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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SYSTEMIC LITERACY CHANGE

A Thesis in

Educational Leadership

by

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This is a phenomenological study that set out to understand the experiences of school personnel who worked in a poor, rural Pennsylvania school district and participated in Reading First, the early literacy initiative that originated in The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The intent of the study was to add to the literature on the phenomenology of change as it applies to restructuring efforts, an often neglected area in the school improvement literature. Within the study, administrators and teachers were interviewed using a phenomenological interviewing approach with the intent of describing and interpreting their experiences of participating in the national reform effort. Furthermore, the study wanted to ascertain how the respondents’ interpretations of their experiences affected the implementation of the Reading First grant. The findings of the study revealed that the impact of a locally generated reform effort in literacy that had started in the district six years prior to the advent of the Reading First grant, known as the Guided Assessment Project, had much more of an impact on the administrators’ and teachers’ knowledge of literacy education than did the national reform effort and provided the foundational work in comprehensive literacy, both in curriculum and instruction, that prepared the district for a successful implementation of the Reading First grant. Furthermore, a related finding indicated that the two reform efforts shared a synergistic relationship, specifically, signifying that both efforts were enhanced by the presence of the other in the district. The Guided Assessment Project provided a comprehensive approach to literacy; an implementation timeline that allowed time for the participants to assimilate significant changes in their literacy instruction; a multi-year customized professional development plan; and activities that promoted transformations in the system. Reading First’s primary benefits were monies for literacy coaches and materials as well as standardized accountability measures which permitted increased implementation of the tenets provided by the Guided Assessment Project.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

Throughout the nation there is increasing pressure on public school systems to increase reading achievement. There is a public impression that our children are falling behind other children of the world in reading, although some researchers argue that in actuality this proposition is not supported by data (Allington, 2002; Bracey, 1997). However, since the emergence in the 1980s of a series of reports sharply criticizing schools and proposing a wide range of reforms in curriculum, instruction, governance, and teacher preparation, restructuring has dominated the discourse about American education (Evans, 1996). Starting with the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1983 “A Nation at Risk” to the most recent education reform, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the public is left believing that our schools are in dire need.

Regardless of the efficacy of the argument surrounding the effectiveness of schools, and, specifically, the state of reading achievement, there is data to support that the challenge of educating all children to proficient levels is complicated by the fact that there are more children in the 21st century attending school than in the early 1900s or in the 1940s (Allington, 2002). According to Allington (2002) there is no evidence that American reading achievement has declined. Good reading is more common and low levels of literacy are less common, but there are more children to educate. Furthermore, according to the 1995 report of the Consortium on Productivity in Our Schools, Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need, schools can no longer be satisfied with what has been because there are newer and higher demands on our youth to be competitive in the 21st century. At one time it was acceptable to learn a single skill and use that training for a lifelong career. As the nation and the world move to a knowledge economy, more and more of the labor positions will be eliminated. Employers will be looking for those
who are able “…to work with complex knowledge and to make decisions under conditions of conflicting or inadequate evidence” (Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need, 1995, p.9). Consequently, there are now more children that need to be educated to higher levels of achievement. This supposition is supported by the National Research Council (Snow, Burns, & Griffen, 1998). The Council opened its Preventing Reading Difficulties report with the following assertion:

(Current difficulties in reading largely originate from the rising demands for literacy, not from declining absolute levels of literacy.

Thus, the reality of educating an increased number of children to higher levels of literacy has increased the pressure on schools to examine how to meet the needs of a growing student populace.

Compounding the issues of increased student enrollment and the economic changes that necessitate educating more children to higher levels of achievement, school districts across the nation are also facing pressure from the federal government to increase student achievement in reading and mathematics. Specifically, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.) to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Title I—Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged) has redefined the federal role in K-12 education with special emphasis on closing the achievement gap. The act is said to be based on four principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility, local control, and expanded options for parents and emphasis on teaching methods that have proven to work (No Child Left Behind in Pennsylvania, 2002). The law’s emphasis on accountability is changing how school districts need to look at student achievement since there are severe sanctions for school districts that do not make “adequate yearly progress” (NCLB, 2001).

Pennsylvania is being impacted by the NCLB Act as are all states who accept federal education funds. The funding is accompanied by regulations. Although the
federal monies may account for only one to two percent of a state’s education budget, the implications of the law are overarching and far reaching.

In addition to focusing on accountability of schools via annual testing in reading and mathematics, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also contained opportunities to support whole school reform efforts in early literacy. This section of the legislation is known as Reading First. Reading First provided additional monies for kindergarten through third grade literacy instruction in elementary school buildings which were classified as high poverty and low achievement schools. The grant outlined a broad-based approach to restructuring literacy education in participating schools. System-wide changes in leadership, collaboration and communication, instruction, intervention, literacy coaching, professional development, and district involvement were requirements of the grant (Reading First Implementation Checklist, 2003). Therefore, by participating in a Reading First grant, school districts signed on for a comprehensive change process. However, participating school districts did not have input into the design of the reform. Their primary responsibility was to comply with the dictates of the grant with their progress measured and evaluated via pre-selected standardized student achievement assessments. Eligible schools applied for the funds via a grant process. To date, there are 160 elementary schools in Pennsylvania involved in Reading First. The implementation of the grant in Pennsylvania officially commenced in the 2003-2004 school year. The grant extends for six years with a mid-point review after the third year. Student achievement progress noted at the end of the third year will determine if funding is continued for the remaining three years (Reading First Grant, 2001).

Systemic Change

Reading First is a school improvement effort that originates in federal legislation. The requirements of the grant necessitate that participating schools implement changes that may affect the normal and accepted routine of everyday school life. Such changes are not necessarily easy to incorporate into schools. The literature on school improvement
speaks to the complexity of implementing deep and lasting change in schools (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 1998; Nolan & Meister, 2000). For example, understanding change is noted as a requisite skill that is proving essential to dealing with the complicated nature of change (Fullan, 2001). Understanding change helps to build the capacity of individuals to understand and deal with the experiences that result as being a part of a change effort (Fink & Stoll, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Nolan & Meister, 2000). Fullan and Miles (1992) identified one of the reasons reforms fail is that leaders of the efforts do not take the time to identify participants’ personal maps of change, which are often based on invalid representations of the change process, and then fail to provide a working schema that can offer guidance to individuals as they progress through a systemic change process. Consequently, understanding the effect the reform effort has on the daily lives of those involved needs to be shared with both policy makers and those participating in the change effort to help ensure a successful outcome (Fullan, 2001).

In addition to understanding the change process, the school improvement literature speaks to the importance of the phenomenology of change (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1988; Nolan & Meister, 2000; Sikes, 1992). Change is personal. Hargreaves (1988) indicates that changing the teacher involves changing the person and, thus, changing that person’s life. Change is not a one-way process. The implementation of change is influenced by the teacher’s beliefs and values, the body of ideas which they hold about education, teaching, schooling process, and life in general (Sikes, 1992). That means that it is not possible to affect one aspect without affecting all the others.

Evans (1996) and Fullan (1998) indicate that most advocates and policy makers of school reform neglect the interaction of the change effort and those on which it is being imposed. They neglect the importance of knowing how teachers and administrators construct meaning and interpret their experiences, which ultimately affects the outcome of the change regardless of its content and intent (Evans, 1996). This is a critical omission that undermines school improvement efforts because the number of the nation’s classrooms that are ultimately restructured will depend on how many of the nation’s
educators make the necessary changes in practice and beliefs (Evans, 1996). According to Fullan (1998) if the personal experiences of the participants who are involved in a change effort are ignored, chances for success are reduced. The practicalities of how people and institutions actually behave need to be given attention since the interaction of the change effort and the lives of the individuals involved affect the ultimate outcome.

Purpose of This Study

Reading First is a national school improvement effort that is being implemented in elementary schools across the nation, including those in Pennsylvania. It is part of a landmark shift in federal legislation that holds schools accountable for student achievement while supplying funds for school improvement in early literacy to help schools meet the accountability measures. It is the largest, mandated school improvement effort in early literacy that this nation has experienced. The legislation has built in evaluation of the reform effort, however, the evaluation is focused on student achievement, curriculum alignment, instructional techniques, assessment processes, and goals and responsibilities of administrators, teachers, and literacy coaches involved. The program evaluation does not include the study of the phenomenology of change despite the documentation of its importance in the school improvement literature (Application for State Grants for Reading First CFVANumber 84.357, 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to address that omission by focusing on the phenomenology of change as it applies to the national Reading First reform effort.

Specifically, the study attempted to ascertain the experiences, beliefs, values, interpretations of administrators and teachers in two elementary buildings who are participating in the Reading First initiative. The study examined how the experiences, beliefs, values, and interpretations of the administrators and teachers affected the outcome of the Reading First implementation.
Research Questions

The study asked the following questions:

1. What did the administrators and teachers experience?
2. How did the administrators and teachers understand these experiences?
3. How did building level leadership impact how teachers experienced the change process?
4. How did the interpretations of these experiences affect the implementation of the Reading First grant?

Possible Contributions of this Study to the Field of Education

Reading First, a whole school reform component of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, was funded with millions of dollars nationwide. The results of this study can inform policy makers about the realities of implementing reform efforts in elementary schools. Saying what needs to be accomplished, dictating materials and curriculum is only part of the puzzle. If policy makers can understand the phenomenology of change, then allocation of resources, realistic time lines, and other strategies that can support successful implementation can be incorporated into the policy that supports such initiatives, thus, utilizing the resources of time, effort, and money in an effective and efficient manner.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature is presented in three parts. The first section is a short introduction to the topic. The second section contains a review of the research on the phenomenology of change. The third section reviews how the phenomenology of change interacts with school improvement processes.

Introduction

There is a plethora of research in school reform which has identified principles of change and structures for implementing school improvement efforts. According to several researchers who focus on change (Allen & Glickman, 1998; Fink & Stoll, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Hargreaves, 1998; Miller, 1998), there are defined principles of change that well-designed systemic reform efforts must consider to help ensure a successful systemic change process. These principles have been developed over time by reflecting on the past 25 years of research on school restructuring (Fullan, 1998). Furthermore, there have been hundreds of books published in recent years that focus on the topic of educational change (Nolan & Meister, 2000). However, many of these texts neglect the human side of change, which is a critical omission. Fullan (2001) and Hargreaves (1998) propose that despite the theoretical analyses of the complexity of school restructuring, which contributes to the understanding of change processes, it is the individual responses and personal reactions of each administrator and teacher involved in the change initiative that determines the success or failure of the initiative. “Educational change depends on what teachers do and think—it’s that simple and as complex as that” (Fullan, 2001, p.115).

This study will examine the experiences of the education staff in two elementary buildings in Pennsylvania that are implementing a Reading First grant, a major school
improvement effort that originated in the federal education law, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and how those experiences impact the reform effort.

The Phenomenology of Change

The phenomenology of change encompasses how the content of the change interacts with the personal belief systems of each participant as well as how the actual experience of going through a day-to-day restructuring affects the individual. Fullan (2001) notes that the crux of change is determined by how individuals come to terms with the reality of the change in the context of their familiar framework of reality. In other words, their interpretation of what the change means for them influences what they subsequently do and how they do it. Sikes (1992) states that imposed change is not a one-way process. The implementation of change is influenced by the teachers’ ideologies; in other words, by the beliefs and values, the body of ideas which they hold about education, teaching, the schooling process in particular and life in general. Hargreaves (1992) indicated that developing the teacher also involves developing the person and, consequently, developing their life. Sikes (1992) argues that those responsible for imposing change have failed to recognize the nature of teaching—that lives are not neatly compartmentalized and the fact that teachers comprise a heterogeneous group in terms of their lives, beliefs, and values.

Sikes (1992) proposes that teachers can be seen as people who make up their own minds; people who are pro- rather than re-active; who choose a particular course of action or strategy because it seems to them to serve their purpose. And to understand how imposed change affects the life experiences of teachers, one must examine the total teacher and the total school, specifically focusing on four areas: teachers as people, teachers’ aims and purposes, the real world context in which teachers work, and the culture of teaching: the working relationship that teachers have with their colleagues inside and outside of school (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Sikes, 1992).
Teachers as People

Teachers are people first, and teachers second. Teaching is a part, not the whole of their lives. It fits in, affects and is affected by other parts (Sikes, 1992). Life experiences have an influence on the sort of people they become, upon their perspectives, understandings, and attitudes; their beliefs and values; their ideologies and philosophies; and the actions that they take. Furthermore, life experiences can be classified into different categories. There are experiences that are idiosyncratic to the person such as those experiences that spring from family and domestic backgrounds or those experiences that are a result of age or gender. Then there are those experiences that originate in the larger world context, such as living through a war, which also can affect an individual’s development and belief systems (Huberman, 1988; Sikes, 1992).

Teachers are also affected by the point in time in which they receive their teacher training. Educational ideologies and philosophies are rooted in history and go in and out of fashion. Different generations of teachers, therefore, come into contact with different ideas which can be expected to have some influence on their ideologies and approaches to teaching, and on their expectations of what a teaching career involves (Sikes, 1992). Teachers are also affected by the particular life-cycle stage they find themselves in. Furthermore, life-cycle related to age is compounded by the teacher career life-cycle. Teachers of similar age and sex share similar experiences, perceptions, attitudes, satisfactions, frustrations, and concerns, and the nature of their motivation and commitment alters in a predictable pattern as they get older. Teacher life-cycle issues vary based on ethnic group of the teacher, location of school, subject area, and managerial regimes; however, aspects of professional life-cycle are common to teachers working in different education systems in different countries at different times (Sikes, 1992).

Teachers’ Aims and Purposes

How teachers develop as people sets the stage for how they view their roles as teachers. Thus, teachers see their purposes in different ways, and these purposes can
change over time. Some see their chief purpose as imparting knowledge, others want to create a thinking citizenry, and, still, others may see teaching as primarily a means to earn a salary. Furthermore, regardless of the specifics of their aims, purposes, and values, teachers strive to find positions in schools in which there is a match between their ideologies and how they want to be seen as teachers (Sikes, 1992).

Work Context

The work context of teachers is complex and varied and provides the social milieu in which teaching and learning take place (Fullan, 2001; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Sikes, 1992). Work context is affected by such factors as what specific grade level teachers teach; whether or not they are an early childhood, elementary, middle school, or high school teacher; do they teach in a suburban, urban, or rural school; and to what degree is the curriculum and testing mandated. Work context is also affected by resources. The availability of resources and the condition of the work environment carry messages about the value that is placed on the work that teachers do (Fullan, 2001; Sikes, 1992).

Fullan (2001) indicates that the conditions of teaching appear to have deteriorated over the past two decades and that, during that same time period teachers have become devalued by the community and the public. Subsequently, teacher stress and alienation are at an all time high due to the range of educational goals and expectations, as well as the transfer of family and societal problems to the schools which are then coupled with the imposition of multiple, disconnected reform initiatives based on the assumed inadequacies of teachers (Fullan, 2001). Teachers are overloaded and work in environments where daily demands crowd out the opportunity for serious sustained improvements.

Overloading contributes to a work context in which teachers work in autonomous isolation in which teacher-to-teacher links for mutual assistance or collaboration are weak or nonexistent and work against school improvement (Goodlad, 1984). Such overloading also contributes to most schools having no time to pay attention to school-wide goals,
limited teacher learning on the job, and increased teacher uncertainty about what and how to teach. These factors contribute to low commitment to the job and to the school and work together to suppress teacher and student desire and achievement (Rosenholtz, 1991). Hargreaves (1994) named an additional component that defines teacher work; namely, the “intensification” of such work. Intensification leads to reduced time for relaxation during the work day, lack of time to retool one’s skills and keep up with one’s field, creates chronic and persistent overload, and leads to reductions in the quality of service as corners are cut to save time. Another work context theme that has emerged from the phenomenology of change research is the concept of “the erosion of the profession.” Scott, Stone, and Dinham (2000) indicate that in a study of teachers’ views of their teaching experiences pointed to the psychic rewards of seeing children learn and making a difference in young people’s lives; however, they also noted the decrease in status and recognition of the profession, outside interference and deprofessionalization of teaching, increased pace, the nature of educational change, and an increased work load as negative attributes.

Work Culture

Although teachers may deal with autonomous isolation, they do not work in a secluded environment (Hargreaves, 1998). They work within an occupational culture that determines the way in which change is perceived, experienced, and realized in schools (Sikes, 1992). Furthermore, the organizational culture of teaching and schools, with only a few exceptions, continue to allow, if not foster, individualism at the expense of teacher growth. This individualism, ironically, thwarts individuality by promoting superficial forms of interaction and an absence of support for teacher development (Rosenholtz, 1991. Therefore, according to Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) the culture of teaching and schools is a major factor in the development of teachers, positively or negatively. How teachers develop, which shapes what teachers do and think, is the determining factor in educational change (Fullan, 2001). Subsequently, it is argued that the organizational culture is at the heart of systemic change with each teacher’s personal change
contributing to the overall change in culture (Fullan, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Hargreaves, 1998; Miller, 1998; Schein, 1990; Stoll & Fink, 1998). Furthermore, the organizational culture is multifaceted and complex. Schein (1990) defines organizational culture as: (1) a pattern of basic assumptions; (2) something invented, discovered, or developed by a group; (3) something learned in trying to cope with problems that originate either in the system or from external pressures; (4) something that had worked well enough to be considered valid; (5) something that is taught to new members; and (6) something learned that offers the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to everyday situations. Willower (1984) indicates that there are multiple subcultures within the organizational culture. For example, there is an administrative subculture, a teacher subculture, and a student subculture and within each subcategory, there may be multiple versions (Fink & Stoll; 1998; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 1998). Furthermore, Fink and Stoll (1998) indicate that teacher subcultures are micro-political entities within the larger school context. Micro-politics is expressed in multiple ways. For example, teachers are strategic. They make decisions on a daily basis as to what is ideal and what is possible in their context. Some teachers are ambitious, some want to influence school decisions, others just want to be left alone. Loyalties to departments and schools vary.

School improvement efforts most often challenge an existing organizational culture within a school. The changes that accompany the reform usually threaten the status quo which can cause people to lose their sense of meaning and direction, their “framework of reality.” They lose their confidence, experience confusion, and a kind of alienation. It has also been argued that change causes loss (Evans, 1996). This state of affairs is in direct contrast to the fact that there is ample evidence that change or continuous improvement is the new accepted way of doing business in schools. It can lead to enhanced well-being for students, teachers, and schools when schools become learning communities that build supportive, collaborative relationships (Fullan, 2001). Change efforts can improve work environments and energize the social milieu of teaching and learning (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001). However, people’s personal responses to change are usually not so optimistic. Evans (1996) speaks to a concept labeled by Peter
Marris in his book, *Loss and Change*, as the “conservative impulse.” According to Evans (1996), the research in personal change indicates that change is not natural or normal, nor is it constant or common. In actual practice, people look for consistency and predictability in their daily lives. Individuals have a conservative impulse to find patterns in their lives and to preserve the continuity of things. Paradoxically, the seeking of patterns is a fundamental, universal element of human experience that is necessary for making sense of events and for adjusting to change. Dealing with change is dependent on continuity and on the validity of what has been learned. The conservative impulse makes adaptability possible (Evans, 1996).

Change, by definition, upsets normal patterns. Upsetting normal patterns leads to stress. Research indicates that it does not matter if the stress is perceived as positive or negative; it is the disruption of the pattern that is the critical feature (Evans, 1996). Furthermore, when the pattern is challenged, the human coping and adaptation response is to find meaning, to fit the new experiences into a familiar pattern which is accomplished within an emotional and interactive context. This context can be expressed as dealing with loss, creating confusion, dealing with feelings of inadequacy, and engaging in conflict (Evans, 1996). Therefore, it can be argued that the conservative response, although messy, is constructive, fundamental to learning, and essential to adaptation. This understanding of the personal response to change is often neglected by innovators or policymakers (Evans, 1996; Fullan & Hargreaves 1992; Sikes, 1992). Resistance is often noted as negative, when in fact it is a necessary component to successful school improvement. According to Evans (1996), innovators are unaware that they actually value resistance. For example, if teachers were in a state of perpetual openness, they would be switching focus with each new initiative without developing understanding and ownership of an earlier initiative. Furthermore, innovators want teachers to become involved in the content of the innovation and to develop commitment which in fact means being resistant to forces which contradict the innovation.
Looking at the total teacher within the total school has major implications for school improvement efforts. Understanding belief systems, life experiences, aims and purposes, career life-cycles, and the role of context and culture for the teacher population must be interwoven into any change initiative that wishes to implement deep, positive, and lasting improvements. Thus, it is argued in the phenomenology of change literature (Allen & Glickman, 1998; Fullan, 1998; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Smith, 1996) that the change process is an especially personal issue and if this precept of change is ignored or is misunderstood, chances for successful reform are reduced. Evans (1996) points out that no innovation can succeed unless it attends to the realities of people and place. Fullan (1998) addresses this via the concept of developing individual capacity. When school districts attempt to institute major structural changes, such as block scheduling, without considering the personal impact it will have on staff, the district is undermining its own efforts. Allen and Glickman (1998) indicate that a change process must impact the hearts and minds of the people involved and that the people involved are most likely a heterogeneous group with varied beliefs, values, and needs. Fullan and Miles (1992) report that change or continuous improvement involves developing a new personal meaning and to do so involves learning. Therefore, they conceptualize the change process as a learning process. Once this connection is made all the knowledge that is at hand concerning learning theory comes into play. Learners must not only experience explanations, they must have time to build their knowledge and experimental base through analysis and debate. They cannot be expected to develop ownership of a reform before they learn something new. Quite the contrary, ownership only develops through learning. Fullan and Miles (1992) indicate that ownership is stronger in the middle of a successful change process than at the beginning and stronger still at the end. Ownership is both a process and a state. Smith (1996) concludes that in the change process only people change skills, behaviors, and relationships, and only in the real work that they do. Strategies, systems, structures, visions, cultures, or processes do not change the minute-
to-minute performance of an organization. Only people, the cumulative efforts of individuals, that is, have that power. Smith indicates that new directions and designs help only when people who must change behaviors engage in understanding and shaping them. Miller (1998) addresses the importance of developing professional learning communities as a part of reforms. In addition, change efforts are further enhanced when changes in skills and behaviors are linked directly to performance criteria. Furthermore, individuals must feel free to experiment with the new knowledge and to allow their experimentation to promote their assimilation of the new information, skills, and behaviors. Risk-taking must be encouraged and protected. The process of assimilation has been characterized as the “implementation dip” (Fullan, 1992). As people begin to experiment with implementation of new ideas and skills, their actual performance will dip as they integrate the new skill into their repertoire of behaviors. However, as they develop mastery, their demonstrated performance will increase dramatically.

Fink and Stoll (1998) and Fullan and Miles (1992) address the issue of teacher “resistance” as a component of the personal nature of a change process. Fink and Stoll (1998) indicate that teacher resistance is a natural and predictable response when one looks at the number of innovations that have hit the schools over the last 20 years. Often the change projects were ill-designed and poorly implemented and contribute to the failure of future efforts since the efforts themselves erode teacher confidence (Fullan, 2001). Therefore, within the context of such efforts, it can be argued that teacher resistance is a positive and necessary response (Evans, 1996). In addition, change was usually something that was “done to” teachers as opposed to something “done with” them (Hargreaves, 1998; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Richardson (1990) suggests that in recent years the change literature has moved from “viewing teachers as recalcitrant and resistant to change to examining the structure of the organization and personal attributes of teachers that affect whether or not they implement new programs” (p.11). Furthermore, the phenomenology of change research has helped to inform school improvement efforts as to the importance and the necessity of resistance for successful school change (Evans, 1996). For example, Nolan and Meister (2000) contend that
teachers’ commitment to students outweighs their commitment to innovations, thus, providing important factors for innovators to consider when imposing a change on an existing system.

The school improvement research also addresses another component of the personal nature of change; namely, each individual’s belief about change. According to several researchers (Fullan, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Fullan & Miles, 1992) building the capacity of individuals to understand and deal with the experiences that result from being a part of a change effort is a critical first step to help insure successful systemic change. However, Fullan and Miles (1992) identified one of the reasons reforms fail is that leaders of the efforts do not take the time to identify participants’ personal maps of change, which are often based on invalid representations of the change process, and then fail to provide a working schema that can offer guidance to individuals as they progress through a systemic change process.

Fullan (1998) delineates two dimensions of capacity: that of the individual and that of the system—specifically, the capacity of individuals to change and the capacity of the system to transform. The capacity of the individual focuses on what a single person can do to develop their effectiveness, despite the system so to speak; and the other is how systems need to be transformed. The two dimensions interact, but are not totally dependent on one another. One can be developed without the complete cooperation of the other. For example, according to Fullan (1998), when a system is not ready to change, it is still well worth the time to develop the effectiveness of individuals because personal change is actually one route to transforming the system. Conversely, the capacity of the system can be changed even if all of the participants have not undergone a personal change process.

However, within the two dimensions of capacity, Fullan (1998) indicates that both affects and is affected by school culture. Culture interacts with the personal responses of individuals to change as well as the system. Fullan and Miles (1992) report that reform must focus on the development and interrelationships of all the main components in a system simultaneously (e.g. curriculum, assessment, instruction, progress monitoring
Reform must focus not just on structure, policy, and regulations, but also on the culture of the system. Schein indicates that culture must be addressed in any kind of change process including problem resolution situations due to the fact that one of the main functions of culture is to reduce the level of discomfort that organization members feel when they are unsure of what to expect. If by definition change is a learning process, and, if the learning process by definition implies a certain level of discomfort, school culture could work to undermine the learning process as it tries to maintain the status quo of the system. From a phenomenological perspective, the school culture plays a significant role in helping individuals construct meaning and interpretations within the change process.

Miller (1998) defines culture as “the way we do business around here” and if the way schools do business is changing for students and teachers, then what we are witnessing in major reform effort is a fundamental reculturing of school (Fullan, 2001). Essentially, school culture dictates how people spend their days—their daily routines. Therefore, a major implication of a systemic change process is that employees’ minute-to-minute routine, their approach to problem-solving, their definition of their job goals and subsequent performance will all fundamentally change.

Summary

As I review the literature in this area, it appears that few studies have specifically focused on the phenomenology of change within a systemic change effort. Furthermore, I could not find any evidence that literature which addressed an understanding of the world of teachers was used to design the Reading First grant. In addition, the external evaluation of the Pennsylvania Reading First project done by the University of Pittsburgh does not include how education staffs are making meaning out of their experience. Therefore, this study will contribute to our understanding of how teachers and administrators actually experience the process of major reform efforts. It will contribute evidence that supports the issue that all huge reform efforts start with the individual
participant’s experience and the interpretation of those experiences. It will contribute to the rationale that acknowledging those experiences and their importance will contribute to implementing innovations in a respectful and efficacious manner.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenology of change as it applies to educators who have been participating in Reading First, an early literacy school improvement effort that is a part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The study attempted to uncover the experiences, beliefs, values, and interpretations of the education staff as they are immersed in the reform effort as well as how their personal experiences affected the implementation of the Reading First initiative.

Research Questions

The study asked the following questions:

1. What did the administrators and teachers experience?
2. How did the administrators and teachers understand these experiences?
3. How did building level leadership impact how teachers experienced the change process?
4. How did the interpretations of these experiences affect the implementation of the Reading First grant?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study focused on how a national reform effort was experienced by the education staff in one school district located in Central Pennsylvania using a qualitative case study design within a phenomenological theoretical framework.
Phenomenology is all about experience. According to Merriam (1998), the focus on the experience of the phenomenon qualifies as having a phenomenological orientation to the study. However, to access that experience, phenomenology honors what is at the heart of being human; essentially, to have the ability to symbolize experiences through language (Seidman, 1991). Thus, the use of interviewing is the basic mode of inquiry in a phenomenologically oriented study because at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 1991). Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) indicates that the intent of the phenomenological perspective is to describe things unto themselves—to blend what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings. It is argued that research in the phenomenological mode attempts to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Interpretation is imperative to an understanding of how those events and interactions are experienced and, subsequently, the experiences include the interpretations (Patton, 1990). Therefore, phenomenologists focus on how people put together the phenomena they experience in a way to make sense of the world, thereby developing a worldview via their interpretations. Subsequently, phenomenology assumes multiple realities, focuses on human perceptions, and attends to feelings that are evoked by the perceptions (Willis, 1991).

To maintain a phenomenological perspective, it is imperative that the researcher temporarily suspend prior beliefs about the phenomenon in order to collect and analyze data. To conduct phenomenological research, different data collection techniques are used which support the goal of looking at a phenomenon from several points of meaning without prejudice (Merriam, 1998). For example, epoche is the researcher’s effort to get rid of personal prejudices—to suspend judgment. Imaginative variation is a technique used to see an object of study from several different angles, thus, seeking meanings by varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from varying perspectives, roles, and functions. Ultimately, the aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, as well as the underlying and
precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced.

Rationale for Case Study Design

Miles and Huberman (1994) think of a case as some sort of a phenomenon that occurs in a bounded context. For example, there are a finite number of people that can be interviewed or there is a finite amount of time for observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people to interview or to the number of observations that could be done, then the situation is not bounded enough to be classified as a case. Stake (1995) indicates that a case is a specific, complex, functioning thing such as an innovation. Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis (1983) write that the most straightforward example of “bounded systems” are those in which the boundaries have a common sense obviousness such as an individual teacher, a single school, or an innovation. According to Merriam (1998), an effort that lends itself to understand a phenomenon, such as a reform effort in a school district, is suitable for a qualitative case study design.

Furthermore, a qualitative case study design can be chosen when the intent of the research is insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 1998). Bromley (1986) indicates that the intent of qualitative case studies is to get as close as possible to the subject of interest in order to access subjective factors such as thoughts, feelings, and desires. Abramson (1992) supports this supposition by indicating that the case study can be used for understanding the range or variety of human experience, which is essential for understanding and appreciating the human condition. Yin (1994) indicates that a case study is the appropriate choice when the investigator has less control over a “contemporary set of events” and/or if the variables are so embedded in the situation as to make impossible to identify ahead of time.

A qualitative case study conveys the data through words and consists of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. There is an emphasis on experience and interpretations in order to find the essence or structure of the phenomenon. By concentrating on a single phenomenon, the researcher aims to
uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon through holistic description and explanation. Furthermore, using a case study method allows the phenomenon to be revealed by enabling the researcher to have access to knowledge that no other approach could access (Merriam, 1998).

Thus, a phenomenologically based orientation using a case study design seemed appropriate for this study since it qualified as a bounded system that sought to understand the experiences of educators from their perspective.

Researcher’s Perspective

My Background and Experiences

I have been an educator for 32 years. For the past 19 years I have been involved in school districts as a consultant who has provided professional development in the areas of literacy, instruction, curriculum, assessment, intervention, and student assistance. For the last nine of those years I have worked primarily as an organizational consultant focusing on restructuring language arts programs on a district level.

My training in the world of education encompasses special education, reading, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and educational leadership. I hold certifications in special education, reading, supervision (special education and curriculum and instruction) as well as building and central office administration. I have worked as a teacher, an administrator, a supervisor, a consultant and professional developer on a local, state, and national level, and a writer for on-line literacy and leadership courses.

My experience in the change process started when I was working as an instructional support team (IST) consultant for the Central Intermediate Unit. In this role, I was charged with implementing a Pennsylvania Department of Education-sponsored training in instructional support, a K-6 pre-referral instructional screening process that was part of Pennsylvania’s Special Education regulations. The training was designed to be building-based and involved a two-year implementation schedule. Initially, school districts could choose to participate in the training; however, in later years of the
initiative, participation was mandatory for all elementary buildings in Pennsylvania.

As an instructional support consultant I followed the mandated training schedule and design and focused on the state-mandated training content. Over the course of three years, I worked in 36 elementary schools located in the purview of the Central Intermediate Unit. During that time I was able to observe the success and failure of the IST implementation process. I was able to hypothesize as to why some implementation processes were successful and long-lasting and why some were not. Additionally, as the representative of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, I experienced multiple types of feedback from the field as I attempted to facilitate the implementation of the IST process in particular elementary buildings.

My experience as an IST consultant motivated me to return to graduate school, specifically to learn about school reform and the change process. I was curious as to what the research had to say about how to successfully implement an innovation and to make sense of my own experience, both the positive and the negative. During the 1996-1997 school year, I had the opportunity to be a part of the Pennsylvania State University’s Educational Administration Wednesday Program, which allowed me to be a member of a graduate cohort of educational administrators, to earn 18 credits in two semesters, and to continue to work full-time. This experience allowed me to become immersed in the area of school improvement and change while still having the occasion to experiment with the new information as I worked in school districts.

Following that intensive year of graduate study, I continued my course work on a part-time basis; however, the field then offered me an experience to implement findings from the research. One of the member districts of the Central Intermediate Unit, Theodore Roosevelt School District, asked me to be part of problem-solving team that would address the issue of increased referrals to instructional support and special education by first grade teachers that had occurred over the previous two years. The team’s initial findings indicated that children were not working on instructional level in their new reading program. The basal series had been adopted by the district two years hence. Thus, the initial findings indicated that the increase in referrals was due to a
mismatch between the curriculum and instruction and the developmental and instructional needs of the students.

At that point in time, I designed a continuum of services for CIU districts to address the issues of curriculum and instruction based on the work I had done with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (The Initial Line of Inquiry, PDE). The services started with awareness sessions and evolved to long-term systemic interventions. Each level of service, as well as expected outcomes of the service, were explained to the districts via trainings, IST networking meetings, and school consultations. For example, one-shot awareness sessions were designed to start the process of looking at the existing curriculum and instruction in a school district. No long-term change would be expected from participating in that particular level of service. Furthermore, a full day overview and a four-day training provided more information to the districts, but long lasting and system-wide changes in curriculum and instruction, without follow through services, could not be expected by a district’s participation (Gordon & Nicely, 1998; Guskey, 2000; Standards for Staff Development, 1995). The intensive, multi-year projects were designed using the Standards for Staff Development as formulated by the National Staff Development Council and The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1995) in addition to a compilation of the school reform and literacy research (Beers, 1990; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Miles & Fullan, 1992; Resnick, 1989; Schein, 1990; Smith, 1996; Using What We have, 1996). The project-level intervention initially focused on primary literacy education; however, over time the projects extended into intermediate and high school instruction.

The Theodore Roosevelt School District chose to participate in the multi-year, intensive literacy project level of service that was designed to promote systemic change within the district’s primary literacy program (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). The literacy initiative is known as the Guided Assessment Project (GAP) within the district. I have been the lead external consultant for this project since 1997. Subsequently, several other districts within the Central Intermediate Unit have implemented the project-level of intervention over the course of the last nine years.
My experience with the literacy projects then afforded me the opportunity to work with Pennsylvania’s Reading First initiative. During my tenure with Reading First I have had the occasion to participate and lead state-wide professional development in systemic change.

As I reflect on what I have learned about change and how people experience change, I am aware of how the literature and real life policy-making, exemplified by the Instructional Support training process, the CIU Literacy Projects, and, most recently, the Reading First initiative, underestimate and neglect how participants in a change process experience the change. And yet, it is the experiences and interpretations of each individual that has presented the greatest challenge to my efforts when faced with the responsibility of facilitating major restructuring efforts. Furthermore, experience has taught me never to overlook the wisdom held within a negative reaction and that looking at situations through the eyes of the educators is a process that requires continual attention and training and is not for the feint of heart.

There is another factor that I examined as I contemplated my experience and how it would affect my role in this study. Due to the fact that I have been an active player in both the literacy project and the implementation of the Reading First grant, my experience has allowed me to develop an insider’s perspective to the reform efforts. It can be argued that I have been a participant observer over an extended period of time within the Reading First schools. Consequently, the advantages and disadvantages of that role need to be addressed.

One advantage of having a long-term insider’s perspective has allowed time for multiple perspectives to emerge and for me to be aware of the diverse perspectives. It has enabled me to observe the system and to work with the staff over time and across environments, thus, decreasing a potential bias of limited exposure to the system. Furthermore, the prolonged engagement that I have enjoyed has allowed me to develop rapport and build trust with many of the potential respondents. However, a disadvantage of my insider status may have been that participants would not be as explicit in explaining their viewpoints as they would be with someone who does not know the
situation as I do. Thus, I needed to be aware of not filling in vacuums with my own point of view along with being vigilant in asking the participants to fully articulate their perspectives. Another disadvantage is related to role change. I needed to suspend my prior perceptions as I interacted with the staff in my new role as researcher and had to anticipate that some of the interviewees would find it difficult to negotiate the change in my role. I needed to state clearly the goals of the research, my role, how the data will be used, and allay any other concerns that may emerge.

