PORTRAITS OF LIVED EXPERIENCE: TEACHERS IMPLEMENTING FIRST STEPS

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother and to my father. *You have both shown me that nothing is impossible if I commit myself to my dreams. Thank you for growing in me an insatiable thirst for reading and discovering new ideas. Your examples have sown seeds into my life. As life long learners you have both shown me that our everyday experiences are filled with treasures to be found.*

Thank you for giving me hope and sharing with me a strong heritage of faith. The investments you have made into my life have fallen on fertile soil. I cherish the time and love you have freely poured into my journey through this wonderful and challenging experience called life.

Abstract

The introduction of new literacy programs at a district level ultimately affects teachers in their individual classrooms. The implementation of First Steps in New Brunswick is an example of this. In my quest to understand how several New Brunswick teachers have oriented themselves to the phenomena of implementing a new program, such as First Steps, I have chosen phenomenology as my research framework. Through in-depth conversational interviews I have listened to individual teacher's "voices", with a desire to become more thoughtful and sensitive to the ways in which they live through the experiences of change in their own professional lives.

Thoughtful data analysis has led to the development of three themes: 1) priorities; 2) connectedness; and 3) accountability. As I have painted each teacher's story I have recognized that each one differs in their experiences under the same thematic umbrella. These unique experiences have painted each individual portrait. Upon reflection, I have also attempted to uncover and describe the meanings of each teacher's lived experience.

My study does not aim at changing the *masses* or providing answers to be used by those in power to change a profession. Instead, I have sought to present the lived experience of each individual so that we might reflect on our own walk through this world and become more experienced in doing so. Ultimately, this will cause us to ask new questions pushing us forward on our journey to new understandings and reflections.

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Many people have helped me along my "thesis journey" this year. First, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Mary Lou Stirling, for investing time in my "garden" and for believing that it would blossom. *I count it a special privilege to have worked with you and admire your zest for life.*

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I am indebted to the four teachers who agreed to participate in my study. *I have learned deeply from your stories and appreciate the time you so willingly shared with me. Your experiences have touched my life and helped me to become more thoughtful and sensitive to those who cross my "garden" path.*

My "garden" grows more beautiful each day because of the people who have entered and are yet to enter my life. To friends and family I throw a large bouquet of wild flowers. *Thank-you for your faithful support and ceaseless encouragement. You have made my journey sweet. I love you and I am grateful that you have walked beside me.*

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Finding My Place

Introduction

A Pearl for the Wanting

Three pearl divers woke to a hot sun shimmering through the windows of their huts. The water in "their" sea was finally quiet and still. After weeks of rain, the opportunity to venture out of the mundane drew them to the water's edge. They gathered needed gear for the day ahead of them, and then carried their reed boat out to the motionless water. In they jumped and effortlessly they began their journey out to sea. The sun caressed their backs and tranquil contentment soon settled amongst them. Laughter and friendly banter propelled their conversations as they glided out to an undecided destination.

After an hour of paddling, the three pearl divers agreed it was time to drop anchor and venture beneath the water's surface. One by one they took turns diving for the oysters that would soon occupy a place in their pails. Each dive was filled with new scenery and sea life. These snap shots of life under the sea were intriguing and often exciting. Late in the afternoon, the divers returned to their places on the boat after gathering enough oysters to take home. On the journey back they told of their experiences under the water and reflected on the "mysteries of the sea" that peaked their curiosity. Each one had his own story to tell; they never seemed to envision the sea in

quite the same way. Enamored discussions ensued as the divers tried to picture the sea world through the eyes of each other.

By light from the setting sun the three pearl divers pulled their boat up to shore and headed to their individual huts carrying the oysters they had collected. One pearl diver immediately set his pail aside and decided it would be too much trouble to bother shucking his oysters so late in the evening. The second diver sat down with his pail and hauled out his knife to begin the process of shucking his oysters. He started with his largest "catch of the day" and intently concentrated on prying open its shell. He worked as fast as he could with no success. The shell wouldn't budge. Frustration overcame him and he threw the oyster aside. He decided not to bother himself with the rest of the stubborn oysters and set his pail aside like the first diver. The third diver eagerly picked the first oyster out of his pail and began the laborious task of prying it open. He worked and worked without making notable progress. "What a strong-willed oyster!" he thought. At times he fought the temptation to give up, and had to consciously force himself to concentrate on the treasure the oyster might contain. The diver decided to work slowly, a little bit at a time. He patiently exercised his knowledge of shucking and adjusted his techniques to suit the shape of the oyster he was attempting to open. As the hours passed, the diver noticed slight cracks emerging in the oyster's shell. He decided it was time to push a little harder. He worked through the night until a loud crack reverberated in his ears. The oyster had opened itself up to him. Slowly he pulled it's shell apart. As he did, it gave way to a most remarkable pearl. The pearl shone with great brilliancy and completely illuminated the diver's poorly lit hut. The pearl diver's world

began to glow and the beauty of his new found treasure enveloped him. He would never be the same again.

- Lynn Smith

Background Settings

The individual experiences of each pearl diver mirror my own confrontations with "change" in the world of teaching. I have often attended workshops with colleagues only to be once again amazed by our differing interpretations of the same session. We seem to grasp the ideas that affect us individually and draw them into our experiences as we see need. Sometimes we set inservice documents aside claiming their irrelevancy to our existing teaching needs, and other times we plunge in with both feet to change and to add to our fundamental instructional techniques. This disparity has caused me to reflect on and carefully consider why I make the changes I do in the programs I teach. What stimulates me to avidly persevere through the process of change? Maybe it is the hope that I will latch unto a new program or teaching strategy that will make the "world of difference" for my students in their learning pursuits. "Teaching [and change appear to be] like a wilderness trek: the terrain is difficult, the direction uncertain, and the focus is always on the trail ahead" (Newman, 1990, p. 67). This thought seems to sum up my experiences along the sometimes lonely trail of change.

Life as a teacher can be perplexing and yet inspiring at the same time. This has certainly been true of my journey, over the last eight years, as an elementary school

teacher. I have often found myself spinning in circles in search of the perfect assessment tool to enhance my understanding of students' reading development. Early in my career, well meaning "veterans" in the field of teaching offered me grade-leveling reading tests to help me pin point individual student progress. I was told this would show my competency and professional knowledge when I spoke with both parents and administrators. To fulfill my desire to be successful I administered these tests and filled in the grade levels on my class list. I remember looking at the list and thinking that I had done a good job, but what did a grade three point two level really mean? I wasn't sure how to describe what reading skills these students were capable of, and which skills were appropriate for a child at a grade three point two level. Although I had done what was considered appropriate for reading assessment by my colleagues, I did not feel these assessments contributed to my knowing and understanding *how* each individual child was learning to read. I needed to be able to describe in words what they could do and what areas they required further support and reinforcement in.

In my pursuit to be thorough in assessing children's reading behaviours I began to read professional articles and books. If reading workshops were offered by my School Board, I was there. Through this process of discovery I devoured new reading techniques and implemented them into my classroom practice as quickly as I could. As I made changes, I noted the successes and disappointments. The process of finding an array of assessment tools and subsequently working to incorporate them into my program was often time consuming and slow.

In my third year of teaching I went to a small workshop offered by a colleague

who had just returned from New Zealand. Her enthusiasm for the program she was promoting enveloped me. She shared a variety of assessment strategies, such as running records and self-evaluation guidelines, in her presentation and explained how they could be incorporated into the daily life of our classrooms. I was hooked. When I left that evening I could barely contain my excitement.

The next day I headed to my principal's office to share the contents of the workshop I had attended the night before. My purpose in doing so was to show her the potential this program had for helping me become more effective in my teaching and assessments. She quickly caught my enthusiasm and offered to provide the money needed for teacher resources and new classroom books. I was very fortunate to have such a supportive principal. She continued to follow the program in the years following and supported me in my process of change.

Change is never easy; yet it is in the midst of change that I have grown as a professional. Over the years change has most often been a positive experience for me. I am sure the support of my colleagues and administrators have helped to paint change in this light for me. Usually the programs I have chosen to implement have added a new dimension to my students' lives. Learning became more meaningful for them in some way. Indeed this is the reason why I make changes in my teaching. "I believe the ultimate in education is reached when - both students and teachers at all levels - take charge of their learning and use their education to lead rich and satisfying lives" (Routman, 1996, p. 147). The language program from New Zealand grounded my philosophical understandings of literacy development and prepared me for the changes in programming

that would soon follow in our school district through the introduction of First Steps.

My First Steps Story

Two years ago I was introduced to a new Language Arts program called First Steps. I had heard through the First Steps' focus teacher, in the primary division (kindergarten to grade three) of our school, that it was comprehensive and served as an excellent resource guide for early literacy teachers. All teachers in the primary division had already attended inservice sessions on the First Steps reading strand. Although many of my colleagues were excited about the individual reading activities found in the Reading Resource Book, they felt it would be too time consuming to actually implement the whole program in their classrooms. They were overwhelmed by the comprehensive assessment strategies outlined in the teacher's guide.

As a grade six teacher I was interested in hearing about First Steps, but assumed it was for primary students in light of its title. Six months later all junior (grades four to six) and intermediate (grades seven and eight) teachers received a memo telling us we were to attend five workshops on First Steps. These workshops were scheduled near the end of the year around report card time. I remember being overwhelmed by the developmental continuum and thinking, "How on earth am I going to learn all the indicators in each reading phase?" The thought of plotting each individual child on the continuum seemed like an impossible task. With report cards on my mind the task was unthinkable. Although I thought the ideas were great, actually implementing this program in my classroom seemed bleak. I decided that it really was for primary teachers and

would be more effective in helping them write their anecdotal notes.

The workshops dragged on as we read through the documents and engaged in discussions with our peers. We all felt the enormity of the task and walked away with little inspiration to change our assessment strategies. Several of us were already doing many of the things discussed in First Steps. The ideas were not completely new or foreign. This helped a little bit. In the end we were told to take the ideas we liked in the resources and use them. With little pressure to implement the program and little time to spare at the end of the year the First Steps manuals were set aside.

The following year I accepted a grade seven position in our school. With thirty-three students my plate was full. First Steps remained on the shelf as I poured over grade seven curriculum documents. Resource staff from the Board office helped me set up classroom programs and shared many useful ideas regarding intermediate education. In my contacts with other intermediate teachers and resource personnel First Steps was never suggested as a framework for my reading program.

After my year adventure into the world of grade seven, I decided to take a sabbatical in order to complete my graduate studies. In the fall of this year I found myself reintroduced to the First Steps program through an independent course designed by my supervisor, Dr. Mary Lou Stirling. In her obvious enthusiasm for First Steps I was encouraged to reread and carefully examine the First Steps documents in reading, writing, spelling, and oral language. This really was the first time I had taken the opportunity to *thoroughly* read each module. The more I am exposed to the philosophies of First Steps and its foundations in present literacy research, the more I am convinced

that it could frame the language programs in our schools. I believe it will help to create a zeal for reading and writing as learners interact and share their new discoveries in the world of literacy.

Implementation of the First Steps program is not an easy task. Teachers respond in different ways to the change process. My own experiences have illuminated this aspect of change. Often I have enthusiastically implemented new programs and persevered until new understanding and success finally grasps me. However, my experience with First Steps has been very different. My understanding of First Steps and my readiness to implement it has evolved over time. I am now standing ready to dive into the pool of First Steps. If I, as one teacher, have experienced change in a variety of ways throughout my career, then it is conceivable that each individual teacher sitting in the same workshop will approach change in a unique way. Our individual experiences are important. Often they encourage others who are struggling in similar ways, and give perspective to those standing outside our frame of reference.

Forming my Research Question

My own experiences in teaching have led me to the question that shapes my study: **What are the lived experiences of New Brunswick teachers implementing instructional and assessment practices recommended in the First Steps reading strand?** I believe there are "treasure troves" of experiences that need to be voiced by individual teachers. Many New Brunswick teachers are well into the process of implementing the reading module of First Steps. They have participated in mandated

workshops and received the resource books needed to help them incorporate First Steps assessment strategies into their already existing reading programs. One District School Board has placed two resource personnel in positions solely responsible for the implementation of First Steps. These teachers are involved in giving workshops, modeling language lessons based on instructional strategies found in First Steps, and providing individual support as needed.

In conversations with teachers throughout the Fredericton district, I have noticed that they appear to approach change from a very personal vantage point. Their willingness to jump into the "pool" of First Steps varies. Throughout my teaching career this aspect of change has fascinated me. Like our students we tackle new "obstacles" based on our experiences and underlying beliefs. It would seem "experience both yields and is shaped by the meanings through which we order our lives" (Hopkins, 1994, p. 35). As teachers we value the individual experiences of students; maybe it is time to do the same for each other. I would like to listen to individual teacher's "voices", with a desire to become more thoughtful and sensitive to the ways in which they live through the experiences of change in their own professional lives. Their experiences may in turn strengthen me in my quest to "be". Experiences are lessons for us all to share. Our world view can open wider as we listen to those who surround us. "You and I can look at the exact same landscape and see entirely different figures" (Hopkins, 1994, p. 41).

Purposes in Sight

The purpose of my study is to gain further insight into how New Brunswick

teachers approach instruction and assessment in their classrooms, how they make use of First Steps instructional and assessment techniques in their reading programs, and how they use on-going assessment to inform their teaching. This research will contribute to our understanding of teachers' assessment philosophies, and ultimately, their approach to the implementation of instructional and assessment practices promoted in First Steps. It is hoped that the individual stories told in this study will assist district personnel and administrators in understanding and supporting individual teachers in the slow and often frustrating process of implementing a new program, such as First Steps.

> The assumptions we make about change are powerful and frequently unconscious sources of actions. When we begin to understand what change is as people experience it, we begin also to see clearly that assumptions made by planners of change are extremely important determinants of whether the realities of implementation get confronted or ignored (Michael Fullan as cited in Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 455).

Thoughtfully listening to the individual experiences of teachers in the midst of change, may help to open the window of reality for onlookers seeking to understand this process that plays a part in the life of all educators.

"Bracketing" My Assumptions

By bracketing my own experiences I must "set aside, as far as humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of participants in my study" (Creswell, 1998, p. 235). van Manen (1990) suggests that I, as the researcher, must face my own private beliefs, feelings, inclinations, or expectations in order to come to terms with a phenomenon or experience as it is lived through. To accomplish this I

began my research study by sharing my own life experiences as a teacher engaged in the process of change. I would further like to voice some of my conceived notions of reading assessment and the process of change, in the life of teachers, by briefly outlining them below:

~ Reading is developmental, therefore, a continuum as an assessment strategy is vital in helping teachers successfully observe student growth
~ Reading assessment should inform our teaching
~ Reading assessment should be an on-going daily process as we interact with our students in the classroom
~ Assessment should be a positive experience for both teacher and student
~ Our beliefs about how children learn to read will directly affect our practices and our decisions to make changes in the programs we use
~ Change is an individual experience
~ To be effective teachers must see the purposes for change and personally desire to implement the new ideas they have encountered
~ Change is often slow and frustrating; time is of essence

Knowing that these are my beliefs and thoughts on reading assessment and change, I will now *try* to bracket them and *attempt* to view the experiences of others through untainted glasses. This will be a challenge and I realize that my attempts may not always be successful.

A Summary of Anticipation

Chapter One has served as a foundation for the rest of my research. I have presented my own teaching experiences and views on reading assessment and the process of change. By voicing my own understandings, I have started to open my ears to hear and

listen to the **lived experiences of New Brunswick teachers implementing instructional and assessment practices recommended in the First Steps reading strand.** In Chapter Two, I will examine relevant research literature in four areas: reading, assessment, implementation, and First Steps. This will add perspective to my research as I share the thoughts of leading educators in the literacy field. Chapter Three will highlight my method of research from a phenomenological point of view. This chapter will address why phenomenology will best help me to answer my proposed research question and illuminate further on the need for this type of research in the literacy field. The research process will be explored through data collection and analysis, participant selection, ethical considerations, and limitations. Finally, Chapters Four and Five will consist of the interpretations of interview conversations and reflections on the implications for teachers, administrators, and the field of study itself.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

A Pathway into Reading

Enter the world of reading instruction and invariably you will be introduced to a myriad of divergent definitions and philosophies of appropriate practice. The process of finding your place in the midst of these countless perspectives may at times seem overwhelming, but don't lose heart. Rona Flippo (1998) has found that many of the leading experts in reading do agree on specific practices for learning and instruction in the classroom. Although their beliefs may be grounded in differing positions, such as traditional or whole language, they each recognize that certain contexts and practices best facilitate the art of learning to read (p. 35). In this chapter, I will explore the most prevalent views on reading and instruction by examining the works of noted researchers and educators in the field of literacy.

