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Determining Attitudes of Middle School History Teachers toward Integrating Contextual Learning Projects into the Core Curriculum

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DETERMING ATTITUDES OF MIDDLE SCHOOL HISTORY TEACHERS TOWARD INTEGRATING CONTEXTUAL LEARNING PROJECTS INTO THE CORE CURRICULUM

A RESEARCH PAPER PRESENTED TO THE

GRADUATE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF

STEM EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

AT

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE MASTER OF SCIENCE

By
Amanda Roberts
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SIGNATURE PAGE

Amanda Roberts prepared this research paper under the direction of Dr. John M. Ritz as part of OTED 636, Problems in Occupational and Technical Studies. It was submitted to the Graduate Program Director as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Science.

APPROVED BY: _____ DATE: _____

Dr. John M. Ritz
Advisor and Graduate Program Director

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Amanda Roberts

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001, President George H.W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act and set a new standard of acceptable education for the children of America. States quickly responded by implementing a series of standards, unique to each one, through which they could record the necessary data to represent their successes toward accomplishing the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act (Ashby, 2009).

Teachers, according to their expertise, were called upon to educate each child toward the designated standards set by the state. However, it became apparent teacher qualifications alone were not sufficient for schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress because student's scores were not meeting standards. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report, 22 percent of states did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP, in mathematics and 16 percent did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress in reading (Nicholas, 2005). To remedy the problem, many states attempted to raise scores by allowing students to practice cumulative standardized testing prior to the actual test date. Several states including Alaska, New Mexico, and Virginia have prepared practice tests which they made available for students online. Other states such as Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, North and South Carolina, and others have posted their practice tests on a test preparation website (Cuesta Technologies, 2010). Continual practice appears to benefit. Student scores have increased and adequate yearly progress continues to climb upward, slowly. NAEP (2007) reports show improved mathematics scores. Fourth grade

mathematics scores rose from 238 to 240 from 2005 to 2007 and eighth grade scores improved from 279 to 281. Likewise there was an improvement in reading scores. Fourth grade scores went from 219 to 221 in 2005. Eighth graders also improved from 262 to 263, a statistically significant gain, though that figure dipped slightly from the reading test given five years ago (Cavanagh & Manzo, 2007). While there is a steady improvement, it is slow. Some would argue any improvement is the right direction. However, there are others who are not convinced. They see the results as meager, at best, especially when considering the amount of investment in time and money (Cavanagh & Manzo, 2007).

This prompted the researcher to question, "For those teachers who were able to make Adequate Yearly Progress, how did they do it?" Have they grown accustomed to teaching according to the standards and acquiring the required pass rates necessary to meet adequate yearly progress and are they content with these scores? Assuming this is not so, what methods are teachers willing to attempt in order to take that general 80% pass rate up to 90% or better? This research seeks to determine the attitude of teachers toward enhancing student learning beyond the necessary scores to make adequate yearly progress through contextual learning methods.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study was to determine the attitudes of middle school history teachers toward integration of contextual learning activities into their academic curriculum to enhance student learning.

Research Goals

To provide a framework for this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are middle school history teacher's feelings of their student's Standards of Learning, SOL, progress?
2. What are teacher's opinions toward using contextual learning activities to enhance middle school history toward Adequate Yearly Progress and state standardized scores?

Background and Significance

There is an ample amount of reports which describe the story of schools suffering from high numbers of at-risk students who continue to fail or drop-out. These schools, which were struggling to make a connection with their students through the academic curriculum, decided to make a switch in their curriculum toward an integration of career and technical curriculum with academic courses through contextual learning methods. However, as stated, each of these schools was "pushed" for a change. They needed to meet a serious demand of their students, and they found success through integration. Yet, there are numerous more student populations who continue to attend school with as much disinterest as the at-risk students. They have the academic capability to "make the grade", yet their enthusiasm for their education is as limp as the at-risk students. Many school systems have attempted to make small changes toward integration through High Schools that Work programs, career and

technical education, and Tech Prep. While these changes have been significant, they are not to the degree they should be (Hull, 2000).

Our world has transformed to an information-based economy. Consequently, employers no longer seek employees with minimal job experience or short-term skills, rather employers are anxious to hire members to their teams who know how to synthesize, integrate, apply, and build on basic knowledge (Hull, 2000). Contextual learning strategies in the classrooms feed these skills and develop students into marketable members of the economy.

Therefore, it is imperative to motivate teachers at the secondary level to begin to integrate contextual learning methods into their everyday curriculum. Integration steps taken in mathematic classes have already demonstrated significant improved understanding of advanced mathematic concepts through integration of career and technical education and mathematic courses with no drawback to mathematic achievement scores in schools which have a significant population of at-risk students (20% English speaking and nearly 65% free or reduced lunch) (Pearson, 2008). Of course, steps were taken to achieve these results. Teachers participated in professional development and in-service training, curriculum development programs, and agreed to maintain the study for an entire school year (Pearson, 2008).

Schools facing dire situations have proven a switch to contextual learning methods ignites the learning process for at-risk students and revitalizes curriculum programs. Now let us continue the movement by applying contextual learning strategies in classrooms which are meeting standards to go above and beyond. This

study will discover core curriculum teacher's attitudes concerning their willingness to make a shift in their current teaching methodology from traditional styles to contextual learning. Continued research toward applying contextual learning strategies to classes already meeting state standards through traditional styles of teaching for the purpose of setting a higher standard of adequate yearly progress achieved through contextual learning would be preferential.