Participants

Gaining Access

- The case study focused on Theodore Roosevelt School District; specifically, two of the four elementary schools that have participated in the Reading First grant for the past four years. Within those elementary schools, only the K-3 education staff was the focus of the study since Reading First addresses only those grade levels.

- Reading First Elementary Schools
  - Reynolds Elementary School: K-3
  - Marysville Elementary School: K-3
  - Smith Elementary School: K-3
  - Buchanan Elementary School: K-3

Description of Theodore Roosevelt School District

Theodore Roosevelt School District is a large rural school district located in Central Pennsylvania. It encompasses all of Clayton County as well as part of Potts and Circle Counties. The district is the largest geographic district in Pennsylvania. It is 1,000 square miles in area, which is larger than the state of Rhode Island. An illustration of the size is the fact that Reynolds Elementary and Reynolds High School are located in the town of Reynolds, which is 30 miles from Smithville, the town in which the district’s administration building is located. Some children who attend Reynolds Elementary live
another twenty miles beyond Reynolds, in the opposite direction of Smithville.

The area which makes up Theodore Roosevelt School District had been economically thriving in the 1950s and 1960s. The biggest industries included Piper Aircraft and Hammermill Paper. Smaller, supporting businesses included Champion Autoparts, Woolrich textiles, lumbering, and several chemical factories. Downtown Smithville was full of thriving businesses including Sears, Montgomery Ward and a two-story J.C. Penney store. However, in the late 1970s, the area started to lose its industry. Piper Aircraft, the largest employer, closed its doors. Three years later in the early 1980s, the employees of Hammermill Paper went on strike. The strike was never officially settled and caused great animosity in the community due to the crossing of picket lines and the loss of jobs. Some community members say that the town never healed from the split that the strike caused. As a result of the loss of its main employers, the area moved from a thriving region to one that now has some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates in Pennsylvania. At the present time, the school poverty rates among the elementary schools range from 92% to 35%, with four schools above the 60% mark. The unemployment rate hovers around 7.3%.

Consolidation

Theodore Roosevelt School District is a consolidation of four smaller districts. The consolidation occurred in the 1960s; however, a unified school district in thought and action does not exist in the 2000s. This is often evidenced at school board meetings by acrimonious debates in which the different sides fall along the original four districts’ lines. At the time of consolidation, the larger district retained the high schools of the original four districts. These high schools actually competed against one another in sporting events even though they all belonged to the same district. In 2000, after years of debate, the district closed three of the high schools and consolidated them into one large high school located in Marysville, Pennsylvania, a small town located four miles outside of Smithville. The high school was given a new name and there was a restructuring of sporting traditions. The fourth high school remained intact due to the fact that it is
located 30 miles from downtown Smithville. It has retained its original name. In 1997, at
the inception of the Guided Assessment Project, the district was composed of nine
elementary schools ranging in size from 400 to 120 students, totaling approximately 2400
elementary students. The district, at the time of the original consolidation, was comprised
of 13 elementary schools. Furthermore, in the 1998-99 school year, the district moved to
a middle school concept. All sixth graders were moved into three middle schools. Then,
in the 2001-2002 school year, two of the middle schools were moved into a new building
that now houses over 1100 middle school students.

Access
- Permission was sought from the Superintendent of Schools via the Director of
  Curriculum.
- A letter was composed that explained the purpose of the study and how it would
  impact the education staff.

Selection of Participants and Rationale for Selection
- The participants were selected from two of the four elementary schools that are
  participating in the Reading First initiative.
- The two elementary schools were selected based on the following criteria:
  - Buchanan Elementary School: This school is of particular interest to me
    because it is the school with the highest poverty rate in the district (92%);
    however, through the course of the grant it has demonstrated in certain
    areas the highest student achievement data. Historically, the school, which
    has an enrollment of approximately 284 students in grades kindergarten
    through fifth grade, was the lowest achieving school with the students
    often being referred to as “those Buchanan kids….what can you expect
    from them.” This was a sentiment voiced by both the teaching staff and
    the community. Approximately five years ago a new principal was
    assigned to the school. She had been a teacher in the district for over 15
years, worked as an instructional support consultant, and then became the principal of Buchanan Elementary. Over the course of her tenure, the climate, teacher attitude, and achievement of the students all moved toward the positive. From a Reading First technical assistance perspective, this principal not only implemented the requirements of the grant such as instituting grade level meetings that focused on student data, she understood the rationale for the requirements and demonstrated a belief in their successful implementation. Two years ago the principal was reassigned to Smith Elementary, a larger school that had not been making satisfactory progress. An administrator brand new to being an elementary principal was assigned to Buchanan Elementary for the 2005-2006 school year. The new principal did not have a strong background in curriculum, instruction, and assessment and has no knowledge of Reading First. One of the questions I was curious about is how the leadership factor affects the teachers’ view of being in the reform effort. The teachers will have their perspectives based on their worldview; however, to what degree does the leadership affect their perceptions? Another factor that was at play in Buchanan Elementary is that teachers were transferred from Madison Elementary for the 2005-2006 school year due to the closing of Madison, thus affecting the cultural norms of the elementary. Furthermore, these teachers brought an additional variable of having had to change schools and adapt to new leadership.

- Smith Elementary School: Smith Elementary is a very large elementary school located in downtown Smithville. It has an enrollment of approximately 462 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Its poverty rate was registered at 63% at the start of the grant in the 2003-2004 school year. This rate is lower than Buchanan Elementary’s rate, but is still considered high relative to other schools and districts within the purview of the Central Intermediate Unit #10 and the state of
Pennsylvania. Over the past year Smith Elementary has also experienced an influx of teachers and students from Madison Elementary. Historically, this elementary has been struggling, although the teaching staff voiced confidence in their teaching and were often reluctant to implement instructional strategies offered through the Guided Assessment Project’s professional development plan as well as offerings from Reading First. The teachers’ confidence has not been supported by student achievement data. In addition, the teaching staff also voiced frustration with the leadership of the principal that was assigned approximately four years ago at the time of this study. From a Reading First technical assistance perspective, the principal did not implement the requirements of the grant. She voiced cooperation; however, I could not verify her sentiments with evidence. The next school year following the principal’s retirement saw the advent of a new leadership style when the principal from Buchanan Elementary was assigned to Smith Elementary. I was curious, once again about the effect of leadership on teacher perceptions of being in a reform effort along with the effect of the influx of teachers from Madison.

- It is interesting to note that all four Reading First schools are high poverty schools with a history of low student achievement, thus, the reason they qualified for the Reading First grant. Furthermore, all four schools have a mix of teachers in varying stages of their career path. In addition, all four schools have experienced a change in the leadership position over the course of the grant; however, these two schools were of particular interest because the principal who has led a successful implementation has had tenure in both. I wanted to see if that theme emerged in the data and what effect it may have on teacher perceptions.
Figure 3.1

*Theodore Roosevelt School District's Four Reading First Elementary Schools: Grade and Staff Distribution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th>No. of K Classrooms</th>
<th>No. of First Grades</th>
<th>No. of Second Grades</th>
<th>No. of Third Grades</th>
<th>Title One Teachers</th>
<th>Literacy Coach</th>
<th>Adm.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buchanan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marysville</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynolds</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Madison Elementary was vacated during the 2005-2006 SY. Students were re-assigned to the remaining four elementary buildings.

- Purposeful selection was used.
- Sample selection for teachers was based on the following attributes and efforts were made to obtain maximum variation on the attributes of grade level and years of experience.
  - Has taught in a Reading First school for at least one year
  - Grade level assignment: Teaches and/or services grades K-3
  - Teaching experience
    - New teacher: 0 - 3 years of experience
    - Semi-new teacher: 4 - 6 years of experience
    - Newly established: 7 - 15 years of experience
    - Experienced: 16 - 25
    - Very experienced teacher: 26 – 40 years of experience
- Sample selection of Reading First literacy coaches was based on their building assignments.
Sample selection for administrators was based on the following attributes:
  - Principal of Buchanan Elementary
  - Principal of Smith Elementary

Sample number for the Theodore Roosevelt School District Case Study
  - There was an attempt to interview enough participants to answer the research questions to a point of saturation or redundancy.
  - Subsequently, there were 15 participants interviewed: a building principal from each building, two literacy coaches from Smith Elementary; however, one of the coaches had been assigned to Buchanan Elementary for the first two years of the grant, thus, giving the perspective of both buildings.
  - Each participant was interviewed twice. The second interviews occurred most times within a week of the first interview. Each interview lasted between 30 to 50 minutes.

Data Collection

Data was primarily collected via an interview process with support from review of relevant documents. The intent of the study was to ascertain the experiences of the educators; therefore, having access to their feelings, opinions, and knowledge was crucial. Interviews are appropriate for such a purpose (Merriam, 1998). According to Patton (1990), interviews should be used when the researcher wants to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind. Furthermore, they are necessary when we cannot observe the behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them (Merriam, 1998).

For the purposes of this study, an in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing approach was used. This method combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Seidman, 1991). In this approach, interviewers use primarily open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those
questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic of study (Seidman, 1991). The approach uses a multi-interview approach, thus interviewing each participant more than one time. In this particular case, phenomenological interviewing was employed using a two-interview-per-participant format that employed a combination of structured and semi-structured questions. The two-interview series allowed enough time to ascertain each educator’s view of the topic area and how meaning was created by that experience.

Within the interview process, structured questions were used to collect demographic data with the semi-structured questions being used to ascertain knowledge, feelings, opinions, sensory experiences and experiences (Merriam, 1998). Although, the first interview was designed to focus on the description of the events and activities of the Reading First reform effort and the second interview was designed to concentrate on the personal experiences of being involved in the reform effort and the interpretation of those experiences, in reality, both topics were discussed simultaneously in the interviews. The interview schedules for each interview (Appendix A and Appendix B) were used to guide the interview process; however, as anticipated, neither the exact wording of the questions nor the order of the questions were determined ahead of time. This structural detail did allow for responding to the situation at hand along with the emerging worldview of the respondent and the new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 1998). The semi-structured questions on the interview schedule were a combination of hypothetical questions and interpretative questions written in every day language (Merriam, 1998). The content of the semi-structured questions also dealt with behavior, opinions and/or beliefs, feelings, knowledge, sensory experiences, and experiences (Heppner, Kivilighan & Wampold, 1999). The respondent’s answers to the semi-structured interviews often led to additional clarifying questions that were customized to the particular conversation and had not been part of the interview schedules.

Based on recommendations from my dissertation committee, each interview was scheduled for a 30-minute block of time. In reality, interviews lasted from 30 to 50 minutes. In addition, most interviews were spaced approximately one week apart. This
spacing did allow time for reflection, which added depth and quality to the second interview. In addition, using the multiple interviews did provide an opportunity for a relationship to develop between myself and the respondents along with relaying a message of respect to each respondent since it was my intent to listen carefully and to record their experiences and perspectives accurately. Ultimately, both building a relationship and showing respect contributed to enhancing the interview process. Respondents consistently remarked on initially feeling apprehensive during the first interview and then moving into enjoying the opportunity to talk about their educational experiences and practices and expressing a desire to have such conversations on an ongoing basis.

The multiple interview approach over time also enhanced the validity of the interviewing process by helping to answer the question, “Are the participant’s comments valid?” This was done by looking at the internal consistency of answers of each respondent across the two interviews. Also, the approach helped to negate the effect of interviews that might occur on an idiosyncratic basis such as the interviewee was not feeling well on a particular day.

I conducted the interviews over a four month time period. I used a digital voice recorder to record all interviews and made two back-ups of the interviews for safe keeping as soon as I downloaded the interviews to my computer. When conducting interviews, I took notes as to which questions I had asked from my two interview schedules and also questions that emerged in each of the interviews. When preparing to do a second interview, I initially reviewed my notes and summarized the content for each participant before starting the second interview. However, I soon realized that I should be listening to the first interview again before conducting the second interview. My realization came after a discussion with my dissertation advisor. Therefore, as time went on I became better at this process to the point that I wrote out summaries of the first interviews to review with the participant before starting the second interview.
Data Interpretation Process

The data analysis process was anticipated to be paired with the data collection process and, in reality that is what occurred. Analysis began with the first interview and emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses were used to refine or clarify the interview questions as was described earlier in this chapter (Merriam, 1998). As anticipated, the process was interactive, recursive, and dynamic. Furthermore, since the goal of the study was to ascertain the experiences of the participants of the Reading First initiative, deliberate efforts were made to ascertain multiple perspectives surrounding the change effort so that the essence of the phenomena could be identified.

Data analysis, according to Merriam (1998), is the process of making sense out of the data. This involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read. It is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, and between description and interpretation. The meanings or insights that evolve are the findings of the study and communicating understanding of these findings was the goal of the study. In order to do so, determining how to manage the data was crucial since all the material that was collected needed to be organized in such a way that it was easily retrievable so that it could be reviewed and manipulated. Yin (1994) calls this organized material the case study data base.

A coding system was also part of the data management system and involved coding on two levels: a code that identified information about the data and a code for interpretative constructs related to the analysis. The challenge was to code the data in such a way that multiple constructs could be accessed individually or in groups. Therefore, a data management system, including a coding scheme, was used to support organizing and managing data and was implemented at the start of data collection. Both the data management system and the coding system evolved as the question of what tools to use to help manage the data was answered.

In practice, once the interview process started, the data management system and
the coding system were also initiated. One of the first questions in data management was how to preserve the interview data so that it was valid and credible. As outlined in my proposal, the interviews were to be transcribed in order to facilitate the analysis process, thus, the transcription process was initiated as soon as the first interviews were recorded. I transcribed the first 12 interviews and then requested support from my advisor in this area. It was taking me at least four hours to transcribe a 30-minute interview and I was becoming overwhelmed by the process. Fortunately, I was granted permission for the transcription to be done by an outside person. At that point in time I then took the analysis process one step further as well as taking steps to establish the validity of the study by starting the process of writing 15 summaries (one summary per respondent) of the interviews for each participant to review for member checking purposes. In order to write the summaries I listened to each interview several times. I then sent the summaries and a direction sheet via a personalized email to each participant. I documented this process via a table and documents file which included follow-up emails, telephone conversations, and participant responses to the summaries. This documentation was part of the audit trail that was used throughout the study.

Once the summaries were completed I then started to write the participant profiles. The profiles were written in the voice of the respondents; therefore, the process was completed by using excerpts from the transcripts with my input only being to add transitional elements. Consequently, the completion of the profiles required me to listen to the interviews several more times.

Meanwhile, I started to create the organizational systems that would allow me to code the data once all of the interviews had been transcribed. I created notebooks (3-ring binders) that housed each participant’s transcribed interviews, the summary of the interviews, and their profile. I housed five participants’ data in one notebook using pocket folders as dividers; subsequently, I had three large binders that were labeled on the front and within the text for easy access to the data. Once the notebooks were created, I started coding the interviews by first reading through the transcriptions once again and noting such items as key ideas, important quotations, and highlighting points of
interest.

At this point in time, I was using a note card method to code the topics much as I would when taking notes for a research paper. On each note card I put the participant code, interview code, page number, line number(s), tentative category, tentative subcategory, and then the relevant information from the transcript. This process helped to give me the big ideas that I thought were coming through; however, I eventually found the process to be cumbersome and I could bear it no longer. I completed 10 interviews using the note card method. However, I categorized the note cards according to the big topic areas that were emerging. I then reread directions my dissertation advisor had sent me via email regarding the analysis process, studied chapter one, *The Context*, from Nolan and Meister (2000) and reviewed chapter eight, *Analyzing, Interpreting, and Sharing Interview Material* from Seidman (2006). I then went through the transcripts and coded right on the transcript in preparation for copying the transcript and then cutting the copied transcript into topic areas. I completed the coding of the remaining 20 interviews in this fashion.

After pulling out big ideas, keywords, quotations from 10 of the 30 interviews using the guidance of the research questions, I had my first round of categories and subcategories that were emerging from the data. I then continued the process with an additional 14 of the remaining 20 interviews and generated a second list. I then compared lists. Topics were combined and subcategories generated, deleted, re-aligned on the basis of 24 interviews. I seemed to need to complete the process for a small amount of the data so that I knew where I was going never having done this before. I would work but then get a bit lost and overwhelmed with the process so jumping ahead actually allowed me to focus better on the analysis of the remaining interviews. This process was a bit of a struggle and it required discipline to see the task through.

I then went through another winnowing process—at least that is what it felt like. I took the categories that had been generated and made signs out of note cards for each category. I then read each entry and either expanded or combined categories and subcategories. The major topics that emerged were the Guided Assessment Project,
Reading First, systems change, leadership, and a miscellaneous category. Each topic had many subcategories. I then copied all of the coded transcripts using an organizational system for the copying process. Even with a carefully thought out and meticulously implemented copying system, I somehow missed copying eight pages of one of the transcripts. Such experiences, although minor, were frustrating. However, writing about them in my reflexive journal actually helped me to keep the big picture in mind and to attend to the process even more conscientiously.

Once I had copies of all of the coded transcripts I went through each transcript, cut the coded sections into strips, and then categorized using the note cards as category and subcategory labels. I then grouped all the subcategories into a file folder that was labeled with the category name. All file folders were kept in an expandable portable file folder. Once again I was amazed by the amount of time this process required. At this point in the process, I started writing the results of the analysis process.

**Document Review and Analysis**

Document review was reserved for those documents that were relevant to the Reading First Initiative as it takes place in Theodore Roosevelt School District. Specifically, the Reading First grant, communications with the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the University of Pittsburgh, district-generated documents, consultant notes from the multi-year project, coaches’ logs, minutes from meetings as well as classroom materials and lesson plans were used. Efforts were made to ensure the authenticity of the documents and to clarify their original use.

**Defining a “Case”**

Initially, at the outset of the study, I left the definition of “case” to be defined by the data. If the data from the schools indicated that the respondents from each school experienced and understood the process quite differently, then each school was going to
be a case. However, on the other hand, if the schools were not that different then I would look at individuals and analyze data across respondents. In reality, the experiences of the respondents from both schools were so similar, that the case was defined by looking at the individuals and analyzing the data across respondents.

Enhancing Trustworthiness and Credibility

Inherent within any research study are the issues of trustworthiness and credibility. For the results of a research study to be plausible and beneficial to the field of study at hand, it is necessary to have a degree of confidence in the usability of the results. The issues of trustworthiness and credibility arise in both quantitative and qualitative research and efforts to enhance both are mandated by the ethics of conducting research. Stake (1995), addressing the issues of trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative research specifically, asserts that although multiple and complex phenomenon are dealt with in which no consensus can be found as to what really exists, there are ethical obligations to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding. Furthermore, establishing trustworthiness enables a qualitative or naturalistic study that assumes multiple realities to make a reasonable claim to methodological soundness (Erlandson et al., 1993). Traditionally in quantitative research, trustworthiness and credibility are discussed in terms of internal validity, reliability, and external validity; however, criteria have emerged from the naturalistic paradigm itself that are congruent with the intent of such research. Trustworthiness is established in a naturalistic inquiry by focusing on the following authenticity criteria that underlie all research: truth value, consistency, applicability, and neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Truth Value

Truth value in traditional research has been defined as the internal validity of the study. In quantitative research, internal validity addresses the question of how research findings match reality and, subsequently, hinges on the definition of reality
In qualitative or naturalistic research, the assumption is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing. It is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) reality are multiple constructions made by humans and when we are employing research methods to observe these constructions of reality we are, in fact, attempting to understand their world. Furthermore, these constructions are on their minds and that the most direct route to access these constructions is via qualitative research because the researcher is the instrument. Using such a methodology precludes having another technique interjected between the experience of the person and the accessing of that experience, thus increasing the truth value or credibility of the results. Therefore, within the naturalistic realm, truth value is measured by establishing credibility. Credibility is enhanced by using techniques that ensure that the constructions of the respondents are reported on their own terms with minimal distortion and/or bias. Techniques such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy materials, peer debriefing, member checks, and reflexive journaling help to ensure credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993).

This qualitative research study, which employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews, is in line with the perspective of using the researcher as the investigative instrument to access the constructions of reality of the education staff of the Reading First schools. However, to enhance the credibility of the study techniques such as prolonged engagement, member checks, peer debriefing, data source triangulation, document review (referential adequacy materials), and reflexive journaling were utilized.

Prolonged engagement has been established by my long-term relationship with the district. I have had the opportunity to learn about the culture over a multi-year period and to understand its complexities and idiosyncrasies. Member checks is a technique which involves taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if the results are in line with what they were communicating to the researcher (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). This check and balance was enhanced by using the phenomenological multi-interview approach. In addition, I
went back to each participant after I wrote a summary of both interviews and shared it with him/her requesting feedback as to the summary’s accuracy with capturing the participant’s feelings, experiences, and interpretations. This served as another member check.

Peer debriefing employs the use of other researchers to review the data for clarity and perspective (Merriam, 1998). In practice, my dissertation advisor fulfilled this role within this study. His careful review of my analysis and findings allowed me to know if I was on the right track in utilizing the data in a credible manner.

Data source triangulation is a technique that allows data on a particular topic to be collected from multiple sources to help inform interpretations made by the researcher (Heppner, Kivilihan & Wampold, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). In practice, the use of documents allowed me to triangulate information that was collected via the interviews. In addition, I used a reflexive journal to record information about myself such as my schedule, logistics, insights, and reasons for methodological decisions.

Consistency

Consistency is demonstrated via reliability measures in quantitative research and through evidence of dependability in naturalistic research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In quantitative research, reliability usually means that the results of the study can be replicated (Merriam, 1998). However, since the intent of qualitative or naturalistic research is to ascertain and understand the experiences of others, such a definition is incongruent with the goals of naturalistic inquiry. According to Merriam (1998), reliability in qualitative research needs to be defined as having results that are consistent and reliable with the intent of the study and, when internal validity or credibility has been established, reliability is enhanced. However, the researcher needs to explain via thick description his/her position, efforts made to enhance the credibility of the study such as through the use of a reflexive journal, and an audit trail which would elucidate all sources of data that provided the bases for interpretations (Erlandson et al., 1993; Merriam, 1998). Throughout the study I used both the reflexive journal and an audit trail that met
the criteria established by Siedman (1993). The audit trail included the following categories: raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, materials relating to intentions and dispositions, and information relative to any instrument development.

Applicability

Applicability is defined as external validity in quantitative research and as transferability within the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). External validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. In other words, how generalizable are the results. This definition is rooted in the paradigm of quantitative research and poses a problem when applied to the motivations and goals of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). In a naturalistic inquiry, a single case or small non-random sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of many. In qualitative or naturalistic research, description and interpretation are desired. It is the obligation of the researcher to provide enough contextual depth and thick description since each inquiry produces a picture of a particular context. Moreover, the goal is understanding this context, thus, a reader of the qualitative product should achieve an understanding of the complexity of the context in order to ascertain how applicable the study is to their situation much as is true in the case of the generalizability of literature or a work of art (Erlandson et al., 1993; Heppner, Kivilighan & Wampold, 1999; Nolan & Meister, 2000). Furthermore, it is argued that human behavior cannot be understood outside of its context and that large, quantitative data bases do not aide in understanding the particular and essentially do not provide applicable results (Heppner, Kivilighan & Wampold, 1999).

This study addressed the issue of context by devoting an entire chapter to describing the background and history of Theodore Roosevelt School District in terms of school improvement efforts over the past ten years. The context chapter outlines the Reading First grant and its entrance to the district as well as the context of key findings of
the study such as a major literacy project that was in place in the district for six years prior to the advent of the Reading First grant.

Neutrality

In traditional research, neutrality is defined as establishing the objectivity of the research methodology. An inquiry is judged in terms of the degree to which its findings are the product of the focus of its inquiry and not of the biases of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such objectivity is established by using a methodology that is described in detail, open to scrutiny, can be replicated, and is insulated from the biases of the researcher. In qualitative or naturalistic research, the researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are free from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the “confirmability” of the data themselves (Erlandson et al., 1993). Confirmability indicates that the data can be tracked to their sources and that the logic used to assemble the interpretations into structurally coherent and corroborating wholes is both explicit and implicit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process can be tracked through the use of a technique known as the conﬁrmability audit which operationally is done via the audit trail. In essence such an audit pulls together all of the criteria that contribute to the integrity of the study and was utilized throughout this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONTEXT

This study takes place in a poor, rural school district located in Central Pennsylvania. The district is part of a community that expects no or minimal tax increases as a matter of routine, has changed superintendents at least every two years for the past ten years, and has the highest poverty rate in the central region. Within this context, the district leadership faces increasing pressure to increase student achievement by both state and federal mandates with ever diminishing resources; however, in spite of such conditions, this district has persevered for the past 10 years to provide coherent, evidenced-based, state-of-the-art early literacy instruction for its students.

Their effort started in 1997 when the district leadership realized that referrals to the Instructional Support process and to Special Education were on the rise especially in first grade. Acknowledging that a problem existed, the district embarked on a journey to restructure its language arts program working in partnership with the Central Intermediate Unit. This reform effort was called the Guided Assessment Project which started in the 1997-98 school year in two of the nine elementary schools. The initial focus was on the kindergarten and first grade curriculum and instruction. Six years later this initiative was followed by participation in the Reading First initiative, a federal early literacy reform effort originating in The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

This chapter will chronicle the district’s experience with both reform efforts, thus, providing the context for this study with the intention of helping the reader to understand the world of the district personnel at the time of this phenomenological study.

The Guided Assessment Project

In the 1997-98 school year Theodore Roosevelt School District embarked on its journey to restructure its elementary language arts program. This effort was known as the
Guided Assessment Project, which is most often referred to as “GAP” by district personnel. The project was a system-level initiative designed to restructure the elementary language arts curriculum and to impact, for the positive, the minute-to-minute classroom instruction of all early literacy classrooms. The goal of the project was to increase student achievement in reading and writing, develop reflective teaching practices, and reduce instructional support and special education referrals. The district and The Central Intermediate Unit (CIU) formed a partnership to undertake this systemic, multi-year reform effort.

The Partnership

The Central Intermediate Unit is one of 29 regional education agencies chartered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to service school districts within a designated area. The Central Intermediate Unit services 12 school districts in Centre, Clearfield and Clinton Counties. These counties are located directly in the center of Pennsylvania. The 12 districts vary in size, percent of low income, and population.

The areas of service provided by the intermediate units include, but are not limited to, preschool and school-age special education, specialized and limited services to nonpublic education, curriculum support services, in-service opportunities, technology, adult education, arts education and staff development. The services are to be designed to support the school districts in meeting state and federal mandates as well as to enhance the education of the students of the member school districts.

In the early 1990s, The Central Intermediate Unit was focused on a state initiative known as the Instructional Support Project. The goal of the project was to design effective interventions for children experiencing academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulty within the schools. These interventions were to occur before any formalized evaluation for special education services took place. Each intermediate unit provided consultation and training support to districts to establish Instructional Support Teams (IST) and an Instructional Support process. Theodore Roosevelt School District took
advantage of these services from the Intermediate Unit during the 1993-1994 school year. In that same year, the district adopted a literature-based anthology reading series. The district received one half-day mandatory in-service and two, after-school, voluntary attendance sessions from the company as preparation for implementation. In addition, the district purchased the main anthology for each grade level. Leveled readers were not purchased since the textbook company classified them as supplemental materials.

The Need

In 1996, three years after the adoption of the new basal series, Theodore Roosevelt School District personnel indicated that a disturbing trend was occurring in instructional support and special education referrals. Referrals were increasing in both systems and the systems were becoming overloaded. Furthermore, many of the referrals were originating in first grade. At this point, two instructional support teachers asked for support from the Central Intermediate Unit. At the suggestion of the CIU instructional support consultant, a small action research study was conducted to help identify the causes of the increase in referrals. Curriculum-based assessment in reading was conducted in four first grades in two of the nine elementary buildings. Accuracy and fluency rates were recorded for all students using the reading materials from the literature-based series. Teachers had anticipated that 85% of the children were working on instructional level in their reading material. The actual data indicated that only 25% of the children could negotiate the reading text at instructional level. It was at that time that district leadership and the CIU instructional support consultant hypothesized that the problem was with the curriculum materials and the concomitant instruction. Therefore, the data indicated that the “bigger picture” of curriculum and instruction needed to be addressed rather than focusing on the individual student as was done in the instructional support and special education processes.
The Contract

The CIU instructional support consultant, using the research literature on Change (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Fullan & Stiege lbauer, 1991) and prior experience with implementing reform efforts, developed a contract that designated district and intermediate unit responsibilities within the project level of service. Conditions of the contract are as follows:

1. A written agreement between the district and the intermediate unit that outlined responsibilities of both parties, specifically, time, money and staff commitments for both the participating district and the CIU. The contract contained the district’s multi-year commitment to the change process. This agreement had to be signed by the district’s superintendent and approved by the district’s board of directors as well as signed by an intermediate unit administrator. The agreement also contained a detailed reference of the supporting research that would be used in the literacy projects.

2. One day per month for on-site training with a training cohort of not more than 30 teachers and administrators in the initial year of implementation.

3. One-half day per month for reflection and guided practice per school building

4. One-half day per month for instructional leadership training for administrators.

5. Use of an internal/external consultant model for facilitating the project.

Rationale for the Contract

The Guided Assessment Project was designed to promote systemic change within a district. Systemic change is defined by Fullan and Miles (1991) as those change efforts that go beyond the superficial and address the supporting systems of the district that are necessary to maintain the innovation. For instance, The Consortium on Productivity in the Schools indicated in its report, Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need (1995) that school districts are multi-faceted, complicated organizations made up of eight interacting subsystems. The Consortium lists the subsystems as the following: governance, management, finance, teaching/learning, adaptation/innovation,
outplacement, hiring/purchasing and maintenance. The Consortium goes on to say that the interaction of these subsystems must be considered when designing school reform efforts in schools. Well-designed systemic reform efforts address the component parts of the overall system so that the subsystems, when working in concert with one another, support the innovation. The Guided Assessment Project initially focused on the governance, management, finance, teaching/learning and adaptation/innovation subsystems. It was this focus that provided motivation for the initial design of the intensive project.

The Theodore Roosevelt School District/Central Intermediate Unit
Professional Development Model for the Guided Assessment Project

First Steps

Understanding that professional development is a key ingredient of reform efforts (Butler, 2000; Guskey, 2000; Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991), that effective professional development does not happen in a day, and that systemic change requires a long-term commitment, a three-day introductory training was made available to all nine elementary schools in the spring of 1997 to introduce the complexity of system change. The primary goal of the training was to present the concept of school restructuring, along with the principles of change, and a review of evidenced-based literacy initiatives so that the district personnel could make an informed decision in regard to participation in the project. The secondary goal of the three days was to make clear the level of commitment that was required to make systemic changes in the district. This training was designed and facilitated by me in my role as the CIU instructional support consultant. I wanted to ensure that district personnel were fully informed when making a decision to participate in a reform effort.

Each elementary brought a team, which included the principal, classroom teachers, and a guidance counselor. The teams had the responsibility for deciding
whether or not to participate in the multi-year, intensive initiative. Therefore, initial participation occurred on a voluntary basis. District leadership wanted participation to be voluntary, initially, so that the kinks could be worked out in a small group before or if implementing district-wide. This thinking was in line with Fullan and Miles’ (1992) and Smith’s (1996) research that indicated that starting small was often an effective strategy. As a result of that initial training, two elementary schools decided to participate and signed on to a multi-year, intensive restructuring effort. The training focused on kindergarten, first grade, Title I services, instructional support, and guidance services. The training cohort was known as the development team. A representative from the district’s language arts committee was also a member of the team. This representative was to function as a liaison between the development team and the language arts committee. Twenty educators signed on as members of the team. It was after this decision was made that the superintendent signed the contract for participation in the Project.

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\text{Internal/External Consultant Model}
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To facilitate this reform effort, an internal/external consultant model was used (Fullan & Stiegalbauer, 1991). The use of two consultants working as a team was viewed as an advantage. The collaboration was predicted to enhance the process by increasing discussion and reflection and by dividing responsibilities so that each consultant could focus on their respective area of expertise. Responsibilities were outlined as follows. In the Project, the district’s Director of Curriculum functioned as the internal consultant. Her responsibilities included procuring funding for the initiative; maintaining the budget; facilitating the administrative team meetings; being the liaison to the superintendent, the cabinet, the school board, and the news media; making logistical arrangements for training days; completing orders for materials; attending as many trainings as possible; and working in a close, collaborative relationship with the external consultant. I, in my role as the CIU instructional support consultant, functioned as the external consultant. In this case “consultant” was defined as a hands-on person who worked with the system on
an ongoing and frequent manner. My responsibilities included being up-to-date on the research on consultation, systemic change, and literacy ensuring that the research informed the district’s process. I planned and implemented the majority of professional development trainings for all of the training cohorts in the areas of systems change, comprehensive literacy, assessment, differentiated, developmental and scaffolded instruction with support from the CIU early childhood consultant who trained in the areas of learning environment, room arrangement, and learning centers. I also facilitated on-site discussion/reflection groups and played a supportive role in administrative meetings. I worked with the Director of Curriculum (internal consultant) to establish the district’s assessment manual for early literacy. Thus, the internal consultant and I functioned as co-leaders of the project in a truly collaborative, respectful, and effective manner. Our partnership formed the leadership team with support from the CIU early childhood consultant and, eventually, the district Pre- Reading First literacy coach.

It should be noted that over time as the capacity of the leadership, the teachers, and the system was developed, I slowly relinquished my responsibilities to district personnel, thus, enabling the district to guide its own efforts.

**Year One: 1997-1998 School Year**

Year One was a time of discovery. I, in conjunction with the TRSD Director of Curriculum, guided the process. Goals had been established for year one and were outlined in the district/CIU contract. The first year was designed to be a year of development and decision-making. To facilitate an environment of risk taking to promote discussion and debate, a team process was instituted with the goal of increased student achievement providing the guiding vision. The principles of system change were studied and applied to the group process. Team rules for collaboration were formulated using a consensus-building approach. Also, the group formulated the district-specific name for the reform effort, which to this day is known as The Guided Assessment Project, or GAP, even though the project quickly evolved into an arts and literacy project
that focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A communication system for the Project was developed. Reflection logs were established to support the project goal of developing reflective teaching practices. The role of data and problems were clearly outlined at the beginning of the initiative. Decisions were to be made based on data and problems were to be welcomed and viewed as a sign of real change occurring. Within this context, the team reviewed the literacy and assessment research. The members reviewed existing practices and existing materials. A lot of indecision and confusion existed within the group. Development and experimentation emerged as the priorities of the group. The team met one day/month for training/development. Another half day per month was devoted to building-based discussion/reflection. Reflection logs helped to guide this part of the professional development plan. I read and responded to the logs in my role as lead external consultant. At the end of Year One, the team had developed the content and the format for future training. The emphasis had moved from primarily assessment to the broader perspective of literacy curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Due to this change in emphasis, the membership of the development team was expanded to include additional representatives from the district’s language arts committee.

**Training Topics**

Initially, the training was focusing on learning theory, instructional assessment, curriculum-based assessment, differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and performance assessment. Also, systems change and school culture were focal points. By the end of the first year, the training’s focus was on implementing a Comprehensive Approach to Balanced Literacy. Topics included scaffolded reading and writing instruction using the Ohio Literacy Framework as the district’s model, room arrangement, students as responsible learners, literacy centers and literacy center management systems, literacy profiles which included such assessments as running records, concepts about print, skill-based checklists, and retellings. In addition, the proposed Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and
Listening, were incorporated into the training content as was the content of the assessments of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. To this date, training topics continue to evolve based on the latest literacy research available to the schools, mandates from the federal and state government as well as individual school and student needs.

*The Language Arts Wheel:*
*A Content-based Framework for School Restructuring*

As the lead consultant, trainer, and facilitator for the project, I was working overtime trying to keep up with everything that I needed to learn as I worked with the development team. At the time I was well trained in assessment, consultation, and system change, but I did not consider myself as being well versed in literacy education; therefore, I started to update my education in literacy by reading, attending trainings, reflecting on what I had learned, and experimenting.

