Conley, 2012). Schleicher (2012) states,

Educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying that knowledge to novel situations.

Education today is much more about ways of thinking which involve creative and critical approaches to problem-solving and decision-making. It is also about ways of working, including communication and collaboration. (para. 9)

Schleicher makes the point that students must be challenged by new situations that push their intellectual boundaries beyond the ability to draw upon past experiences. In doing so, students will gain critical cognitive thinking skills, which for the sake of this study are defined as

“The ability of an individual to perform the various mental activities most closely associated with learning and problem solving. Examples include verbal, spatial, psychomotor, and processing-speed ability” (National Council on Measurement in Education, 2017). Cognitive skills offer students a full understanding of knowing how to retrieve existing knowledge to solve new and complex problems. Summit Learning acknowledges the fact that definitions and verbiage of cognitive skills vary throughout the literature. But the literature also uncovers a nearly unanimous agreement that the acquisition of cognitive skills is a necessary outcome of the educational process. According to Summit Public Schools (2017),

it is important to note that the discussion of Cognitive Skills here reflects higher-order thinking skills on one end of a developmental continuum. Recent evidence in learning science suggests that the development of cognitive readiness is a pathway analogous to the development of other complex skills. (p. 28)

As such, Summit Learning places a premium on its students’ ability to acquire and utilize cognitive skills both in and out of the educational setting.

Content knowledge is a natural extension of cognitive skills. The development of cognitive skills takes place in tandem with the acquisition of content knowledge. Content areas in Summit Learning schools are aligned with focus areas. Focus areas align with Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards in an effort to make students college ready. Summit Learning asserts that “In order to be successful in college and careers, students must master rigorous Content Knowledge in each of the academic disciplines” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 42). This is based on findings throughout the literature (Common Core State Standards, 2010; Conley, 2012; NGSS Lead States, 2013; Fadel, 2015).

According to Summit Learning, the acquisition of content knowledge takes place only by referencing existing knowledge. As such, focus areas build upon previous focus areas. Without fully mastering current focus areas, students will be unable to move to the next as they will not have adequately prepared to move on. This process is made more complex by the fact that content is delivered to students in different modalities, providing better opportunities for exercising content knowledge. Content delivery modalities include videos, written materials, primary sources, etc. Access to learning modalities are available at all times, allowing students the ability to work independently or with peers when necessary. Additionally, content is designed specifically to build on previous learning content, which offers students the opportunity to commit information to long-term memory, freeing up mental resources for learning new content (Glaser & Chi, 1988). Students are able to progress at their own speed, with the opportunity to perform assessments at the appropriate time (Rose, 2016).

The acquisition of cognitive skills and content knowledge depends heavily on gaining valuable habits of success. These habits of success must be dynamic, relevant to scholastic work, allow for social engagement while learning, and coincide with student development (Farrington, 2012; Stafford-Brizard, 2016). Habits of success are learned through curricula that is cognizant of local cultural nuances that may impact student learning (Dee & Penner, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Summit Learning includes opportunities to develop habits of success by creating an academic setting that is interconnected. This not only includes student academic exercises, but also includes teacher professional development allowing for up-to-date pedagogical practices that reinforce the development of habits of success. These pedagogical practices are utilized throughout the curriculum, in both purely academic efforts and project-based learning experiences.

Habits of success in Summit Learning schools are also gained through a shared sense of belonging. “Students with a sense^[1]_{SEP} of belonging in school feel socially connected, supported, and respected. They trust their teachers and their peers, and they feel like they fit in at school” (Summit Public Schools, 2017, p. 55). This takes place through regular one-on-one meetings with mentors. Throughout the mentoring process, teacher mentors track progress and provide additional help when students struggle. Mentor time is a minimum of 60 minutes each week in a one-on-one setting. Additionally, mentors are assigned to students for the duration of their time at a Summit Learning school. Mentorships include an individual plan for growth for each student. This offers students the opportunity to model habits of success and review with their mentor.

Cognitive skills, content knowledge, and habits of success are all made more robust by establishing a sense of purpose among students. According to Duckworth (2017) of The Character Lab,

having a purpose is different from being tracked into a specific vocation or outcome—it’s being oriented toward a vision of the future;^[1]_{SEP} a motivation to help the world around you or both. The goal or purpose itself can be general, and it can be relatively temporary.

When kids are motivated by a larger purpose, studies show that they have more academic motivation, life satisfaction, identity formation, and vocational success. (p. 101)

Building a sense of purpose at Summit Learning is comprised of five components; a) self-awareness b) values c) relationships d) having a credible path toward long-term goals e) having an established transition. By establishing these five components, individuals are expected to persist toward their goals (Yeager, 2014). According to Summit, “the Summit Learning Platform helps seamlessly connect students’ interests, values, goals, and areas of strength” (Summit Public

Schools, 2017, p. 67). Teachers at Summit Learning schools aid in the establishment of sense of purpose among students by setting short-, medium-, and long-term goals with the students they mentor. Setting goals during this developmental stage supports student mindset growth (Dweck, 2007).

Summit Learning considers the development of self-awareness as critical to the learning process and overall student outcomes (Farrington, 2012; Goleman, 1995). This, in part, is done by working with mentors to discuss individual cultural backgrounds, and by reflecting in peer-to-peer interactions along with individual strengths and weaknesses. All of these distinct characteristics are discussed in student portfolios and oral defense. Finally, students work with mentors to create a sense of belonging in school, as Summit Learning views a positive sense of belonging to be paramount to the learning process.

As teacher efficacy at Summit Learning schools has not generally been discussed in the literature, chapter two focused on teacher efficacy at Summit Learning schools from a broad perspective. Teacher efficacy can be compartmentalized in two general categories; general teaching efficacy and personal teaching efficacy. General teaching efficacy is the belief that teachers have the ability to reach all students, regardless of home-life issues that are unique to each child. This tends to support a teacher's view that their profession, as a whole, is well-equipped to teach all students. Personal teaching efficacy, on the other hand, is more specific to the individual teacher. Personal teaching efficacy is the belief that teachers are able to adequately pass on content that is specific to their individual academic discipline.

Teacher efficacy is an important element to this literature review because Summit Learning heavily relies on teacher-student interactions to support its general educational

philosophy. It can be seen as a hidden component to the Summit Learning process, as teacher buy-in is necessary in order for the Summit Learning process to effectively unfold.

Lastly, this literature review discussed criticism of Summit Learning, which is scarce in the literature. The lack of criticism is largely due to the unwillingness of Summit Learning to share data and other important information relative to the impact Summit Learning has on student success.

This chapter has focused on the primary components of Summit Learning; cognitive skill, content knowledge, habits of success, and sense of purpose. The literature review covered both the Summit Learning philosophy and supporting research. It concluded with a discussion of teacher efficacy and its connection to Summit Learning. The literature regarding the Summit Learning core components is robust, as is a general discussion of teacher efficacy. However, there is a gap in the literature discussing Summit Learning as an educational platform and teacher efficacy. Chapter Three will describe the methodology used for this study. Additionally, it will provide a rationale for qualitative research and the phenomenological approach, researcher role, study design, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter Three will discuss this phenomenological study and the methods used to effectively research the central question. Beginning with research design for this study, Chapter Three then discusses the foundational characteristics of a phenomenological study, rationale for using the phenomenological approach, the central question for this study, sub-questions, participants, the role of the researcher, data collection procedures, confidentiality, data analysis, and closes with accuracy and verification.