The conflict in the reading arena appears to be spurred on by reading readiness proponents who support the traditional perspective in reading instruction, and emergent literacy advocates who are gaining substantial influence in educational circles. The reading readiness philosophy teaches that it is important to wait until a child matures and is ready to learn to read. It suggests that children should possess specific pre-reading skills before being engaged in authentic reading activities. Skills are taught in isolation. Adherents of this ideal theorize that learning and development are independent of each other. Emergent literacy devotees support Lev Vygotsky in his belief that

"...learning, rather than development per se, sets in motion a variety of developmental processes" (Mason & Sinha, 1993, p. 140). Within this perspective, literacy begins before children are formally taught to read and it does not merely encompass decoding but the whole act of reading. For example, this may include an understanding that print carries a message or knowledge about directionality. Interactions between adult and child are significant as literacy activities become a joint adventure. "Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement" (p. 141).

"The term developmental refers to an evolutionary change in character through successive periods, a change which results in a better, fuller, or more useful stage of advancement" (Bracken & Malmquist, 1970, p. 3-4). I would describe this process of development as sequential. Yet I cannot ignore the steps backward or the moments of stagnation that enter into this period of metamorphosis. Change is not always fluid. "Developmental records show that children seldom progress in a neat and well-sequenced manner" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994, p. 2). As teachers we need to provide activities that meet the needs of children at various developmental stages and are meaningful to their life situations. The classroom should become a beehive of activity and exploration as teachers and students work together to climb the learning spiral. In essence there is a sense of circular motion as teachers observe children at their present stage of development, support their successes, model

new skills and strategies for students to attain, and then again reinforce new acquisitions. It is well documented (Padak & Rasinski, 1998; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993; Cambourne, 1988; Chall, 1983; Holdaway, 1979) that children progress through stages when learning to read. In fact, "stage development schemes are deep in our culture" (Chall, 1983, p. 166). A mix of reading specialists, psychologists, and linguists have published works in support of developmental processes throughout the century.

The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children have recently issued a joint position paper (Padak & Rasinski, 1998) examining developmentally appropriate practices in early literacy. They promote a developmental continuum as a means of linking assessment to instruction. Due to individual and experiential variations within a classroom, the continuum can become a valuable tool in the hands of an effective teacher. "Excellent instruction builds on what children already know and can do, and provides knowledge, skills, and dispositions for life long learning" (Padak & Rasinski, 1998, p.198). As teachers we need to carefully reflect on our approaches to literacy instruction. Many existing teaching practices are outdated and lack the support of present literacy research. This entreats us to consider the benefits of developmentally-based instruction for our students.

I see the steady interplay between student and teacher as a necessity for developmental growth in reading. It is through our interactions with each other and our environment that we learn. "Children develop language through interaction, not action. They learn to talk by talking to someone who responds. They learn to [read] by [reading]

to someone who responds" (Fox, 1993, p. 22). This personal interaction with the learner enables the teacher to closely examine the needs and strengths of each individual, and to then build upon pre-existing skills and knowledge.

> A theoretical model of literacy learning and development [is seen] as an interactive process. Research supports the view of the child as an active constructor of his or her own learning, while at the same time studies emphasize the critical role of the supportive, interested, engaged adult...who provides scaffolding for the child's development of greater skill and understanding (Padak & Rasinski, 1998, p.207).

Leading educators and researchers (Booth, 1994; Lowe & Bintz, 1992, Cambourne, 1988; Glazer, Searfoss & Gentile, 1988; Yinger, 1986; Chall, 1983) support an interactional model for a successful learning environment. Our teaching styles must change from a transmissional model of literacy instruction to a more transactional model.

Through teacher-student interactions, valuable information can be gleaned to help teachers make informed decisions regarding strategies needed for further literacy growth. Pressley & Harris (1990) purport that many students do not learn such strategies automatically. They require the guidance and assistance of a teacher to be able to apply, monitor, and evaluate a new strategy. Unfortunately, many literacy researchers have found that little strategy instruction has been occurring in classrooms (p. 31). These researchers are working to make well-validated strategies available for teachers. Reading strategies have been formulated to improve reading comprehension. "These include summarization, story grammar, prior knowledge activation, self-questioning, and question-answering strategies" (p. 32). Strategy instruction should be supportive and mobilizing. This is possible through the interactive instructional model. "Student

progression is criterion-based rather than time-based, with teaching and interactive practice continuing until the student understands the strategy and can carry it out" (p. 33).

The need for improved strategy instruction in our literacy programs calls for appropriate instructional techniques to support students in their reading development. Is there one successful teaching technique that we should employ? According to many literacy educators our programs should incorporate a variety of teaching strategies and materials (Booth, 1996; Routman, 1991; Education Department of Western Australia, 1994; Cambourne, 1988; Glazer, Searfoss & Gentile, 1988; Chall, 1983; Holdaway, 1979; Bracken & Malmquist, 1970). These approaches may include Shared Reading, Guided Reading, Independent Reading, reading to children, cooperative retelling, reading journals, modeled and shared writing, mini-lessons, literature circles, and so forth. Each component allows for the teaching, repetition and reinforcement of learned reading strategies. They integrate speaking, listening, reading, and writing. As we practice these approaches in our literacy programs children will be given further opportunities to experience language in a variety of meaningful ways. "...The more control [they] have over language forms and the more [they] use them and refine them, the more [they] are empowered" (Cambourne, 1988, p. 3).

Essentially our goal as literacy teachers is to empower our students to individually seek meaning and understanding in their reading experiences. Our students are unique individuals and each one walks through the developmental continuum of reading at varying paces. "Individual people progress through the reading stages at

different rates. Even with an equal number of years of formal schooling, different people reach different stages of development. The rate of advancement depends upon an interaction between individual and environmental factors" (Chall, 1983, p. 82). In our acceptance of their differences we find the freedom to walk away from the confinement of teaching whole class lessons exclusively. Our instruction becomes more specific and relevant to the learners who interact with us on a daily basis. Padak & Rasinski (1998) suggest that this is a key feature to good teaching. Concentrating on students' strengths and building on their individual successes help to focus instruction in a positive manner. "Focusing on strengths also means focusing on the possibilities, appreciating and valuing students' cultures..." (Routman, 1991, p. 15). A positive approach to language learning fosters an atmosphere where reading becomes "welcomed and cherished and, most important, continued for life" (Booth, 1994, p. 87).

To engage my students in a supportive environment that draws them into the world of reading I must be able to offer materials that will 'wet their appetites'. All kinds of fictional and non-fictional books, magazines, poetry, newspapers, directions, menus, and student writing should fill my classroom. The reading environment "must embrace not just a range of types of texts and genres from many cultures, but also old favourites to be dipped into again, books about their current interests, and reading that is challenging but still within their grasp" (Booth, 1994, p. 142). These 'real' books should be accessible and plentiful, as noted by both Flippo (1998) and Chall (1983). Reading encompasses not only the cognitive domain, but also the affective domain. What we read should rivet a response intellectually and emotionally. This is what draws us back to

books and urges us to explore beyond our known realm. Mem Fox (1993) writes that reading one book increases our knowledge, and in turn this "prior knowledge" teaches us how to read another. As a writer of children's literature, Mem Fox

> tries to touch the hearts of [her] readers. [She] hopes to introduce them to the squealing delights and ineffable beauties of language. [She] hopes to expand and explain their world. [She] hopes [her] books make learning to read an easy and hysterical pleasure... [She] hopes to strengthen the bonds between children and books so they're seduced into loving reading *so* much that they'll be readers forever (p.122).

As a literacy teacher, this call to inspire young students in their quest for living and real experiences cannot help but motivate me to expose them to the wonders and power of our written language. Indelibly, readers and writers are intricately linked in their interactions.

What is reading? Is reading primarily getting "the message" or acquiring skill in the "print medium"? (Chall, 1983) The way in which you define reading will ultimately dictate your instructional approach in the classroom. Cambourne (1988) explains reading as comprehension. "By this [he] means that the end result of any act of engagement with text **must be** comprehension of the meanings which the author of the text originally encoded" (p. 158-159). In essence, the message must be meaningful to the reader. The International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children have substantiated this belief in their 1998 joint position paper by stating that "real reading is comprehension" (p. 205). In light of the extensive research and many studies pertaining to the purposes of reading we should be challenged by the admonitions of respected literacy educators to redefine many of our current practices.

Even with diverse views we can find unity in the literacy field. Flippo (1998) worked with leading educators over a period of ten years. Through extensive conferencing and belief comparisons these experts found points of agreement that Flippo (1998) has been able to articulate though brief summaries. Contexts and practices that all experts agreed "would facilitate learning to read" include:

> Make reading fun and authentic; Give students lots of time and opportunity to read real books; Develop positive self-perceptions and expectations; Encourage learning about strategies; Encourage learning to paraphrase and summarize; Allow learners to use techniques which help them become consciously aware of what they do as readers: through metacognition probing, help learners think about how they arrived at an answer, or how what they read influenced their personal understanding; Provide feedback that includes clues about meaning, as well as letter sound information; Provide multiple, repeated demonstrations of how reading is done and used; and Combine reading with other language processes (p. 35-36).

The lists developed in this project are not intended as absolutes. They are to facilitate discussion and planning of reading instruction amongst teachers. It is at the school level that research becomes practical and can ultimately make a difference in the lives of young children. I must ask myself if reading is an intricate part of my students' lives, and if not what steps must I take to help them open the door into this vast and enchanting world. "(I) need to fill their storehouses with events, characters, styles, emotions, places, and themes that will help them to grow, not wither, thirsty in the desert of illiteracy" (Fox, 1993, p.67).

Linking Assessment to Instruction

Effective reading instruction embeds itself in effective assessment. As teachers, the word assessment frequently conjures up thoughts of standardized tests and provincially downloaded reading examinations. Once or twice a year we may expect our students to undergo intensive assessment. We either end up "patting ourselves on the back" for our students' successful achievements or "hanging our heads low" at their supposed lack of skill retention. According to these results school initiatives are put into place, and as individual teachers we work to see that students cover the ground they failed to grasp, in hopes that next year their scores will be higher. Our instructional approach is necessitated by the yearly assessments and the need to succeed. Can this be all that empowers our reading programs? I would suggest that if we are locked into this mentality regarding assessment it is time to step back, reflect on our practices, and ask ourselves who is benefitting from this experience.

> Tests tell us only what children know about a small sample out of a possible universe of discrete items chosen for the test, and only then if the conditions under which the test is taken are optimal: if the child is not preoccupied with a personal agenda, if there are no health problems, or if the temperature in the room is appropriate, for example (Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson & Preece, 1991, p. 9)

We cannot base our assessment of a child's reading ability solely on a standardized test. As teachers we interact with our students on a daily basis. We watch and observe them as they work. We know what they are capable of even before a formal test is administered.

Assessment should not be an event once a year, but an on-going process in the daily life of our classrooms (Rich, 1998; Education Department of Western Australia,

1994; Routman, 1991; Valencia & Pearson, 1986; Holdaway, 1980). It should reflect the developmental growth of a child. "Assessment implies the process of carefully collecting or recording and analyzing students' literacy products and processes in a way that establishes a strong connection between the assessment data and the teacher's instructional plans" (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 3). It benefits our instructional practices much the same as a fitness assessment of an athlete benefits a coach. The coach is able to work out a fitness plan for each individual athlete based on the results of the assessment. This reinforces physical strengths and illuminates areas for further development. Likewise, teachers need to gauge their instruction to meet the needs of individual students. We also want our students to be healthy and able to work at their optimum intellectual level.

"Assessment allows a teacher to make well-grounded decisions about what approach to take with a child. [It] is an ongoing process of observation and analysis of the children's language behaviours" (Booth, 1994, p.313). Our assessment feeds our instruction. For many teachers this is a new way of viewing assessment. Assessment changes from slotting a child into a grade level for what they have produced, to assessing their strengths within the process of learning. Therefore, we are not assessing their weaknesses (Glazer, Searfoss & Gentile, 1988). "Instruction consists of guiding learning through the interplay of assessment and meaningful applications of skills; the "measure" of students' ability is not a score but an index of the type and amount of support required to advance learning" (Valencia & Pearson, 1986, p.728-729).

Booth (1994) states that students' progress in language development can be

monitored along a continuum. If we view literacy growth as developmental then our assessment strategies should support this model. "Using a developmental continuum enables teachers to assess individual children's progress against realistic goals and then adapt instruction to ensure that children continue to progress" (Padak & Rasinski, 1998, p. 207). This is a valuable tool to help teachers in their observations and understanding of individual students' reading development. First Steps advises that "the purpose of the Continua is to link assessment with teaching and learning in a way that will support children and provide practical assistance for teachers" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994, p. 3). The individual student once again becomes the focal point for assessment. By using the continuum to assist in assessment practices the individual child is not lost in a "sea of forgetfulness". The teacher must engage in meaningful interactions with the child in order to knowledgeably assess his or her progress. "To teach and [assess] in developmentally appropriate ways, teachers must understand both the continuum of reading and writing development and children's individual and cultural variations" (Padak & Rasinski, 1998, p. 211).

Using the continuum as a means of assessing student progress through observation is only one out of a vast array of assessment tools available to classroom teachers. In fact, a well balanced program incorporates a variety of assessment techniques. Padak & Rasinski (1998) quoted Shepard, Kagan & Wurtz emphasizing the need for teachers to use multiple indicators when assessing and monitoring children's progress. These indicators may include talking to students through interviews and conferences, using students' self-assessments such as reading logs and journals, or

analyzing responses through running records, miscue and cloze analysis, and analysis of readers' written or oral activities (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994). The ways in which we can assess our students may seem limitless and daunting at times. We cannot physically implement every assessment strategy we are introduced to. Ultimately we must carefully choose a group of assessment tools that will be effective in helping us assess the whole child, and consequently inform our teaching.

> There must be a counter balance to unrestrained inclusion, and this is selection - a process that is required of every teacher. Through selection the array of information gathering will differ in every classroom. In this way both assessment and evaluation become individualized, with teachers exercising their professional judgement to develop a workable scheme in response to the needs of...the students (Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson & Preece, 1991, p. 28).

Valuable assessment is complex and often time consuming, yet it can breed confidence and assurance. For in the midst of interactive and on-going assessment the teacher comes to know and appreciate the strengths and individuality of the children in his or her care.

Assessment is most meaningful when teachers observe and interact with students involved in authentic reading experiences (Valencia & Pearson, 1986). "We should assess natural language activities in contexts that are meaningful and relevant to the learners..." (Booth, 1994, p. 316). Assessment should be purposeful and concerned with the child's actual work. We learn about students by observing their everyday reading behaviours. "Sound assessment should be anchored in real-life writing and reading tasks and continuously chronicle a wide range of children's literacy activities in different situations" (Padak & Rasinski, 1998, p. 206). However, often our assessment practices do not match our instructional practices. This dichotomy between assessment and

instruction in school reading programs can inhibit positive growth. As reading theories and practices have changed in the classroom, many teachers struggle to make assessment authentic in the face of countless competency testing programs. The increase of tests sends a confusing message to teachers. Valencia & Pearson (1986) support these experiences in their findings that "reading assessment has not kept pace with advances in reading theory, research, or practice" (p.726). Change is needed to further establish the link between assessment and instruction in our classrooms.

Catalysts for Change

"Change in the world of education is often uncomfortable, and the more we understand about the process, the more likely it is we can effect change realistically" (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 452). I have often wondered if one might find a successful protocol for change, mapped out in a self-help book, tucked away and forgotten in the back part of a library. The more I read about change, as a teacher experiences the process, the more my eyes are opened to the unique path each individual must walk along. I have discovered general guidelines for those involved in the process of change, and possibly these may act as helpful insights for those instigating change, as well as for those hoping to find their bearings amidst the process.