As I worked with the team, it became evident that many of the teachers knew a lot about teaching reading from years of experience, but many did not. Furthermore, the teachers who felt confident in their teaching skills could not say why they did what they did in their classrooms. Primarily they relied on the anthology’s teacher manuals to guide their instruction. Most of the teachers did not work from a research base.

Additionally it appeared that the teachers were not aware of the complexities of learning how to read and how many instructional foci needed to be addressed for a student to become a successful reader and writer. To complicate the matter, as I reviewed the research and instructional models, I found that the literature in literacy had a complicated vocabulary in which terms used by one author may not be used by another author, or one term may have different definitions depending on the author. Furthermore, I realized at that time that the development team needed an organizer so that all of the areas of literacy instruction could be addressed so that the team was taking a comprehensive view of a balanced literacy approach.
It was at this time that I constructed a graphic organizer for literacy instruction. The graphic organizer was labeled the Language Arts Wheel and provided the much needed visual for understanding what the key areas of literacy instruction were and how those areas interacted with one another. My initial reference for the Wheel was the work of Gickling and Armstrong (1978). Dr. Gickling (1991) had provided extensive work in the reading area for the Instructional Support Project in Pennsylvania. He had introduced curriculum-based assessment to me, which essentially was a broad-based approach to reading assessment that included a running record.

The Language Arts Wheel (see Figure 4.1) contained eight areas. The first area was language development followed by accuracy. Accuracy was then followed by word study, fluency, and comprehension. Metacognition, spelling, and writing rounded out the wheel. Spelling was included as a separate entity on the wheel since both the teachers and parents considered it a subject unto itself even though, theoretically, it was classified under word study.
Figure 4.1

The Language Arts Wheel’s Eight Design Elements

With the agreed upon areas of the wheel, I started to design its application to practice based on literacy research and my knowledge of assessment. One of the first tenets of using the Wheel that emerged was that it could be used for guidance when developing a program for an individual student or for an entire school district. Initially it was applied to K-3 instruction; however, over the years it was found to be relevant to K-12 literacy instruction and it proved to be an invaluable tool for explaining differentiated instruction in literacy instruction.

This is how it worked.

Each area of the wheel was called a design element borrowing a term from architecture. Essentially, all eight design elements were necessary for a literacy education program to be structurally sound. Furthermore, as with basic architectural design
elements such as floors needing to be level, and roofs needing not to leak, the elements were essential and non-negotiable. This was an important component of the explanation because my experience with instruction was that teachers would pick and chose instructional elements based on personal knowledge and comfort levels, rather than on what was needed to create proficient readers and writers. However, as with the architectural design elements, there was flexibility and room for individual input in how to integrate the design elements into a language arts program just as there are hundreds of house floor plans, which all contain the basic architectural design elements.

Figure 4.2
*The Language Arts Wheel – All Design Elements Present in a Language Arts Program*

Each of the design elements was considered to be an area of curriculum within literacy education; therefore, each design element contained a curriculum strand, which essentially contained the K-12 scope and sequence for that particular focus area. Over
time each design element could contain multiple curriculum strands such as word study which included print awareness, letter identification, phonics, spelling, and high frequency words.

The design elements were also aligned with the Pennsylvania Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Standards and actually helped to apply the key components of the standards to differentiated instruction. For example, comprehension was a part of the three reading standards. The design element of comprehension provided the scope and sequence needed to address comprehension in all three standards. In other words, the standards and the design elements informed the teachers as to WHAT to teach in a comprehensive literacy program.

Figure 4.3
The Language Arts Wheel and Curriculum Strands

Each design element of the Language Arts Wheel can be considered to be a Curriculum Strand
The design elements were then applied to the Ohio State University Literacy Framework. This framework provided a schema for providing the HOW of instruction with the standards and the Language Arts Wheel providing the WHAT and the WHEN. This format was then used to provide coherence and structure to all future literacy trainings that were conducted as part of the Guided Assessment Project.

Figure 4.4
*Scaffolded Instruction: Adapted from the Ohio State University Literacy Framework*

Funding

The primary costs for the project were monies for substitutes, professional development resources for the participants; classroom materials, which included books
for read alouds, shared, guided, and independent reading and literacy manipulatives for literacy centers; and training expenses such as refreshments and room costs. The Central Intermediate Unit covered all consultant fees.

For the first two years, district monies covered all expenses. In 1999-2000, the district successfully completed application for nine Read-to-Succeed Grants, a state-sponsored literacy grant. Under the leadership of the Director of Curriculum, the nine elementary buildings each submitted a grant application. The Pennsylvania Department of Education approved all of the grant applications. The district received Read-to-Succeed monies for the next four years in decreasing yearly installments. These monies covered classroom-based materials and professional development resources for teachers. The Director of Curriculum was instrumental in procuring funds for the Project. She also had the primary responsibility for maintaining the budgets.

*The Summer of Year One*

Teacher feedback from the first year of the project was positive and word spread around the district that the Guided Assessment Project had the potential to make positive instructional changes. The elementary administration team made the decision that the Guided Assessment Project should be adopted district-wide. To facilitate the expansion, a five-day Administrators’ Summer Institute was designed by the KCSD Director of Curriculum and me. During that institute, the elementary principals and the assistant superintendent were trained in the basic tenets of the project. The five-day session ended with a planning process in which the principals formulated a five-year professional development and implementation plan for restructuring the district’s language arts instruction via the Guided Assessment Project.

*Year Two: 1998-1999 School Year*

Based on the five-year plan, three additional elementary schools joined the project
during the 1998-99 school year. Kindergarten and first grade were still the focus. The development team remained intact and the educators from the three new schools formed a new cohort. At this point in time, there were now two training cohorts. Both groups, on separate days each month, participated in the intensive level of the professional development plan as outlined in the original contract. I along with support from the CIU Early Childhood Consultant provided the training.

Year Three: 1999-2000 School Year

In year three, the Theodore Roosevelt School District/Central Intermediate Unit Partnership was expanded to include Galaxy, the CIU Arts in Education Program. Artists were trained in the Comprehensive Approach to Balanced Literacy and the Language Arts Standards. Galaxy artists then became part of the training team for the Theodore Roosevelt Guided Assessment Project. Their focus was on language development and comprehension in both literature and informational text. Furthermore, the partnership with Galaxy led to the creation of an Arts and Literacy Conference for Parents and Teachers. This conference was developed to showcase the connection between the arts and literacy development while providing professional development for parents. The conference was a joint venture sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, The Central Intermediate Unit, Galaxy, the Arts in Education Program of CIU 10, Theodore Roosevelt School District, West Branch Area School District, and Penns Valley Area School District. The conference was instituted in 1999 and continued for five years, one year beyond the end of the Read-to-Succeed grants.

In the fall of 1999, the four remaining elementary schools joined the Project on an intensive level as the third cohort. Therefore, all kindergarten and first grade teachers were now participating in the language arts training. Each new cohort also included the Title I staff, guidance, speech and language clinicians, and administration. The development team was moved from an intensive level to a maintenance level. They
attended update trainings one day every other month. The second cohort remained on the
intensive level for another school year. According to the five-year plan, all second grade,
third grade, primary learning support, and primary emotional support teachers were
brought into the project on a “readiness” level. This level preceded the intensive model.
It involved one, one and one-half hour, after-school training per month and all (four) in-
service days. This level was designed to inform the teachers of the content of the Guided
Assessment Project and to start the articulation of the restructuring effort from first to
second grade in a gradual manner. The after-school sessions were voluntary and the
teachers were paid a stipend to attend. Furthermore, during the third year, the Director of
Curriculum added a literacy coach to the training team to help support the massive
training effort.

The third year also brought a tightening of the administrative monthly meetings.
The meetings had been scheduled since Year One; however, attendance had been
unpredictable. With all of the elementary buildings now in some level of training, the
behind-the-scenes organizational work intensified. The need to standardize procedures
and policies emerged. For example, the implementation of assessment frameworks and
the development and adoption of a new primary report card necessitated the cooperation
of all key administrators. With the support of the superintendent, a message was given
that the meetings needed to be given high priority status by all elementary principals. The
Director of Curriculum facilitated this communication with the superintendent. In
addition, the special education lead teacher joined the administrative team since she
functioned as the elementary special education supervisor. With the administrative team
now a working entity, district-level, classroom-based literacy assessments were instituted
as well as the first change in the primary report card. Another Administrative Summer
Institute was held in the summer of 2000. The goal of the institute was to develop a
teacher observation form based on the Comprehensive Approach to Balanced Literacy.
However, due to major political happenings within the district, the time designated for
the Institute was used to problem-solve the problem at hand.

It should be noted that the research on systems change was heavily relied upon in
the third year. In terms of school subsystems as referenced in the report of the Consortium on Productivity in the Schools, *Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need* (1995), the project moved from having an impact primarily on the subsystems of teaching/learning and innovations, to affecting the administrative and governance (school board) subsystems. Parent and community subsystems were added to the list. Strategic communication systems for the school board, parents, and the community were carefully planned and implemented.

*Year Four: 2000-2001 School Year*

Year Four, 2000-2001, was business as usual with continued expansion of the Project into the intermediate grades. Two of the kindergarten and first grade cohorts were moved to a maintenance level within the professional development design. The development team was dismissed from formal training days. Three cohorts (approximately 25 teachers per cohort) of second grade, third grade, and primary special education teachers were moved to the intensive level. All fourth grade teachers, fifth grade teachers, intermediate special education teachers, librarians, and the remainder of the speech and language teachers participated in the “readiness” level. The administrative team continued to meet on a monthly basis and the second change in the primary report card was implemented. This change involved moving to a non-graded, narrative format. In the summer of 2001 a report card committee was formed. Further development of the report card would be the responsibility of this committee under the leadership of the Director of Curriculum.

*Year Five: 2001-2002 School Year*

The professional development plan continued in Year Five. For Theodore Roosevelt School District, the Guided Assessment Project was the longest running initiative in the district’s history. The project, at this point in time, had survived an
acrimonious change in the superintendent’s position, the advent of new school board members as well as the loss of supportive school board members, and staff complaints brought to the union leadership. The Project enjoyed a foundation of support from administration, the school board, and the teachers’ union. This support was crucial in dealing with numerous attempts to derail the process from within the district. The project, in line with all reform efforts, challenged many of the cultural norms of the different subgroups within the district. The role of culture is to maintain the status quo of an organization. By definition, a restructuring effort means new learning and, thus, a challenge to the “the way we always have done things around here.” Support from the governance and management subsystems was imperative to work through the challenges in a proactive, respectful manner.

In Year Five (2001-2002 school year), the fourth and fifth grade cohorts (three) were in the intensive level. In addition, a decision was made to include all kindergarten to third grade teachers in the maintenance level, including the original development team. Program evaluation data indicated that the earlier training groups needed ongoing, update trainings to maintain a high level of implementation. Consequently, the Director of Curriculum instituted three days per year per cohort as part of the maintenance plan. All fine arts teachers and substitute teachers entered the “readiness” level and a new cohort, named the Flex Group, was developed to accommodate new teachers and teachers who changed classroom assignments. Year Five brought the third change in the primary report card. The non-graded reporting system moved from a narrative to a standards-based format. In the summer of 2002, the Report Card Committee was given the additional responsibility of supervising the district’s developmental assessment plan. Its name was changed to the Assessment Committee. In addition, a day and one-half summer institute was held for the secondary principals in preparation for moving the project into the middle school and high school during the 2002-2003 school year.
The Guided Assessment Project continued into Year Six. All cohorts of kindergarten through fifth grade teachers were in the maintenance level of the professional development plan. The Flex Group, with new members, met one day per month for training. The Director of Curriculum and a literacy coach now facilitated this training. Monthly administrative meetings continued. Middle school teachers (regular and special education), high school department program leaders, and vocational-technical instructors entered the intensive level of the training. They formed three new cohorts for a total of 75 secondary teachers. The training content moved to a focus on adolescent literacy and reading in the content areas. I was, once again, the main trainer for these three new cohorts. In Year Six, the non-graded, standards-based report card was extended to include fourth grade.

While the Guided Assessment Project continued its work, the district had applied for and had received early literacy funds via a Reading First grant. In the summer of 2003 the district started the implementation of the Reading First grant by hiring five early literacy coaches. At that point in time the district had requested that I be appointed the Reading First technical assistant. That request was granted by the State Director of Reading First. The director was aware of the work done via the Guided Assessment Project and had invited the district and me to present at the Governor’s Institute for Early Childhood in the summer of 2002. Therefore, at that time I serviced the district both as an IU employee and also as the Reading First technical assistant for the Pennsylvania Department of Education. I now had the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the Reading First grant in Theodore Roosevelt School District while maintaining my role as external consultant for the Guided Assessment Project.
Summer of Year Six

The Director of Curriculum and the literacy coach conducted a five-day training for teachers who wished to substitute in the district. This training, which had been started in Year Five, was well-received by administrators, teachers of the district, and substitute teachers. Classroom teachers felt comfortable having a substitute in their rooms that had been trained in the Comprehensive Approach to Balanced Literacy. Classroom schedules did not have to be disrupted due to a teacher’s absence. The substitutes appreciated the training because it kept them up-to-date with the needs of the district and made them into viable candidates when teaching positions were available within the district. Administrators appreciated a well-trained group of substitutes for both the continuity of service they provided and for having excellent candidates from which to choose when interviewing for teaching positions.

Year Seven: 2003-2004 School Year

Year Seven was similar to Year Six. The only significant change was that the administrative team, at my request, and under the leadership of the Director of Curriculum, instituted “Data Days.” The administrative team reformatted two Act 80 days into four half days. These half days were dedicated to scoring of assessments, analyzing data, and developing appropriate classroom-based interventions based on the assessment results within each elementary school. The elementary principals were the facilitators of these sessions. I provided the principals with a process for reviewing the assessment results. In Year Seven, the non-graded, standards-based report card was extended to include fifth grade.

The Advent of Reading First

This next section will chronicle the implementation of the Reading First grants in
Pennsylvania and will outline the state’s response to facilitating the grant.

Reading First

Reading First is part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged). This act is the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. 6301 et seq.) and has redefined the federal role in K-12 education with special emphasis on closing the achievement gap. In practice it increased federal control and local accountability. It also expanded options for parents and put an emphasis on teaching methods based on scientifically-based reading research (No Child Left Behind in Pennsylvania, 2002). However, Reading First was not the first federal initiative to focus on early reading and the concept of scientifically-based reading research. It was preceded in recent history by the federal literacy initiatives known as America Reads and The Reading Excellence Act. The America Reads Challenge was issued by President Clinton in 1997 in an effort to recognize that reading is key to learning and that research shows that students unable to read well by the end of third grade are more likely to leave school and have fewer good options for jobs. The President asked all Americans to join in the effort to improve children’s reading achievement focusing on the importance of communities coming together to ensure that all children read well. America Reads supplied money for federal work-study tutoring programs at colleges and universities (America Reads Challenge, 1997).

The Reading Excellence Act (2001) continued to focus on the concept of teaching every child to read by the end of third grade. However, it also put an emphasis on providing children in early childhood with the readiness skills and support they need to learn to read once they enter school; expanding the number of high quality family literacy programs; providing early intervention to children who are at risk of being identified for special education inappropriately; and basing instruction, including tutoring, on scientifically-based reading research. The Reading Excellence Act program awarded over...
$325,000,000 in three-year grants to states to help improve the reading skills of pre-kindergarten through third grade children. States competed for the three year grants by creating plans for improving reading in the primary grades. The state education agencies then in turn distributed the funding to eligible local education agencies through a competitive process. The intent of the grant was to provide funds to the neediest of districts and schools.

Therefore, the stage was set for The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its emphasis on early reading; however, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 focused much more heavily on accountability than did the earlier literacy initiatives. Essentially, the law’s emphasis on accountability changed how school districts look at student achievement since there are severe sanctions for school districts that do not make “adequate yearly progress” (NCLB, 2001). Adequate yearly progress was based on state assessments and predetermined benchmarks on those assessments.

Before the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act secured funds for school districts across the nation to aide in the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The funding was dispensed via state departments of education. The accountability consisted of keeping local data; however, there was a great deal of freedom in determining which assessments would be used, when to collect the data, and how the data was used to determine success.

With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, states had to decide if they would accept the funds from the federal government. Acceptance of the funds was accompanied by a myriad of regulations, stipulations, and responsibilities. In addition, the states could apply for Reading First funds. These funds were targeted at high poverty, low achievement schools in each of the states. The funds were for K-3 general education students and K-12 special education students who were at risk of failing to learn to read at grade level.

Reading First has its basis in the work of the National Reading Panel Report of 2000 (NRP; National Institute of Child, Health and Human Development [NICHD]) The five instructional elements that are stressed in the law are those aspects of teaching
reading for which the NRP found solid, supporting research evidence that instruction in each of those elements gave students a clear learning advantage (Cummins, 2006). The elements are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension. The U.S. government via Reading First grants, provides money for materials, assessments, professional development, and help for struggling readers; however, only in the five elements. The idea is that, although there might be other good things to do with students, spending this money solely on what is certain to help students learn would be a good start toward raising reading achievement (Cummins, 2006, p.107). Thus, it was via the National Reading Panel’s work that the term “scientifically based reading research” entered the vocabulary of the Reading First grant and the nation.

The Constructs of the Reading First Grant

The Reading First grant was a six-year federal grant in early literacy. According to the language of the actual grant, it required grantees to select and administer screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments. It also required the selection and implementation of a learning system or program of reading instruction that was based on scientifically based reading research. Furthermore, the grantee was to provide professional development for teachers of kindergarten through grade three, and special education teachers of kindergarten through grade 12 (Reading First Grant, 2003).

The federal requirements also included the collection and summarization of data to document the effectiveness of activities carried out with grant funds and to stimulate and accelerate improvement by identifying schools that produce significant gains in reading achievement. In addition, the grantees were required to report data for all students in the following categories: economically disadvantaged, low income, disabled, and limited English proficiency (Reading First Grant, 2003).

The grantees were permitted to use Reading First funds for humanities-based family literacy programs that bond families around the act of reading and using public libraries; training in essential components of reading instruction to parents or other
individuals who volunteer to be a student’s reading tutor; and assisting parents, through the use of materials and reading programs, strategies, and approaches that are based on scientifically-based reading research, to encourage reading and support their child’s reading development (Reading First Grant, 2003)

In Pennsylvania, each elementary district and school that accepted the Reading First funds had to agree to a letter of assurances. The following items were included in the letter that was signed by the district superintendent:

- Active participation in any Reading First training for administrators as required by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- Provide district leadership in the selection and implementation of a scientifically-based reading research comprehensive reading program that will be used in all K-3 Reading First classrooms.
- Support intensive reading instruction for young children (K-3) based on the five essential components of learning to read (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and text comprehension), including extended learning opportunities before and after school hours. It should be noted that the Guided Assessment Project employed a much broader definition of reading than did Reading First. The Guided Assessment Project looked at literacy in a comprehensive manner and did not separate the reading process from the writing process. It also highlighted key areas that needed to be the focus of instruction and supported implementation via developmental, differentiated, and scaffolded instruction.
- Provide district leadership in providing mandatory training for principals and other building leaders in the essential components of learning to read, as well as the specific instructional programs and materials used in the buildings.
- Agree to monitor building leaders (principals) to ensure they:
  - Schedule 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction every day for all K-3 students.
  - Purchase instructional materials, including software programs, based on
scientifically based research.

- Promote reading and library programs for young children that provide access to engaging reading material.
- Plan professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals that is clearly aligned to the instructional Reading First program.
- Develop and implement a well-organized reading assessment system that includes screening, diagnosis, formative, and summative assessments.
- Systematically collect assessment data, maintain appropriate records, and submit all progress reports to the Pennsylvania Department of Education in a timely manner.

Superintendents also had to agree to the fact that the Reading First funding for the six-year grant was contingent upon evidence of significant improvement in student performance.

Each building principal also had to sign a letter of assurances. Their letter was similar to the superintendent’s letter, but focused on the supervision of teachers. It is as follows:

- Active participation in any Reading First training for teachers as required by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- Provide school building leadership in the selection and implementation of a scientifically-based reading research comprehensive reading program that will be used in all K-3 Reading First classrooms.
- Support intensive reading instruction for young children (K-3) based on the five essential components of learning to read (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and text comprehension), including extended learning opportunities before and after school hours.
- Provide building leadership in providing mandatory training for teachers and other building educators in the essential components of learning to read, as well as the specific instructional programs and materials used in the buildings.
- Agree to monitor teachers to ensure they:
o Schedule 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction every day for all K-3 students.

o Purchase instructional materials, including software programs, based on scientifically based research.

o Promote reading and library programs for young children that provide access to engaging reading material.

o Plan professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals that is clearly aligned to the instructional Reading First program.

o Develop and implement a well-organized reading assessment system that includes screening, diagnosis, formative, and summative assessments.

o Systematically collect assessment data, maintain appropriate records, and submit all progress reports to the Pennsylvania Department of Education in a timely manner.

Principals also had to agree to the fact that the Reading First funding for the six-year grant was contingent upon evidence of significant improvement in student performance.

The district and each building also had to, as part of the application process, submit a district and building plan. The district-wide plan included the following areas:

- Improving Reading Instruction
  - Current reading initiatives and identified gaps
  - LEA outline and rationale for using scientifically-based reading research
  - LEA Reading First program

- Instructional assessments

- Instructional strategies and programs

- Instructional materials

- District-Wide professional development

- District-Wide leadership and management
  - District-Wide technical assistance plan
  - Developing a district-wide infrastructure
- LEA management plan
- LEA reporting and evaluation
  - Evaluation strategies
  - LEA reporting
- Classroom level impact

The building-level plans included the following:
- Description of the school
- Access to print materials
- School-wide instructional leadership
- School-wide professional development
- School-wide management.

In practice, the Pennsylvania Reading First leadership indicated that districts must buy an approved basal series as their learning system and were required to use the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) as an early literacy screening instrument.

Reading First in Pennsylvania

When the Pennsylvania Reading First grant was written, Thomas Ridge, a Republican, was the state’s governor. His Secretary of Education was Charles Zogby, a lawyer who had worked for Governor Ridge in the Governor’s Policy Office. Secretary Zogby put the grant process under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Special Education. The Bureau Chief of Special Education and other members of the state Reading First team attended meetings in Washington, D.C. in preparation of writing Pennsylvania’s Reading First grant. After attending the national meetings, Pennsylvania’s team wrote the majority of the grant proposal in August of 2002. The University of Pittsburgh was charged with writing the accountability section of the grant.

Pennsylvania was the eleventh state to have their state Reading First grant approved. When Pennsylvania’s grant was accepted, Pennsylvania was the only state to
put the administration of the grant, one that addressed whole school reform in early literacy, under the auspices of a state department of Special Education.

On December 10-12, 2002, the Pennsylvania Reading First leadership team held a comprehensive leadership meeting for districts that qualified for Reading First funding. The districts’ PSSA scores and poverty index determined their eligibility. The meeting took place in the Harrisburg offices of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network. The requests-for-proposals were given out to Pennsylvania districts at that meeting. Subsequently, the completed applications were sent to the state Reading First team and were reviewed by numerous reviewers. Seven district proposals were accepted. Theodore Roosevelt School District’s grant proposal was not accepted because the district did not include the purchase of a basal series as their core curriculum. The Director of Curriculum was aware of this stipulation and was not in favor of writing the grant; however, under the guidance of her superintendent, she was directed to do so. The superintendent felt that if the funds were available and the district did not attempt to receive them, it could have implications for the district down the line. At that point the district writing team wrote their grant based on the work that was done via the Guided Assessment Project, which did not include buying a new basal series.

Change in Politics

During the gubernatorial election of 2002, Governor Ridge, a Republican, was replaced by Governor Edward Rendell, a democratic candidate. Secretary of Education, Charles Zogby, was replaced by Vickie Phillips. Ms. Phillips was an educator. Her approval by the legislature marked the fact that for the first time in approximately two decades an educator whose emphasis was K-12 held the Secretary of Education position in the state of Pennsylvania. Ms. Phillips left the superintendent’s position at Lancaster School District to become the Secretary of Education.

At her third staff meeting as secretary, Ms. Phillips moved the jurisdiction of the Reading First grant from the Bureau of Special Education to the Division of Teaching
and Learning. In late January of 2003, Ms. Phillips named a new state coordinator of Reading First and in March of 2003, Ms. Phillips named a new director of the Division of Teaching and Learning, the division in which jurisdiction of the Reading First grant was housed.

_A Second Round of Reviews_

Accompanying the change in governor and secretary of education, the state then conducted a second round of reviews for the Reading First grant proposals. According to a member of the state Reading First team, this was based on the submission of revised grants from those that had been rejected in the first round. The first grant applications were not re-reviewed. It was in this second round of reviews that the grant proposal from Theodore Roosevelt School District was accepted although no major revisions had been submitted.

_Reading First Technical Assistance_

In the original Pennsylvania Reading First grant, The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) was going to provide the basis for technical assistance. This network houses a cadre of consultants whose responsibilities include servicing Pennsylvania school districts and is under the auspices of the Bureau of Special Education. Secretary Phillips decided that the state should develop a different model that was based on regular education. However, due to Reading First being pulled from the Bureau of Special Education, this “built in army” of trained individuals was not at the disposal of the new state coordinator of Reading First. The new coordinator then reviewed what other states were doing and suggested a regional technical assistance system which would involve hiring regional technical assistants. The coordinator then hired a professional development specialist to work with the technical assistants and to guide the professional development part of the Reading First grant. However, permission
was not given to advertise the technical assistant position; therefore, the new coordinator relied on past relationships to search for technical assistants who possessed the skill set needed for the position. Subsequently, ten state technical assistants were selected. Their responsibilities included providing support to the Reading First districts in the implementation of their Reading First grants.

*Change in Politics – Again*

In December of 2003, the state coordinator of Reading First resigned from her position due to health reasons. The professional development specialist resigned at the same time and pursued private consulting. Dr. Phillips then put two consultants with whom she had worked in the Lancaster School District in charge of the Reading First project. The consultants were kindergarten teachers that specialized in interactive read alouds. They held no administrative certificates.

In August 2004, Dr. Phillips resigned as the Secretary of Education. She was replaced by Dr. Frances Barnes, a long-term superintendent in Pennsylvania. Dr. Barnes named a new Director of the Division of Teaching and Learning. The new director then brought the former Reading First state coordinator back as the program director for Reading First. The former/new program director was hired as a consultant rather than an employee of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. A Pennsylvania Department of Education administrator with no experience in early childhood or professional development was then named State Coordinator of Reading First.

The former/new program director retained the Reading First position for approximately five months. Her position ended when she received an email indicating that her contract would not be renewed. Meanwhile, Frances Barnes had already been asked to leave as Secretary of Education, which meant that the new Director of the Division of Teaching and Learning would also be asked to leave. For approximately one month, Reading First had an interim director; however, in October of 2005, a consultant for the Berks County Intermediate Unit and a Reading First technical assistant, was put in
charge of the Reading First technical assistants and the Reading First professional
development plan.

In the fall of 2005, Dr. Jerry Zvorchak replaced Dr. Barnes and was assigned the
Acting Secretary of Education position. With this move, came the change in the Division
of Teaching and Learning director’s position. The position was then held temporarily by
a director of curriculum from an intermediate unit until a new director was named.
During that same time period, Reading First was put under the charge of the director of
the Office of Child Development and Early Learning. By training, the director is a
lawyer. In October of 2005, the director hired a new Reading First state coordinator. The
new coordinator, who had originally been hired by PDE as an Early Childhood Advisor,
had no administrative or literacy background and had not applied for the position. The
coordinator remained in this position until June of 2006. At that point in time, PDE then
named a supervisor of Reading First, a new program director of Reading First and
parceled out the financial element of the grant to another employee. In February of 2007,
the program director was moved to the newly created Office of Child Development and
Early Learning. In March of 2007, a new Reading First State Director was named.

It is under these constantly changing conditions that the Pennsylvania Reading
First districts attempted to implement their Reading First grants.
CHAPTER FIVE

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

This chapter will offer the opportunity to get to know each of the interviewees whose thoughts, feelings, and experiences contributed to the findings of this phenomenological study. The format of each profile roughly follows the pattern of, first, providing demographic information, such as number of years teaching and present teaching assignment, which is then followed by information about each of their careers in education. After giving general information about their teaching careers, each interviewee was asked to comment on the highlights and lowlights of their education careers. These highlights and lowlights are reported upon separately at the end of each profile. Furthermore, each profile is written in the first person with the content originating in the interview transcripts. Editing was done for readability purposes only.

This chapter includes interviews from two central office administrators, two building level administrators, two literacy coaches, one primary learning support teacher, one Title One teacher, two kindergarten teachers, three first grade teachers, one second grade teacher, and one third grade teacher. The building level administrators, the literacy coaches, and the classroom teachers were pulled from Buchanan and Smith Elementary schools of the Theodore Roosevelt School District, both of which are Reading First schools. See Figure 5.1 for the roles and building assignments for each participant.
Figure 5.1

*Roles and Building Assignments for Each Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Director of Curriculum and Federal Programs</td>
<td>Central Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Director of Special Education</td>
<td>Central Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Buchanan Elementary School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Kindergarten Teacher</td>
<td>Buchanan Elementary School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>First Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Buchanan Elementary School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kaylee</td>
<td>Second Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Buchanan Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry*</td>
<td>Title One Teacher</td>
<td>Buchanan Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan**</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>Buchanan Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>Kindergarten Teacher</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>First Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>First Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Third Grade Teacher</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry*</td>
<td>Title One Teacher</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darla</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan**</td>
<td>Literacy Coach</td>
<td>Smith Elementary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Terry was assigned to both elementary schools during the 2004-2005 school year as a Title One teacher. He had been a third grade teacher at Buchanan Elementary School during the 2003-2004 school year.

** Susan was first assigned to Buchanan Elementary School in 2003-2004 as a literacy coach and then was transferred to the coach’s position at Smith Elementary School in 2005-2006.
Profile for Katherine, Director of Curriculum and Federal Programs

I am the Director of Curriculum and Federal Programs for Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have been in Theodore Roosevelt School District for 12 years, 10 of which have been in administration; however, I have been in education for a total of 18 years. I have been with Reading First since the beginning of the grant. This will be our fourth year…this year coming up. We just ended our third year.

I only ever wanted to be a teacher. So I played school always. And everyone in my family taught school. So when I was…I always tell this story… when I was in fourth grade my mother was my teacher, my dad was a physical education teacher, my grandfather was the building principal. So I have a long line of teachers in my family and everyone in my family pretty much on the Browns’ side taught school.

So teaching school was something I always wanted to do. I loved school. It was a good place for me. I wanted to stay there because I liked it. So I went to the local university and got a teaching degree. However, that was in the early eighties when there were not a lot of teaching positions in our local area. But there were a lot of teaching positions in the South. And so I got recruited in an urban area in Virginia. I moved to this urban area and taught there for five years; however, it was really baptism by fire in terms of walking into a whole different atmosphere and living away from…really far away from home for the first time. But I learned a lot.

After teaching in Virginia for five years, I moved back to Pennsylvania after a series of events happened including my grandparents leaving me their home when they died. So I had a home here in Pennsylvania and an apartment and a whole life in Virginia. So I decided that it was time to move back home.

I wanted to come back home. Plus I just wanted to teach in a different environment. So I moved back without a job in mid-August and toward the end of August I got a substitute position and taught for a local district just as a substitute for one year, but in the mean time looked for something more permanent. Locally you have to sort of substitute in order to get a job and I just was not in the position to do that. I needed health
insurance. I needed to be able to take care of a house. I just couldn’t be that uncertain about whether I got a paycheck or not so I got a job…still in education but a little bit of a different twist.

I taught drug and alcohol education for a county agency. I taught DUI classes, people who had been arrested for DUI. I taught those classes. I taught under-age drinker classes and then the best part was I went around to all of the schools, so it happens here in Theodore Roosevelt…I went around to all of the high schools, but at that time there were more than there are now, but I went around to all of the high schools and I was on the student assistance teams. Also I would go in and do presentations for classes…health classes or driver’s education classes. They would have me come in and do presentations for students so I just got to know administrators and I got to know central office administrators through my work and so then when an opportunity for a position became available here in Keystone I was able to move in. So I started as a substitute here and it was sort of a quick progression for me.

I was a substitute teacher for one year; the next year I was a permanent teacher, and the following year I was in central office. It was very quick. Then I…the central office position was just a substitute position…a one year position. In the meantime a full-time principal’s position, an assistant principal’s position came open at the secondary level, which I was offered. So I took a permanent administrative position so that I could stay in administration. And then that evolved into …I stayed as the assistant principal at that high school and moved to a principal at an elementary school at the same time. And then the following year…I was going to be principal at two elementary schools when the Director of Curriculum job opened and so I was invited to apply for the Director of Curriculum job. And I did and got that position and that is where I have been ever since.

Probably one of the biggest highlights was…I spent a year in kindergarten. Those kids left a huge impression on me…of course, those kids are now eleventh graders. That is how long ago it was. But they left a huge impression on me. I have never forgotten them. I have had other highlights in between but nothing has quite compared to those interactions with those kids, but there has been some very good work done in the district
that I have been able to be a part of….things like our Guided Assessment Project (GAP) training has been a definite highlight. Also, the creation of the standards-based report card has been a huge highlight because that took away the ranking and sorting of children….that was really a huge step in developmental…in true developmental education for our young children. It was a huge step to stopping the ranking and sorting of our littlest ones.

And another highlight has been moving the stuff (Guided Assessment Project) into the secondary. It is a highlight for me when I am training secondary teachers and they are telling me about their word wall, which would not have seemed even like a remote possibility ten years ago. And now they are using word walls to teach vocabulary. They are doing word sorts with students. They are doing these things that they would have at one time said were too elementary. They are really starting to see the light and so that has been another huge highlight.

Another highlight is watching the improvement our students are making. Seeing kids doing stuff and every year saying we should raise the bar more because the kids are doing more than we thought they would be able to do.

Another highlight is seeing the potential of our teachers being realized. They didn’t know they had it in them and rather than just say to them here is a basal just do what it says….to say to them you need to know what to do…you need to be able to figure out that out for yourself…you need to be able to think….it is not about spewing back to me what the basal says…We say to the kids it’s not about spewing back the facts to me….take the facts and do something with it…to higher level thinking, to application…that is what this is really…what the training has really endeavored to do….to say to people you have to be reflective…you have to think. It’s not black and white. You are going to have to figure out the shades of gray. It’s much more complex than that. That has been a real highlight…helping teachers do what they thought they couldn’t do.

Lowlights have been probably to some degree dealing with the politics of things. It is always a lowlight and it is always hard. And so dealing with agendas that don’t have anything to do with student success is difficult at times.
I guess another lowlight would have been when there were times when the teachers who we were really trying to honor and support in their move forward…we were really trying to make them better at what they did, would turn on us and undermine what was important for children….that was a real lowlight…when you would be shocked that they would have called board members or called the superintendent because they didn’t want to do guided reading or they didn’t want to do whatever….they didn’t want to do assessments. You know we were ahead of our time on this stuff and so I guess that was a lowlight to think people who were supposed to have children’s best interest at heart…really to be looking to what can I do to be better at this….instead were trying to undermine the work and were saying it is all about me instead it’s all about….really doing the right thing.

And I guess too...there’s been the concept flux is an issue. We have a flux in local leadership. And if you want to go back to Reading First…my years in Reading First…the constant flux in the Reading First leadership that the stability just isn’t always there. So that is a low light so I guess a high light is that we have persevered in spite of all that.

Profile for Jennifer, Director of Special Education

I am Director of Special Education for the Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have been in the district for thirteen years; however, this is my 18th year in education. I was here and went to Youngstown and came back. I taught multi-disabilities intermediate level for five years in the Youngstown City Schools. However, in the Theodore Roosevelt School District I taught high school when it was mixed categorical, mixed organizational so everybody came regardless of their disability to me in grades 7-12 throughout the day. I have also done instructional support, enrichment and I was the lead teacher in special education before I became the director.