Limitations

The limitations established for this study include:

- The use of a focus group methodology to obtain research information.
- The focus groups will consist of middle school history teachers representing the three middle schools in the Lynchburg City School system.
- The study will have little representation of a non-English speaking student body, although there is a fifty-four percent free/reduced lunch population within the school system (Gosap, 2010).

Assumptions

The following assumptions were believed to be true concerning this study:

- The focus groups consisted of teachers who maintained an average pass rate for the last five years on their annual Standard of Learning scores.
- Student scores were representative of at least 90% of their class roles, with the exceptions of special needs students and students who transferred from a different school system within the last two months of school.

- Teachers were teaching the same standards for each given grade using a variety of teaching aids to meet the various learning modalities.
- Teachers were applying traditional teaching strategies in their classroom instruction 80% of the time.

Procedures

This study was intent to discover the attitude of middle school teachers toward the integration of contextual learning methods into their classroom for the purpose of enhancing student's learning. After reviewing a handout displaying examples of contextual learning strategies, the focus groups of teachers from the three middle schools in Lynchburg City, VA, were asked the following questions in a survey. They were:

- Most of you consistently have an 80% pass rate or higher on the Standards of Learning for the past five years. Do you find yourselves pleased with these numbers or would you like to see your scores raised?
- As a department, have you considered ways you might raise your pass rate averages?
- What were some of the methods you have tried to raise your scores?
- Have you considered integrating contextual learning activities into the academic curriculum?
- What do you believe would be the advantages and disadvantages to integrating these types of activities into the curriculum?

Definition of Terms

In regards to this study, the following terms have been defined for clarification:

Adequate Yearly Progress: determined by each state, it is the record which demonstrates that state's growth toward the established goal of the No Child Left Behind Act to attain universal proficiency in mathematics and reading (Yeow, 2009).

Contextual Learning: rooted in the Constructivist Movement, it is an educational theory which stipulates individuals learn by constructing meaning though interacting with and interpreting their environments (Imel, 2000).

Curriculum Integration: a philosophy implemented through various teaching styles which draws on material from various subject areas to instruct about a specific theme (ASCD, 2003 as cited by Stone).

National Assessment of Education Process, NAEP: the test used by states to provide the Federal government the data needed to determine the academic growth of fourth and eighth graders in reading and mathematics (Nicholas, 2005).

Standards of Learning: academic standards written by the Commonwealth of Virginia to measure achievement on the annual Standard of Learning tests (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

Summary

Chapter I described the standards which have been set by the Federal government which all students are expected to achieve by the 2013-2014 school year according to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. These standards are being measured through assessment tests used to determine the effectiveness of classroom instruction

and the student's ability to retain the provided information. However, at-risk students as well as academic students are losing their enthusiasm for the traditional format of an academic classroom. Urban schools inundated with at-risk students and low-income schools in rural communities have begun to breathe life back into their curriculums through the integration of CTE and contextual learning methods into their academic programs. Students are succeeding and at no cost to their required academic standards for Adequate Yearly Progress.

Chapter I also explains there are still several school systems that consistently reach Adequate Yearly Progress and yet, achieve no more. It was suggested that just as the urban schools and low-income schools began to reinvigorate their programs through CTE and contextual learning strategies, the same could be done by schools that have met Adequate Yearly Progress and need to impassion their students for learning.

Furthermore, Chapter I provided the framework for the survey to be completed. Three focus groups consisting of middle school history teachers from the three middle schools of Lynchburg City, VA, were surveyed to determine their feelings toward their current teaching practices and the potential for integrating a few contextual learning methods into their curriculum. The study will provide the results from those focus groups and draw conclusions about the receptivity of contextual learning methods into the academic classrooms of Lynchburg City middle school history teachers.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Prior to conducting a focus group study with the designated sample groups, further research was done to create generalizations of contextual learning techniques. A study to determine the need for contextual learning began with a focus on Adequate Yearly Progress. This chapter will define Adequate Yearly Progress and explain its development.

Following an explanation of Adequate Yearly Progress, Chapter II will provide a brief overview of the need for implementation of contextual learning strategies into core curriculum courses and the principles unique to contextual learning by defining contextual learning, explaining how it is implemented in the classroom, discussing the advantages and disadvantages teachers have reported when they infused contextual learning through CTE coursework and their core curriculums. Finally, Chapter II will provide general characteristics of teacher beliefs who stifle or ignore contemporary teaching strategies in preference to traditional teaching methods, which explains why teachers are slow to incorporate changes into their typical method of operation.

Adequate Yearly Progress

In 1965, the Federal government, motivated to influence academic progress in the public school system, instituted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This was the beginning of a new wave of government involvement in education. At no other time in history has such attention been provided to the public school arena (Nichols, 2005). Restructured and reauthorized in 2001, it became commonly referred

to as the No Child Left Behind Act. More stringent and direct, the No Child Left Behind Act ambitiously sought greater student accomplishments. Essentially, 100% of American students would demonstrate proficiency in mathematics and reading by the 2013-2014 school year (Ed Data, 2010). It was then Adequate Yearly Progress was introduced to the education system (Education Week, 2004). Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP, is "the measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (Education Week, 2004, p. 1).

Adequate Yearly Progress is to be determined in each state through a single testing agency (Education Week, 2004). Every state has established standards for their academic curriculums. Students are to be tested annually, and the results are to be compared to prior years (Education Week, 2004). Each state then bases their reading and mathematics results on their state-determined AYP standards and concludes if each school has progressed towards their proficiency goal (Education Week, 2004; Ed Data, 2010; Nichols, 2005). The states are allowed to determine what AYP will constitute for them, individually. However, they must follow certain federal stipulations. For example, a state must set a baseline of student performance toward the goal of 100% student proficiency by 2013-2014 as well as include benchmarks for how students will measure progress toward their goal (Education Week, 2004). Those schools which do not make AYP for two consecutive years must be labeled as a school needing improvement (Education Week, 2004). If the school is unable to reach AYP following their improvement strategies, further sanctions are implemented.