In her book, Invitations, Routman (1991) shares five stages she found herself moving through in the midst of making changes in her own teaching beliefs. These included:

1. I can't do this. It's too hard, and I don't know enough.
2. Maybe if I find out about it, it's possible.
3. I'll do exactly what the experts say.
4. I'll adapt the experts' work to my own contexts.
5. I trust myself as an observer-teacher-learner-evaluator. (p. 27)

When we compare stage one to stage five we see that Routman has made important changes as a teacher. Curiosity and a desire to grow as a teacher helped start the wheels in motion. Most significantly we see that change was a process for Routman. It took time and energy on her part. We may view this process of change as a continuum (Taylor, Boscato & Beagley, 1992). Possibly this process of change is developmental and therefore individual in its scope and sequence. Lowe & Bintz (1992) report in their study of the implementation of Primary Language Records that each individual teacher reacted differently to change. One teacher at the beginning of in-services for this program exclaimed:

Horrified - completely overwhelmed - when are we going to get time to do it all? Is there going to be any time left for teaching? Is school going to take over my whole life?

Six months later the same teacher wrote:

As the reading aspect is of particular personal interest, it was most reassuring to find that ideas which I had been working out for myself were being recommended. The Primary Language Record is making life much easier (p. 56).

This teacher has made drastic changes in her attitude toward Primary Language Records over a short amount of time. Her individual process of change may be found in the personal link she found with the program. She became interested and saw the possible benefits of implementing the program in her classroom. The change improved the

'quality' of her life. Regardless, change was still a process for her and time was an important factor.

Change can be a slow and frustrating process. This may panic some people who feel change must be instant. Usually these are the people who have poured money into the new programs and want to see them implemented immediately. Such expectations are unrealistic and sometimes may even be harmful. "Unrealistic or undefined time-lines fail to recognize that implementation occurs developmentally...Careful planning can bring about significant change on a fairly wide scale over a period of two or three years" (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 457). Some experts suggest that effective change may even take five to ten years to be successful. As individual teachers we must find our own pace.

> It may be faster or slower depending on your general approach to change, what forces are driving the change, whether the forces are external or internal or both, what impedes change, what is going on in your life outside teaching, what sort of support you have to make changes, and how you feel about assessment as it currently occurs in your classroom (p. 462).

Some teaching colleagues may progress quickly through the different phases of development on the change continuum. Don't panic. We are individuals and time is one of the most important components in this process of change (Freidus, McNamara & Grose, 1998; Routman, 1991; Newman, 1990).

How many times have we gone to professional development workshops, gathered interesting ideas, been stirred by the suggestions made for change, and yet have never really made the changes needed in our classrooms? In reflection, I have asked myself what it is that makes me go the step further after the workshop to actually implement the

new ideas I've been exposed to. In most cases I have had an invested interest in the program. I see the personal gains for improving my teaching and further reinforcement of my beliefs and teaching practices. I believe our beliefs anchor us and often act as a gauge in our decision making. Some teachers may not even be aware of the belief system they have formed as a foundation for their teaching practices. "The difficult part of becoming a learner-directed teacher is learning to see the beliefs that undergird our instructional decisions. Every teaching act, every decision we make in the course of a day, every response in the classroom is based on a number of often contradictory assumptions" (Newman, 1990, p. 65). It has become necessary for me in my own process of change to consider carefully why I believe the way I do, and if my beliefs and practices ring true in light of present research in the literacy field. Change in practice for some individuals may only occur when they reflect on their understandings of learning and their entrenched belief systems (Booth, 1994; Routman, 1991).

> A shift in beliefs may precede actual changes in practice. While beliefs are in a state of flux, a teacher's beliefs and practices may be inconsistent with each other. Because of the changing paradigms, teachers need to clarify their beliefs about literacy learning so that they can integrate their changing theories with their instructional practices (Lenski, Wham & Griffey, 1998 p. 220).

For some teachers to adopt new instructional and assessment practices they may have to struggle for change at the foundations of their belief systems. This can be a difficult adventure, since our beliefs usually grow out of what we have experienced throughout our lifetime.

It is frequently through personal reflection and professional reading , not

compulsory workshops, that effective change occurs. It is the teacher as a lifelong learner that seeks to improve and if necessary change his or her beliefs and/or practices.

> Trying to become a learner-directed and learning teacher is not easy. The transformation doesn't occur overnight as a result of having attended an inservice or two. No, changing our beliefs and practices is a messy, slow process, and there are relatively few supports for people as they try out new ideas (Newman, 1990, p. 124).

Although workshops are beneficial in introducing us to new programs or new teaching techniques, they do not provide on-going support for those who try to implement what they have learned. Successful change requires intensive and continued support (Freidus, McNamara & Grose, 1998; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993 Routman, 1991).

> To make... inservices with district teachers more meaningful, we have to consider the teachers' experiences and needs. We need to discover the obstacles the teachers perceive in translating this change into practice and help them develop strategies for overcoming them. Only by planning a long-term implementation, closely monitoring and supporting its growth, can we bring about significant improvement in our current... instruction (Newman, 1990, p. 131).

It would seem to me that this is where administrators need to reflect on their approaches to change, and on the amount of support they are providing for teachers trying to effectively implement new programs.

Studies also show that teachers need to see the purposes and relevancy for change (Rehorick & Dicks, 1998; Booth, 1994). In Rehorick & Dicks' (1998) research they refer to six key principles for adult learning found in the MOCAP Train-the-Teacher Workshop Manual (1994). These include *relevancy* of learning, *reduction* of stress and

anxiety through the avoidance of ambiguity, *responsibility* for making decisions regarding learning is left to the learner, *respect* for the background and individuality of the learner, *relationships* built between the learning environment and the learner, and *response* to adult learners regarding their progress. Those attempting to facilitate change in our schools should be well versed in such principles of adult learning. If administrators would thoughtfully consider the needs and unique qualities of the teachers working for them they would approach change in a balanced manner. Respect for the individual would help them accept that change occurs in a different way for each teacher. And in truth "the power to make change ultimately lies with the teacher" (Freidus, McNamara & Grose, 1998, p. 24).

Making Connections

In 1988, educators in Western Australia developed the First Steps project in response to the needs for more effective literacy teaching. The Education Department of Western Australia spent five years researching and developing the program. The First Steps project consists of four modules covering reading, writing, spelling, and oral language. First Steps teachers are provided with two books for each of these modules during their training, they include the Developmental Continuum and the Resource Book. These manuals provide valuable information to help teachers implement new teaching strategies and assessment practices. Both assessment and teaching practices are based on the philosophy that children's literacy growth is developmental. Therefore, First Steps has created a developmental continuum for each language module (reading, writing,

spelling, and oral language) as a practical assessment tool for teachers. The continuums help link assessment to instructional practices. "They have been developed to provide teachers with a way of looking at what children can actually do and how they can do it, in order to inform planning for further development" (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994, p. 2). The continuum is designed to help teachers concentrate on students' strengths rather than weaknesses.

The developmental continuum for reading consists of six phases: role play reading, experimental reading, early reading, transitional reading, independent reading, and advanced reading. Within each phase teachers find key indicators for reading behaviours appropriate at that particular phase of development. These indicators help teachers place students on the continuum. Major *teaching emphasis* are also suggested for each phase of development. First Steps does recognize that all children will progress in different ways. Thus, the continuum allows for student differences and helps teachers focus their reading programs on individual learning needs. By using assessments to inform teaching strategies teachers interact on a daily basis with students involved in authentic reading activities.

The First Steps Reading Resource Book introduces a variety of assessment and instructional strategies with detailed explanations for teachers. This resource is really an extension of the Reading Developmental Continuum. It shows teachers how reading strategies can be used in the daily routine of their classrooms (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994). In First Steps, 'variety' is a key to both assessment and instruction. Students need to be given multiple opportunities to consolidate reading

strategies through a variety of activities that help to reinforce what they are learning. "Information about children's reading development should be gathered across a range of reading activities where children are working in different contexts with varied texts. Observations need to be systematic, informed and ongoing" (p. 18). First Steps also promotes the use of a 'variety' of assessment tools ranging from reading conferences to miscue analyses.

A brief examination of the First Steps program reveals its link to present research in the field of literacy. In fact, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children promote the developmental continuum, created by First Steps, in their 1998 joint position paper. Research studies on the implementation of First Steps have been carried out in both Australia and the United States. These studies serve to illuminate the benefits and the difficulties teachers have experienced as they work to adjust their instructional and assessment practices within their classrooms.

The First Steps Research Summaries (1994) are a unique compilation of studies completed in Australia spanning the years 1988 through to 1994. In general, researchers found that schools were making positive progress in the implementation of First Steps. Most teachers were excited about the resources and the new program. However, teachers were concerned about the "excessive amounts of information provided in professional development sessions" (p.18). Teachers were finding that the implementation of First Steps modules required extra time and as a result they experienced increased workloads. However, teachers noted improved student attitudes and results, increased interest and

enjoyment in teaching, and increased clarity about their teaching. As with any change in literacy instruction some teachers were forced to reconsider their beliefs about reading development. Time has been a major factor for teachers and schools to become comfortable and successful with the implementation of First Steps. Overall, the feeling in schools toward First Steps has been positive (Ducharme, 1994).

In the United States the First Steps Study: Year Two Project Report (1998) explores the effects First Steps has had on literacy development in urban school settings. Researchers discovered that as teachers became more confident in utilizing First Steps teaching strategies a direct correlation could be drawn to student improvement. For example, students increased in their ability to use appropriate literary language when discussing their work. Teachers, in general, found the developmental continuum "informed their teaching in meaningful ways" (p. 6). In the beginning months teachers felt overwhelmed by the task of placing students on the continuum. However, "these teachers found the process of analyzing and recording student work became more automatic and, consequently, less onerous as time went by" (p. 6). Their confidence increased as their understanding of literacy growth became more informed. The continuum was successful in influencing teachers' instructional choices and therefore has had a positive impact on student outcomes. There has been "resistance to using it to link assessment to instruction on an on-going basis...due to the amount of time it takes to learn to use it. At first glance it is daunting" (p. 9). To ease teacher anxiety, on-going support is needed to assist them in their attempts to implement the developmental continuum. The research "suggests that if teachers are to embrace change, it needs to be

integrated into their responsibilities, replacing or refining rather than adding on to pre-existing routines and processes" (p. 10).

The study found that Tutors and Focus teachers were invaluable in their on-going support and encouragement of teacher growth. In order for the First Steps program to develop successfully, district personnel within the schools were found to be vital. Their roles included workshop-based instruction, modeling of lesson strategies in the classroom, and facilitation of discussion groups to encourage teachers and promote collaboration. "They [tutors] recognized that the implementation needed to be viewed as a process, that it would take time to reach their goals" (p. 13).

To the onlooker, implementation of the First Steps program is a costly and time consuming process. You may find yourself wondering if the difficulties of establishing such a program is worth the immense effort. My intent is to explore the lived experiences of teachers implementing First Steps in their classrooms. Their experiences will open our eyes to the individual paths of change each one must journey on and possibly will expand our horizons of understanding. "I'd like to imagine, as we travel together, that [our journey] might be a passport to new territory that will excite and challenge us all" (Fox, 1993, p. 166). First Steps will serve as my window.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

Research Approach ~ Interpreting Phenomenology

"The method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (a parent or teacher) in the first place" (van Manen, 1990, p. 2). As a person, I am deeply interested in how we, as people, live in our world and what shapes our own unique experiences as we walk through life. Each of us accepts and views life from the experiences that touch us. As I sit with my grandfather, he unfolds a world vastly different from the one I've come to understand. His past, rich experiences paint a life of wisdom and personal insight. My four year old niece pulls at my hand and leads me into her world of make believe. Her experiences touch her play and her young life bubbles with excitement at the new adventures she sees just around the corner. My conversations and interactions with those who enter my life add a new dimension to my understanding of people and the choices they make. This desire to listen and to attempt to understand other people's experiences has led me to phenomenology.

In choosing phenomenology, I have taken the opportunity to listen to the individual stories and experiences of New Brunswick teachers implementing First Steps. By listening to their "voices" I have become more thoughtful and sensitive to their understandings of the world they live in. Phenomenology is described in a number of ways by experts in the field. van Manen (1990) explains "phenomenology as an attempt to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively,

without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it... Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9). Hopkins (1994) refers to phenomenology as "the study of the "life-world," of lived, everyday experience, of how consciousness takes in the givens of the experienced world" (p. 39). "Heidegger's phenomenology is...hermeneutic in that it takes understanding as primary and seeks to understand it, to interpret what (one) already knows" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 162). Anderson (1998) defines phenomenology as a method "aimed at understanding the meaning of experiences in our everyday lives" (p. 121). Each of these definitions seek to understand the experiences of individuals in their daily lives.

After careful consideration, I decided that my research question, **"What are the lived experiences of New Brunswick teachers implementing instructional and assessment practices recommended in the First Steps reading strand?"**, would be best answered in a phenomenological study. Phenomenology has helped me to understand how several New Brunswick teachers have oriented themselves to the phenomena of implementing a new program, such as First Steps. It has given me the opportunity to hear the "essence" of what they are saying and living as I have "attempted to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of (their) lived experiences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). It has been through this process of discovery that understanding has surfaced.

My approach to interpreting the lived experiences of the teachers I conversed with throughout my research has been influenced by my evolving understanding of phenomenology. Picture the all encompassing umbrella of a qualitative framework that

tries "to understand people from their own frame of reference" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 6). Then picture the arm of the umbrella as the phenomenological perspective that supports the "framework". If I were to propose a "pure" phenomenological study my analogy would end at this point. Instead, my eyes move further down the arm to the umbrella's handgrip. Here I grapple with my understandings of conceptualization and pre-reflective thought. Considering my desire to understand the lived experiences of teachers implementing instructional and assessment practices in First Steps, I have recognized that as teachers we are often formed, consciously or subconsciously, by our evolving walk through the education system and thus influenced by its conceptualizations. In the conversations I have had with the teachers involved in the First Steps program I acknowledge their conceptions and ownership of literacy and assessment discourse as a part of their lived experience. Aspects of our conversations did venture into pre-reflective thoughts, but often I found that as thoughtful teachers themselves, they were already thinking through the process of implementation they had been engaged in. It is in consideration of my wanderings from the necessity of focusing on pre-reflective thought and conceptualization as guiding forces in my research interpretation that I ground my use of the term phenomenology. In essence, what is "pure" phenomenology? As a phenomenologist I listen and search for pre-linguistic utterances and pre-conceptualized thoughts; the raw, organic materials of our experiences. In theory this may well work, but in practice our language experiences and life exposures often contaminate this process. Herein lies the struggle...do I erase all that is not organic and render another person's verbal conceptualizations of their world as an unlived

experience? In this one act I would become untrue to another person's lifeworld. I, as a phenomenologist, must act with tact and become sensitive to the lifeworld of the other person. It is their understandings I seek to reveal, not my own.

Research on the implementation of First Steps has been completed in Australia and the United States. To my knowledge and in discussion with experts in the literacy field, no Canadian studies have been carried out. Existing research studies on First Steps include: ethnographies, case studies, empirical studies, evaluation research (ACER), and a myriad of qualitative designs, such as the participant-observer model. In this study, a phenomenological perspective will guide my research within a qualitative framework. It is my desire "to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld" (van Manen , 1990, p. 11). I believe my study will add to the already existing research on First Steps. I also hope it will add a new dimension of understanding and sensitivity to the lived experiences of teachers attempting to implement new programs in their classrooms.

The Research Process

1.1 Participant Selection and Ethical Considerations

In my research study I interacted with four participants. These participants were elementary school teachers from districts within the province of New Brunswick. As a part of my criteria for selecting these individuals, they had to be involved in the implementation of the First Steps reading strand for at least two years. I was able to facilitate this through the many teacher contacts I made at First Steps meetings

throughout the fall of 1998 and January 1999. Teachers were made aware of my research and I personally spoke with individuals that I thought would be willing to participate in my study.

