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Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Reading First

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Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Reading First

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Curriculum and Instruction
Literacy Studies

By

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B.S., Louisiana State University, 1997
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1998

December, 2009

Dedication

This work is dedicated to all of the teachers who have inspired me throughout my life.

Most especially,

My Father, who art in heaven

My very first teachers, my parents, Reginald and Lynn Billiot who made me the person I am today

My husband, Leon, who taught me about true love and forgiveness

My daughter, Raelynn, who taught me about unconditional love and true joy

My babies, Andria, Adrienne, Iliana, Theo, Shaun and Kingston for the many lessons about life and love

My grandparents, Noella and Catherine for the Christian values you instilled in my parents who then passed them on to me

My mentor, Dr. Judith G. Miranti, for inspiring and supporting me on this journey

Our Deepest Fear

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to those who made the completion of this journey possible:

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand teachers' experiences related to the implementation of *Reading First* in the classroom and more specifically, how Reading First has impacted curriculum, instruction, assessment, student achievement, and professional development.

The participants for this study were five certified, kindergarten and first grade public school teachers. In depth interviews were conducted with each participant regarding her experiences with the implementation of Reading First. Once collected, the data was then analyzed according to a method advanced by Moustakas (1994) and reported. Findings and recommendations included, but were not limited to the following:

1. There are advantages and disadvantages for both students and teachers. The biggest disadvantage for teachers was the lack of flexibility and instructional decision-making imposed by Reading First.
2. Most of the teachers felt there needed to be more of a focus on comprehension, not just phoneme segmentation and oral reading fluency.
3. Some teachers felt that Reading First hurts some of the kids, especially the lowest kids and the above level kids.
4. All participants in this study reported collaboration with other teachers, interventionists, and reading coaches regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment and student achievement.
5. All of the teachers stated that they have received professional training as a result of Reading First which in turn has helped them to become more effective teachers.

The researcher believes that the administrators of Reading First need to be more flexible and receptive to the input of those, namely teachers, who implement the directives. There needs to be a course of action allowing for a review to be done and modifications to be made to ensure that the premise of Reading First is upheld.

KEYWORDS: Reading First, Literacy, Education

Chapter One

Overview

Introduction

After spending billions of dollars and creating numerous programs, the federal government determined that American children were not meeting the goals set forth for academic excellence. According to the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress, approximately 70% of inner city fourth graders are not able to read at a basic level on national reading tests. According to the Digest of Education Statistics, approximately one third of this country's college freshmen are required to enroll in a remedial course before they enroll in regular college courses. In addition, research showed that the achievement gap between white students and minority students (specifically African American and Hispanic American students) grew continuously. According to the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress, reading assessment scores cited 38% of Anglo fourth grade students scored at or above proficient and 70% of Anglo fourth graders scored at or above basic. In comparison 10% of African American fourth graders scored at or above proficient, and 35% of African American fourth graders scored at or above basic. Only 13% of Hispanic fourth graders scored at or above proficient, and 37% of Hispanic fourth graders scored at or above basic. In math, the gap is slightly wider. About 34% of Anglo fourth graders scored at or above proficient, while only 5% of African American fourth graders achieved proficient or above. Out of this crisis, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was born.

History of the Federal Government's Role in Public Education

The extent of the federal government's role in public education reaches back to our country's humble beginnings. America's founding fathers realized the necessity of creating and

sustaining an educated citizenry. These insightful leaders also questioned the level of power the federal government should exert on those educational policies to be determined by the newly formed federal government. “The original framers of the Constitution wanted to give states ultimate power over education, so that this power was not placed only in the hands of a few at the federal level” (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005, p.182). As a result, the federal government has kept a watchful eye on the operation of elementary and secondary public school systems while each state government has implemented and provided oversight for its own systems. The Constitution of the United States of America neglects to refer to schools, schooling or education. “The founders assumed that the education of American children would remain a chief concern reserved for states exclusively” (Graham, 1984, p.xvii). According to the Tenth Amendment of the Constitution, it is the state and local governments’ responsibilities to educate the country’s youth. “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (Constitution, 2003).

Passed in 1647, the “old deluder Satan” act is significant because it marked the establishment of public education. Towns with populations of 50 families or more were required to compensate someone to teach writing and reading. Parents were concerned with educating their children so that they could read the bible (Gruffendorf,et.el, 1994). Since our country’s birth, the federal government’s role in education was one of advisor giving guidance through court decisions and assisting states with the development of their own educational systems. These systems were created with the help of such actions as the first federal enactment supporting education, the Northwest Ordinance of 1785, and the establishment of the Federal Office of Education in 1867, and the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 when the United States Supreme Court ruled against segregation in schools. As important as the

federal government's assistance was, the establishment of public schools between 1787 and the middle of the twentieth century was solely the responsibility of state and local governments. During this time, the federal government's role was that of supervisor and protector of educational freedoms (Spring, 2001).

Surprisingly, in 1957 a major historical event piqued the federal government's interest in schools. The launch of the Russian satellite, Sputnik, drew attention to the quality of American schools.

With the Cold War at its height, the launch of Sputnik created public concern that the American education system was technologically inferior to Russia's and a risk to national defense. As a result, Congress passed the *National Defense Education Act* of 1958 to provide additional funding to schools and states in support of science, mathematics and foreign language instruction. (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005, p. 190)

Among the harshest critics of American public education, Vice Admiral Hyman G. Rickover declared that the Russian launch of Sputnik surely meant that the United States was failing in the technological and military race against Russia. In an interview conducted by Edward R. Murrow, Rickover stated that education

is even more important than atomic power in the navy, for if our people are not properly educated in accordance with the terrific requirements of this rapidly spiraling scientific and industrial civilization, we are bound to go down. The Russians apparently have recognized this. (Spring, 2002, p.368)

This criticism was the impetus for educational reform and marked the beginning of significant change in the function of the federal government in the future of public education.

This change in the level of involvement of the federal government in public schooling manifested itself in a variety of ways. In addition to critical Supreme Court decisions, the President of the United States and the Secretary of Education became more involved. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson and Commissioner of Education, Francis Keppel, promoted the passing of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* in order to address the problems

of poverty and segregation in schools. *ESEA* would award an annual sum of \$11 billion to qualifying schools. Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, vetoed three of the six appropriation bills for the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare asserting that federal funds for K-12 education programs did not result in any significant change (Spring, 2002). Despite the fact that federal interest in elementary and secondary education wavered, schools welcomed any federal financial boost.

In 1981, under the direction of President Ronald Reagan and his Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was created and charged to present a report on the quality of education in America. On April 26, 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released their report entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which asserted, "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (U.S. Dept. of Education 1983, p. 1). Once again, global competition spurred increased concern regarding the state of public education. The authors of *A Nation at Risk* boldly stated,

We have squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge . . . Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. (p. 1)

Later administrations would be concerned with the direction of federal education policies as well. For example, both the educational policies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton were influenced by interest and concern about global educational competition which led to federal discussion and nationwide goals. In September 1989 in Charlottesville, Virginia, an education summit commenced and six *National Education Goals* were established by the nation's governors and confirmed by President George H.W. Bush. At the summit, President Bush

announced his vision stating, “From this day forward let us be an America of tougher standards, of higher goals . . . and our goals must be national, not federal” (Friedman, 2004, p. 60). The six goals included the following: Readiness for School, High School Completion, Student Achievement and Citizenship, Science and Mathematics Improvement, Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning, Safe Disciplined and Drug-Free Schools.

Then governor, Bill Clinton served as director for the National Education Goals summit. Subsequently, in 1992 when Bill Clinton became president, he did not make extensive modifications to federal education policies and in 1994, Members of Congress passed President Clinton’s *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, which was built on Bush’s *National Education Goals*. In addition to the original six goals, two were added which included: Teacher Education and Professional Development, and Parent Participation (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1994). “The overall goal of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* again linked education to the needs of big business by emphasizing the importance of educating workers for competition in international trade” (Spring, 2001, p. 434).

Yet again, with a new presidential administration came new education reform. In January 2001, President George W. Bush announced drastic plans for education reform that he referred to as “the cornerstone” (Bush, 2001, forward) of his administration. In response to the professed failure of earlier education reforms, the *No Child Left Behind Act* was passed by Congress on January 8, 2002 (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2003). *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) has had a drastic effect on U.S. K-12 public school administrators, teachers and students. NCLB was supposed to improve education by promoting high accountability among educators for student achievement.

History of Reading Instruction in the United States: 1900-2000

In this section, I will give a brief history of reading instruction in the United States from 1900-

1999. All of the information in this section summarizes the International Reading Association's publication entitled *A Short History of United States' Reading Research and Instruction: 1900 to 2006* by Lou Ann Sears. The primary focus of reading from 1880-1910 was to develop an appreciation and interest in literature. Early reading instruction focused on phonics instruction and later reading instruction occurred in the context of instruction in English. With the publishing of E. B. Huey's book *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in 1908, the definition of reading began to change and to include what we now refer to as comprehension. This sparked new research and according to Flesch (1955) led to the generation of the whole-word method. World War I revealed that many soldiers could not read well enough to follow simple printed instructions. Thus, from 1910-1920 reading instruction became a huge concern and the topic of rigorous study. Prominent researchers like Charles Judd, Francis Parker, William S. Gray, Edward Thorndike, and Ernest Horn were at the forefront of the study of reading. This era laid the foundation for the development of basal reading programs and reading achievement tests.

From 1920-1930, research of the time influenced instruction and the materials used. Teachers continued with basal reading instruction. Basals began to evolve; they became more colorful and focused on silent reading versus oral reading. Reading instruction was conducted in the confines of a reading class, as opposed to an English class. New research topics included reading readiness, reading disability, attention to individual needs, the use of reading in content areas, and continued study of the whole-word method. New materials and resources were developed for teachers allowing for varied methods of teaching reading. In 1928 the National Education Association was founded.

In the 1930's students' interest was considered a factor in reading instruction. The look-say method continued to gain momentum, and was incorporated into some basal programs, which were still the primary form of instruction. Newer basal programs were implemented. Research topics during this era were vast and included: disabled readers, spelling, reading instruction in high school, comprehension, determining text difficulty, and phonics. Based on research findings of the day, some schools hired reading supervisors that teachers were to report to.

During the 1940's, basal reading instruction was continued. Although not as much, research continued. Topics included: reading education for adults, reading for a well-rounded life, developmental reading for high school and college students, remedial reading, and comprehension. During this era, the concept of reading clinics labs were formed, along with new reading programs that included students' interests and integrated science and social studies. Concern for teacher training also emerged and led to the creation of teacher workshops, trainings and summer course offerings.

From 1950-1959, most reading research dealt with reading disability and teaching focused on teaching to each student's potential. Cloze activities became a topic of interest. The launch of Sputnik and the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It* by Rudolf Flesh ushered in a renewed focus on phonics and letter-sound recognition. It sparked a hot debate and thus began the reading wars. Teachers were under harsh criticism from phonics proponents and the public in general and profiting publishers had a huge influence on reading instruction.

In the 1960's, use of basal readers lessened and writing was a topic of interest. A surge of research ushered in this era, addressing a variety of topics. Areas for research included:

comprehension, cloze procedure, reading in the content areas, and technology in reading instruction. Reading readiness was thrown out. Around this time reading instruction was standardized and included defined criteria for evaluation purposes. Developmental reading programs for adults were popular. Jeanne Chall, noted phonics proponent, opposed basal reading program publishers for their unjustifiable influence on how children were taught to read by persuading district representatives to purchase specific programs. New to this time period were criterion-referenced tests, informal assessment, and a host of instructional strategies (i.e. Directed Reading Activity, advance organizers, etc). In addition, some states created a certification for reading specialists. There were four major studies during this era which included: Ken Goodman's study on oral and reading miscues, First Grade Studies, Dolores Durkin's study on early reading, and the Children's Television Workshop's *Sesame Street*. Ken Goodman's study on oral and reading miscues would eventually give rise to the whole language movement.

From 1970-1979, there was a tremendous amount of new research occurring. Several significant studies were conducted, studies that have had a profound impact on reading instruction. Those landmark studies include:

- Friere's study on the school's role in reducing social inequality (1970);
- Read's study recognizing that children come to school with knowledge about language (1971);
- Sticht, Caylor, Kern, and Fox's study of literacy in the workplace (1972);
- Pichert and Anderson's study of prior knowledge and literacy (1977);
- Durkin's studies on comprehension (1978 to 1979); and
- Clay's research on Reading Recovery (1979)

Perhaps most important during this era (and arguably one the most important points in the history of reading instruction) was the birth and growth of Ken Goodman's whole-language movement. Another important movement was related to the institution of standardized testing

requiring achievement of minimum proficiency levels, a predecessor of current high-stakes testing. Despite the research and advancements of this era, many teachers still used basal reading programs to teach reading. Basals were improving, now including excerpts from children's literature and a variety of stories.

During the 1980's, most teachers taught using the basal reading programs of the previous decade. Toward the end of the 1980's, basals were changing to include more real literature and authentic activities. Important studies of this decade included:

- Marie Clay's work with Reading Recovery (1985);
- Donald Graves' work on the writing process (1981);
- Nancy Atwell's work on student interest (1987); and
- Nagy and Herman's work on vocabulary instruction (1985)

During this time period, the state-wide textbook adoptions occurred and the idea of mastery learning was launched. With the new adoptions, came mandates to use the textbooks as written and loss of teacher autonomy. Many district provided personnel to supervise teachers to ensure proper implementation of proven scientific methods. Despite these challenges, there was a renewed interest in using real literature within a sociolinguistic framework advanced by Vygotsky (i.e. literature circles, book clubs, etc).

In the 1990's while some educators were adhering to the whole language ideology, most teachers were still locked into the "one-size-fits all" philosophy. Qualitative research was more prevalent than in years past. While diversity emerged as a "new" topic of interest, phonics re-entered the scene. As a new decade begins, new legislation is introduced. In the next section, I will give a detailed explanation of Reading First.

Overview of Reading First

As stated in the executive summary of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), President George W. Bush and Members of Congress believe that unproven fads in instructional

methodologies are largely to blame for the crisis we are facing in education today. According to the U. S. Department of Education's *No Child Left Behind* website, this legislation seeks to "Provide teachers up-to-date information on how to use scientific-based research to teach reading skills to children; and actually use the methods and related material in the classroom."

Furthermore, President George W. Bush asserts that years of research conclude that reading is essential to all learning. Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act established the Reading First program.

The Reading First program is based on "scientifically-based research" that identifies and defines five essential components of early reading. These components were derived from the National Reading Panel Report delivered in the year 2000. According to the Report of the National Reading Panel entitled *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*, the panel identified a limited number of studies that met the following criteria:

- The research has to address achievement of one or more skills in reading. Studies of effective teaching were not included unless reading achievement was measured;
- The research had to be generalizable to the larger population of students. Thus, case studies with small numbers of children were excluded from the analysis;
- The research needed to examine the effectiveness of an approach. This type of research requires the comparison of different treatments, such as comparing the achievement of students using guided repeated reading to another group of students not using that strategy. This experimental research approach was necessary to understand whether changes in achievement could be attributed to the treatment;
- The research needed to be regarded as high quality. An article or book had to have been reviewed by other scholars from the relevant field and judged to be sound and worthy of publication. Therefore, discussions of studies reported in meetings or conferences without a stringent peer review process were excluded from the analysis.

Discounting thousands of research articles with this narrow definition of research (i.e. only experimental or quasi-experimental research designs), the National Reading Panel drastically

changed the face of reading instruction in American classrooms. The Panel's work identified five essential components of successful reading instruction. The components include:

- Phonemic awareness—the ability to hear and identify individual sounds in spoken words.
- Phonics—the relationship between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language.
- Fluency—the capacity to read text accurately and quickly.
- Vocabulary—the words students must know to communicate effectively.
- Comprehension—the ability to understand and gain meaning from what has been read.

The NCLB website (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) identifies Reading First as a \$900 million state grant program which endorses the use of scientifically based research to provide high-quality reading instruction for grades K-3. The goal is to help every student in the country to become a fluent reader by third grade. States that create a comprehensive reading program rooted in scientific research for K-3 students are eligible to apply for grants under the Reading First initiative. Due to its tie to federal funding, these findings have had a tremendous impact on curriculum, instruction, and assessment in American classrooms.

Research Question

The following research question serves as a guide for this study: What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of Reading First? More specifically, this research seeks to examine teachers' perceptions of the impact of Reading First on curriculum, instruction, assessment, student achievement and teachers' professional development.

Significance of this Study

As is often the case, with change comes controversy. Due to the profound impact of Reading First on teaching and learning, it is essential for educators to examine its perceived effect. This study will add to the existing limited body of qualitative research with regards to the implementation of Reading First. As a result of Reading First being one of the most sweeping

literacy education reform policies in American history, critical examination and analysis is crucial.

Limitations of the Study

This study represents one school district in one state. Ten teachers were selected to participate rather than all Reading First teachers in the district. Additionally, the teachers selected have taught in Reading First Schools since its implementation in the district.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the history of federal education policy and an introduction to Reading First. Chapter 2 will provide a review of literature, analyzing *Reading First*. Chapter 3 contains a detailed description of the qualitative methodology used in this study, with a focus on conducting individual interviews followed by phenomenological analysis.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

No Child Left Behind and Reading First

On January 8, 2002 at Hamilton High School in Hamilton, Ohio, President George W. Bush signed the *No Child Left Behind Act* into law, a reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (Bush, 2002, p.1). *No Child Left Behind* encompasses seven critical components (Bush, 2001, p.3) which include:

1. Closing the Achievement Gap
2. Improving Literacy by Putting Reading First
3. Expanding Freedom and Reducing Bureaucracy
4. Rewarding Success and Sanctioning Failure
5. Promoting Informed Parental Choice
6. Improving Teacher Quality
7. Making Schools Safer for the 21st Century

According to the *No Child Left Behind* website (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), in addition to the seven critical components the Act is based on four basic principles which include stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. Thus, it appears that Reading First was born of the component dedicated to improving literacy by putting reading first, and the principle related to utilizing proven education methods.

As noted in Title I, Part B, Subpart 1, Section 1201 of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, the purposes of Reading First are to provide assistance to state educational agencies and local educational agencies in:

- establishing reading programs for students in grades K-3 that are based on scientifically based reading research to make certain that every student can read at grade level no later than the end of third grade;
- preparing all teachers through professional development so that teachers can recognize specific reading difficulties facing their students and have the necessary materials (including technological resources) to effectively help students learn to read;

- selecting and administering screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments; and
- strengthening coordination between schools, early literacy programs, and family literacy programs to advance reading achievement for all children.

As stated in the document *Guidance for the Reading First Program* (U. S. Department of Education, 2002), state educational agencies (i.e. Louisiana Department of Education) submit an application for Reading First funds to the United States Secretary of Education. Applications are made for a specified time period, not to exceed six years. Upon receiving approval from the Secretary of Education, applications undergo a rigorous expert review process. Once state educational agencies are approved, they collect and review applications from local educational agencies. In turn, state educational agencies must allocate funds to each eligible local educational agency (i.e. school systems, charter school systems, etc.) giving priority to those in which at least 15% of the children served are from families with incomes below the poverty line, or at least 6,500 children served are from families with incomes below the poverty line (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). Additionally, according to *NCLB*, all state educational agencies are required to disperse Reading First funds to local educational agencies that are identified for school improvement, and based on the most current data available have the highest percentages of children in grades K-3 reading below grade level (U. S. Department of Education, 2002).

National Reading Panel: Scientifically Based Reading Research

In 1997 Congress asked the director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the Secretary of Education to convene a national panel of experts to produce a report that evaluated the status of research-based knowledge, including the efficacy of various approaches to teaching children to read (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Thus, the National Reading Panel was formed and started their work by thoroughly analyzing the National Research Council Committee's publication, *Preventing*

Reading Difficulties in Young Children. After meeting, discussing and debating, the Panel settled on the five essential components (Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary and Comprehension) as topics for further study (NICHD, 2000). Once these topics were identified, the panel developed and adopted a set of rigorous research methodological standards. The research had to employ systematic, empirical methods that drew on observation or experiment, involve rigorous data analyses that were adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn; had to rely on measurements or observational methods that provided valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and had to have been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts (NICHD, 2000). In addition, studies should “allow for replicability” (U. S. Department of Education, 2002, p.5). These standards guided the screening of the research literature and identified a final set of experimental or quasi-experimental research studies that were then subjected to detailed analysis. The methodological standards adopted by the National Reading Panel are the same as those used in efficacy studies in both psychology and medicine. The Panel stated (NICHD, 2000) that it was their belief that reading research should be conducted no less rigorously than medical and/or psychological treatments. The Panel alluded to their lack of examination of non-experimental studies stating, “such standards have not been universally accepted and used in reading education research. Unfortunately, only a fraction of the total reading research literature met the Panel’s standards for use in the topic analyses” (NICHD, 2000, p. 5). For example, while the Panel initially identified 1,962 studies relevant to phonemic awareness instruction, only 52 of those studies met the specific research methodology criteria (NICHD, 2000). Opponents like Garan (2005) wondered how the Panel could discredit and exclude so many research studies.