As the Special Education Director I am responsible for implementing basically Chapters 14, 15 and 16 (of the Pennsylvania School Code) if you want to put it in a nutshell. Chapter 14 is IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)…in PA the regs.
for kids with disabilities. Chapter 15 is ADA (*Americans with Disabilities Act*)…504 and Chapter 16 is gifted education for students in PA.

We have 844 children in special education out of the 4700ish that are in the district. I have the speech people with me, the school psychologists, all of the related services as far as…Chapter 15. I was made the Chapter 15 compliance officer this year with the new superintendent. I have not done that job in the past few years. I also do Chapter 16, but we do the school-wide enrichment model…the Renzulli model out of the University of Connecticut. It looks a lot different, I’m sure, than Chapter 16 looks in a lot of districts. It is certainly better for kids but it is also more time intensive.

I am in education because…I truly love teaching and I love watching children grow and learn. I guess as a teacher I would say…and as an administrator…I am highly organized and sequential…having taught life skills and multi-disabilities, I tend to break things down and put them back together. I have a lot of checklists and procedures….I just…I guess to me…a lot of things we have always done we did them because it made good common sense. You know when I did morning activities before it was morning message. I had checklists with what kids knew and didn’t know. I knew what I wanted to target for every child and charted that. We did it in the morning, then we did it later in the morning, then we did it in the line waiting to go to phys ed, then I did it one-on-one and I brought them back before we went to lunch. So they got 10-12 repetitions of little chunks of information every day and you just did those things because it made sense. To some degree I administer the same way. I probably over do people with paperwork and checklists and cheat sheets and do it this way and do it that way, let me show you and let me come back and see if you are doing it that way…that’s how I learn and that’s how I teach and how I administer as well.

I really love teaching Life Skills, that is, students with rather significant disabilities, but still are highly capable and able to do things. And I think one of things that makes me want to go back so much is that we are doing the life skills literacy piece right now and watching these children grow and write and read and do all sorts of things, is so exciting for them. …They think books are so wonderful and they finally have their
own. I guess that is my passion and that is what I would go back to in a heartbeat if I was going back to the classroom.

Another highlight certainly is being a part of GAP (The Guided Assessment Project) which represented my own thinking of what school should look like, what classrooms should look like and what students should have available to them. So as far as what does GAP look like…GAP is reflective of what I think a classroom should look like. Gap is best practice. Gap is how all of us should be instructing and assessing children and it provides the scientific framework from which to do that. I think it is the only thing that makes me able to function in public school because I guess the essence of my being doesn’t really support what public education has historically been.

I guess that is because I had a non-traditional education background. I went to non-traditional elementary school. I went to boarding school. I had no frame of reference for what a traditional classroom looked like until I became an instructional support teacher. Even when I taught special ed it was non-traditional. Kids were doing their own thing. They were in small groups, they were working individually. I might do a 10 or 15 minute big bang whole group mini-lesson and then everyone had something differentiated. I had never seen a class of third graders reading the same text at the same time until I became an instructional support teacher and that was quite bazaar for me. And then moving out of IST into administration, what I found was special education teachers not wanting to be trained with regular education teachers in the GAP training yet they were teaching like regular ed teachers. They weren’t teaching a differentiated model of instruction. They were teaching a one size fits all model of instruction…so I guess I saw this Cyclops…nothing made sense to me. What they were saying, what they were doing and I guess what I found most about Gap is that people who have been trained for years still will say things like, “When are we going to have training for the special ed teachers?” I just find that to be phenomenal. I am not sure where I am not communicating and this path continues to veer…I think that one thing that we have come to realize is that I am assuming prior knowledge that was not there.

A lowlight is, and I am uncertain and it is a question that I ask myself a lot, is
related to why we have special education programs. I feel our purpose, once a child is in special education is to take them back to their instructional level and then accelerate instruction so we get them out. Special education was not meant to be a life long kind of commitment...hopefully, even if children are severely discrepant, even if children are mentally retarded...I don’t think on any given day that we can say, “It’s ok...you don’t have to try to accelerate their learning anymore.” We tended to...out of very, very big hearts, nurture them and feel badly that they’re learning so slowly and that they struggle, but our goal is to teach them, educate them and so I think for many lovely reasons we’ve gotten off course. You know my first year teaching it made sense to me that my kids were in the same civics books as the kids next door in regular ed because any opportunity I got to send them over there I was taking it. I may have had to read the text or take the text apart in different ways to get that initial information into them but at the day’s end they needed to manipulate that same content and if there was an opportunity where they were successful with me for a given amount of time then out they went. And I think we are doing a better job of that...we’re seeing the resource environment as a service...just very much like Title One and it might be more intense and it might be for a longer duration, but it needs to be very explicitly planned and then children return to regular education.

Another major lowlight is dealing with the testing program of the No Child Left Behind Act. I think because it is...for 175 days of the school year I am saying provide individualized instruction for the student, make sure you are giving them specially designed instruction and modification and above all make sure that the things that they need to interact with independently is on their instructional or independent reading level because they cannot comprehend it if they have to worry about decoding it. And you are talking about informational text and you are doing this, that, and the other thing. Because we have been doing GAP and because, even though we have not called it the Response to Intervention Model, we have been doing that for the last seven or eight years...the kids that are getting to special education are pretty significant. Those little late bloomers who were a little developmentally behind no longer end up in special education. So the population we get that are identified and are pulled out have pretty significant needs and
yet that is the population that you are saying at least five days of the year figure out how to perform on the instructional level you would be on if you were in regular education. And that is the big piece if you are in regular education…if you didn’t have these significant cognitive issues, we would not have you in special education in the first place. And so they struggle a great deal with that. We are pretty proud of a ninth grader who is on a seventh grade instructional reading level. And we are thrilled that we are sending every single ninth grader from the middle school on at least a seventh grade instructional level to the high school. But if you give them the 11th grade PSSA they are going to bomb it. It is overwhelming. It is nerve wracking. And because of the climate of the community, in the school our students are panicking and our teachers are panicking. I am not sure that it is measuring what it was intended to measure, which was overall program efficacy.

Another lowlight is dealing with a community that does not seem to understand or support education. When I was raised in this community it was, in fact, a community of balance. There were engineers and white collar workers and blue collar workers. The industry was here and there were many groups represented and I guess I just found…even sitting in a strategic planning meeting last Friday. We were creating a vision statement and there were a couple of people sitting there saying…I used the term “best practice” and I was told that it is over some people’s heads. And I guess my feeling is I realize that we are a community and the strategic plan represents a community, but it should represent a community of learners, not a community that has been depleted by industry leaving. And we have a community that does not seem to understand that education has changed since “they were in school” and it must be different to address today’s learner. But as members of the Theodore Roosevelt School District, we are education. We are this community’s hope...
Profile for Tom, Principal
Buchanan Elementary School

At the present time I hold the position of building principal at Buchanan Elementary and Wilson Elementary Schools in the Theodore Roosevelt School District. I am starting my second year as an elementary principal, but I have been in education for 22 or 23 years. I’ve started to lose count. When I started teaching my initial placement was in a first grade classroom at Buchanan Elementary. I taught there for eight years in that position. Then I moved to 3rd grade at Buchanan Elementary and taught there for about six and a half or seven years. I then moved to the middle school and implemented and developed the 21st Century after school program. From there I was assigned to Flemington as principal of the alternative school. I then had a couple years’ stint as an assistant principal at Central Mountain High School and then returned to the elementary as a building principal. And in between there I also had a year as lead teacher for special education. As lead teacher I worked primarily with the building principal and I was responsible for the emotional support kids at Smith, Buchanan and Moore Township at that time. In terms of Reading First I have had one full year. I am starting my second year working with the grant.

When I was entering education, I always thought that I’d like to be a fifth/sixth grade teacher. And it wasn’t until I became a first grade teacher that I realized that the primary was really of more interest and more intriguing than the intermediate level. The rewards in what you were able to see students do were greater. So I think from that standpoint I received a lot of positive feedback when I was able to see just what students were able to accomplish and what I was able to accomplish with students. And one thing that I learned very quickly is that I think teamwork and using a multifaceted approach was one of the most effective ways to reach students. And not be afraid to have people come in and out of my classroom to service kids. It just became sort of a natural thing for my classroom and I felt very comfortable in that. And I carried that on through the third grade. Another element that teaching first grade taught me was that I learned to give
directions in whatever I do. A teacher needs to be very explicit and direct in what it is they’re asking for and what it is they want. Otherwise, they just might get what they ask for. And I’ve tried to use what I learned in that first grade classroom as an elementary principal, as a high school principal, and I’ve found it very beneficial. And there’s also the compassion that comes with . . . being a first grade teacher that you’re able to carry with you.

I think that as an educator you have to have that compassion because whether you are a principal or classroom teacher, you need to have an understanding of your staff and your students. And you need to demonstrate that you’re willing to listen to them and that you truly care beyond just the surface ‘I care.’ So then, I would describe myself as compassionate, caring, and demanding, in that order, as an educator. I’ve always wanted to work to establish the atmosphere that we’re working toward this together, whether that was my classroom with my students or whether that’s a building with my teachers. I think I learned that from a couple of different places. For example, I was involved in sports kinds of things that fostered that environment. And back to that early exposure with my first grade. A couple of the people I had to work with that I think had those same beliefs and was in that same framework of being caring, compassionate and demanding. I can think of two in particular.

My Title I reading teacher when I was a first grade teacher is one. She was very innovative and I mean she really tried to stay abreast of current research technologies and strategies. She would go out to conferences and come back and work with us to implement the new strategies. But she worked very well as a team member and brought me into that fold, was in my room, supported me, allowed me to support her. At that same point in time we had grade level supervisors within the district. And my grade level supervisor had the highest expectations of anyone that I’ve ever worked for. But at the same time she was probably the most caring person that I ever worked for. She made it to every classroom every month in the district that she was responsible for and she was responsible for all K-3 classrooms. Now she wasn’t there for 45 minutes. But she was there for 10 or 15 minutes. She set expectations and she had a monthly memo that she
sent out telling all of us what she would be looking for that month, which actually is something that I use as well. And she had a tremendous knowledge base. I mean she was an avid reader and she would talk about a lot of the research that we have seen since come and go. She was just always on the cutting edge.

Having my elementary background has been a highlight because I see it as an advantage. Also, my role as an administrator in developing the 21st Century program here in the district was a highlight. I had budget responsibilities, transportation responsibilities, discipline and I was working within a middle school setting. Because it was so multifaceted I was able to learn that secondary framework and because there were so many pieces involved, it was a microcosm of the district. So I had an opportunity to learn a lot of the daily routines that an administrator has to go through. So I think that was just a nice training spot.

You know when I look at lowlights . . . you know really I can’t really say that I’ve had any. There have been things that have gone wrong along the way but that happens. And you grow from those and learn from those. I’d rather not . . . I just chose to never look at it in that, in that fashion.

Profile for Beth, Kindergarten Teacher
Buchanan Elementary School

I teach kindergarten at Buchanan Elementary, which is located in Theodore Roosevelt School District. I’ve been teaching for 15 years. I was a tutor, a part-time tutor for two years and then I had a sixth grade for my first full year of teaching here at Buchanan Elementary and then I taught kindergarten at Smith Elementary for 12 years and then one year here at Buchanan. I have been in Reading First since the beginning of the grant but my first two years were at Smith in kindergarten and last year was here at Buchanan in kindergarten.

I started my career late. I was in my thirties when I went and got my teaching degree. My kids were junior high age. I went back and got my degree…I went for three
years and got my degree. Tutored for a few years, subbed for a few years...really...even from high school I wanted to teach. I was in Future Teachers of America, but I had this phobic reaction to public speaking and all those things. So that kind of kept me back for a while. My first full time job was sixth grade and truthfully I felt like I didn’t know what I was doing. I had real behavior problems and on Sunday afternoons I would get a knot in my stomach knowing I’d have to go back to sixth grade. I had some good experiences there, but the next year, I bid...because it had been only a one year position...I bid on a kindergarten at Smith Elementary. It was scary going from the older kids to the younger kids, but I really enjoyed it. It’s like my niche...kindergarten, they’re just delightful, just so willing to learn and they love me no matter what.

After I got my undergraduate degree, I then had to get credits...I think you needed 36 credits so I wanted to get my master’s in Reading so I went to Bloomsburg and got my master’s in Reading. So I felt I had this very strong background in Reading...so...I think my teaching career...I am just learning all the time. Learning new things, trying out new things. I kept thinking if I just keep things the same it would be simpler, but it’s not as much fun. You need to experience different things.

Ok...my highlight is...and this happens a lot...is when I...and this might sound stupid, but it’s when I see my students actually problem solving and I get excited seeing that. They’ll ask me if they can do something and I throw it back to them, “You decide.” Of course, not if it’s something like, “Can I walk out onto the street?” I love to see them...their creativity and see their little brains... you can see them thinking. So, I guess those are my highlights. And I love when they see me out in the street and they wave and come up and hug me...just seeing that...I feel like I am making a difference when I’m allowing them to be creative, giving them some skills to be independent.

So I guess those are my highlights of teaching. When you can see...you can tell that look on their faces and they fell competent...they feel secure and safe in my classroom and they feel like they’re home, too.

A lowlight is for instance...I hate to say this but...the different things we have to do for Reading First. I feel a lot of pressure. For instance, this year we had to do second
doses for the students who were at risk on the DIBELS assessments. For two months I did not sleep well. I kept wondering, “How am I going to do this cause I had 22 kids and twelve of them based on that DIBELS assessment needed second doses.”

So I was just panicky about that. I felt that someone was going to come into my classroom and I wouldn’t be really doing what I should be doing. But it’s not feasible to do what I was supposed to be doing. So I feel a lot…I like the idea of being accountable for what the children…you know, we can’t be doing real fluffy things and they need to be learning…but I think that we’re getting to the point where we are pushing them too hard. I feel the stress, then the kids feel the stress.

Then sometimes I feel like Big Brother is watching me. We’re very willing to try different things to make our students more successful, but…I guess, you know, the assessments…Reading First I feel has put this pressure on that we’re just…how do I want to say it…they’re kind of…each child I feel we’re treating them like little robots. And there’s just too many things to do.

Profile for Lisa, First Grade Teacher
Buchanan Elementary School

I am a first grade teacher at Buchanan Elementary School in Theodore Roosevelt School District. This is my 22nd year in education and all 22 years have been in first grade in Theodore Roosevelt School District. I taught in Reynolds Elementary for 12 of those years and the rest of the time I have been at Buchanan Elementary. I have been in a Reading First school since the beginning of the grant, which means I am entering my fourth year in Reading First.

I graduated from Clarion University in 1985 and was hired three months later by Theodore Roosevelt School District. I was one of the lucky ones because I didn’t have to sub. When I came out of Clarion, I was waiting tables and the elementary supervisor from Theodore Roosevelt called me after my midnight shift and said, “Can you come in for an interview?” and the rest is history.
I’ve only been in first grade because I see such a big change in the kids and I like that. And I think I have stayed in first grade because when I see big problems coming, I can do something about them before they get bigger. This is important to me because I was the only one in my family that did not struggle with learning to read. My three brothers, my son and my daughter are dyslexics.

And knowing how to teach children to read has been a struggle. I had only one reading course in college and it did not teach me anything. When I first started to teach, I just thought that since I learned to read so naturally everyone should. I thought that if you were exposed to print you should be able to read because that is how it unfolded for me. So I used a whole language approach to teaching reading and I went to a ton of trainings on the method. I thought whole language was a lot of fun. The kids enjoyed school and they were happy. In whole language we did themes and had a lot of collaboration with the Title One teachers. We wrote lots and lots of printable, publishable books. What I learned as a whole language teacher was very usable for writing but to say that we actually taught any reading instruction, I can’t say I did that. For one thing, phonics was missing even though I kept teaching it even though I was told not to teach it. Overall, I enjoyed whole language and I think the kids did, but I saw my son who was in school at that point…he’ll never recover from that. He’s a reader now because he received services in special education. He’s headed to college now and he writes wonderfully because he went through the whole language. I think some of that is good, but he was reading at a third grade level going into high school.

My daughter was in school when GAP was in place. She reads better now going to seventh grade than my son did at that time and she did not test as high as he did on an intelligence scale and she has the same kind of handicap. So you can sort of get an insight into the two different approaches right in my home.

When I think of myself as a teacher I would say that I’m in tune and I do not give up. All children have to read. I don’t give up on my kids and I don’t give up on anyone else’s kids either.

I guess it’s…kids that I’ve seen succeed, I’m seeing that. The ones that have gone
to college and come back and say, “Thank you.” I was also asked to be in the Who’s Who this year by a student. I don’t know who that is and I don’t want to know, but that is cool. I made a difference to somebody. Highlights are also when kids, who came in to my classroom on a level A in guided reading and were nonverbal a couple years ago, leave my room on a G or H guided reading level. That is huge progress.

A lowlight for me is when I cared so much and tried so hard to help a child and my efforts failed anyway. I think usually for me it’s not the academics, it’s the kids that come in that I know are abused or neglected and you go out on a limb and you shouldn’t. It’s hard for me to not…it’s hard for me to not love kids. I think I see lots of places where we let kids down…because of politics.

Profile for Kaylee, Second Grade Teacher
Buchanan Elementary School

I am a second grade teacher at Buchanan Elementary in Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have been in education for about 11 years. I taught 4th grade at Reynolds Elementary for about nine years and I have been in second grade for two years. I am starting my third year in second grade. I have been in a Reading First school since the beginning of the grant; however, the first year of the grant I was teaching fourth grade and Reading First focused on K-3.

When I taught fourth grade, my class size would vary. Some years I might have 15, but many years I would have a large class of 25 or 28 students. And then I bid into second grade. I dropped down two grade levels and it was very interesting. Moving to 2nd grade kind of brought the whole loop together for me. I understood for the first time what the primary teachers were doing to get the children to the point where I picked up with them in fourth grade.

However, as a former fourth grade teacher, I knew where my second grade students needed to go. I knew where they needed to go as a 4th grade teacher because of the state required testing and the type of writing that they needed to do. And I think as a
4th grade teacher I hit on a lot of writing. And I really felt I pulled that into my second grade classroom. Also, I did literature circles at 4th grade. Well as the year would advance in 2nd grade I would pull that into some of my groups so that they just had a taste of that. And I guess like with the writing aspect I just didn’t do it as a writer’s block. I would try to have components of my different centers touch on writing in some way. There would be the morning message where I think I probably started passing the pen fairly early with my 2nd graders. I just think I pulled it into many different places, not just a block time.

It was amazing the amount of growth that I would see from the first day of school to the end of the school year, year less data taking. It’s just amazed me. Like I don’t think at 4th grade I saw that much growth whereas 2nd grade I saw major leaps and bounds. And that was neat to see. I think they’re making tremendous progress. That makes me feel good and I’m sure they’re feeling pretty good about themselves.

I would say seeing the growth of my second grade students would be a highlight. I really would. It’s just rewarding to see that growth. And I think in my previous experience it was not like that . . . you saw growth but not to the extent you see in second grade. I also think the success students were having encouraged me to look at what I felt worked best so that I wanted to keep that going. And what aspects I thought maybe I could fine tune and adjust. I mean I do that normally as a teacher. But I think with that success I was just a little more energized over it.

I would say a lowlight is when I have a child that I just do not see the growth and I feel like I am not doing enough for them and then they get caught in that red tape where they aren’t low enough to be incorporated into the special education program. And I would probably say that there is at least one student every year or every other year in that situation. I do think we have more support now and ideas offered to us for what we can do with those type of students than we had previously.

Another lowlight was dealing with leadership issues at Reynolds Elementary. Leadership since I’ve been at Buchanan has been superior. I have had two different principals since moving to Buchanan and both have been excellent. They know what
elementary is about. They know what direction they need to take the reform effort in and they know how to make demands on you. Also, they know what they’re talking about and they don’t have to be aggressive. Prior to my experience at Buchanan I think I went through eight different principals at Reynolds. Many of which had no clue about elementary, I mean, truthfully. They were secondary and I just really think that that was a downfall for Reynolds. For example, if an observation was done they couldn’t offer you any suggestions of how to better yourself. I mean not that I’m looking for criticism but you’re always looking to grow. And, and in the same hand they really didn’t offer any positive feedback to you either. I just don’t think they knew what they were watching. So I was on my own.

And because we didn’t have a real principal, the teachers would have to fill in the gaps. There was one teacher in particular who would take care of things. And it wasn’t a glory kind of thing. It was for the good of the school. And then that teacher left Reynolds and then there was kind of a power struggle situation of different personalities and I just felt if we had had a strong principal you would not have seen that kind of thing.

When I moved from Reynolds to Buchanan, I was actually displaced from my fourth grade position. They eliminated my classroom and I was the low man on the totem pole out of the 30 teachers. I was the lowest one who had to go. But technically I could have stayed and I knew I could have stayed because I knew that one of the fourth grade teachers was bidding out and I could have bid on that fourth grade. And I could have also bid on a second grade there, but I just felt that it was the time for me to go and I needed some structure. I was also in a rut starting around my sixth year of teaching and I think the lack of strong leadership contributed to that slump. I do not feel that any more now that I am in Buchanan with a superior principal and teaching second grade.

Profile for Terry, Title One Teacher
Buchanan Elementary School and Smith Elementary School

Currently I am assigned to a fourth grade classroom at Smith Elementary in
Theodore Roosevelt School District. This will be, I think, my 6th year of teaching. After I graduated from college in December of 2000, I took a half-year position in the Baltimore Public School System as a third grade teacher. Following that year, my fiancé and I came back to Smithville and I subbed for a year as a day-to-day sub. The following year I was assigned a third grade at Buchanan and I taught there for three years. And last year I was a Title I reading teacher at both Buchanan and Smith Elementary schools. I was assigned three days at each school in a six day cycle. This upcoming year I’ll be teaching fourth grade at Smith Elementary. I have been in Reading First since the beginning of the grant.

When I was in high school we had a Future Teachers of America Club and through its high school co-op program I was able to volunteer at the Marysville Elementary once or twice a week in the afternoons. And, then through this Future Teaches of America program we did some work and just basically talked about education and then it was neat because my senior year of high school I didn’t know what I wanted to do. And one of my high school football coaches actually got me into college. And from there I entered the education program at Smithville and within a year I declared a minor in reading. And from there it’s where I’m at today. I have a minor in reading. I have seven extra courses in reading from Smithville.

I’m an active teacher. I’m the teacher that’s going to be out in the classroom. I hate, I just, I don’t like children at their desks. I mean there’s a place for that. I’m the type teacher that I like that almost chaos kind of thing where the children are out in centers or working on individual levels or in small groups. But I’m very active. I’m more of a learner with them than a teacher. I try to become part of the learning process and facilitate. I’m definitely a hard worker. I’m not sure if you can work harder because I just feel like I put a lot of time into the profession. It’s what I love to do and I love children and I like just being here with them. So I’m hard working and I’m definitely active.

When I think about highlights of my teaching career, certainly at the top of the list would be the students. And just not even the kids in general, just basically what they bring to the classroom and how every child is different and, and how you have to . . . I, I
think the funniest things in teaching is trying to find the interest of those children and trying to meet the needs of every child individually and at the same time trying to bring the community of the classroom together. You know, it’s kind of a family. So I try to do all those things. I think probably the biggest thing in teaching that I enjoy in terms of highlights is just seeing that child grow from the beginning of the school year and not only to the end of the school year but daily. It’s hard seeing it on a daily basis but there’s something every day that the child is going to grow. And then recently probably one of my biggest highlights of teaching has been when a child nominated me for Who’s Who. I don’t know who the child is, but I’m now a member of Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers. So that’s kind of like neat because you never know the affect you have on a child till something like that happens.

The low light in terms of teaching for me is the moving around from school to school when I was in the Title One itinerant position. I feel I’m a classroom teacher so at times last year I struggled in the itinerant position—being in two schools. I was still working with children, but I didn’t see the growth. It’s hard because I didn’t see those kids every day. I was the kids every other day and for me one of the biggest enjoyments is seeing that child grow and that light bulb go off. So I don’t want to call it a low light but, I’m a classroom teacher. I love the interaction with children on a daily basis. I like to grow with them.

I did learn that being an itinerant is tough. From being in that position and wearing those shoes I have a lot more respect for them because they can be pulled at any moment to do something else. It’s hard because a classroom teacher is working around one schedule and they’re working around all the schedules. I have a lot more respect for them in terms . . . I’ve always treated them fairly, but now when they come into my classroom, I will have more of an open mind towards them and how to fit them in. But one of the biggest things that I enjoyed from that position was seeing every teacher. I learned a lot of things and not only what to do, but what not to do. And I saw a lot of things because of being in every classroom and I was able to pick up a lot of strategies in terms of teaching strategies and strategies in terms of classroom management and all
Profile for Susan, Literacy Coach
Smith Elementary School and Buchanan Elementary School

I am a literacy coach through Reading First at Smith Elementary in the Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have been in education probably for 30 years at the present time. I started out as a substitute. I had a half-year of third grade and a half-year of fourth. Then I was hired the following year for full time kindergarten. And that went for 25 years. I was in full day kindergarten. And then literacy coach. Now this is my fourth year as a literacy coach. I really started at Smith Elementary. That was my half . . . that’s strange, half year third then I went over to the half year fourth. I just switched rooms. And that was at Smith. Then I came up to Flemington for two years in kindergarten and then to Buchanan for 23 years. And now I am back at Smith and this is my second year at Smith. I am right back where I started. I have been in Reading First as a literacy coach since the beginning of the grant.

I think maybe one of the highlights is how much influence I have had to develop the full day kindergarten in Theodore Roosevelt because when that was brought to the district we had no plan to follow. There were seven of us hired. Our grade level supervisor said we needed more time in kindergarten. So the seven of us sort of floundered through for the first year not really knowing what we should have done. We only had the half day kindergarten that was already in place and nobody was doing full-day kindergarten 30 years ago.

The full-day program started at Flemington Elementary. And I don’t remember that first year very well. I had 31 students. I had one classroom assistant. I had an autistic child but they would never had identified that child then as autistic. There was nothing wrong with this child. I can remember the little boy going into the restroom and screaming because he didn’t want to be in a closed room. And he did not talk. I did a lot of finger plays with him and the speech therapist would come and counsel me to get
through these days about He was a real mentor in getting me through the experience with an autistic child.

Over the years we developed the program by talking with other kindergarten teachers and knowing what kids liked to do and how they seem to learn better. So we did a lot of music and movement. We used to do a lot of art projects, but that sort of went by the wayside as the years went by. I thought they’ll just take those home and throw them away. What good is it? We could be doing murals and you know really writing with that. When I first began the kids did write. Just practicing the single letters and a few sounds, maybe a few site words. But nothing like we did . . . my last year I had two kids reading at a late first grade level, writing beautiful papers that would make anybody so happy you know. So just a big, big change. And the freedom that you’re allowed. I think as you become older some people as they get older let the kids have more free time. They learn to think what’s real, okay is this really wise for the kids? And do they have to be sitting at tables? Why do they have to be? You know so I wasn’t, I’m not a rebel but I would just go against the norm and I would try to stay current with the philosophies. The children were my number one concern.

When I think of lowlights, nothing comes to mind. I’ve never wanted to stop teaching. And I still don’t want to stop teaching. I love coming to work. I love looking for new things. I love every child. I went to the middle school last week to work with the secondary special education teachers and these sixth graders were coming down the hall, saw me and started hugging me. Their sixth grade teachers said, “Hey what about me?” I said, “I’m the kindergarten teacher.” You know, I’ve been to the high school and the same thing happens. They still remember and they’re not afraid to touch where the high school people are afraid to touch the students. So I don’t have any low moments that I can think about.

But my first year as a literacy coach was difficult because I was teaching with my peers and I think they looked at me and thought, “Well, what do you know more than what we know?” You know, so that was hard. But I think as they worked with me that year and saw that I was out to help them and not evaluate, not criticize or anything, it
became quite evident. I think I built a better rapport with some of the primary teachers than the upstairs (intermediate level) teachers simply because I had worked on their floor. I was at recess and lunch and all that with them whereas the upstairs teachers didn’t see me on a full time basis.

Now, I’ve moved to a new school. So two years at Buchanan as a literacy coach and the second year my door of my room was like a revolving door. There was always someone in there talking. Whether it be kindergarten, Title, could be math, could be an upstairs teacher, could be a learning support teacher…come in to talk. I’d have phone calls from other schools, too, to talk. And I thought, “Okay, moving to Smith I had heard that that was going to be more difficult.” First year, I can’t say was all that bad because they knew, I think from the past practice that the new principal was there to make the school better and I supported her. She supported me and there was no changing of answers mid-stream. You know, what was said was going to be followed and the expectations, if they needed help, I would go in and help them with it. I would give them some shortcut suggestions. And my room is just as busy down here as what it was at Buchanan. So it’s been a, a good positive move.

Profile for Rebecca, Principal
Smith Elementary School

I am a principal at Smith Elementary School in Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have been in education for 22 years. Five of those years were in administration and 17 years were in teaching, which included about four years as instructional support teacher and two years as a Dean of Students…that was at the middle school. I have been in Reading First since the beginning of the grant as a building principal. We are entering our fourth year.

I started teaching third grade right out of college in Beech Creek, PA which is part of Theodore Roosevelt. I taught for approximately 11 years in third grade. At that time I was trained in IST (Instructional Support Project, a Pennsylvania Department of
Education Initiative) and then left third grade and went into an IST position for about three to four years in Buchanan Elementary. I then moved out of IST into a Dean of Students position for about two years at the middle school.

I did not start working on my principal’s certificate until I became Dean of Students and then I started working on that. It took me about two years...went all semesters including summer. I really hit summer hard and then the last five years I have worked as an administrator.

I think my favorite job of all was Instructional Support. I learned the most in Instructional Support. I truly learned...you know....getting children to accelerate their learning. I truly learned interventions and strategies. Instructional support also trained me to be a principal because it made me hold people accountable. I came up with my system for holding them accountable, which was interesting because Instructional Support did an awful lot of instructional areas...a little bit of behavior...not quite as much behavior, but when I became Dean of Students in the middle school my whole job revolved around discipline. So truthfully I had about four years of really learning instructional strategies and interventions and then two years of intensive...of doing nothing but discipline at the middle school. And then I went right into administration and I was the principal in the building in which I had been the instructional support teacher.

Another highlight was being a part of GAP. I was so appreciative of GAP and what it was trying to do and in the direction that it was going. It did cause anxiety but it was good anxiety...it was good anxiety... because I felt like even before GAP came into existence we were at a low.

I think I knew it was at a low because I felt like I was, as the Instructional Support teacher, trying to hold teachers accountable for interventions and strategies and yet the school district was holding them accountable for a basal that was extremely too hard for the children to be reading and we really weren’t accelerating their learning so, therefore, we were testing a lot a students and putting them in special education and we know that we can make any student, even if he is gifted, look as if he has a learning disability and that’s what we were doing.
We were making all children appear as if they had some sort of learning disability because they really weren’t accelerating to where they should be…

So the district was expecting one thing. I wanted another thing and yet we were turning out a lot of special education students so I looked at that as a low and felt like we needed to go in a different direction. And GAP made us go in that different direction.

When I think of lowlights I think of my first year at Buchanan Elementary as a building principal. That year the teachers did not respond real well. They bucked me in every scenario. When they stopped bucking me is when they got a formal letter from me when they knew I meant business. When I was assigned to Buchanan Elementary, it was very low economic school…very low. We were the lowest in the district. We were 97% free and reduced lunch. The teachers were very fragmented…did not work well together. Also, they truly believed that what they taught the student learned and if the students didn’t it was the student’s fault. So it was a challenging….challenging experience but very, very beneficial because I think I learned a lot.

My first year at Buchanan as a principal, I had the tendency to watch…sit and watch…watched what went on. When I first went there, the teachers came to me and said, “Please let us handle discipline. Please let us do the discipline. We haven’t been able to do our own discipline for a couple years now and please let us handle the discipline.”

I left them handle it until March when these same people came to me and said, “You don’t have any discipline in this building.” So I left that whole year…as much as I was an administrator I really did not enforce a lot of my own ideas and my own thoughts. But the second year I started right from the get-go. I started out with, “You were absolutely right, there wasn’t discipline in this building and I will take responsibility for that. I will take the fault. It is my fault. I am the leader of this building, but this year will be different. Now we will do it my way.” And we did.

We changed a lot of interventions in reading through the GAP process. The GAP process was in full swing by that point…through trainings from you…Kelly…ideas that I had had from instructional support…things I wanted to see in place, we put into place.
And I said to the teachers, “This is the direction we are going in and it is not going to change so if you cannot support me in this then it is best that you are not at Buchanan Elementary.”

The strange part was that some of those people...because I was an IST in that building...were my friends and even though they were my friends I knew that it wasn’t acceptable to me so I just laid it on the line to them that it needed to go in this direction.

Once I went back to Buchanan Elementary...because I had two years in between. I had been at Buchanan and then I had two years as a Dean of Students at the middle school...so when I went back I never did anything socially with the teachers who had I had been friends. They would say in the very beginning, “Heh, let’s go have a drink.” Or “Heh, let’s go out for supper tonight.” I really wouldn’t go that route. I would make up some excuse or whatever at that point. I really was not around socially and I made sure that I wasn’t even as far as with the faculty and staff holiday gathering. I did not even partake in that because I felt I needed to cut all those strings socially ‘specially that first year. I had to make that distance. And they were respectful in that area. Where I think they wanted some more...some of them not a lot....maybe four of them...wanted me coming in and really yelling at kids and that is not my style.

So cutting those strings was the biggest lowlight in my career. Cutting those strings wasn’t easy. It really wasn’t easy, but I’m pretty fortunate because I don’t know if I really have a lot of lowlights. In education I feel like I am constantly learning, constantly trying new things. Knock on wood, I have always had teachers that have responded quite well to me. I think I expect a lot but also in return I give a lot and there isn’t a teacher who I think doesn’t want to do good...they all want to do good, but sometimes they don’t know how to go about it.
I am a kindergarten teacher at Smith Elementary School in the Theodore Roosevelt School District. I’ve been teaching for, I have to think, this will be my twelfth year. I started at another local district where I was a learning support teacher for third and fourth grade. During the following year I did some homebound instruction and some substituting for that same district. Then I moved to Theodore Roosevelt and I was hired as a learning support teacher at Sandy Ridge Elementary School and taught learning support for K-1, 2, 3 for one year. After that I worked in several other Theodore Roosevelt elementary schools over the next few years. For example, after working in Sandy Ridge, I went to Notting Hill Elementary School for two years and I taught third grade. Then I jumped to fourth grade at Madison Elementary for one year. I then jumped back to Sandy Ridge for one year in third grade. Finally I jumped to Buchanan Elementary for two years of third grade and two years of kindergarten. I have now been here at Smith Elementary in kindergarten for two years. So, hopefully, I’m here to stay. I have been in Reading First since the beginning of the grant but in two different schools.

I feel that my job as an educator, especially in kindergarten, because it’s their beginning year in kinder or first year in school is that this is the first step and I do not want to fail them. So I feel that my goal and my philosophy is that I need to reach all of the students at their developmental levels. But yet I want to make it very fun and exciting for them. So I feel many of the things that I do are very fun and exciting, very hands-on activities and just very, oh, silly sometimes. They are silly and fun, but yet in an academic way. And I think I am very energetic as a teacher as well as being very organized and structured. I also feel that I am a very firm yet fair when it comes to discipline in the classroom.

When I first started teaching, instruction was very textbook driven. Students were not at centers, there was not a lot of independent work and everybody was working on the same levels. Everybody was expected to do the same thing. Then when GAP (Guided
Assessment Project) came I remember I was excited to see how successful the program would be. And I remember soaking in the philosophy and I was just ready to do the hands-on instruction. I wanted to see what was happening. But yet I was one of those teachers who would come back from a GAP training and I would try this and then I would try that. And it was a process. It was a couple years worth of transitioning into it. So I look back and I think, “Wow, if I knew then what I know now it would have been such an easy to transition.” But it was really a learning process. With GAP I remember taking very slow steps. I remember using the assessments to guide my instruction which allowed me to get away from the textbooks and into the guided reading groups and the centers. At that point, I was also started using the math wall and the morning message. And I remember that my morning message then was very different than it is now because I remember in GAP starting the morning message when I taught third grade. If I knew then what I know now, it would just have been a totally different learning experience. When I look back, if we had understood earlier what GAP was trying to teach, I think we could have done so much more. But I remember moving away slowly and taking little steps.