District personnel were not made aware of the teachers who agreed to participate in my research. Participant names have been and will be kept confidential, unless they individually choose to make their names known. Upon contacting teachers, I introduced myself as a graduate student from the University of New Brunswick. I then shared my interests, as a fellow colleague, in First Steps and briefly described my research study. When each teacher agreed to participate in my research, I assured her of confidentiality and requested a time for an interview at their convenience. Choice of setting was left to the individual teacher. I wanted them to be relaxed and comfortable during the interview process. I also asked for permission to audio tape the interviews, so that I would not be concerned about writing every word spoken and would feel free to converse with my participants. This allowed me to concentrate more intently on what was being said, and showed the participant my sincere interest in what they were sharing.

Since my data was generated from the conversations I had with each individual teacher, I asked each participant to carefully read the *participant consent form* (see Appendix A) outlining my research and requesting her signature, in acknowledgement of their participation. Anderson (1998) suggests that there are six basic elements which must be respected when seeking informed consent:

> ~ an explanation of the purpose of the research and the procedures that will be used;
> ~ a description of any reasonable foreseeable risks and discomforts to the

subjects;
~ a description of any benefits that may reasonably be expected;
~ a disclosure of any alternative procedures that might be advantageous to the subject;
~ an offer to answer any questions concerning the procedures; and
~ a statement that participation is voluntary and that the subject is free to withdraw from the study at any time (p.19).

I made my home phone number and e-mail address available to prospective participants so that they would feel free to contact me with questions or concerns. My goal was to make the interview process as non-threatening as possible. These preparatory steps helped to facilitate such an environment. The consideration of each participant in my research study has been foremost in my mind. It is their experiences that have shaped my study and ultimately, through them I have gained deeper understandings and insights.

1.2 Data Collection

I collected data through in-depth, conversational interviews. These served as sources of lived experiences. Eisner (1991) suggests that "conducting a good interview is, in some way, like participating in a good conversation: listening intently and asking questions that focus on concrete examples and feelings rather than abstract speculations..." (p. 183). This was my ideal as I conversed with individual participants. Each interview began with a version of my central research question; from there I encouraged participants to share their own personal experiences with me. Throughout the interview I worked to keep our conversation close to the experience as lived, keeping in mind the fundamental question that prompted my research (van Manen, 1990). "As we ask what an experience is like, it may be helpful to be very concrete. Ask the person to

think of a specific instance, situation, person, or event. Then explore the whole experience to the fullest" (p. 67). Patton (1980) asserts that

> the phenomenological interviewer wants to maintain maximum flexibility to be able to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on the information that emerges...from talking to one or more individuals in that setting. Most of the questions will flow from the immediate context. Thus, the conversational interview is a major tool...to understand...participant's reactions to what is happening (p.199).

This type of conversation allowed me, the interviewer, to be more responsive to the individual differences in my research participants (Patton, 1980).

Conducting a conversational interview takes skill and sensitivity. To be effective as an interviewer I required practice prior to beginning my actual research interviews. Dr. Kathleen Berry offered to model conversational interview techniques in a practice demonstration. This gave me an opportunity to watch a seasoned interviewer and learn from her presentation. I then facilitated an interview on my own while being observed by others. This allowed for feedback and suggestions to improve my techniques. Conducting the conversational interviews was a challenge for me. I had to trust that each teacher would have a story to tell, and would feel comfortable enough to share their own thoughts on implementing the First Steps reading strand. It was important for me to set aside my personal views on First Steps and the implementation process. This sometimes proved to be a difficult aspect to control in the midst of the conversational interviews. Yet, it is "the participant's perspective on the...phenomenon of interest (that) should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82).

1.3 Data Analysis

As a first step in analyzing data collected from the conversational interviews, I transcribed each of the audio taped sessions. After reading and rereading the interview transcripts I searched for emerging themes in the interviews. In trying to apprehend the essential themes I asked the question: "Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon? (van Manen, 1990, p. 107). As I asked this question I sifted through the many themes I had originally thought were relevant and narrowed the number to three overall themes which truly reflected the experiences of my participants. van Manen (1990) describes theme in four ways:

1) Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point.
2) Theme formulation is at best a simplification.
3) Themes are not objects one encounters at certain points or moments in a text.
4) Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand (p. 87).

The essence or theme of an experience helped me to develop phenomenological descriptions. These eidectic (vivid or memorable) descriptions captured experiences in the narrative. Secondly, eidectic variations examined the same phenomenon showing variations in the experiences of my participants. Finally, eidectic reduction thoughtfully reduced experiences to a theme. We may ask how theme relates to the notion (the lived experiences of teachers implementing First Steps) that is being studied? van Manen (1990) suggests that:

1) Theme is the means to get at the notion.
2) Theme gives shape to the shapeless.
3) Theme describes the content of the notion.

4) Theme is always a reduction of a notion (p. 88).

I took the *selective reading approach* toward isolating themes within my participants' experiences. In this approach I listened to and read my transcripts "several times and asked, What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described? These statements [were] then...circled, underlined, or highlighted" (p. 93). The themes helped me to understand the essence of each experience shared in the interviews. They helped to accurately write the stories that reflect teachers' lived experiences.

> The thematic structures derived inductively from the material researchers have put together...can provide the conceptual hubs around which the story can be told. The stories told around these thematic situations can then be used as material for a summary account of the story as a whole (Eisner, 1991, p. 190-191).

The themes I gleaned from each teacher's lived experience and the stories that developed from these experiences will not necessarily illuminate new findings or revelations. Within a qualitative study influenced by a phenomenological perspective answers are not to be sought, rather evolving understanding and thoughtfulness are our mandate. "Phenomenology provides a deep perspective on the reality of others, but it does not do this necessarily by providing new information...(It) functions not to settle human questions, but to convert answers through reflection into new questions" (Hopkins, 1994, p. 42). The experiences and themes that emerged from them will stand on their own for interpretation. My task as a qualitative/phenomenological researcher and writer has been "to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 41). This involved re-writing again and again until I

have, hopefully, written a picture of understanding.

I engaged in *member checks* at three levels: first, I made available the transcripts from each interview, so that participants could verify the contents; secondly, I shared with them the themes I had developed from our in-depth conversations; and finally each participant was given a copy of my description and interpretation of their experiences for examination. This gave participants an opportunity to further discuss what they had shared with me, and to reflect on the themes that had emerged.

> Both researcher and interviewee weigh the appropriateness of each theme by asking: "Is this what the experience is really like?" And thus the interview turns indeed into an interpretive conversation wherein both partners self-reflectively orient themselves to the interpersonal or collective ground that brings the significance of the phenomenological question into view (van Manen, 1990, p. 99).

I believe these steps have been essential to my overall analysis. They have given further authenticity to the themes and narrative stories I have written.

1.4 Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. The most difficult limitation was to *bracket* my own understandings and conceptions throughout the research process. It was important for me not to impose my perspectives on participants' experiences. Secondly, I had to be prepared during member checks to accept the possibility that participants could decide to delete material that would change the essence of their in-depth conversational interviews. This left the possibility that my themes and

understandings of their experiences would have to change. I tried to keep these limitations in mind as I collected and analyzed my data.

Fortunately, my participants worked closely with me as I developed my themes and each carefully read their transcribed interview offering comments and personal perspectives. Also, they set aside time to read through my description and analysis of their experience. This gave them the opportunity to share any further insights with me and to make changes if necessary. Each participant was extremely helpful in this process. No major changes were made to my descriptions of their experiences. One participant did help me to clarify a few technical points, concerning district and provincial operations, that were unclear for the reader and required a more detailed explanation. I am truly grateful for the time each participant spent reading and reflecting on their interview and my description of their experience with First Steps.

1.5 Final Thoughts

My understanding of phenomenology within a qualitative framework has evolved as I have immersed myself in relevant literature. The path I have chosen to take has held many interesting "turns" and "bumps" along the way. This has been a step away from security for me. Yet, it seems to me that this is a notion of phenomenological research. My destiny does not have to be known; it emerges over time as I seek to understand the experiences of other human beings in this world. My task has been and is to walk along this path with thoughtful tact. I must be willing to see others as they see themselves

(McDougall, 1998). "A tactful person has the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desires from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanor, expression, and body language...Tactful action is thoughtful, mindful, heedful...thoughtfulness and tact go hand in hand." (van Manen, 1991, p. 122). I have journeyed down the research path well aware of my need to be sensitive to those I interact with on my way. Each *unique* situation has required patient thoughtfulness and tactful action. To this I hope I have been true.

Chapter Four

Portraits of Lived Experience

Introduction

I gaze at the frosted window before me and embedded in its snow-etched designs I picture a swirling wind storm blowing across rugged country fields. My friend envisions elegant skaters twirling across the ice as she gazes upon the same frosted window. We each appear to interpret the world before us through the eyes of our own understandings and experiences. I have returned to this thought again and again amidst interviewing the teachers in my study. Each teacher's experience implementing instructional and assessment practices in the First Steps reading strand has been uniquely significant to her as an individual. It would seem that their experiences have become a home for their understandings. This chapter will explore these understandings as voiced by each teacher. It is their thoughts, their perspectives, and their reflections that will bring life to the *portraits of experience* I will endeavor to unveil.

The four teachers whom I interviewed often forced me to look beyond my own personal and professional understandings. At times I found myself thinking, *"Yes! That's it. I know what you mean!"*...I gave the phenomenological nod...at other times I found myself seeking to discern a perspective foreign to the structure of understandings I had built in support of First Steps. The interviews have changed me. The opportunity of gaining entrance into the frame of reference held by another *person* has opened my world. Maybe this is the gift phenomenology offers to me...the expansion of the *space* I've closed myself into. Max van Manen's suggestion that "phenomenological research is

often itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, and increased thoughtfulness and tact..." (1990, p. 163) no longer reads as a simple quote for me to glance over. I have tested its truth and believe in its reality. My colleagues have stretched me and their words confront and affirm the understandings I hold onto.

Each interview began with my central research question and quickly diverged into unique scripts reflecting the individuality of each person who conversed with me. **Rebecca** was introduced to First Steps as a member of a regional English Language Arts Curriculum Committee. She worked with another colleague researching literacy practices and programs. A lot of the readings they reviewed came out of Australia and New Zealand. It was from her research readings and review of curricular possibilities that Rebecca first heard about First Steps. At the time she came across First Steps they were investigating Reading Recovery to see if it would be plausible to implement in the province. In passing one day a colleague wondered,

> *Maybe our province can't afford to do Reading Recovery, but maybe the province can afford to do the program First Steps.*

This was Rebecca's introduction to First Steps.

Rebecca was involved with the development of the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum document for three years. The Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum is a regional curriculum document that focuses on Language Arts as a curricular priority. As one of the New Brunswick teachers serving on the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum development committee, Rebecca

became familiar with the First Steps program a year prior to it ever being brought into the schools.

> *The first thing we were given was just a copy of the whole developmental continuum to see if the terminology would fit with our Atlantic Curriculum. There's a lot of overlap and a little bit of a discrepancy between the programs. We were concerned about mixing everybody up if First Steps used different terms than the Atlantic Curriculum.*

Initially the committee members did not focus on the content of First Steps or the question of it being introduced as a new program in schools. Their first concern was technical compatibility, such as terminology, between the two documents.

> *When I, as a teacher, looked at First Steps more closely I thought that it made sense. If we were going to implement the Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation document and we could have both programs...let's go for it. Right away the Department decided that this* ***might*** *ease some people's minds and some districts decided to do it.*

Rebecca had the unique opportunity of struggling with colleagues from within and outside the province to determine the philosophical and technical compatibility of the First Steps program with the Language Arts Curriculum (Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum document) developed for New Brunswick teachers.

Rose, a primary teacher, attended mandatory inservice sessions on First Steps two years ago and liked the program from the beginning.

> *I remember thinking this is what we really needed...more to inform our teaching. The teaching emphasis is what caught my attention and what I really liked about it.*

Although Rose found the inservice a bit dry, she was excited about the contents of the program and could see herself implementing First Steps in her own classroom. In a sense

she encountered a personal *ah ha!* The program *clicked* with her needs. Rose felt she had finally found a program to help focus her reading instruction and assessment.

> *I felt like I was floundering...I didn't feel focused enough. Perhaps I didn't have enough confidence in myself that this is what I am doing and I was on top of everything. First Steps really helped to put everything into focus for me...I think it raised my standards a little bit as well. It gave me more of a focus on how to assess, how to push, and how to challenge the students a little bit more.*

For Rose First Steps provided a map for learning and teaching reading skills; it became a curricular priority.

Kathleen has been a teacher in the primary division for twelve years. Her introduction to First Steps was through a series of afternoon workshops given over a period of four weeks in her own elementary school. Kathleen remembers initially thinking.

> *These are things we already do. I think that the teachers in early childhood and the lower grades would like this.*

Being an early childhood specialist herself she was already familiar with many of the strategies used in First Steps. In fact, she was already using many of these strategies in her own classroom.

With a smile Kathleen recalled her first look at the teacher guides for First Steps,

> *I can remember when they passed out these books and one of them was really thick and I thought, "We have to read this?"*

However, as she began to flip through the guides and take the time to read selected portions in each one it made sense to her conceptualized understandings of reading instruction and assessment. The presenter at the workshop further encouraged the

teachers through activities, taken from the guides, by showing them how to incorporate specific reading strategies into their classroom Language Arts programs. Kathleen remembers having a lot of fun with the activities and was struck by how positive the presenter was about First Steps.

> *She was very excited about it, but at the same time she was telling us that we didn't have a choice...She said we shouldn't get stressed about it. Take the time to read the books. She then showed us the plotting in the Developmental Continuum guide, but no one said, "You have to do this." It was more get to know the program first.*

As a result Kathleen didn't feel pressure to implement the program immediately.

> *The guides probably went on my desk for a while. I didn't open them because there were so many things I had done before. The presenter didn't say you have to have your students plotted by a certain date. So I didn't really feel I had to dive into it more to still do my job.*

Kathleen already had a successful Language Arts program in place that used many of the strategies presented in First Steps. For her change was not a necessity.

Joan recalled her initial introductions to First Steps with mixed emotions. Her *first introduction* was through a university course offered on Saturday mornings. She described that experience as,

> *Great! It was in context. The teachers who attended the course wanted to be there. We wanted to learn about First Steps.*

Her *second introduction* to First Steps was at a workshop given in her own elementary school. She found herself frustrated by this experience and surprised that First Steps ran at all after the presentation.

> *I was really frustrated because I was thinking that the teachers on staff were probably very frustrated not having the information I*

> *already had. I kept thinking that the teachers I'm going to have to lead in First Steps aren't getting a good shot at training for First Steps and this is probably not going to be a fair start...I felt a lot of responsibility perhaps on my shoulders.*

Joan ended up participating in the two workshops for First Steps beginning in the same month. She started the university course first and the school workshop followed soon afterwards. Throughout this time she found herself comparing her First Steps training experiences. She compared the university course with what she was receiving at the school level. As a vibrant and enthusiastic teacher she found the incongruency of her initial First Steps learning experiences disturbing.

The purpose in briefly introducing you to each teacher in my study is to help you begin envisioning the first brush strokes of their individual stories on my canvas of paper. As you can see, their initial introductions and responses to the implementation of First Steps reflect their individual differences. W.H. Auden once said, "As persons, we are incomparable, unclassifiable, uncountable, irreplaceable" (As cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 6). Possibly these personal stories may resonate with you, the reader, but each portrait is incomparable and unique in its overall composition. As I have read and reread the stories each teacher has shared with me, emerging themes and sub-themes have transpired from the documented conversational interviews. Although these themes can be found in each interview their interpretations often vary according to the individual teacher. The themes and sub-themes are as follows:

Priorities	*Connectedness*	*Accountability*
Personal / Professional Journeys Time - Frustration / Empowerment	Support	Assessment

Using the above themes I will begin the challenging task of painting a portrait of each teacher's lived experience implementing instructional and assessment practices in the First Steps reading strand. Their experiences will create their stories. As their stories develop I will explore the meanings and interpretations of their experiences. "A good phenomenological [interpretation or] description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience - is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). It is to this that I will try to remain true. Throughout Chapter Four I will share my thoughts on and insights into the experiences that help to form each individual portrait. I will also raise questions for us to reflect on and explore further in Chapter Five.