A proponent of scientifically based reading research and George Bush's first director of the Institute of Education Sciences (previously titled the Office of Educational Research and Improvement), Grover J. Whitehurst stated that his office "engages in a variety of activities to encourage the use of scientifically based research in education policy and decision making throughout the United States" (Whitehurst, 2001, p. 1). Therefore, in an effort to assist educational leaders with scientific evidence about the effectiveness of instructional programs and practices related to student achievement and outcomes, the Institute of Education Sciences established the *What Works Clearinghouse* website. Whitehurst went on to claim,

There is every reason to believe that, if we invest in the education sciences and develop mechanisms to encourage evidence based practices, we will see progress and transformation . . . of the same order and magnitude as we have seen in medicine and agriculture. (Whitehurst, 2005, p. 1)

Many researchers and educational professionals object to such a narrow view of "valid" research. In direct response to Whitehurst's comment noted above, Mary Smith in *Political Spectacle and the Fate of American Schools* (2004) posed the following questions:

Does it make sense to apply the same criteria to educational research as to medical research? Or is this identification yet another political intrusion into the endeavors of truth seeking? Whether education experiments share sufficient characteristics with medical experiments is anything but settled, and there is no institutional forum for considering the issue. (p. 184)

Smith (2004) and Garan (2005) also questioned how the NRP could impose the model of medical research on a complex, behaviorally based discipline. They argue that the conditions for conducting medical research are quite different than those for conducting educational research. Smith (2004) gives us several examples. One example relates to the level of control. For instance, control over variable and treatment conditions is much greater in medical research than in educational research. Another example relates to the fact that comparative experiments on teaching and instructional methods present complications that do not exist in the medical field

(Smith, 2004). With regards to the notion that studies should be able to be replicated, Allington (2005) argues that effective instruction cannot be packaged and repeated over and over again. Allington (2005) also states that, “Effective teachers are much like the effective physician who offers a multi-pronged approach to reducing cholesterol, for instance, an approach that includes changes in diet, added exercise, and the use of drug therapy” (p. 464). Thus, effective doctors know that the information learned from clinical trials applies to most people in the population and that when treating patients they must also consider the individual patient’s history and reaction to treatments. Along the same vein, Allington (2002) rejects the idea of a national reading curriculum and a one size-fits-all mentality.

In opposition to the notion of using scientifically based research exclusively, Smith (2004) asserts that no study is perfect or completely comprehensive, noting that one study cannot address all of the important aspects of a policy and its effects. Thus, we can make the connection that in order to see the whole picture, we need to examine all types of research available. She continues to point out that all researchers make choices, and those choices ultimately impact the study, findings and others’ interpretations. For example, one researcher may measure immediate but not long-term effects of policy. One researcher may limit the study to a single measure while another uses multiple measures; other researchers study the workings of the policy in the field while others may study just the policy itself. Some may interpret statistical findings conservatively using circumspect language, while others may use more latitude and speculative or generous language (Smith, 2004). There have even been accusations that Timothy Shanahan misrepresented findings of the National Reading Panel to further his own agenda. Garan (2005) cautions readers about being seduced by words and insists that ethical scientists must “approach

their work with humility and discipline and resist the temptation to indulge their own pet notions at the expense of the truth and in defiance of the evidence” (p. 438). Garan stated

It is this fundamental precept that defenders of the Report of the National Reading Panel (NRP) have not faced. As a result, instead of an evidence-based guide that can inform practice in reading instruction, we are faced with a biased report characterized by misreported, overgeneralized findings that do not inform but rather mandate education policy— ironically— in the name of science (Garan, 2005, p. 438).

Whether dubbed right or wrong, scientifically based reading research as identified by the National Reading Panel report is the foundation for Reading First. Many critics fear that the process used by the National Reading Panel marked the beginning of a federal hijacking of public education, and these critics loathe the promotion of the idea of scientific research as a cure-all for the United States’ ailing public education system (Garan, 2005).

National Reading Panel: Findings

While the *Report of the National Reading Panel: Reports of the Subgroups* (NICHD, 2000), provides an in-depth review of the Panel’s findings, the summary report, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidenced Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (NICHD, 2000) provides an overview of the major findings and determinations made by the National Reading Panel. For this study, I will examine the areas of alphabets (including phonemic awareness and phonics instruction), fluency, comprehension (including vocabulary instruction and text comprehension), and teacher education and reading instruction. Therefore, the information in the subsections immediately following are paraphrased and summarized from the two aforementioned reports published by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000), along with the document *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (2001)

published collaboratively by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute for Literacy and the U. S. Department of Education.

Alphabetic Phonemic Awareness (PA). PA instruction involves the ability to recognize and work with individual sounds in spoken words. Students who are phonemically aware understand that words are made of speech sounds or phonemes and can manipulate the sounds in spoken words (NICHD, NIFL & USDE, 2001). In addition to experimental studies, the Panel found correlational studies which “identify PA and letter knowledge as the two best school entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of instruction” (NICHD, 2000, p. 7). As stated previously, the Panel initially identified 1,962 studies relevant to phonemic awareness instruction, yet only 52 of those studies met the specific research methodology criteria. Data from the 52 studies were entered into a meta-analysis. The overall findings were identified as follows:

- PA training was the cause of improvement in phonemic awareness, reading, and spelling in normally developing readers following the training;
- PA training was not effective for improvement in spelling in disabled readers;
- The PA training found to be most effective in improving phonemic awareness, reading and spelling skills was explicit and systematic;
- PA training is not a complete reading program, but it is a critical component; and
- PA instruction should not exceed 20 hours over an entire school year (NICHD, 2000).

It should be noted that all of the programs in the studies included in the analysis provided explicit instruction in phonemic awareness (NICHD, 2000). Therefore, it is the recommended

that explicit phonemic awareness instruction be implemented in elementary classrooms as a necessary part of a complete reading program (NICHD, NIFL & DHHS, 2001).

Alphabets: Phonics Instruction. Phonics instruction teaches children the relationships between the letters (graphemes) of written language and the sounds of spoken language (phonemes). Ultimately, children should apply their knowledge of phonics to reading and writing (NICHD, NIFL & DHHS, 2001). Perhaps this has been the most focused on and controversial topics identified by the National Reading Panel. According to the summary report of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), there are five different approaches to teaching phonics, varying in unit of analysis. The approaches include analogy phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, phonics through spelling, and synthetic phonics. Phonics can be taught systematically or incidentally. The Panel's report states that the initial search for studies included 1,373 studies, but only 38 of those studies qualified as scientifically based reading research. After meta-analysis of 38 studies, the Panel concluded that explicit, systematic phonics instruction improves K-6 students' success in reading and that systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than little or no phonics instruction (NICHD, 2000). Further findings concluded that systematic synthetic phonics instruction had a substantial effect on disabled readers' (i.e. students with disabilities, low-achieving students without disabilities, and low SES students) reading skills. All students included in the studies examined demonstrated improved reading skills from explicit, systematic phonics instruction, but typically kindergarten and first grade students benefited most (NICHD, 2000). Although the Panel's review indicates that explicit, systematic phonics instruction is effective and should be implemented in kindergarten and elementary grades 1 and 2 as a critical component of a complete reading program, they are cautious about endorsing all kinds of phonics instruction (NICHD, NIFL &

USDE, 2001). The Panel suggests that effective phonics programs should focus on phonological knowledge as well as on the successful application of that knowledge. The Panel also discussed the need for teacher training, teacher ownership and ability to tailor phonics instruction to meet the specific needs of the students in a particular class (NICHD, 2000).

Giving more insight into the research done on this topic NRP member, Joanne Yatvin (2003) reported that due to time constraints the Alphabetic subcommittee could not complete the phonics report by the specified deadline. Therefore, an outside researcher was commissioned to conduct the review. Yatvin (2003) stated that, “The phonics report in its completed form was not seen, even by the whole subcommittee, of which I am a member, until February 25, four days before the full report was to go to press.” Yatvin (2003) concluded, “Thus the phonics report became part of the full report of the NRP uncorrected, undeliberated, and unapproved.”

Another criticism of this portion of the report deals with the fact that there are contradictions between the information in the full report and what is published in the summary. Garan (2005) asserted that while the panel concluded in the summary report that the “the application of phonics to real reading and writing must be the ultimate goal of phonics instruction,” the full report of the NRP primarily contains studies which focus on phonics as an isolated skill with an overall goal of decoding, not comprehending. Garan (2005) concluded, “The panel labeled the overall findings based on these discrete reading subskills as “reading growth” even though the meta-analysis showed that these isolated skills did not significantly affect children’s comprehension of connected text.”

Fluency. Fluency is the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy, and appropriate expression. Fluency is one of many factors that impact comprehension (NICHD, NIFL & USDE, 2001). Two instructional approaches (each having variations) have usually been

associated with teaching reading fluency (NICHD, 2000). The first, repeated guided oral reading, requires students to read orally while accepting direct instruction in the form of comments from a teacher. The second approach, independent silent reading, requires students to read independently with minimal direction and feedback.

The National Reading Panel's first review of the literature for studies on fluency yielded 364 relevant studies, but only 16 met the established methodological criteria and were included in the meta-analysis. Twenty-one additional studies were identified and used in the qualitative interpretation of the effectiveness of the two aforementioned instructional strategies (NICHD, 2000).

Based on meta-analysis of 16 studies, the Panel concluded that repeated oral guided reading that incorporated supervision and assistance from teachers, parents, or classmates had a significantly positive effect on word recognition, fluency and comprehension across various grades with both regular and special education students (NICHD, 2000). One limitation the panel found was that there were no long-term (multiyear) studies to verify the relationship between guided oral reading and fluency.

According to the *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*, the Panel identified hundreds of correlational studies that suggest that the more students read, the better their fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Since correlation does not mean causation, the panel reviewed 14 studies that "examined the specific impact that encouraging students to read more has on fluency, vocabulary and comprehension" (NICHD, 2000, p. 12). Since these studies could not be subjected to a meta-analysis, the Panel identified converging trends and findings from the data. After such analysis, the Panel could not

substantiate a positive relationship between instructional programs that encourage large amounts of independent reading and improvements in fluency (NICHD, 2000). However, the Panel's summary report stated that their findings do not negate the possibility of independent silent reading having a positive impact on fluency; at this time, sufficient data do not exist to establish causation. Thus, the panel made no recommendation regarding the implementation of independent silent reading. Instead the following instructional recommendations were given to teachers:

- Model fluent reading;
- Have students repeatedly read reasonably easy passages aloud with guidance; and
- Have students participate in choral reading, tape-assisted reading, partner reading, and/or readers' theatre (NICHD, NIFL & USDE, 2001).

Comprehension: Vocabulary Instruction. Vocabulary plays a crucial role in comprehension. The larger a reader's vocabulary, the easier it is to comprehend a text (NICHD, NIFL & USDE, 2001). The Panel identified 20,000 research citations involving reading comprehension. After screening, all but 50 studies were discarded (NICHD, 2000). Upon further review, the Panel concluded that they could not conduct a meta-analysis "because there was a small number of research studies in vocabulary instruction dealing with a relatively large number of variables" (NICHD, 2000, p. 14). However, there were recent meta-analyses for some variables, and that information was reviewed. Additionally, the vocabulary instruction database was used to identify trends across studies (NICHD, 2000).

After reviewing data, the Panel concluded that vocabulary instruction enhances comprehension when methods are appropriate for the age and ability of the reader, and utilization of computers for vocabulary instruction seems to be effective (NICHD, 2000). The research also showed that vocabulary can successfully be learned before reading a story, through context in stories, and through repeated exposure. In addition, research found that low-achieving

students can enhance vocabulary knowledge by substituting easy words for harder words (NICHD, 2000).

With this research in mind, the Panel recognized that there is little research on the best methods of vocabulary instruction. Therefore, the Panel recommended that vocabulary be taught directly and indirectly, students be repeatedly exposed to vocabulary words, vocabulary instruction should occur in rich contexts and utilize computer technology, and instruction incorporates a variety of teaching methods such as using word parts, using dictionaries and other reference aids, and using context clues (NICHD, NIFL & USDE, 2001).

Comprehension: Text Comprehension Instruction. According to Harris and Hodges (1995), comprehension consists of purposeful thinking during which meaning is created through transactions between text and reader. The data examined by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) suggests that comprehension is improved when readers make text-to-world connections. The initial searches (from 1980-1997 and from 1970-1979) identified 481 studies for review. Of those, 205 studies were examined based on the established methodological criteria (NICHD, 2000). Meta-analysis was not conducted because of the large variation in methodologies used. In their review, the Panel noted the following seven categories of text comprehension instruction that improve comprehension with normally developing readers:

- Comprehension monitoring;
- Cooperative learning;
- Use of graphic and semantic organizers;
- Question answering receiving immediate feedback from teacher;
- Question generation;
- Use of story structure to recall; and
- Summarization (NICHD, NIFL & USDE, 2001).

While questions remain about which strategies are most effective with specific age groups, the evidence examined suggests that using a variety of the instructional strategies mentioned will help to improve reading text comprehension.

In summary, federal legislation linked to Reading First imposes several mandates related to assessment of students, curriculum selection, and professional development for teachers. The law dictates that recipients of Reading First grants must select and administer approved, valid and reliable screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based reading assessments for the essential components of reading (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). The data from such assessments must be collected, summarized and reported to document the effectiveness of the reading program. With regard to curriculum, Reading First schools must select and implement a program of reading instruction based on the previously discussed scientifically based reading research that includes the essential components of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (U. S. Department of Education, 2002). The reading program must be used to provide instruction to children in grades K-3 who have reading difficulties (including children with learning disabilities and limited English proficiency) and/or are at-risk for being referred to special education because of reading deficits, particularly deficits in the essential components of reading skills. Under the provisions of Reading First, professional development must be provided to both regular and special education teachers in grades K-3. Teachers must be afforded training by eligible providers on the essential components of reading instruction, as well as on the use of the scientifically based reading program and the selected assessments.

Reading First in Louisiana.

According to the Executive Summary of Louisiana Reading Reforms and the Louisiana Reading First Plan, Louisiana's *Reading First Plan* "reflects a research-based foundation of

support for a comprehensive, statewide reading plan, designed to bring about improvement in the area of reading for all stakeholders, and the realignment of resources for English/language arts, including reading” (p.1). The state chose to use the Learning-Intensive Networking Communities for Success (LINCS) model to ensure a rigorous and consistent approach for the delivery of reading instruction, continuous job-embedded professional development, and proper use of assessments. The plan also requires collaboration with higher education institutions (LDE, p.23).

Louisiana’s *Reading First* application lists a number of actions to be carried out by the state to address closing the gap in students’ reading achievement. First, the state intended to generate “a comprehensive and shared knowledge base across multiple agencies” (LDE, p.1) regarding the use of scientifically based reading research for the improvement of student achievement in reading. Secondly, the state implemented the LINCS model, in part to serve as a mechanism for providing professional development in the area of scientifically based reading research and to create professional learning communities. In addition, the state placed District Assistance Teams (DAT) in schools to provide training and technical support on implementing the five essential components of reading and approved assessments. Thirdly, the state identified appropriate, scientifically based core reading programs and valid and reliable assessments for use by *Reading First* schools. Additionally, Louisiana’s *Reading First* Plan identifies eight key characteristics that must be exhibited in *Reading First* classrooms:

- Implementation of a high-quality reading program based on scientifically based research that includes instructional content based on the five essential components of reading;
- Coherent instructional design to include explicit instructional strategies, coordinated instructional sequences, ample practice opportunities, and aligned student materials;
- Ongoing use of assessments that inform instructional decisions;
- Protected, dedicated 120 minute block of time for the five essential components of reading instruction;
- Clear expectations for student reading achievement and clear strategies for monitoring progress;

- Small group instruction as appropriate to meet student needs with placement and movement based on ongoing assessment;
- Active student engagement in a variety of reading-based activities connected to the essential components of reading and clearly articulated academic goals; and
- Instruction designed to bring all children to grade level, with appropriate, scientifically based intervention strategies aligned with classroom instruction designed for students not making sufficient progress (p. 24).

According to a press release dated March 18, 2003, by then Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, Louisiana was awarded \$19.2 million for the first year of the Reading First grant to assist schools and districts to improve students' reading achievement using scientifically based reading instruction. In total, Louisiana was slated to receive \$124.7 million over six years to implement *Reading First*. According to the Louisiana Department of Education's website, there are over 100 schools receiving *Reading First* funds. The district being used in this study (Apple School District) located in Louisiana. It is a large district consisting of 84 schools and over 50,000 students. According to H. Jones (personal communication, March 18, 2009), Apple School District has been involved in *Reading First* since 2004. In the spring semester of 2004, Apple School District was awarded a *Reading First* sub-grant for five schools. At this point, school based literacy coaches and a District Reading First Coach were hired and began DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2006) training and administration. Training continued through the summer for literacy coaches and teachers in the *Reading First* schools (H. Jones, personal communication, March 18, 2009). Since the implementation of *Reading First*, teachers and coaches have participated in numerous hours of professional development related to the use of scientifically based reading research in the classroom, most especially in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. I pose the question, how will teachers react to the mandates of Reading First if their philosophy of teaching reading differs from that outlined by Reading First?

Summary

This chapter provided a review of literature, analyzing *Reading First*. Chapter 3 will contain a detailed description of the qualitative methodology used in this study, phenomenology, with a focus on conducting individual interviews followed by analysis.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research assists us in investigating and comprehending the meanings that people assign to the experiences in their lives (Creswell, 1998). Given that the purpose of this study is to understand teachers' experiences related to the implementation of *Reading First* in the classroom, an interpretive and naturalistic approach, in which data is collected through stories, seemed most appropriate. While quantitative research reveals statistics, it cannot furnish in-depth insight as to how teachers describe their experiences. Giorgi (1985) asserts that quantitative methods either overlook or distort lived and experienced phenomena. Additionally, Silverman (2001) advises "there are areas of social reality which statistics cannot measure" and that qualitative methods "can provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative data" (p. 32). Creswell (1998) identified the following characteristics of qualitative research:

- The data source is the natural setting of the participant.
- The researcher is the key instrument of data collection.
- The data are collected as words or pictures.
- The analysis, as well as the outcomes, is the result of the process of induction.
- The primary focus is on the meaning of a participant's experience.
- The narrative uses expressive language to understand and interpret participants' stories (p. 16).

Creswell (2003) states, "I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of materials" (p. 13). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative researchers inductively generate

themes and patterns of meaning that emerge from the data (Creswell, 2003). I believe that phenomenology, the qualitative method used in this study, enabled the participant and the researcher to delve into and explain the “many colors” and “different textures” of their experiences.

Rationale for Phenomenology

According to Kockelmans (1976), “the term *phenomenology* was used as early as 1765 in philosophy and occasionally in Kant’s writings” (p. 24). Even though Hegel is credited with defining phenomenology as “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experience” (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 24), Edmund Husserl is deemed the father of phenomenology (Smith, 2007). Husserl was influenced by several philosophers, including Franz Brentano, Carl Stumpf, Rene Descartes, and Immanuel Kant (Moustakas, 1994).

The purpose of the phenomenological research method is to understand the essence or universal meanings of a phenomenon as revealed through the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Smith (2003) notes that life consists of various types of active and passive experiences that include cognitive intentions (i.e. perception, thought, emotion, desire and imagination). Smith (2003) writes:

The discipline of phenomenology may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomena’: appearances of things or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. (p. 1)

Giorgi (1985) described the phenomenological research method as being descriptive, requiring reduction, including the search for essences, and involving intentionality or consciousness. Additionally, Moustakas (1994) asserted that phenomenology attempts to provide a holistic view of participants’ experiences, utilizes description to explore, and engages the

researcher as a crucial part of the research process. The challenge of this method is to “explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49).

The Researcher

As a phenomenological researcher, I have examined and set aside my beliefs and understand how my own personal and professional experiences have influenced me. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that the researcher “engage in prior ethnography to provide both a springboard and a benchmark for the more formal study to follow” (p. 252). I always wanted to be a teacher and I always loved reading. Early in my career as a first grade teacher, I encountered many students with reading difficulties and deficiencies. My heart went out to these kids, and I found myself constantly trying to find ways to help them. At that point, I decided to pursue a graduate degree and to specialize in the area of literacy, particularly to become a Reading Specialist. Armed with new knowledge, I sought to work intimately with my students, especially those demonstrating deficiencies in reading. I began teaching reading using small groups, implementing literacy centers in my classroom, and utilizing portfolios to demonstrate student improvement. I subscribed to Marie Clay’s (1993) ideas about literacy development and instruction, as well as those advanced by Fountas and Pinnell (1996), and began using on-going assessment (both formal and informal measures) to guide my instruction. My students flourished and made leaps and bounds over the course of the academic year. As I began doctoral studies, my beliefs were further confirmed and supported. Given my experiences, I have strong opinions and am passionate about literacy instruction.

As stated previously, I must examine and set aside prejudgments concerning the phenomenon being studied (this “setting aside” is known as the Epoche process). This must be done in order for the researcher to be receptive and open to the descriptions and meanings of participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, I examined my perspectives about teaching reading. I believe that children learn best in an environment that stimulates naturalistic interaction and engagement. I believe that children should be immersed in a print-rich environment and provided with a multitude of opportunities for reading and writing in meaningful and useful contexts.

I also believe that teachers are more aware of their students’ needs than anyone or any curriculum, and well trained teachers must have a large repertoire of teaching strategies and activities in order to adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students. I believe that instructional decisions should be dictated by students’ needs, not by a mandated curriculum. I disagree with the “one-size fits all” philosophy proposed by the *Reading First* legislation, and I am deeply concerned about the narrowly defined category of research on which this law is based.

I recognize that the participants in my study will express a variety of beliefs and views related to teaching in *Reading First* schools. I will respect and value their experiences and honor their perspectives. I also recognize that many students have and will benefit from the provisions of *Reading First*. I am open to the truths revealed through this study.

Research Site

I studied Reading First teachers in Apple School District for a number of reasons. First, I chose this district because many of my students have field placements there and will eventually be employed in this school system. I wanted to know, first hand, how the teachers have experienced Reading First and how I can better prepare my students for implementing such

programs. Second, I chose this district because I have working relationships with a number of employees. Therefore, I felt it would be easier to gain entry and be granted approval to conduct this study. Finally, I chose this district because of proximity. Most of the Reading First schools in this district are relatively close in distance to my home and work place.

Initially, I applied for permission to conduct this research project at the University of New Orleans. To get permission, I submitted a detailed application to the Institutional Review Board. Upon receiving the IRB's approval, I applied for permission to conduct research in Apple School District. The detailed application was sent to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Once approval was received, I negotiated access to Reading First teachers from the district's Reading First director. The Reading First director provided me with a list of teachers who met the criteria set forth in the next section. After receiving the list of possible participants, a letter was sent to their principals requesting permission to interview the teachers. In addition, reading coaches distributed consent forms to those interested in participating in the study. The consent forms were collected by reading coaches and interviews were scheduled. I received each participant's signed consent form on the date of her interview.