Research Design

Behavioral research consists of two distinctly different, yet interconnected research paradigms; qualitative and quantitative. Researchers choose the appropriate paradigm based on their own “worldview assumptions...; procedures of inquiry (called strategies); and specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (Creswell, 2009, p. 3). Research design is largely premised on the phenomenon in question. Quantitative and Qualitative can be seen as two separate ends of a continuum (Creswell, 2013). “Often the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is framed in terms of using words (qualitative) rather than numbers (quantitative), or using closed-ended questions (quantitative hypothesis) rather than open-ended questions (qualitative interview questions)” (Creswell, 2009, p. 3). There are many differences between quantitative and qualitative research, not the least of which is subjectivity and the researcher’s interaction, or lack of interaction with study participants. This study is a qualitative study based on the researcher’s underlying assumptions and the phenomenon to be studied.

“Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 15). These assumptions are developed over the course of our individual academic career and influenced by literature, advisors, and scholastic

relationships. According to Creswell (2013) “We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices” (pp. 47–48). This study follows this line of thinking through direct inquiry of teacher efficacy. Qualitative research requires extensive time with research participants. Additionally, qualitative researchers must commit to a labor-intensive process of data analysis in search of emerging themes. Upon finding emerging themes, qualitative researchers must “write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate claims” (Creswell, 2013, p. 49). This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach. “In its applied form, phenomenology can be described as a qualitative research technique that seeks to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experience” (Sanders, 1982, p. 353). Furthermore, a phenomenology seeks to “grasp the pedagogical essence of a certain experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 78).

Phenomenology

A phenomenology “is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The phenomenological approach explores the world as the lived experience takes place, rather than following reflection and contemplation. Van Manen’s (1990) perception of the lived experience is based on Edward Husserl. According to Barnacle (2004),

for Husserl, there are two elements to the life-world. Firstly, the experiential world of perception, or intuition—that which grounds our activities and interests. Secondly, the life-world refers to the world as a whole—or that which encompasses the multiplicity of particular worlds. The world is not understood as an object, or discrete entity, but rather

is the pre-given, always already there, horizon in which all of our experiences and actions are directed. (p. 58)

At the heart of a phenomenological inquiry is the researcher's quest to uncover the lived experience. According to Morse and Richards (2002), the lived experience is based on individual perceptions of our own presence at specific times and during specific events. "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). In other words, a phenomenology is an inquiry into the human experience and its relationship with others experiencing the same phenomenon. In order to better understand the phenomenological process, Creswell (2013) uses Moustakas (1994).

The researcher begins with the determination of whether or not a phenomenology is an appropriate inquiry for the proposed study. "The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). Once this determination has been made, the researcher clearly identifies the problem to be studied as a lived experience. When describing the study, the researcher must "bracket out" personal experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). At this point, data are collected from participants who have experienced the same phenomenon. An appropriate number of participants, according to Polkinghorne (1989), is 5-25. Other forms of data collection are considered acceptable, but not required. Moustakas (1994) suggests the following two questions be asked of participants: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences? These two questions are then joined by a series of sub-questions with the intent of "understanding of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 81).

Data analysis consists of a process referred to by Moustakas (1994) as horizontalization. This process seeks to identify significant statements from participants, allowing the researcher to establish clusters of meaning. The clusters of meaning are then used to describe the phenomenon in question. This description can be referred to as a structural description. The structural description is then used to write a composite description of the phenomenon. This description is referred to as the essence of the phenomenon. After reading this description, the reader should feel as though “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

Rationale

Qualitative researchers should rely on an “abiding concern” of personal interest (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31). The literature regarding Summit Learning schools is incomplete. Consequently, there is a gap in the literature regarding teacher efficacy at Summit Learning schools. As stated in the literature review, teacher efficacy is a critical component to the educational process. Phenomenological research provides “clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 44). This study utilized the phenomenological approach in an attempt to provide a descriptive understanding of teacher efficacy at Summit Learning schools.

Central Question

The central question is the foundational question on which the entire study was predicated. According to Creswell (2013), “qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional” (p. 138). For the purposes of this study, the central question was: Do rural Montana teachers teaching in schools that have adopted the Summit Learning believe in its efficacy?

Four subquestions guided the study:

1. To what extent are teachers relied upon to inform pedagogical decisions in Summit Learning schools?
2. To what extent do teachers at Summit Learning schools consider themselves impactful as educators?
3. To what extent do teachers at Summit Learning school consider the overarching Summit Learning educational philosophy effective for every student?
4. What themes emerged from teaching in rural, Summit Learning schools?

Participants

Participants for this study were purposefully selected from Montana high schools that have adopted Summit Learning. This study inquired about issues of teacher efficacy in selected rural Montana schools utilizing Summit Learning. Therefore, participants were chosen based on specific criterion germane to the proposed study. Participants were selected specifically on their professional affiliation to Summit Learning schools in rural Montana. Using Polkinghorne's criteria for participants (5-25), this study included 9 participants from Darby High School and St. Regis High School. Both schools are small, rural, schools that have independently adopted Summit Learning. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

1. Participants must be teachers teaching in core Summit Learning courses.
2. Participants must teach at Darby High School or St. Regis High School.

Role of the Researcher

As a public school teacher, the researcher of this study acknowledges his potential bias regarding this study. Open-ended questions were utilized, allowing participants the opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words without researcher interference. The researcher

used epoche, or bracketing, as a means of restricting personal “experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80).

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected by interviewing participants in person over the course of two weeks, and was recorded and transcribed. By conducting interviews over the course of two weeks, the researcher intended to create a sense of consistency and accuracy in data collection. Personal identification of participants were kept separate from data. Written permission to record interviews were received prior to conducting interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy in reporting. Transcriptions were done by the researcher in Microsoft Word (Version 16.45), using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants. Interview questions were established based on the sub-questions (see Appendix, Interview Questions section).

Confidentiality Statement

All participant identities were kept confidential, with only the researcher and dissertation chair having access to the locked files that connect names or institutions with the data. Signed consent forms were locked and kept separately from the data. The audiotape of interviews were transcribed by the researcher or a professional hired transcriptionist. The tapes will be erased after a successful dissertation defense.

Data Analysis

A database was used for easy filing and retrieval of emerging themes during data analysis. Analysis followed Moustakas’s modification of Van Kaam’s method of analysis process for phenomenological analysis. The first step was to bracket the researcher’s personal experiences so that “focus can be directed to the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2013,

p. 193). Next, was the identification and categorizing of significant statements into meaning clusters. The researcher then provided textural and structural descriptions that comprise the essence of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

Issues of ethics, trustworthiness, and validation are of the utmost concern to researchers. According to Merriam (2002), it is important that researchers strive “to produce valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p. 22). This begins by gathering data that are robust enough to adequately support research findings (Merriam, 2002). For an adequate level of trustworthiness, research findings must be valid and reliable. Validation must be ethical and substantive (Creswell, 2013).

In order to achieve ethical validation, the researcher confronts personal underlying philosophical assumptions. At the same time, the research must provide participants the ability to freely respond to questions relating to the phenomenon. According to Creswell (2013), “our research should also provide non-dogmatic answers to questions we pose” (p. 248). The researcher for this study used four validation strategies as suggested by Creswell (2013); prolonged engagement with participants, peer review, clarifying researcher bias, and providing rich, thick descriptions. In order to achieve substantive validation, the researcher must have in-depth knowledge of the research topic. The researcher then analyzes data in order to “co-create the interpretations derived” (Creswell, 2013, p. 248). This study provides both ethical and substantive validation as a means of delivering ample trustworthiness for its readers. This study achieved reliability by accurately and consistently coding emerging themes. The researcher of this study ensured consistency in coding throughout analysis.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the methodological approach for this study. It began with the historical and philosophical foundations of a phenomenology and justified a phenomenological approach for this study. Next, the central question and subquestions were delineated, leading to survey questions designed to study the phenomenon under inquiry. Lastly, this chapter described how trustworthiness was attained.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study was conducted to provide a substantive description of the lived experience of rural Montana k-12 educators working in selected schools that have adopted the Summit Learning platform. Through exhaustive interviews with high school teachers at two select rural Montana schools utilizing Summit Learning, thick and rich data emerged providing insight to the lived experience of this study's participants. The central question driving this qualitative phenomenological study was; Do rural Montana teachers teaching in schools that have adopted Summit Learning believe in its efficacy? As a means of answering the central question, several questions were asked of participants (see Appendix, Interview Questions section).