Prioritizing...Personal and Professional Journeys

1.1 Rebecca: Compelled to Discover New Horizons

"...To be alive is to dwell in tension. It is to be aware and open to the anxiety that exists in venturing forth into new frontiers of existence and to use that tension as a compelling force for creative interaction with the world" (Robert Brown as cited by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995, p. 426). Rebecca's enthusiasm for new programs and new challenges weaves its way throughout her career.

> *I work better with new materials and new challenges. That's why I've always been willing to pilot new programs and to try new things out. Other teachers can work for ten years and be very happy fine tuning some things and working on the same program. I can't do that...I think it's personality.*

Rebecca has taught the spectrum in elementary schools from kindergarten to grade six.

> *I'm a person who every five years likes to change and every five years I have changed and I have worked better that way.*

Rebecca's expertise and vast experience in the Language Arts arena has enabled her to knowledgeably contribute to curriculum development teams at the district and provincial level. She recognizes the area of Language Arts as a strength for her professionally and readily admits that other areas such as Science and Computer Technology are not her forte.

> *We're not all as strong in every area...Other teachers can do things in Science and Computer Technology that I may never be able to do and they know what reasonable outcomes to expect from their students...My strength is in Language Arts, so I'm not as panicked when changes occur in this area of the curriculum.*

Rebecca's personal/professional readings and research continually challenge her perspective on and understandings of reading instruction and assessment. Her involvement with the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum document has further added to her existing Language Arts expertise and enabled her to join with other colleagues investigating the feasibility of implementing First Steps in the province of New Brunswick.

Rebecca's expertise has led her to positions of responsibility and ultimately participation, to a certain extent, in curriculum decision making. Originally, the implementation of First Steps posed the question of technical feasibility. Then the question of philosophical compatibility had to be answered. These initial decision making stages forced Rebecca to carefully examine the First Steps program in light of the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum document and her own personal and

professional knowledge of literacy development. As Rebecca spent more time reading the First Steps guide books she was shocked to think that if she plotted many of her upper elementary students they would be reading at an *Early Reading* phase. The First Steps developmental continuum consists of six phases: role play reading (*phase 1*), experimental reading (*phase 2*), early reading (*phase 3*), transitional reading (*phase 4*), independent reading (*phase 5*), and advanced reading (*phase 6*). The titles for each phase concerned Rebecca. The *Early Reading* phase itself, as a title, suggests a stage of reading development that children in the early primary grades might be working at.

> *My first thought was that this would scare off teachers...I've done a fair amount of work in Language Arts and research and if I'm that petrified when I see how it looks like our children are doing...how are we going to get the point across to other teachers that it's okay? Reading is a developmental process and if that's where your children are that's where they are. Instruct them from that level using the teaching emphasis as a guide.*

Rebecca found herself reflecting on the needs of teachers and the question of morale.

> *I was a little concerned that New Brunswick, the Maritime Provinces, Canada, wherever...the group of us who decided to do First Steps would look pretty low on the totem pole compared to another continent, such as Australia...My worry was that teachers were going to be broken from the start...And you do feel like..."Gee we've been working on literacy the last few years and it looks like we're further down"... Once I got into First Steps I didn't feel the same way.*

The problem Rebecca encountered was a question of discrepancy in terminology. The more she used the First Steps program the more she became comfortable with the descriptions for each phase of reading development and began to consider the phase titles as irrelevant to the overall growth of a child in the end. Philosophically First Steps and

the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum document were found to be very similar and this was the most important factor in connecting the two documents.

> *When First Steps all of a sudden appeared we were concerned about all the work we had already done and how far behind we might be. Although we had some fine tuning to complete on the Foundations document we were very happy to find that we could actually make connections with the First Steps program and other than terminology we had the same outcomes...Really there's nothing new in this program, nothing. That's its saving grace I think...we've been doing most of the things found in First Steps for years. In fact, there was maybe a little pessimism from some people because of this... "Why do we need this program to tell us what we've been doing?" The advantage is that it is all in one spot. Instead of having to flip through five or six different resource texts the First Steps guides combine it all. It's so compact.*

Once Rebecca's district adopted First Steps she participated in beginning workshops offered at the school level and agreed to take on the responsibility of becoming a focus teacher for her elementary school. Implementing First Steps in her own classroom was not an arduous task. Rebecca was familiar with the teaching strategies and assessment tools. She was already using them in a variety of ways in her classroom reading program. Using First Steps did not mean Rebecca would have to make major program changes.

> *If you've done reading conferences, sitting down to plot children on a continuum is not new...In fact, New Brunswick teachers are familiar with the idea of a developmental continuum showing how children move through steps in their growth. If you had used the New Brunswick continuum at all it's the same thing, just different terminology...Implementing First Steps wasn't really a change for me. Now, I was surprised that some children whom I thought would have been a little higher on the continuum were lower, but as you start going through it you realize that's where they fit. After you've plotted children for a year you are not as surprised by an individual student's performance.*

> *I believe First Steps has made us become more aware of what we are giving to the children. We are giving them the reading strategies and tips they need for reading. It's not a big secret anymore and I do believe that has been the biggest change for a lot of teachers...The vocabulary is now being made accessible to the children. It's not just the teacher vocabulary that you use with a parent or on the report card, but the children are part and parcel of it...I don't think we've done that as much and I know that I didn't do that as much until First Steps. I knew what I was searching for and what outcomes and strategies I wanted, but I certainly was not using the vocabulary as much with the children until First Steps. That has been a fairly major change for me.*

Rebecca believes it is important to help children knowledgeably use strategies that will encourage them along the path of reading. Students also need to become aware of the reading strategies they are already using and learn to reflect and critically think about the texts they are reading. It is to the child's benefit if they are able to use and hear the proper vocabulary when discussing reading strategies in the classroom. First Steps has helped Rebecca to further engage her students in using appropriate vocabulary in relation to the reading strategies they are utilizing. Possibly this also helps to empower her students as they become more knowledgeable about the world of words that surround them in their school.

> *I'm comfortable with First Steps...Comfortable, for me, is being challenged to a certain extent. When I'm comfortable that means I don't know it all but I can see the benefits for the students...That motivates me. First Steps offers benefits for the children's learning and benefits for me as well. My assessments will be easier and I won't have to be doing ten extra things at the end of a three month period for my reporting. So, there's a light at the end of the tunnel and I think there's enough flexibility in it too. First Steps wasn't an add on for me.*

Upon reflection I appreciate Rebecca's strong knowledge of self. She recognizes her strengths/weaknesses and works to fill her needs through new challenges and *tensions* in her life. In a sense she builds on her prior experience and uses it as a springboard into new educational adventures. I see Rebecca as a life long learner and wonder if this is not her *art* in life. She herself has suggested that personality has a lot to do with the changes we make as individuals and as teachers in the education system. This begs me to question the effectiveness of mandating new curriculums without considering the individual teachers who will be implementing them and the personal and professional needs they may have.

1.2 Rose: A Time to Explore and Grow

"Teachers, who must be pupils as well,...embark upon the journey of education with an open, not closed, end" (Berman, Hultgren, Lee, Rivkin & Roderick, 1991, p.viii). It would seem that Rose has embarked on this journey to continually grow as a teacher. Rose sets aside personal time to read and reflect on professional materials and willingly considers new programs in light of her needs and desire to further refine her skills.

> *I keep the Language Arts Curriculum guide at home...that's where you do most of your reading and reflecting. You do the bread and butter things here at school, but sometimes you need these reflective moments at home. I'd almost like to have two copies, one for here and one for home.*

Through the process of evaluating her own professional needs, Rose recognized the value of First Steps for her as a teacher.

> *My initial reaction was very positive with First Steps...It fit my teaching style...It gave me as a teacher a better sense of "Oh, I see how Katie is doing this. This is how I can help her. These are some specific activities to help her. Or, he's over here so this is what I can do to help him." I didn't look at First Steps so much as a change. I looked at it more as another resource to go to and certainly a very helpful one...First Steps has helped me to improve the way I assess and it has enhanced my teaching. Perhaps the biggest change was the vocabulary I started to use in our Language Arts classes. I now expose students to vocabulary I would have only used with their parents. Now they have an understanding of specific terms used to describe particular aspects of reading in the classroom.*

Although the implementation of First Steps has not meant drastic changes in teaching style for Rose, it has helped her to find the focus she sought for her grade one reading program.

First Steps filled a personal need for Rose in her teaching. As Rose reflected on her choice to embrace First Steps she was also thoughtful of the responses from some of her peers.

> *Maybe it's an individual choice...You have to decide if you think you need it. I mean some people are very confident in what they're teaching and how they're teaching it. They can assess children and move them along. Maybe they didn't need it as much as I think I did...And then on the other hand I do think the implementation of First Steps helps us to have a common language. Something very specific to show parents and fellow teachers too. We don't all use the same terminology even though we may mean the same thing. I think the consistency would help a lot. I think it is what our language program needed in this district.*

Rose believes we cannot assume that every teacher has the same needs and because of this teachers should be given a choice. Does this mean that as teachers our level of need for a new program may differ? If so, how do we make room for these differences?

Over the course of Rose's career she has seen many language programs come and go. Throughout the changes in materials Rose has used in her classroom she has decided that *balance* should be the key to the choices we make as teachers.

> *As primary teachers...I think we do reflect and are more willing to do things to improve our teaching. I don't think we have to go on any big bandwagon...that's almost what happened with the literature based push. I was just on the cusp of that. I taught a couple of years with the Basal Reading Program and I could see that it wasn't the answer. I knew there were better ways from my article searches and readings...I think there needs to be a bit of balance. That's my tangent - balance. I also think we need to say, "No, we're not going to run away with every faddish thing, but we are willing to reflect on our teaching and to evaluate the First Steps program. What can you do for us as teachers and as a profession?"*

Rose believes that programs we use in our classrooms should benefit both the students and the teacher. They should enhance our teaching and the learning of those we work with on a daily basis.

1.3 Kathleen: A Decision to Prioritize

"Good teaching is not the materials and the resources..."(Booth, 1994, p. 360). What makes a Language Arts program *good*? Is it the resources themselves or the teacher? These are questions I've been forced to ask after sitting in conversation with Kathleen. As an experienced teacher she has been faced with many choices in her career. She finds herself constantly prioritizing the programs she uses to foster success in her students.

> *I've come to a point in my career where there are so many packages sent to me saying, "Smile New Brunswick Day is this*

> *week and use the Learn Not to Burn kit for Fire Prevention next week." We have a binder for everything and we are supposed to try to do it all. I really have to set my priorities for my class and some of these programs aren't a priority...I try not to get stressed out about things like this because I've taught long enough to be able to say, "This is what is really good in this program and this is what I'm going to use..." First Steps, for example, is a tool. It's something I do have to be able to use along with all the other resources I have in my classroom. I don't think it is a quick fix to teaching kids to read. I've learned over the years that you take the bits that make sense to you and integrate them into what you do in your classroom. I don't think you will find one perfect program.*

Personal priorities and beliefs affect the decisions Kathleen makes. She has learned how to deal with the many curriculum responsibilities that fall on her plate so that she doesn't feel overloaded all the time. I wonder if the curriculum leaders in school districts take the time to acknowledge the vast responsibilities of teachers and what they are already doing in their classrooms.

Change doesn't scare Kathleen if it is needed. Her students come first and influence the many *colours* she chooses to mix and paint with on her curriculum *canvas*.

> *When I reflect on my last twelve years of teaching I've done a fair amount of changing. The idea of change doesn't bother me if it's something that I believe is effective and will help my children. I have to work through new programs to make them fit for me and for the children I teach...Some people think you should teach the same thing every year you remain in the same grade, but when you have different children you really have to look at their needs and their interests. Every year you have to analyze how the programs you use fit with the overall curriculum.*
>
> *One of my big concerns with the First Steps program is the use of a lot of whole group activities...My classroom is not set up like that. I have a lot of different centers. When I did some of the First Steps activities I really had to struggle with doing whole group things because I don't like doing things that way. This is one of my concerns with First Steps...I don't want to change how I run my*

classroom for one program...In order to come to a point where I feel comfortable with a new program I think my heart has to be totally sold on the program. Every teacher is different, how they present things is different, and their enthusiasm for certain activities is different. No matter how much support is offered to me if my heart isn't in working with whole group activities then it will come out in my teaching and it will affect my students.

Kathleen's concern over whole group activities can be quickly rectified. The idea that First Steps is based mainly on whole group activities is a misconception. It encompasses a variety of teaching styles and truly focuses on the individual needs of children in the developmental continuum. This forces me to question what Kathleen has been shown and how First Steps has been presented to her as a teacher. If the activities given to Kathleen have all centered around whole group exercises then it is reasonable to assume that she would interpret this to be the intent of First Steps. How a new program is presented may determine its ultimate success at the classroom level.

Kathleen realizes First Steps must become a part of her Language Arts program. She knows that she is expected to plot children on the continuum and plans to further integrate First Steps into her classroom planning. This year she had to set priorities and university studies demanded much of her time.

This year I had responsibilities to the university and my research as a graduate student. I didn't have the time to work through the bumps in First Steps, but maybe next year I will...I'm going to have to. It has always been in the back of my mind that I'll deal with First Steps later. I know we are being sold First Steps and I think we are definitely going to be using the continuum, but I don't think I have to do all the activities to get to the continuum. My experience tells me that there are numerous ways to collect children's work and I can use many of the strategies I already have in place to plot children on the continuum. As a professional I believe I can feel confident in the choices I make. I may not have

all the answers but my past successes help me to make important curriculum decisions.

Kathleen acknowledges our differences as teachers and believes change is a personal process. She sees her *experience* as a mother, a teacher and a researcher forming the back drop on her teaching canvas. The *colours* Kathleen chooses to light up the foreground with are carefully chosen in response to her students and to her own professional development needs. Is it necessary for Kathleen to be mandated to implement a new program, such as First Steps, when she is confident in and successful with the Language Arts program already in place in her primary classroom? Is First Steps really meeting a *need* for Kathleen?

1.4 Joan: Making a Difference for Teachers

"Change has to be meaningful before people can feel committed to bringing it about" (Newman, 1990, p.131). What makes change meaningful? Joan believes that teachers experience their own level of change in respect to their personal needs.

I think teachers' responses to change depends on where they are in their learning curve and in their career. It has a lot to do with personality. Change ultimately comes from within. It's an intrinsic thing whether you are receptive to change or any new innovation. It comes from within or it doesn't...I think change can be like reversible clothing. Many teachers being introduced to First Steps are not recognizing that they are already doing many of the same kinds of things promoted in First Steps. It's just presented in a different format and they press a panic button because they can't see the connections...We need leaders and presenters to help teachers make the connections when new programs are introduced.

Joan feels it is important for leaders presenting new programs to consider the needs of their audience and to then format their presentations to help teachers successfully engage in the implementation process. Her initial introductions to First Steps contrasted two very different presentation styles and two different reasons why teachers attended the workshops.

> *In my first experience with First Steps it was our choice to take the university course. People wanted to be there...In our sessions we asked a lot of questions that I felt were meaningful and we were all interested in what each other had to share. There was a lot of discussion around the table. I think this happened because of the way First Steps was presented...Initially, First Steps was put into context with what I had to do in the classroom . It was related to the curriculum guides we had to use in our schools. There was a lot of debate about how First Steps fits in with the curriculum documents and we engaged in healthy professional talk. By this I mean that we dialogued with each other and voiced our thoughts. I think people learned a lot from that experience. We made connections. I was very comfortable with the structure of First Steps and the strategies it uses by the end of the course. I realized that if I didn't understand something I could ask questions the following week at Saturday's class and discuss my ideas with colleagues. I didn't have to panic.*
>
> *In my second experience we were expected to attend the workshops for First Steps. In a sense it was mandated...Our first session was on Valentine's Day after school. I just sat, listened to the presenter and got the information as opposed to being actively involved with First Steps. We were then told to go away and use it. It was frustrating...I think this is what is done to teachers often. It was not as positive as my first experience. We weren't really given the whole picture of what First Steps was about. I was given small chunks without being given the whole picture. I needed to know where we were going with this. Rather than making the information meaningful I guess I felt that the information was thrown at me. The purpose of it wasn't clear enough. I think many of our staff members were expecting more from the presentation. A lot of the teachers were well into using some of the strategies found within First Steps and had an*

understanding of children's literacy development in terms of the assessments in First Steps. They needed further guidance... Fortunately, I had my first experience with First Steps to fill in all the missing pieces. I felt frustration from teachers who hadn't had this so I was frustrated knowing what they had missed.