Participant Selection

Because qualitative research helps us explore and understand the meanings that people assign to their life experiences (Creswell, 1998), purposeful sampling plays a significant role in a qualitative phenomenological study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants must be selected in a purposeful and informed manner. In order to develop a deep understanding of the phenomena being examined, I selected participants according to the guidelines set forth by both Miles and Huberman (1994) and Seidman (1998). These guidelines include criterion sampling and maximum variation. According to Creswell (1998) a phenomenological study employs a limited

range of sampling strategies because the study should only include participants who have experienced the phenomena being examined. Initially for this study, participants were going to be selected based on the criteria below:

- Current, full-time classroom teacher in a *Reading First* school in Apple School District located in Louisiana.
- Has been a full-time classroom teacher in a *Reading First* school since the 2004-2005 school year in Apple School District located in Louisiana.

The maximum variation strategy was used to address all school sites and all potential participants for the study. Accessing the maximum range of sites and participants who make up the desired population and selection of representative participants will possibly draw more readers who can relate to those selected and to the topic of study (Seidman, 1998). Seidman (1998) writes, “In my experience maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies” (p. 45).

The initial list of possible participants was compiled based on the previously stated criteria by the Apple School District’s Reading First Coach. Once identified, we realized that there were less than a handful of teachers teaching in Reading First schools that had been there since the program’s implementation. Two participants met the criteria, two participants have been teaching for less than two years and one participant was a Reading First teacher and is now an interventionist. This topic will be discussed in more detail in future chapters. Efforts were made to address maximum variation techniques, but the diminished pool of possible participants limited options. Therefore, those teachers who teach in Reading First schools and indicated an interest in participating were invited to join the study. Creswell (1998) states, “For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews with as many as ten individuals” (p.122). For this study, five participants were selected according to the sampling guidelines previously mentioned.

Procedures for Data Collection

Typically, the phenomenological interview constitutes an informal, interactive process which consists of using open-ended comments and questions to allow participants to reconstruct their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Seidman (1998) states,

The purpose of interviewing is not to get answers to questions, not to test hypotheses, and not to “evaluate” as the term is used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (p. 3)

For this study, I used a single, in-depth interview. This approach is modified, but is based on a structure developed by Seidman (1998). Seidman’s (1998) protocol requires conducting a series of three separate interviews with each participant. During the first interview, Seidman (1998) suggests that the interviewer focuses on the participant’s life history in light of the topic. During the second interview, Seidman (1998) identifies the focus as the details of the participants’ present lived experience related to the topic of study. Finally, the last interview requires the participants to reflect on the meaning of the lived experience under study (Seidman, 1998).

While the protocol used for this study varies from Seidman’s (1998) approach in the number of interviews conducted, the protocol is similar to Seidman’s (1998) approach in that the interview will address each of the focus areas he identified. For example, the focus questions include

- How did you come to be a teacher? How did you come to be a teacher in a *Reading First* school? What experiences led you here?
- Tell me about your experiences as a *Reading First* teacher?
- How do you feel that *Reading First* has impacted your teaching?

In addition to the focus questions, follow-up questions were asked in response to participants’ answers. Although Seidman (1998) prefers that researchers adhere to the structure he developed, he recognizes that researchers will have reasons for modifying the model. Seidman (1998) states,

“As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience in the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can certainly be explored” (p. 21-22).

The interviews were audio-taped for the purpose of transcription and analysis. The data is stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. After the data was collected, it was analyzed and interpreted to uncover the meanings and essence of the phenomenon.

Procedures for Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2003),

The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data. (p. 190)

The method of data analysis used in this study is Moustakas’ (1994) modified version of van Kaam’s (1959, 1966) method of analysis. After reading all transcribed interviews and using the completed transcription of each participant, I engaged in each of the following steps:

1. *Listing and Preliminary Grouping.* According to Moustakas (1994), procedural analysis begins with horizontalization which involves listing every statement relevant to the experience and regarding every statement as having “equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence” (p. 95).
2. *Reduction and Elimination.* Moustakas (1994) purports that the purpose of reduction and elimination is to determine the invariant constituents, or the nature and essences, of the statements listed through horizontalization. Reduction does not refer to condensing, but rather the act of reflective thinking and understanding. Van Manen (2004) states, “To come to an understanding of the unique meaning and significance of something, we need to reflect on it by practicing a thoughtful attentiveness” (*Reduction*, Section 25). Moustakas (1994) instructs researchers to test each preliminary statement in order to determine the Invariant Constituents by considering the following:
 - a. “Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?” (p. 121)
 - b. “Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.” (p. 121)This step also involves the elimination of overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions yielding the beginnings of “rich, thick description” (Moustakas, 1994).

3. *Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents.* This step requires clustering and labeling of the identified invariant constituents. The results are the core themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).
4. *Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes: Validation.* During this step, the invariant constituents and themes are referenced to the original transcriptions for each participant to assess whether they are (a) explicitly expressed in the transcripts, (b) compatible if not explicitly stated, and (c) relevant or not to the participant's experience and should be deleted (Moustakas, 1994).
5. *Individual Textural Description.* Using the validated invariant constituents from the previous step, researchers create a narrative description, using verbatim examples from the original transcripts, for each participant (Moustakas, 1994).
6. *Individual Structural Description with Imaginative Variation.* Using the individual textural description and imaginative variation, the researchers strive to identify structural themes from the individual textural descriptions. During this stage, it is necessary to explore the "countless possibilities that are intimately connected with the essences and meanings of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). Variation focuses on meanings and relies on "intuition as a way of integrating structures into essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). Structures should be examined from various perspectives (i.e. time, space, relation to others, etc), and Merriam (1998) states, "the process is highly intuitive; a researcher cannot always explain where an insight came from or how relationships among data were detected" (p. 156). Therefore, the individual structural description examines "the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98).
7. *Individual Textural-Structural Description.* The final step of this method of analysis incorporates previous steps to describe the meanings and essences of the experience, including both the invariant constituents and themes (Moustakas, 1994).
8. *Composite Description/Thematic Analysis.* Using the individual textural-structural descriptions, researchers create a composite description of the meanings and essences of the entire group (Moustakas, 1994).

Methods for Ensuring Quality

According to Merriam (1998), "All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner" (p. 198). Validity and reliability are terms usually associated with quantitative research methods. When evaluating qualitative studies, Strauss and Corbin (1990) advise that the "usual canons of 'good science' ...require redefinition in order to fit the realities of qualitative research" (p. 250). Due to the naturalistic context of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified criteria to test the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research:

- “Credibility” – referring to the formulation of a credible research design to ensure the production of reliable and trustworthy findings.
- “Transferability” – which refers to providing the conditions which allow readers to transfer information about the findings to their own experiences.
- “Dependability” – referring to an evaluation of the research process to guarantee equivalent treatment for all participants.
- “Confirmability” – referring to an external review of the data, findings, and recommendations to guarantee they are based on data.

In addition to and in alignment with the aforementioned criteria, Creswell (2003, p. 196)

identified and Lincoln and Guba (1985) confirmed the following strategies for verifying qualitative findings which will be utilized in this study:

1. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert, “The ultimate credibility of the outcomes depends upon the extent to which trust had been established” (p. 257). I hope to establish trust with the participants through personal interactions and communications. These include speaking at one of the district’s Reading Leadership Team meetings, phone calls, emails and letters.
2. In addition to conducting interviews, I will keep notes and observations to document the research experience. The purpose of keeping notes and making observations is to add to the “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2003) to enhance transferability. Merriam (1998) elaborates on this strategy stating that rich, thick description, “provides enough description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (p. 211). In addition, as stated previously, the implementation of purposeful sampling and maximum variation will possibly attract more readers who can relate to the topic of study (Seidman, 1998).
3. Member-checking also improves a qualitative study’s credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member-checking is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). For this study, the participants will be invited to correct errors, and provide feedback to ensure the accuracy of the data.
4. Peer-review and debriefing will help to ensure credibility, consistency, and neutrality. For this study, peer reviewers (i.e. committee chair, colleagues/peers, second reader) will be used to filter and clarify ideas that are implicit to the researcher. In addition, they will help to ensure rigor which adds to the study’s credibility, dependability, and confirmability. According to Conroy (2003), this “helps to ensure the explicitness of the shared world of the researched and the researcher” (p. 30).
5. The researcher must enact Epoche to set aside her preconceptions and refrain from judgment to gain a pure view of the participants’ experiences. Moustakas (1994) writes, “In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense . . .”(p. 33). Creswell (1998) writes, “In this clarification, the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (p. 202). Previously noted in this chapter in the section titled, *The Researcher*, I articulated my views regarding the topic. In addition, since the early stages of this

process, I have kept a journal for reflection. This journal will be used throughout the research process to monitor and make known new ideas and understandings. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 327), this strategy “has broad-ranging application” to each of the four areas (i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability). By recording decisions and rationales related to methodology, as well as personal insights and understandings the research process will be strengthened.

6. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation improves the chances that “the findings and interpretations will be found credible” (p. 305). Creswell (2002) writes, “triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection” (p. 280). For this study, triangulation will involve the transcription of in-depth interviews, feedback from participants, data from the researcher’s journal, input from committee members, and researcher coding and analysis.

It was my intention to conduct a rigorous and trustworthy study that adds to the body of research related to the topic of study. I employed each of the strategies outlined in this chapter to ensure a quality study.

Summary

Chapter Three included a rationale for the decision to utilize qualitative methods, more specifically phenomenological research methods, to explore and understand teachers’ experiences as they implement *Reading First* in their classrooms. There was also an in-depth discussion of the processes of data collection and analysis, as well as strategies for verification to ensure a credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable study. The following chapters will deal with data analysis and report findings.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis

Stories from the Field

Participants' stories are the individual textural descriptions, narratives using verbatim passages from the original transcripts. I believe they form the heart of this qualitative study. The reader hears the participants' stories in their own words, pure and unpolluted. At the end of each individual textural description, a structural description is presented in table form. The tables portray the topics or themes that emerged from the individual textural descriptions. Lastly, the textural-structural description, which incorporates all previous data analysis steps, yields a more complete understanding of the experiences of teachers in Reading First schools. A thematic analysis closes the chapter.

Profile #1: Amy

I've been a teacher for a year and a half. I've been at this Reading First school for a year now. This is my only experience with Reading First. I don't have anything else to compare it with. There were some things that were fun, but then there were some things that the kids and I got bored with. But, we had to continue because it was in the Reading First plan. We just had to work through it.

After lunch, the kids go into their intervention groups. At the beginning of the year, I didn't have an intervention group because most of my students were at benchmark. The interventionist would come in and she'd work with her group and I would have the rest of the kids. I did whole group stuff with them. I was missing about six or seven kids. During the second half of the year, I had a group and an interventionist had a group. I also had special ed. children

in my class through inclusion. The special ed. teacher also came in and pulled her special ed. students. So, I actually had two interventionists at one time, which was awesome.

After intervention groups which lasted 30 minutes, we'd go into our 60-minute whole group time. After our whole group lesson, we'd go into centers. The kids looked forward to having centers at the end of the day. I used all of the center flip charts. I had six centers: writing center, reading center, literacy center, etc. They just worked on different skills. The kids spent 30 minutes in each center.

In the beginning, they loved it. They couldn't wait to get to centers. I used centers as a form of bribery. Then, towards the end of the year, man, it was so hard to keep them engaged and in the centers. They got bored because they had done the same activities too many times. They were like, "Oh, do we have to do this again? It's the same thing." I switched out a few things, but they were just getting tired.

The *Treasures* reading series (Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, n.d.) is really good. It came with a pile of stuff that you could use. There was so much stuff that I couldn't use it all! The series came with a lot of resource books, tons of resource books. I definitely use those; they're awesome.

I wish that I had the opportunity to take all of this and sit with it for about a week and just look through everything, it wouldn't have felt so overwhelming. When I started, it seemed like every day they were dropping new stuff off. I was wondering where on earth am I going to put all of this stuff? What am I going to do with it? It was a lot. I didn't receive any professional development related to the series. I know that they had some type of training, but I wasn't a classroom teacher at that time. At the beginning of the year, the reading coaches sat down with us and had collaborative planning meetings where they talked about certain parts of the series.

We talked about how to use the manuals, but I didn't get any type of official training. At your request, the coaches will come in and model a technique. Training would have been very beneficial. It would be awesome if we had a person that would come in at the beginning of the year and do a refresher to get everybody on board, then again in the middle of the year because a lot of teachers and students start slacking and need a fresh start again.

We have so many programs to do, it's a big problem. We have to follow the core and WOW. I feel that Reading First contradicts the WOW program. For example, for Halloween, the focus skill was adjectives. I had this awesome book that had a bazillion adjectives in it-all about pumpkins, and mushy, and squishy, and all that. So, I was going to bring in a real pumpkin, and we were going to cut it while I was reading this book. It was a great lesson according to the WOW program. Well, lo and behold, they pop in for a Reading First visit.

Well, I got cited because I was using a book that wasn't included in the core. Now, I'm like, how can I do anything that fits WOW when I'm in a Reading First school and not get in trouble for it? It's like we have to do one thing for one observer and another thing for some other observer. I feel like I'm on stage and my performance changes depending on who's watching. I wish they were all on the same page.

I feel like I'm spread thin because we're also a Kagan school, so we have to incorporate the Kagan cooperative learning strategies. Oh, and we've got to do thinking maps. We are spread thin with all of our programs. They're awesome programs, don't get me wrong, but they contradict each other. They don't go together well. It's time consuming too. I wish I could devote the amount of time that they want me to for each program, but I can't. So, I'm decorating my room with everything they want to see, so if they walk in, at least it's on the walls.

I voice my concerns every time we have a collaborative meeting. They tell me, “It’s for the kids,” but nobody comes in to really look at the kids. They come in to see what’s on your wall. They come in to see what’s in your hand. Are the kids using Reading First materials? Are the kids engaged?

I’ve attended DIBELS training. I also went to the literacy conference, which was excellent. It was wonderful. The speakers were awesome. The only “training” I ever received was DIBELS and intervention. During collaborative planning, we’d sit and talk about Debbie Diller’s foldable things and stuff like that. That’s about it. I did not attend LETRS (Moats, 2004) training.

I think DIBELS is good. It helps you to see where your students are, what they don’t know, what they do know, and where you can go from there. I don’t think it’s fair to use it as the only indicator of a student’s performance; especially, if the test is given by someone that they don’t know. For example, I have a couple of kids that will flip out if they’re pulled into a strange classroom, and they’re tested by a stranger. They automatically shut down. We use DIBELS scores to group students for intervention groups. Sometimes I don’t agree with the numbers and placements. I work with the kids every day, all day and I think I can tell which group s/he needs to be in.

We do weekly tests from the core and the district requires us to do interval assessment. In my opinion, those two assessments contradict one another. They told us our tests were too easy, but this is what we have to use because of Reading First. They told us that we needed to have written responses and things like that. So we started adding it to the test. We pleased everyone. That’s just one more example; the core and interval assessment don’t line up. They say it’s lined up and correlated, but when we did it, it didn’t line up.

Another problem was that if the kids were struggling, and I wanted to go back and re-teach, I fell behind. For example, I'd try to re-teach the following week, but then I'd feel like I need to hurry up because they're falling behind on the new skill. The testing schedule is just so rigid.

I think Reading First has helped a few students, like those teetering around benchmark. I think that small group instruction and working in centers has really helped them. I feel that I could pull up the ones that are on the edge, but the ones that are far behind seem to be left behind. They need good, consistent small group instruction. Honestly, half of the time the interventionists don't show up because they're pulled to do this or that. We only had two interventionists this year, and they're going to cut that down to one. Honestly, I did my part. I pulled my small group for interventions during my assigned time.

If I were to leave this school and go to a non-Reading First School, I might take a few things with me, but I'd probably leave the majority of it behind. I would take centers; it was fun. I would use centers and small group instruction. It's effective because once you have the kids engaged in something, you can sit with a small group. That worked well. I'd take the core, but I'd give myself some leeway to bring in outside sources. I'd bring in books and things that I know that would interest the kids that are not in the core; I'd work with it and keep it flexible. I think Reading First would work better if it was a little more flexible.

An analysis of Amy's story as a first grade teacher in a Reading First school resulted in the emergence of eight broad topics or structures on which the participant focused: professional development; assessment; time; programs and initiatives; collaboration; effectiveness; curriculum; and student achievement. Table 4.A highlights these structures.

Table 4.A Amy: Underlying Structural Factors of the Experience

Structures	Responses
Professional Development	Desires professional development especially for the core reading program
Assessment	Feels it is effective to determine what kids know
	Doesn't think it should be the only indicator
	Core program assessments do not correlate to Interval Assessments, and Interval Assessment schedule is too rigid
Time	Desires more time to get familiar with new core program
	Has no time to re-teach because there is so much material to cover
Programs and Initiatives	Feels there are too many programs to implement
	Programs and initiatives contradict one another
Collaboration	Collaborates with other teachers, reading coaches, and interventionists during planning
Effectiveness	Feels the centers and small group instruction are effective
Curriculum	Challenges: lack of flexibility and variety with core program
Student Achievement	Reading First helps borderline benchmark students
	Students who are far behind seem to be left behind
	Seems as though the focus is on programs, not on student achievement

Textural-Structural Description

The district adopted a new core reading program that was used for the first time during the school year in which the study took place. Amy stated that she didn't receive any training on the new series and expressed a desire for training on the core program. On the other hand, she mentioned that the series included an abundant amount of materials. She stated, "I wish I had the opportunity to take all of this and just sit with it for about a week and just look through everything,[then] it wouldn't have felt so overwhelming. But when we came in it was like every day they were dropping new stuff." Amy went on to say, "That would be awesome if we had a person that would come in...in the beginning of the year and do a refresher or get everybody on board, and then come in the middle of the year...because a lot of teachers and students start slacking. Let's start fresh again, and pick it up. That would be awesome." Amy also mentioned

that she had attended some professional development activities as a result of reading first. She confirmed, “I’ve attended DIBELS training, and they sent me to the [Louisiana] literacy conference, which was excellent, and the little professional development, I guess they would call it, during our collaborative planning where we’d sit and talk. We did some Debbie Diller foldable things...that kind of stuff. So that’s about it.” When asked if she attended LETRS training, she responded, “No. They sent another teacher to it- a couple of other teachers.”

The district adopted DIBELS (Good & Kaminski 2002), Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills, as its main assessment for Reading First schools. Amy feels that DIBELS is an effective assessment tool, but doesn’t think that it should be the only tool in determining students’ group placements. She said, “I think DIBELS is good...to see where your students are and to see what they don’t know, and what they do know, and where you can go from there. But to use it as [the]only indicator of your students’ performance, I don’t think it’s fair to the students.” Amy also believes that the teacher’s knowledge about the students should be taken into consideration when grouping them for instruction. She affirmed, “...there are students that are teetering, so it’s like, I would think that they would benefit more on one scale, but then the numbers say they need to be here, but I’m working with the student all day and I can tell, no, he needs to be in this group. But they go by the numbers.”

Amy is a novice teacher, full of excitement about the beginning of her career. She seems to have mixed feeling about implementing Reading First in her classroom. She stated, “I mean there were some things that were fun, but then there were some things that I got bored with and the kids got bored with, but we had to continue because it was in the Reading First plan. So those things kind of—you know, we work through it.” This quote also speaks to the lack of flexibility

that teachers like Amy have in working with Reading First in addition to other initiatives and/or programs.

Amy was passionate about a few topics during the interview. One particular topic dealt with her feeling “spread thin” over the number of programs that teachers are expected to implement. Amy was clearly disturbed that their school had taken on a myriad of programs and initiatives, many of which contradict one another. Even more disturbing to Amy was the rationale given when she expressed concern. Here is just one example that Amy gave during the interview, “This core we have to follow with Reading First contradicts the WOW program that they want us to [use]...for Halloween...our skill was adjectives. I had this awesome book that had a bazillion adjectives in it all about pumpkins, and mushy, and squishy, and all that. So I was going to bring in a real pumpkin, and ...cut it, and ... things like that. I was reading this book, and they pop in for a Reading First visit. Well, I got cited because I was using a book that wasn’t with the core.” Amy went on to question, “How can I do anything for WOW when I’m in a Reading First school and not get in trouble for it? I feel like I’m on stage. It’s like whoever walks in the door, okay, it’s time to do this now.” Amy expressed her concern at collaborative planning meetings, where she was told “it’s for the kids.” Her response was, “...nobody comes in and really looks at the kids. They come in and see what’s on your wall. They come in to see what’s in your hand. They come in to see if the kids are engaged.” Amy maintains, “I wish I could devote this amount of time that they want me to do but I can’t because I’m by myself decorating my room with everything they want to see, so if they walk in, at least it’s on the walls.”

Another example includes the district’s requirement of teachers to administer Interval Assessments in English language arts and mathematics. Teachers are given a calendar indicating what skills should be taught during specified weeks and details when those skills will be tested.

At the beginning of the year Amy found that the Interval Assessment schedule did not coincide with the core reading program schedule. Therefore, kids were being assessed on skills on the Interval Assessment that had not been taught yet in the classroom. She said, “[We taught from the core] ... two to three weeks of learning letter sounds—stuff that they learned in kindergarten—we reviewed again. Well, had we not done that, it may have worked out better, but there were some skills that, after we would take interval assessment, we would teach it the next two weeks. So they had just missed it.” After expressing her frustration, Amy vowed to keep her students on track next year: “They could fuss all they want. I’m not teaching that head start...the first week of school [I will] do some, without the core, refreshing the children on how to sound out letters... but I’m not spending that much time.” Amy asserted that there’s so much time spent on programs that there’s no time to re-teach a skill or strategy if the kids don’t get it. She exemplified that belief in the following statement, “I feel like if the kids were struggling, I feel like I want to go back and teach it, and I try to do it the following week. I’d pull in—we’ll do it as a journal or we’ll do it somewhere else throughout the day, but then I feel like, oh, man, I spent 15 minutes on that. I need to hurry up and get the other skill going before they’re falling behind in the new skill. So, I mean, it’s just so rigid...”