The number of schools being reported as "needing improvement" has been remarkably high. In 2004, there were at least 19,644 schools who did not make AYP and at least 11,008 schools who were identified as in need of improvement (Education Week, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, by 2006-2007 these numbers had risen to 25,623 schools not making AYP and 15,904 schools in need of improvement. In other words, 80% of public schools across the nation were reported as not making AYP (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). It appears the number of schools who will face sanctions will greatly increase in the upcoming years (Education Week, 2004).

The Necessity of Contextual Learning

Meeting AYP is proving to be a struggle. However, there are those schools who are accomplishing the task through traditional academic instruction. Yet, there growth is not characterized as substantial, rather just enough. It is 2010, and the federal government is beginning to reassess NCLB and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Hyslop, 2009). This could be an ideal time to instigate significant changes in instruction, which a handful of schools have already begun. Contextual learning strategies implemented in academically struggling schools have proven to be more than effective to turn their overall performance around. Using Karweit's definition, Ritz and Moye explain contextual learning is an instructional strategy which allows students to use activities and problems to solve real world problems (in press). Furthermore, Ritz and Moye (in press) describe how contextual learning strategies can be determined to be effective by citing CORD (2010). They suggest,

> Learning occurs only when students (learners) process new information or knowledge in such a way that it makes sense to them in their own frames of reference (their own inner worlds of memory, experience, and response). This approach to learning and teaching assumes that the mind naturally seeks meaning in context, that is, in relation to the person's current environment, and that it does so by searching for relationships that make sense and appear useful (¶ 5)

While there are schools demonstrating some growth, the bottom line is that standards are nowhere near the 100% student proficiency goal set by NCLB. It is the contention of the researcher the problem is not with the quality of curriculum, school policies, testing methods, or the students. Rather, there is an apparent disconnect between the mode of instruction and student retention of the material. It is not that students cannot learn to read and solve mathematic problems; it is that the material is insignificant to them because they see no applicability to their world.

Conversely, many career and technical education teachers who have implemented a contextual learning style of instruction, which makes the material applicable to students and allows them the opportunity to practice the skills they are learning in the classroom and apply them to real life situations, have found their students excel. To clarify, they not only excel in the career and technical classroom but in the core curriculum classroom as well. Furthermore, studies have shown students who participate in CTE programs have a higher attendance rate as well as a higher percentage of graduation rates (Bottoms, 2008; Drage, 2009; Hyslop, 2009).

Consider the following examples provided by Bottoms and Sharpe (1996). In 1989, Howard High School of Technology in Wilmington, Delaware, was one-third empty. They were facing closing their doors. Through a collaboration of business leaders, teachers, and administrators a new curriculum with more stringent academic courses integrated through career and technical education courses was developed. The result was a renewed school whose enrollment nearly doubled in less than ten years. Hoke County High School in Raeford, North Carolina, is located in one of the state's poorest communities. Seeking to create a mist system for the school's greenhouse, a mathematics and an agriculture teacher integrated their curriculum. The program was so successful, the entire school has since integrated its curriculums. Student's scores have increased. The number of A's and B's have increased across all core subjects at an average of 7%, and the teachers who offered the most integrated material discovered their grades were the highest in the school. In 1990, Delcastle Technical High School, Wilmington, Delaware, had writing scores which were described as "rock bottom" when compared to other students in the state. Through a program of combined technical writing and English, student scores rose. Students improved their writing skills by learning how to develop, edit, and publish their own trade and technical journal (Bottoms & Sharpe, 1996).

Development and Application of Contextual Learning

There are significant claims to the value of an integrated curriculum which includes contextual learning strategies. The development of contextual learning could be traced to the beginning of time when the first man taught another how to hunt

through demonstration and practice. However, the American education world credits John Dewey with the development of contextual learning (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008; Pautler, 1999). Dewey was a pragmatic, education philosopher and participant of the Constructivist Movement in the early to mid 1900s. Dewey was less than enthusiastic for the traditional style of teaching. Essentially, the traditional style of instruction includes providing students material based on an objective, applying the skill through an avenue of guided practice, and finally, allowing the students to utilize the skills independently through homework or quizzes, which culminated in an assessment to determine the student's level of understanding.

Dewey argued for the implementation of what he referred to as problem-based learning, essentially vocational education (Pautler, 1999). Throughout the early twentieth century, vocational education developed. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, vocational education was stifled due to the Space Race. At that time, there was a shift back to the importance of the core subjects as well as computer programming to keep the country academically competitive, particularly with the Russians. The result was a prevention of the growth of vocational education and a return to a more traditional, academic style of instruction (Bond, 2004). Then with the invention of the personal computer and programs such as Apple Computers of Tomorrow (ACOT), vocational education, now referred to as career and technical education, was revived (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008; Franklin & Bolick, 2007). By the 1990s, the Information Age was developing exponentially and the federal government began to take the importance of career and technical education seriously (Franklin & Bolick, 2007).

The growth of CTE programs led to the development of supplemental programs such as Career and Technical Student Organizations as well as written curriculum guides to improve instruction. For example, the 2006 Carl D. Perkins Improvement Act instituted a requirement for a "career and technical programs of study" (Whitaker, 2008). These programs of study served as a curriculum pathway for secondary students. Beginning in middle school and continuing through high school, students can enroll in courses relevant to the career they desire to pursue and lay a strong foundation for either an immediate career move upon graduation or a post-secondary degree. Such efforts have resulted in an increased awareness and participation among secondary students in CTE courses which provides a rich experimental ground of the benefits of contextual learning.