The juxtaposition of Joan's beginning experiences with First Steps raises important educational questions. Her first experience with First Steps was by choice, whereas her second experience was mandated by district leaders. Should new programs be mandated for all teachers? If so, how should inservice sessions be shaped to best meet an individual teacher's need? Joan believes that curriculum leaders should be able to help teachers make connections with what they are already doing in their classrooms and show sensitivity to the individual needs of teachers. In a sense we would be asking curriculum leaders to treat us, as adults, the way we, as teachers, are expected to treat our students. We would be asking them to respect our differences and to support us in our growth as professionals. Possibly the university could play more of a supporting role for us as a profession and we could draw on their expertise of working with adult students to encourage change, if necessary, and professional development.

Joan has felt a weight on her shoulders knowing that her colleagues did not have the same opportunity to initially experience First Steps as she did. Personally she was comfortable implementing First Steps into her Language Arts program. It connected with her teaching style and she didn't feel she had to make big changes to be successful.

For me I didn't feel like I had to make a change...First Steps was another thing we had to learn and it fits with what I'm already doing. I think it's good. Now I have put it on my shelf and I take it out when I need it. I've gone in depth with a couple of students so that I have a feel for using the continuum. It integrates with what

I've been doing in the classroom.

When Joan reflects on the unique experience of being introduced to First Steps in two different ways at the same time she sees the importance of educational leaders learning how to effectively teach teachers. The foundations built at workshops introducing new programs will either help or hinder teachers in their efforts to implement what they have been given.

A Question of Time...Moments of Feeling

It would seem that one cannot run from time. "We regulate our lives by time. We carry time around on our wrist. We divide the day into morning, afternoon, evening and night time. And we reflect on the past time and anticipate the time to come. We even talk about time going by, sometimes fast, and at other times more slowly" (van Manen, 1990, p. 77). Time is a part of our lived experience as human beings. The question we face is one of how we experience time in our daily lives. What meaning do we give to our lived experience of time? What role does time play in the implementation of First Steps?

For **Rebecca**, time threads itself in a myriad of ways throughout her experience with First Steps. When First Steps was adopted by Rebecca's school district teachers were working to implement other programs that had been mandated by the district in the same year.

> *You only have so many hours in a day...Having the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum document and the First Steps program coming in at the same time was not a smart move. Some people are trying to mesh the two. Many people are doing one or the other, it's rather tough to have both. I think this*

was a disadvantage. Unfortunately, it was just the timing and no one could do anything about it. The funding became available for this (First Steps) and of course the province was funding the other curriculum documents too, but that's a lot to swallow in one year.

Teacher overload adds onto the daily time spent trying to become knowledgeable about new programs, time spent implementing programs, and increased frustration levels. When do teachers' plates become too full? When is enough enough?

And it was frustration...we had two documents in Language Arts plus the Foundation documents coming out for Social Studies and Math. Even though we only had the initial drafts we were still making comments on them, we knew what was coming...and we were thinking, "Whoa!" All the other documents are in the process of being devised now...and then I think, "Teachers are pressured now?"

Rebecca has discovered that the time in which a program is introduced can be related to its level of acceptance and how teachers manage to implement it in their classrooms.

As a focus teacher Rebecca has worked along with fellow colleagues to implement First Steps in her own classroom and to encourage peers to begin using the First Steps teaching strategies and assessment tools. She has observed that when time frames are not put in place for the implementation of a new program it becomes much easier for teachers to set it aside without investing the time and energy needed to put the program in place.

People keep saying to us, "We know that you're overworked, we know that you are struggling with plotting the children, and we know it's going to take time..." I as a person don't want to be mandated to have this done in a certain period of time, but I also don't want to have years to do it. I am concerned that if we are given years to implement First Steps we will take the last two months of the third year to do it...I think this is happening to a certain extent in our district. I know that you want teachers to feel

comfortable and that you don't want them to feel overburdened, but if you really believe in the program you have to put some restrictions on that time frame. I find this very frustrating. It's too wide open right now...No one wants to make a decision saying, "This is a feasible number of children that we should be trying to see where they fit on the continuum."

As an individual teacher Rebecca has been implementing First Steps in her classroom. If she was not a focus teacher she would feel little pressure It is in her role as a focus teacher that she has felt the tremendous weight of responsibility. Over the years that Rebecca has been a focus teacher she has made changes in the way she approaches and works with her peers.

I honestly believe First Steps helps us with our teaching, assessments, and communications with parents. We have some work to do to convince others of that, but I do not believe we have to be selling it to every teacher and as focus teachers we have sort of backed off in that way...We are trying to make it successful by supporting teachers as much as we can, by bringing in resource book and videos, and by not having as many meetings where the agenda is mandated...I think we were moving too quickly by starting off in the fall of the year with the First Steps agenda. We've learned that the fall is not the time to start. That's one thing about a new program...you learn through experience. Now we see that by January people are saying, "Oh, I now see that my child can do this. She is struggling here." The teachers really know their students by January. When we were encouraging teachers to plot children on the continuum in October all we were doing was panicking them and ourselves included.

The time of year teachers are asked to assess students may affect the quality of the evaluations and the confidence with which teachers make their judgements. It would seem that *time* is necessary to come to know and understand the students with which we daily work.

As a focus teacher, **Rose** finds she dedicates more time to reading and thinking

about First Steps on a consistent basis.

> *When the principal asked me to become a focus teacher I said, "Sure" because I knew it would force me to delve into First Steps a bit more. I had to set aside a little bit more time to look at First Steps and to become knowledgeable about the program. It became a priority for me and I could see how it would help me.*

Taking on the role of a focus teacher was a personal choice for Rose. She believes there is a time when you have to push yourself in order to grow.

> *I think I've become a little more conscious of the fact that there are times when you have to push yourself a little bit so that you move off the plateau of learning that is so easy to settle on. There are times to push children a little bit too. We need to motivate and challenge them...I really hope First Steps lasts because it really helps us as teachers challenge children in specific skill areas...I hope First Steps proves that it isn't just another fad. Maybe in the beginning they went overboard on First Steps. Maybe the workshops scared people. I know that I need deadlines, but I don't like pressure so much.*

The implementation of First Steps has been a positive experience for Rose, but it has also been time consuming. Assessing using the continuum takes time. In the end it has empowered Rose and encouraged her in her communications with parents. Her time has been well spent.

> *Using the continuum has been more time consuming than other assessment tools I have used. There are more points to consider and you have to go through and check each of the indicators...It certainly is time consuming, but then assessing is. I don't do assessments lightly. You really have to sit down, think about the child, look at your notes, and sometimes do another conference with or observation of the child because you aren't sure if the child is really exhibiting the indicator you are looking for. This isn't an exercise in frustration for me, it's just time consuming. It has helped me a lot with parents. I'm much more confident sharing how a child has progressed with parents. The time has been worth it.*

Maybe time is one *colour* that formulates our thoughts and helps us to paint an accurate picture of the progress and capabilities of our children.

Kathleen remembers feeling little time pressure to implement First Steps when it was initially introduced at her school.

> *We knew that we were in the first group of schools given the reading workshop for First Steps...The presenter said we shouldn't get stressed about it. We were told to take our time, to read the guide books and to try out activities in our classroom. I didn't feel any pressure at first. Later on we were encouraged by our focus teachers to begin plotting our students...We were given supply teacher days so that the focus teacher and myself could work together plotting my students. We each had one day, but it wasn't enough. That was one of our big concerns as teachers, "We don't have time to sit with these children and read with them in order to plot them on the continuum." I think you really have to sit with children over a period of time, make notes on them and then go to the continuum to plot them.*

The need for time to assess children has been problematic for Kathleen. She believes it is necessary to assess children over a time period in order to present a true picture of their capabilities. One look through the window into their understandings and skill development is unfair. Of course one look doesn't take as much time, but it is also not as realistic in her view.

When Kathleen observes her colleagues in the upper elementary grades she feels empathy for them as they try to tackle the much larger task of plotting children who have already been in school for four or more years.

> *It's even more overwhelming for teachers that are starting to plot their students in grades four and five. They have to start way back at the beginning to plot students in the proper phase. It must be terribly time consuming...As a grade one teacher I know that my students will basically fall in the first two phases...At least that*

makes my job a little easier when compared to the intermediate teachers.

Kathleen has raised an important issue for us to consider. Should First Steps be introduced initially in the upper elementary grades? Would upper elementary teachers feel more comfortable with First Steps if they received students already plotted on the continuum? In light of the conversations I have had with upper elementary teachers concerning this very issue I think they would generally feel more at ease receiving students already plotted on the continuum. I believe this would also lessen the anxiety these teachers feel in the beginning stages of implementing First Steps in their classrooms.

Time itself can be hard to balance in the juggling act of life. Kathleen finds herself spread thin when she tries to accomplish the many tasks stacked on her daily plate.

I don't feel like I have given a lot of time to First Steps because of other added responsibilities, things I have taken on. University courses have been a priority at this stage in my career, for example. Putting my whole class on the continuum hasn't been a priority. I've plotted some children, but not all of them. So I still don't feel comfortable with First Steps...Once I have more time to explore and examine the First Steps program I'll feel more comfortable. Time is the key.

If only we had enough time to accomplish all that is set before us. I wonder if indeed we would truly be content or would our lives somehow become overshadowed by these things that demand our time?

Joan has listened to and watched colleagues as they have struggled with the need

for time to start First Steps and to assess students using the continuum. She sees this struggle, in part, as an outgrowth of the training they have received. For Joan this continues to be a source of frustration for her personally.

> *First Steps is not embraced as much as it could be because of the time teachers perceive it takes to start something new...I think time is always the consistent thing for teachers. In the university course that introduced me to First Steps, I felt that I could go at my own speed and implement the program as I was ready. In the school workshops that introduced my colleagues to First Steps I sensed that teachers felt they had to start First Steps "tomorrow". The teachers felt a lot of pressure. The two experiences were really different.*
>
> *Right now I can think of teachers who are doing a wonderful job implementing First Steps and yet they are complaining the whole way through it saying, "I don't have time for it. I just don't have time for it..." The strategies in First Steps are not new to these teachers but they struggle with time management and worry about getting to the children and plotting them on the continuum throughout the year.*

Somehow the timelines that are placed on us can either encourage or inhibit us as teachers. Is there a time balance to be found by district leaders hoping to successfully implement a new program?

Often, as teachers, we move from having time to work with new programs to time restraints, to pressure, and finally to frustration. Joan sees the question of time as the instigator for teachers voicing their increased frustrations over the continuum used in First Steps.

> *The teachers need time and they need time with individual children to place them on the continuum. They are feeling a sort of time pressure. Some teachers may not have had the time before and now they are being asked to conference with every single child and place them on the continuum...The teachers on our staff*

> *have felt that they need to have substantive evidence, a piece of work, for each indicator to show mastery by a child. If you have 25 to 30 children times every indicator, the task of showing a piece of work for each child and for every indicator is mammoth. They are very frustrated by this. Where do they find the time and how do they do that?*

This calls into question the way in which we as teachers collect student work for assessment and how we analyze it. In this instance, I wonder if one piece of student work exhibiting multiple indicators could not be used to plot a child on the continuum? This may possibly mean more thoughtful preparation on our part as teachers before actually assessing students, but the benefits may be worth the time in the end.

Maybe time is not as easily grasped as we would hope. Somehow it infiltrates our existence and measures our successes unknowingly. Our grasp of time seems to haunt our abilities to realize the accomplishments we seek or are *forced* to seek.

Finding the Links...A Matter of Connectedness

When someone or something familiar connects me to new understandings I feel secure. My confidence stays in tact and the unfamiliar becomes a challenge. To run from new *tensions* would be to miss the challenge. Sometimes we must face them head on and grow within their space confident in our prior experiences and those who walk beside us down the same uncertain path. We may even be surprised to find the familiar wrapped up in the unfamiliar.

Rebecca shared with us earlier that her first interaction with First Steps was to attempt to connect it with the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum

document and the New Brunswick curriculum. She questioned the fit of First Steps with the curriculum she was using. She found that it made sense and that there really was nothing new in the program to her pre-formulated literacy understandings. In fact, when Rebecca was given an opportunity to pilot the new Nelson Language Arts resource she saw its emphasis on reading strategies and vocabulary as a connection to First Steps.

> *I checked to see if the Nelson program would meet our mandate and it certainly did assist. It's one more vehicle to use and it fit perfectly with First Steps.*

Rebecca saw the need to link the literacy programs she used in her classroom. This has helped her in the daily task of organizing and presenting materials to her students. She has been able to connect outcomes from a variety of programs.

As a focus teacher Rebecca has also been able to work with teachers in both the early and upper elementary grades. Through these encounters she has observed the ease with which most teachers in the early grades adopt First Steps and the difficulties many teachers in the upper elementary grades face.

> *Most primary teachers are taking First Steps and using it more than the intermediate teachers. Primary teachers have always done authentic testing where they have made up their own assessments. They have looked at children in different developmental areas and given the individual group guided reading tests. Primary teachers do all the things that proponents of First Steps do.*

> *I have been a primary teacher for most of my career and I have a lot of early childhood background, whereas most of the intermediate teachers in my school have only taught in the intermediate grades throughout their careers...I've taught from kindergarten to grade six. So I can more easily see the developmental process because I have dealt with children at all different levels and at different times. If you haven't done this*

you're not as aware. Some of our teachers have only taught grade five and six their whole life and if you have only been in those older levels I don't think the awareness would be there. If you do move around it is to your advantage.

It would seem that teachers in the early elementary grades are able to connect the reading strategies and assessment tools found in First Steps more easily with their own teaching styles. This connection makes the implementation of First Steps easier for these teachers.

Rebecca believes that continued support from the district may determine the ultimate success of First Steps in the schools. Continued support for teachers as a whole and further support for individual teacher needs may make the difference for the future of this program in district schools.

The first time we had Jane and Jill (district support) come in they did group lessons highlighting certain indicators they were watching for. That gave everyone a boost. I can't say it went a long way, but it motivated them. It made them a little more enthusiastic and it made them aware of more indicators. Now we want it more personal. We've asked them to come in for half hour time slots, meet with an individual teacher about a particular indicator that they are really struggling with and let them talk one-on-one...The teachers need this individual support.

We definitely need the district to continue supporting our efforts to implement First Steps. If they drop Jane and Jill (hired by the district to help implement First Steps in the schools) next year the teachers will say, "Just what we thought...they're gone." It will affirm their thoughts that First Steps is just another bandwagon brought in on a whim. I would hope that if Jane and Jill have been hired this year that they would stay at least another year and then they would have to reassess where we are at. At least the continuums would have moved up by the end of that year and teachers would hopefully feel more comfortable with the process.

As teachers struggle to implement First Steps Rebecca has found that they need on-going support to encourage them in the process. It is easy to become isolated in our classrooms

and end up scrambling on our own to make a new program work or possibly give up completely. Rebecca sees on-going support as an important factor in the success of new programs.

Rose found that First Steps connected with her personal philosophy of reading instruction and assessment. It fit with her teaching style and connected her with teachers across the district.

> *First Steps is a good resource. We need some consistency across the board so that you feel you're not alone. Without the consistency you can easily feel isolated...First Steps gives us a common language. It mirrors so closely our Language Arts curriculum guide...which is so well done. The connections are there for teachers if they want them. I see a lot of connections because the teaching strategies really aren't anything new.*

As Rose worked with colleagues in the early elementary grades they searched for reasonable interpretations of unclear indicators through discussion and debate. In a sense, Rose connected with her peers in an earnest desire to help others in the implementation process of First Steps. As a group they supported individual needs and encouraged each other in their understandings of the assessment process.