Amy mentioned examples of how she collaborates with other teachers, interventionists, and reading coaches. As mentioned previously, Amy’s grade level meets for collaborative planning meetings. She also works with the interventionist that pulls her students, as well as the special education teacher who works with her special needs students. She testified, “And then the second half [of the year] I had a group, and an interventionist had a group...the special ed. teacher would come in and pull her special ed. students. So I actually had two interventionists at one time, which was awesome.”

Amy likes the small group instruction and literacy centers that are a part of the Reading First curriculum. However, she still has mixed feelings about the impact of Reading First on student achievement. Referring to a previous statement, Amy verbalized, “I think it has helped a few students, like those teetering students. The ones that could either fall or get better. I think it’s helped them because they get that small group instruction and they get that one on one while they’re working in centers. I could pull the ones that are on the edge. But the ones that are so far behind, it feels like they just kind of leave them. Because it’s like I said. You have to get through it, and I don’t think 20 to 30 minutes of small group time for some of these children—it’s not beneficial to some of them, and it’s like, they give it to them and say, oh, why aren’t they passing? They had small group, but they need more than just that.” In this quote, Amy is alluding to an earlier statement she made, “...there were some things that I got bored with and the kids got bored with, but we had to continue because it was in the Reading First plan. So those things kind of—you know, we work through it.” So, whether an activity in the core program or an intervention lesson related to the core program worked for the kids or not, it still had to be done.

When asked, “If you were to leave this school today and get a job at a non-Reading First school, would you take the tenets of Reading First with you or would you leave them behind?” Amy responded, “I might take a few things with me, but I’d probably leave the majority of it behind. I would [take] the centers, it was fun, and I see how it could work to get me to work with a small group...that worked well, but other things, I don’t know.” When prompted further Amy stated that, “I think I’d take the core... I’d leave some leeway to bring in...outside sources... leave it flexible.” Amy closed the interview session by stating that Reading First would work “if it was more flexible.”

In the next profile, we hear Taylor's story. Like Amy, Taylor is a novice teacher. When I interviewed her, she had been teaching for a year and a half at the same Reading First school as Amy.

Profile #2: Taylor

I've been teaching for a year and a half, and I've been involved with Reading First for a year and a half. The core that we use is the Treasures series (Macmillan-McGraw, Hill, n.d.). I love the resources you get. It's plentiful. Teachers shouldn't really need anything outside of what they give you, except for little things. The centers are already done for you. I think it's effective, but with Reading First being so strict it's hard. They're not flexible with how you can use the materials. You have to be faithful to that core. The new series is more scripted, telling me everything you should be saying. If you're teaching a lesson and you see it's not clicking, you don't have the flexibility of changing the lesson. Even with intervention groups, it's hard because we have to use *Triumphs*. I've found that the kids get bored with it because you have to be so structured in what you're doing. Also, it's limiting with the other [subject] areas because it's strictly reading. The kids can write only if they're responding to a story. We can't do grammar or the writing process; they're included in the series, but we can't do it in our reading block. It's a big chunk of time; you have 120 minutes, but you can only do reading.

During the reading block, we can do the 'fab five': phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This series stresses oral vocabulary and phonics, but it's so overworked that the kids just tune out. There's an hour for whole group reading with the core, and an hour for centers and small groups. We've been told to use the center flip charts that come with the series, and if we choose to use something else, it has to be approved through Reading First. You can't just come up with a center idea and implement it. It has to be research-

based. I use the center flip charts. They're okay if you modify them a little bit. Some of the activities aren't long enough; I need the kids to be engaged for a whole 30-minute time frame. Some of the activities are too hard, so I try to group the kids so that they can help each other to complete the activities.

Reading First is just so strict. It's not flexible. I mean, as far as the series goes, I think it's pretty good. I think it'd be more effective if we could modify some of it. I also like the idea of the intervention materials and resources being a part of the core program because last year it wasn't. Last year we used Voyager for intervention groups, and it wasn't really correlated. This year it's all correlated, so for most of my Tier Two kids it works. It really works for the ones who get help at home.

The interventionists probably have a little bit more flexibility, since the intensive kids are so far behind compared to what we're doing in the classroom. This year I've seen kids move or progress through the tiers. For example, I saw a student go from tier two/strategic intervention to benchmark, and I've seen a student go from tier three/intensive intervention to tier two/strategic. I didn't see as much movement last year. It's the end of the year, and about 50 percent of my kids are at benchmark. I have 24 students, and only 12 were benchmark. A couple of kids were strategic, but the rest of them were intensive. So, they're going to second grade and they're not reading on level. Actually we're all about the same, so next year almost half of second grade will be below level.

Our reading block was in the afternoon, after lunch. It was at the end of the day. Our lunch was from 12:30 to 1:00 p.m. Our reading block was from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. and our intervention groups were from 3:00 to 3:30 p.m. We had about 15 minutes then dismissal at 3:45 p.m. I taught one hour of whole group, then centers and small group for an hour, and finally

I pulled a tier-two intervention group for 30 minutes. While I pulled an intervention group, the benchmark kids worked independently or with a partner. I had three groups being pulled. All tier threes were with one of the reading coaches. A couple of borderline benchmark students, who were just on that edge, went with another interventionist. The intervention groups were supposed to be pulled every day, but our students were not getting hit like they should. At the end of the year, we had an extra interventionist come on. She would push in sometimes during our center time and to work with the students. If they were too distracted, she'd pull them into another classroom if space was available. My intensive students' oral reading fluency scores were basically zero. At the end of the year, they still didn't hit benchmark on phoneme segmentation fluency.

Reading First has been a little overwhelming at times. We had a training class at the end of last school year that gave a basic overview. It lasted a half day. With Reading First, we're required to do DIBELS training, as well as all four days of the LETRS training. There was an introduction to Reading First that was held after I started. It was held after school and there were two days of it. There was another training for Reading First schools regarding attention problems in students. The focus was on how to recognize those types of problems and included tips to deal with attention problems. As far as I know, there's no more professional development planned for Reading First, but lots of times we don't know until they tell us. We just found out that for next year we lost one of our coaches. Now, it'll be even harder to service all of the kids.

The school system will be doing a three-week jump start program over summer for the students who are the lowest for a little boost. It's LAP, Literacy Advancement Program. It's not a requirement, but if the parents give permission the kids can do it.

We use DIBELS scores to form our intervention groups. We progress monitor every three weeks. We do the progress monitoring for our students, and the coaches and interventionists pull groups. They're there to help you with the students. I also have students who are not familiar with DIBELS. This year, if a student reaches benchmark on oral reading fluency, but his retell is 10% of what he read, he will not be considered benchmark. Last year he would have been benchmark, but now they're starting to count retell. I think DIBELS is effective, but it shouldn't be the only assessment. I have kids benchmarking in DIBELS, but failing weekly tests. We are required to give the assessments that are in the core program. There are two assessments that we can use. One correlates to the story; it's ten questions based on everything from the story. Then there's a comprehensive test of all the skills we've learned through the week. It's hard because they have to read something they've never seen. We've tried both, and it's basically about the same.

After lunch the kids are tired. They don't want to read. That puts them to sleep. Behavior begins to be a problem, etc. They just want to be done. If they don't get it, I don't have the option to go back and re-teach unless it comes up again later on. Sometimes I can re-teach during small group time. You cover the material and then you have to move on.

I feel that Reading First is hurting some of the kids. Like I said, we can't do the writing and the grammar, so that of course is suffering. We have kids who are going on not knowing how to write, not knowing how to speak well, etc. I also feel that Reading First is limiting teachers as to what we can possibly do. It's like you come in, do your thing, and that's it. You try and get what you can done, and hope that you can have a positive impact. In my experience, if the students don't get the extra help at home, they fall into the cracks.

I have a perfect example. I had a student last year who was like a blank slate. I'd look at him and ask him a question, he'd smile. I'd ask him to read a word, and he would just look at me. He went through the evaluation process. He was in my classroom again this year. He was being pulled out to get his special education services. He was in the third tier as far as intervention. Well by the winter benchmark, he moved up into tier two, so he came into my intervention group. He's also getting help at home from his mom. He's reading now. He's not at benchmark, but he was close. Then, there are others who repeated first grade and still have an oral reading fluency score of zero, one or two. If they've been held back once already, they're going to move on to second grade and they're going to struggle. I asked for a repeater to be evaluated because his oral reading fluency score is zero, and I was told that he's just in first grade.

Teachers don't buy in to Reading First. Teachers come in, they see it, they experience it, and if they can, they get out of it. I wonder how many people are still in Reading First that have been in Reading First since the beginning? This school already has a high teacher turnover; that's due to other issues, not just Reading First. We are overwhelmed with different programs. There are lots of issues.

If I went to a non-Reading First school, I think I would take some of the components but not all of them. I would leave the part that doesn't allow me to be more creative with things. I need the flexibility to change things if my kids don't understand something. In addition, we don't even really get to science and social studies. Basically, I teach reading and math. The way our schedule falls, we have 30 minutes for grammar and writing. For some kids, just getting them to understand 'is' and 'are' takes a whole hour. Instruction on the writing process is lacking because of the other things. We could incorporate it more during small groups by saying, "Today

we're going to brainstorm. Tomorrow we're going to write a draft." If I could, I would be less focused on time allotments. I've been in classrooms where an hour was sufficient, or 90 minutes. After a while, it's like beating a dead horse. The kids feel like, "Okay, we're done. It's time for this to be over with it." I feel like we could be doing something more effective.

An analysis of Taylor's story as a first grade teacher in a Reading First school resulted in the emergence of six broad topics or structures on which the participant focused: assessment; time; programs/initiatives; collaboration; effectiveness and student achievement; and curriculum, instruction and assessment. Table 4.B highlights these structures.

Table 4.B *Taylor: Underlying Structural Factors of the Experience*

Structures	Responses
Assessment	Feels DIBELS is effective, but shouldn't be the only assessment
	Doesn't think it should be the only indicator
	Core program assessments do not correlate to interval assessments
Time	Has no time to re-teach because there is so much material to cover for interval assessment
	Reading block is at the end of the day when the kids are tired
	Doesn't want to be locked into 120-minute block
Programs and Initiatives	Is overwhelmed with programs that don't complement one another
Collaboration	Collaborates with other teachers, reading coaches, and interventionists during planning
Effectiveness	Feels the centers and small group instruction are effective
Curriculum	Challenges: lack of flexibility, no writing process or grammar instruction allowed, supplemental activities have to be Reading First approved
	More scripted and explicit
	Thinks it's effective because it has a lot of resources
	Overwhelming
	Fidelity is expected
	Likes intervention materials that come with series
Student Achievement	Reading First helps borderline benchmark students
	Sees some kids progressing through the tiers, but the lowest kids are still failing

Textural-Structural Description

As stated in the previous description, the district had adopted a new core reading program for the school year during which this study was conducted. At the time of the interviews, the teachers had just completed their first year of implementing the new series. As it is with many things in life, it seems that Taylor found the new series to be both a blessing and a curse. Taylor stated, “I love the resources you get. It’s plentiful...at times... you just don’t know where to begin.” Taylor criticizes the Reading First program for its rigidity regarding the curriculum. She purported, “I think it’s effective, but with the Reading First being so strict, it’s kind of hard and they’re not so flexible with how you can use certain materials and things. You have to be very faithful to that core.” She went on to say, “if you’re teaching a lesson and you see it’s not clicking or connecting, you don’t really have the flexibility of modifying or adjusting the lesson so much.” Another instance where Taylor feels the series is a blessing and a curse relates to the Triumphs portion, which she is required to use with her tier-two intervention group. Taylor asserted, “I like the idea of the intervention part of it being part of the series because last year it wasn’t...even with the small group stuff it’s a little harder because we have to use that—the triumphs for our interventions. What I’ve found is, the way some of the stuff is, the kids get bored with it because you have to be so structured in what you’re doing.”

Like Amy, Taylor feels that DIBELS is an effective assessment tool but that it should not be the only tool used to determine grouping. However, she did point out a positive change in that students’ benchmark scores now take into account oral reading fluency and retell fluency. The district also looks at all of the other DIBELS scores for a more comprehensive outlook. Taylor said, “I think it’s effective but it shouldn’t be the only thing. Because I have kids benchmarking in DIBELS but for the weekly tests, they’re failing. We had Interval Assessments this year for

first graders. The Interval Assessments didn't match the core." Thus, she feels that the required assessments, including DIBELS, core reading program assessments, and Interval Assessment, are not correlated.

Another challenge that Taylor mentioned was that their reading block was at the end of the day. She argued, "Our block's in the afternoon. They get to the point where they don't want to be in here. They don't want to be trying to work." According to Taylor, another challenge she has experienced is little or no re-teaching time. She stated, "You cover it. You have to move on and hope [they get it]." This is partly due to the fact that the teachers in the district have to implement various types of programs and initiatives. Taylor confirmed, "We are overwhelmed with different programs."

On the flip side, Taylor talked about the collaboration amongst herself, other teachers, interventionists and reading coaches. "They're there to help you with the students. At the end of the year we had an extra interventionist that came on. There were three groups being pulled: my group, which was the tier-two [group]; the tier-three [groups] were with one of the reading coaches, and a couple of benchmark students who were just on that edge went with another interventionist to kind of make sure they stayed there. And the other group of benchmark students did independent work...like partner reading."

Taylor feels that Reading First has been effective for some of her students, while others have suffered. She stated, "So he's getting his services, you know, the special ed. pull out. He was in the third tier as far as intervention. Well, he moved up into tier two, so he came into my group." However, she feels that Reading First is harmful to other students. She accused, "I feel that it's hurting some of the kids...I feel it's limiting the teachers as to what we can possibly do and it's to the point where, yeah, you come in and you do your thing, and that's it. And you try

and get what you can done. You hope you can impact it. And if the students don't get the extra help at home, I feel it's just passing them by. They fall into the cracks."

This leads us to Taylor's main criticisms of Reading First. She was passionate about the lack of flexibility that Reading First allows. "We do the fab five. We can't do grammar. We can't do writing." When asked, "If you were to leave this school today and get a job at a non-Reading First school, would you take the tenets of Reading First with you or would you leave them behind?" Taylor responded, "I think I would take some but not all of them. I would [leave] the part that doesn't allow me to be more creative with some things...give me the flexibility that I need. Okay, my kids did not understand. You go back and work that in some kind of way with something...I would maybe be a little bit less time focused...Because I've been in classrooms where an hour was sufficient. You know, after 90 minutes I feel like I'm beating a dead horse." Her response to the question above indicated that she would keep the whole group and small group instruction, as well as centers. Taylor also indicated that she would include writing and grammar. "I would change that to allow some of that to be incorporated because how else can you [teach writing]?"

Taylor closed the interview discussing teacher buy-in to the Reading First program. She feels that high teacher turnover at Reading First schools in the district is a result of little or no teacher buy-in. "They come in, they see it, they experience it, and if they can, they get out of it," she said. After the interview, Taylor's words haunted me, "I just feel like I could be doing more effective things with my kids."

In the next profile, we hear Cathy's story. Cathy is a first grade teacher. She has been teaching for 5 ½ years at this Reading First school. Thus, she has been involved in Reading First

since its inception in the district. However, it is important to note that like Amy and Taylor, this is the only school and grade level in which she has taught.

Profile #3: Cathy

My first actual experience in first grade was with Reading First. It was the first year they implemented it here, so that's all we've done since I've been at this school. I think I've had good experiences. [I've been to] a lot of workshops, [and had] a lot of collaboration with other teachers. The first year was probably the hardest one because it was a lot of [do] this, [do] this, [do] this and this. This is what you have to do, and you have to do it in this time period. We were all a little blown away by it. There was a lot of doubt at first. We were like, "What do you want us to do?" Once we got into it, it wasn't as complicated as people made it to be. The program is very specific. You have to do what you have to do, but you're not asked to jump through hoops. They just want you to teach the components that they want you to teach, and it's for the benefit of the children. Once we started implementing [Reading First] and we got familiar with the manuals that we were using—we were using Houghton Mifflin at the time—it worked. We were able to do our thing in the time periods [allotted]. We needed to tweak a little bit here and there, especially with the centers. I can't imagine doing all of this without the support of the interventionists and coaches.

Now, the district uses Macmillan/McGraw-Hill's Treasures series; this is the first year. The hardest parts of adjusting to a new series have been getting those [centers] down, making sure they were on the kids' level, and differentiating instruction for different kids. It came with time; we had a few little flaws along the way, you live and learn, but now it works fine. We were a little iffy at first, you know, it was a new thing. We didn't want to change [the old reading series]. Teachers were like, "We finally got the other one right, and now they want to change it."

But I find the new series is better, especially with the science and social studies that's incorporated into it. During this year, the first year we're using the new series, we've done more science and social studies than in the past because we're able to pull it out of the reading series. The integrated activities in the new series meet a lot of our GLEs for science and social studies. It doesn't meet all of them; we have to do other things too, but it meets a lot of the science and social studies GLEs. There was a district training on the new series, on a Saturday over the summer. We were given a broad overview of everything, including all of the things that come with it. Then we had a Saturday that we came to the school, before the school year started, and we were able to look through everything and start our planning. We had plenty of time to look at it. You have to live and learn. As a result, there have been things that we added to it. We're teaching the same concepts, but sometimes we do it in different ways. There's so much to the series, and some things we had to tweak a little bit. For instance, there are some things I find that the kids like because it's more engaging for them. So for example, there's a flip chart sound of the week activity. Well, I found the kids like a similar extension activity that allows extra practice and is engaging for them. Like I said, I tweak it a little bit so that it works for my students. I use the core with fidelity. I stick with the five components [identified by the NRP]. I can't say that we do anything that is not focused on those components. We got everything that we needed to go with the new series and I use most of it. One thing that I don't use a lot of are the center flip charts. The flip charts are meant to be used at centers, but when I do centers, they usually last about 15 to 20 minutes. Well, my kids would be done in those flip chart centers in about five minutes, so that's something I had to come up with my own. I might base some of my centers and activities on the flip chart centers. Some of the activities are very simplistic, which is

fine at the beginning of the year. When they're getting into the routine that's fine, but after a month or so, they need a little bit more.

I've been through a tremendous amount of professional development activities. I think that LETRS (Moats, 2004) was probably the most beneficial. It was right after we had the big Reading First session where we learn everything that we needed to do. LETRS (Moats, 2004) training was very specific in the area of phoneme awareness, which is good because I don't remember that from when I learned it, and they didn't really go over that a lot in college. So that was probably the most beneficial training I went to. I've done handwriting [inaudible] tiers, which was offered through ELFA. There have been so many trainings that were effective, things that you can use, go to the classroom and start implementing, and add to what you've already been doing. Especially in the first couple years, we did some share fairs where everybody was getting into the program. Teachers from the different Reading First schools in the district (there was five of them I want to say). We did "share fairs," so we would get together and we would share what we were doing. It was good because we were all doing some different things, and we could share what we were doing and learn from other schools. Another training we went to was on literacy centers where we received books that we could actually use—it was like a make and take. We received three books for our grade level where we could cut out and make our own centers to use in our classroom. I still have them and I use them every year! They are worn out and I need to replace them because we truly use them throughout the year. They're called "take it to your seat," because that's pretty much what it is.

My students are assessed with DIBELS which is helpful. DIBELS is one-on-one and the students have a minute to take each part. It lets us look at exactly what they need help with, especially on fluency. Early in the year, it's usually phoneme segmentation. In addition to

DIBELS we use an additional assessment with the reading series. Since the reading program changed, the assessment changed, and I found it's a little bit more difficult than it was before the curriculum switch. We struggled with it because it was a lot more difficult than the previous one, and it took the kids a lot longer to catch on, too. It consists of a story that's about three, three and a half pages long, and then they answer questions about the story, which takes them a while. The kids have to read it on their own and they have to answer the questions. They get whatever time they need. Actually, that's helped a little bit with improving comprehension because I go over the test with them after they're graded. The problem with first graders is that some of them will actually read it and take the time to do it, and some of them will only need two minutes because they're just picking whatever they want to pick. So, I don't think that it's reliable. I feel like DIBELS is going to be more reliable because it's given one-on-one with someone listening to them read recording the mistakes that they're making. The test is supposed to assess silent reading, comprehension, and their ability to write.

The assessments are used to group students. They're grouped based on their ability according to DIBELS benchmark scores. I actually think we need to consider the retell portion of the assessments for grouping. At the beginning, the students are placed according to their benchmark scores in DIBELS Phoneme Segmentation. In the middle and at the end of the year, the students are placed according to their benchmark score in DIIBELS Oral Reading Fluency. For instance, this year I have one student who is reading 117 words per minute when his benchmark is 40, but he's retelling only 12 percent of that. I'm not exactly sure what the guideline is, but I'd like [my students] to retell at least 50 percent. I have some kids that are reading below benchmark, but they can retell 100 percent of what they've read. So this year, I really tried to focus more on retelling because just because they're benchmark in ORF, it doesn't

mean they know what's going on when they're reading. When I was with my benchmark students during intervention, when other students were pulled, I focused mostly on comprehension and fluency. And I'm pulling those kids who are not retelling at least 50 percent or more.

Vocabulary is incorporated in the reading series, but we added an extra vocabulary test. We tested their ability to use vocabulary words in a sentence and also to pick out which ones would go in a sentence. We also had to supplement the phonics assessment. For example, we're studying short *o* words: they're reading the story with those words, but again, we have half of the students just picking answers, so it's not an accurate test. It doesn't really tell me if they know the short *o*. There's a phonics book that we pull from to test the students separately.