Formerly known as vocational education, career and technical education's roots lie in courses such as home economics and shop classes. However, with the modern age of technology, CTE has advanced to include courses in nuclear technology, health sciences, architecture, the automotive industry, as well as STEM education. Teachers in each of these courses provide instruction to their students through real-world problems. There are various methods available to teachers who choose to integrate core curriculum material with career and technical curriculum. As Bottoms and Sharpe (1996) explain, there are three general methods of integration between the two curriculums which demonstrate how to apply contextual learning in the classroom. The first, and easiest mode of integration, is "single course integration". Teachers may incorporate material from a different curriculum to accomplish an assignment in their

curriculum. For example, an English teacher might ask their students to complete a technical writing paper in their class. The second mode of integration and slightly more complex is referred to as “joint planning”. Using joint planning, teachers from a department or across departments, may join curriculums to teach a concept. For example, students may work to develop high level mathematic skills through a project studying solid waste problems in America. They use data provided on the amount of garbage generated each year and the availability of landfill space to determine the extent of the nation’s waste disposal problem. A third mode of integration is “interdisciplinary approaches”. Academic and technical teachers work together to develop a curriculum through common learning objectives. This can be accomplished through team teaching, short-term projects, or thematic projects. For example, students would complete a senior project in which they write a term paper about a prospective career, complete a project using concepts from that career, and then deliver an oral presentation to staff, a peer committee, parents, and a representative from that career field.

In each of the examples provided, students are introduced to academic and vocational material through the contextual learning strategies. The teachers are using real-world situations to instruct academic principles through career and technical course material. It is situations like these which motivate students to participate in their educational development and complete the program.

Advantages of Contextual Learning

The advantages gained through incorporating contextual teaching strategies become apparent once they have been implemented. Statistically, student's attendance and graduation rates increase. Furthermore, academic skills are improved, the teacher's are able to expand on their teaching strategies, parent and teacher relationships are strengthened through interaction and involvement as teachers request help from parents or their places of work, and the nation's supply of qualified skilled workers increases (Bottoms, 2008; Bottoms & Sharpe, 1996). While these advantages serve the student, school, and community, there are advantages which the students receive alone.

In the real world, contextual learning is how people learn. When it is applied at the middle and high school level, students are being trained in methods which will be invaluable to them in the workforce. Yet, it is without the pressure of meeting an employer's standard. Experience and success are innate teachers. Contextual learning connects what students are learning to what they have experienced and allows them to make conclusions and expand their knowledge (Bottoms & Sharpe, 1996).

Furthermore, a student's desire to learn can be fueled through contextual learning. Instead of wondering "why do I need to know this?" or "when will I ever use this?", students are taught the applicability of the material through the lesson because they are using real-world situations in which to relate the curriculum (Bottoms & Sharpe, 1996).

Drawbacks of Contextual Learning

It would be natural at this point to consider the disadvantages to breaking away from the traditional form of classroom instruction and applying the contextual learning strategy to a curriculum. Many teachers prefer the traditional methods of instruction (Armstrong, 1996). Some have postulated the preference to not make changes to a teaching style, and it is triggered by a behavioral observation referred to as "fear of failure" (Armstrong, 1996). Others might argue, it is what teachers have had modeled for them throughout the majority of their educational career, or simply that it is easier to stand in front of a class and tell the students what they need to know and then test them on their ability to recall the pertinent information (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008).

Contextual learning requires training. Professional development activities which hone the skill of applying real-world situations to academic material help teachers understand how to integrate the curriculums. Furthermore, professional development activities provide teachers with creative ideas to implement in their classroom (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008).

In addition to professional development and training, teachers will find adding contextual learning activities to their curriculum will increase the amount of time necessary for preparation and meetings with team teachers. Correlating instructional materials requires teachers to meet and align curriculum scope and sequence. Then teachers will need to update each other and ensure projects are staying on time. This amount of preparation time can be costly to some teachers, particularly those who have

coaching or extracurricular school activities which mandate they participate following normal instruction time (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008).

Finally, teachers who choose to implement contextual learning through integrated curriculums may find it difficult for the school to accommodate through scheduling, lab assignments, and planning periods (Fallik, Eylon, & Rosenfeld, 2008). Integrated instruction is best suited when teachers have similar planning periods which facilitates necessary meetings. If the school is unable to meet these needs, it becomes difficult for teachers to work around opposing schedules.

Hesitation to Implement Contextual Learning

The challenges faced by those who integrate contextual learning into their curriculums, although they can be significant, are far outweighed by the significance of the rewards of contextual learning. That said, why do teacher's struggle to make the change? Little research has been conducted on this matter. However, research has been done concerning teacher's lack of desire to integrate technology into the classroom. As Ertmer (2005) explains, it was determined that for a teacher to change their method of instruction, it requires a change in their belief system. This is referred to as a second-order change. First order changes are those that adjust practice, not beliefs. They are reversible and thus easy to make. Second-order changes require a change in a belief system, and this is deemed irreversible.

Ertmer (2005) further explains the premise made by Kagan in the article *Implications of Research on Teacher Beliefs* that there is little in respect to the skill of teaching which represents "truths" about teaching. Most of a teacher's knowledge is

better described as a belief. Yet, there seems to be little consistency between a teacher's belief and their classroom practices (Ertmer, 2005). For example, there are inconsistencies between the relationship of the stated beliefs a teacher will hold concerning reading and their instructional reading practices (Ertmer, 2005).