I think of kindergarten as a highlight because I feel it’s my niche. And I absolutely enjoy that age as well as all of the singing and the phonological awareness activities such as rhyming and reading and all of that I totally enjoy. And so when I think of a highlight I just think of all of the playing with language that we do in kindergarten and I think that’s me. It’s in my heart is to sit down at a circle time and, and just to be able to sing and rhyme and play with words and I really enjoy that. A specific highlight that I will never forget is with a struggling reader. And after reading and reading, well, actually, after rhyming and rhyming and rhyming and nothing was rhyming right for the student. Actually, he could not rhyme at all and then at one moment in time, it clicked for him and then everything just clicked and from the point where the rhyming clicks everything else clicks. Everything! And I will just never forget getting goose bumps sitting down with that young man and having him say to me, “Mrs. Knowl, C rhymes with ‘E.’ And then it was ‘C’ rhymes with ‘B’ and ‘B’ rhymes with ‘we’ and just
“everything.” When one thing clicked everything else clicked and it was just amazing. It just makes you feel like wow we’ve been working so hard and nothing was happening and then all of sudden it all just clicked! Everything just fell into place.

Another highlight for me is when the concepts of “assessment guiding instruction” and “understanding how scope and sequences cross grade levels” clicked for me. I think moving from one grade level to another and letting go of and starting over was what did it for me. I realized how everything starts. For example, when I went into kindergarten I could see . . . what really helped with me was seeing the baseline data and seeing how the students came in and knowing that, “Oh, my goodness. Here’s my data. This is what I’m going to teach now. This is what my instruction is going to be based on.” And using the profiles that we use with Reading First makes it very simple for me to look at student achievement via my profiles and see what my lesson plans need to cover and it shows me the whole class. And I can see exactly . . . I don’t now how I remember that feeling because I was just overwhelmed. Yes. I was overwhelmed with, “Wow this is it. How can anybody not teach this way?” And there were no textbooks—nothing—in kindergarten. And I didn’t need that. I didn’t need that at all. And I remember seeing my students’ growth in phonological awareness and then moving into the letters, upper and lower case letters, and then the letter sounds and everything was scaffolded one on top of another. But yet it was all me understanding how it was all related. It was all intertwined.

Another thing that I think was amazing when it all clicked for me was that I realized that this isn’t just reading and this isn’t just math and this isn’t just writing. I remember working at the math wall and realizing that it wasn’t just a math wall. Our math wall said, “Today is …” and someone said there’s an ellipses. And so it was all intertwined. And I actually had said to my principal I would really like to say to you, “These are my objectives for the week. These are my activities but I don’t know when I’m going to do them. But by Friday they will all be met.” And I could say that because it was so student . . . driven yes, so student driven and I think at that point, because I had understood the whole developmental process, I was able to stretch it across the entire day,
across the entire curriculum.

Another thing that I remember that was very successful which I remember talking about at one of our GAP trainings, is the “revisiting.” Teach a concept and then revisit it. And every day, even if it was just simply after I had introduced maybe just five words on the word wall, it was simply, “If you think you know my word raise your hand.” But it was an every day occurrence. It was revisiting it every day. It wasn’t like the way I had taught in third grade… a noun names a person, place or thing. And that’s it. Then we practiced it for a bit and then we moved on. Now we pattern from day one to day 180. And we graph from this day to this day. It was the entire year long. And I think my instruction was geared more toward the low end and the high end. So those low end students or the lower students were exposed to this way back here even though they didn’t quite get it there, it was still that piece of Velcro that they could attach something to it eventually.

I have just taken a look at my assessment data with my baseline being September and I kind of consider all of September baseline and October is when I really start looking at how much we’ve grown and October . . . I must say September and October are the months that in kindergarten we do a lot of routines and procedures and I feel as though the academics aren’t quite as strong as they will be the rest of the year. However, as I finished yesterday doing one of my, actually, one of my upper and lower level letter identification assessments, I was amazed because I look back and I think a lot of my instruction so far has been whole group for just these first couple months because we’re learning routines and procedures and doing learning centers. I’m actually rotating around the room and trying to teach the centers; however, I have been amazed at how successful and how much they have grown already. In fact, one of my students came in at the beginning of the year knowing two letters, just two upper case letters. Today, six weeks later, he knows 15. So I think to myself ultimately the small group instruction is where we will be very soon because I’ve started their centers. They’re independently working very well now. So I’m starting to pull those flex groups and I think wow he has gained that much with the whole group setting, which means he’s just going to fly when it comes
to a small group setting. So I feel that they’re very excited about learning, they’re very excited about coming to school and someone may walk by my room and think, “Huh, you know she’s silly.” But my students are very successful. I’m seeing the growth. I’m seeing the growth.

I would have to say one of the low lights was that teaching fourth grade was not my thing. And I remember that at the time, not that I didn’t enjoy it because I’ve enjoyed my career from the get go, but it just was more difficult for me—the age level was more difficult. The things I wanted to do in my lesson plans were too young for fourth graders and that’s when I realized what my niche was. That’s how I found my niche was working with the younger children. And with the fourth graders my sense of humor was not at their age level.

And then I’d have to say one of the other things that is difficult is dealing with parents. I feel like college did not prepare us for dealing with parents. We needed a Parents 101 course. And oftentimes I think that parents don’t understand some of the things that are happening in the classroom. I offer invitations to come into the classroom to explain what we are doing, but often the invitations are not accepted. However, parents then say that they feel frustrated about what we’re doing in the classroom. So one of my personal goals is doing more with parents and helping them to understand what this whole kindergarten thing is all about.

Profile for Sara, First Grade Teacher
Smith Elementary School

I am a first grade teacher at Smith Elementary in Smithville which is a part of Theodore Roosevelt School District. I’ve been teaching for 21 years. I started as a Tells tutor at Reynolds Elementary for one year and then I went to first grade. I taught first grade in Reynolds for seven years. Then I transferred to Madison and taught second grade for I don’t remember how many years. I then went to multiage 1-2 and after that I went down to first grade. I’m still in first grade. I have been in Reading First since the
beginning of the grant. My first two years I was Madison Elementary before the district closed that building and I have been at Smith Elementary since moving from Madison.

I’ve always wanted to teach ever since I was little and so I went to Smithville University, graduated, and then worked as a Tells tutor and as a substitute teacher in Reynolds. Then I left Smithville and went to Virginia for four years. I was out of teaching during that time. Then I came back to Smithville and started again and so I’ve always taught in Theodore Roosevelt. I’ve never taught any place else.

I love the younger kids. I love teaching the younger kids and seeing how they can grow. And I believe that teachers are so important in the life of every child. We need to find the spark in each child and keep it lit throughout their schooling. We need to find the best way each child learns to help them be successful. We need to build the child's confidence and help them become the best they can be.

I think GAP has been a highlight. GAP was a little stressful when it first started because it forced all this change. We were to implement this and this and this. And that was stressful. But through everything that we learned and the flexible grouping, I feel that that has helped a lot. And with the assessments guiding the instruction it was stressful at the beginning trying to do all those assessments and getting them all finished so you knew where the children were and that was stressful. But as the years go on then you get in a habit of knowing when you’re going to do it and it gets done. So, I think GAP has helped individualize it more and reach more children. So I think that’s a highlight. And then Reading First coming in, Reading First wasn’t difficult for us because we already had all these assessments implemented. We just had to add the DIBELS. And now you’re reaching all the kids. For example, last year I had this little boy who was new to the district. His mom kept fighting to put him back into kindergarten. And so we did the assessments and met with the mom and said this is where he is and he was basically on a kindergarten level, but we felt that teaching him on his instructional level that he will be okay staying in first grade. So she made the decision to leave him in first grade. And he came so far. He passed some of my . . . other kids. It’s because he had the individual attention, he has a reading teacher. At first, I wasn’t
sure where he was going to go and then all of a sudden he just took off and passed some of the other kids. I think that after the first year or so of GAP then I felt more comfortable and I think that helped. And I think it helped more kids.

When I first started to teach, it was difficult starting at the very beginning because I was not sure of what to do. When I first started we did HBJ, the reading basal with Buffy and Mack. And then the district went through the whole language phase. That was a difficult time for me.

I started teaching full time in 1986. That’s when we had the HBJ basal with Buffy and Mack and then probably about four or five years later we went to whole language. The district got the whole new basal series and went with the whole language where you really didn’t group children at all. You taught them as a total entity—total group. And I didn’t feel I was as good of a teacher at that point because the good children got it. The average children were okay. But the children that weren’t grasping a lot of the concepts really didn’t go anywhere. At the end of the year I would feel really terrible about the low kids. I felt like I was sending them on and I hadn’t reached them.

The whole language series just was not on the level of the kids. The series did have little books that went with the anthology, but the books, a lot of them, weren’t on the readability level of the kids. I thought the kids learned better with Buffy and Mack. And, you know, you had your groups and you could focus on it. I still have a couple of those books. I didn’t throw them all away. I haven’t used them but I still have them.

Profile for Barbara, First Grade Teacher
Smith Elementary School

I am a first grade teacher at Smith Elementary School in Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have been in education for 31 years. I started in Theodore Roosevelt in kindergarten. And I taught kindergarten, I believe, for 10 years. So this would be 13 years, 12 years in first grade. I think that’s right. I think. All right, may I borrow your pen? Give me a little piece of scrap paper. I had kindergarten when I started here. I
started in Reynolds and then Madison and I was hired in 1984. So that’s 22 years. And actually it was 1983-84 so I’m starting my 22nd year, right? And I had ten years in kindergarten and 12 years in 1st grade. But I started with Head Start. Actually, at first, when I was in college I ran the summer recreation program through the university. Then I graduated and I taught for a year in a long term sub position in first grade in Avis. Then I went to Head Start and I was their special needs coordinator/part time director. So I had seven years with Head Start. Then I took a year off and I had my children and just subbed in the district. Then I went back to Theodore Roosevelt full time. The elementary supervisor called me and said there was a position to teach kindergarten. Was I interested? I said yes. So I was hired for kindergarten. And then through the bidding process and went to 1st grade.

Now prior to that I was a legal research assistant. I actually was to do law school and didn’t . . . four schools, four different majors: Spanish, pre-law, education, phys ed major, yeah I have a pretty interesting diversity. So basically that’s where I am right now. So I have a different background. I come from a lot of different choices and anyway so what drew me to education was children basically. That’s why I’m here. And when I started, it all started with administration in Head Start and, honestly, it was not my forte. I begged to get out, but they eliminated my position because they wanted me to take the director’s position in Head Start, which I did for two and a half years. But I really needed to be in a classroom. I loved it. I absolutely . . . it drew me there. So that’s what happened. Then I ended up going back.

In terms of Reading First, well, actually to be honest, I was part of the grant writing. So that was three, I guess it’s three years now. It will be two more years till it’s done. So I actually was on the ground level with the writing of the grant. So I started there with Reading First, but prior to that it was GAP. And prior to GAP I actually had started implementing a lot of their philosophies. Then when you came on board then we started from ground level. So actually I think our school came on in the second year but with Reading First I really started right at the ground breaking of it.

I worked on our building level grant for Reading First. So at that point we were
just looking at the needs of Madison Elementary and what we wanted to implement, what we thought would be most effective for our particular classroom and the needs of our students. So we started looking at statistics and scores and where our weaknesses and strengths were and what they thought they needed the most of as far as personnel, as far as materials, and as far as training. After that we had to look at what particular needs were being required from the grant and what they were looking for us to do. At the time we were looking at an after school program. There seemed to be some emphasis in doing the after school program and doing a summer carry through program. So we set some monies aside for tutoring and an after school homework program. That was a big push at that point. There was a great amount put in for training. And there was also some for materials for the classroom and the needs of the teachers. And then they looked at the needs of the students and where we needed to go from there. What particular areas they were weak in, whatever it was versus, you know, whether it was word study, comprehension, fluency, whatever it was.

Well, oh, I have lots of highlights. I guess I’d have to say I’ve done a lot from serving on the committees, every single committee, writing grants, being awarded grants, monetary grants and what not. But I guess what keeps me going after all these years cause I’m thinking it’s 31 years and I found that my true love and my true focus is on the children. We all say that as teachers, but I guess that is what really, truly makes us a good teacher. I just believe that I can truly raise children’s IQs. I believe that. I just believe that I can truly teach kids what they need to know. And what’s important and what’s valued and what you believe in and just kindness…

I never lose focus on children and their families. And over the years I’ve seen so much come and go, but I think truly that’s the one thing that doesn’t ever leave. And you can teach really well, which GAP and Reading First perfected all of that. Those programs made us better at presenting what is needed for kids. And why we do what we need to do. But it still boils down to that caring, loving and, you know, kids are very needy today, very, very needy.

Well, I guess truly my only really low light is I tend to take on more than I can
chew as they say then I find myself, even though I may appear to be effective, inwardly I don’t feel quite as effective. I take on too much because we’re real good as humans. We take on so much. And then something will come in from the outside like closing our elementary school last year and it’s too much to deal with. The closing of our school brought me to my lowest point. So I was taking in and dealing with all of the changes and then the closing of the school happened. It was just so traumatic.

We were told that the university was interested in our building. Then we were told that it was the enrollment because our enrollment was low. But enrollment was low all over the district. Well, that was how they were covering up, we think. So they wanted to look at making all these changes in our district as far as building changes. I had taught at Madison for 20 years in the same room, the same spot; same room just different grade level. All of a sudden they come in and say you’re out of here. You are going. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. And then there was the turmoil. There was the union fight and the teachers were fighting among each other and then one school said, “Well, you can’t come here.” Then another school said, “You can’t come here.” And then we had to bid on new positions. And then seniority was an issue. Oh, the stress! So then our colleagues at the school district wanted collegial buildings, but your colleagues are not in favor of you coming to any of their schools and taking their jobs. And then, the families were affected. I had . . . heavens I was their grandmother. I mean I had their kids and their kids’ kids because having started with Head Start I’ve had a lot of kids over the years.

And I was like an icon there at Madison—I truly was. And so I really found this year to be overwhelming and I thought I just couldn’t put any more on my plate. This was the first time in 30-some years where I found that I had way too many stresses at school. Usually school was a relief from home stresses. So this was probably my lowest of lows where I couldn’t have taken on another thing.

It was my choice to go to Smith Elementary School, which is a much bigger school than Madison. I wanted to be with my friend who was the other first grade teacher at Madison because we are a real team. So I said to her I only have two more years so
I’m really looking at retiring. I thought I might as well finish it out in that comfort zone where it’s a huge school. And you really lose your identity as far as that goes. But when you have your little group it doesn’t matter what goes on in the world. You know you support one another. You deal with what you need to deal with. We sort of can conquer the world that way. So you have to weigh where you find that fit. I knew I’d have my families. I knew my families were split both ways. So I was okay with all of that.

Profile for Nancy, Third Grade Teacher
Smith Elementary School

Currently, I teach third grade at Smith Elementary in Smithville, which is a part of Theodore Roosevelt School District. I have taught for around 15 years. I taught kindergarten for six years and I did Tells and Title I math for about two and a half years, and then the rest of my time has been in third grade, except one year at fourth. I taught third grade at Madison Elementary since my son was in kindergarten and then the school was closed when he was going into eleventh grade. That’s when I moved to Smith Elementary. I have been in Reading First since the beginning of the grant, but two years at Madison Elementary and now I am in my second year here at Smith Elementary.

My career in education, for the most part, has been an enjoyable one. When I taught kindergarten I was used to having assessment and then centers and doing small group lessons. And I felt very strong in the program of whole language in that I believed that you still assessed to teach. And so I continually had small skill lessons going on during that time while I did the whole group with the story. And I also had, of course, their needs, whatever their needs were, we were teaching and there was an assistant in the beginning and that was very nice. And so then probably two or three years into kindergarten teaching the district didn’t feel there was a need for assistance. And that’s when it just was too much to run a kindergarten without an assistant, once you were used to having one. Then I started to think maybe I wanted a little bit more of a challenge intellectually, not that I took a huge leap—only to third grade. At third grade, I wanted to
be able to teach more social studies and science in greater depth and so that’s why I moved up to third grade. Then, of course, I just loved the writer’s workshop plan for my writing and I saw so much growth in my third graders. And I’m a firm believer you write to read, you read to write and so I was constantly working with that. I didn’t worry about the spelling program because I felt that through their writing I was hitting what they needed to hit anyway. I guess it’s sort of like what we do with GAP anyway in our guided reading program and other parts of literacy because basically whatever they need you work with. And it was very individualized at that point for me, at least I felt it was. So GAP training wasn’t a trauma for me. It was for other people.

I watched a lot of people suffer through it and felt miserable. And I tried to be reaffirming in that you are probably doing something like this, but you’re not labeling it in the same way maybe. But, of course, then with third grade it seemed, at first I still had enough time to do science and social studies. But as the time went on they increased an hour, like right now it’s an hour writing workshop, then a 90-minute block of Reading First program. And then there’s the hour that we have to do for math and I have my 45 minute itinerary and I had my hour that they’re at lunch or recess. So when I did my schedule I ended up with 45 minutes out of a six-day rotation where I didn’t have to be doing something specific. And so it made it a little more difficult to feel… because I didn’t want to be doing science experiments in the middle of language arts because it even though you can incorporate it, it just didn’t seem to fit. So now 45 minutes is my little time. My social studies I feel that I can integrate and I do integrate my science. It’s just there’s no real hands-on. It’s all book knowledge and in third grade book knowledge isn’t enough. So I try to integrate as much as possible, but I feel the constraints and I wish we had a longer time with our children. If we have to do 60/60/90 then . . . and I’ve told them you need to give me more time with my students. And I’m not saying take away itinerants because those are important, but just give me another 45 minutes somehow to be able to hit science. . . because they will be testing on those other skills and I feel that this program sort of has overwhelmed the rest of our curriculum.

Highlights are definitely when I was able to do more of the integrated science and
social studies and do the hands-on with that. I loved when we did construction and they actually constructed something or when we did units about the early American times. We would do recipes or we would experience that. We would dress the part and really become integrated into it. So those are my highlights.

Low lights? I think watching others feel pressure and feeling that I couldn’t really do much for them. Probably because I didn’t want them to think I thought I was perfect, that I could do this (the requirements of the Guided Assessment Project). But I felt fairly comfortable with it.

Profile for Darla, Special Education Teacher
Smith Elementary School

At the present time, I teach in a primary learning support resource room in Smith Elementary School, which is part of Theodore Roosevelt School District. Primary consists of grades first and second. Overall I have taught 28 years with most of those years being in special education. During my first year of teaching, I taught kindergarten through sixth grade students in a learning disabilities resource room but the building that I taught in, which was known as Casey, only had first through fifth grades. The building was in Theodore Roosevelt School District, but I was employed through the Central Intermediate Unit. So needless to say my first year was rather interesting.

Then the next year the district closed the schools as they were and then opened them with Casey being primary and Smith Elementary being intermediate so I then taught learning disabilities, intermediate (grades fourth through sixth). It was still called a learning disabilities resource room. So I was there for eight years. I was at Casey for one year and Smith for eight years. Then the IU lost the classrooms because Theodore Roosevelt took them over. And I was sent to Sandy Ridge. I was there eleven years. And I taught, again, grades kindergarten through sixth, in a trailer, self-contained pretty much. The kids had to put their coats on to go in and out of the building. Interesting little tidbit was when the kids were dismissed one day for a snow storm and my assistant
looked out the window and said, “The kids are all getting on the buses” (it was lunch time) and we had a whole group of kids that hadn’t eaten lunch yet and yet all of the kids were boarding the buses. So they had forgotten about us and so the kids had to run in and get their coats and leave. Things back then were pretty much we took care of the kids. I mean even though they were supposed to go out into the regular classrooms, they were ours.

So I was there for 11 years and then...oh, I did inclusion there. I did inclusion...primary. I did inclusion primary in the morning and learning support K-6 in the afternoon. They hired a half-day teacher for the morning for the intermediate kids and I was out doing inclusion. So then after going through about seven half-day teachers, I got tired of that scenario so that is why I bid on the instructional support position at Marysville. So then I did six years of IST at Marysville before returning to the classroom. This will be my third year back in learning support and I love it. It has been a fast 28 years. I have been in Reading First since the beginning of the grant.

How would I describe myself as a teacher...boy that’s a tough one....I love research so I read. I read lots and lots of books. I would say I am open to new things. If you tell me what I have been doing is wrong I might think you are full of baloney, but I’m going to try it. I am going to try what you told me and then I might still say that you are full of it and keep on doing what I have been doing. But at least I am going to give it a chance.

I’d say I am pretty flexible. I’d say I am humanistic to children. I love them. I put their feelings first before education and I really feel if the kids feel they can’t learn they can’t learn so my biggest thing...and I hate to feel the pressure of testing and the PSSAs and the principals giving us...you have to do this and you have to do this....even if I know it is absolutely going to hurt my kids...so I guess sometimes I go against the grain and I might say, “Ok I’ll do it but....

I also give a lot more time than most people do and I am willing to put out that extra time...spend extra money. I have a child who is communicating with me this summer and he just emailed me that he loves me and he wants to have me next year, but
he still hates school. And I knew that and he still wanted to do everything I wanted him to
do because he liked me.

The highlights are the kids. I get emails. I get letters. I talk to parents. I see kids
who tell me how much I meant to them; how much they love me, how I made a
difference in their life…yes, it’s incredible. I had a little boy this year who said to
me…actually I had sent him down to the librarian and said to her have him read this book
to her. She had tutored him last year in that after school EAP tutoring and he really was
pretty much a non reader when I got him at the beginning of this year…level 5 which
would be beginning first grade. He’s in third grade…by January, February he was
reading beginning third grade stuff. I sent him down to the librarian and she said, “What
Happened!” He said, “I don’t know. I just learned how to read this year.”

Well, I looked at what he needed. He…I think he had a memory problem so I
worked a lot on flash cards for the beginning skills so he could read at a first grade level.
He needed those 100 or so high frequency words so that he knew them instantly and he
knew them every single day and not kinda, once in a while and get stuck all the time. So
we did that. He was a really bright kid so he had a lot of background knowledge. He had
a lot of exposure to books so when he was reading he relied heavily on phonics and I said
to him forget sounding it out. Just start with your beginning sound. I just want you to get
your mouth ready just like a “k.” And I want you to just think about the story. I don’t
want you to even think about the word past that and see what pops out. And he said, “I
don’t know how I did that!” He was just thrilled because he would read this paragraph
and he’s say I don’t know those words and I said, “But you do now.” And actually so we
did it sort of backwards….tested him on the next set of high frequency words after he had
learned how to read and it was amazing. I hadn’t taught him any of those but from
reading…he read and reread books constantly. He read 55 Accelerated Reader books. He
read continually books that he could read on his independent level. He reread those books
and reread those books and reread those books and when he read those high frequency
words he read every single one of them and we had never practiced them. But he had
reread them so much within text that he learned them instantly. It was neat.
I had another child that contacted me just two years ago…it was the first year at Smith…so it was not last year, but the year before. He’s getting his doctorate and needed verification that he had a learning disability when he was in fourth grade. He’s getting his doctorate in physical therapy.

A lowlight was when I was an instructional support teacher and I had to work with teachers. It was a lowlight only because I was so angry at certain people for not doing things to help children. People didn’t want to hear it. If their belief system is that everyone can be taught through a basal and we can do everything whole group and everybody learned and if that was their belief system then no matter what we said, it didn’t matter to them.

And I guess when I went in and looked at children who I knew could move or could learn and the teacher’s only decision was how can I get them out of my classroom and tested and placed, I was a little bit angry and I guess that is my…that is my lowest…that was the worst… A basal meant, “I don’t have to really think about where the child is because if they are in third grade, they are working a third grade book and if they’re not then there is something wrong with them and I need to have them tested and placed.” Special education was a whole lot different. We devised a plan based on the child’s needs, but those people…there were other people who would work with it, but there were a lot of people…their goal was to have them placed. They felt….some people actually bragged about how many children they had placed in a year. Like that was a trophy.

Profile for Theresa, Literacy Coach
Smith Elementary School

I am a literacy coach at both Smith Elementary and Buchanan Elementary in Theodore Roosevelt School District. I do four days at Smith and two days at Buchanan. I think I am in about my eleventh year in education. I started my career as a whole year substitute teacher in Theodore Roosevelt School District teaching second grade at Wilson
Elementary. I was filling in for a teacher who was on sabbatical. Then I went to West Branch School District where I taught fourth grade and then a third grade...fourth one year, third another year. Then I came back to Theodore Roosevelt in a Title One position and started studying Reading Recovery. The district put me through the classes for Reading Recovery and so I did Reading Recovery and Title One for four years or so. Now this will be my fourth year as a literacy coach for Reading First.

My first year as a teacher was a wonderful year. I had a class of 16 so it was a good introduction to being in a classroom. I felt my year went really well. I had interviewed at Theodore Roosevelt School District for the next year, but there were no available jobs so I interviewed at other districts. That’s when West Branch hired me for a fourth grade position because they had five instead of four classrooms. It’s kind of…I think they called it a bubble position. I loved it up there...the people I worked with were wonderful. They helped me out knowing that I’d be in fourth grade only for one year. And the next year I could have gone to fifth, but I chose to go down to third to work with some people that I knew and I wanted to work with. So I did third. I would have stayed but the drive was just a pain in the neck and I really wanted to be in Theodore Roosevelt and then the reading position came up and they were looking for people to do Reading Recovery and I said, “I’ll do it, I’ll do it.” So then they hired me as a Title One/Reading Recovery teacher and I went through the Reading Recovery training. That was a three credit course and then three credit ... six credits. The whole year we did it and then we always had to go back for training every year.

So we did Reading Recovery for several years, but it wasn’t fully implemented within the district so it didn’t really work as well as it could have and then it kind of fizzled out. Then my building principal approached me about the literacy coach job. She said, “Would you be interested in this?” So that’s when I said, “Sure.” And I interviewed and this will be my fourth year being a literacy coach for Reading First.

I have had a lot of highlights along the way. Having that Reading Recovery training is a big highlight because it was a very intense training. It really helped me to learn a lot of how kids truly learn and what kinds of things to do and how to move them
along and how not to give them too much. Having that training those years was a big highlight because it was a big help in how kids learn to read and it helped me a lot more.

Another highlight has been being in the district and just having the success in the schools because of the GAP process. I jumped on board with that…I was at Buchanan and Wilson when it started and it started with Marysville and Reynolds, I think. And the next year Buchanan and Notting Hill, I think, jumped on. So then Wilson wasn’t, but Buchanan was, so I started…because I just wanted to learn more about that so I thought that was a highlight to learn once more about the upcoming and to keep up with the trends on learning and teaching. When I started GAP I just felt that it helped me to know, to learn more about what needs to be done for the students and why it needs to be done. I knew with your trainings and with Kelly’s training, it had all the trends, up and coming, what was going on, and why it needed to be done. I just always wanted to be involved. I was very interested in that because I felt that you always presented the good ideas and you also presented the theory as to why we were doing it. You guys were keeping us current and taking us to where we needed to be. So that has been a tremendous highlight. Just having all the training within house I think is wonderful.

I have enjoyed Reading First for the same reasons. It has helped me out tremendously with different professional development cause we were able to go a lot more than regular ed teachers…we…had the extra money to go. So we’re allowed to go to several more conferences…and we have the professional development training through Reading First, which is always a big help…I like to get out and about and see what’s going on and, and keep updated on what’s going on.

A major low light would be the administration that I had my first two years of being a literacy coach. The principal that I had was not trustworthy and the relationship between us was not there. I don’t think there was much relationship between her and the other teachers either. I really just had a rough two years and had she not left, I wouldn’t be here as a literacy coach because I just wasn’t going to do it again. She would tell us one thing today and we would do it. You know, put it in place and then tomorrow she would change her mind and she didn’t say that she wanted it done this way. Or if she
would come to me and tell me something that she wanted me to do with some teacher, she was then going to that teacher saying things to that teacher about me. She always liked conflict. She was always trying to have conflict between teachers. She was the leader, she was the principal, but she felt she needed to control every little situation in the school.

It was really hard. I mean even my husband could tell a major difference in me and was not happy that I was in that position and he had even said to me, “I can tell a big difference in you.” It was just a constant “I didn’t want to be there.” I didn’t want to be there. I wanted to be there for the teachers, but I was happy when she when she wasn’t there.
CHAPTER SIX

THE ANALYSIS

The Story

As I approached the coding and the categorizing of the 30 interview transcripts from the 15 participants of this study, I stood in awe of the information that had been collected. Fifteen people shared their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and experiences in relation to Reading First, their careers, and working in the Theodore Roosevelt School District. As I analyzed their contributions via the transcripts, five categories emerged. They were: Reading First, the Guided Assessment Project (known as GAP in the district), leadership, systems change, and a miscellaneous category. However, as I reflected on the categories, I looked for the relationships that existed among the categories to establish the themes that were emerging from the data in order to tell their stories. Following is an account of what I discovered.

Introduction

Four major themes emerged from the categorization of the data and will be explained in detail in this chapter. The first and most dominant theme was present in all of the participant interviews. This theme addressed the sentiment that Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project shared a synergistic relationship. According to the respondents, each reform effort was enhanced by the presence of the other and neither would have reached the levels of success that it did without the support of the other.

Another theme addressed in this chapter is the role that stress played in the lives of the participants. The data indicated that stress had its origins in personal issues and professional issues with the two sources often interacting with one another. Furthermore, the respondents experienced stress in a variety of the categories, and, regardless of the
category, the perception that a situation was stressful seemed to be related to the individual participant’s temperament and life view as much as it was related to the actual situation.

A third theme found in the data was that leadership, both administrative and teacher-based, played a major role in the experiences of the participants. Leadership had an impact on the implementation of both the Reading First grant and the Guided Assessment Project; however, the participants seemed to view leadership as an entity that was part of their lives that was not limited to the reform efforts. The data indicated that it was a factor in both teacher development and teacher satisfaction and had a major effect on the participants’ everyday working experiences.

Finally, a fourth theme that emerged from the data indicated that the participants’ dedication to children and their school success provided both motivation for their choice of careers and a sense of career satisfaction for the participants. It was also noteworthy that the participants expressed a pride in their learning system and appreciated the coherence of the curriculum and the instruction, which was attributed to the presence of both reform efforts—Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project. This coherence allowed them to instruct their students in a manner that assured high student achievement. Furthermore, the coherence was attributed to the leadership and knowledge of their Director of Curriculum, Director of Special Education and several building principals.

Synergy

Theme # 1 – Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project had a synergistic relationship.

The implementation of the Reading First grant as of this point in time is viewed as a success in the Theodore Roosevelt School District by the participants; however, the level of success is attributed to the fact that the district had been involved in the Guided Assessment Project, known as GAP by district personnel, for six years prior to the
inception of Reading First. The Guided Assessment Project was seen as paving the way for a relatively easy implementation of the Reading First grant.

The Guided Assessment Project is a major literacy reform effort that was started in the district in 1997 as a cooperative endeavor by the district and the Central Intermediate Unit and continues to the present time. However, the reform effort initially started as an assessment project, thus the name. It evolved into a literacy project when the reason for its initiation in the first place, declining student achievement, was found to be a factor of curriculum and instruction rather than a need for more sensitive assessment procedures. In addition, the concept of Reading First did not stand alone as a separate entity in the minds of the participants. It was always merged with the participants’ experiences with the Guided Assessment Project. It was difficult to reference one without referring to the other. A kindergarten teacher speaks to this situation,

I think GAP very much prepared me for Reading First because I don’t see a lot of…differences. I think I personally eased right into Reading First. As far as the philosophy of GAP I think all of the philosophy that was presented to us paralleled very well to the Reading First initiative (Jada, Teacher, 10/31/06).

A special education teacher had this to say, “I think Reading First put some of the research out there for people to hear and I guess what is said in Theodore Roosevelt is, ‘Boy! GAP is right on!’ And now the state is following what Theodore Roosevelt School District did” (Darla, teacher, 7/21/06). However, the relationship between Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project actually materialized as being a synergistic one. Reading First was viewed as successful only because the Guided Assessment Project had paved the way and the Guided Assessment Project continued to be successful because it was enhanced by the resources, including political clout that Reading First provided. This point will be illustrated and evidence will be provided throughout this section.

According to the participants, the Guided Assessment Project set the stage for implementing the requirements of Reading First in several areas. First, it had prepared the
district for dealing with change by building the capacity of the district personnel to understand change and their experiences with change. It had also allowed for a slower pace of implementation than the pace that was designated in the Reading First grant. One kindergarten teacher spoke to this issue,

> With GAP I remember taking very slow steps. It was really a learning process. I remember initiating the assessments. Getting away from the textbooks and into the guided reading groups and the centers…so I remember moving away slowly and taking little steps (Jada, Teacher, 10/10/06).

The Guided Assessment Project also spearheaded major renovations in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in literacy instruction in both the primary and intermediate grades. Consequently, it was the consensus of the group of participants that the district did not have to implement any major changes in literacy instruction when implementing the Reading First grant due to the changes that had been instituted via GAP. A first grade teacher spoke to this issue,

> It (the approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment) didn’t have to change radically because when we had GAP we were implementing a lot of the things that Reading First wanted us to do. The only thing we don’t do is we don’t have the basal. But we’re following everything else that Reading First wants us to do. And we’re already there, (for example) we already have the assessments whereas I know a lot of the school districts had to make up the assessments. I mean they had to find tests to assess the children where we already had that all in place (Sara, Teacher, 8/22/06).

The participants were aware of what literacy instruction looked like before the advent of the Guided Assessment Project. They voiced the fact that the literacy instruction had been textbook driven with whole group instruction being the dominant
instructional mode prior to GAP. They also labeled the instruction as being whole language; however, the term whole language was defined differently by different participants and, in fact, what they were referring to was the literature-based basal series that started the district on the path of whole group instruction that did not provide for differentiated instruction, individualization of needs, or a focus on both the reading process and supporting skills, neither philosophically nor with materials. This basal series, inaccurately, fell under the label of “whole language” for the respondents. One first grade teacher labeled this pre-GAP time period as one of the major lowlights in her career. She felt that she was not meeting the needs of most of her students and she experienced feelings of guilt for the children who struggled to learn how to read.

(The district)…got a whole new basal series and went with whole language where you really didn’t group the children at all. You taught them as a total entity – total group. And I didn’t feel I was as good of a teacher at that point because the (higher performing) children got it, the middle of the road performers were okay, but the children who were not grasping the concepts really didn’t go anywhere…at the end of the year I felt that I was sending them on and I hadn’t reached them… and I would feel really terrible (Sara, Teacher, 8/22/06).

The district had adopted the series in the 1993-1994 school year. It was reported that the basal series had not been the choice of the teacher advisory group designated for selecting a new basal series, but was bought because the textbook company provided the sweetest deal for the district. This decision that seemed to be based on finances rather than knowledge of curriculum seemed to have caused a major breakdown in language arts instruction both in regular education and in special education over the course of four years. It was this decline in student achievement and the increase in instructional support and special education referrals that prompted two instructional support teachers to seek relief from the Central Intermediate Unit. Also, it was reported that once students were placed in special education, they were never able to accelerate their learning since they
worked in the basal series levels that put them a year or two behind to begin with and then in special education they only covered one level of the basal per year when in regular education two levels of the basal were to be covered per year. The pacing of the basal also worked against those students in regular education who were able to only cover one level of the basal per year (Darla, Teacher, 7/21/06). However, the students in enrichment did not use the basal and thus were not held back by the structure of the basal series. Consequently, these circumstances brought the district to a low point as was voiced by one of the participants.

I think I knew it (language arts instruction) was at a low (at the inception of the Guided Assessment Project) because I felt like I was as the instructional support teacher expecting…trying to hold teachers accountable for interventions and strategies and the yet the school district was holding them accountable for a basal that was extremely too hard for the children to be reading and we really weren’t accelerating their learning so therefore, we were testing a lot of students and putting them in special ed and we know that we can make any student even if he is gifted look as if he has a learning disability and that’s what we were doing (Rebecca, Principal, 7/25/06).