Since I've been here, all I've done is Reading First. Knowing the benefits of Reading First, if I went somewhere else, even if it wasn't required that I use centers and have the two hour block, the small group and the whole group instruction, I would still have it all. If I only had an hour of reading, I would still do two hours and probably a little bit more because the kids need it. I think Reading First impacts the students positively in reading, but then it also impacts them with math and everything else we do. They've come a long way, especially since the beginning of the year. They like to read and are confident in what they do. They'll be the first to tell you, "I know how to read. I can read this book. This is too easy; I know how to read it." They have good attitudes about reading. Even the couple of struggling readers have good attitudes because even if they're having trouble keeping up with everybody, there's that small group where they're being pulled, and they can still feel successful because they're reading at their level. Currently, I have three kids (out of 20) that are below benchmark. One student is two points away—this is what I'm talking about, the positive impact of Reading First. The one that is two points away

from benchmark is a beginning English language learner. She's not a student who necessarily might've been able to keep up as good as she did, except that she's getting all this extra attention. She's getting the intervention, small group, and center time. I think center time is especially beneficial because during center time she's sometimes partnered up with another ESL student, and they're talking about what we're doing. One of the other students [not benchmark] is in speech therapy for language processing. The third student is just a struggling reader. She might be reading 27 words per minute right now when she should be reading 40 words per minute, but she's retelling 75 percent of it. So she's coming along, she needs a little extra push.

The first few years, we did our two hours and then we had another 40 minutes to do writing. Now, writing can be incorporated within the reading block. I find that I separate it a little bit more because they do need more practice. That's one thing I find we struggle with more in first grade. They are good writers, though, for being first graders. I would think if there's anything that they need more help on, it's the writing, but their spelling [when they're writing] is beautiful. They know how to use the word wall, they know how to sound out their words, and they know the mechanics of the sentence. Their biggest thing is elaborating; that's something we need to work on. They can definitely tell stories, if only they could put them down on paper- that would be better. There is a little bit of writing in the new series. For example, every unit has a grammar component that's connected it, which I like because if we're doing verbs, we'll do verbs and then nouns, but we'll go back to verbs again, so there are a lot of refreshers in the book. We incorporate those skills into the writing. Writing was never incorporated in our old series. So, we are actually getting more [writing instruction] now than we were before. Is it enough? I'm not sure. I have some [students] that will write three sentences and be perfectly

content with that; others will give me two pages full. Like with the reading, the students' writing levels differ.

I use centers to differentiate instruction in reading because I pair [students] up with a partner that would be beneficial. I would never put a really low student with a very high student; I don't think it's fair to either one of them. I put the middle [level] students together because they will help each other. A lot of the students can do the work independently, so sometimes I add extra [work] for them to do if I know that it's too easy. For example, the student with the language processing disorder may not be able to do the activity by herself, so I'm going to pull her in a small group, and we're going to do that page together. As we're doing it, we're going to be talking about it, and we're going to be sounding out the words because most of them are the words of the week. I find it easy to differentiate instruction in centers.

Earlier in the year [after the first benchmark testing], I had a group that I pulled for intervention. The second and third benchmark periods I only had three students that needed to be pulled, so I was able to utilize that time on my benchmark students. That's when we worked on fluency, and retelling. After looking at their scores, I saw who needed to work on comprehension more. I was able to group the students according to their needs. Benchmark could mean they're reading 40 [words per minute] or 115 [words per minute]. There were groups within that benchmark group that needed to work on certain skills. Even if they're reading 117 words [per minute], there's something that they need to work on, and they need to be challenged.

Our daily schedule is the same every week. They do their journal, which is usually a review on Monday. On Monday, I'm introducing their vocabulary words. I put them up, they write them down, and they write sentences with the ones they know. That lets me know what they know. Some [students] will know all of the words, and some will not know any of them; but

that lets me know what we need to work on, and who I need to work with. On the next day, we review a skill that we have done before. Then I'll post words, the students draw a little picture to go with the words. I see who knows how to sound them out. On Wednesday, I review the English skill. The next day, the students sort words. This varies a little bit, but I try to keep consistent so they know what they're doing every day. Then we do whole group [instruction] on the carpet: we go over the phonics skill, we go over their words for the week, and skills in the teacher's manual. I don't read [the manual] word for word; I do what's engaging for the students. We break out into groups, and using the leveled readers they practice their story. They actually get in front of the class with their group and read the story to the class. This has helped them to read with expression and confidence. Most of them don't want to stand in front of the class to read by themselves, but they will read together. Before they read, we've worked on making sure that I can hear them, and that they're following along with their finger. Every other day we're reading the stories together, and doing the skills for the week. Then they get back to their seats to do two workbook pages, there's no reason to do more than two. That's just to let me know what they are getting and what they are not getting. I don't want to give them [worksheets] just to give [worksheets]. I want to assess it, and I want to see who's not getting it. For example, if I check their work and I see that most of them didn't get it, we stop. I pull them back to the carpet, and we go over it again. Usually, after that they're fine. After the two workbook pages, they usually go to centers. I keep track of which centers they do every week. I have all the centers on a list. Every week we start a new list, and they go to whatever center they're going to. They have 15-20 minutes to work, then we switch and they rotate. While they're in centers I'm pulling students, especially my slower learners and sometimes my higher learners. I'm pulling all groups

depending on what they need to work on. The whole class is grouped according to ability, but it changes with the results of their assessments.

If I could change anything about Reading First, I think I'd focus more on retelling and comprehension for all benchmarks, not just phoneme segmentation for the first benchmark and oral reading fluency for the second and third benchmarks. As it is, it doesn't matter if they benchmark on retelling. During intervention groups in the fall benchmark period, they work mostly on phoneme segmentation. Then during intervention groups in the winter and spring, they work mostly on fluency. I just think they need more help with retelling and comprehension.

An analysis of Cathy's story as a first grade teacher in a Reading First school resulted in the emergence of seven broad topics or structures on which the participant focused: professional development; assessment; collaboration; effectiveness; curriculum and instruction; teacher perspective; and student achievement. Table 4.C highlights these structures.

Table 4.C *Cathy: Underlying Structural Factors of the Experience*

Structures	Responses
Professional Development	Received lots of professional development, especially in the first years of Reading First (i.e. fair shares, make and takes, etc)
	Feels LETRS (Moats, 2004) was most effective because of the phoneme awareness training
Assessment	Feels DIBELS is effective at identifying students' needs
	Feels required core program assessments are harder
	Feels that the total DIBELS score should be used for grouping, not just oral reading fluency
Collaboration	Sees collaboration with other teachers and support of reading coaches and interventionists as necessary
Effectiveness	Feels the literacy block, centers, and small group instruction are effective
Curriculum and Instruction	Challenges in the first year of implementation: overwhelming requirements (i.e. two hour block, small group instruction, no writing during reading block, literacy centers, fidelity to core, etc)
	New Series: Felt "iffy" about new series
	Feels teachers lack flexibility
	Needs supplemental phonics and better center activities (hard to match materials to students')
	Needs to focus more on comprehension and writing
	Does not use center flip charts (told don't have to)
	Likes that science and social studies are incorporated
Teacher Perspective	Initial feelings were doubtful and overwhelming
	Has had good experiences overall
	First year was very difficult
	Feels Reading First benefits all kids
	Feels teachers lack flexibility
Student Achievement	Feels that Reading First benefits all kids in all areas
	Feels that kids experience success in small groups and are confident because of it

Textural-Structural Description

Cathy's experiences differ slightly from Amy and Taylor. Cathy has been teaching for a little more than five years and almost all of her experiences are limited to Reading First. At the beginning of the interview, Cathy indicated that Reading First is all that she knows. She taught a half year in a special education class and then her first full year of teaching was the first year of

implementation of Reading First. She said, “So my first actual experience in first grade was with reading first. [It was] the first year they implemented it here, so that’s all we’ve done since I’ve been at this school.” She went on to say that she has had good experiences with Reading First. “I think they’ve been good experiences. A lot of workshops, a lot of collaboration with other teachers,” said Cathy.

She talked about the vast amount of professional development she received, particularly in the first years of implementation. Cathy also mentioned that Reading First allowed for collaboration with other teachers. Cathy said, “LETRS (Moats, 2004), I think, was probably the most beneficial. It was right after we had the big reading first session where we learn everything that we needed to do. We went to LETRS (Moats, 2004) training, which was very specific in the phonemic awareness aspect.” She went on to explain, “There’s been so many... especially I want to say in the first couple years... We would do share fairs, so we would get together and we would share what we were doing... it was good because we were doing one thing here. Well, we could share what we were doing and learn from other schools. Another one we went to was literacy centers where we received books that we can actually make and take.”

Cathy encountered several challenges with the onset of Reading First. She said, “The first year was probably the hardest one because it was a lot of this, this, this, and this. This is what you have to do, and you have to do it in this time period. We were all a little bit blown away by it, but once we started implementing it and we got familiar with the manuals that we were using—we were using Houghton Mifflin at the time—it worked. We were able to do our thing in the time periods. We needed to tweak a little bit here and there...the centers was probably the biggest thing.” She went on to say, “There was a lot of doubt, there was a lot of doubt at first with what, what do you want us to do, but once we got into it, it wasn’t what it was

as complicated...as people made it to be...it is very specific. You have to do what you have to do, but they're not asking you to jump through hoops. They just want you to do the components that they want you to do, and it's for the benefit of the children."

Any time there's change, there is an adjustment period and time of discomfort. As stated in the previous descriptions, Any Place School District adopted a new core reading program the previous year. Therefore, this year was the first year of implementation for the new series. Regarding the new series, Cathy purported, "we were a little iffy at first, you know, any new thing. We want to change it, finally we got it right, and now they want to change it. But I find it's better, especially with the science and social studies that's incorporated in it. This is the first year we're using it, and we've done more science and social studies with it because we're able to pull it out of the reading series, and it meets a lot of our Grade Level Expectations for science and social studies." According to Cathy, even though the new series has a lot of positives, it is not perfect. She verified, "...some things, we tweak a little bit. There are some things I find that the kids like that are more engaging for them. So, for example, there's a flip chart which has the sounds for the week and the list of words. Well, there's one activity that you do in the book. I found the kids like it if I let them be the teacher for a minute and take turns going up to call up the words. It's not in the book, but it's extending the practice and it's engaging for them. So, like I said, you have to tweak it a little bit to work for your students." When asked if she is faithful to the core program, she responded, "Yes, we are. We stick with those components, and I can't say we do anything that is not focused [back] on those components." Cathy indicated that she received all of the materials and resources that accompany the new series. When asked if she uses all of the resources, she responded, "One thing that I find I don't use a lot of are the center flip charts... they're meant to [be] used at the centers, but when I do centers, they usually stay

about 15 to 20 minutes at each center. Well, my kids would be done in those centers in about five minutes, so that's something I had to come up with [on] my own. I might base some of them off of that, but just the way they have them set up. Some of them are very simplistic, which is fine at the beginning of the year...but after a month or so, they need a little bit more." Despite its shortcomings, Cathy feels that the new series is effective.

Like Amy and Taylor, Cathy finds DIBELS effective. Cathy asserts, "DIBELS is helpful...It lets us look at exactly what they need help on...[It's] easy to see where everybody falls at in... ." With the new series came new assessments to evaluate students' performance on the skills taught. She stated, "...since the reading program changed, the assessment changed, and I found it's a little bit more difficult than it was before the curriculum switch. And we struggled with it because it was a lot more difficult than it was before, and it took the kids a lot longer to catch on, too." After comparing the two assessments (i.e. DIBELS and core program assessment), Cathy feels that DIBELS is a more valid and reliable assessment of students' skills. She added, "The problem with first grade is some of them will actually read it and take the time to do it, and some of them they only need two minutes because they're just picking whatever they want to pick, so that's not reliable. I feel like DIBELS is going to be more reliable because they're one on one with somebody, they're listening to them read, and they can say okay, these are the mistakes that they're making." Despite the aforementioned concerns, Cathy feels like the new core program assessment has been beneficial. She elaborated, "And actually, that's helped a little bit with the comprehension because we've gone over the test with them. After they're graded and we pass them out, we sit down with the test, and we talk about it, and that's actually helped with their comprehension." Cathy went on to discuss how students are grouped for intervention. She seemed concerned with the fact that benchmark status is too narrowly

determined. In the interview, Cathy confirmed that students' fall benchmark status is determined by their DIBELS phoneme segmentation fluency scores, and their winter and spring benchmark status is determined by their oral reading fluency scores. She stated, "For instance, this year I have one student who's reading 117 words a minute when his bench mark is 40, but he's retelling only 12 percent of that. I actually think [retell] is something we need to look at more." In order to address those concerns, Cathy is taking matters into her own hands. She reports, "So that's something, this year, I really tried to focus on more...looking at the retelling because just because they're benchmark, doesn't mean they know what's going on when they're reading. So when I was with my benchmark students...when other students were pulled, that's what I focused on mostly, comprehension and fluency."

Cathy feels that Reading First has had a positive impact on her students, in reading and in other content areas as well. She proudly affirmed, "They've come a long way, especially since the beginning of the year. They're confident in what they do, and they'll be the first one to tell you, "I know how to read"...They have a good attitude about it. Even the couple of struggling ones, they have a good attitude because even if they're having trouble keeping up with everybody, there's that small group where they're being pulled...and feel successful because they're reading at their level." Giving a specific example, she reported, "...this is what I'm talking about, the positive impact of Reading First. [There's one student] that is two points away from benchmark, a beginner ESL, and she's not a student who necessarily might've been able to keep up as good as she did except she's getting all this extra attention. She's getting the intervention, she's getting the small group, she's getting the center time—especially center time when she's sometimes partnered up with another ESL student- and they're talking about what we're doing."

Overall, Cathy feels good about what Reading First has helped her students accomplish. She is comfortable with the requirements of Reading First and is excited to continue with the implementation of the program. She sums up her experiences, stating, “Well, like I said, since I’ve been here, that’s all I’ve done. But knowing the benefits of it, if I went somewhere else, even if it wasn’t required that I do the centers and the two hours, you know, the small group and the whole group, I would still – if they told me I only had to do an hour of reading, I would still do my two hours and probably a little bit more because they need it.”

In the next profile, we will learn about Susan. Susan’s experiences are quite different than all of the previous participants. Susan is a veteran teacher who has had the opportunity to teach both pre- and post-Reading First in the same school setting. Prior to Reading First she taught kindergarten for four years. In addition, she taught kindergarten as a Reading First teacher for two years. Susan currently works as an interventionist.

Profile #4: Susan

I’m an interventionist and I’ve been in Reading First since it was implemented. I was a kindergarten teacher in Reading First for two years, and I’ve been an interventionist for three years. As a teacher in a kindergarten Reading First class, we started with the small groups, and rotating kids through different literacy centers. We started implementing small group instruction according to needs, and teaching to the students’ weakest points. I had taught for about four years or so prior to that, and we did centers prior to Reading First but we were able to implement more play centers, and math centers. [We did it] all together. Then Reading First came along, and the 120 minute core program. We taught whole group for an hour, and then centers for an hour. It was a big change. We no longer could do math during that time. All of the play centers, like housekeeping, and dramatic play had to be taken out; we weren't able to use any of that.

Well, we could use it later in the day if we wanted to, but there was no time for it. After 120 minutes of the core program, we had lunch, P.E., math, nap and then it was time to go home. So we had to get rid of the play centers. We tried to continue to use them, but it didn't work. It was taking up space, so we had to get rid of all those centers. That was a major change. We couldn't incorporate centers unless it had a phonics skill attached to it. Initially, the literacy centers in kindergarten had to be phonics based, but they couldn't involve writing. We couldn't do social studies or science activities unless it had a connection to the core, and that was hard to do.

Another major change was that you couldn't do Christmas or art activities during the reading block. It sounds silly, but for kindergarteners that's a big part of their development. We couldn't do any of that, but years before we did. It was a big adjustment to block off 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., only for reading. That was a big, big change. I struggled with it that whole first year. That was one of the biggest challenges. Honestly, the biggest challenge for me was that I couldn't do journals during that time. That was a huge, huge thing – not being able to do the full everyday counts calendar math. I used to start my day off with the calendar, and the morning message. I used to incorporate a lot of math within that one calendar activity. After Reading First, later in the day I would have to go back and say, "Okay, now we're going to find patterns and count." That was a huge problem for me that first year, mainly because I couldn't make sense of it. I said, "This is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Why would you take math and journaling away from a kindergarten classroom during this time? That's crazy." That was the biggest challenge for me as a teacher.

As we went through more training, we found different ways to play, so to speak, but still use phonics materials; we made games with the phonics content. That was a big transition for the first year. At that time, we couldn't do any writing; writing was not included. It had to be

separate, which was really difficult for kindergarten because reading and writing are connected. But now, they've put it back in. So they can do writing during the core block.

As an interventionist, I've been able to work with more grades, from kindergarten to fourth grade. Mainly, I pull small groups of intensive students, and teach to their weakest point. Grouping is based on their DIBELS scores. I teach according to their DIBELS scores and the Quick Phonics Screener to see what phonics skills they are weakest in, and then we do activities and enrichment for 30 minutes at a time, usually about five students in the group. They're supposed to get 60 minutes extra, but we just don't have the staff to give all of the intensive kids that extra 30 minutes. We did do an extra 30 minutes in kindergarten. Kindergarten did get the full Tier 3 intervention. We also managed for first grade to get Project Read for the intensive kids. The rest of the grade levels, we couldn't fit it in. We didn't have manpower to do it. My day is typically spent pulling out small groups of kids, bringing them here and working with them in 30-minute segments for intervention.

I've had a lot of training and professional development. The summer prior to Reading First being implemented, we had a two-week training on LETRS (Moats, 2004). The following year, we had a weeklong institute that was refresher. It also built on what we had the year before. As an interventionist, I've attended the literacy conferences. I did that for four days last year and three days this year. Last summer I attended ELFA training, which was four days long as well. It was a repeat for some because we had new teachers coming in, but a lot of it was to expand our knowledge.

This year we used Start-Up, Build-Up, Spiral-Up for our intervention groups. We also used the Voyager fluency passages for fluency and comprehension. We used the QPA Screeners, the Quick Phonics Screeners–Quick Phonics Assessments, and the DIBELS scores to group them

according to need. For example, do they need nonsense word building, phoneme segmentation, or letter identification? We grouped them according to the data from those assessments, and correlated the QPA level to the StartUp, BuildUp, SpiralUp (Benchmark Education) level. We used the passages from Voyager for fluency, but that's going away. Next year we will be using two new programs for intervention groups: Read Well and Language! Our principal chose the new programs for intervention groups.

The intervention programs we used this year were difficult because it wasn't a sequenced curriculum. Each week you had to pick and choose and pull what you were going to use. Whereas, the training we received in Read Well showed that it's a totally sequenced curriculum, and one skill builds on another. That was the good thing about Voyager; it was sequenced. However, Voyager didn't pinpoint specific needs. It was like, all strategic kids are going to start on this level, and all intensive kids are going to start on this level. It didn't pinpoint a specific area like nonsense word fluency, phoneme segmentation, or letter identification. From what I understand, Read Well and Language! are both sequenced curriculums and one skill builds on another. Also, they both pinpoint specific skills. I'm looking forward to working with both programs. We found Start-Up, Build-Up, Spiral-Up difficult this year because it felt like we were asking, "What are we going to do next?" There was nothing to tell us specifically if the students master that lesson, then you go to this lesson. There were units, but the students may not have needed Unit 5 because they may already know long e. The interventionist had to figure that out.

I guess everything has its pros and cons. Having to pick your own activities is good in a way because it allows you to pinpoint those specific things that you know from the students' DIBELS and QPA assessments that they need to work on. The programs are good too, because they kind of give you a map. I wasn't so much looking for a scripted program, as I was a

sequenced program. One thing that was frustrating was working with the older students. A lot of the older students were deficient in phonics, but they were only assessed with DIBELS oral reading fluency and retell. Even though they were deficient in phonics, we still needed to get them fluent because that's what they were tested on. They were not tested on phoneme segmentation; they were tested simply on reading. It's frustrating because they are not going to be fluent if they don't have the phonics skills. So, I would use the QPA to see what phonics skills they were lacking; then, I would find materials from the Start-Up, Build-Up, Spiral-Up program and use those to teach phonics. In addition, I would use the fluency passages so that the students could get both the phonics and the fluency that they needed. When the older kids are not fluent, there is always an underlying reason. Sometimes you feel like you're running in circles.

The DSC is what was used to assess kindergarteners before Reading First; now, there's DIBELS. They still do the DSC, but it doesn't give you specific information about literacy skills. In the classroom, I found that DIBELS was very specific; this student may not know these letters, or may not know these sounds. With others you were able to see, they know all their letters and sounds, but that can't blend, decode, or segment. It was good, for forming intervention groups. That information was useful for small groups and whole class [instruction] as well. Before Reading First, you kind of had to figure it out on your own. From the kindergarten report card, we assessed blending and segmenting, but it was maybe only five examples. I don't think it was enough to tell if they knew the skill. What's crazy is we were assessing blending and segmenting, but the curriculum at the time didn't really address it. I think that the assessment change has been very beneficial for the teachers. Before Reading First, we also did small groups, but we had been taught just to follow the curriculum.

The literacy centers were the most beneficial thing for me and my students. Once we had received training on centers, began implementing them, and received more support from our coaches it got easier. At first it was really hard, but in the second year I said, "How did I ever teach without that?" Again, not to say that we didn't do centers, because we did, but it wasn't the same. Before Reading First, during center time we played with Play Dough, sand, blocks, etc. After Reading First, center/station time means students do phonics activities individually or in groups with or without the teacher. It was different, but it was better because you started to see things like, "Wow, these four kids really don't know what I thought they knew." When you're teaching whole class, it's hard to really know what your kids are doing and what they're not. During my last year in the classroom, I said, "Next year, if I don't get the interventionist position, I want to have a math only block and use small groups for math instruction. Small group rotation with math centers, just like literacy." I guess the light bulb went off and it was like, "This is genius."

If I left this school and went to a non-Reading First school, I would definitely use small groups. I'd definitely use that 120-minute timeframe. Now that writing is included, I would do all of things Reading First requires. I believe that Reading First has a positive impact on student achievement, as long as the population isn't transient. We have such a transient population. A lot of our students bounce from one school to the next from year to year. They may be in a Reading First school for two years, then they leave for two years, then they come back to a Reading First school; the achievement gap is so large. You really can tell if the students have been in a Reading First school or not. When Reading First was K-3 only, our fourth grade teachers used to tell us they could see a difference in the kids that started in kindergarten, and stayed in the

program through the third grade. Their reading ability was much stronger than kids who were not in Reading First schools.