Analysis for this study utilized Moustakas's modification of Van Kaam's (1994) method of analysis. Throughout data analysis and reduction, major and minor themes emerged. Interviews with participants were transcribed verbatim, from which data was coded for analysis. The first step in phenomenological analysis is the Epoche process:

In order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies – to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22)

Epoche

As suggested by Van Manen (1990), phenomenological researchers should choose an area of research that stems from an abiding concern. As with any qualitative research, the researcher is at risk of influencing results through personal biases based on past experiences. By virtue of holding an abiding concern, the researcher has an inherent bias that must be addressed

in order for it to be understood where personal opinions and experiences have been set aside in the interest of clean analysis.

The researcher of this study is a fourth generation Montanan. Every generation prior had included public school teachers. However, the researcher of this study had not previously been occupied in k-12 education for any substantial period of time at the time interviews were conducted. The abiding concern at this study's inception was through innovative teaching models in the larger educational realm. Having substitute taught for roughly three years prior in a rural school, the researcher had built an affinity for public education and its transformational power. But, there had been zero personal experience with online learning.

Following the interview of participants for this study, the United States joined the world in a global pandemic. The results of this pandemic was a widespread adoption of online learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Edgenuity, Edmentum, and others meant to create a virtual environment from which students could still learn while maintaining a state of isolation for safety. Not long after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the researcher of this study took a position as a classroom teacher in k-12 at a rural school in Montana. That school had adopted a hybrid model that included face-to-face instruction and remote online learning using Edgenuity, Edmentum, and to a certain extent Google Classroom. These platforms stray from the Summit Learning platform substantially, but fit within the larger realm of online learning, nonetheless.

Having taught both in person and online during the pandemic, the researcher holds the personal bias that in-person education at the k-12 level is largely more productive in person. While this may not be the case across all virtual learning platforms, it is the stance of the researcher of this study that online learning is prohibitive in many ways and lacks the interchange of thought necessary for young minds to grow in a meaningful way. However, it is

important to note significant differences between the Summit Learning and the platforms the researcher has been utilizing. The primary difference is that Summit Learning is not meant to be a stand-alone online learning platform. Summit Learning is designed and utilized as an online platform meant to be used by classroom teachers who are primarily face-to-face with their students. On the contrary, Edgenuity and Edmentum are designed to be near stand-alone platforms with little to no in-person teacher influence on student learning. The researcher acknowledges the fundamental difference between the platforms he's accustomed to and Summit Learning.

Study Participants

Participants for this qualitative study were purposefully selected from two rural Montana schools utilizing Summit Learning. Montana is a rural state with few schools utilizing Summit Learning. Upon approaching school leadership at both schools, the researcher for this study was at first received without hesitation. Each school superintendent offered a direct line of communication to teachers who were using Summit Learning. As stated earlier, participants in this study were required to have taught core courses in order to join the study. Following a discussion with each superintendent and principal, the researcher was granted access to the entirety of each school's teaching staff.

Teacher response varied from enthusiastic to very hesitant. Most of the teachers contacted were willing to participate. Some, in fact, were quite excited by the study and eager to participate. However, some teachers either outright refused to participate or did not acknowledge emails or phone calls. One teacher explicitly told the researcher that they did not trust Summit Learning and worried that by participating in this study they might be subjected to negative

repercussions. Throughout the interview process, it was revealed that many of those unwilling to participate held similar concerns. Ultimately nine teachers agreed to participate in this study.

Teaching experience varied by teacher. Three participants had decades of experience teaching (45, 28, and 21 years). Conversely, three participants had no teaching experience prior to teaching with Summit Learning. Teaching experience was not a criteria for selection, however it is important to note that there was a varied degree of experience teaching prior to Summit Learning, which necessarily played a role in perceptions regarding curricula, leadership, and teaching efficacy. Table 2 reflects participant teaching experience prior to Summit Learning, during Summit Learning, and throughout the entirety of their teaching experience.

Table 2

Participant Teaching Experience

Participant	Years teaching		
	Total	With Summit Learning	Prior to Summit Learning
1	1	1	0
2	1	2	1
3	8	3	5
4	4	1	3
5	2	2	0
6	45	2	43
7	21	3	18
8	1	1	0
9	28	3	25

Analysis

Participant interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 70 minutes on average. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Once transcribed, each interview was read

multiple times to ensure the researcher understood each participants experience deeply. Additionally, by fully understanding each participants' experience, the researcher better understood the lived experience of teachers at rural Montana schools utilizing Summit Learning. Throughout the horizontalization process, the researcher identified significant statements made by each participant. According to Moustakas (1994),

another dimension of Phenomenological Reduction is the process of horizontalization. Horizons are unlimited. We can never exhaust completely our experience of things no matter how many times we reconsider them or view them. A new horizon arises each time that one recedes. It is a never-ending process and, though we may reach a stopping point and discontinue our perception of something, the possibility for discovery is unlimited. The horizontal makes of conscious experience and continuing mystery, one that opens regions of laughter and hope or pain and anguish as these enter our conscious life. (p. 95)

The process of horizontalization resulted in the identification of multiple significant statements. Significant statements help the researcher better understand the phenomenon under inquiry. Following horizontalization, the researcher continued the phenomenological reduction process by removing repetitive or redundant statements (Moustakas, 1994). While recording statements, the researcher asked two questions, 1) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent to understand it? 2) Is it possible to abstract and label it? (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). If the answer was yes for a horizon, it became known as an invariant constituent of the experience. The final step of phenomenological reduction is describing the essence of the phenomenon in composite textural and structural descriptions. The

textural description can be seen as what was experienced throughout the phenomenon, while the structural description can be seen as how it is experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Horizontalization and Thematization

Multiple significant statements emerged throughout the process of horizontalization. As significant statements emerged, meaningful horizons became apparent. Horizontalization occurred by ensuring all participants of this study had an equal voice. This was an essential component to the phenomenological reduction process. Continuing with Moustakas's (1994) process, once all invariant constituents had been identified, they were clustered and labeled, creating the core themes of the experience. Following the initial clustering and thematization, this study checked "the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participants" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). This study resulted in the identification of seven emerging themes:

- support from leadership matters,
- lack of teacher efficacy in a pure Summit Learning teaching environment,
- curriculum change,
- poverty,
- mentoring works,
- lack of data to support Summit Learning assertions, and
- students are not able to acquire content knowledge or habits of success.

Composite Textural-Structural Description

In order to create a composite textural-structural description, the researcher of this study first developed individual textural and structural descriptions for each participant. In keeping with Moustakas (1994), this process includes "verbatim examples from the transcribed

interview” (p. 121). From the individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural-structural description took shape. The researcher gave much consideration to including individual textural and structural descriptions in this study. Ultimately, given the small participant size from two small schools, the researcher found this potentially harmful to the participants’ confidentiality as some themes may be seen in a negative light.

Table 3 offers examples of significant statements identified in the horizontalization process.