The Guided Assessment Project started in four kindergarten and four first grade classrooms in two of the nine elementary buildings four years after the adoption of the literature-based basal series. The training started at the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year and throughout the years eventually provided training in literacy education for all teachers, administrators, support staff, and substitute teachers in the primary and intermediate grades. The project was then expanded to the secondary program of the district and continues to this day. When speaking of GAP, the participants voiced thankfulness and also expressed a sense of pride in their students’ achievement levels and in the skills that the teaching staff has obtained over the nine year period of implementation.
According to the participants, the Guided Assessment Project brought best practices in literacy education to the district and implemented them in a system-wide manner. A number of participants had the following to say about their perspective of GAP. ‘GAP is best practice. GAP is how all of us should be instructing and assessing children and it provides the scientific framework from which to do that’ (Jennifer, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

When I think of GAP I think of teacher training; I think of teaching teachers how to assess; how to implement without having a cookbook like a basal. Plus GAP taught us to look at the child and see where the weaknesses lie and then what are we going to do to remediate them. It taught us that rather than doing whole group teaching we need to look at flexible groups and individual groups and we need to look at specific areas such as comprehension (Darla, Teacher, 7/21/06).

GAP focused on taking the child from where he is and getting him up to where he needs to be and whatever it takes to do that, that’s what you do. And seven or eight years ago…we had never even hear the word ‘differentiated instruction’ and then that is what GAP was all about…teaching children where they are and accelerating them from where they are… (Rebecca, Principal, 7/18/06).

“When I started GAP I just felt that is he lped me to know, to learn more about what needs to be done for the students and why it needs to be done” (Theresa, Literacy Coach, 8/18/06).

(With GAP)...You’re looking at your assessments of the kids, you’re finding what level they’re in, you’re pulling the books out, you’re pulling the skills out of the books, and it’s more oral and manipulative type of work than it is paper and pencil. So the kids are more involved in it and they’re not just sitting there writing things. So in that way I think it’s much better. It’s more work on the teacher’s part
to do it because you’re responsible for planning it, but I think it’s better that way and you are reaching more kids…and you don’t worry about the little ones (who are developmentally younger) because you work with them at their level and you can see their growth (Sara, Teacher, 8/22/06).

“(As a fairly new teacher)…GAP allows me to teach in a whole different way. GAP allowed me to be my own teacher rather than leaning on somebody else” (Terry, Teacher, 8/17/06). “Without GAP I would have relied on the textbook and would have followed it step by step and I would have leaned on veteran teachers not knowing if they were guiding me in the right direction or not” (Terry, Teacher, 8/17/06). “Plus sometimes veteran teachers force their way onto new teachers and with GAP that didn’t happen. I could develop my own style through GAP” (Terry, Teacher, 8/17/06). GAP offers us so much in terms of instruction and how to teach and what to teach such as scaffolding instruction via the Ohio State University Literacy Framework. “GAP…made us better at presenting what is needed for kids” (Barbara, Teacher, 7/18/06).

“I think what GAP has truly done, this is my own personal opinion, I think it has taken any weakness and made them stronger. I see that. I truly saw that happen” (Barbara, Teacher, 7/18/06). “(In GAP)…we were taught methods. You talked about the research. We were not just dictated to – you explained why…Because of GAP I ask myself when lesson planning, ‘How is this helping children? Because we don’t have time for any more fluff’” (Beth, Teacher, 8/22/06).

The Guided Assessment Project was also credited for making the implementation of the Reading First grant a less stressful event than it would have been if GAP had not already been in the district for six years. When asked what Reading First would have been like if GAP had not been in the district, the usual response was that Reading First would have been overwhelming and chaotic and would have resulted in major rebellion by the primary staff. “Without GAP I don’t know how I would have adapted to the requirements of Reading First” (Terry, Teacher, 8/17/06). “If we had Reading First without GAP, it would have been terrifying. I would have been totally lost without the
knowledge from GAP…it would have been so overwhelming” (Beth, Teacher, 8/17/06). “GAP brought us data analysis. GAP brought us teaching children on their level, differentiating instruction, scaffolding…so Reading First without GAP would be very tough, very difficult…very difficult as an administrator, very difficult for kids, very difficult for teachers. It would have brought chaos” (Rebecca, Principal, 7/25/06).

However beneficial the Guided Assessment Project was seen, the participants also expressed an appreciation for the Reading First grant. The grant was credited with bringing a major source of money into the district that has not had more than a two mill tax increase in five years. The money was able to supply literacy coaches, materials such as classroom libraries, and extra support for children. However, the grant also brought other benefits including a set of non-negotiables in instruction such as an uninterrupted 90-minute block of instructional time for reading, professional development opportunities, and accountability.

Of all of the benefits of Reading First that emerged in the data, the introduction of the literacy coach to the schools was seen as the most beneficial aspect of Reading First. The coaches, for the most part, were seen as supportive, knowledgeable, and a major reason that the schools, which had already been making significant progress in terms of Adequately Yearly Progress, started to increase their student achievement levels at a significantly higher rate than pre-Reading First days. One administrator voiced the following sentiments,

Sometimes it’s (Reading First) very exciting and rewarding because…like having the coaches…has pushed us…has given us a layer that we never would have had. If it weren’t for Reading First, we would never have those coaches and we would never move as much as we have moved the last several years so I am grateful (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/13/06).

The teaching staff also voiced similar sentiments. A third grade teacher had the following to say,
I just don’t know what I would do without her (literacy coach). Just the fact that we can go to her and know you’re getting an honest answer. Not something you may necessarily want to hear but you’re going to hear it because that is what needs to be done. And, then she’s going to take that and she’s going to help you design things to meet that. And she’s just so much help, so much help (Terry, Teacher, 8/17/06).

Another teacher shared a similar sentiment about the literacy coach position,

It (the literacy coach position) is a very important position, at least I think it is because it’s a communication…and one of the things you need in order to have change…it has to be communicated and it needs, and you need time to bounce ideas off of one another. And the coach was an in between state for us. She was still like a teacher but she was an administrator, too. So you weren’t feeling like you were butting against an administrator if you were asking a question. You felt like, okay, she’ll help us solve this (Nancy, Teacher, 10/24/06).

It was noted that the four elementary schools that had not qualified to be Reading First schools because of high performance, were starting to lag behind the Reading First schools. Not having access to a literacy coach on a daily basis and being held accountable for ongoing assessments and data analysis were the two reasons offered that might be contributing to the decrease in student performance. It should be noted that one of the primary responsibilities of the literacy coach is to work with the assessment data and translate it into the instructional responses. A district administrator had these comments on the efficacy of the coaching position,

So we are seeing schools that do not have coaches because they were not eligible because their scores were high…that is what that was really based on…those old
scores…they were doing well at one time…so the schools that were the highest poverty and lowest results are now some of the highest results and those schools that should not be lagging…who have not lagged in the past…are now lagging. And I think that one of the things that we can directly relate it to has been…having the coaches in place. It has made a huge difference (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

One of the reasons that the literacy coaches have been so well received by the teaching staff was attributed to the people that were selected to be coaches. The district was conscientious about the selection process. At the onset of the implementation of the grant, the district went through a collaborative process to hire the five literacy coaches that would serve the five Reading First elementary schools as well as special education teachers K-12. The process involved the superintendent, a board member, all elementary principals, and the Central Intermediate Unit consultant. The entire process was facilitated by the Director of Curriculum and Federal Programs. The goal was to hire personnel who demonstrated a solid foundation of literacy knowledge as well as the ability to work with administrators and teachers in a supportive and effective manner.

Other benefits of the grant noted by the participants were money for materials, after school tutoring, summer reading programs, and professional development opportunities. One teacher gave the following perspective, “Reading First became a vehicle through which we could buy materials and through which teachers new to GAP could become trained” (Darla, Teacher, 7/21/06). Reading First also had an impact on instruction. A second grade teacher indicated that it, “…made us look at students as individuals, (and it brought us)…core curriculum books, and different centers” (Kaylee, Teacher, 8/15/06). Some staff member also attributed the scheduling of common planning time as a by-product of the Reading First grant.

Plus it added credibility to work that had been done within the Guided Assessment Project. A district administrator spoke to this issue.
So what it (Reading First and NCLB) did was, it took, this thing that (people thought) was all your idea or all my idea, what was originally was thought of as our idea and we were just…sitting in my office thinking up stuff for people to do became now a mandate and we got a little of, ‘Thank God, we are here because what would we have done if we had to do all this!’ and I also think that what it did was it brought teachers to say, ‘Wow!’ we have really done some good work. We really are ahead of the curve. And we look at where some of the other (Reading First) districts are, we don’t know how they are going to deal with the obstacles that they are dealing with…we had overcome a lot of that earlier (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

Within the synergistic relationship of Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project, the concept of accountability came up time and again in the interviews and it was always with an appreciation that Reading First was holding the entire system accountable. Reading First made certain instructional requirements mandatory as was noted by a district administrator,

One of the things that it (Reading First) did was…we had suggested things, we encouraged administrators to do these things, now Reading First made it a mandate so things like an uninterrupted 90 minute block were no longer negotiable items. Principals could not take their schedules and say well sorry…I couldn’t help it I am going to have art class in between there because…OK, that’s over. You must have it this way. I must look like this . . . those were some of the things that changed…so principals went from these are good ideas to these are mandates and we must implement them. So that was a difference. Even in terms of my interactions with the principals…and they have been really good about it…they would take the things that were suggested in training and we knew were best practice, but they would say but here is the reality…but our reality became we have this initiative…that became the reality and we must do certain things.
Reading First didn’t change us other than it made some things richer for us (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

Also the teaching staff expressed similar perspectives. A third grade teacher provides the following viewpoint,

…with Reading First there is a lot more accountability…I felt before Reading First I’m not so sure that my assessments were as strong as they are now. That’s one of things that I like about Reading First is the accountability of your assessments and using your assessments to guide instruction…I think because of GAP and Reading First, they have allowed me to become more of the kind of teacher I want to be (Terry, Teacher, 8/08/06).

“I think maybe it’s because I’ve been around so many places and I’ve seen teachers not doing what they’re supposed to be doing so I think the whole thing a being accountable…is one of the top things in Reading First” (Terry, Teacher, 8/08/06).

“Teachers reported that due to the tightening of the system, the students seemed better prepared for the next grade level because Reading First required that the students were taught at their instructional level (Kaylee, Teacher, 8/08/06).

Within the context of accountability, it was interesting to note that a reverse situation emerged. It seemed the district was able to hold the federal and state leadership of Reading First accountable in both an instructional and a political context based on the knowledge they obtained over the years by being a part of the Guided Assessment Project. The Guided Assessment Project allowed the district to look critically at the requirements of Reading First and to make informed decisions. A district administrator speaks to this issue,

It allowed us to look critically at what Reading First was saying…our knowledge of language arts and balanced literacy enabled us to say, “Heh, those five areas
are fabulous, but without writing, without metacognitive skills, without these other things...that stuff is not going to get you anywhere, but you have to have those pieces in place. So in terms of learning Reading First taught us a lot...it enriched...but we already had all those pieces in place. We were talking about phonemic awareness here when nobody even knew what it was...all those pieces have always been a part of our wheel (The language arts wheel)...(Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

Stress

Theme # 2– The individuals involved in the change process experienced stress, but the stress came from several different sources.

Dealing with stress seemed to have both a personal and a professional valance. On a personal level, some of the participants did not express experiencing stress to a great extent regardless of topic area whereas for others most experiences were found to be stressful. In addition, stress experienced in either one’s personal life or one’s professional life often became a factor in the other. On a professional level, the main sources of stress noted were dealing with overload in the work schedule, dealing with political situations including complying with federal and state mandates, dealing with work relationships, and being asked to change professional practices.

Stress and Overload

Stress as a result of overload was experienced by some of the participants when trying to comply with particular Reading First requirements. One such requirement involved the DIBELS assessment, which is a mandatory Reading First early literacy screening. If a student tested at-risk on the DIBELS assessments then an extra 30 minutes of interventions was necessary. These 30 minutes were to occur outside the 90-minute
uninterrupted block of time reserved for reading instruction. The feasibility of completing such a requirement was dependent on the number of children who tested in the at-risk category. For some teachers this proved to be an impossible task and caused significant concern. A kindergarten teacher spoke to this situation,

And…this year we had to do second doses. For two months…when you said about not sleeping, (I kept thinking), ‘How am I going to do this cause I had 22 students and twelve of them in that DIBELS assessment (said) they needed second doses…how am I going to do this?’ So I was just panicky about that…someone is going to come in and I’m not really doing what I should be doing…but it’s not feasible (Beth, Teacher, 8/15/06).

Another area of overload that emerged was connected to the number of assessments that were required by both the district and Reading First. Although, all of the participants valued the district assessments, some of the participants expressed major concerns that there were now too many assessments and to complete the assessments and to document results was taking too much teacher time. A literacy coach spoke to this issue,

I truly feel that the assessments are very important. It’s what drives instruction…but that is one of the things that the teachers complain about is the different amount of assessments…First grade does seem to have the bulk…but once you have that bulk down, once the team goes around and you have your information, then it is not so (overwhelming)...I don’t understand how they would teach if they didn’t have them (Theresa, Literacy Coach, 10/09/06).

With the advent of the Reading First initiative, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), early literacy screening measures, were added to the assessment plate. The literacy coach commented on this situation, “And people were not
happy about…DIBELS…because they felt the assessment packet we had from Theodore Roosevelt School District was well and good enough…that (DIBELS) was just an extra waste of their time to have to do…” (Theresa, Literacy Coach, 8/18/06). The issue of assessments was also connected to the standards-based report card which was also reported as a cause of stress. This reporting system is one that is developmental and does not assign grades to academic performance. It is based on the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. Teachers are required to monitor all areas of the standards and the standard statements in a developmental fashion for each student...

Furthermore, a few of the teachers spoke to feeling stress as a result of Reading First requirements. They viewed the tenets of Reading First to be rigid and to meet all of the requirements has taken the fun out of teaching. They also considered stress to be filtered down…and that it was eventually affecting children. A kindergarten teacher spoke to this situation,

I like the idea of being held accountable for what the children (are learning)…we can’t be doing real fluffy things and they need to be learning…but I think that we’re getting to the point where we are pushing them too hard…they’re pushing too hard. I feel the stress, then they (my students) feel the stress (Beth, Teacher, 8/15/06).

In addition, being told what to do did not encourage the teachers’ curiosity or creativity; however, not all teachers viewed Reading First as restrictive. Some welcomed the structure and appreciated the guidance.

**Stress and Politics**

An example of stress caused by political situations was the closing of an elementary school two years ago. In this case the politics were local. The closing was
based on a decision made by the school board - a decision whose validity was questioned by the participants. The participants did not trust the rationale provided by the school board for the closing of the school and also found the semantics used by the school board to be confusing. For example, a third grade teacher recalls the situation, “Madison was closed and they had...they didn’t close us literally. They transferred our students because they wanted to use Madison as the school …for students of a building that they were repairing. Now it’s been two years and the school has been empty” (Nancy, Teacher, 10/10/06).

In addition, there had been much confusion and speculation before the school board actually designated Madison as the school that was to be closed. They were considering Madison and one other elementary school as possibilities. Consequently, this state of affairs precipitated a stressful and uncomfortable situation between the two faculties. Furthermore, the school board’s plan had major implications for another elementary that would be one of the receiving schools. The children and the staff from the school that was being closed were to be integrated into the two elementary schools, which were closest geographically (one of those schools having been considered for closing). This plan then necessitated the bidding of teaching positions in all three schools—the school that was being closed and the two receiving schools. The faculty of the receiving school that had not been considered for closing was upset that all of their positions would have to be bid because of the situation of closing one school for what they considered to be dubious reasons. The bidding process was then determined by central administration and the teachers’ association. One of the participants voiced her reaction to that process,

…The teachers struggled with that the most because you are displaced, that’s the word, you were displaced…and then seniority ruled. They lined us all up like cattle by number of years of seniority dates. What job do you want? What job do you want? What job do you want? And you know, the people in the back with the lowest seniority were somewhere crying because they knew. They were going to
get a job that they didn’t really want. So I was thankful that I was towards the upper end (Nancy, Teacher, 10/10/06).

For the faculty of Madison Elementary, being displaced caused enormous stress. A third grade teacher speaks to the situation,

It was voted that we would lose our school. And that was very traumatic. It was…well, I’ve taught there from the time my son was in kindergarten until he was in 11th grade. And I know that other people were there even longer than me. So it was home. We were a family. And they sort of just kind of ripped that out. And we were our support system (Nancy, Teacher, 10/10/06).

Further sentiments were provided by a first grade teacher,

So there we have 20 years, same room, just different grades. Same spot. All of a sudden they came in and said you’re out of here. You are going. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it. And then the turmoil. Well, then there was the union fight and the teachers fighting among each other…and then the families. You know, I was their grandmother…I had their kids, and their kids’ kids…I was like an icon in the school – I truly was…this was the first year in 30 years that I had more stressors at school than I had at home. So this probably my lowest of lows…I couldn’t take on one more thing (Barbara, Teacher, 7/18/06).

The surprising ending to this story is that the successful merging of the three faculties into two occurred by the end of the first year. And what makes it even more surprising is that the situation was complicated by the fact that with the closing of the school, building leadership positions were also changed. Thus, two new faculties had new principals and new literacy coaches. Reasons for the successful transition will be discussed in the leadership section of this chapter.
Local politics as a source of stress was also related to the fact that the district has had five different superintendents in a 10 year span. Three of the superintendents had their contracts bought out by the school board. One acting superintendent accepted another superintendent’s position in another district after having differences with the school board which brings us to the present tenure. With each change in superintendent came uncertainty and new rules and new politics for the administrators and the faculty. A teacher speaks to this situation,

…And then we had the feeling that big brother was there. And I forget which superintendent it was at that time, but at some point one of them kicked off the school year by saying watch your back sort of. Don’t go out and talk bad…we felt like maybe the intercom was on…we needed to vent and we couldn’t. And everyone who is an administrator is in that lump of those people who can affect my job. And they are going to talk and they are probably listening. They’d go out and talk to somebody in the community and the next thing you knew you were being called into the office. It wasn’t me, but you heard these things whether they were true or not…the job wasn’t any fun at that time. I think a lot of people retired because the camaraderie was gone and there was the potential that if I talked to Susie, Susie was going to talk to somebody important and that was going to come back. There was no trust (Lisa, Teacher, 7/21/06).

This situation had an affect on the implementation of the Guided Assessment Project. The teacher continues, “There was no trust between us and you. There was no trust between us and administration and even with the people you were sitting with at the table” (Lisa, Teacher, 7/21/06).

Another example of stress that had a political etiology was the conditions under which the district was granted approval for their application for a Reading First grant. This situation dealt with state rather than local politics. A building leader recalled the following,
I was in on the grant writing and we wrote the grant…around GAP. We wrote it around what we were currently doing and we went very excitedly down to a meeting in Harrisburg because we understood that we were accepted…and we were ready to put in a good amount of training. And then they came out and told us that we had to go with a basal. We got together as a team and our curriculum director asked each one of us how we felt. Nobody wanted to go backwards and everybody was feeling that it was a step backward (to buy a basal series). We could not do this to kids. So at that point she (curriculum director) made a call to the superintendent and he asked her how the team felt and then he asked her how she felt, because I think he valued her opinion, and then he said I think you need to come home. So we came home…disappointed because we were excited about it. But then there were changes (on the state level) and we got word that we did not have to go with a basal. And I remember somebody else OK’d the grant that we had written without the basal. And truthfully, we were almost forewarned. ‘Well, you better be ready!’ (Rebecca, Principal, 7/25/06).

Another complicating factor of dealing with state politics was the inconsistent leadership provided by the state in Reading First. The initial stages of the grant process in Pennsylvania exemplify this situation, which has continued throughout the last four years. The curriculum director recalls her experiences dealing with the constantly changing state leadership.

I did not want to apply for the grant because it was very clear that you had to buy a basal, but the superintendent at the time said to apply and then they can’t say that you didn’t. I said OK. So we went through the meetings. There were people from the state that said you will not be awarded the grant. We said OK…we were fine with that…we are not going to change what we are doing. That was one set of leadership. OK new set of leadership comes in…new governor, new secretary of ed, new set of leadership of Reading First…this new leadership says, ‘Oh, I
know Theodore Roosevelt School District…I know what they are all about…it is wonderful…they do not have to buy a basal, they can just be doing what they are doing. OK, you are in.’ So we get on board. Then that leadership changes and then basically there was no leadership for a long time so we really didn’t get a lot of pressure…now with our technical assistant it was a different story. We have always had the good involvement with the TA from Reading First trying to take over the role that just wasn’t there. So essentially there was no leadership for a very long time so really did not get a lot of tension about not having a basal because there wasn’t anyone to tell you didn’t have a basal and nobody gave us any suggestions. Nobody said anything. Then the state got new Reading First leadership whose knowledge of literacy was limited and the issue of the basal came up again…so we had to send off our system to get looked at and we questioned some of the feedback that we got from that; however, we were told by the leadership at that time that we may continue with our system and we did not have to buy a basal…then meanwhile new leadership came on board…it has just been a constant revolving door on the state level…and it has been that way on the local level, too…so what happens then you kind of get left alone to do what needs to be done (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

Furthermore, the administration of Reading First on both the federal and state levels was viewed as being inflexible. Administrators spoke to the black and white thinking that was experienced as well as the frustration of dealing with a bureaucracy with which it was difficult to have logical and evidence-based conversations. Reading First was supposed to be all about data; however, the districts’ high proficiency scores did not decrease the number of conversations that continue to this day about not having a basal. Furthermore, one of the Reading First elementary schools was nominated for a Reading First award by the district’s Reading First technical assistant and the state leadership for Reading First disqualified the school based on the fact that it did not have a basal.
The Theodore Roosevelt School District administration was clear in pointing out that the Reading First grant does not indicate that a basal is needed. The grant references that a “learning system” must be in place and the district has a learning system that is resulting in high student achievement. District administrators question why the district’s success has not been acknowledged and celebrated.

Politics also emerges in the form of federal and state mandates and causes its own flavor of stress. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 with its Adequate Yearly Progress component in Pennsylvania is a source of stress for both regular and special education with the dominant pressure being felt by special education. One third grade teacher reported the following,

Well, I try not to let the PSSA stress me, but it is that underlying key all the time. When you’re doing something at the beginning of the year you start talking about the PSSA. It’s constantly, ‘Oh, when you see this, this is what we’re going to do’…it’s constantly teaching strategies to master the test. But not…and here’s where I think this is a downfall of the PSSA – we’re not enriching them... We are just focusing on the PSSA and it’s a shame that the kids are missing out on depth and breadth of all the learning (they could be doing) (Nancy, Teacher, 10/10/06).

The director of special education spoke to the effect of the mandates on the world of special education.

For 175 days of the school year I am saying to provide individualized instruction for the student, making sure that the teachers are giving them specially designed instruction and modifications and above all making sure that the things that the students need to interact with independently are on their instructional or independent reading level because they cannot comprehend it if they have to worry about decoding it…and because we have had GAP, the kids that are getting to special education have pretty significant learning issues…and yet that is the
population that you are saying at least five days of the year figure out how to
perform on the instructional level you would be on if you were in regular
education…and if you didn’t have these significant cognitive issues, we would
not have put you in special education in the first place. And so the teachers
struggle a great deal with that. We are pretty proud of a ninth grade student who is
on a seventh grade instructional reading level. And we are thrilled that we are
sending every single ninth grader from the middle school on at least a seventh
grade instructional level to the high school but if you give them the eleventh grade
PSSA they are going to bomb it. It is overwhelming. It is nerve wracking
(Jennifer, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

Stress and Work Relationships

Relationships that exist among staff members were noted as a source of support,
but also as a source of stress. A former instructional support teacher expressed frustration
when dealing with some of the classroom teachers in her building.

A lowlight of my career was working with teachers when I was an instructional
support teacher…only because I was irritated with people for not doing things.
People don’t want to hear it. If their belief system is that everyone can be taught
through a basal and we can do everything whole group and everybody learned and
if that was their belief system then no matter what we said, it didn’t matter to
them. And I guess when I went into (their classrooms) and looked at their children
who I knew could move or could learn and their only decision was how can I get
them out of my classroom and tested and placed, I was a little bit angry and I
guess that is my lowest…that was my worst (experience). And (for them) a basal
meant, ‘I don’t have to really think about where the child is because if they are in
third grade, they are working in a third grade book and if they’re not then there is
something wrong with them and I need to have them tested and placed’ (Darla,
A principal who had been a teacher in the building in which she had been a staff member reported that having to break the social ties with her friends was considered a lowlight of her career. Another teacher said that seeing her co-workers struggle with the requirements of GAP caused her stress since she did not see GAP as stressful. Her acceptance of the literacy training caused an uncomfortable situation between her and some of her co-workers. This issue of staff relationships extended to how principals interacted with their faculties and what demands that they placed on the teaching staff. A central office administrator spoke to this issue,

What Reading First (and NCLB) has helped to do is this…it has helped the principals who have to live with the teachers every day…Somebody said to me the other day, “Why do these principals care…just tell them (the teachers) they have to do this, just go do it…it is because they have to live with them everyday, they have to look at them everyday, They have to deal with them everyday…they need them to be on their team, to be on their side. There is a certain amount of wanting to make them happy. Wanting to do what is going to make the environment good for the teacher, too. And what this has done is it has taken the personalization out of it. This is not about whether I like you or I don’t like you. It is about results (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

Stress and Change

The Guided Assessment Project and Reading First were reported as being a source of stress at one point in time or another. Both can be classified as systemic change efforts that affect multiple subsystems of the overarching teaching and learning system. A first grade teacher who had classified herself as someone who welcomed the Guided Assessment Project, but was also put off by it due to personal reasons, had the following
The Guided Assessment Project did a lot of good. Change is good, but change is painful…I think what you feel is, ‘I’m really doing good. I see kids growing and learning’…the things that you get warm and fuzzies…the things that are high points in our career…and then somebody says, “Oh, maybe that’s not so good.” If you hear that enough times you start taking it personally cause we’re people…and you are emotionally involved in the kids’ lives and in your successes and in your failures and the kids that fail, you take them to heart and you say, ‘Joe Smith, he’s in high school and he can’t read and maybe that’s your failure because you didn’t do this (GAP) then. You were doing that stinken whole language business…’

‘Change is easier for some people than for others. Some people pretend to change but they really aren’t. I think you saw a lot of that. People going, ‘Oh sure that sounds like a wonderful idea and you’re in my room right now and I do it all the time, but I’m going to do it my way when you leave.’ Or they really didn’t get it. There are those people. Then there are the people who are very flexible and just change. And then you got the people that find change to be intimidating or threatening or scary or whatever and I was probably one those people by nature but going through a lot of changes anyway (Lisa, Teacher, 7/21/06).

Lisa’s statements about acting as if one is complying with change are supported by the findings of Sikes (1992) when she reports on how experienced teachers respond to change. Sikes states that when changes are introduced to older teachers who have a longer term perspective, they often claim to “have seen it all before.” They point to the way in which educational fashions come and go: “We’ve gone full circle.” and “If you wait long enough you end up swimming with the tide again.” Such remarks suggest that these teachers have strategically carried on as before when faced with imposed change (Sikes, 1992, p. 45).

A central office administrator who had been an instructional support teacher at the
beginning of the Guided Assessment Project presents the following perspective on this issue of change,

And I guess when we started GAP, I really thought teachers would say, ‘Whoo Hoo! What a relief! I can understand my children. I know what they need and isn’t this wonderful!’ (I thought this) because they love kids and they seem to love teaching…I was shocked at the nature (of the resistance). It was my building. I kept saying they are really going to be on board. It shocked me when they weren’t because I watched those teachers invest countless hours in trying to improve student achievement and meet their needs and spending hours at home reading on the computer trying to fix one kid so to start something based in science where someone else does the research for you and showed you how to do it, it only made sense to me that they would say, ‘This is great! This makes my job, not necessarily easier, but better.’ I was also surprised (by the fact) that the fourth and fifth grade teachers seemed to come along with it so much more easily and what I surmised from that is that people who teach primary tend to take to the children as surrogate parents. They are very nurturing. They are very personal with the students and with their families and so when you say, “You’ve done that method for 10 years, not that it is bad, let’s try this. It is going to make it easier.” They took it personally that they were harming children or that they had been doing bad things or that they had not been working hard. I think it was their mindset of where they were… (Jennifer, Central Office Administrator, 7/13/06).

Nolan and Meister (2000) indicate that the ethics of responsibility and caring are part of a teacher’s make-up and that teachers will experience feelings of guilt as they try to deal with the complexities that they may be unequipped to handle throughout a change process. Administrators and change agents need to understand that teachers are “people” driven and not “thing” driven and that the impact on their learners will be the deciding factor that teachers use to gauge the failure or success of school restructuring.
A principal who had been a classroom teacher and an instructional support teacher in the district at the beginning of the Guided Assessment Project gives another perspective on this subject of change and stress,

…it (GAP) did cause anxiety but it was good anxiety…it was good anxiety in where we were possibly going cause I felt like even before GAP came into existence we were at a low…at the time as an instructional support teacher what I saw happening was ‘GAP is a bunch of crap! They’re expecting me to do this and I was trained in one way and GAP doesn’t work…’ But eventually the district held us accountable for GAP and held us accountable for the implementation of it, people slowly got on board to the point now that if I don’t have a teacher signed up for GAP they will come to me and say, ‘Hey, I’m not on that list. I need to get to GAP training.’ And now especially you hear wonderful things about GAP… (Rebecca, Principal, 7/25/06).

The rate of change caused stress both for being viewed as being too fast and for being viewed as too slow. A first grade teacher who had been with the project since the beginning had the following to say,

The rate of change of (the Guided Assessment Project)…we were on your pace and that was stressful for everybody. In the faculty room we felt like, ‘Everyone is breathing down my neck and I just got the hang of what she said last month and now she’s saying this and I can’t change all this stuff at once’(Lisa, Teacher, 7/21/06).

A building principal who was an instructional support teacher at the time of the inception of GAP had a different perspective.

…starting out with GAP and being so appreciative of GAP and what it was trying
to do in the direction that it was going...but back at the beginning I thought the rate of change was slow because I wanted it to happen fast...I thought it took a long time to get there because I wanted it to happen overnight...that’s my personality...Now that I’ve been in it, I do see that time was necessary and to have such a huge system change it was a necessity, but when I was first in it I thought it was slow (Rebecca, Principal, 7/25/06).

One kindergarten teacher also spoke to this issue, “With GAP I remember taking very slow steps. It was really a learning process. I remember initiating the assessments...getting away from the textbooks and into the guided reading groups and the centers...so I remember moving away slowly and taking little steps” (Jada, Teacher, 10/10/06).

Leadership

Theme # 3: Multiple levels of leadership seemed to have a major impact in all facets of the study.

Leadership issues emerged in almost all areas of discussions with the term being applied to federal and state departments of education, the school board, central office administrators, building-level administrators, literacy coaches, and teacher leaders. The data indicated that all levels of leadership had an impact in implementing the Reading First grant and district-based leadership continues to be an issue within the Guided Assessment Project, both of which are major systemic change processes. Leadership also emerged as a factor in teacher development and teacher satisfaction.

The district is a study in contrasts when it comes to leadership. The school board is a constantly shifting entity with ever-changing purposes and goals. This dynamic state of affairs has been manifested by five changes in the superintendent’s position over the course of the last 10 years. However, within the central office two key administrators...
have had long and stable tenures. The curriculum director has been in her position for the past nine years. Her responsibilities included both K-12 curriculum and federal programs. The special education director has been in her position for the last eight; thus, it was the collaboration of these two directors that has resulted in the successful implementation of the longest running initiative in the history of the district, the Guided Assessment Project and has allowed the district to enjoy a singularity of purpose when it came to literacy instruction and student achievement. Operationally-speaking, this collaboration translates into the fact that the departments of curriculum, federal programs, and special education have been on the same page throughout that time period. A special education teacher reflects on this situation,

I look at what the Director of Curriculum has done. I look at what the district has done in response to GAP. I look at some of the changes in the classrooms and it’s just phenomenal. She has stayed the course and she is very knowledgeable. And I know that the Director of Curriculum and the Director of Special Education are trying to tie special education and elementary education together because we’ve been kind of thrown in with regular education (in GAP training) and that’s fine because I think we all need to be working from the same basis (Darla, Teacher, 8/10/06).

The Director of Curriculum also had long standing relationships with the elementary administrative team and the Guided Assessment Project, which was a primary goal of the elementary principals. Therefore, since 1997 literacy instruction has been at the forefront of district planning for the elementary team. Through the efforts of the Director of Curriculum, the Director of Special Education, and the elementary principals, the case has been made to the ever-changing number of superintendents and the board of directors time and again that state-of-the-art literacy instruction is crucial for the welfare and future of the children of the district as well as for the more immediate and concrete situation of meeting the mandates of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.
Subsequently, there was alignment and a clear message down through the levels of leadership for supporting both the Guided Assessment Project and Reading First; however, the level of support varied from principal to principal. The principal’s background seemed to be a factor in the different levels of implementation. A central office administrator spoke to this point,

I think the places that have been most successful in the district in terms of moving teachers forward, moving students forward, has been the places where the principal was extremely knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction. Places where the principal is not as knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction is where it has been more sporadic. I think that what happens in the schools where the principals really understand, they understand curriculum and instruction…they understand what the assessment data is telling them about students. Then when they sit down with teachers to analyze that data, they really know what it means (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

The central office leadership positions have been the most stable over the course of several years. The elementary school leader positions have been stable in some buildings, but not all and the varying situations have affected staff perspectives on leadership. The two buildings that were the focus of this study underwent a change in building leadership at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year. This was a topic of conversation throughout the interviews; however, broader leadership issues emerged from the data.

Smith Elementary and Buchanan Elementary are both located in the town proper of Smithville. Both schools have a history of dealing with high poverty levels, with Buchanan having the highest poverty level of all schools in the district. At the time of application for the Reading First grant, it had a 97% poverty rate. Two years before the beginning of the grant, a new principal was assigned to the building. The principal had been a third grade teacher in the district as well as an instructional support teacher and a
dean of students in the middle school prior to becoming an elementary principal. Buchanan Elementary was her first assignment as a principal.

When this principal started at Buchanan Elementary, fifth grade PSSA reading proficiency scores were at 17% and the learning environment was not one of high expectations for children. (It should be noted that the third grade PSSA reading assessment did not exist at that time.) The principal reported on the state of affairs of Buchanan Elementary at the beginning of her tenure,

Buchanan Elementary was a very low economic school. We were the lowest in the district. Teachers were very fragmented…they did not work well together. (Some of the teachers) believed that what they taught the student learned and if they didn’t it was the student’s fault. So it was challenging…but very beneficial because I learned a lot (Rebecca, Principal, 7/18/06).

When she was reassigned to Smith Elementary four years later, Buchanan’s PSSA scores in reading were 70% proficient in third grade and 60.4% proficient in fifth grade. She was then reassigned to Smith Elementary after the principal of Smith retired in the summer of 2005. The reassignment occurred because Smith Elementary was the largest elementary school in the district and was struggling to sustain an ongoing increase in student achievement. Furthermore, the principal was transferred at the time of the closing of the Madison Elementary; thus, the faculty of Smith was a conglomeration of the teachers who had bid into the positions at Smith. Some teachers had been at Smith, others transferred from Madison and Buchanan Elementary schools. All came with different backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and expectations.

There was a sentiment expressed that the building leadership was the reason for the lack of consistent growth at Smith Elementary. One teacher said, “I blame lack of leadership at Smith for the staff not knowing (certain basics of assessment)” (Susan, Literacy Coach, 10/09/06). Other staff members indicated that the former principal was not trustworthy and created conflict among the teaching staff by playing one staff
member off another. Furthermore, she seemed to need to control all aspects of the school to the detriment of developing a collaborative environment. One teacher’s perspective spoke to this issue,

She was the leader, she was the principal, but she felt she needed to control every little situation in the school. She assigned everyone to a committee and they (the teachers) would work their tails off on the committees and she wouldn’t be involved. Then the end of the year would come along and she would happen to come to one of the committee meetings and change everything…So she was really well known to do that kind of stuff to the point that people did not want to do committees because she would do it anyway.