> *As primary teachers we met quite a bit after school...There were three of us who were really into it. We had some lively discussions about what this and that indicator meant...I found our discussions gave me some things to look at that maybe I would have overlooked...Together we each plotted one little girl to compare our findings. Two of us agreed that she was an Early Reader and one teacher thought she was at the Transitional Phase. There was quite a bit of debate about her placement. We each had our arguments and shared our reasons for the assessments we made.*

Together, Rose and her peers reinforced and challenged each others understandings and

formulated conclusions. They created a supportive environment for each other to test and share individual insights and ideas.

For **Kathleen** the connections between First Steps and what she was already doing in her Language Arts classroom was evident from the beginning workshops she participated in.

> *I remember turning to a friend and we both said, "This isn't anything we haven't done before. What's new?" I didn't really take it seriously because I kept coming back to the fact that I was doing these things anyway.*

Kathleen did not see the need for major changes in her program because so many reading strategies and activities were already in place and being used in her daily classes. The continuum presented a new format for assessing her students, but again she was already using assessment tools comparable to the continuum and meeting with success.

In light of Kathleen's satisfaction with her Language Arts program, she was not in desperate need for support from the people around her. In fact, she believes that support can be difficult to give and receive if your teaching styles differ as professionals.

> *The focus teachers are very willing to give help and are wanting us to dive into First Steps...When I look at the things they want us to do a lot of them are whole group activities. I usually do not use many whole group activities in my classroom. The focus teachers can give you lots of support and lots of ideas but somehow it has to fit with your own teaching style. For example, one of the focus teachers gave me an activity that worked wonderfully with her class, but when I did it it bombed. As teachers, in general, we present things differently and our enthusiasm for certain activities differs...No matter how much support is offered to me if my heart isn't in working with whole group activities then it will come out in my teaching and it will affect my students.*

In order for *support* to be effective it should focus on the individual needs of a teacher and encourage them to develop their skills within their own teaching style and comfort range.

Joan also sees the importance of connecting a new program with your teaching style. For her it meant a certain level of comfort and ease with First Steps.

> *First Steps connected with my teaching style and because it connected that made the difference for me. I felt I was in my comfort zone because it wasn't a hundred percent new to me. I learned to look at things in my own teaching in a different way and I could see that what I was already doing fit with First Steps and I fit in with it as well.*

In the Saturday morning course sessions Joan found the personal support she needed. Together she worked with her colleagues and could ask the questions that had evolved throughout the week as she worked in her classroom. Joan's concern is for other teachers trying to implement First Steps who can't find the support they need. Where do they go?

> *Where do you get the support for First Steps? This is key. So you have your first training session, you're given a bit of time, then you're not seen again, and there's no networking. I think that it is important to have support through networking with teachers in other schools, with colleagues in your own school or from a good leader...You have to have a good instructional leader that will help teachers put First Steps into perspective so that they won't become frustrated. Someone to ask you, "Where are you now experiencing problems and what have you done about this particular part of First Steps to make it easier for you?" If you don't have that kind of support it's difficult...We need leaders who will help teachers make the connections with First Steps before it is presented as something new. They need to see that they are already doing similar activities in their own classrooms. There has to be an education throughout and I think that's what the problem is.*

Somehow it is in the connections we make with the world around us that we enter a comfort zone. Teachers need to see the connections between First Steps and their classroom programs. Maybe it is the trainers and leaders in First Steps that must act more as the crucial links needed to help connect teachers to this new program.

Accountability...Respect in the Balance

As educators we have been called to a place of accountability within our society. We are being asked to become more accountable for the decisions we make on student progress, be it academic or social/emotional, for parents, for students themselves, for teaching colleagues, and for those in administrative positions above us.

Rebecca has found that the developmental continuum in First Steps is forcing teachers to become more accountable.

> *I don't feel as New Brunswick teachers, possibly the whole Maritimes, we have been as accountable as people in other jobs. Now more things, such as the continuum in First Steps, are coming down and we do have to be more accountable. We should be more accountable, but when we're made accountable people get a little...you know, nervous...I think many teachers are uncomfortable with plotting children on the continuum because you actually have to put your decision down on paper with your John Henry on there and say, "I believe this child is in this phase..." In the end I do believe it has helped us and I think we are on track. We need more of it and it is perhaps frightening and maybe a little frustrating at first, but I think as it happens more teachers realize the purpose of and need for it.*

There is the fear of making a mistake that seems to accompany the process of becoming accountable. In essence that is why Rebecca has found teachers worrying about the

interpretation of each indicator on the continuum. They are afraid of not placing a child in the right phase.

> *We want to make sure we are not marking the students higher than they should be. Maybe we are more panicked than we should be, but teachers are worried about how they plot their students. They know parents will be wanting to know exactly how their children are progressing. Well, we didn't bear these children and we've only had them for one year...I think it's important that we let parents know that not many children in elementary school are ever going to go beyond the Transitional phase and that usually they will spend many years in one phase. Unfortunately, because we have a graded system people think there should be six reading levels in elementary school. Some people haven't got beyond that and they can't believe a child could be in the Early Reading phase for two and a half or three years and the Transitional phase for another...It would be easier to work with children that are all in the same phase and need the same teaching emphasis. This is not a reality in our classrooms today in Canada.*

As teachers, we need to inform parents about how children are assessed and what they can expect to see throughout the school year. Would we not help ourselves by further making parents aware of the unique classroom culture their children are a part of and how we are working to provide the individual instruction and assessments to promote the growth of their own child's literacy skills? It has been said that through knowledge comes understanding.

As **Rose** has worked with the developmental continuum found in First Steps she has used it as a tool to help her in the process of becoming more accountable to parents. She believes parents should be educated and helped to understand how she assesses and instructs students in her classroom.

> *The continuum as a form of assessment has been more time consuming, but I think it has helped a lot with parents. I am able to*

confidently share with parents that this is where their child has been, this is where they are, this is where they are going, and this is where they can go...The continuum has really validated what I am saying to parents. There is not always a whole lot of response or questions when I show the continuum to parents, but I certainly get the feeling that they appreciate seeing that what their child is doing is appropriate for their age and that they are showing progress...By using the First Steps continuum the parents can see that it is not just me making the assessments up. They can see it in the First Steps guide books from Australia if they need to. Again, this validates what we are saying as teachers.

Last year I had some difficult parents and First Steps helped me convince them that I wasn't a total wing nut...They didn't think their daughter was learning enough and I thought she was doing really well...When I showed them the continuum they could see where their child was and the steps she was taking...I think they wanted me to do word lists. They didn't feel reading a story and discussing it was an important language experience. First Steps helped them to see that it would help their child. This is when I really turned the corner...my confidence increased and I felt empowered. I hesitate to use that word because it is one of those nineties words, but it is exactly how I felt. It helped me put things into perspective for them and for me.

First Steps has helped Rose to become more confident in the assessments she makes. She feels a sense of empowerment rather than fear as she takes further steps toward being accountable to parents on a regular basis. It is a part of her program that has contributed to her success as an educator.

Kathleen uses a variety of authentic assessment tools in her classroom to support her evaluations of individual children. She sees the need for accountability in our classrooms and recognizes that sometimes it can be stressful for teachers trying to plot students on the continuum found in First Steps.

I think accountability is really important. First Steps has helped us with this. I think teachers can do great assessments of their

children without having the continuum. Teachers have done it for a long time, but the continuum has given some teachers who have felt like they were floundering something specific to focus on. They are able to see what they can do to help their students along the reading road...This builds confidence in teachers who need reassurance.

At the beginning I felt inadequate to plot my students and I wanted to make sure I plotted them correctly because I knew that the continuum would go on to next year's teacher...As a staff we had decided that the continuums would stay with their records and I didn't want my highlighted marks to come back and haunt me. "You said this child could do this and we don't see that..." The beginning process of plotting my students gave me a stressful feeling.

Kathleen feels comfortable with the assessment tools she uses on a regular basis in her classroom. For her assessment becomes stressful when she is beginning to use a new tool and is expected to immediately share her evaluations with peers and others. Like her colleagues, Kathleen would like to become more comfortable with the First Steps continuum before it is placed in student records.

Joan has also watched the *cry* for accountability in education grow over the years. She sees the assessment tools in First Steps as instruments to help teachers become more accountable.

When I was introduced to First Steps I was comfortable with it. It was the managerial things that I kept thinking about, "How will I put this all together? How do I know for sure that this child is now in the next phase? How am I going to make sure that next year's teacher knows what I've done with this continuum? How will I convey this information to parents?..." When I started working with my students I decided that I would eventually figure it out as I went along.

I believe that we needed First Steps because of accountability and the need for accountability. The pressure to be accountable is

> *around us everywhere. I think that teachers are now appreciating the fact that First Steps will help them to become more accountable in their communications with parents. Setting children in stages helps with that. It's on paper and it carries with the children to the next teacher...Over the years it has been hit and miss with some teachers who were very accountable and some who were not. So for some teachers I think First Steps is really needed.*

If we as educators are called to be accountable for our decisions and assessments, might we not do well to embrace tools, such as First Steps, that offer the possibility of lightening our load in the end? Although the call to accountability may be frightening, most teachers see the need for it in our schools and profession. Therefore, we must ask how district leaders will support and help teachers trying to become more accountable in their role as educators.

Final Thoughts

In Chapter Four I have attempted to share the individual experiences of four teachers implementing instructional and assessment practices found in the First Steps reading strand. Rebecca, Rose, Kathleen and Joan have willingly allowed us to view their pictures of experience through the eyes of their understandings. We have been given the unique opportunity to learn more about our world of education through their paintings. Why is it important or necessary to tell their individual stories? van Manen believes that, "We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (van Manen, 1990, p. 62). It is my hope that this will be true for all of us as individual educators.

To become more experienced ourselves we must also reflect on the portraits of

lived experience created for us. Throughout Chapter Four I have attempted to more fully understand the meanings each teacher has given to her story. In essence, I have engaged in the process of interpreting the canvases as they have been created for us. Gadamer distinguishes between two senses of interpretation: First, interpreting "is...clearly a revealing of what the thing itself already points to...We attempt to interpret that which at the same time conceals itself" and secondly, "when we interpret the meaning of something we actually interpret an interpretation" (Gadamer as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 26). By examining the colours of interpretation on each canvas I have taken one step closer to understanding the paintings unveiled for our viewing.

In Chapter Five, I will examine the meanings and interpretations that have surfaced in each unique portrait of lived experience. I will also consider the questions that have arisen out of the experiences painted for me and reflect on some of the implications for administrators, for curriculum leaders, and for us as teachers in the present education system.

Chapter Five

Reflections

Introduction

As I reflect on the journey I have embarked on over the last year, I am overwhelmed by the changes I have made in my understandings of others and myself as an individual educator. Phenomenology has heightened my appreciation for fellow colleagues and the individual experiences that paint their life portraits. By *stepping* into the teaching worlds of Rebecca, Rose, Kathleen, and Joan I have been able to look through the lenses of their understandings as they experience First Steps in the everyday life of their classrooms and through a variety of professional development opportunities. I believe we, as educators, often rush through our days without stopping to listen to our peers and their stories. We each hold nuggets of enlightenment to share with each other. It is when we are thoughtful and sensitive to those around us that we will grow individually and professionally in our daily lives. I have learned *deeply* from the four teachers who have willingly opened the doors to their experiences and allowed me to step in. Their stories resonate deep within me compelling me to examine what their portraits of lived experience mean for me, other teachers and educators, and district leaders involved in training teachers for the implementation of First Steps in their classrooms.

In this chapter, I will explore the meanings and interpretations that have surfaced in Chapter Four, but I will not attempt to answer every question that has arisen or pretend

that generalizations are possible. Phenomenological research does not aim at changing the *masses* or providing answers to be used by those in power to change a profession. Instead, phenomenology seeks to present the lived experience of an individual so that we might reflect on our own walk through this world and become more experienced in doing so. Ultimately, this will cause us to ask new questions pushing us forward on our journey to new understandings and reflections. "The art of questioning is the art of being able to ask further questions, that is, it is also the art of thought" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 208). So it is with thoughtful reverence that I delve further into the experiences of Rebecca, Rose, Kathleen, and Joan asking myself to carefully reflect on their lived experiences and the meanings they may bring to my life and others as I seek to grow in my understandings.

It is my intent to explore two areas that provide the *conceptual hubs* (see Appendix B) around which the meanings and interpretations of the portraits of lived experience, found in Chapter Four, will be thoughtfully and tactfully examined. In the end I will reflect on how I have changed through this process and what this phenomenological journey has meant to me as a person, as an educator, and as a student-researcher.

Being Accountable for New Program Inductions...Time...and Support

New programs, such as First Steps, will always appear on the doorsteps of our schools. As teachers we will face this countless times throughout our career. Each of the teachers I have interviewed have come face to face with First Steps through workshops

provided by their districts. Their experiences have differed and have forced me to reflect on the meanings that have emerged from their understandings of these experiences.

Joan's beginning experiences with First Steps were diverse and in many ways conflicted with each other. Through these contrasting experiences she has come to believe that educational leaders need to learn how to effectively teach teachers and how to support their growth as professionals. This resonates with Levine (1989) who writes,

> Attending to the developmental needs of adults requires patience. Adult development is complex, slow, and untidy... Patience and persistence are demanded of staff developers and principals who are committed to supporting and promoting adult development (p. 269).

Like our students, we as educators are learners and often need supportive guidance to encourage us to try new things in our classrooms. Each of the teachers I interviewed see on-going support from district leaders as being crucial to the success of a new program. Their views reflect Routman's (1991) when she writes..."For change to be effective, comprehensive, and lasting, staff development must occur cohesively over an extended period of time" (p. 461). It would be easy for me to agree whole-heartedly with these statements, and yet I cannot ignore the variations of individual understandings when reminded of Kathleen who has shared that no matter how much support she received it would not be helpful or effective if it did not match her teaching style. I can understand her concern. I've sat in meetings where I could not see the purpose for a new program presented. It didn't fit with my way of teaching and I did not see the need to fully incorporate it into my daily classroom routine. Maybe the question of support goes beyond simply providing it for long extended time periods. What should the role of

inservice leaders be? How can they effectively support and promote change?

Joan adamantly believes that inservice leaders should be able to help teachers make connections with what they are already doing in their classrooms. This would infer that the leaders must be aware of the various teaching styles of the teachers in their training sessions and work to encourage their success. Often teachers are talked to and then told to go away and implement a new program. Joan has seen this *done to teachers* many times. As I reflect on this I am reminded of Taylor, Boscato, and Beagley (1992) who suggest that "the old adage, "actions speak louder than words," is particularly appropriate to assisting staff make changes to their practice" (p. 53). Words may not be enough. Personally I cannot help but think of my role as a teacher to my students. If I were to stand in front of my class and verbally expound on the knowledge they are to internalize many of my students would quickly tune out or would have difficulty taking in all that was said. We use a variety of methods to teach our students and to meet their learning needs. As teachers and life long students (at least we are expected to be) at the same time, I believe we are still individuals as adults. We don't suddenly *all* fit in the same mold when we enter the profession of teaching. Could it be that some inservice leaders have forgotten that our needs are unique as persons and teachers? From my perspective and the perspective of the teachers I interviewed this would appear to be true.

The first introductions a teacher has to a new program would seem to be very important to its overall success. For Joan this was crucial as she reflected on the two contrasting beginning experiences she had with First Steps. In her comparison of the two experiences I see a difference in presentation style and the consideration of teachers'

needs. Joan found her experience frustrating at the school level and depended on her weekly sessions at the university to bring the clarity and guidance she needed. She believed that the differences in presentation styles dictated the level of acceptance found in the teachers attending the two First Steps sessions. In other words, how the presenters related to their audience directly affected the overall implementation of First Steps in individual classrooms. Each presenter made assumptions, consciously or subconsciously, about the needs of the teachers being inserviced and assumed their presentation would facilitate successful implementation. Michael Fullan (1982) addresses this in his book Assumptions About Change. He believes that "...the assumptions made by planners of change are extremely important determinants of whether the realities of implementation get confronted and ignored" (as cited in Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 91-92). These assumptions affect teachers and appear to be important factors contributing to the success or failure of a new program.