An analysis of Susan’s story as a kindergarten teacher and interventionist in a Reading First school resulted in the emergence of seven broad topics or structures on which the participant focused: professional development; assessment; time; collaboration; effectiveness; curriculum; and student achievement. Table 4.D highlights these structures.

Table 4.D *Susan: Underlying Structural Factors of the Experience*

Structures	Responses
Professional Development	Received lots of professional development
Assessment	Feels DIBELS is effective and specific, much better than the assessment used for kindergarteners prior to Reading First
	Feels there should be something other than DIBELS oral reading fluency to assess older kids
Time	Lacked time and personnel to give all intensive students the required intervention
Collaboration	Collaborates with teachers, reading coaches and other interventionists
Effectiveness	Feels the literacy block, centers, and small group instruction are effective
	Feels second year of implementation was more effective than first
Curriculum	Challenges in the first year of implementation: total change in how we taught (i.e. block, no play centers, no content area centers, small group instruction, no writing, holiday activities or art in the reading block, etc)
	Feels teachers lack flexibility during reading block
Student Achievement	Believes that student achievement is not evident in the data because of the school’s transient population
	Student achievement for students in Reading First in grades 1-3 was evident to fourth grade teachers

Textural-Structural Description

Susan’s story gives a bit more insight as to how Reading First changed the landscape, or ecology of classrooms. In comparing her pre-Reading First classroom with her post-Reading

First classroom she stated, “I had taught for about four years or so prior to that. And we did centers prior to that, but we were able to implement more play centers, so to speak, and math centers [integrating it] all together. Then when Reading First came along, the [120-minute] core came in, we taught whole group for an hour, and then centers for an hour. So it was a *big* change. We no longer could do any math during the center time. All of the play centers...like the housekeeping, and dramatic play centers, had to be taken out; we weren't able to use any of that. We could use it later in the day if we wanted to, but there was no time for it after that. Because after that 120 [minute] core, we had lunch, P.E., then we had to fit math in, and they took a nap, and then it was time to go home. So we had to get rid of it. We tried, but it didn't work.”

Susan elaborated and explained that as she had more training, the transition became more manageable. She said, “But then as we went through more training, we found different ways to play, so to speak, but still use phonics materials and make more games out of it. So that was a big transition the first year. And we couldn't do any writing at the time; writing was not included. That had to be separate as well, which was really difficult for kindergarten because reading and writing were connected.”

Susan reported that she had attended numerous professional development activities or trainings, especially in the early year of Reading First. She asserted, “We had two weeks of training on LETSR during the summer. Then the following year, we had a weeklong institute which was a refresher; it built on what we had the year before. As an interventionist, we've done the literacy conferences; last year that was four days, this year it was three days. I also [attended] four days of ELFA training last summer.”

When asked what she does as an interventionist, Susan reported, “As an interventionist, I've been able to work with more grades, from kindergarten up to fourth grade. What I do now is

pull small groups—of mainly the intensive students—and teach to their weakest point of academic need. That's what I do as an interventionist.” Susan expressed some concern about the kids she works with. They are the Tier 3/Intensive kids, meaning they are among the lowest in their grade level. She explained that their levels are determined by their DIBELS and a quick phonics screener scores. All Tier 3/Intensive kids are supposed to get the 120-minute core and an additional 60-90 minutes of intervention. However, personnel shortages and time constraints prevent all of the Tier 3/Intensive kids from getting the required time allotment. She confirms, “They're supposed to get 60 minutes extra; we just don't have the people to give them that extra 30 minutes. We did do an extra 30 minutes in kindergarten. Kindergarten did get the full Tier 3, but the rest of the grades; we weren't able to do it. The first grade [teachers]...worked with them to try to get Project Read for those intensive kids. The rest of the grade levels, we couldn't fit it in. We didn't have any people to do it. We didn't have manpower to do it.”

During the interview, Susan indicated that the students are assessed and grouped according to their DIBELS and quick phonics assessment scores. Susan feels that DIBELS is an effective assessment, but also feels that the older kids need to be tested with something other than DIBELS. Susan points out that DIBELS is “very specific.” It seems that many of the older kids are lacking in phonics, but with DIBELS, they're only tested on oral reading fluency. In the interview, Susan explained that scores from the DIBELS and quick phonics assessments were correlated to the intervention curriculum levels. Susan specified, “...even though they were deficient in phonics, we still needed to get them fluent because that's what they're tested on. They're not tested on phoneme segmentation; they're not tested on nonsense words; they're tested on simply reading.” This year the interventionists primarily used the Start-Up, Build-Up, Spiral-Up and Voyager programs. The interventionists pulled additional materials as needed. With

regards to the curriculum, Susan stated, “It was more difficult this year because it wasn't a sequence curriculum. Each week you had to pick and choose and pull what you were going to use...there's nothing that tells us, ‘After you do this lesson you go to this one, or if the students master this then you go to this.’ It just was Unit 3, Unit 4, and Unit 5. Well, they may not need Unit 5. You had to figure that out on your own.” Susan also pointed out that two new programs would be utilized for intervention groups during the upcoming school year. The principal chose *Language!* and *Read Well*(Sopris West Educational Publishers).

When asked about her biggest challenges with implementing Reading First as a classroom teacher, Susan listed two Reading First requirements: literacy-based centers only, and strict reading only block (i.e. no writing, art, math, science, social studies). Susan gave an example, stating “You couldn't do Christmas activities...it sounds silly, but for kindergarten, that's a big part of their development...being able to do art. We couldn't do any of that, and years before we did. It was just a big adjustment to block off 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., and all you're doing is reading.” Susan went on explaining, “...honestly, the biggest [challenge] for me was that I couldn't do journals...or everyday counts calendar math during that time. I struggled with it that whole first year.”

Susan ended the interview discussing the benefits of Reading First, particularly for the classroom teacher. She feels that the literacy centers and the small group instruction was the most beneficial. With regards to literacy centers, she stated, “At first it was really hard; once we had received the training... started to implement them, received more support from our coaches, and more professional development...I said, how did I ever teach without that?” Susan found small group instruction to be very effective, “...because you started to see, wow, these four kids

really don't know what I thought they knew." She even stated that in the future she wanted to use small group instruction and centers during her math time.

When asked if she would take the tenants of Reading First with her to a non-Reading First school, without hesitation Susan responded yes. Susan feels that Reading First has a positive impact on student achievement, but it may not be reflected in their scores because of their transient population. However, she revealed that, "our fourth grade teachers used to tell us they could see a difference in the kids that started in kindergarten, and stayed in the program through the third grade, that their reading ability was much stronger than kids who were not in the program."

In the final profile, we will hear Faith's story. Similar to Cathy and Susan, Faith has been teaching first grade in the same Reading First school for the past five years. Thus, she too has been involved in Reading First since the program's implementation in the district.

Profile #5: Faith

I've been teaching five years and have been involved in Reading First for five years as a first grade teacher. We started off the very first year with lots and lots of training. We did the LETRS (Moats, 2004) training. We had training on the curriculum, and DIBLES. I attended a day or a half- day of district-wide training on the new series, and this year I went to a workshop on small group instruction and management that went along with this series. It was just a couple of teachers that attended the training for small group instruction.

There was no adjustment period for me; it was just the way I was trained to teach. I taught 60 minutes of whole group, 60 minutes of small group instruction, and intervention groups. I use DIBLES to pull my groups. Reading First is all I've ever known. The curriculum we have now is better than the old one because it incorporates the science, social studies and

writing. When we first started, we were not allowed to put writing in our block. Writing and spelling had to be taught in a separate 45-minute block; now we can incorporate writing. The new curriculum also incorporates fiction and non-fiction in the same week. If our main selection is fiction, our second selection is non-fiction. I like that a lot; it gives the kids more—it exposes them to non-fiction where before they didn't have as much non-fiction. With the old curriculum, I liked the way the comprehension strategies were taught a little better than in the new curriculum—it might be just me getting used to the difference in how the strategies are presented.

I think we have all of the materials that came with the new series. There may only be one set of leveled readers per grade level, but other than that, we have everything that has been in our manual and that they tell us we have access to. There's also a website that we can go to and get extra information. Overall, I prefer the new curriculum over the old. I still don't like the way that some things are taught. For example, this week the skill was compare and contrast, and we were comparing and contrasting cubs—baby cubs to grown up tigers. The lesson didn't involve a lot of thinking. The kids just listed 'things I know about cubs', and 'things I know about grown-up tigers.' The lesson didn't actually compare what's alike; you have to be faithful to core. Now the good thing is I teach science later in the day, so I could incorporate it into science; but it's not always that way. Sometimes I feel like I'm missing the opportunity for a teachable moment. There was no Venn diagram. I wanted to talk about how the two are alike, and how they are different. It just wasn't much thinking involved in the lesson. I guess I could have incorporated more. I've stuck to the curriculum this year just because I'm getting the feel of it.

For small group instruction, the series includes lessons for students who are below level and students who are above level, so I've been sticking to that. I'm just trying to get used to the new curriculum; it is overwhelming. There's a lot to do in one day.

I'll be attending professional developments this summer, like LETRS Foundations (Moats, 2004). I also went to the Louisiana data summit where we looked at DIBLES data and were able to tell which children were struggling and what we needed to work on. For me, that information was very helpful for managing small groups. During the first couple of years, we did a lot of fair shares across the district and study groups within our school. I'm sure there's been a lot more professional development that I can't think of. This year, we meet every Tuesday and we look at data, and have small study groups with a professional book. In the past, we did whole faculty study groups after school.

If I were in a non-Reading First school, I'd still use DIBLES to see where my kids are struggling, where I need to pick them up. I think it's helped me to better understand where they're coming from or where they need to be in order to succeed. Even without Reading First, I'd still pull my small groups. It's just the way I teach now. I think it's effective. I think because we have so many kids coming and going that Reading First is not showing its effectiveness; I'm sure that other places have the same problem—a transient population. This year, especially, we had a huge turnover. A lawsuit and a natural disaster have skewed our data so much that it's hard to say how effective Reading First has been. It would be interesting to track those kids, but it's hard to do that with everything that's going on.

The new series requires us to do a weekly assessment on a cold read. The kids are supposed to silently read the text with no prior exposure. I think the problem with the test is that it jumps all over. Sometimes the kids can answer the questions without even reading the story. The questions jump from phonics, to phonemic awareness, to comprehension, and grammar. Another problem is that schools modify the test; some are reading it out loud and others are using the ESL version. In addition to this, we do our selection test from the story that we've read

all week. As a grade level, we do our vocabulary assessment. We give a vocabulary test just to make sure the students understand the words and can use the words in sentences.

I think the students who have been in Reading First since the beginning and have had the intervention groups and the core curriculum are succeeding. I think the impact on those students who haven't had Reading First is negative; it takes a while to catch them up. Sometimes I feel that the students who didn't benchmark take on a negative feeling, but you have to be able to show them their growth over time. No matter where they start, they should be growing in some type of way. So actually, every student is being effective in a positive way. For the kids, going from a non-Reading First school to a Reading First school is like a culture shock. Some kids comment that they've never been to a center, so that's huge for them. It's huge because you have to get them to understand that it's not playtime, it's learning time.

For centers, I don't use the flip charts that come with the series. I don't think it's mandated. We have a listening center where students can listen to stories and respond to them. We also have a center with Reading First cards that focus on phonics, and phonemic awareness, that we purchased those ourselves. We also have LEAP pads where the kids read and listen to stories. All of those things are in the listening center. I also have a spelling center where they write and practice their spelling words. In the library center, the kids can read—they read by themselves and then respond in some kind of way. In the computer center, there are phonics programs that go along with the series. We also use approved Internet sites. There's also partner reading; I usually highlight certain parts and one partner will read the highlighted portion while the other partner will read the part that is not highlighted. Of course, there is always a phonics center and a writing center.

I use choice charts which indicate how many centers and activities each student has to complete, depending on their ability, per week. When an activity is completed, it is checked off on the chart and the work goes in their folder. Sometimes it works well and sometimes it does not. This year I have had some management issues. This year it didn't work so well, so I had to start them off in a certain center. Once they completed that, they could check it off and then choose something else. It takes a lot of practice and training, but once they know your expectations it works. I attribute the issues to the shift in population, as well as the fact that I have inclusion this year. Scheduling has been an issue with my inclusion kids because they come in almost 35 minutes into center time, and that's where the problems have been. They get pulled during whole group instruction, and then they come in for centers.

I have eight students (out of 21) not at benchmark. I have five that are intensive, those are my special ed. kids, and three that are strategic. Three or four of the kids are very close to benchmark. The other ones, because they're special needs students and their disabilities vary, are close to benchmark. Two of my students are actually in the process of being evaluated right now, and those two are not benchmarked. Believe it or not, they are reading even less than the special ed. kids. They're being evaluated right now, so hopefully in August they'll get what they need. I think that DIBLES helps us when we bring the kids up for evaluation. One problem is that some people who are on the team don't actually understand the DIBELS data. For example, a child went from reading 8 words per minute to 24 words per minute, can segment the sounds, but can't read the word back to you.

If I were to go to a non-Reading First school, I think I would definitely take the 60 minutes whole group instruction and the 60 minutes small group. What would I leave behind? I would leave behind the lessons on comprehension strategies that are in the new curriculum that I

don't like. I would use other activities that I think would apply the same concept. I would like to have the flexibility of being able to use things that might benefit the kids more than what's in the book. Even if I know the activity is going to be a mess, I can't change it.

I think, overall, Reading First has helped me to better understand phonics. It's also helped me to know where my kids are, and what they are not understanding. I can look at the data and identify exactly where they are and understand where I need to pick them up. As a result, I think my kids see success. I like the small group time, and overall I think that helps a lot of the kids.

We start our day with whole group instruction. We begin with the morning message; we go over it and discuss vocabulary. Next, there's usually a read aloud story and response. I do a think-aloud, then they go to their journals to respond. Then, we move to phonics and spelling. This series incorporates all of that. We also do phonemic awareness activities. For example, I might say, "This week we're doing the *oo* sound. I'm going to name three words. Give me a thumbs-up if you hear the *oo* sound in the word." In phonics we'd talk about the letters that make the *oo* sound, as well as practice blending *oo* words. Afterwards, we'd write the words and spell the words. We even sort words that have *oo*, and words that don't have the *oo* sound. We also do vocabulary activities. When all of those activities are done, the kids do their practice book pages. The completed practice book pages are their tickets to centers. I check their work, they get their center folder and look at their chart to see where they need to start. They have to show me that they've finished each center's activities before they can go on. While they're doing centers, I'm pulling small groups. During this time, I work with the lower kids on phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary. I also do read-alouds and shared readings. There's always a lot of discussion to make sure the kids understand, can retell, and talk about what we're reading.

That's a big problem. Just because they've hit benchmark on DIBELS oral reading, doesn't mean they can tell you what was read.

In the beginning of the year we group kids by DIBELS nonsense word fluency and phoneme segmentation fluency scores. In January, we group them by oral reading fluency scores. Sometimes I have kids that may be at benchmark for oral reading fluency, but are not retelling much. So, during intervention groups I work on comprehension and retelling. My intervention group is almost at benchmark. "Research says that comprehension comes with fluency," but I don't see it.

For my students who are above level, I get the book from the series [for beyond level students] and I partner them up for buddy reading. I try to pull them for five minutes to say, "Okay, let's discuss what I taught in whole group instruction, or let's talk about what happened in the story you just read." They like that so much more because it's not reading class; it seems like we're just sharing. They take pride in that. They'll come to me and say, "We didn't discuss our reading today." That helps me to be sure that I get to the beyond level kids.

Next year we'll be using Read Well for our intervention groups. So those intensive kids are going to get the core curriculum, a 30-minute intervention plus 90 minutes of Read Well. That's why it's nice to have science, social studies and writing incorporated into the reading block. I'm not sure how the scheduling is going to be arranged, but they're going to arrange things so that the kids get all of the reading instruction they need. It's been a challenge, to try and squeeze things in.

An analysis of Faith's story as a first grade teacher in a Reading First school resulted in the emergence of seven broad topics or structures on which the participant focused: professional

development; assessment; time, collaboration; effectiveness; and curriculum and instruction.

Table 4.E highlights these structures.

Table 4.E *Faith: Underlying Structural Factors of the Experience*

Structures	Responses
Professional Development	Received lots of professional development at the beginning of Reading First Phonics training was most beneficial
Assessment	Feels DIBELS is effective; it helps teachers understand where the kids are
Time	Lacked time and personnel to give all intensive students the required intervention Feels that there is a lot to do in a day, “squeezing things in”
Collaboration	Collaborates with teachers, reading coaches and other interventionists (i.e. share fairs, planning, whole faculty study groups)
Effectiveness	Feels that everything about Reading First is effective Data tells what students know and where they are
Curriculum	Likes new series because it includes science, social studies, writing, spelling, etc. Feels teachers lack flexibility in teaching the reading core Did not use all aspects (i.e. center flip charts)
Student Achievement	Feels that the data may not show its effectiveness because of the school’s transient population Feels that all students are positively impacted by Reading First, especially those who have been in the program consistently Above level kids do buddy reading

Textural-Structural Description

Faith has been a Reading First teacher for five years, so like Cathy, Reading First is all she knows. She began the interview detailing the professional development and training she has participated in as a result of Reading First. She stated, “We started off the very first year with lots and lots of training. We did the LETRS (Moats, 2004) training. We had training on the curriculum, then we had DIBLES training... it was never an adjustment...it’s all I’ve ever known.” She also mentioned other professional development activities like the Louisiana Data

Summit, as well as collaborative professional development opportunities like fair shares, and faculty study groups.

Faith likes the new curriculum better than the old. She explained, “The curriculum we have now is better because it incorporates the science and social studies and the writing. It allows more of the writing involved where, when we first started, we were not allowed to put writing in our block. Writing had to be 45 minutes separate (writing and spelling separate) and now we can incorporate writing...So I like that a lot.” Faith went on to state, that she does not like the lack of flexibility she has with the core program. She gave an example, stating, “...this week was compare and contrast, and we were comparing and contrasting cubs–baby cubs to grown up tigers. It was just cubs, one two three, tigers, one two three, and there was nothing to show them, like a Venn diagram. I wanted to talk about how they were alike, and how it was different. [The lesson didn’t involve] much thinking. So the kids just listed things I know about cubs, things I know about grown-up tigers. So it [really] wasn’t comparing...” The lack of flexibility is frustrating, but Faith is determined, always looking for a way to make things work. She stated, “...Now, the good thing is it’s science, so later on in the day, I could incorporate it into science, but that’s not always the case...I feel like at that time I’m missing that opportunity...” Faith is grateful for the abundance of materials and resources that come with the new series, but at the same time she feels overwhelmed.

As far as centers go, Faith does not use the flip chart centers. She pulls her own center activities together. For management, she uses a choice chart. She told me, “I don’t use the flip charts. I don’t think that’s mandated though. We have a listening center where they can listen to stories and respond to them. We also use Reading First cards that focus on phonics, and phonemic awareness...and we have Leap pads where they can read and listen to stories. There’s

a spelling center where they just are writing and practicing their spelling words. In the library, they can read...and then respond in some way. On the computers, we have programs like the Buggles and Beezy phonics series. We also have Alexia and—some Internet sites that are approved that we can use.”

Faith believes that DIBELS is an effective assessment tool and likes the structure that small group instruction provides. She explained, “I think even without being in a Reading First school, I’d still use DIBELS to see where my kids are struggling...I think it’s helped me to better understand where they’re coming from or where they need to be in order to succeed. And I really think, even without being in a Reading First school, I’d still pull my small groups...I think it’s probably just going to be the way I teach now.”

In addition to DIBELS, Faith’s school is required to use the core program assessments. She expressed concern about the test, more specifically about the vast variety of questions asked. She also stated that each school can modify the core assessment. Faith complained that it isn’t fair for some kids to get one version of the test and other students another version. Additionally, some students have the test read to them. She said, “The problem with the test is it jumps all over...they read a story and sometimes they can answer the questions without even reading the story...the questions jump from phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, and grammar... . I think a few of the problems is schools can modify the tests...but some are reading it out loud. Some are doing the ESL version. So it’s still not everybody doing the same exact thing...So it’s difficult.”

Faith truly believes that Reading First is effective, but worries that her school’s scores may not indicate that. She asserted, “I do think it’s effective...We have so many kids coming and going that it’s not showing its effectiveness because of the type of school it is.” She also cited the

impact that recent hurricanes and lawsuits have had on the district's population. Faith went on to say, "I think the students who have been in it since the beginning and got the interventions and the curriculum...we're seeing success in. I think the impact—those students who haven't received it, you know, it takes a while to catch them up, and sometimes I feel that the students—oh, I didn't benchmark, and they get that negative feeling, but you have to be able to show them, look at your growth. I mean, they're growing no matter [what]— if they start off negative, they're growing some type of way. So every student is being effective in a positive way. It's just not the same because depending on where they start off."

When asked, "If you were to leave this school to teach at a non-Reading First school would you take the tenants of Reading First with you?," Faith responded, "I think I would definitely take the 60 minutes whole group, 60 minutes small group because that's a big thing for me. Leave behind? I want to grab one of those comprehension strategies that they use and throw it out to do something else that I think would get the same concept applied. Just the flexibility of being able to use things that might benefit the kids a little bit better...sometimes I know that's going to be a mess, and I know it's going to be a mess, but I can't change it." She elaborated, saying, "...there are just some times when I read something and I'm like, this is not going to work, but I'm going to do it. Sometimes it works anyway."