This particular staff member was scheduled to leave her position in the building if the building principal had not retired and reported the experience as a major lowlight in a career that had otherwise been positive and forward moving. A teacher who transferred into Smith had the following observation of the state of affairs at the elementary,

The principal and her staff had the reputation of not being very friendly. That you would walk in there and parents didn’t feel welcomed. There seemed to be cliques. So the school wasn’t functioning very well. People didn’t know who to trust. They would be told one thing in the morning and then by afternoon it had changed to a whole different concept. And very little trust with the principal as well (Susan, Literacy Coach, 10/09/06).

In addition, to not developing an environment that was based on trust and predictability, the principal also did not fulfill the requirements of the Reading First grant in terms of the principal’s responsibilities such as supervising classrooms, monitoring assessment data, and facilitating data analysis.

Other members of the teaching staff also reported having had negative
experiences with building leaders. These events affected their development as teachers. One third grade teacher reported that she transferred from one elementary school to another, which necessitated changing grade levels in order to make the transfer, due to the fact that in her previous school the principals had secondary backgrounds and did not understand nor did she feel that they respected elementary education. There was no one to give guidance and to help her develop as a teaching professional and she felt that she was in a rut by her sixth year of teaching due to this situation; however, when she transferred to a Reading First school that had a strong principal and literacy coach, the teacher attributes their support and guidance as being a significant factor in her teaching career.

…If I did not have the support that I had from my literacy coach and from my principal, that first year…I mean it could have been a make or break year for me. And (even with the change in principal this year) leadership…at Buchanan has been superior. I mean they know what elementary is about and I am saying ‘they’ because I’ve had two different principals for the two years (since my transfer). They know what elementary is about, they know what direction they need to take this in, they know how to make demands on you and know what they’re talking about and (they know how) not to be aggressive…prior to that I think I went through eight different principals at my old school. Many of which had not a clue about elementary, I mean truthfully…they were secondary and I just really think that was the downfall for our elementary school. If an observation was done, they couldn’t offer you any suggestions of how to better yourself. I mean not that I’m looking for criticism but you’re always looking for ways to grow. And on the same hand they really didn’t offer any positive feedback to you either. I just don’t think they knew what they were watching (Kaylee, Teacher, 8/08/06).

Thus, the data indicated that leadership affected teachers’ perspective of their career and the level of satisfaction that they experienced. And the effect worked in both
directions—positive and negative. The positive was spoken to time and again by the participants in relation to the new principal who had been at Buchanan and then transferred to Smith Elementary. The participants talked about her high expectations’ love of children’ supportive style; knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment; understanding of safety and discipline in the building and in the classrooms; and most of all her ability to hold all teachers accountable without being threatening and without getting involved in personality issues. Many of the participants considered her to be a mentor and the best principal for which they have worked. One kindergarten teacher expressed the following sentiments,

When I think of a very successful leader, I do think of my principal. I feel as thought she has been a very positive mentor as well in my career…what has made her leadership so user friendly to me and successful in my eyes is that her expectations are very clear and very concrete, and she…the accountability is there. So that has been very helpful to me…and she has been very supportive. And my personality is a personality in which if I’m doing what’s expected and I’m doing…in the principal’s eyes what is considered to be satisfactory…I like to hear that. And I like to know. And I think our styles fit each other very well because I don’t always have to wonder what her expectations are. They have been clear from the get-go…and yet there’s leeway for us to do what we want to do and we enjoy in our classrooms… (Jada, Teacher, 10/31/06).

The data also indicated that a successful integration of the teachers from the three elementary schools had also occurred by the end of the year. Credit was attributed to the leadership skills of the principal.

Positive comments were also made about the principal at Buchanan Elementary who replaced the principal who had been transferred to Smith Elementary. This administrator was new to administration. Buchanan Elementary was his first assignment. The data indicated that the switch in leadership had been a smooth transition due to the
fact the new principal worked collaboratively with the former principal and did not change the structure that had been instituted. He also used the former principal as a mentor as well as the Director of Curriculum; therefore, he was easily incorporated into the elementary administrative team as a supportive and motivated member.

Madison’s former principal was also held in high regard by former staff members. One former Madison staff member shared the following comments,

I adored the way that our principal ran the school…it was a relaxed situation and cozy…and I felt that what I did was valued. And that she trusted me to do what I knew was best for kids. And so I was comfortable in that…and I didn’t feel like I had to prove my skills…but I think she varied her approach depending on where each teacher was…I think she pushed some of them (Nancy, Teacher, 10/24/06).

A theme that started to emerge for the new principals that were viewed in a positive manner by their staffs, was that they had been part of the teaching staff at the beginning of the Guided Assessment Project. Consequently, when they entered an elementary administrative position that required knowledge in curriculum and instruction, specifically in literacy education, they already had a working level of knowledge, the experience necessary to know what needed to be done, and the respect to learn what they needed to know. They required very little adjustment time. They worked well with their literacy coaches and their faculties. Furthermore, participating in a long-standing focused initiative was also considered a training ground for many of the principals who had not had the advantage of being a classroom teacher in the Guided Assessment Project. Essentially, the project provided meaningful, job-embedded professional development for the principals. A district administrator speaks to this point,

I think one of the reasons that Reading First works here…because the strength of the program (GAP) grew the principals. It made the principals instructional leaders, not just managers of their buildings…but people who looked at data and
had meetings with teachers and talked about, ‘Where are your kids? What is happening? What are you going to do to get those kids up? I want to come and see what you are doing.’ I mean they know instruction; they know curriculum. So they move beyond (being) people who organize Picture Day to people who really impact learning in their buildings. And understand what things they are about (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/13/06).

A teacher speaks to this issue when talking about her present-day principal who had been in the district as a classroom teacher and then moved into a principal’s position,

And in some of the other buildings that I’ve worked in I might not have felt as comfortable…approaching the principal if I did have a concern…now our district has grown a lot in that area in the last five to eight years because I think a lot of (the curriculum) was mish-mash (before then). I remember for example…when I first started teaching third grade, I was told I could teach any science curriculum I wanted. And I remember saying to my principal that doesn’t seem right…Isn’t there something that I can follow? And there were no answers and now my principal is very well informed and very up on everything. I just think she is a very, very good leader. Very strong. (Jada, Teacher, 10/31/06).

Reading First was also credited in helping to develop the leadership skills of the building principals. Reading First made certain things mandatory so that principals could “blame” Reading First for some of the implementation issues. The curriculum director spoke to this issue,

It is about results. That is what we tuned into and we are tuned into it because it is a mandate. And so it helped drive some of those things…keep some of the personalization out of it for leadership. They have been able to say, ‘Look…these are the mandates…how do we work together to get there? Get to where we need
to go.’ And that has helped. (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

The discussions of leadership also included the concept of teacher leadership. The data indicated that when the participants thought about leadership their primary thoughts were about either their building principal or their literacy coach. A district administrator speaks to her observations of this phenomenon,

Before Reading First…I think leadership was driven by administration so that…maybe the best way I can describe it is to say what has happened since. I think that what has happened since is has the (development) of teacher leadership…so that it is really more shared leadership as opposed to administration pushing. It is…because we have those coaches…and teachers take things on now because they have the coaches right there for support in the buildings (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/06/06).

A first grade teacher shared her view of working with a literacy coach,

It’s nice to have a coach in your building that you can go up to and say, ‘I have this child and they’re experiencing difficulty…can you help me? What can you give me? What can you show me to do to help this child?’ I mean before you had the reading teachers but the reading teachers were busy with their own students…and with the reading coach you can pop in any time, ask some questions, they can come in and help you in your classroom, tell you what to do, they can demonstrate things for you…Our coach helped us with our assessments and helped us evaluate them. She was just always there if we needed her. So they just give a lot, a lot of support…. (Sara, Teacher, 10/24/06).

Furthermore, for some buildings a change in literacy coach was more significant than a change in principal. A first grade teacher speaks to experiencing a change in literacy
coach, “When we were assigned a new principal and new coach, the coach change was a bigger change than the principal because that really governs what I do more than the principal…as far as what I do on a day-to-day basis…” (Lisa, Teacher, 7/10/06).

Caring for Children and Craft Pride

Theme # 4: Loving and valuing children and appreciating one’s ability to teach all children to read was a source of pride and satisfaction.

A theme that emerged from the data was the consistent message of the importance of children and loving teaching. Seeing children grow and excel were noted as highlights of teaching careers. This sentiment merged into experiencing pride in one’s craft when students were achieving at high levels and becoming readers and writers. One teacher expressed the following sentiments,

The highlights are the kids…I get emails. I get letters. I talk to parents. I see kids who tell me how much I meant to them; how much they love me, how I made a difference in their life…yes, it’s incredible. I had a little boy who said to me…actually I had sent him down to the librarian and said to her to have him read this book to her. She had tutored him last year in that after school EAP program and he really was pretty much a non reader when I got him at the beginning of this year…level 5 which would be beginning first grade. He’s in third grade…by January, February he was in beginning third grade material. I sent him down to the librarian and she said, ‘What happened!’ He said, ‘I don’t know. I just learned to read this year!’…so that was excellent!’ (Darla, Teacher, 7/21/06).

A second grade teacher spoke to the importance of seeing her students achieve,

I think Reading First made me more insightful on individuals…for example, this
past year I had a student who came to in October from the charter school on a level three and made it to level 21…He made it to benchmark…those are those little tidbits that make you want to pat yourself on the back…(because when he came to me) he was down in the dumps about not being able to read…I mean it was obvious…and it’s just amazing to see that growth and you know that you’ve made him feel better. You feel good…(When I saw the initial assessment data on him)…my thoughts were that I don’t want to be negative because if you are negative and say he’s not going to get anywhere, he’s not going to get anywhere if you have that mindset. So I think you have to keep an open mindset and say this is your goal, this is what we’re going to try and achieve. At the same time you have to keep your eyes open to make sure that there’s not a learning problem going on, too…I felt that he had the ability and that he didn’t have a learning problem…so I just kept pushing him. I mean once I felt we were strong enough on one level we just kept moving on to the next…and I think he had a lot of encouragement from myself and other faculty members…that enabled him to want to (achieve)…just watching his peers…he never received the message that he couldn’t do it. (Kaylee, Teacher, 8/15/06).

A first grade teacher expressed similar sentiments, “Highlights are the kids who come in on a level 1 that were nonverbal a couple years ago and left my room on a level 11…I see huge progress now that I know what I am doing (because of all the literacy training that we have had)” (Lisa, Teacher, 7/10/06).

Pride in one’s self was expanded to pride regarding the progress that the Theodore Roosevelt School District has made in the area of literacy education and much was credited to the Guided Assessment Project. A principal speaks to her confidence in the system when dealing with the Reading First state leadership and the issue of not having a basal, “And there was no question in our mind that we were ready (to deal with the consequences of not having a basal). We have seen what we are doing working. And we are proud of that and when I look at my children…how they are accelerating, how they
are progressing there is no question does it work” (Rebecca, Principal, 7/25/06). A literacy coach adds the following sentiments,

…when we go to these Harrisburg (Reading First) meetings and come back, we say you have no clue how lucky you are that we have had GAP before we had Reading First because we were already way beyond all these other people because we have assessments in place to drive our instruction. Whereas a lot of those districts depend on DIBELS and that is it. I mean we look at that second to none…that’s not our most important (assessment) (Theresa, Literacy Coach, 10/09/06).

The curriculum director speaks to the learning of the system.

I think again the way that the GAP trainings are organized is so when you come in the training what you experience in the training is exactly what we want kids to experience in the classroom. So that when I talk with teachers about vocabulary and what that means and when I say ‘word wall’ everybody knows what that means because not only have they seen it they’ve experienced it. So that the vocabulary...again with common language it’s really – I guess we could really break that down and say it’s vocabulary...it’s about what they’ll refer to as GAP vocabulary even though it’s literacy vocabulary...this GAP vocabulary is our language. This is how we speak about things. And that the teachers, when I say word wall or I say fluency they remember it not only from that but from the articles they’ve read, from the readers theater they have participated in...and plus what’s interesting too is that they’re understanding of the common language deepens and changes over time. So that what vocabulary meant to them when we started...by the time we get done in May, vocabulary has a deeper and more faceted meaning than it did in September. So that’s kind of neat too about what has happened with the program...and then really learning this common language
helps them to understand that there is very little black and white; that there are so many shades of gray…so that the art of teaching is a complex thing…and so you must be a reflective teacher. And that vocabulary gives us a means to be reflective together as we can talk about these things, have those communities, have those learning communities. You know what Marzano says, ‘If you don’t have the vocabulary, you don’t have the content’ (Katherine, Central Office Administrator, 7/13/06).

In Conclusion

As I bring this chapter to a close, I have the opportunity to reflect upon the analysis of the interviews of the fifteen participants and to contemplate on the major themes that emerged as I collated, cross-referenced and reflected on their contributions. It was interesting to note the synergistic relationship between Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project and all of the nuances and idiosyncratic elements of that relationship. It was also of import to ascertain the role that stress played in the lives of the participants and how stress had its origins in personal issues and professional issues and how the two interacted with one another.

It was also interesting to see the role that leadership played in the minds of the participants. It had an impact in the implementation of both the Reading First grant and the Guided Assessment Project; however, it was an entity that was part of the participants’ lives independent of the reform efforts. Participants talked about it as a factor in teacher development and teacher satisfaction.

Finally, the data indicated that the dedication to children and their success was a primary motivator and provided a sense of satisfaction for the participants. It was also noteworthy that the participants expressed a pride in their system and appreciated the coherence of the curriculum and the instruction. The coherence was attributed to their school leaders and how they supervised the implementation of both the Reading First grant and the Guided Assessment Project.
CHAPTER SEVEN

FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

This final chapter is presented in four parts. The first section is a short introduction to the topic. The second section contains my personal reflections on conducting a phenomenological case study. The third section is a review of the findings of this study and the fourth section outlines the lessons learned and recommendations for designing school improvement efforts and conducting future research.

Overview

Reading First is a national school improvement effort that is being implemented in elementary schools across the nation, including those in Pennsylvania. It is part of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which presents a landmark shift in federal legislation with its inclusion of strong accountability measures for student achievement. Reading First, which is an early literacy initiative that provides funds to help schools meet the accountability measures of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, is the largest, mandated school improvement effort in early literacy that this nation has experienced. Furthermore, the Reading First initiative includes provisions for two separate monitoring systems to insure compliance with grant requirements. First, each state is required to hire an external evaluator to assess the implementation of the grant. The University of Pittsburgh is the external evaluator for the Pennsylvania grant. This evaluation focuses on the role and activities of the literacy coach, assessment data, and teacher perceptions of the literacy coach and other structures of the grant. The second evaluation is under the purview of the United States Department of Education. Subsequently, each Reading First school has the potential of being monitored by the United States Department of Education with a building-level focus on student achievement, curriculum alignment, instructional techniques, assessment processes, and goals and responsibilities of
administrators, teachers, and literacy coaches (Application for State Grants for Reading First CFVA Number 84.357, 2002). Although both monitoring systems are comprehensive and time-intensive, neither one focuses on the phenomenology of change and its role in the implementation of the grant despite the documentation of its importance in the school improvement literature (Nolan & Meister, 2000). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to address that omission by focusing on the phenomenology of change as it applies to the national Reading First reform effort in two Reading First schools located in a poor, rural school district in Pennsylvania.

Specifically, the study attempted to ascertain the experiences, beliefs, values, and interpretations of administrators and teachers in two elementary buildings who are participating in the Reading First initiative. The study also examined how the experiences, beliefs, values, and interpretations of the administrators and teachers have affected the outcome of the Reading First implementation.

Research Questions

The study asked the following questions: What did the administrators and teachers experience? How did the administrators and teachers understand these experiences? How did building level leadership impact how teachers experienced the change process? How did the interpretations of these experiences affect the implementation of the Reading First grant?

The goal of this chapter is to answer those questions and to highlight the implications of the responses that may prove beneficial to the field of phenomenological research in school improvement, to the Reading First initiative, to the district, and to my work as a student of system change. However, as I sit down and think about what has been learned from this study—what did the participants experience, how did they understand those experiences, what role did leadership play in their experiences, and how did their experiences affect the implementation of the Reading First grant—I realize that it is helpful for me to also ask what meaning I have made of this work in order to better
write my conclusions (Siedman, 2006).

My Personal Reflections on Conducting a Phenomenological Case Study

My first thought is how fortunate I feel that I was able to do this research. I have worked in the district for over ten years, knew most of the faculty, had been in their classrooms, and had functioned as the lead trainer and facilitator of the Guided Assessment Project for at least six of those 10 years. However, in my role as the Reading First technical assistant for the first two years of the grant and then being on leave from the Central Intermediate Unit for the next year and a half, I had not worked with teachers for over three years before starting my research. This time away provided space for all of us, allowed my change in role to be accepted, and, consequently, I seemed to have the advantages of a participant observer as well as the advantages of temporal and physical distance. Furthermore, we all commented on how easily the conversations flowed and that the experience of the interview was enjoyable. Several participants also thanked me for the opportunity because they rarely have time to reflect on their educational practice and were surprised at what a pleasure it was to have their thoughts and experiences be the focus of the interviews.

Speaking from my perspective it was a delight to do this kind of phenomenological research because it fit with how I think and interact in the schools in which I work. It has been clear to me for some time that it is the minute-to-minute changes in the classroom that are the critical features of systemic change and those critical features constitute teacher work. Since teachers are people first, and teachers second, their world views (e.g., beliefs, assumptions, values, life experiences) impact their daily work (Sikes, 1992). Therefore, if teachers’ personal reactions and responses to changes in literacy instruction are not addressed and incorporated into the professional development design and the overall implementation of a reform effort, then changes in literacy instruction on the classroom level may not occur.

Consequently, this research methodology allowed time for and gave priority to
people’s everyday experiences. Furthermore, I was especially interested in this because I had been on the other side of the road as the lead trainer of the Guided Assessment Project and had the perspective of a professional developer. It was now so informative and interesting to address the issues from different vantage points.

As I conducted this research, I also became aware of the role that culture plays in this phenomenological process. The school improvement literature indicates that school culture is at the heart of change (Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 1998; Miller, 1998) and that teachers work within an occupational culture that determines the way in which change is perceived, experienced, and realized in schools (Sikes, 1992). With these thoughts in mind, it may be hypothesized that cultural norms also affect research about school improvement. This phenomenon seemed to play itself out in this study. Participants verbalized that they were willing to say things within the confidential interview process that they would not say in a more public forum. Thus, the cocoon of the interviews allowed a sharing of information, experiences, opinions, and historical references that provided richness to the data that otherwise may have not been accessed.

Moving on to the logistics of conducting the research, I found the actual process of scheduling and conducting interviews to take more time than I had anticipated. I was made aware of things that I take for granted and do not allow enough time to complete such as time for finding a parking space, setting up the voice recorder, establishing rapport. I became aware of my beliefs about these issues and quickly made adjustments that allowed for the process to be enjoyable and realistic.

Also, as I conducted the study, I appreciated the process of doing the second interview as designated by the phenomenological approach. Everyone was more relaxed during the second interview, the situation was familiar, rapport was quickly established, and we easily picked up our conversations from the point from which we had left off in the first interview. The second interview consisted of mostly new information; however, the participants or I would build on comments made in their first interview, which ultimately allowed the participant to go more in depth on the subject at hand. Thus, the two interview process did allow for reflection, which added breadth and depth to the
description of the concepts that were being discussed.

During the time period in which I was conducting first and second interviews, I was also transcribing interviews. I found the transcription process to be overwhelming and fortunately received permission from my dissertation advisor to have the interviews transcribed by an approved outside person. This proved to be a life saver for me since it took me around four hours to transcribe one 30-40 minute interview; however, I did transcribe 12 interviews and found the process to be invaluable for knowing the content of the interviews.

Once the interviews were completed, I wrote 15 summaries to use for member checking purposes. Following the completion of the summaries, I then wrote 15 participant profiles. These profiles were written in the first person so that the voice of each participant was present. I wrote each profile using large excerpts from the transcripts (Seidman, 2006) and edited for transitions and clarity. As I reflected on doing this research, writing the profiles ended up being one my most memorable and unexpected experiences. As I composed each participant’s experiences into an integrated document, the profiles seemed to come alive. I as the writer faded into the background and functioned only as an instrument to type and to provide transitions to aid meaning-making for the reader. The profiles and their authors were entities unto themselves. For a reason that I cannot explain, my response was emotional and I experienced feelings of awe.

Once the summaries and the profiles were completed, I moved on to the coding process which I explain in detail in Chapter Three. Once the coding was complete and I had categorized the hundreds of entries, I then approached writing the analysis chapter. My first response was to feel overwhelmed by the amount of data that I had at my fingertips. I was especially thankful for the organizational system that I had used to review each transcript for coding purposes. I was also humbled by the complexity of the task, its monumental nature, and the determined focus that it required to make sense of all of the responses. I was also struck by the realization of understanding why there may be a paucity of phenomenological research in the school improvement area. It is hard, time
intensive, non-linear, and requires a reflective and respectful approach to other people’s experiences, thus making it difficult to schedule into busy, managerial kind of days. And yet, it is crucial. Establishing relationships emerge in the leadership literature as being a major component of leadership and continuous improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Schmoker, 2006). One does not establish deep relationships without understanding the world of the other. Furthermore, understanding different perspectives is a requirement for establishing successful professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), an approach that is proving necessary for school improvement. And even one of my favorite writers Elton Mayo, a Harvard Business School professor, talked of the importance of relationships and understanding where people are coming from and their consequent needs. He wrote about the Hawthorne Experiment in 1933 explaining that the real message of the experiment was about understanding and respecting people’s individual experiences and then meeting their underlying needs (Mayo, 1933). It was about attending to…it wasn’t just about adjusting lights.

As you can see, I was making connections to my prior knowledge and experiences as I was immersed in working with the data. However, paradoxically, I noted another experience while looking for patterns with supporting evidence in the data. My background was an important component of this research and yet while I was categorizing and analyzing and interpreting, I was also freed from my own perspective. The critical feature of doing the research was to give voice to the participants’ experiences and meaning-making comments. There was no place for my opinion. I had developed an allegiance to the participants’ stories. Although reviewing each entry under each subcategory in each big category several times was laborious and painstaking, it was also freeing. The process also allowed me to move beyond the categories and to “listen” for the themes that were emerging. This multi-leveled process required an intense focus on what was being communicated via the data. I had to listen very carefully.

Moving onto this chapter which outlines my process, my findings from the study, and implications that I think are critical products of this research, I find myself switching
orientations. I am now moving back into the picture. Therefore, I understand the importance of examining my process and conclusions so that I can do justice to the data. Furthermore, as I review my responses to conducting this research, I am thinking that some of my personal connections may apply to the field in general, to the initiative, and to the district. Perhaps, we all need to listen to the same message.

In Chapter Six, I outlined and expanded upon the themes that emerged from the categories of the data. However, as I move to summarizing the findings of this study I seem to be moving to another level of analysis. The analysis and interpretation process seems to be both cyclical and spiraled. It has been a combination of analyzing, synthesizing, and identifying patterns. It also involves understanding that patterns emerge within and among categories and themes and that multiple perspectives are possible when reviewing the data. In this final chapter, I am now at the point in which I am filtering the analysis and interpretation process into findings and implications. I do so with the understanding that I am presenting one person’s perspective and that alone is a limitation of the findings; however, I also contend that I conducted a phenomenological case study with careful attention to establishing credibility, maintaining consistency, and determining confirmability. Therefore, it is in this context that I present the findings and implications of a phenomenological case study of a Reading First district.

Review of the Analysis

In this study I interviewed 15 participants using an in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviewing approach in which the participants via 30 interviews shared their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and experiences in relation to Reading First, their careers, and working in Theodore Roosevelt School District. As I analyzed their contributions via the transcripts, five categories emerged. They were: Reading First, the Guided Assessment Project (a restructuring effort in literacy known as “GAP” in the district), leadership, systems change, and a miscellaneous category. Furthermore, each category was composed of multiple subcategories. For instance, the Reading First category was
broken down into 8 subcategories. The Guided Assessment Project was composed of 14 subcategories; leadership and systems change each had nine and the miscellaneous category had five subcategories.

Although the five categories appeared to be distinct entities the data also indicated that they were interrelated. Actually, none of them stood alone. They affected one another in integral ways and could be viewed as supports when working optimally and viewed as challenges and distractions when implemented inadequately. These connections among the categories support the literature on change which indicates that systems are complex with systems change mirroring that complexity while also being non-linear and impacting most of the subsystems of the larger organization (Fink & Stoll, 1998; Fullan, 1998; Hopkins, 1996). These subsystems can include entities such as governance, management, teaching and learning, and adaptation/innovation (Using What We Have to Get the Schools We Need, 1995). In this particular study, the interdependence of the subsystems and the complexity of the change process became evident as I was initially analyzing and interpreting the data. For example, leadership was a category that permeated all other categories and was viewed as a necessary component for the successful implementation and development of each of the other areas. It was a major component in implementing the Reading First grant and the Guided Assessment Project as well as being a factor in teacher development, teacher values, and the culture of a school. Furthermore, it emerged as major topic in the systems change category and was tied to professional development issues. Therefore, according to the participant responses, leadership was needed for everything else to work. However, the Guided Assessment Project was viewed as a factor in the development of building leaders and without the Guided Assessment Project the level of leadership would not be present in the district. Reading First was then noted as enhancing the development of the building leaders beyond the influence of the Guided Assessment Project since it required the principals to institute such things as a 90-minute language arts block and the principals could rely on the federal mandate to provide the rationale for their staffs.

However, as I reflected on the categories and their interrelationships, I started to
identify themes that were emerging from the data. Eventually four major themes were identified. These themes provided another layer of analysis and interpretation and became the vehicle through which I could tell the participants’ stories.

For the sake of the reader, however, I will digress for a moment to define the Guided Assessment Project since the project will be referenced throughout this chapter. The Guided Assessment Project is a major literacy reform effort that was started in the district in 1997 as a cooperative endeavor by the district and the Central Intermediate Unit. It continues to the present time. The project was a system-level initiative designed to restructure the elementary language arts curriculum and to impact, for the positive, the minute-to-minute classroom instruction of all early literacy classrooms. The goal of the project was to increase student achievement in reading and writing, develop reflective teaching practices, and reduce instructional support and special education referrals. It was in place for six years before Reading First entered the picture. The project included a major professional development plan which provided multi-year training opportunities for each grade level with at least nine full-day workshops per grade level per school year. All of the participants had been involved with the project and thus, it proved to be a major topic that emerged in the data.

Themes

Four major themes were identified in the data. The first and most dominant theme was present in all of the participant interviews. This theme addressed the sentiment that Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project shared a synergistic relationship. According to the respondents, Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project were enhanced by the presence of the other and neither would have reached the levels of success that it did without the support of the other.

The second theme that emerged in the data is the role that stress played in the lives of the participants. It was clear that the individuals involved in the change process experienced stress, but the stress came from several different sources. The data also
indicated that stress had its origins in personal issues and professional issues with the two sources often interacting with one another. Furthermore, the respondents experienced stress in a variety of the categories, and, regardless of category, the perception that a situation was stressful seemed to be related to the individual participant’s temperament and life view as much as it was related to the actual situation.

A third theme found in the data was that leadership played a major role in the experiences of the participants; however, the term was used to reference multiple levels of leadership. For example, the term was applied to federal and state departments of education, the district’s school board, central office administrators, building-level administrators, literacy coaches, and teacher leaders. Regardless of the level of leadership being referenced, “leadership” had an impact on the implementation of both the Reading First grant and the Guided Assessment Project; however, the participants seemed to view leadership as an entity that was part of their lives that was not limited to the reform efforts. The data indicated that it was a factor in both teacher development and teacher satisfaction and had a major effect on the participants’ everyday working experiences.

Finally, a fourth theme that emerged from the data indicated that the participants’ dedication to children and their school success provided both motivation for their choice of careers and a sense of career satisfaction for the participants. It was also noteworthy that the participants expressed a pride in their learning system and appreciated the coherence of the curriculum and the instruction which was attributed to the presence of both reform efforts, Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project. This coherence allowed them to instruct their students in a manner that assured high student achievement. Furthermore, the coherence was attributed to the leadership and knowledge of their Director of Curriculum, Director of Special Education and several building principals.

With these themes in mind, this chapter will now attempt to answer the research questions that were at the heart of this phenomenological case study.
Findings

Research Question: What did the administrators and teachers experience and how did they understand these experiences?

The administrators and teachers talked about a myriad of experiences and shared their interpretations, opinions, and feelings of those experiences. When analyzing the results of this study, it was clear that there were experiences that were a direct result of participating in the change efforts; however, many personal responses extended to issues that had no bearing on the change efforts whatsoever. This section will attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the participants’ sentiments and the findings of this study.

Participants’ Experiences and Their Interpretations of Those Experiences

One of the major findings of this study is that the participants perceived the implementation of the Reading First grant as a success in Theodore Roosevelt School District; however, they attribute the level of success to the fact that the district had been involved in the Guided Assessment Project for six years prior to the inception of Reading First. They expressed the sentiment that the Guided Assessment Project set the stage for implementing the requirements of Reading First, initially, by preparing the district for dealing with change. Specifically, participation in the Guided Assessment Project had developed the capacity of the district personnel to understand change and their experiences with change. Also, as the project progressed, it allowed for a slower pace of implementation than the pace designated in the Reading First grant.

When talking about the Guided Assessment Project, the participants consistently expressed a sense of pride in what they have learned as a result of participating in the literacy project. They reported feeling competent in teaching reading and were pleased that their students were progressing so well. They were proud of their district in this particular area and often referenced the work of their director of curriculum. They
appreciated that she had stayed the course over the years and, at the time of this case study, the district enjoyed a coherent and robust literacy curriculum.

According to the participants, the Guided Assessment Project spearheaded major renovations in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in literacy instruction in both the primary and intermediate grades. Consequently, it was the consensus of the group of participants that the district did not have to implement any major changes in literacy instruction when implementing the Reading First grant due to the changes that had been instituted via the Guided Assessment Project. Furthermore, it should be noted that due to the comprehensive nature of literacy education via the Guided Assessment Project, the district was able to have their Reading First grant approved without having to buy a new basal series, thus, sparing the faculty from having to learn an entirely new system.

Many of the participants were aware of what literacy instruction looked like before the advent of the Guided Assessment Project. They voiced the fact that the literacy instruction had been textbook driven with whole group instruction being the dominant instructional mode prior to the Guided Assessment Project. They also labeled the instruction as being whole language; however, the term whole language was defined differently by different participants and, in fact, what they were referring to was the literature-based basal series that started the district on the path of whole group instruction that did not provide for differentiated instruction, individualization of needs, or a focus on both the reading process and supporting skills, neither philosophically nor with materials. This basal series, inaccurately, fell under the label of “whole language” for the respondents. All of the participants who had been teaching during the era of the literature based anthology expressed feelings of frustration at the type of instruction they felt they were coerced into conducting and also expressed feelings of guilt and distress at not reaching all of their students during that time period. Consequently, the participants felt that the Guided Assessment Project brought best practices in literacy education to the district and implemented them in a system-wide manner and they were grateful for the changes in literacy instruction.
The Guided Assessment Project was also credited for making the implementation of the Reading First grant a less stressful event than it would have been if the literacy project had not already been in the district for six years. When asked what Reading First would have been like if the Guided Assessment Project had not been in the district, the usual response was that Reading First would have been overwhelming and chaotic and would have resulted in major rebellion by the primary staff. Once again, the participants expressed an appreciation that they did not have experience the grant “cold turkey.”

However, the Guided Assessment Project was a systemic change effort and it affected the lives of the participants. Sikes (1992) indicates teachers are people first and teachers second and that teaching is a part of their lives and affects and is affected by other parts. This point was illustrated by the experiences of a first grade teacher who had difficulty in implementing changes in her literacy instruction as designated by the Guided Assessment Project. The participant said that the content of the professional development opportunities of the Guided Assessment Project contributed to her feelings of guilt surrounding her seventh grade son’s inability to read beyond a third grade level. It was this background experience that was at the root of her reluctance to implement any new changes in her literacy instruction. She reports being paralyzed by fear that she may be doing something wrong that may hurt children…again…since she felt that her previous allegiance to “whole language” had been detrimental to students that were like her son. She did not want to make another mistake; therefore, her resistance was the conservative response as identified by Evans (1996) with the welfare of her students as her guiding principle.

However, the Guided Assessment Project, at this point in time was seen by all of the participants as positive. This fits in with the research findings of Fullan and Miles (1992) which indicates that participants have more ownership in the middle of a change effort than at the beginning and stronger still at the end when they have developed a level of mastery. Furthermore, even though the participants expressed such an appreciation and a sense of pride in the Guided Assessment Project, they also expressed an appreciation for the Reading First grant. The grant was credited with bringing a major source of
money into the district that has not had more than a 2 mill tax increase in five years. The money was able to supply literacy coaches, extra support for children, and materials such as classroom libraries. Most of the participants found the literacy coach to be an invaluable addition to the district and the position was credited with being critical to teacher development. The literacy coach position added the necessary support for full implementation of the tenets of the Guided Assessment Project, which would have been difficult to sustain without the additional monies. Furthermore, the participants were pleased with the additional services that could be offered to their students such as tutoring and after school programs. Overall, the participants were child-centered and having skills and resources to work with their students brought feelings of satisfaction and contentment to their career experiences. The participants also expressed appreciation for Reading First because the tenets of the grant added credibility to work that had been done within the Guided Assessment Project.

On the other hand, some of the participants expressed frustration at the requirements of the grant. They experienced feeling overwhelmed by the number of assessments that were added to their district assessment manual and the demand to provide additional levels of support to students in need without additional support for the teacher. Their experiences support the concept of “intensification” as defined by Hargreaves (1994). Intensification leads to reduced time for relaxation during the work day, lack of time to retool one’s skills and keep up with one’s field, creates chronic and persistent overload; and leads to reductions in the quality of service as corners are cut to save time.

Furthermore, some of the teachers lived in fear of having a Reading First federal monitor visit their classrooms at some point in time. Their concern stemmed from the fact that the entire district would be judged on their knowledge of the essential reading elements and their ability to articulate their core curriculum and literacy instruction. This responsibility was experienced as intense pressure by some of the participants. Other participants felt more assured of their instructional practices and, although intimidated by the thought of the federal monitoring, it was not at the forefront of their thoughts when
asked about their experiences with Reading First.

Another major finding of this study was that although Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project emerged as major topics, certain local district experiences seemed to have much more impact on the participants’ perspectives than did the effects of participating in change efforts. Often these experiences were viewed as being a source of stress and had undermining and distracting effects on the implementation of the initiatives. For example, the closing of an elementary school two years into the Reading First grant which then caused the bidding of all classroom positions in three Reading First elementary schools was a major topic that emerged in the data. This topic was a significant source of stress and was considered a local political issue. The closing was based on a decision made by the school board—a decision whose validity was questioned by the participants. The participants did not trust the rationale provided by the school board for the closing of the school and also found the semantics used by the school board to be an example of doublespeak. In addition, there had been much confusion and speculation before the school board actually designated which elementary school was to be closed. At the time of this decision, the district had nine elementary schools. Three were located within the city limits of Smithville and the remaining five elementary schools were located in small towns surrounding Smithville. It was two of the three schools located in Smithville that were being considered for closing, either Madison or Buchanan Elementary Schools.

Consequently, this state of affairs precipitated a stressful and uncomfortable situation between the two faculties of these two buildings. Furthermore, the school board’s plan had major implications for the third in-city school, Smith Elementary. The children and the staff from the school that was being closed were to be integrated into the two remaining in-city elementary schools. This plan then necessitated the bidding of teaching positions in all three schools – the school that was being closed and the two receiving schools. The faculty of Smith Elementary was upset that all of their positions would have to be bid because of the situation of closing one school for what they considered to be dubious reasons. The bidding process was then determined by central
administration and the teachers’ association. In the end, the board of directors decided to close Madison Elementary, which caused enormous stress for Madison’s faculty. The teachers expressed feelings of shock, disbelief, and significant loss at having to leave their building. Many teachers had been there between 10 and 20 years. They had never experienced this level of disruption in their teaching careers and found the experience to be traumatic. Furthermore, all of the teachers in the three buildings then experienced feelings of stress, instability, and panic in some cases as they had to re-bid their teaching positions. Teachers with seniority were relatively safe; however, new teachers faced teaching a grade that they did not prefer or worse yet being displaced completely. These same teaching staffs were then expected to continue implementing the mandates of the Guided Assessment Project and Reading First.