Therefore, if teaching practices are based on teacher beliefs, yet teachers do not always teach according to their own beliefs, what does that mean? Essentially, it is important to remember not all beliefs are held to the same degree. Ertmer (2005) explains through an analogy offered by Rokeach in *Belief, Attitudes, and Values: A Theory of Organizational Change* that beliefs resemble an atom. The nucleus of the atom represents the core system of beliefs. These beliefs are unchangeable and have been formed over years. They are referred to as Type A. Type B beliefs are the next layer out and are formed through personal experience. Similar to Type A beliefs, Type B beliefs are almost never changed. Proceeding out from the nucleus are Type C, D, and E beliefs. It is Type D and E beliefs which are developed from outside authorities and therefore, more easily changed, particularly if the authority suggests the change (Ertmer, 2005). Ertmer continues to explain that beliefs are most often changed overtime and slowly through experience and social-cultural influences (2005).

In addition to allowing personal experiences and social-cultural influences to adjust the teacher belief system toward a willing attitude to a different style of instruction, there are steps the education world can take to help motivate teachers to an integration of contextual learning into their curriculum. For example, at the university level, staff can begin to instruct future teacher educators in the methods of

contextual learning strategies (Waddoups, Wentworth, & Earle, 2004). At the secondary level, faculty can be encouraged to make changes by demonstrating to them the positive effects through statistics and success stories (Armstrong, 1996), asking them to rethink the curriculum, providing mentors and support for faculty members, and finally developing collaborative relationships between faculty, students, and school districts (Waddoups, Wentworth, & Earle, 2004).

Just as a doctor is bound by the Hippocratic Oath to provide medical aid when necessary, teachers are bound by a duty to ensure students are improved through instruction. They should never wonder why the material they are learning is important or when they will use it. These questions should be answered in the course of the lesson (Clarke, 2003). This is precisely the motivator behind the principles of contextual learning. As Clarke (2003) describes, "Contextual learning is a phrase to describe bringing applications to the knowledge educators are teaching in their classrooms" (p. 1).

Summary

In summary, Chapter II demonstrates the need for contextual learning strategies to be implemented into the secondary classroom. Beginning with an explanation of Adequate Yearly Progress as defined to be "the measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (Education Week, 2004, p. 1), Chapter II explains the deficiency of the American education system in that it has not been able to make AYP in 80% of America's schools. NCLB set high goals, yet the system is falling short.

The federal government is moving now to make recommendations for updates on NCLB as well as other education reform acts. Now is an ideal time to implement other strategies in the classroom which have proven to be successful. Contextual learning strategies have worked in schools which required a change of venue in order to survive. Chapter II provides examples of schools which were struggling to remain open. Through contextual learning and integration of career and technical education programs into their academic curriculum, student's scores began to improve, their attendance rates increased, as well as their graduation rates. Students, who were not succeeding through a purely academic curriculum, were able to flourish when their academic program was mixed with real-life application.

Chapter II concludes with potential reasons as to why contextual learning may not be applied to typical academic teacher classrooms. While many teachers may agree the theory is credible, they do not demonstrate a desire to apply it to their classroom. There are several supposed reasons to account for this including: difficult to plan or lack of school support, fear of failure, or a practical belief system which is contrary to the application of contextual learning.

Regardless of the reasons, the fact is many teachers incorporate little to no contextual learning strategies into their classroom and the result is a purely academic form of instruction which lacks creativity and ingenuity. The end product is a student body which is left deflated and uninterested, unchallenged, and unchanged by school. Consequently, drop-out rates increase, graduation rates decrease, and AYP remains unachievable. Chapter III will provide a detailed description of the steps taken to acquire

the data concerning the middle school history teacher's attitudes toward including contextual learning strategies into their classroom curriculum.

Chapter III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The conducted study was descriptive research to determine the attitudes of middle school history teachers toward the incorporation of contextual learning strategies into their core curriculum. This chapter provides a description of the processes used to conduct the research. Included in Chapter III is a discussion of the population surveyed, a description of the data instrument and the method of data collection, the statistical analysis, and a summary of the material covered.

Population

The population of this study was the Lynchburg City middle school history teachers for the 2009-2010 school year. There are three middle schools in the Lynchburg City Schools system. Two middle schools have six history teachers and one middle school has seven teachers for a combined total of nineteen middle school history teachers. Total, there are seven teachers for the sixth grade, six teachers for the seventh, and six teachers for the eighth grade classes. On average, teachers have a total of eighteen students in each class and a cumulative class roster of ninety-two students.

The middle school history teachers are between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-two and a mixture of male and female. They have a range of two to thirty years teaching experience. The sixth grade instructors teach early American history to the Civil War period as well as some Virginia history and geography, the seventh grade instructors teach American history beginning with the Civil War up to present day, and the eighth grade instructors teach Civics and Economics.

Instrument Design

The instrument used to collect the data was a survey distributed to the teachers through focus groups which met at each school site. Teachers were provided examples of contextual learning strategies and then asked to participate in the focus group discussions. The survey was written based on the information collected to create the research goals. The survey contained five questions regarding the teacher's attitudes toward their current Standard of Learning scores, ideas for raising their scores, and their attitude toward the inclusion of contextual learning strategies into their curriculum. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey questions.