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Table 3

Horizontalization Invariant Constituents

Participant	Statement
1	So, I would say my school is pretty good with this. We’re given a lot of freedom to adjust Summit as we see fit. It seems like the administration here trusts us pretty implicitly to ... if we think something isn’t good in Summit, we have the freedom to delete it, change it, add our own thing. So, that’s a big positive I would say is that our administration does give us freedom.
2	That has to do with our administration. We are giving a lot of flexibility. So, if we something in summit, they have their curriculum. But if we see certain lesson plans that we’re like, yeah, I don’t think maybe that’s the best way I want to approach this, we have full ... we have I guess the full green light to be able to make that decision in our classroom, and some of that I think is related to administration in support of our being able to have control of what’s taught in our classroom. I know some schools aren’t that way in Summit but our school is that way where I can go through and say I don’t know that I really need to spend six days on something for instance, and because maybe my students already know it, so it’s like I have full flexibility to make modification however I see it’s appropriate. Maybe I have a better activity that I think the students will benefit from, and I can add things in as I want, and as I feel like the students need, so, I feel like I have really full control over that.
5	The administration gives me a lot of freedom. Obviously, I need to be able to justify what I’m doing in a classroom with regards to the state standards, but I have a lot of freedom.
7	The current leader allows quite a bit of decision-making of manipulation of the content of creating your own projects as opposed to just this sheer adherence to following Summit.
3	I’ve edited almost every project that comes with my courses that I use. I’ve changed some of the content areas focuses just to adapt to my students’ needs because I know what they’ve had in the past, and what they still need to meet benchmarks. So I’ve, I’ve changed it a lot.
4	I felt probably like 50% of what I do maybe is from the Summit platform and then 50% is decisions I make to add this or takeaway that based on what I think my students need.
5	I would not be able to teach my discipline effectively without being able to bring in just the outside resources.
4	I think that our specific rural setting is kind of finding that the community is not really invested in education.
5	You see a poor rural school struggling with the same students that were struggling in a traditional academic environment, turning things in on time, completing their assignments, carrying about what they’re doing because they don’t have the basic needs in their home. So, that’s a common thread.
8	I feel like this community doesn’t put a big emphasis on school. Just as parents, the community itself doesn’t really care about school as much. If they go home and say, oh school doesn’t matter, then why would they want to do their homework?

The central question for this study was: Do rural Montana teachers teaching in schools that have adopted Summit Learning believe in its efficacy? Through the process of phenomenological reduction, seven core themes emerged. The following are composite textural descriptions for each theme.

Support From Leadership Matters

Participants of this study largely credited leadership with their ability to teach effectively. Commonly, participants noted autonomy and sweeping support of leadership. The flexibility to adjust curriculum and differentiate instruction to more effectively teach was nearly universal across all participants. One participant noted, “That has to do with our administration. We are able to make decisions in our classroom, and that is related to administration in support of our being able to have control of what’s taught in our classroom.” This point was further supported, when the same participant stated, “I have full flexibility to make modifications however I see it’s appropriate.” Modification varied by participant. Examples of modifications included both additional and removed subject matter in the curriculum. When participants noted changes, they typically discussed discipline-specific modification based on their own perceived beliefs on what students should learn. All nine participants, however, individually modified the curriculum to achieve better teaching results.

As will be seen in subsequent sections, participants of this study questioned the Summit Learning curriculum frequently. In order to construct a curriculum that both aligned with Summit Learning and the teacher’s preferred curriculum elements, many participants were in open communication with colleagues and administrative leadership. Both participant schools enjoy leadership teams that fully support teacher autonomy in the classroom, including introduction of

outside resources and the differentiation of curriculum based on individual student needs.

According to one participant,

I have a lot of freedom and I think most of that is due to the administrator, not necessarily Summit. But I felt probably like 50% of what I do maybe is from the Summit platform and then 50% is decisions I make to add this or takeaway that based on what I think my students need. And I think I feel very supported in my decisions to do that and what I do or don't do is not questioned.

Leadership also involved the participants of this study in conversations regarding discipline-specific issues. One participant noted, "I can't think of any case where they've decided to do something discipline-related that didn't directly involve me." Later, that same participant stated, "I would think, by and large, most teachers have a pretty strong influence." This statement reinforced the fact that leadership inclusion and support of teachers supports a high level of teacher efficacy in both schools. Many participants made statements such as "not being left in the dark" and "I have a lot of freedom." Throughout the lived experience teacher efficacy was high, at least partially, due to support from leadership as individual teachers capable of making the best decision for their students.

The type of direction offered by leadership provided further support of teacher efficacy. Summit Learning provides a very detailed and specific curriculum. However, schools in Montana are still required to meet state curriculum standards. Participants frequently noted that leadership rarely, if at all, handed curricular components down as mandates. One participant described this by saying, "it's never, 'hey you guys are going to do this.' It's 'what's your input?'" This type of support gave participants of this study additional confidence in their understanding of individual disciplines and how to most effectively teach their students.

The high level of autonomy experienced by participants of this study was reiterated frequently throughout interviews. Equally as important, however, was the expectation of difficulty working with Summit Learning had administration not been supportive and offered less autonomy. “If I didn’t have autonomy, it would be a struggle. It would be a real struggle. But that’s the autonomy, because I have the ability to do that and the administration has provided it. It’s really helpful.” Statements such as these provide insight to the reflective nature of this study’s participants and the anticipation of significant barriers working with Summit Learning under different circumstances.

Finally, participants highlighted their belief in the teaching profession by using words such as “craft” to describe the act of teaching. In doing so, they frequently noted the perceived inability to practice their “craft” if their administration did not offer them the support and freedom necessary to teach effectively. All of this emphasizes the impact of supportive leadership on teacher efficacy. Each participant of this study spoke at great lengths about supportive leadership.

Lack of Teacher Efficacy in a Pure Summit Learning Teaching Environment

For the purposes of this study teacher efficacy is defined as “the belief or judgment that a teacher’s own abilities will bring about positive changes and desired outcomes of student engagement and learning even among students who may be difficult to work with or who lack motivation” (White, 2014, p. 31). As we saw in the previous section, participants of this study believed in their ability to teach effectively, and that of their profession as a whole, when given the appropriate support by leadership. Teachers did not believe they were able to effectively teach every student, however. In many cases, participants noted students with developmental constraints as well as students lacking educational support at home. One participant put it like

this, “We have a pretty high needs population here. Some of it’s domestic stuff. Others are a bit. . . is actually developmental. And I don’t think there’s enough support for the developmentally delayed children here.” For students with significant needs, Summit Learning was widely considered ineffective:

For instance, one of my students who has some serious, pretty serious needs. And I think that Summit makes it really hard for her to understand, like she’s been struggling in power focuses for probably a month or more. And I can’t help her much.

The expectation across all participants is that some students will excel while others will not. Depending on a variety of factors ranging from home life to student aptitude, Summit Learning was considered either very effective or ineffective. But for students with disabilities or significant home-life issues, Summit Learning was widely considered ineffective. As one participant put it, “Some students who. . . whether it’s from a lack of drive or, you know, other issues that it’s really tough on them.” This participant went on to question, “Maybe the students who don’t succeed with Summit would be in trouble with any educational system, but I just don’t know.”

The inability to effectively teach all students using Summit Learning was due to the onus put on students to perform independently. For students who were considered high achievers to begin with, Summit Learning was seen as more effective. But, most participants pointed out that those students were likely to be successful regardless of educational platform. For instance, one participant said,

I would say that the students that I have that are consistently here, they understand the platform, they can manipulate it, they can maneuver through it as needed. The problem is

the ones who are not here that are not using it consistently. Show up one or two days a week and go, 'Where are we?' Those kids I have a hard time guiding through it.

Attendance was seen as a major factor in student success. Students who were chronically absent were simply not as successful as students who were regularly in attendance. This is not necessarily a unique situation to Summit Learning, but it played a role nonetheless.

Most participants that questioned their ability to effectively teach students made it clear that Summit Learning was not a platform that works for every student. The nature of independent work creates a system that can be unrelenting once a student has fallen behind. As students fall behind, there are fewer mechanisms for them to recover than there is in a conventional system. As a result, they find themselves attempting to rush through the content, resulting in a loss of whatever learning took place. As one participant put it, "I asked them content based questions, two or three days later after they've taken one of these assessments and they can't answer it. And a majority of them can't answer it." For the most part participants of this study believed that students who had a propensity to fall behind using Summit Learning would also have the same challenges using a conventional system. For instance, student who struggle in reading were expected to also have trouble with Summit Learning.