Another of Faith's concerns has to do with the emphasis on phoneme segmentation and oral reading fluency and the lack of focus on comprehension and retell. Faith argued, "In the beginning of the year we used the nonsense word fluency and phoneme segmentation scores...to group them, but in January we used oral reading fluency scores. I find those kids that are at benchmark may not be retelling much. So they're benchmarked because they're reading where they need to, but they can't retell. So a lot of...my small groups will work on retelling. During

intervention time, I pull students... the kids that are benchmarked will do partner reading and a lot of discussion...to make sure we're understanding, can retell, and can talk about what we're reading because that's a big fault. That's my beef to say with DIBLES is we're benchmarked because we can read, but we can't tell you anything we can read."

When asked about differentiating instruction for above level students, Faith said that she uses the partner reading strategy and then discusses what they've read with them. She also indicated that she doesn't get to "pull" them all the time, but they remind her when she gets wrapped up in other things. She stated, "I don't get to pull my beyond level kids all the time. So I choose a book and I partner them up, and they read together. Then I can pull them for five minutes and discuss what happened in this chapter. They like that so much more because then – it's not reading. We're just sharing, so and they take pride in that. They'll come to me and say we didn't read our chapter today, or we didn't read and discuss today. So that helps me make sure I get my beyond level kids to keep reading." Faith pointed out that she has had some management issues with her below level readers. She stated, "I've had inclusion in the past...they come in almost 35 minutes into my centers, and that's where the problems have been. They're with me about 45 minutes...they get pulled during whole group instruction...and then they come in for centers." There is an obvious scheduling issue.

When asked if she thought that Reading First was helpful in identifying and tracking special needs students, Faith replied, "I think that DIBLES has helped us when we bring kids up to identify [them for special education services]...I think it's helped us look at the kids and have the correct data, but other people interpreting the data may not understand what it means."

Overall, Faith feels that Reading First has been beneficial for both her and her students. She feels that she is a better teacher because of the professional trainings she has attended. She

thinks her kids have benefited most from the small group instruction. She asserted, “I think overall for me as a teacher it has helped me to better understand phonics and ...the kids when they do not understand something...I can look at the data and I can look back on the LETRS (Moats, 2004) training and identify exactly where they are and understand where I need to pick them up. I think my kids see success, and they’re enjoying the fact that they’re reading...but I like the small group time and overall think that helps a lot of the kids.”

Thematic Analysis

In this chapter, five teachers told the stories of their experiences with Reading First. They discussed how they perceived Reading First impacted the classroom landscape, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student achievement. They also talked about the professional development activities they participated in as a result of Reading First. Lastly, each participant described her overall experiences with Reading First and indicated the components of Reading First that she would utilize if she found herself teaching in a non-Reading First school. As a result of questions asked and answers provided, several themes surfaced. The themes identified were:

- Language of Reading First
- Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading First
- Levels of Teacher Autonomy
- Views of Effective Reading Instruction

Theme #1: Language of Reading First

Jargon.

I recognized the first theme, the language of Reading First, after my initial reading of the interview transcripts. This theme has three parts: the jargon of Reading First, the language of

labeling students, and the descriptive language used to describe experiences. The fact is, there are very specific terms tied to Reading First: *intervention*, *progress monitor*, *DIBELS*, *coaches*, *interventionist*, *benchmark*, *fidelity*, *fab five*, etc. These terms, along with others, were used in each of the Reading First schools visited.

Labels

Related to the language of Reading First is the manner in which students are categorized and labeled. Many times during the interviews, the participants referred to their students as “my benchmark kids,” “my tier two kids,” or “my intensive kids.” Each of these categories implies the level at which the students are working according to their DIBELS scores, particularly in phoneme segmentation and oral reading fluency. For example, in her interview at the end of the school year Taylor stated, “...my intensives were – their oral reading is basically zero. They still didn’t even hit benchmark on phoneme segmentation.” She went on to state, “Half of my kids were there or above. Two were, I would say, probably in the 30s. So they’re strategic and the rest are now considered intensive because they are going to second grade reading less than 30 words per minute.” Faith categorized her kids stating that she has three strategic kids and, “I have five that are intensive...Those are my special ed. kids.”

Descriptive Language

The final concept related to the terminology of Reading First is the manner in which participants describe their experiences. In many instances, the participants use descriptive language as well as figurative language to convey their ideas and feelings accurately. For example, when describing the 120-minute block and the core reading program, Taylor stated, “Because I feel like after a little while it’s like beating a dead horse.” In another instance, referring to the lowest kids who don’t get assistance at home, she said, “They fall through the

cracks.” In another example, when discussing centers, Amy stated “I used centers as a form of bribery.” In a final illustration, Susan spoke about the assessment cycle, “Sometimes you feel like you’re running in circles.” These types of vivid descriptions allow the reader to grasp a true sense of the participants’ experiences.

Theme #2: Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading First

Another theme that emerged from the data related to the efficacy of Reading First. Each participant felt that Reading First had pros and cons for both students and teachers. The paragraphs below detail the teachers’ perceived advantages and disadvantages of Reading First for their students and for themselves as teachers.

Perceived Advantages for Students

Each of the teachers felt that their students benefited from Reading First academically. Taylor indicated that she had seen students move through the tiers. Taylor stated, “This year I’ve seen kids move or progress through the tiers. For example, I saw a student go from tier two/strategic intervention to benchmark, and I’ve seen a student go from tier three/intensive intervention to tier two/strategic.” In addition, Cathy stated, “Even the couple of struggling readers have good attitudes because even if they’re having trouble keeping up with everybody, there’s that small group where they’re being pulled, and they can still feel successful because they’re reading at their level.” Two of the participants felt that Reading First was most beneficial to students who were consistently enrolled in Reading First schools (i.e. attended Reading First schools from kindergarten through third grade). To address that point, Susan stated, “When Reading First was K-3 only, our fourth grade teachers used to tell us they could see a difference in the kids that started in kindergarten and stayed in the program through the third grade. Their reading ability was much stronger...” Elaborating on the topic, Faith noted, “I think the students

who have been in Reading First since the beginning and have had the intervention groups and the core curriculum are succeeding.”

Perceived Disadvantages for Students

Despite the advantages for students listed above, the teachers also reported disadvantages for students. In many instances, it seemed that the “benchmark kids” and the above-level kids got less time with the teacher in small group instruction. For instance, Faith said,

For my students who are above level, I get the book from the series [for beyond level students], and I partner them up for buddy reading. I try to pull them for five minutes to say, ‘Okay, let’s discuss what I taught in whole group instruction, or let’s talk about what happened in the story you just read.’ They like that so much more because it’s not reading class; it seems like we’re just sharing. They take pride in that. They’ll come to me and say, ‘We didn’t discuss our reading today.’ That helps me to be sure that I get to the beyond-level kids.

On the same note, Taylor stated, “While I pulled an intervention group, the benchmark kids worked independently or with a partner.” Consequently, it appeared that the majority of the teachers’ and interventionists’ time and efforts were spent working with the “strategic-tier two kids” and the “intensive-tier three kids.” Susan illustrated, “As an interventionist, I’ve been able to work with more grades, from kindergarten to fourth grade. Mainly, I pull small groups of intensive students and teach to their weakest point.”

In addition, two teachers reported feelings that the lowest kids, those needing the most assistance, were in fact falling further and further behind. To make that point, Amy reported, “the ones that are far behind seem to be left behind.” Taylor indicated, “I feel that Reading First is hurting some of the kids.” Another participant reported that a disadvantage for students was the reliance on one DIBELS score for grouping. Amy explained, “I don’t think it’s fair to use it as the only indicator of a student’s performance; especially, if the test is given by someone that they don’t know.” Susan alluded to the need for an additional assessment for the older kids when

she stated, “A lot of the older students were deficient in phonics, but they were only assessed with DIBELS oral reading fluency and retell.”

Perceived Advantages for Teachers

Most of the teachers felt that they benefited from the professional development they received as a result of Reading First. Consequently, they felt they were more knowledgeable and better teachers. Faith testified,

I think, overall, Reading First has helped me to better understand phonics. It’s also helped me to know where my kids are and what they are not understanding. I can look at the data and identify exactly where they are and understand where I need to pick them up. As a result, I think my kids see success.

Cathy said,

I’ve been through a tremendous amount of professional development activities. I think that LETRS (Moats, 2004) was probably the most beneficial... LETRS (Moats, 2004) training was very specific in the area of phoneme awareness, which is good because I don’t remember that from when I learned it and they didn’t really go over that a lot in college.

When asked if the professional development received built on existing knowledge, Susan replied, “It was a repeat for some because we had new teachers coming in, but a lot of it was to expand our knowledge.” In general, most of the teachers thought that the core reading program and related materials were effective; they liked the abundant amount of resources that accompanied the text. Amy said, “The *Treasures* reading series (Macmillan/McGraw-Hill, n.d.) is really good. It came with a pile of stuff that you could use.” On the same topic, Taylor said, “I love the resources you get. It’s plentiful.”

In addition, all of the teachers felt that DIBELS was an effective assessment because it identified specific student weaknesses which allowed for more targeted instruction. Amy summarized the general feeling of the participants: “I think DIBELS is good. It helps you to see

where your students are, what they don't know, what they do know, and where you can go from there.”

Perceived Disadvantages for Teachers

According to the participants, the biggest disadvantage of Reading First was the lack of flexibility allowed. This lack of flexibility permeated the classroom and included restrictions related to: time (i.e. 120 minutes); curriculum (i.e. core reading program only); instructional methodology (i.e. only Reading First or scientifically-based activities that are explicit and systematic); assessment (i.e. DIBELS and core program assessments); and grouping (i.e. to be determined exclusively by DIBELS scores in phoneme segmentation and oral reading fluency). Taylor summarized comments made by virtually all of the participants relating to the rigidity of Reading First requirements, stating if she went to a non-Reading First school, “I think I would take some of the components but not all of them. I would leave the part that doesn't allow me to be more creative with things. I need the flexibility to change things if my kids don't understand something.”

Theme #3: Levels of Teacher Autonomy

Closely related to the perceived disadvantage of the lack of flexibility teachers are allowed in Reading First is the third theme of the study, levels of teacher autonomy. Reading First teachers are expected to implement the mandate with complete, unwavering fidelity. One of the tenets of Reading First specifically deals with fidelity to the core. The powers-that-be require that teachers be faithful to the scientifically-based core reading program that has been deemed effective for teaching all students to read. Fidelity to the core is supposed to make teaching reading “teacher proof.” The five participants in this study implement Reading First with varying levels of fidelity. In their discussions, three participants indicated that they were faithful to the

core. Despite their admitted fidelity, some of these same participants gave examples or told of instances in which they “tweaked” activities in the core to better meet their students’ needs. It is interesting that those who admittedly “tweaked” activities or neglected to use the center activities included in the core reading program still considered themselves faithful to the core. However, the examples below tell us that these teachers are not completely willing to sacrifice their autonomy and instructional-decision making. For example, Cathy stated,

I found the kids like a similar extension activity that allows extra practice and is engaging for them. Like I said, I tweak it a little bit so that it works for my students. I use the core with fidelity. I stick with the five components [identified by the NRP]. I can’t say that we do anything that is not focused on those components. We got everything that we needed to go with the new series and I use most of it. One thing that I don’t use a lot of are the center flip charts. The flip charts are meant to be used at centers, but when I do centers, they usually last about 15 to 20 minutes. Well, my kids would be done in those flip chart centers in about five minutes, so that’s something I had to come up with my own. I might base some of my centers and activities on the flip chart centers. Some of the activities are very simplistic, which is fine at the beginning of the year. When they’re getting into the routine that’s fine, but after a month or so, they need a little bit more.

In the next example, Faith talked about how she feels she often misses a “teachable moment” because of the rigidity of Reading First and the expected fidelity to the core. She explained,

I still don’t like the way that some things are taught. For example, this week the skill was compare and contrast, and we were comparing and contrasting cubs–baby cubs to grown up tigers. The lesson didn’t involve a lot of thinking. The kids just listed ‘things I know about cubs’, and ‘things I know about grown-up tigers.’ The lesson didn’t actually compare what’s alike; you have to be faithful to core. Now the good thing is I teach science later in the day, so I could incorporate it into science; but it’s not always that way. Sometimes I feel like I’m missing the opportunity for a teachable moment. There was no Venn diagram. I wanted to talk about how the two are alike, and how they are different. It just wasn’t much thinking involved in the lesson. I guess I could have incorporated more. I’ve stuck to the curriculum this year just because I’m getting the feel of it.

However, later in the interview Faith admitted to not using the center activities included in the series and detailed the activities she implements. Faith explained,

For centers, I don't use the flip charts that come with the series. I don't think it's mandated. We have a listening center where students can listen to stories and respond to them. We also have a center with Reading First cards that focus on phonics, and phonemic awareness... We also have LEAP pads where the kids read and listen to stories... I also have a spelling center where they write and practice their spelling words. In the library center, the kids can read – they read by themselves and then respond in some kind of way. In the computer center, there are programs like the Buggles and Beezy phonics series, and Alexia. We also use approved Internet sites. There's also partner reading; I usually highlight certain parts and one partner will read the highlighted portion while the other partner will read the part that is not highlighted. Of course, there is always a phonics center and a writing center.

Taylor summarized the point, noting,

...with Reading First being so strict it's hard. They're not flexible with how you can use the materials. You have to be faithful to that core. The new series is more scripted, telling you everything you should be saying. If you're teaching a lesson and you see it's not clicking, you don't have the flexibility of changing the lesson.

Never claiming to be faithful to the core, one participant, Amy, gave a specific example of how she was cited for incorporating materials and activities into the reading block that were not part of the core reading program. This example indicates that she will not succumb to the rigidity of Reading First; that is, she will not sacrifice her autonomy and instructional decision-making. Amy explained,

For example, for Halloween, the focus skill was adjectives. I had this awesome book that had a bazillion adjectives in it - all about pumpkins, and mushy, and squishy, and all that. So, I was going to bring in a real pumpkin, and we were going to cut it while I was reading this book. It was a great lesson according to the WOW program. Well, lo and behold, they pop in for a Reading First visit. Well, I got cited because I was using a book that wasn't included in the core.

Fully aware of the expectation of fidelity, Amy implemented a lesson that was relevant, using materials that did not meet Reading First criteria but that would engage her students and meet her GLEs for the week, thereby, retaining her autonomy in the classroom. Based on her intimate

knowledge of her students and believing in her professional ability to make decisions, Amy trusted that she could make more effective decisions about student grouping instead of relying solely on the students' DIBELS scores to make grouping decisions. She stated,

I would think that they would benefit more on one scale, but then the numbers say, they need to be here, but me working with the student all day, I can tell, no, he needs to be in this group. But they go by the numbers.

Theme #4: Views of Effective Reading Instruction

Each of the participants indicated that there were some parts of Reading First that they felt were effective. As summarized in each participant's table (refer to Tables A-E in this chapter) following their profiles, each teacher indicated that she would use the components of Reading First that she deemed effective even if she taught in a non-Reading First school. For example, one participant, Faith, reported that all of the components of Reading First were effective and had a positive impact on all of her students. Two participants, Cathy and Susan, noted that the literacy block, centers, and small group instruction was effective. The remaining two participants, Amy and Taylor, commented that centers and small group instruction were effective. What's interesting is that most of the components regarded by teachers as effective are practices that they associate with Reading First rather than recognizing them as components of solid reading instruction that can and have been implemented by successful teachers for decades without the requirements of a federal mandate or the implementation of a commercially-packaged reading program.

Another view of effective reading instruction expressed by the teachers in this study relates to the lack of focus on comprehension in Reading First. Some of the participants indicated feelings that there is too much of a focus on phonics and fluency and therefore, not enough of a focus on comprehension. For example, Faith noted that in the beginning of the year, they use

DIBELS “nonsense word fluency and phoneme segmentation fluency to group students.” Then in January, they begin to use DIBELS “oral reading fluency scores for grouping.” She went on to comment, “But I find those kids that may be doing benchmark on reading may be not retelling much. So they’re benchmarked because they’re reading where they need to, but they can’t retell.” She went on to state that her “beef” is that students are “benchmarked because they can read, but can’t tell you anything they can read.” She summarized her sentiments saying, “Well, they say that—research says that comprehension comes with fluency. But I’m not seeing it.”

To the same point, Cathy stated,

They’re asked to retell, which I actually think is something we need to look at more because they’re grouped based on their ability to read a certain amount of words (benchmark or not). For instance, this year I have one student who’s reading 117 words a minute when his benchmark is 40, but he’s retelling only 12 percent of that...I’m not exactly sure what the guideline is, but I like them to retell at least 50 percent.

In the aforementioned examples, the teachers indicated a need to focus more on comprehension than Reading First requires. It seems that the current focus of assessment and instruction is oral reading fluency, which does not necessarily equate to readers’ understanding.

Theme #5: Contradiction of School Programs

Two teachers in the study indicated that they were frustrated and overwhelmed with the number of programs that they are expected to implement in the classroom. In particular, they are frustrated with the fact that the programs do always complement one another yet they are expected and held accountable for effective implementation. Amy said, “We have so many programs to do, it’s a big problem.” For example, she explained that they are expected to follow the core reading program, as well as keep the students 100% engaged with WOW (Working on the Work). Amy clarified,

I feel that Reading First contradicts the WOW program. For example, for Halloween, the focus skill was adjectives. I had this awesome book that had a bazillion adjectives in it-all

about pumpkins, and mushy, and squishy, and all that. So, I was going to bring in a real pumpkin, and we were going to cut it while I was reading this book. It was a great lesson according to the WOW program. Well, lo and behold, they pop in for a Reading First visit. Well, I got cited because I was using a book that wasn't included in the core.

Now, I'm like, how can I do anything that fits WOW when I'm in a Reading First school and not get in trouble for it? It's like we have to do one thing for one observer and another thing for some other observer. I feel like I'm on stage and my performance changes depending on who's watching. I wish they were all on the same page.

Taylor and Amy both feel like they're "spread thin" because their school also implements Kagan strategies for cooperative learning, and thinking maps. Amy stated, "They're awesome programs, don't get me wrong, but they contradict each other. They don't go together well...So, I'm decorating my room with everything they want to see, so if they walk in, at least it's on the walls." In instances like these, teachers are forced to implement programs and "perform" on demand and performances are based on "who's watching". How can others judge your teaching effectiveness based on a few observations. It's what teachers do every day with their students that makes a difference and determines their effectiveness.

Summary

Having told my participants' stories, I will work to acquire the meanings and essence of teachers' experiences with the implementation of Reading First. In the next chapter, I will present a summary, my interpretations, and implications for practice.

Chapter Five

Summary and Recommendations Meanings and Essence

In some ways, it is tempting to let the profiles and the categorized, thematic excerpts speak for themselves. But another step is appropriate. Researchers must ask themselves what they have learned...The last stage of interpretation, then consistent with the interview process itself, asks researchers what meaning they have made of their work. (Seidman, 1998, pp. 110-111)

In the preceding chapter, you heard the voices of the participants and were able to make your own judgments and discover your own interpretations. In this chapter, I will briefly summarize the study and then draw out my own interpretations to come to the meanings and essence of teachers' experiences implementing Reading First. I will discuss my understanding of the phenomenon and my conclusions within the framework of the current literature. Finally, I offer my recommendations for the successful implementation of education mandates as well as recommendations for further study.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand teachers' experiences related to the implementation of *Reading First* in the classroom and more specifically, how Reading First has impacted curriculum, instruction, assessment, student achievement, and professional development. An introduction and overview were given to place this study within an historical and political context, to assist the reader in understanding the history of the government's role in administering educational initiatives and mandates.

The participants for this study were five certified, kindergarten and first grade public school teachers, all women, currently teaching in Apple School District in Louisiana. I conducted one in depth interview with each participant regarding her experiences with the implementation

of Reading First. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and verified for accuracy. The participants took on the role of co-researchers as they gave feedback and input while verifying the data.

Data analysis was based on the method advanced by Moustakas (1994), and a first person profile (Seidman, 1998) was used to depict the stories of the participants. Through analysis, topics, themes, and structures surfaced to make clear the meanings and essence of the participants' experiences. Their experiences provide the basis for my interpretation and recommendations.

Discussion of Findings

Traditionally, teachers have been asked to tolerate and implement inept or awkward mandates and initiatives that result in new programs and curricula, all of which are assessed by standardized measures. We live in a dynamic world, with things in a constant state of flux. The changes and mandates forced on educators by politicians have left an ugly scar. There is hesitation, doubt and reluctance with each new demand. The current reliance on test data to demonstrate student achievement is unfair to all parties involved. Under pressure to conform and get results, this system neglects the fact that student performance is affected by a multitude of factors. Heller (2004) makes the point boldly as he compares the medical model with the educational model. He asks, "Does the doctor have only 10 months to cure the patient regardless of the patient's condition, environment, like habits and other variables?" (p. 103).

The first theme of discussion is the language of Reading First. As a result of the amount of research I've conducted related to Reading First, I have become familiar with the related jargon. However, I remember my first encounters with Reading First, and I recollect a feeling of overwhelming unfamiliarity; initially, it was intimidating reading and hearing the language of

Reading First. Similarly, the teachers in this study were overwhelmed and a bit taken aback. In addition to the requirements and components of Reading First, there was the language or jargon associated with it. Most of the teachers in this study were new teachers when they were introduced to Reading First. Most of them had never heard the terms associated with Reading First like: DIBELS, intervention, benchmark, progress monitoring, tier one, tier two, tier three, etc. Cathy referred to this when she stated, “The first year was probably the hardest one because it was a lot of [do] this, [do] this, [do] this and this...We were all a little blown away by it.” She went on to say, “We were like, what do you want us to do?” Learning about Reading First involves all of the nuances of learning a new language.

A related theme deals with the jargon related to labeling students. Throughout the study, the participants referred to their students saying, “my benchmark kids,” or “my intensive kids,” or “my strategic kids.” For years, teachers have labeled students. I remember being in the “high” group for reading class. I also remember kids making fun of the “low” group because they struggled and were not up to par with everyone else. I also remember feeling pressured to do well and get all of the answers right because I was in the “high” group; it was quite stressful at times. I always wondered if that type of labeling had a negative effect on the “low” students. I assumed it did. Similarly, I wonder what type of effect Reading First teachers’ labeling has on their students? One participant, Faith, made a statement alluding to this point, “...sometimes I feel that the students say, ‘oh, I didn’t benchmark,’ and they get that negative feeling.” I wonder if the teachers’ labeling impacts the way they think about students? I also wonder how this new terminology impacts teachers’ discussions about kids (both formal and informal discussions)?