Methods of Data Collection

The research study was based on the attitudes of teachers toward the incorporation of contextual learning strategies into their curriculum. Initially, approval to conduct the study was sought from the Lynchburg City School superintendent, Dr. Paul McKendrick, through a personal interview. Upon receipt of his approval, contact was made with each school's history department chair for approval to complete the survey during their regularly scheduled department meeting. Once approval to meet with the teachers had been received, the survey was conducted in three separate focus groups, one group per school. Initially, teachers were provided a definition of contextual learning, and an example such as an English teacher developing a career and technical journal to be published at the end of every semester, was discussed. Teachers were allowed to share their answers to the survey questions and asked to record their thoughts on paper. The teachers were assured their answers would remain confidential

and be recorded in aggregate. See Appendix B for a copy of the cover letter sent to the history department chairpersons.

Statistical Analysis

Once the data were collected, the results were tabulated. Question 1, 2, and 4 of the survey required a yes or no answer. An arithmetic mean was determined to tabulate the average number of teachers who were in favor of the survey questions. The average number of teachers who disagreed with the statements was also calculated and reported.

Questions 3 and 5 of the survey allowed teachers to elaborate their thoughts concerning the implementation of contextualized learning. These answers were tabulated according to the teacher's overall attitudes toward the application of contextual learning. They provided a second mean distribution describing the belief these teachers shared toward the practicality of the actual application of contextualized learning in the classroom. Therefore, descriptive statistics were employed to determine mean responses.

Summary

Chapter III provided a synopsis of the methods and procedures used to conduct the research. The chapter described the population of middle school history teachers who were used in the focus group study. It then explained the design of the survey utilized to collect data. Through three separate focus groups, a series of five questions were asked to prompt teacher's thoughts and attitudes toward the integration of contextual learning strategies in their classrooms. The method of data collection began

with approval from the school system superintendent as well as approval from each of the school department chairs. Once approval had been received, focus groups were conducted during the teacher's regularly scheduled department meetings. A mean distribution was created according to each teacher's responses describing their attitude toward incorporation of contextual learning strategies. The findings of the focus groups will be reported in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

The problem of this study was to determine the attitudes of middle school history teachers toward integration of contextual learning activities into their academic curriculum to enhance student learning. Based on research conducted through the Review of Literature, survey questions were provided to three different focus groups consisting of the Lynchburg City middle school history departments at each of the middle schools in the district. Prior to each group recording their answers the researcher described the intent of the study, defined the term contextual learning, and provided examples of contextual learning strategies. Once the intent of the research was clarified for each participant, the focus groups discussed the questions in the survey, and each participant recorded their opinion on the survey. The data were collected and recorded to determine the teacher's attitudes toward the incorporation of contextual learning strategies in the core curriculum classroom. Following a description of the participant population, Chapter IV will provide an explanation of the data analysis method through the survey response, a report of the teacher responses toward their current Standard of Learning scores, an account of their attitudes toward contextual learning, and conclude with a summary of the chapter.

Population Response

There are a combined nineteen middle school history teachers employed by the Lynchburg City School system. Of the nineteen, eighteen teachers participated in the study providing the researcher a 95 percent participation rate. Dunbar Middle School

has six history teachers, two for each grade sixth through eighth, all of which participated. Likewise, Sandusky Middle School has six teachers, two for each grade. Five of the six teachers participated in the study. Linkhorne Middle School has seven history teachers. There is an additional teacher whose class roles split the sixth and seventh grades to keep class sizes down. All seven from Linkhorne Middle School participated. Table 1 demonstrates the number of teachers who participated from each school.

Table 1

Participants from the Lynchburg City Middle School

School	**Number of History Teachers in the School**	**Number that Participated in the Study**
Dunbar Middle School	6	6
Linkhorne Middle School	7	7
Sandusky Middle School	6	5
Total	19	18

Survey Response

Upon completion of the survey, a mean distribution was used to determine the average description of the attitude the teacher's shared toward their current Standard of Learning scores achieved by their students. A second mean was calculated to report teacher's attitudes toward creating and applying improved teaching techniques in the classroom. A third mean was determined to demonstrate teacher's attitudes toward the inclusion of contextual learning strategies in the classroom. The teacher's attitudes were determined through Questions 1, 2 and 4 of the survey.

Teacher's feelings toward Students Standard of Learning Progress

Question 1 asked teachers if they were satisfied with their current pattern of Standard of Learning scores. With a mean of 2.0, it was unanimous. One hundred percent of the teachers stated they would prefer to see improved scores. However, one teacher recorded on their survey that it was impractical to expect they could do any better.

Question 2 asked teachers if they had discussed ways to improve their scores. Each history department is comprised of three distinct curriculums. Therefore, while each history department acknowledged they do not create improvement plans together as an entire group, the teachers agreed each grade level works together as a team to enhance instruction. Therefore, with a mean of 2.0 and 100% agreement, all three history departments affirmed each grade level works to share ideas and improve lessons.

Question 3 asked the teachers to elaborate on their ideas to improve student understanding of course material and thereby student Standard of Learning scores. Teachers shared ideas and activities they had incorporated in their classroom. A few examples offered were the involvement of Jamestown re-enactors who visited the school site to portray life in colonial Jamestown, involving students in field trips to the Holocaust museum, discussion of current events, aligning curriculum with current career opportunities, participating in mock trials, and the stock market games.

Teacher Opinions of Contextual Learning

It was Questions 4 and 5 which created the most response and participation. Teachers found the idea of contextual learning to be exciting and ideal. Question 4 asked the teachers if they had considered the idea of contextual learning. They consented that such instruction would be beneficial for students and allow for more creativity in their teaching day. However, every focus group complained of the constraints they felt by the Standards of Learning and the necessity to complete instruction in the allotted time frame. Through verbal discussion, it was determined there were two general attitudes of the teachers held toward the application of contextual learning strategies. With a mean of 2.56, teachers demonstrated an overall approval of the idea of contextual learning. In other words, teachers saw the value of contextual learning strategies, and they stated it showed potential to prove beneficial for a student's increased understanding of course material. Table 2 illustrates how the teacher's recorded scores ranked with thirteen expressing a positive attitude toward contextualized learning and three expressing apprehension or disfavor toward

contextual learning. Two teachers expressed an uncertainty toward contextual learning, but they explained during the focus group it was due to a lack of understanding how contextual learning could be accomplished with their curriculum. Consequently, they were described as undecided in their attitude toward approval of including contextual learning in the classroom.