Participants of this study believed as teachers and as a profession, they were capable of effectively teaching. However, this was predicated on leadership supporting each teacher's actions to more effectively teach their students. However, under a strict Summit Learning system with no autonomy and no alterations to the curriculum, all participants agree that they would not be able to teach as effectively. As we'll see next, changing the curriculum was nearly universal among participants of this study.

Curriculum Change

In an effort to more effectively teach their students, nearly every participant in this study has made changes to the Summit Learning curriculum. One of the most stark comments made on this subject was as follows,

I mean, there's constant, on a daily basis, I find stuff that has glaring errors. Sometimes it's something small like typos. But, oftentimes, those errors are super confusing questions. I have trouble sometimes trying to figure out what they're trying to ask or which answer is a little. . . like, you know, just the tiniest bit of difference. So it's this constant kind of struggle, that's not a good question. I've got to delete that and try to come up with something better or just delete it altogether.

This type of curriculum revision took place across every discipline represented in this study. The extent the curriculum needed changing varied by teacher and discipline, but all agreed that the curriculum was flawed in one manner or another. One participant stated plainly, "I would not be able to teach my discipline effectively without being able to bring in just the outside resources."

Changes made to the curriculum were meant to benefit both low and high achieving students. For one participant, changes were necessary "especially for teaching your high students more engaging lessons. And I think again, certain students from certain socioeconomic backgrounds would do well regardless." Another stated, "I think it's just, that these students, you know, they just don't have the. . . they don't get the outlets. They don't get physical outlets. They're here. They're stuck. They're not engaged. So yeah, it's a struggle." For low achieving students, participants of this study viewed much of the Summit Learning curriculum to be too much and too fast. By making the requisite changes, participants were able to better tailor projects and classwork based on the needs of lower achieving students. However, participants

noted concern over special education students and the ability to effectively teach this population using Summit.

Most changes were not wholesale. Rather, they were made strategically as a means of enhancing the curriculum. As one participant put it,

I got to say like probably next year, I plan on doing a lot of what my colleague has done. And I'm going to go through the textbooks and go through lessons I have taught before and adjust them as much as I can and, you know, try to keep what works, which I do think there are some good stuff in there. Keep what works and get rid of the rest. And it's one of the things that it's, you know, I . . . just as much as I believe in my students are works in progress. I know I am too.

Changes made were based on student needs and perceived shortcomings or gaps in the Summit Learning curriculum. At times participants offered specific examples of disagreements with the curriculum, but by and large they saw room for improvement based on professional experience and personal relationships with their students.

In addition to attempting to improve the curriculum, participants struggled with time constraints based on the amount of content and lack of time with students. For example one participant stated, "There were a lot of things that I ended up taking out, just based on the amount of time that we had. It's really a time standpoint of we can't do all of this, what's the highest priority." Participants had difficulty completing everything that needed to be completed for content delivery and assessments, consequently they found it difficult to teach the entirety of the content provided by Summit Learning. One participant described it by saying "you're always trying to play catch up and you can't really get into a nice groove, so it's kind of a plus and minus thing."

Another justification for change is the perceived need for more face-to-face instruction. By nature all online learning platforms replace face-to-face instruction to an extent. Summit Learning is based on a combination of both face-to-face and computer based learning. For participants of this study there was concern over the lack of in-person learning and a worry that content delivered online would not be retained. Much of what was added to the curriculum included in-person lessons and activities. Significant changes were made for those who believed in person learning would better suit their students. “I feel probably like 50% of what I do maybe is from the Summit platform and then 50% of decisions I make to add this or takeaway that based on what I think my students need.”

Changing the curriculum to best teach students was an empowering component for participants of this study. By changing elements of the Summit Learning curriculum, each participant was able to differentiate instruction and tailor the educational process for their students as they saw fit. This was in no small part due to support from leadership, but also stemmed from the belief in themselves to best identify how and what their students should learn. As we will see in the next section, in the case of impoverished students, there were outside factors impacting the learning process.

Poverty

Both schools associated with this study are situated in low income rural communities. Consequently, issues of poverty and its associated impact on learning was widely discussed during the interview process. Poverty in rural settings can be starkly different from that of urban settings. In the communities associated with this study, poverty includes a heightened sense of importance to work, rather than go to school. Many participants noted the lack of support among parents who placed working well above schooling. Additionally, issues such as food insecurity,

healthcare scarcity, and the ability to meet basic needs are demonstrated differently in rural settings. Participants noted issues of tardiness and lack of support at home for learning. One participant discussed the transient nature of teaching positions in such a community and how challenging it was to develop meaningful relationships with some students. “Many of them have been kind of abandoned both by teachers and elsewhere. So, it’s getting through that wall to get them to trust me that has been difficult.” Later in the interview process this participant said, “because they are used to seeing teachers come and go and come and go, they tend to be closed off when you first come. I’ve been having a lot of students asking me, ‘so, are you going to stick around?’”

The most frequently discussed issue related to this theme, however, was lack of student support at home. Many participants found this component of their teaching experience most challenging. The overwhelming feeling was that of helplessness. These students were seen as the most at-risk with little in the form of help available. For example, “some students, they don’t have support at home, and they are not willing to meet even the minor goals that they’re setting for themselves.” This participant was quick to note that the issue was not necessarily related to Summit Learning. Nonetheless, the hint of despair in such a comment suggests significant struggles with effectively teaching some of their students. Another participant described the situation by saying, “our community doesn’t have a huge investment in education, just most families. . . we’re kind of fighting an uphill battle.” This participant also qualified the statement by following up with, “I definitely don’t think it’s any worse than any other academic curriculum.” But, not all participants were willing to let Summit Learning go as a potential culprit.

It's for the affluent demographics, right? Students that are able to self-regulate and to prioritize and to manage their time correctly and all of that. Unfortunately, a tiny, poor community like this, we have students that really cannot do that. It would look different if you went to a very affluent school in Southern California or something.

This participant did describe the challenges faced by impoverished students as students who would face challenges under any educational setting. The general consensus was that although these students would struggle regardless, under a more traditional setting there are further safeguards against failure.

The impact of home life and success in school was universally agreed upon by all participants. Most participants viewed negativity at home as part of the larger community's skepticism of education as a whole. One participant described it by saying,

I feel like this community doesn't put a big emphasis on school. Just as parents, the community itself doesn't really care about school as much. If they go home and say, oh school doesn't matter, then why would they want to do their homework? There's a lot going on in their home lives so I try to help them the best I can, but they don't always want to talk about it, and I'm always not sure if I should ask about it.

The challenges faced by students living in poverty are impactful. From an educational standpoint, participants in this study not only discussed the social impact, but also factors such as not having fast enough internet at home to effectively work on homework. By virtue of being an online platform high quality internet is a necessity. Even in the school environment internet was challenging at times for participants of this study.

Mentoring Works

A key component to Summit Learning is teachers mentoring students individually. As one-on-one mentors, participants of this study were able to develop meaningful relationships with their students that transcended traditional teacher student interactions. Every participant spoke highly of mentorship and how beneficial it has been for their students. One participant stated, “So a big thing with Summit is mentoring and I think, if anything, that has been the best thing that we could’ve done at the school is just being able to make those connections.”