Finally, the last sub-theme related to the language of Reading First addresses teachers’ use of language to describe their experiences. According to Wiehardt (n.d.), figurative language

is defined as “a word or phrase that departs from everyday literal language for the sake of comparison, emphasis, clarity, or freshness.” The participants used descriptive and figurative language to tell of their experiences with Reading First. They chose words and phrases that sometimes exaggerated their feelings to drive the point home. In my opinion, this is very telling and speaks volumes about their perceptions of Reading First.

The second theme of discussion deals with the idea that Reading First has advantages and disadvantages for both teachers and students. Heller (2004) writes of NCLB, “Although this act is unquestionably well intentioned, once again we see people who are non-educators, far removed from the actual day-to-day activity of schools, deciding for us what we should do and how we should do it” (p. 102). The good intentions driving Reading First legislation have proved beneficial for some students. Some of the participants in this study feel that Reading First has been beneficial for students who are hovering some place close to benchmark. Others feel that Reading First has been most beneficial to those students who have attended Reading First schools in kindergarten through third grade. One participant felt that all of her students have benefited from Reading First in some manner. On the other hand, some participants felt that Reading First was not beneficial for the lowest students, those for whom the program was designed. It appeared that the lowest students are not getting all of the intervention or small group instruction required by Reading First. Whether it’s due to a lack of time, personnel or both, it seems that those who are in most need are the ones being left behind. Therefore, in some instances, it appears that Reading First is doing the exact opposite of what was intended. Additionally, teachers indicated that they focused so much on the kids that were not benchmark that they had less time to devote to the benchmark and above level students. If the lowest kids

and the highest kids are not getting the time and attention they need, how are we leaving no child behind?

When asked about how they are differentiating instruction for their above-level students, some of the participants indicated that those students are engaging in buddy reading sessions, concluding their reading time with a five-minute teacher discussion. Some critics of NCLB and Reading First accuse that above-level or advanced students are being neglected. Even more disturbing is the fact that benchmark levels for DIBELS measures in Louisiana only reach the 40th percentile! We are telling our students that we expect the minimum.

Teachers have had the benefit of participating in professional development and training activities because of Reading First. Most of the participants in this study indicated that they are more knowledgeable teachers as a result. They testified that LETRS (Moats, 2004) training helped them with phonics and phonemic awareness and DIBELS helped them to determine what their students' specific needs were. They also noted a high level of collaboration among other teachers, coaches and interventionists. Contrarily, the teachers' biggest challenge or disadvantage was the lack of flexibility associated with Reading First. This leads to the third theme, that of teacher autonomy.

The participants in this study were frustrated because they lack the ability to make decisions and the flexibility to modify the curriculum to better meet the needs of their students. I fear this type of atmosphere will cripple teachers and severely damage their already delicate morale. I suspect there is or soon will be a feeling of not being valued for their knowledge and skills related to teaching and learning. Teachers are getting the message that they cannot be trusted to make sound decisions regarding their students' learning. Kohn (2001) writes, "...mandates imply a rather insulting view of educators—namely that they need to be told what

(and by extension how) to teach by someone in authority because otherwise they wouldn't know" (p. 4). Yet teachers continually feel obligated to conform to the mandates set for them by higher powers who control the educational arena, particularly with funding.

As stated in the previous chapter, I found it extremely interesting that most of the participants indicated that they were faithful to the core, yet they told of instances in which they "tweaked" activities in the core to better meet their students' needs. It is interesting that those who admittedly "tweaked" activities or neglected to use the center activities included in the core reading program still considered themselves faithful to the core. This leads me to conclude that these teachers are not completely willing to sacrifice their autonomy and instructional-decision making. One of the newest teachers seemed less inclined to "tweak" anything, and appeared more faithful than all others. The once-kindergarten-teacher-now-interventionist stated that she had a lot of flexibility because she worked with the lowest students and lacked a sequenced curriculum for them to follow. The teachers in this study appear to be thoughtful, knowledgeable professionals with their students' best interests at heart.

Surprisingly, I noticed there were a number of inconsistencies across the schools in the study. For example, one group of teachers indicated that writing and grammar instruction are allowed during the reading block, while another group of teachers insisted that they could not teach writing and grammar during this time. There also seemed to be inconsistencies regarding the use of the centers that go along with the series. Some teachers said they had to use them, while others said it was not required and therefore they designed their own centers to meet students' needs. A final set of inconsistencies related to assessment. First, each school modified the core reading program assessment to meet their needs. Second, the schools used different

DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2002) scores to classify students into groups. The chart below details the discrepancies related to DIBELS assessment and grouping.

	Fall Benchmark	Winter & Spring Benchmark
School 1	Nonsense Word Fluency Phoneme Segmentation Fluency	Oral Reading Fluency
School 2	Phoneme Segmentation Fluency	Oral Reading Fluency Retell Fluency

While fidelity is expected, I found variation existed in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. This discovery leads me to question why these inconsistencies exist. Is it a lack of clear communication, or are schools willing to make their own interpretations of how to implement the mandate?

As stated in the previous chapter, each of the participants indicated that there were some parts of Reading First that they felt were effective. Each teacher indicated that she would use the components of Reading First that she deemed effective even if she taught in a non-Reading First school. For example, one participant, Faith, reported that all of the components of Reading First were effective and had a positive impact on all of her students. Two participants, Cathy and Susan, noted that the literacy block, centers, and small group instruction was effective. The remaining two participants, Amy and Taylor, commented that centers and small group instruction were effective. What’s interesting is that most of the components regarded as effective could be implemented without a commercially-packaged reading program. There are several frameworks, like the framework mentioned in a previous chapter espoused by Fountas

and Pinnell (1996) that would allow for a literacy block, small group instruction, and centers. I think this goes back to policy-makers' lack of trust in teachers to make decisions for their students. I propose that suggestions be made by policy makers but that decisions be made by teachers, those who most intimately know their students and who have been trained accordingly.

As stated in a previous chapter, historically the federal government's role in education was that of overseer, yet Reading First mandates have trickled down to the classroom, impeding teachers' individual instructional decision-making. I wonder if this what our forefathers had in mind?

For years, three basic definitions of reading have driven literacy programs in the United States (Foertsch, 1998). These definitions describe reading as learning to pronounce words; learning to identify words and get their meaning; and learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it. With such a narrow focus on oral reading fluency, it seems that these are the definitions of reading that Reading First policy-makers adhere to. I would infer that the teachers in this study who believe there needs to be more of a focus on comprehension and retelling subscribe to a more comprehensive view of reading, a view that includes all of the above definitions and places learning skills in the context of authentic reading and writing activities. This view recognizes the importance of skill instruction as one piece of the reading process and supports balanced reading instruction (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Au, 1993; Foertsch, 1998; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Maryland State Department of Education, n.d.; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Initially, I intended to study classroom teachers in the district that had been involved in Reading First since it was implemented. As I engaged with the gatekeeper who identified

potential candidates, I was shocked that there were literally only a handful of teachers that met the criteria. The gatekeeper and I were astounded! We found there had been a tremendous amount of faculty turnover at each of the Reading First schools. Therefore, despite the district's substantial financial investment in teacher training, the high level of faculty turnover jeopardizes the successful implementation of the initiative. Heller (2004) warns in order to retain teachers, "...then we have to appreciate them, trust them, empower them, and treat them as professionals..." (p. 99).

Another concern was the narrow focus of Reading First. Teachers are so consumed with DIBELS scores and what the data reveal about their schools that the program has had "a narrowing effect on what they teach" (Pedulla, 2003, p. 43). According to the DIBELS website, DIBELS "are a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of prereading and early reading skills." DIBELS consists of seven measures which are supposed to validly assess phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, fluency with connected text, comprehension and vocabulary. In addition, these assessments are supposed to predict later reading proficiency. However, according to Goodman (2006), DIBELS has wrongly become a major driving force in literacy education. In lieu of teachers making decisions in the classrooms, DIBELS scores are determining how and what students are taught. Goodman (2006) reported that many states applying for Reading First funds did not make DIBELS their first choice for an assessment system, but felt pressured by federal officials to do so. Fearing they would not receive Reading First funding, they caved in to the pressure. Other challenges or criticisms by Goodman (2006) include: the narrow view of reading espoused and promoted, reliability and validity of indicators (especially with regards to the prediction of later

reading achievement), and the negative impact on teachers and students (especially noting the impact on curriculum, teacher-student relationships, and reading development).

In response to another facet of the narrowing effect, the participants have expressed concern about the lack of comprehension of students and the elimination of science and social studies except for what is included in the core reading program. Smith (1991) noted, “[Some teachers] began discarding what was not to be tested and what was not part of the formal agenda and high priorities of the principal and district administrators” (p. 10). As stated in chapter one, in 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released their report entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which asserted, “Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (U.S. Dept. of Education 1983, p. 1). If that was true then, how true is it now with teachers limiting students’ learning experiences by neglecting to teach science and technology?

Another interesting finding is related to teachers feeling overwhelmed with the number of programs they are expected to implement in the classroom. While the programs may be valuable when implementing alone, it becomes challenging for teachers to integrate the programs’ components effectively. This is especially concerning when the programs being implemented do not complement one another and seem to be based on different educational philosophies. These teachers are frustrated with the administration’s misdirected focus on program implementation.

Trying to make sense of and understanding the participants’ experiences and challenges related to the implementation of Reading First led me to the concept of dialectical thinking. Distinguished educator James Berlin noted, “The point of education in a democracy is to discover as many ways of seeing as possible, not to rest secure in the perspective we find easiest

and most comfortable or the perspective of those currently in power” (source unknown). As I further analyzed and synthesized the participants’ stories, I had to find a new perspective from which to view the phenomenon.

According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), life consists of difficult predicaments and options, and dialectical thinking, “allows for the acceptance of alternative truths or ways of thinking about similar phenomena that abound in everyday adult life” (p. 152). My initial review resulted in negative outcomes. However, the dialectical process has allowed me to see a silver lining. Like the teachers involved in this study, I see both positives and negatives associated with Reading First. Through this study, I found:

1. When examining Reading First, one must consider the language and terminology associated with it, including how the labeling and classification impacts student and teacher views. I believe that the language can be intimidating and add to the overwhelming feeling that accompanies the implementation.
2. Like the teachers in the study, I believe there are advantages and disadvantages for both students and teachers. The biggest disadvantage for teachers deals with the lack of flexibility and instructional decision-making imposed by Reading First. While teachers say they are faithful to the core, they “tweak” activities to meet the needs of their students indicating that they are not completely willing to sacrifice their autonomy.
3. All of the teachers indicated that DIBELS is an effective assessment tool to determine what students’ weaknesses are. They also indicated that the DIBELS data was used to inform instruction.

4. All of the teachers noted that the small group instruction and use of centers was beneficial for students. They also noted that interventions allowed “teetering” students to be successful.
5. Most of the teachers felt there needed to be more of a focus on comprehension, not just phoneme segmentation and oral reading fluency.
6. Some teachers feel that Reading First hurts some of the kids, especially the lowest kids and in my opinion the above level kids.
7. All participants in this study appear to collaborate with other teachers, interventionists, and reading coaches regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment and student achievement. Apparently, the types of collaboration mentioned in the interviews did not exist prior to the implementation of Reading First.
8. All of the teachers stated that they have received professional training as a result of Reading First which in turn has helped them to become more effective teachers.
9. Responding to time constraints, some participants report that they are purposefully integrating science and social studies into the reading block.
10. There were a number of inconsistencies across schools (i.e. inclusion of writing and grammar, use of centers from core reading program, DIBELS scores used for grouping) as well as a high teacher turn-over rate.
11. Teachers are overwhelmed with the number of programs and/or initiatives they are responsible for implementing in the classroom. In many cases, the programs do not complement one another.

In light of the significant conceptual faults in No Child Left Behind, and specifically in the implementation of Reading First, there has been a renewed interest in literacy education. I can't help but think of the old saying, "Too much of anything can't be good." In this case, one-sided ideologies aren't going to be beneficial to all involved parties. Rowan (2004) summarizes, "The lessons of the dialectic are hard ones. It tells us that any value we have, if held to in a one-sided way will become an illusion...The only values which will be truly stable and coherent are those which include opposition rather than excluding it" (p. 2).

The processes of teaching and learning are complex. If the focus of education is defined by mandates with specific programs, curricula and assessment, teachers will succumb to teaching to the test and lose ownership of both the teaching and learning processes. Teachers are challenged to ascertain their roles in a one-size-fits-all climate and achieve some type of balance as they are trying to adhere to all of the programs handed to them, while still meeting the needs of their students. It seems that there have been some unintended consequences of Reading First legislation. I believe that one effect of Reading First legislation has been the silencing of teachers' voices. Not only are teachers silenced in their classrooms by not being allowed to make the necessary instructional-decisions for their students, but they are also silenced by not being listened to or consulted about the programs and mandates they are charged with implementing. Some of the teachers in this study were concerned with ensuring the confidentiality of their participation. I can only presume that they do not want to be singled-out. Another effect of Reading First legislation found in this study indicates that the mandate has had the exact opposite impact than the authors originally intended. For example, those for whom the program was intended are the very ones being left behind. In this study, it appears that the very lowest students and the very highest students are not receiving the attention needed (i.e. small group or

individualized instruction). Apparently, the students who have traditionally done well or succeeded academically are continuing to do so under the Reading First regime. Confirming these findings, the 2009 SREE report entitled *Findings from the Reading First Impact Study* (Gamse, Horst, Boulay & Unlu, 2009), indicate that while Reading First has had a significant impact on the amount of instructional time spent on the components of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel, Reading First has not has a significant impact on students' reading comprehension scores in grades 1-3. Further confirming the results of this study the 2009 SREE report's findings concluded that Reading First had a significant impact on professional development, support of reading coaches, the amount of reading instruction received by students, as well as the amount of supports available for "struggling" readers. Due to the concentrated focus on phonics as noted in this study by participants, the 2009 SREE report indicated that Reading First had a significant impact on decoding among first graders.

In this final section, I provide implications for practice through the dialectical lens. Based on the structures and concepts mentioned previously, I consider the following implications followed by suggestions for further study.

Implications

Language of Reading First. The language of Reading First is both confounding and complex. I believe this contributes to the overpowering sense of difficulty that teachers face when implementing such an initiative. If the terminology were more familiar, teachers would feel more at ease with the subject matter. I suggest that policy-makers take this into consideration as they craft policy and execute initiatives.

Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading First. Like the teachers in this study, I believe that Reading First has positives and negatives for all stakeholders. Policy-makers have good intentions, but experience teaches us that good intentions don't always equal positive outcomes. Teachers are on the front lines and in the trenches. They are responsible for implementing government-mandated initiatives. As a result, they see first hand the impact of those initiatives. Who better to give feedback and input about appropriate curriculum and instruction for students? According to Lisbeth Schorr (2003), Director of the Harvard University Project of Effective Interventions, "Many of the change initiatives that now seem most promising are complex efforts with multiple, interacting components that require constant mid-course correction and the active engagement of committed human beings" (p. 5). Based on this information, it appears that the administrators of Reading First need to be more flexible and receptive to the input of those, namely teachers, who implement the directives. There needs to be a course of action allowing for a review to be done and modifications to be made to ensure that the premise of Reading First is upheld. In addition, teacher attitudes dictate classroom and school climate. As a result, teachers need to feel empowered to make decisions that are right for their students. Research shows that teacher-led reform is effective (Davis, 2005).

Teacher Autonomy. With so many teachers leaving Reading First schools, one has to wonder if the mandates of Reading First proved too burdensome for them? After coming to this realization, I would have to infer that many Reading First teachers are not intrinsically motivated to carry out this initiative. Argyris (2000) states, "When someone else defines objective, goals, and the steps to be taken to reach them, whatever commitment exists will be external" (p. 41). Fullan (2001) suggested that external motivation may produce short-term results, but sustained change relies upon internal belief in the change at hand. Again, Argyris (2000) notes, "External

commitment is triggered by management policies and practices that enable employees to accomplish their tasks. Internal commitment derives from energies internal to human beings that are activated because getting a job done is intrinsically rewarding” (p. 40). If teachers are frustrated due to a lack of flexibility, will they continue to find their jobs rewarding? According to the International Reading Association’s position statement on using multiple methods of beginning reading instruction,

Controversy about the “best” way to teach reading cannot be resolved by prescribing a single method. Because there is no clearly documented best way to teach beginning reading, educators who are familiar with a wide range of methodologies and who are closest to children must be the ones to make decisions about what instructional methods to use. And further, these professionals must have the flexibility to modify those methods when they determine that particular children are not learning.

I maintain that teachers must retain their autonomy, ownership, and the ability to manage all aspects of their classrooms. Teachers must be respected and appreciated for the knowledge and skills they bring to the field.

Collaboration. All too often, teachers face feelings of isolation and loneliness. Collaboration should take place in various forms across the school campus. Carter (2004) states, “Interactions among teachers are a vital component of school success” (p. 1). Particularly in Reading First, honest conversations must take place among teachers, interventionists, coaches, and parents regarding students’ strengths and weaknesses. Principals must also be involved in this discourse. With all stakeholders giving input and working together, only the best will be accomplished for the students. This sentiment leads to the theme of contradictions with school programs.

Contradiction of School Programs. It appears that teachers are overwhelmed with the number of programs they are responsible for implementing in the classroom. In many cases, the programs do not complement one another. Full and effective implementation of programs is time-consuming, leaving little time for effective, responsive teaching. This challenge leaves

teachers feeling “spread thin” and perhaps not able to effectively implement any of the programs they are charged with managing. It is not until administrators and teachers come to the table to honestly discuss the expectations placed on teachers and gather input from all parties involved in selecting school-wide or district-wide programs.

Professional Development. As a teacher educator, I realize that teachers need authentic professional development opportunities to grow professionally. It seems that there was an abundant amount of professional development offered when Reading First implementation began. However, it seems as if less and less is done each year, so that new teachers are unfairly left out. Trainings must be systematic and all teachers should receive the same information as her peers in a timely fashion. There must be funds and people dedicated to making this happen.

For Further Study

This study is limited because there were only five participants from one school district in Louisiana. Therefore, additional research should be more comprehensive and expansive by interviewing more teachers from a variety of schools (large, small, urban, rural, etc). Additional research could focus on another group’s perceptions related to the implementation of Reading First, particularly principals, reading coaches, and interventionists. For future study, I also recommend research be conducted on the effects of labeling students specifically according to Reading First terminology (i.e. benchmark kids, intensive kids, etc.) Does this labeling impact how students see themselves? Does this labeling impact how teachers view and/or treat students?

Another angle might be to compare fifth grade teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of Reading First based on their students’ performance at the conclusion of the Reading First program. I would be interested in tracking the students who have participated in Reading First as

they move through middle and high school to try to determine long-term effects on student achievement.

One could also compare the perceptions of teachers who feel empowered to make decisions for their students to the perceptions of teachers who are not allowed to make instructional decisions for their students. For further study, I would also recommend conducting studies related to the impact of mandated initiatives on teacher autonomy, morale and efficacy.

Other considerations for further study include teachers' training and background in reading and literacy education. In particular, I am interested in how teachers' philosophies of reading align (or not) with imposed mandates.

Summary

This study adds to the growing body of literature on Reading First. It provides a peek into the world of teachers as they struggle to implement government imposed mandates. I hope that this study helps those who administer such programs, to think about how to more effectively manage implementation and create and sustain teacher buy-in. With all stakeholders at the table, respected for their knowledge and input, internal commitment will come and so will success.

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**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans**

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: April Bedford
Co-Investigator: RaeNell Billiot Houston
Date: March 17, 2009
Protocol Title: "Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of Reading First"
IRB#: 02Apr09

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2, due to the fact that any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.
Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Appendix B
Letter of Consent
[University of New Orleans letterhead]

LETTER OF CONSENT

Greetings Fellow Educator:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Bedford in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research study to understand teachers' perceptions and experiences related to the implementation of Reading First in their classrooms.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve a 60-90 minute individual interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation would add to the body of research regarding the effectiveness of this particular federal policy.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at (504) 912-9722.

Sincerely,

RaeNell Houston

By signing below you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-6501.

Appendix C
Interview Guide

RaeNell Billiot Houston
Interview Guide
Teachers' Perceptions of Implementation of Reading First

INTRODUCTION

Hi, my name is RaeNell Billiot Houston and I am a doctoral student at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting this interview to fulfill a requirement for the completion of the doctoral program. Under the direction of Dr. April Bedford in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, I am conducting a research study to understand teachers' perceptions and experiences related to the implementation of Reading First in their classrooms. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to participate. I will record and transcribe this interview solely for research purposes. The information gained will be analyzed, coded and shared via my dissertation. All participants' identities will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

QUESTIONS

Tell me a little about yourself.

How long have you been a teacher?

How long have you been a teacher in a Reading First school?

Tell me about your experiences as a Reading First teacher.

What professional development, if any, have you received as a result of teaching at a Reading First school?

How has Reading First impacted your classroom?
(i.e. curriculum, instruction, and assessment)

How do you feel Reading First has impacted you? How has it impacted your students'?

If you were to be employed at another school, a non-Reading First school, which of the tenants of Reading First would you take with you? Which would you leave behind?

CLOSING

I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I have gathered a lot of information that will be most beneficial to my study. Do you have any questions for me? Again, thank you for your time.

Vita

RaeNell Marie Billiot Houston was educated in the Plaquemines Parish public school system. She received a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Grades Education and a Master of Arts degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Louisiana State University. In addition to being a certified elementary and middle school teacher, RaeNell is a certified Reading Specialist. RaeNell received her Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of New Orleans in 2009. She is currently a teacher educator at Our Lady of Holy Cross College in New Orleans, LA.