Table 2

Attitudes toward Including Contextual Learning into Core Curriculum Classroom

	Yes	**No**	**Undecided**	**Total**	
	13	3	2	18	
Percentage	72%	17%	11%	100%	
Mean					2.56

Following further discussion, however, teachers wanted to specify in the survey Question 4, that while they viewed contextual learning as a positive instructional technique, they did not perceive it to be a viable tool for instruction. It was revealed only 3 teachers of the 18 surveyed demonstrated an attitude of openness toward implementing contextual learning strategies in their classroom. With a mean of 1.5, teachers expressed an overall uncertain attitude toward the practicality of incorporating contextual learning. Fifteen teachers cited time constraints and the necessity to teach all of the material which would be covered on the Virginia Standards of Learning tests as two reasons to not experiment with change in their teaching format. One teacher also mentioned the lack of understanding how to write a curriculum contextually as another

obstacle toward the integration of contextual learning. Table 3 shows the majority of teachers disagreed with the necessity to apply contextual learning in their classrooms with only a small representation of three teachers open to the idea of practicing contextual learning strategies in their classroom.

Table 3

Attitudes toward Applying Contextual Learning in Core Curriculum Classrooms

	Yes	**No**	**Undecided**	**Total**
	3	12	3	18
Percentage	17%	66%	17%	100%
Mean				1.5

Summary

This chapter related the results of the data collected from the three focus group studies conducted at Lynchburg City's middle schools. The results from the surveys were collected, compiled, and reported to demonstrate the mean respondent of the data of the study conducted to determine the middle school teacher's attitudes toward their current student progress on the Virginia Standards of Learning tests and the incorporation of contextual learning strategies in the classroom. The chapter provided a description of the population surveyed. Furthermore, there was an account of the teacher's responses to survey Questions 1, 2, and 4 including tables to demonstrate

survey results. Chapter V will give a brief description of the study and the implications from the results as well as offer some recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will provide an overview of the entire study, including a brief description of the research problem, research goals, an interpretation of the results from the research, an analysis of those results, conclusions from the study, and recommendations for future study in regards to the development of professional enhancement and training activities in the field of contextual learning.

Summary

The problem of this study was to determine the attitudes of middle school history teachers toward integration of contextual learning activities into their academic curriculum to enhance student learning. The goals for this study were to determine teacher's attitudes toward their student's progress through the Standards of Learning, and to assess the teacher's opinion toward using contextual learning activities to enhance middle school history standardized test scores toward Adequate Yearly Progress and required state standardized scores.

Secondary education is suffering under the umbrella of segmented curricula which fail to create a synthesis of material. Consequently, students often fail to see the need for the skills learned in each subject. Students then lose interest in the application and necessity of school, and many opt for a quicker way to earn an income. These students fail to graduate, or they graduate with less than the equivalent of what educators might hope to be the level of a high school senior's education. Schools have sought to remedy this epidemic through applied educational strategies such as

contextual learning, which is the driving force of career academies and career and technical education programs. The schools which have applied these principles have seen tremendous results. Attendance and graduation rates are up, the quality of overall education is increased, and students are engaged and improved because of the time they have spent in the classroom. It stands to reason if the career and technical courses can see such success through applied educational techniques such as contextual learning; core curriculum courses would be no different.

This research sought to answer the following research goals:

1. What are middle school history teacher's feelings of their student's Standards of Learning, SOL, progress?
2. What are teacher's opinions toward using contextual learning activities to enhance middle school history toward Adequate Yearly Progress and state standardized scores?

In order to complete this study the following limitations were considered:

1. The use of a focus group methodology to obtain research information.
2. The focus groups consisted of middle school history teachers representing the three middle schools in the Lynchburg City School system.
3. The study had little representation of a non-English speaking student body. However, there is a fifty-four percent free/reduced lunch population within the school system (Gossap, 2010).

Furthermore, the following assumptions were made when conducting this study:

1. The focus groups consisted of teachers who maintained an average pass rate for the last five years on their annual SOL scores.
2. Student scores were representative of at least 90% of their class roles, with the exceptions of special needs students and students who transferred from a different school system within the last two months of school.
3. Teachers were teaching the same standards for each given grade using a variety of teaching aids to meet the various learning modalities.
4. Teachers were applying traditional teaching strategies in their classroom instruction eighty percent of the time.

The study consisted of three focus groups consisting of an average of six teachers representing sixth, seventh, and eighth grade history courses in Lynchburg City's middle schools. Each focus group began with a brief description of the intent of the study, a definition of the terms, and examples of applied contextual learning scenarios. Then the group proceeded to discuss classroom objectives and accomplishments in light of the Standards of Learning. Teachers recorded their answers to the survey questions, as well as additional thoughts relative to the discussion. The results were tabulated and reported.

Conclusions

To determine the attitude of each teacher toward contextual learning the following research goals were addressed:

1. What are middle school history teacher's feelings of their student's Standards of Learning, SOL, progress?

The results of the focus groups revealed an attitude of frustration toward the Standards of Learning. Teachers perceived the standards to require information which is not necessary in real world application. With a mean of 2.0, teachers agreed their current Standard of Learning scores could improve. Furthermore, with a mean of 2.0, teachers with common curriculums conceded they work together to improve current instructional practices in an attempt to improve scores. In addition, through the focus group discussions, the teachers expressed they felt frustration with the scheduled upcoming changes to the Standards of Learning, and their inability to already cover the material the Standards require them to meet.