Participants described themselves as advocates for their mentees. Once per week they take time with their mentees individually to discuss not only academics such as projects, grades, etc. But, they also discuss how to set goals, what it means to achieve a goal, and how to create a plan to achieve their goals. In doing so, students were more connected to the school and had an individual teacher who they were able to rely upon to discuss both academic and non-academic subjects. As goals were set, teachers continually followed up with their mentees for accountability. One participant described it by saying,

When you come in on Monday morning I’m going to ask you about this. You made a commitment that you were going to do X, Y, Z and then I follow up with them, and so now somebody notices. They can’t just slide through and do nothing, right? So, yeah, that’s why the mentoring piece was huge.

Participants found the mentorship program useful as a means of getting to know their students, which allowed them to better tailor their educational approach. With the benefit of spending one-on-one time together having substantive conversations, both the teacher and mentor were able to better communicate educational needs and goals. Goals would then turn into plans that could be monitored for progress.

Mentorship was credited for establishing better relationships between students and teachers. Along the same lines, Summit Learning was credited for introducing this mentorship model to participants and their schools. One participant noted at the end of the interview, “I don’t think it would have happened had we not used Summit.” As with much of Summit Learning, mentorship is not as rigid as the traditional educational setting. Participants noted the positive impact this had on students as it allowed them to relax and open up to their teacher-mentor. While not highly structured, however, it does create a high level of accountability and openness that were not present prior to participant schools adoption of Summit Learning. While discussing the mentorship program, one participant said, “I think the culture changed a little bit. I definitely think the mentor thing is the biggest part of the change.” Part of the culture shift was how students spoke with each other and to their teachers about how they are doing in school.

The overwhelming consensus among participants of this study was that the mentorship component of Summit Learning was meaningful and effective, allowing them to better teach and build confidence in their abilities to teach. At the end of a discussion regarding mentorship, one participant said,

I think the mentor system helps a lot. I do think that’s been a plus that has come out of the Summit system is the mentoring because each staff member has a certain amount of kids that they just kind of oversee their academics and looked to make sure that they’re progressing.

Participants of this study viewed the mentorship program as a resource to be used to most effectively teach their students. It helped create deeper, more meaningful relationship with their students, allowed them to tailor educational paths for a more differentiated teaching approach, and offered insight to some of the hardships faced by students outside of the classroom.

Lack of Data to Support Summit Learning Assertions

Summit Learning is a relatively new program, but was very new to the participant schools for this study. Many participants in this study questioned the efficacy of Summit Learning simply due to lack of data as evidence of its success. Both schools had mechanisms in place to track student success from an early age through senior year. Such data allowed school leadership to make informed decisions regarding curriculum and approach to student learning. Participants of this study were dubious of the success rates reported by Summit Learning, especially in their schools. For some, it brought into question the entirety of Summit Learning. For instance, one participant noted immediately, “That was one weakness I thought, as I didn’t really get to see much of their previous data that I would have liked to have.”

Participants were worried that without high quality data to back up assertions made by Summit Learning about its success, there would be no way for them to adjust their own teaching practices to meet the needs of incoming students. Many specifically discussed the transition from 8th grade into high school. This was a time seen by participants as critical for teacher understanding of student success during high school years. From year to year, participants of this study have begun to track their student’s success within Summit Learning with their own data collection. This has allowed some participants to make adaptations as necessary to better suit incoming students while also providing better learning opportunities for their existing students.

Another concern with data collection was the lack of testing data that reflects Summit Learning and its effectiveness. One participant said,

We just don’t have any longitudinal studies, like are they doing better on tests or reading more? We don’t know. We don’t know yet as to the process. I don’t think Summit has it either because it’s only been like four years since I’ve been aware of its existence.

Testing has long been a standard form of student assessment. Many participants were eager to see the test scores of students banded by years to compare with previous students. For instance, how does a group of students in the 8th grade in 2005 compare to a group of students in the 8th grade from 2019? Obviously this data does not exist as neither school participating in this study has been utilizing Summit Learning long enough to have captured that data. For participants of this study, however, it left a question mark on their confidence in what and how they were teaching.

Students Are Not Able to Acquire Content Knowledge or Habits of Success

As seen in the literature review of this study, Summit Learning considers the acquisition of content knowledge and habits of success critical components of the overall system.

Participants of this study do not believe their students were able to acquire either. Not all credited Summit Learning specifically for not achieving this goal. Some attributed something as simple as poor internet or more complex issues of home life and poverty. One participant described the inability to acquire content knowledge like this,

I don't think that they actually acquire content knowledge. Just using the platform the way it is. I've had to change a lot of things, like I said at the beginning, because I don't believe that they're. . . the content they're actually getting with the focus areas that come with these courses, and the projects that come with them. I asked them content based questions, two or three days later, after they've taken one of these assessments, and they can't answer it. The majority can't answer it.

Similar comments were repeated throughout the interview process. Participants of this study were unable to find instances where the majority of students were able to acquire and retain content knowledge at any meaningful level. One participant put it more bluntly, "I think it's

worse in Summit, I really do. They don't have a clue on the content." Another participant said, "Absolutely not. Not as much as they used to under the old system."

Regardless of which educational system is being utilized, the acquisition of content knowledge is a critical part of the process. Students must be able to fully grasp and retain the information they are being taught. Participants of this study questioned whether or not that was happening. For the most part, it was seen as a larger problem with multiple factors, such as those listed earlier, exacerbated by Summit Learning and the adoption of a less direct approach to learning.

The lack of acquisition of content knowledge has not been a boost in teaching confidence among this study's participants. The inability to reach students at a place where they can fully grasp what they're being taught was stressing on all participants. As stated earlier, they understood the impact of outside forces and factored those into their overall understanding of how and why students succeed. But, seeing students travel through their courses without learning what the teacher believes they should be learning was a significant blow to teacher efficacy.

Essence

According to Van Manen (1990), "the essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of a phenomenon" (p. 10.) "The term essence can be seen as the 'to be.' The essence of a lived experience is 'what makes a thing what it is'" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Participants for this study were purposefully selected from Montana high schools that have adopted the Summit Learning platform. Participants must have been teachers teaching in core Summit Learning courses. Participants must have taught at Darby High School or St. Regis

High School. The essence of this lived experience has been categorized under two headings; uncertainty and educational courage.

Uncertainty

Participants of this study were introduced to Summit Learning with little to no experience teaching with an online platform. Consequently, none of the participants associated with this study were able to rely upon past experience nor educational preparation as a means of adapting to Summit Learning. Summit Learning does have regular conferences, training opportunities, and representatives for help. Those resources, however, do not offset the element of newness experienced by the participants of this study. Throughout discussions with participants of this study, responses had a hint of concern and lack of full confidence in Summit Learning and how they would move forward as teachers. Concerns over curriculum and data for informed decision making cast a cloud of uncertainty over Summit Learning as a program and also brought into question whether or not participants of this study were teaching their students to the best of their ability within the confines of Summit Learning. Although participants of this study were teaching with uncertainty, they were confident in their ability to teach effectively so long as they were able to adapt the program to the needs of their students. With such adaptations, participants of this study remained confident in their ability to teach effectively and confident in their colleague's ability to teach effectively.

Educational Courage

Participants of the lived experience under inquiry demonstrated a great deal of educational courage in making changes necessary to effectively teach their students. While uncertain of teaching with Summit Learning, all participants made notably significant changes to the curriculum in order to improve effectiveness. Changes were approved by leadership, but

were proposed with a sense of courageousness demonstrated in support of their students. Participants of this study made changes not only for academic reasons, but also to address issues of socio-economic status such as challenging home lives, lack of educational interest, and frequent absences. In making such adjustments, students were able to engage with material tailored to their interests and educational needs. To make such modifications meant addressing perceived shortcomings in Summit Learning and acting with a sense of autonomy.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed data analysis. Following data collection, the researcher of this study bracketed his own experiences in order to establish a more pure view of the lived experience under inquiry. Following bracketing, or epoch, significant statements were identified and thematized. The establishment of horizons allowed for the researcher of this study to create individual textural and structural descriptions, which lead to composite textural and structural descriptions. In order to provide an additional layer of confidentiality for participants, the individual textural and structural descriptions were left out of this study. Rather a composite textural-structural description was provided. Lastly, the essence of the lived experience was provided.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experience of teachers who worked in a small, rural high school that has adopted the Summit Learning online platform. Participants for this study were purposefully selected from two schools that met the criteria for this study. Once participants had agreed to participate, face-to-face interviews were conducted and recorded using two separate devices. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher. Transcriptions were read multiple times to ensure the researcher was deeply familiar with each participant and their response. Significant statements were identified throughout each participant interview. Following horizontalization and thematization, the researcher created individual textural and structural descriptions, followed by a composite textural-structural description. Finally, the essence of the lived experience under inquiry was provided.

