

CONFRONTING THE REALITIES OF IMPLEMENTING CONTEXTUAL LEARNING IDEAS IN A BIOLOGY CLASSROOM

by

Julia B. Akers

(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this study was to describe the implementation of contextual learning practices in a biology class. Research contends that contextual learning classrooms are active learning environments where students are involved in “hands-on” team projects and the teacher assumes a facilitator role. In this student-centered classroom, students take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. This study examined these assertions and other factors that emerged as the study developed. The research methods used were qualitative.

The subject for this study was a biology teacher with twenty-six years of experience who implemented contextual learning practices in two of her biology classes in the 1997-98 school year. As the teacher confronted contextual learning, we engaged in collaborative research that included fourteen interviews transcribed verbatim for analysis, classroom observations and the teacher’s written reports.

Throughout the study, factors developed that adversely affected contextual learning practices. These factors were discipline, curriculum, and administrative decisions over which the teacher had no control. These are examined along with their consequences for implementing a contextual classroom.

Successful practices that worked in the teacher’s classroom were also determined and included the teacher’s “failure is not an option” policy, mandatory tutoring, behavior contracts, high expectations and teamed projects. Besides contextual learning, a key component of the study was the collaborative research process and its meaning to the subject, the researcher and future researchers who attempt this collaborative approach.

The study’s conclusion indicate that scheduling, multiple repeaters, discipline and the state Standards of Learning moved the teacher away from contextual learning practices to a more

teacher-directed classroom.

Two recommendations of this study are that further research is needed to study how the state Standards of Learning have affected instructional practices and the effect of administrative decisions that influence the level of teacher success in the classroom.

KEYWORDS:

Active learning, Teacher role, Collaborative research, Discipline, State Standards of Learning, Administrative issues, Success of contextual learning, Future of contextual learning