2. What are teacher's opinions toward using contextual learning activities to enhance middle school history toward Adequate Yearly Progress and state standardized scores?

Teachers revealed two distinct attitudes toward contextual learning strategies in the core curriculum classroom. With a mean of 2.56, teachers expressed an attitude of agreement with the concept behind contextual learning. While 11% of the teachers freely admitted they knew nothing about contextual learning and 17% believed it impossible due to the restrictions of the Standards of Learning, 72% agreed it is a novel idea that shows potential. However, a second attitude the teachers expressed in their recorded answers revealed they were skeptical of their ability to teach through contextual learning strategies because of the confines of the Standards of Learning. With a mean of 1.5, 67% of the teachers believed it to be impractical to teach through contextual learning strategies. Thus, while the majority of teachers found it interesting

and five even stated it was an exciting concept, the results reveal two distinct attitudes. Teachers agreed readily with the idea of contextual learning strategies. They stated it would make teaching more fascinating, and the students would gain from an ability to apply their content to current occupations and situations.

Teachers were enthusiastic with the potential of the theory of contextual learning. However, they showed little enthusiasm for their capability to adopt such methods into their curriculum under the stipulations of the Standards of Learning. Many cited such disadvantages as time constraints, the amount of course material required of them to cover, and a few stated the lack of understanding of how to develop their curriculum through such a framework.

Recommendations

This study was designed to determine the attitude of middle school history teachers toward the integration of contextual learning strategies in the core curriculum classroom. It was determined that while many teachers saw the potential for this theory, the practicality of its successful application was unlikely due to the lack of time and constraints put on them through the Standards of Learning.

However, such constraints are not legitimate reasons to prevent future study in the development of contextual learning curriculums for the core courses. Efficient time management and creative applications of the Standards of Learning material through contextual learning activities is possible. Therefore, the following recommendations have been made:

1. Further study should be developed to create professional development activities and training modules to help teachers learn how to teach contextually and still incorporate the material mandated by the Standards of Learning.
2. Further study should be completed which would provide teachers a general format to follow when writing a lesson plan to help them develop the necessary skills to convert a traditional lesson into a contextually based lesson.
3. Further research needs to be compiled to create a case for the benefits of contextual learning in the core courses in order to motivate veteran teachers to implement contextual teaching strategies in their classroom.
4. Further attitudinal research could be compiled to understand the various reasons why teachers are slow to create change in their classrooms. A proper diagnosis of the fears to change would help trainers address the proper issues in professional development activities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Focus Group Study Survey

I. Description of Study

a. Introduction to Study: I am conducting a study on the applications of contextual learning strategies to the academic curriculum.

b. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of my study is to determine the attitude of Lynchburg City middle school history teachers toward the integration of contextual learning strategies into their academic curricular content.

II. Sample of Contextual Learning

a. **Defined:** contextual learning is an instructional strategy which allows students to use activities and problems to solve real world situations.
b. **Application:** This can be assessed as effective by determining that learning has occurred when students process new information or knowledge in such a way that it makes sense to them in their own frames of reference. This approach to learning and teaching assumes that the mind naturally seeks meaning in context, that is, in relation to the person's current environment, and that it does so by searching for relationships that make sense and appear useful.
c. **Example:** Combining a mathematics and agricultural class to create a school mist system in their greenhouse.
Using English class to create, edit, and publish a trade and technical journal for the shop class.
Students completing a senior project in which they write a term paper about a prospective career, complete a project using concepts from that career, and then deliver an oral presentation to staff, a peer committee, parents, and a representative from that career field.

III. Research Questions

1. Most of you consistently have an 80% pass rate or higher on the SOLs for the past five years. Do you find yourselves pleased with these numbers or would you like to see your scores raised?

2. As a department, have you considered ways you might raise your scores?

3. What were some of the methods you have tried to raise your scores?

4. Have you considered integrating contextual learning activities into the academic curriculum?
5. What do you believe would be the advantages and disadvantages to integrating these types of activities into the curriculum?

IV. Additional Thoughts

APPENDIX B

Letter Requesting Permission to Survey

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Amanda Roberts, and I am a graduate student attending Old Dominion University in pursuit of a Master of Science in Career and Technical Education. In partial fulfillment of my curriculum requirements, I am conducting a research study on the attitudes of Lynchburg City middle school history teachers toward the integration of contextual learning strategies into their academic curriculum for the purpose of increasing student SOL scores.

It is my understanding Lynchburg City schools boast an average of 80% pass rate on the SOLs among the middle school history departments. My research seeks this type of success rate, as it is my desire to determine if teachers, who are meeting state standards, are open to integrating contextual learning strategies into their curriculum to bump an already successful method of instruction to a superb method of instruction.

I would appreciate a few minutes of your time at your April department meeting to conduct a focus group survey among the history department concerning their thoughts and feelings toward the integration of contextual learning strategies into an academic curriculum.

Let it be understood this is purely a focus group survey on the teacher's thoughts and feelings about contextual learning. There is no other intent at this time to conduct further study. It is purely voluntary, and all persons who volunteer will remain confidential.

Old Dominion University has been notified of this study and supports the endeavors to conduct the research.

I would greatly appreciate your time and thoughts toward this research project.

Sincerely,

Amanda Roberts
Old Dominion University
Graduate Student