This chapter will first report the findings of this study. Findings will be provided for each sub-question and this study's central question. Following findings, this chapter will provide implications for researchers and educational leaders. Lastly, this chapter will discuss recommendations for educational leaders and future research.

Findings

The central question for this study was, Do rural Montana teachers teaching in schools that have adopted Summit Learning believe in its efficacy? In order to answer that question, the following four sub-questions were posed:

1. To what extent are teachers relied upon to inform pedagogical decisions in Summit Learning schools?
2. To what extent do teachers at Summit Learning schools consider themselves impactful as educators?

3. To what extent do teachers at Summit Learning school consider the overarching Summit Learning educational philosophy effective for every students?
4. What themes emerged from teaching in rural, Summit Learning schools?

Subquestion 1

Subquestion 1 asked to what extent teachers are relied upon to inform pedagogical decisions in Summit Learning schools. Participants of this study were routinely included in pedagogical decision making. While discussing issues of curriculum and methods of teaching, participants described highly autonomous environments with regular individual decisions made by teachers. On occasion, curriculum teams would make decisions on behalf of the school, but those teams included teachers with direct input on how and what content was delivered. Participants of this study credited leadership with much of their ability to make changes to the curriculum and to adjust pedagogically. The ability to make changes as they saw fit was empowering for this study's participants. Many participants questioned one or more elements of the Summit Learning curriculum. As teachers wishing to be as effective as possible, making changes to the curriculum and making pedagogical changes such as content delivery, projects, and lectures, participants of this study were able to operate with autonomy.

Subquestion 2

Subquestion 2 asked to what extent teachers at Summit Learning schools consider themselves impactful as educators. Participants of this study do consider themselves impactful as educators. Once the appropriate changes to the Summit Learning curriculum were made, participants of this study felt they were able to differentiate instruction and develop an educational approach that was impactful. They were, however, challenged by issues of poverty and a perceived lack of support for education in their communities. It is important to

acknowledge that the obstacles faced by participants of this study were expected regardless of the curriculum or learning platform used. The most meaningful actions with regard to Summit Learning was participant's making changes to the curriculum to further suit the needs of students.

Subquestion 3

Subquestion 3 asked to what extent teachers at Summit Learning schools consider the overarching Summit Learning educational philosophy effective for every student. Participants of this study do not believe the Summit Learning educational philosophy is effective for every student. Of primary concern to participants were the challenges faced by low-achieving students and those lacking educational support at home. For those students, participants believed that personalized learning and an expectation of self-guided study was not achievable. While it was acknowledged that those students would likely struggle under any setting, the nature of Summit Learning was considered inadequate. Despite changes made to the curriculum and teaching approaches, low achieving students and those lacking educational support at home remained behind their peers educationally.

Subquestion 4

Subquestion 4 asked what themes emerged from teaching in rural, Summit Learning schools. The following themes emerged from this study; a) support from leadership matters b) lack of teacher efficacy in a pure Summit Learning teaching environment c) curriculum change d) poverty e) mentoring works f) lack of data to support Summit Learning assertions g) students are not able to acquire content knowledge. Through qualitative data analysis, the aforementioned themes emerged following the identification of significant statements and the process of horizontalization.

Central Question

The central question asked whether rural Montana teachers teaching in schools that have adopted the Summit Learning believe in its efficacy. As a platform with no changes, participants of this study do not believe Summit Learning is an effective platform for teaching. This study found that Summit Learning is not effective in rural communities due to lack of infrastructure and issues of socio-economic status. Furthermore, participants of this study did not find the curriculum effective as it was presented to them. However, with modifications to the curriculum, participants believed they were able to effectively teach the majority of their students. Those students who participants were unable to reach were largely at risk students with outside obstacles not attributed to Summit Learning.

The lived experience under inquiry for this study was one that allowed participants the ability to modify curriculum and teaching approaches as and when necessary. Consequently, when participants saw a flaw in Summit Learning, they simply made the necessary changes. Additionally, the mentorship component to Summit Learning was highly regarded as critical to better understanding each student's life situation, learning strengths and weaknesses, and offering the opportunity for students to better know their teachers. The combination of modifications and mentorship created a learning environment in which participants believed in their ability to effectively teach students utilizing Summit Learning.

Implications for Educational Leadership

Data collection for this study was carried out prior to the Covid-19 global pandemic. Since the world was introduced to Covid-19, schools across the United States have adopted online learning platforms. The adoption of Summit Learning by the two participant schools in this study was a much greater leap of faith than the, now contemporary, adoption of online

learning platforms as a means of delivering content remotely. By adopting Summit Learning, educational leaders are not only adopting a specific and singular curriculum. They are also adopting a philosophy that online learning is inherently better than purely in person content delivery. As seen by the findings of this study, that is a dubious notion. This study brings into question the efficacy of online learning as a stock curricular delivery method. Without the input of teachers willing and courageous enough to make the necessary changes, participants of this study would not have had faith in Summit Learning as an effective platform.

As seen in the findings of this study, leadership matters. Specifically for the participants of this study, teachers need leadership support in order to make changes with autonomy based on their understanding of each student and the learning environment. For educational leaders considering the adoption of Summit Learning, it can be expected that changes to the curriculum will be necessary at times and that teachers are best equipped to make those changes for individual disciplines. Summit Learning simply was not sufficient in its stock form to enable participants of this study to teach in a manner they found impactful and effective.

In addition to allowing teachers the freedom to modify the Summit Learning curriculum, the introduction of a mentorship program was universally seen as a positive outcome. Participants credited much to the mentorship, not the least of which was an opportunity to better understand their students as individuals. Issues both academic and non-academic were discussed and addressed during the mentorship process. It was of note that none of the participants of this study saw the mentorship as necessarily tied to Summit Learning. On numerous occasions they discussed the power of mentoring and the ability to institute such a program regardless of Summit Learning adoption.

The mentorship program associated with this study included weekly one-on-one interactions between teachers and students. From a broad perspective, this allowed teachers and students an opportunity to get to know each other and better strategize the educational process. Additionally, during mentorship sessions teachers helped students set goals academically and non-academically for the short and long terms. Following goal setting, teachers followed up with students and held them accountable for achieving goals through regular check-ins and monitoring. As teachers checked in on student goal progression, they were able to modify the curriculum in a way that best suited each individual.

The most important implication for educational leaders considering the adoption of Summit Learning is that their involvement must be meaningful and include the teaching staff in decision making. Summit Learning offers an environment in which students who self-start are able to thrive. Not all students are able to self-start, therefore changes will need to be made in order to best serve every student. Educational leaders must support their teaching staff and allow greater opportunities for teachers to mentor students if Summit Learning is to be a success.

Recommendations for Further Research

As this dissertation was being written, the world was going through the first global pandemic in over 100 years. Covid-19 turned the educational community upside down. As a means of coping while attempting to continue educating students, schools across the United States have adopted a variety of different learning platforms. Summit Learning was a bit of an anomaly at the time this study began. That is no longer the case. With widespread adoption of online learning platforms and widespread use of remote learning, the opportunities for research are endless. For instance, at the time this study began only two small rural schools in the state of Montana had adopted Summit Learning.