However, Rebecca and Kathleen both mentioned how uninspiring they found the beginning workshops they attended for First Steps and yet Rebecca continued on to become a focus teacher and Kathleen decided to approach First Steps in her own way as she works to implement it in her classroom. Rose found her beginning inservice to First Steps also dry, but she was enthusiastic because she looked beyond the presentation and found a program that she believed would work for her and meet her personal needs. Here I once again see variations in the experiences of my participants within the same phenomenon. If I am to be sensitive to their experiences I cannot generalize, but I must recognize the eidectic variations and share the reality faced by each individual

participant. Their experiences are unique. "Recognizing differences can help us become more aware of ourselves as well as the men and women with whom we work" (Levine, 1989, p. xvi). I see a myriad of factors affecting the implementation of new programs. Inservice leaders, individual teachers' beliefs and practices, unique circumstances found within schools, and so forth all play a part in this phenomenon. For each individual teacher the interplay of these factors appears to differ.

As *time* played out in the experiences of the teachers I interacted with it tended to center largely around the issue of assessment. Each of the teachers found the plotting of students on the developmental continuum time consuming. Whether they saw this as a negative or positive factor depended on their past experiences and personal needs. Routman (1991) expounds on this in her reminder that "even when teachers feel ready - both theoretically and practically - to move toward more holistic evaluation, just managing the time and logistics for on-going evaluation can be overwhelming" (p. 301). Rose saw this *time* as well spent and empowering in the end. She accepted the challenge and made room for these assessments in her time schedule. Rebecca was already spending a lot of time conferencing individual students and did not have to make big adjustments in her time table. Kathleen's daily and on-going assessments of her students progress was well in place when First Steps entered the arena. She struggled with the how and when of plotting students on the developmental continuum. Kathleen believes assessment should extend over *time* to truly benefit a child. One shot assessments are unfair in her view. She asserts that it takes time to really know and understand the students in her care. Kathleen can see how the developmental continuum in First Steps

promotes on-going assessment and is searching for ways to organize her time to effectively assess and plot her students. Trying to manage time and logistically work within its confines has played a part in each teacher's experience, but the ways in which they have dealt with it has been and still is a personal journey for each one.

Concern by many teachers over the developmental continuum and the "problems" surrounding its use extend into the arena of *accountability* and our *confidence* in our own abilities. These "problems" relate to time and the fear of inaccurate assessments. Kathleen shared her fears of making a mistake when plotting a child on the continuum that would come back to haunt her the following year. I often wonder if we, as teachers, pressure ourselves into being *perfect* users of a new program before we have even taken the *time* needed to become comfortable and confident with the new resources we are asked to use. Maybe we are too hard on ourselves and need to relax in the realization that it is alright to take our time as we venture down new paths. Routman (1991) even acknowledges that,

> ...change is difficult and risky for most of us. Whatever we do for the first time, whether it is small-group guided reading,...we are bound to bungle it at the start...This is natural behaviour for all new, comprehensive processes and procedures, we need to be forgiving and patient with ourselves...Slowly your confidence will build and your competence will grow (p. 4).

Time seems to infiltrate the need we feel to be more accountable and confident as educators in our classrooms. For Rose, her personal time spent learning and using the First Steps program empowered her in her interactions with parents and increased her confidence along the road of accountability. Other teachers need colleagues or district

leaders to provide on-going support and guidance. If teachers are being called to become more accountable I wonder, once again, about the role district leaders are to play in helping teachers in this venture. The issues surrounding the implementation of new programs, the need for more accountability in our classrooms, time, and support grow out of the individual experiences and needs of each teacher affected by changes in instructional and assessment practices. Beneath massive changes or program implementations are individuals with unique needs and strengths. My small study of four individual teachers has illuminated our need as a profession to recognize these differences and to learn from each other along the educational paths on which we journey

Acknowledging Our Individual Needs as Teachers

It seems somewhat easy for us as teachers to expound on the need for recognizing students as individuals with different strengths and needs. However, many educators struggle to see the same individuality within the teaching profession. To me this concept is simple to comprehend and yet I must admit that before engaging in this phenomenological study I often assumed *teachers*, all teachers, implemented new programs in their classroom similar to the way I would. I never really took the time to consider the complex nature of this *person* called a *teacher*. Our needs do differ. Depending on our past experiences and our individual educational beliefs our classroom practices can vary in a myriad of ways.

Rebecca, Rose, Joan, and Kathleen each found the First Steps philosophy on reading instruction to be similar to their own beliefs about reading. They did not find it

difficult to implement many of the instructional techniques suggested in First Steps. In fact, they had many of these practices already in place. Several of these teachers did mention that First Steps seemed to be easier for teachers in the early elementary grades to implement than for their colleagues in the upper elementary grades. This they attributed to different teaching styles and beliefs about how children learn to read. "These beliefs which are often implicit, show up in the classroom in the form of instructional behaviours and classroom interaction patterns" (Lenski, Wham, & Griffey, 1998, p. 218). Our beliefs about how children learn to read can have a positive or a negative effect on our instructional practices. How do I determine if I have the best instructional practices in place in my classroom? I could have a colleague or administrator come in and examine my techniques, but only I can thoughtfully and truthfully analyze my own beliefs about how children learn to read and make personal changes if needed. "Since we know that growth starts from within, the most effective forms of staff development begin with the *self*" (Levine, 1989, p. xv). We see this in Rose's own educational journey. She began with a need, she felt, to improve her Language Arts program. It began with her*self*, personal/professional readings, and then her introduction to First Steps. Rose was ready to make changes and to enhance her own reading program when the opportunity presented itself in the form of First Steps.

Kathleen's story differs from Rose's in that she did not feel a personal need to adopt the First Steps program for her classroom. She was pleased with her already existing and successful Language Arts program. However, she fell under the same mandate as every teacher in her district. She was not given a choice. Her personal and

professional needs were not considered. Implementing First Steps does not mean that Kathleen will have to make major changes in her programming, but it does not seem purposeful for her. If we were to re-examine Routman's (1991) five stages of change, as referred to earlier in this document, Kathleen would already be at stage four and five: "4. I'll adapt the experts' work to my own contexts. [and] 5. I trust myself as an observer-teacher-learner-evaluator" (p. 27). She is confident in herself as a teacher and quickly adapts experts' work to her own personal contexts. Kathleen and Rose differ in their need for First Steps. What can district leaders do to help each individual really meet their potential as a teacher? How should they acknowledge the differences found in the hundreds of teachers they are in contact with on a daily basis? These are questions for us to thoughtfully ponder. The answers are not so simple.

When it comes time to make changes in our instructional or assessment practices, either by adopting new techniques or by adding onto our existing practices, it can be a lonely journey without others walking beside us. We may be individuals, but we need other individuals to help us and to share their experiences with us throughout *the continuum of change*. If change occurs it is a process. Taylor, Boscato, and Beagley (1992) emphasize this in their article on *Changing school language teaching: Evolution not revolution*. Joan, Kathleen, Rose and Rebecca each mentioned the value they place on the times they are able to interact with colleagues to gather new insights, ask questions or to reinforce ideas they have already taken ownership of. The supportive environment Rose found among several peers struggling with the intricacies of First Steps challenged and encouraged her. The need for networking with others seemed

important to each of the individuals with whom I talked. Newman (1990) recalls her own experience as a teacher trying to implement change,

> ...I did not seek out teachers who were successfully implementing such change, lest my inadequacies become public and my own image of competence be tarnished. I was operating under the traditional illusion of the teacher as an expert, and I continued my struggle in isolation (p. 130).

Fear stopped her from networking with fellow colleagues. Unlike Newman (1990), Rebecca, Rose, Kathleen, and Joan have each found colleagues to network with and although they are still frustrated with some of the elements of First Steps they know they are not alone. I truly believe we are stronger standing together as teachers than alone. Our individual differences and experiences make us strong and can enlarge the understandings of those we interact with in the professional realm. Maybe it is in Gadamer's thoughts on play that we can view our professional relationships for "...there is such freedom that no game [professional walk] is ever played identically, and for all this variety it is still the one game" (Weinsheimer, 1985, p.105). We each bear the title *teacher* in this profession. We each *play* the same game and yet our experiences differ as we do as persons.

Enlightenment on My Journey

I have listened to four teachers tell their stories and share their experiences. I have sought to understand the meanings they have given to their lived experiences. I have reflected on their journeys and I have grown as a person. My journey this year has had its

trying and rewarding moments as I have struggled to understand phenomenology and the lived experiences of the teachers I interviewed. This process has stretched me and helped me to become more confident in who I am as an individual. In valuing others' experiences I have come to truly value my own lived experience. My daily meetings with life are not wasted experiences. They create who I am on the inside, which is ultimately reflected on the outside. My experiences this year have opened up an understanding that has restored a sense of embodied knowing (van Manen, 1991). I do not need to clamour about anymore to find my uniqueness...I am unique because I am a person.

As an educator I have become more thoughtful and conscious of my own and others' experiences. I respect our differences as teachers and realize that I will continue to become more experienced if I learn from the experiences of other colleagues. In September I will return to the classroom awaiting new opportunities to learn from and desiring to be sensitive to those I will work with on a daily basis.

As a student-researcher the doors to understanding phenomenology have just begun to open. I realize the research path is long and winding. My research will not stop at the end of this thesis. Phenomenology as a method and philosophy will continue to affect the way I teach and learn. I can translate the research process into the classroom decision making I must engage in. In doing this I would like to call myself a teacher-researcher. My journey has not ended, instead I have been inspired to experience and learn more.

On Being Thoughtful Educators

So what does this mean to you, as educators, who read my thesis? What are the implications for each of you educating young students or adults, and for those of you desiring to further expand our field of educational research? First, I will address teachers involved in the process of implementing First Steps in their own classroom. My thesis is not a work that has offered you answers to make the implementation of First Steps easy. It has offered the stories of other teachers involved in the same process as you are. Their experiences may have resonated with you or they may have challenged your personal thinking. I hope that as I have thoughtfully reflected on their experiences that you have yourself become more experienced and sensitive to the *worlds* of our fellow colleagues. If you have indulged yourself in this I would dare say you will not feel alone on your journey down the educational path.

To program decisionmakers at the district level and to educators involved in training teachers for the implementation of First Steps (or any other new program) I speak to you next. Again, my task here is not to generalize or to provide answers to make the implementation of a new program easy. If anything, it has been the questions that have arisen in my mind, as I have written this thesis, that may be of value to you. They are as follows:

~ Should new programs be mandated for all teachers? If so, should inservice sessions be shaped to best meet the individual needs of teachers?

~ How do we make room for the practical and philosophical differences adhered to by teachers?

~ How might curriculum leaders in school districts take time to acknowledge the vast responsibilities of teachers and what they are already doing in the classroom?

~ What time frame allowances would promote successful implementation of a new program?

~ How will district leaders support and help teachers trying to become more accountable in their roles as educators?

These questions provoke us to thoughtfully examine how we act as educators and the impact of our actions on others who are unique individuals themselves. Practically, this may encourage all of us to become more sensitive and tactful in our actions as we work with teachers at the school level. The four teachers who have shared their experiences with First Steps in this thesis do not share identical stories. As you have read their stories you have heard their concerns and may be asking yourself what their stories may mean for you personally in your actions as a trainer. Being thoughtful of the differences in beliefs about how children learn to read and the range of teaching styles that may congregate in your workshops is challenging. How will the differences be addressed? How will teachers be helped in their quest to be successful professionals? Each of us must recognize the needs before us and act with pedagogical thoughtfulness.

My study has added to the already existing research on First Steps and I believe it has also added a new dimension of understanding and sensitivity to the lived experiences of teachers attempting to implement new programs in their classroom. In understanding the uniqueness of each experience I have raised many questions for us as educators to reflect upon. Some of these questions deserve further investigation in other studies. In

particular, I see the need for continued research on effective inservicing to meet the individual needs of teachers. We know that teachers differ in their understandings and practices, but how can educational leaders practically meet the challenge of encouraging professional development in each teacher with whom they come into contact? What practical measures can be put in place, if at all? I believe this complex matter deserves further investigation and thoughtfulness. Really First Steps has served as a window into the larger phenomenon of promoting successful professional development in individual teachers under the same umbrella.

Final Thoughts

As a musician I am familiar with van Manen's (1991) reminder that rhythm or beat can exist without melody, but melody cannot exist without rhythm (p. 132). Yet it is the melody that brings beauty and meaning to my thirsty ears. The rhythmic steady beat can set the stage for a melody to *sing* forth. As I reflect upon my experience as an educator and the lived experiences of the teachers I have painted in this thesis, I see the mandated curriculums and the new programs introduced by our school districts as the steady beats that march into our educational lives. The melodies are the individual experiences of each teacher that clamours to be heard and understood. Their melodious songs fill the air and urge me to listen to their stories. Each melody is important. I cannot ignore them or something will be lost. The melodies sung in my thesis have transformed me. I have walked with them. I have wrapped myself in their stories and the scales have fallen off my eyes. I have seen in a new way what they are living and my life in turn has

become more meaningful. The beauty in my educational journey sings the melodies of *others* to whom I have thoughtfully listened. I have found my *pearls* in their experiences. I will never be the same again.

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Appendix A: Participants' Consent Form

34 Haines Crescent
Fredericton, NB
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(506) 472-2683
j935g@unb.ca

Dear _____:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of New Brunswick's Faculty of Education. I have been an elementary school teacher for the past eight years. Last fall, I was granted a leave of absence from my position in order to complete the requirements of the Masters of Education Program. To do this I am expected to write a thesis. The purpose of this letter is to seek your consent to be a participant in my thesis research project.

The area of interest I will be researching encompasses the individual experiences of teachers implementing assessment practices recommended in the First Steps Reading Program. As a researcher, I want to find out what it is like for teachers implementing a new program in their classrooms. As a teacher myself, I realize that each of us experiences change in our own unique way. Our individual experiences are important. Often they encourage others who are struggling in similar ways, and give perspective to those standing outside our frame of reference.

I would like to listen to individual teacher's stories, with a desire to become more thoughtful about and sensitive to the ways in which we live through the experiences of change in our own professional lives. In a sense we can become more experienced as we thoughtfully reflect on and search for meaning in our own experiences and those of others.

The research for my thesis will involve an interview with you, as a teacher participant, and possible sharing of some of the assessment tools you use in your classroom. I would also like to audio tape the interview for transcription. At the end of my research I will destroy the audio tapes. The interview length may vary depending on our conversations together. Interview times will be arranged (time and location) for your convenience. Following the first interview session, I may ask to meet with you again to follow-up on specific points raised in our beginning conversation. I will also make available drafts of my work so that you can confirm that I have reflected your thoughts, feelings, and experiences accurately.

Participant names will be kept confidential, unless you choose to make your name known. Pseudonyms will be used throughout my thesis since it will be a public piece of writing. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any questions concerning my procedures throughout the research process please feel free to call or talk with me.

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign the following page of this letter and return it to me at your convenience. If you have any further questions about this project feel free to contact me at home, 472-2683. Thank-you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Lynn Smith

Statement of Consent

"I have read the above description of the project and the researcher has answered my questions to my satisfaction. I, _____, agree to participate in this study."

_____ _____

Participant (signature) Date

****

"To the best of my ability, I, _____, have explained the purposes, benefits, risks and inconvenience of this study to _____ and I have answered all of his/her questions."

_____ _____

Researcher (signature) Date

What should the role of inservice leaders be? How can they effectively support and promote change?

How do we make room for the practical and philosophical differences adhered to by teachers?

How do I determine if I have the best instructional practices in place in my classroom?

Should new programs be mandated for all teachers?

What time frame allowances would promote the successful implementation of a new program?

What can district leaders do to help each individual meet their potential as a teacher?

How can district leaders support and help teachers trying to become more accountable in their roles as educators?

How can inservice leaders acknowledge the differences found in the hundreds of teachers they come into contact with on a daily basis?

A myriad of factors affect the implementation of new programs.

Our needs are unique as persons and teachers.

Need for networking with colleagues