As with the implications for educational leaders, the researcher for this qualitative phenomenological study recommends further research on the subjects of leadership supports for teachers using online learning platforms and the efficacy of mentorship programs in both online and in-person learning environments. Regardless of how many schools continue to utilize online learning platforms post-pandemic, the impact of their necessity in-pandemic has resulted in a new means of seeing the educational process and the widespread introduction of new learning approaches such the world has never seen. This study found, among other findings, that leadership support granted teachers the freedom to modify curriculum in a way that improved each teacher's perceived ability to teach effectively. Modification in an online learning environment was critical. Additionally, mentorship programs are meaningful both academically and non-academically. These two subjects deserve further inquiry.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers teaching at selected rural public school in Montana that have adopted Summit Learning. Participants taught core courses in rural Montana schools. This study resulted in three main findings; a) that participants of this study were routinely included in pedagogical decision making b) they consider themselves impactful as educators c) they did not believe the Summit Learning educational philosophy is effective for every student. The following primary themes emerged; support from leadership matters, lack of teacher efficacy, curriculum change, poverty, mentoring works, lack of data to support Summit Learning assertions, and students are not able to acquire content knowledge.

This study began in an attempt to better understand a relatively new approach to learning through the Summit Learning platform. It ended in an era of widespread adoption of similar

online platforms, each with a different approach and style. The results of this study can be taken into consideration by educational leaders, teachers, and researchers as they navigate a new era of teaching and learning.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Study Title

A Phenomenological Inquiry of Rural Montana Teacher Efficacy in Summit Learning

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Roch Turner, graduate student
The University of Montana Missoula, MT
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FACULTY SUPERVISOR

Dr. John Matt
The University of Montana Missoula, MT
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Special Instructions to Participants

This study may contain words that are new to you. If you read or hear any words that you are not familiar with, please ask the researcher who will be interviewing you to explain them to you.

Purpose

You are being asked to participate in a research study examining Summit Learning and teacher efficacy. You have been chosen for this study as you have insight into the researched phenomenon.

Procedures

Thank you for agreeing to an interview with me. This interview will take about one hour and will be audiotaped. I will also be taking notes as you answer questions. You will be asked a variety of questions about your teacher experience with Summit Learning. A detailed analysis will be done with the data provided by your interview.

After the interview, you may choose to provide the researcher with documents regarding your experience.

You will need to sign the consent form (attached) in order to participate in this study. You will sign one form that you may keep and one form that I will keep.

Risks/Discomforts

Although no risks or discomforts are anticipated, answering the research questions may cause you to think of feelings that may make you sad or upset. If this happens, you may stop the interview and take a break. The interview can proceed when you feel comfortable. If you wish to terminate the interview completely, you may do so with no negative consequences. You will be asked if the researcher can use the information that you provided up to this point or if you wish to withdraw completely from the study and not allow the researcher to use your information. If this happens, the researcher will ask if you can provide the names of other individuals who may be able to complete the interview.

Benefits

Your contribution to the study may assist the field educational leadership. You will also receive a copy of the study once it is completed.

Confidentiality

Your identity will be used in my findings unless you specifically request otherwise.

Your data and information will be released only with your written consent. If you agree, I will use quotations from the interview in my research findings.

You will have the opportunity to review any quotations and qualitative data before my final draft.

If you wish that your interview and identity remain confidential, only the researcher and dissertation chair will have access to the locked files that connect your name or institution with the data. Your signed consent form will be locked and kept separately from the data.

The audiotape of the interview will be transcribed by the researcher or a professional hired transcriptionist. The tape will be erased after the study has been approved. The transcriptionist will sign a statement guaranteeing confidentiality.

Compensation for Injury

Although only minimal risks are foreseen in taking part of this study, the following liability statement is required on all University of Montana forms to inform and protect you.

In the event that you are injured as a result of this research, you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of The University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the

Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Admission under the authority of M.C.A. Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury further information may be obtained from The University's

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Your decision to take part in this research is entirely voluntary.

You may refuse to take part or you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are normally entitled.

If you choose to withdraw, you may do so at any time.

You may also choose not to answer any questions during the interview.

Questions

If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, you may contact Dr. Roch

Turner at 406-360-8478 or Dr. John Matt, my dissertation chair, at 406-243-5610.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the IRB through The University of Montana Research Office at 406-243-6670.

Participant's Statement of Consent

I have read the above description of the research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been satisfactorily answered. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I have will also be answered by the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Release Form Permission to use quotations

The purpose of this form is to secure permission to use quotations from the interview conducted as part of a research study on teacher efficacy of Summit Learning at rural Montana schools conducted by Roch Turner. The undersigned (participant of the study and originator or the quotation) hereby grants permission for Roch Turner to utilize quotations by the undersigned to be reported in his research study.

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Interview Protocol

Interview Form: A Phenomenological Inquiry of Rural Montana Teacher Efficacy in Summit Learning.

Date: _____ Time: _____ Male: _____ Female: _____

Institution: _____ Ethnicity: _____

Major: _____ Year: _____

Opening Statements:

Thank you for agreeing to take time from your busy schedule to participate in this research study. There are a few things that I would like to make sure you understand before we get started.

- I will be asking you some general questions and writing notes as we proceed. You will also be audiotaped during the interview.
- If you provide permission, I will be using your name, major and institution in my dissertation.
- No direct quotes from you will be used in the study without your prior permission. When quoted, your identity, location, and institution will remain confidential unless you give me permission to use them.
- If you hear any terms during the interview that you would like to have defined, please let me know.
- There are no correct answers to the questions that I will be asking you. What is important are your thoughts, feelings and experiences. The intent is to hear your thoughts, feelings and experiences, not to make judgments on your responses.
- You may withdraw or terminate the interview at anytime. You may also choose not to answer any particular question.

Interview Questions

1. To what extent are teachers relied upon to inform pedagogical decisions in Summit Learning schools? (This question is meant to establish the level of input teachers perceive to have on pedagogical decision-making in Summit Learning schools.)
 - a. Please describe your influence on pedagogical decision-making at your school?
 - b. From a broad perspective, how does your school make pedagogical decisions?

- c. In what ways do you believe that all teachers at Summit Learning schools have the ability to reach every students, regardless of academic abilities?
 - d. In what ways are you able, as a teacher, to effectively teach students, regardless of academic abilities?
 - e. In what ways do your personal beliefs regarding the teaching profession align, or not align, with your perception of the Summit Learning philosophy?
2. To what extent do teachers at Summit Learning schools consider themselves impactful as educators?
 - a. How long have you been teacher under the Summit Learning platform?
 - b. How long did you teach prior the adoption of Summit Learning at your school?
 - c. To what extent do you believe you are able to effectively teach your academic subject under Summit?
 - d. To what extent do you believe you are able to effectively guide students, both academically and otherwise?
 - e. To what extent do you believe other teachers are able to effectively guide students, both academically and otherwise?
3. Do teachers at Summit Learning school consider the overarching Summit Learning educational philosophy effective for every students?
 - a. To what extent do you believe your students are able to acquire cognitive skills based on the Summit Learning platform?

- b. To what extent do you believe students are able to acquire content knowledge based on the Summit Learning platform?
 - c. To what extent do you believe students are able to acquire habits of success based on the Summit Learning platform?
 - d. To what extent do you believe students are able to acquire a sense of purpose based on the Summit Learning platform?
4. What, if any, underlying themes emerged from teaching in rural, Summit Learning schools?
- a. What have been the major themes associated with your experience as a teacher at a rural school utilizing Summit?
 - b. How have those themes informed your decision-making as a teacher?
 - c. How have those themes impacted the overall teaching culture of your school?
 - d. How have those themes impacted the overall learning culture of your school?