The surprising ending to this story is that a successful merging of the three faculties into two did occur by the end of the first year. And what makes it even more surprising is that the principal and literacy coach positions were also changed at the same time. Reasons for the successful transition will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another local situation which was also experienced as stressful by the participants was the fact that the district has had five different superintendents in a 10 year span. Three of the superintendents had their contracts bought out by the school board. One acting superintendent accepted another superintendent’s position in another district after having differences with the school board which brings us to the present tenure. With each change in superintendent came uncertainty and new rules and new politics for the administrators and the faculty. The participants expressed, once again, feeling unsafe and unsure as to what the future would bring each time there was a change. Furthermore, the frequent changing of superintendents required months and sometimes years before stability would be re-established…usually in time for the next change in the top leadership position. These transitions always caused feelings of mistrust and frustration with a school board that did not seem to understand nor respect the complicated nature of teaching and learning. Furthermore, these disruptions in the top leadership position seemed to cause alliances and adversarial relationships to emerge within the
administrative and teacher ranks. For example, if a superintendent instituted a new procedure that was viewed as being unreasonable by the faculty and, subsequently, was passed down to the administrators to implement, many of the teachers would lump all of the administrators with the new superintendent rather than understanding the constraints that central office and building administrators were under. All of the participants experienced frustration at this state of affairs. Thus, the decisions and the activities of the school board were major sources of stress for the participants. Furthermore, these local experiences bring home the fact that systemic change efforts regardless of their etiology take place within the context of the district life. Evans (1996) points out that no innovation can succeed unless it attends to the realities of people and place and in this case the realities meant that the participants were dealing with stressful local issues and politics as well as the reform efforts. All of the participants had to negotiate both.

Furthermore, it was evident that the district administrators were significantly affected by the school board issues. They expressed a myriad of emotions including frustration, disappointment, anger, and resignation when talking about the actions taken by the board of directors; however, the administrators also had to interact with entities located outside of the district that proved to be additional sources of stress. For example, the Reading First leadership, both federal and state, proved to be two such entities that were a source of frustration and stress for a variety of reasons. Initially, the conditions under which the district was granted approval for their application for a Reading First grant proved to be political and, consequently, a source of stress. The district made application for the Reading First grant incorporating the work of the Guided Assessment Project that had been in process for six years prior to Reading First. Within the project, the district relied heavily on the Ohio State University Literacy Framework to provide structure and substance to primary literacy instruction. They chose not to buy a basal since it was the adoption of a literature-based basal series four years prior to starting the Guided Assessment Project that necessitated the literacy restructuring effort in the first place. The district leadership was committed to designing a comprehensive curricular framework that supported the development of teachers who understood the “why” of
literacy instruction as well as the “how.” However, the decision not to use a basal was a point of contention with the Reading First federal and state leadership. The district went through several rounds of discussion on this topic with the state leadership first saying that their grant was not accepted because of the lack of the basal, then telling them it would be accepted, and then indicating that they would be watched carefully because they chose not to buy a new basal series. This situation with the state leadership provided a level of complication that proved to be a distraction to the implementation of the Reading First grant. It should be noted that the administration primarily dealt with this issue. The teaching staff was aware of the situation but was protected by their administrators from any direct involvement. The administrators credit their participation in the Guided Assessment Project with the fact that they felt prepared to deal with the requests for multiple forms of documentation of their curriculum and in most cases, they were able to deal with and confront ambiguities when dealing with both state and federal requests.

After this initial source of stress, the Reading First state leadership issue continued to be a source of frustration for the district leadership. One of the factors was that the state provided inconsistent leadership and guidance throughout the first four years of the grant. Technically speaking, there were 10 different state directors of the Reading First grant in four years. Only the regional technical assistance system provided by the state was viewed as stable and was appreciated by the district. The administrators expressed exasperation when dealing with the inconsistent leadership; however, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that, at times, both federal and state levels of leadership were viewed as being inflexible. Administrators spoke to the black and white thinking that was experienced as well as the frustration of dealing with a bureaucracy with which it was difficult to have logical and evidence-based conversations. For example, Reading First was supposed to be all about data; however, the district’s high proficiency scores did not decrease the number of conversations that continue to this day about not having a basal. Furthermore, one of the Reading First elementary schools was nominated for a Reading First award by the district’s Reading First technical assistant;
However, the Reading First state leadership at the time disqualified the school based on the fact that it did not have a basal. The Theodore Roosevelt School District administration was clear in pointing out that the Reading First grant does not indicate that a basal is needed. The grant references that a ‘learning system’ must be in place and the district has a learning system that is resulting in high student achievement. District administrators question why the district’s success has not been acknowledged and celebrated.

Another entity outside of local situations that was viewed as a source of stress was federal and state mandates. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 with its Adequately Yearly Progress component in Pennsylvania is a source of stress for both regular and special education with the dominant pressure being felt by special education. Both administrators and teachers voiced feeling pressured and overwhelmed by the chronic nature of the mandates.

Another finding of the study indicated that the work culture was a source of support and a source of stress for the participants. A principal reported that having to break the social ties with her friends when she became the principal of the building in which they were teaching was considered a lowlight of her career. Another teacher said that seeing her co-workers struggle with the requirements of the Guided Assessment Project caused her stress since she did not see the project as stressful. Her acceptance of the literacy training caused an uncomfortable situation between her and some of her co-workers. This issue of staff relationships extended to how principals interacted with their faculties and what demands that they placed on the teaching staff. This experience speaks to the issue of school culture. Specifically, educators do not work in a secluded environment (Hargreaves, 1998). They work within an occupational culture that determines the way in which change is perceived, experienced, and realized in schools (Sikes, 1992). Often individualism is rewarded by the culture; however, paradoxically it thwarts individuality by promoting superficial forms of interaction and an absence of support for teacher development (Rosenholtz, 1991); therefore, the participants who went against the prevailing cultural norms at the inception of the Guided Assessment Project
and embraced teacher development experienced some form of sanctions from their peers.

Another finding that is supported by the research is that change efforts can improve work environments and energize the social milieu of teaching and learning (Fullan, 2001; Evans, 1996); however, people’s personal responses to change are usually not so optimistic and reactions to change vary from person to person. This research was evidenced in the data by the fact that the Guided Assessment Project and Reading First, both systemic change efforts, were reported as being a source of stress at one point in time or another; however, perceptions differed from participant to participant. For example, a principal who had been a classroom teacher and an instructional support teacher in the district at the beginning of the Guided Assessment Project gives the perspective that the Guided Assessment Project did cause anxiety but she considered it to be “good anxiety” because the Guided Assessment Project was moving the district out of an all time low that was caused by the adoption of the literature-based anthology. However, some of the teachers found the training to be stressful and resisted implementing any of the recommendations made via the professional development opportunities. Others welcomed the new knowledge. Another group of teachers interpreted the need for the literacy project as saying that they were harming their students and that they were doing something bad. Still others did not take the initiative seriously because they felt that the reform effort would not withstand the test of time. However, in reality, the district leadership stood firm and the teachers were held accountable for changing their literacy instruction based on the literacy research that informed the Guided Assessment Project. The district continued to supply intensive, ongoing professional development over a multi-year period for all of the teachers. Materials were bought to support the implementation process and curriculum and assessment committees were formed to facilitate components of the literacy program. Subsequently, the teaching staff came on board slowly and at the present time the workshops offered via the Guided Assessment Project are considered a valuable commodity by the teaching staff, principals, and substitute teachers.

Several of the teachers reported feeling overloaded by the requirements of the
Reading First grant during the third year of the implementation. The teachers talked about the increase in their responsibilities which were viewed as overwhelming and unreasonable. As was noted earlier in this chapter, their responses seemed to support the component of teacher work that Hargreaves (1994) labeled as “intensification.” Consequently, some of the participants reported a decrease in job satisfaction and feelings of personal autonomy as the work load for assessments and interventions increased without additional support being provided. This response could have been a factor of needing more time to incorporate the new requirements into their daily routines since the participants had reported similar feelings at the beginning of the Guided Assessment Project. Some of the participants reported experiencing feelings of guilt, and then resistance to the instructional changes. However, over time and with support they had assimilated the changes into their everyday routines and had developed a level of expertise that allowed them to feel empowered and competent.

When talking about participating in the Guided Assessment Project and Reading First, both the administrators and the teachers experienced feelings of thankfulness that the Guided Assessment Project had been in place before the advent of the Reading First grant. They felt this way because the literacy project had been in place for six years prior to participating in the Reading First grant allowing them time to build both individual and system capacity. The Guided Assessment Project taught the participants about change and provided a pace of implementation that allowed the teachers to experiment with the new instructional practices before being held accountable for their implementation. Therefore, the participants also experienced relief that they did not have to confront the Reading First grant without background knowledge and experience.

The participants also expressed an appreciation for accountability. They were happy that Reading First forced the issue of accountability; however, an important point was that they felt that the district leadership had been working for years at establishing a coherent literacy curriculum via the Guided Assessment Project. It was the combination of the coherent curriculum, years of professional development to support the implementation of the curriculum, and then holding all staff members accountable that
seemed to be the winning combination.

The participants expressed dismay if they would have been held accountable for the requirements of Reading First without the established curriculum and time to learn new teaching skills.

Research Question: How did building level leadership impact how teachers experienced the change process?

Leadership issues emerged in almost all areas of discussions. Building level leadership, specifically, was defined by the participants to include both administrative and teacher leaders and the responses also expanded the definition of leadership to include central office administrators. The data indicated that leadership had an impact in implementing the Reading First grant and it continues to be an issue within the Guided Assessment Project, both of which are major systemic change processes. It also emerged as a factor in teacher development and teacher satisfaction.

When talking about leadership, the district is a study in contrasts. The school board is a constantly shifting entity with ever-changing purposes and goals which has led to five changes in the superintendent’s position over the course of the last 10 years as was noted earlier. However, within the central office two key administrators have had long and stable tenures. The curriculum director has been in her position for the past nine years. Her responsibilities included both K-12 curriculum and federal programs. The special education director has been in her position for the last eight, thus, it was the collaboration of these two directors that has resulted in the successful implementation of the longest running initiative in the history of the district, the Guided Assessment Project and has allowed the district to enjoy a singularity of purpose when it came to literacy instruction and student achievement.

The director of curriculum also had long standing relationships with the elementary administrative team and the Guided Assessment Project was a primary goal of the elementary principals. Therefore, since 1997 literacy instruction has been at the forefront of district planning for the elementary team. Through the efforts of the director
of curriculum, the director of special education, and the elementary principals, the case has been made to the ever-changing number of superintendents and the board of directors time and again that state-of-the-art literacy instruction is crucial for the welfare and future of the children of the district as well as for the more immediate and concrete situation of meeting the mandates of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Subsequently, there was alignment and a clear message down through the levels of leadership for supporting both the Guided Assessment Project and Reading First; however, the level of support varied from principal to principal. It should be noted that the superintendents throughout this time period supported the initiative by maintaining school board support and by not interfering and allowing the central office administrators and the principals to do the work that needed to be done. The importance of this dynamic is not to be underestimated when considering the unpredictable nature of the school board’s decision making; however, the superintendents, as a rule, did not develop a thorough understanding of the literacy project including the importance of the role of the building principal in the implementation process. Consequently, this situation had a negative effect when it came to holding all of the principals accountable for incorporating best practices in literacy in their buildings since the superintendent, not the director of curriculum, had supervisory power over the principals. Therefore, this dynamic contributed to the participants’ view that one of the benefits of Reading First was that it provided the supervision and accountability of the principals that was not made available by the superintendent’s office.

Stability in leadership positions and quality of leadership were major topics that emerged in the data. It appeared that the participants appreciated stability but only when it was coupled with quality. For example, the participants consistently reported a sense of pride in their director of curriculum. They considered her to be a talented leader who is knowledgeable, committed to the students of the district, and has the ability to build strong relationships with board members, administrators, and teachers. It was her leadership that was considered the most instrumental in keeping the district focused on state-of-the-art literacy education. Opinions, however, varied when talking about the
elementary principals. In this case, the elementary school leader positions have been stable in some buildings, but not all and the level of quality varied from principal to principal. This state of affairs affected staff perspectives on leadership.

For example, Smith Elementary and Buchanan Elementary, the focus of this study, are both located within the city limits of Smithville. Both schools have a history of dealing with high poverty populations, with Buchanan having the highest poverty level of all schools in the district. At the time of application for the Reading First grant, it had a 97% poverty rate. Two years before the beginning of the grant, a new principal was assigned to the building which at the time had a 17% proficiency rate on the fifth grade PSSA. The principal had been a third grade teacher in the district as well as an instructional support teacher and a dean of students in the middle school prior to becoming an elementary principal. Buchanan Elementary was her first assignment as a principal. After four years of being the principal at Buchanan Elementary and having turned the school around (PSSA scores hovered around the 70% mark when she left), the principal was then transferred to Smith Elementary, the largest elementary school in the district and one that was not progressing sufficiently. There was a sentiment expressed by the participants that the building leadership was the reason for the lack of consistent growth at Smith Elementary. However, after the new principal had been at Smith for only one year, the teaching staff of Smith and her former building, Buchanan, time and again, noted the superior leadership skills of this principal. The participants talked about her high expectations, love of children, supportive style, knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment, understanding of safety and discipline in the building and in the classrooms, and most of all her ability to hold all teachers accountable without being threatening and without getting involved in personality issues. Many of the participants considered her to be a mentor and the best principal for which they have worked. They also appreciated the psychological safety and the open climate that was established in the building during her tenure.

The participants also experienced other building principals positively. The new principal at Buchanan Elementary was new to administration. Buchanan Elementary was
his first assignment. The data indicated that the switch in leadership had been a smooth transition due to the fact the new principal worked collaboratively with the former principal and did not change the structure that had been instituted. He also used the former principal as a mentor as well as the director of curriculum; therefore, he was easily incorporated into the elementary administrative team as a supportive and motivated member.

These two situations are significant. Both of the elementary schools went through major staff changes and yet due to positive and collaborative leadership, shifts in principals and teaching staff were able to occur in a relatively stress free manner. A theme that started to emerge for the new principals that were viewed in a positive manner by their staffs, was that they had been part of the teaching staff at the beginning of the Guided Assessment Project. Consequently, when they entered an elementary administrative position that required knowledge in curriculum and instruction, specifically in literacy education, they already had a working level of knowledge, the experience necessary to know what needed to be done, and the respect to learn what they needed to know. They required very little adjustment time. They worked well with their literacy coaches and their faculties. Therefore, an unanticipated benefit of participating in the Guided Assessment Project as a teacher was that it was essentially “growing” future leaders for the district.

Furthermore, participating in a long-standing focused initiative was also considered a training ground for many of the principals who had not had the advantage of being a classroom teacher in the Guided Assessment Project. Essentially, the project provided meaningful, job-embedded professional development for the principals. The former principal of Madison Elementary who had participated in the Guided Assessment Project since its inception was one of these principals. The participants interviewed appreciated the fact that they felt valued and trusted by her, that children were her top priority, and she supported the implementation of the Guided Assessment Project and the Reading First grant. In the reshuffling process, however, she was transferred to an elementary that was not a focus of this study.
Reading First was also credited in helping to develop the leadership skills of the building principals. Reading First made certain things mandatory so that principals could “blame” Reading First for some of the implementation issues and thus allowed certain best practices such as an uninterrupted 90-minute block of time for reading instruction to be implemented.

However, not all experiences with principals were positive. In contrast, other participants had negative and disheartening experiences with their principals. For example, the teaching staff from Smith Elementary indicated that their former principal was not trustworthy and created conflict among the teaching staff by playing one staff member off another. Furthermore, this principal seemed to need to control all aspects of the school to the detriment of developing a collaborative environment. In addition, to not developing an environment that was based on trust and predictability, the principal also did not fulfill the requirements of the Reading First grant in terms of the principal’s responsibilities such as supervising classrooms, monitoring assessment data, and facilitating data analysis. Consequently, the school was having difficulty reaching and maintaining consistently high student achievement results and the teachers interviewed experienced significant stress when dealing with this type of leadership. It significantly affected their perspective on the teaching field.

Other members of the teaching staff also reported having had negative experiences with building leaders which affected their development as teachers. One third grade teacher reported that she transferred from one elementary school to another, which necessitated changing grade levels in order to make the transfer, due to the fact that in her previous school the principals had secondary backgrounds and did not understand nor did she feel that they respected elementary education. There was no one to give guidance and to help her develop as a teaching professional. She felt that she was in a rut by her sixth year of teaching due to this situation; however, when she transferred to a Reading First school that had a strong principal and literacy coach, the teacher attributes their support and guidance as “saving” her teaching career. Thus, the data indicated that the quality of leadership affected teachers’ perspective of their career and the level of satisfaction that
they experienced. And the effect worked in both directions – positive and negative.

The discussions of leadership also included the concept of teacher leadership. The data indicated that when the participants thought about leadership their primary thoughts were about either their building principal or their literacy coach. This finding supports the change literature on leadership which indicates within a climate of continuous improvement the total amount of leadership within a school must be shared with the teachers, students, and parents with the principal holding the vision (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Schmoker, 2006). In this study, the literacy coaches were identified as teacher leaders and in some cases a change in a literacy coach had more bearing on the everyday lives of the staff than the change in the principal. Furthermore, the coaches seemed to help facilitate the initiatives in key ways. They were the bridge from the content of the professional development to the personal world of the classroom and the teacher who taught there. Because the literacy coaches were not administrators, the teachers were more willing to ask questions, take risks of implementation, and attend to the data. Furthermore, interacting with the coaches allowed time for each teacher’s process; therefore, when working with a skilled coach, teachers came to rely on them as much as the principal for direction and guidance. Thus, the role of the literacy coach supported the change process by allowing the teachers to experience explanations and then to have time to build their knowledge and experimental base through analysis and debate. I think it is fair to say that the literacy coaches helped many of the teachers to develop a new personal meaning regarding their literacy instruction (Fullan & Miles, 1992) and helped to provide a full spectrum of professional development activities that are needed to implement changes on the classroom level (National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development, 1995).

Another finding in the area of leadership was that administrative leadership, via the Guided Assessment Project, provided moral purpose, along with a vision for literacy education prior to the implementation of the Reading First grant which helped to ameliorate the top-down and political nature of Reading First (Fullan, 2001). Top-down initiatives are those that are imposed on a system from an outside source usually without
input from the constituents who will have to implement the change effort while also being the focus of the change effort (Fink & Stoll, 1998, Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 1998). They usually do not take the time to build grass roots support; therefore, have proven themselves to be unsuccessful over time (Hargreaves, 1998; House & McQuillan, 1998; Smith, 1996). Consequently, Reading First, which was predominantly a top-down reform effort, benefited from the foundation that was established by the Guided Assessment Project. For example, the rationale for embarking on the literacy journey via the Guided Assessment Project was made clear to the teaching staff by the increase in instructional support and special education referrals and placements. There were individuals in the system who knew things had gone awry and had sounded a distress call; therefore, the vision was established early. The details of the mission evolved over time. In addition, in due time external forces such as the establishment of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment followed by the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act into The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 added to the credibility and the importance of the district’s voyage into a major system change effort in early literacy. However, it is significant that the district embarked on the literacy journey out of concern for its students.

A related finding in the leadership area was that district leadership provided coherent and sustained support for the systemic change efforts and the participants expressed gratitude for this consistency of purpose (Fullan, 2001). This fact speaks to the leadership of the district especially that of the superintendent who signed on to project in the spring of 1997, the three superintendents that followed, and the director of curriculum who has provided the guidance for the district throughout the last 10 years. Furthermore, the leadership of the district, primarily that of the curriculum director and the special education director, provided the coherence needed to make sense of the Reading First grant and to allow for the meaningful and efficacious incorporation into the existing system. This level of central office capacity then developed an elementary administrative team that over time developed a centrality of purpose. There was no question that the goal was to have most of their students be proficient readers by the end of third grade
even if they did not know how to accomplish that goal by themselves. Thus the team was willing to participate in a collaborative partnership with the Central Intermediate Unit.

Another finding of the study related to leadership was the importance of the background of principals. The data indicated that if there is to be successful implementation of initiatives the principals need to be a ‘finger-tip away’ from the classroom in order to have a high level of implementation within a building. The participants felt that their building leaders need to know how to do what teachers are being asked to do so that observations and evaluations make sense. They wanted their principals to attend the same trainings that they were attending. And beyond observations, the teachers want “real” feedback regardless of its valence. They want the feedback in order to grow in their profession. With many of the participants this translated into wanting the principal in their rooms on an ongoing and relevant manner.

Research Question: How did the interpretations of these experiences affect the implementation of the Reading First grant?

When reviewing all of the participant experiences and their interpretation of those experiences, the parameters of the answer to this question have already been formulated. However, to review, it is clear that the implementation of the Reading First grant as of this point in time is viewed as a success in Theodore Roosevelt School District by the participants; however, the level of success is attributed to the fact that the district had been involved in the Guided Assessment Project for six years prior to the inception of Reading First. The Guided Assessment Project was seen as paving the way for a relatively easy implementation of the Reading First grant. Furthermore, the concept of Reading First did not stand alone as a separate entity in the minds of the participants. It was always merged with the participants’ experiences with the Guided Assessment Project. It was difficult to reference one without referring to the other; however, the participants voiced the sentiment that implementing the Reading First grant was not a major event in their lives since they had participated in the Guided Assessment Project.
Therefore, within this case study it was clear that the effects of implementing the Reading First grant and its accompanying requirements were ameliorated by the district’s involvement in the Guided Assessment Project. Participating in the Guided Assessment Project seems to have developed the capacity in both the individual and the system; that is the capacity of individuals to change and the capacity of the system to transform (Fullan, 1998), allowing the participants to integrate the rules and regulations of the Reading First grant into the schema established through their work with the literacy project. All participants except for one spoke to this issue. And the only reason that one participant could not discriminate between Reading First and the Guided Assessment Project was because she had not been a part of the primary Guided Assessment Project literacy training. Therefore, the incorporation of the Reading First grant into their everyday lives was not viewed by either administrators or by teaching staff as a major event during the first two years of implementation. This changed during year three when additional tasks were added by the federal and state leadership which caused an issue of overload for the teaching staff.

However, an advantage of the grant was that certain Reading First requirements enhanced the existing infrastructure of the district. For example, mandating the establishment of the 90-minute reading block and common planning time along with earmarking money for materials and services such as tutoring programs added strength to the literacy program. Furthermore, Reading First helped to standardize elements and conditions across schools that promoted a focus on student learning, such as using formative assessment data to guide instruction, by removing the implementation of those elements and conditions from subculture influences. Reading First also helped teachers and administrators deal with work culture issues. For example, principals used the grant as the reason that they were forced to implement certain changes which may have been perceived as negative by their faculties. This reality seemed to take the pressure off of administrator-teacher relationships.

Another advantage of Reading First in conjunction with the Guided Assessment Project was the development of a coherent literacy program. The coherence of the
literacy education had many advantages. One that was voiced by the participants that were relatively new to education indicated that the structure and comprehensive nature of the literacy program allowed new teachers to develop as individuals rather than be at the mercy of the school culture. Also, the coherent literacy program was also referenced in conversations about accountability. The data indicated that the teachers valued accountability that was based on the coherent literacy program. They valued it even though it may have been breaking a cultural norm of privacy. They appreciated that all teachers were held to the same standards and that personality and/or favoritism were superseded by the accountability requirements. However, it was significant that the accountability measures were based on a literacy learning system for which the district had provided innumerable hours of professional development. Therefore, it appears that the combination of accountability measures and a coherent literacy curriculum, which was implemented with care, provided for a powerful force within the district. It is also noteworthy, that the teachers valued a system that promoted high student achievement.

Within the context of accountability, it was interesting to note the participants’ appreciation of the Reading First grant; however, when dealing with the Reading First federal and state leadership a reverse situation emerged. It seemed the district was able to hold the federal and state leadership of Reading First accountable in both an instructional and a political context based on the knowledge they obtained over the years by being a part of the Guided Assessment Project. The Guided Assessment Project allowed the district to look critically at the requirements of Reading First and to make informed decisions. For example, the Reading First leadership would often ask for evidence of scientifically-based reading research in the district’s core curriculum. The director of curriculum, working with the literacy coaches, would send a myriad of documents giving evidence of such research. Often the documents would be lost or partial reports would be sent to federal monitors by the state on which evaluations would be based. The district, through the efforts of the director of curriculum, was able to point out the inconsistencies and inadequacies of such evaluations since she possessed a wealth of knowledge of literacy education and the curricular framework on which the district’s literacy
Another finding of this study was related to professional development. Butler (2000) indicates that staff development represents a change within the school district; however, by design, it provides support at the organizational level for the change effort it represents. It should be noted that both reform efforts provided job-embedded professional development; however, the participants were primarily referring to the Guided Assessment Project when they talked about professional development. The Guided Assessment Project had provided years of intense professional development opportunities in literacy education which was viewed as a support by the participants. They appreciated professional development via the Guided Assessment Project because it provided the supporting research, a rationale for implementation, time for discussion, and time to experiment. They viewed the content of the Reading First professional development as much more didactic and without explanation. It should be noted that the participants were referring to the workshop portion of the professional development provided as part of the grant. They were not referencing the literacy coaches which were considered invaluable sources of support by both the administrative and teaching staff.

The data indicated that the participants valued the professional development because it allowed them to develop a sense of empowerment and autonomy. It supported their desire to be skilled professionals that could teach their students at a high level and the majority of participants felt a sense of pride in their ability to teach children how to read and write. This finding supported that of Scott, Stone, and Dinham (2000) that indicated that teachers’ view of their teaching experiences pointed to the psychic rewards of seeing children learn and making a difference in young people’s lives. The participants also valued having a literacy project that kept them up to date with the latest research including working with literacy coaches. They spoke with an air of confidence and felt pride that their district was up on the latest literacy research and expressed a sense of thankfulness to their curriculum director for staying the course and for providing coherence to literacy education.

Another finding of this study that proved to be interesting was related to the
participants’ ability to critique the design of the Reading First implementation plan. Because the participants had participated in the Guided Assessment Project prior to Reading First, it allowed them a perspective on what life would have been like in Reading First without the benefit of participating in the Guided Assessment Project. With this perspective in mind, the participants indicated that the Reading First grant and its evaluation system would not have provided a sufficient amount of time to build capacity in the individuals participating in the grant nor time for the system to transform before expecting a significant increase in student achievement (Fullan, 1998). The Reading First timeline was viewed as being unrealistic for a system that had not developed an infrastructure for dealing with the complexities of the change process. Time to learn all of the new skills was not provided, either for the administrators, the teachers, or the system. Fullan and Miles (1992) report that change or continuous improvement involves developing a new personal meaning and to do so involves learning. Those involved in the change must not only experience explanations, they must have time to build their knowledge and experimental base through analysis and debate. According to the participants, the Reading First grant did not allow sufficient time for the learning process before expecting significant changes in student achievement.

Furthermore, the Reading First grant would not have provided time for the participants to develop an understanding of the change process nor did it provide a schema that allowed for a proactive approach to issues that accompany most change efforts. This is a significant omission since Fullan and Miles (1992) identified one of the reasons reforms fail is that leaders of the efforts do not take the time to identify participants’ personal maps of change, which are often based on invalid representations of the change process, and then fail to provide a working schema that can offer guidance to individuals as they progress through a systemic change process. However, the Guided Assessment Project did provide training and time for the participants to develop an understanding of the change process as well as to confront issues in a proactive manner. This phenomenon then supported the implementation of the Reading First grant. Therefore, issues such as resistance to changing one’s teaching practice, needing time for
experimentation, developing a new set of skills and implementing changes in classroom environments were challenges that had been dealt with prior to the inception of the Reading First grant.

Lessons Learned

In this section I will, initially, state the lessons that I have learned from this study. Secondly, I will describe the role each lesson played in the current context and, thirdly, I will follow each context discussion with strategies for taking advantage of each lesson in future change efforts.

Lesson One

*Readiness building on multiple levels is a key ingredient in effecting change.*

In this study readiness proved to be a significant issue. According to the participants, the Guided Assessment Project had provided the knowledge, the experiences, and the time for district personnel to understand what it meant to participate in a systems level reform project. In other words, it had readied the district for systemic literacy change. Without this prior experience, the respondents indicated that the implementation of the Reading First grant would have been overwhelming since it did not address the individual characteristics of each targeted district and/or building, strategies for entering each district and/or building, or the application of research-based principles of systemic change. The Reading First grant, essentially, had a one-size-fits-all approach to reform regardless of the status and state of each district and/or building at the time of implementation.

Strategies for Building Readiness

The following strategies may prove useful in future reform efforts to address the
issue of readiness-building.

1. Prepare personnel (e.g., policymakers, grant writers, administrators, technical assistants) working on a federal and state level with the understanding of the reform and all of its accompanying tenets as well as knowledge of how to prepare each district and/or building for the implementation process to effect successful change.

2. Incorporate readiness strategies such as the development of an individualized entry plan into the timeline of the grant.

3. Base the entry plan for each targeted district and/or building on the needs of that particular district and/or building.

Lesson Two

*Understanding the change process and the phenomenology of change is a critical component of effecting change.*

The findings of the study revealed that one of the reasons that the Guided Assessment Project was viewed as successful was that it focused on the change process at the beginning of its implementation plan and that the steps of the project carefully and strategically incorporated knowledge of the district’s cultural norms into the implementation process. The project used its professional development plan to provide explicit instruction on research-based principles of change which highlighted the dynamics of the change process and focused on building relationships and problem-solving strategies at the outset of the implementation. Furthermore, the Guided Assessment Project used the research on change to help guide the project throughout the six years prior to the implementation of the Reading First grant.

In contrast, the Reading First grant did not address any of the aforementioned issues. The grant and its evaluation processes did not focus on change or the phenomenology of change. The grant’s requirements and its evaluation processes did not
ask each individual about their world and, subsequently, what effect the implementation of the grant would have on that world. The grant did not seek out information on the culture of the districts or the idiosyncratic characteristics of each district that may affect the implementation process. Essentially, the implementation process of the grant neglected the fact that no innovation can succeed unless it attends to the realities of people and place (Evans, 1996).

Strategies for Developing an Understanding of the Change Process and the Phenomenology of Change to Successfully Effect Change

The following strategies may prove useful for future reform efforts in developing an understanding of the change process and the phenomenology of change.

1. Have all personnel from which the reform effort originates (e.g., federal, state, or private organizations) develop an understanding of the change process, the phenomenology of change, and the role those concepts play in effecting successful change.

2. Incorporate such knowledge into the structure of the reform effort including the entry plan, the technical assistance system, and the evaluation processes.

3. Investigate the following areas that can speak to the phenomenology of change. These areas can be a major focus of the entry plan:
   a. Investigate the history and culture of each district/building including the role of the school board. This knowledge needs to be added to standard demographic information so that it can inform approaches used within a particular site.
   b. Assess the resources of the particular site and ascertain the capacity of the individuals within the system and the capacity of the system in relation to the reform effort. This is critical information that needs to inform the content of professional development activities and the pace of implementation.
c. Develop an understanding of teacher values and the complexity and idiosyncratic nature of different educational environments.

d. Identify school cultural norms.

e. Identify and respect resistance issues and put them into the context of the local culture with the understanding that systemic change efforts regardless of their etiology take place within the context of the district life.

Lesson Three

*Ongoing differentiated professional development needs to be provided to meet the needs of the various stake holders.*

The participants in the study indicated that the multi-year professional development plan of the Guided Assessment Project was viewed as a valued commodity. They expressed appreciation for the design of the job-embedded professional development in which rationale for the changes in educational practices were given and in which reflection, questions, and discussion were valued. They also appreciated time being allocated for experimentation. Furthermore, the staff development was differentiated based on the needs of individual disciplines.

Many of the participants did not respond favorably to the professional development provided via the Reading First grant; however, it should be noted that the participants voiced only support and positive comments for the literacy coach positions that were funded by the grant. They did not consider the literacy coaches as part of the professional development plan and were primarily referring to conferences and workshops. With this definition in mind, many of the teachers felt that they had no say in what was being asked of them and expressed resentment at losing their autonomy and not having their professional judgment valued. On the other hand, the Reading First grant focused many professional development activities on the development of the literacy coach and this focus was appreciated by the literacy coaches that were interviewed. However, it should be noted that the implementation of the grant in Pennsylvania did not
provide extensive guidance for the development of ongoing, differentiated professional development plans for each Reading First site.

Strategies for Designing Ongoing Differentiated Professional Development to Meet the Needs of Various Stakeholders

The following strategies may prove useful for future reform efforts in developing ongoing differentiated professional development to meet the needs of various stakeholders:

1. Utilizing professional development research and professional organizations as resources for the design of the professional development plans.
2. Incorporating professional development readiness activities into the entry plan for all stakeholders.
3. These readiness activities can include the following topic areas:
   a. Understanding the rationale or need for the reform effort.
   b. Understanding the goals of the reform effort.
   c. Understanding the individual roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder group that will be essential in supporting the implementation of the reform effort. This is a first step in developing a consistency of purpose which will help guide all facets of the reform effort.
   d. Understanding in depth research-based principles of change.
4. Differentiating the content of the professional development to meet the needs of a particular subject area or role once the foundational knowledge is shared with all key participants. For example, the data from this study indicates that principals who supervise early literacy programs need to have a strong understanding of early literacy education in order to support teacher development and high student achievement. Therefore, if they don’t, the professional development can be designed to address that need.
5. Designing the professional development plan so that it allows time for learning new skills which involves not only having the skill demonstrated but also time for discussion and practice accompanied by supportive and critical feedback. In this study, the role of the literacy coach was an instrumental and significant addition to the comprehensive professional development plan that the district had used for the Guided Assessment Project which facilitated discussion and practice on the part of the teachers. The plan also needs to foster positive and trusting relationships which can be done through strategies and structures such as professional learning communities.

6. Targeting the development of an infrastructure that supports continuous improvement as part of the professional development plan.

Lesson Four

*During implementation, establishing procedures for ongoing assessment, feedback, and communication helps to facilitate lasting change.*

A finding in this study indicated that the design of the Guided Assessment Project and the relationships that the director of curriculum and the director of special education had with the Theodore Roosevelt elementary administrators and faculty allowed for formal and informal communication structures that informed the progress and the next steps of the literacy initiative on an ongoing basis. The district had established a system that allowed communication to occur in an easy and flexible manner while having discussions based on student achievement data. Consequently, this situation played a major role in establishing healthy and productive problem solving approaches to the challenges that arose as deep change was occurring. However, it should be noted that it was the Reading First grant that forced ongoing discussions about student achievement across all Reading First buildings and, subsequently, all Reading First classrooms that resulted in significant increases in the use of student achievement data to guide instruction.
Strategies for Establishing Procedures for Ongoing Assessment, Feedback, and Communication to Facilitate Lasting Change During Implementation

The following strategies may prove useful for future reform efforts in establishing procedures during implementation for ongoing assessment, feedback, and communication to facilitate lasting change:

1. Establishing regular administrative meetings that focus on the intent of the reform effort with a focus on classroom instruction.

2. The creation of a professional development plan that includes ongoing, differentiated instruction with the purpose of the plan being two-fold: (1) to develop a reflective teaching process with the goal of increasing student achievement, and (2) a vehicle for communication of goals, changes in procedures, and problem-solving.

3. The establishment of an assessment plan.

4. Established procedures such as an assessment calendar, an assessment committee to oversee the content and process of assessments, a professional development calendar, procedures for problem-solving, and procedures for recursive communication at all levels of the organization.

5. Establishing frequent small group meetings that focus on the administration of assessments, assessment data, and classroom instruction.

Lesson Five

*Early accountability demands without the opportunity to build capacity and mastery are more harmful than helpful.*

The findings of this study indicated that since the participants had participated in the Guided Assessment Project prior to Reading First, it allowed them a perspective on
what life would have been like in Reading First without the benefit of participating in the Guided Assessment Project. With this perspective in mind, the participants indicated that the Reading First grant and its evaluation system would not have provided a sufficient amount of time to build capacity in the individuals participating in the grant nor time for the system to transform before expecting a significant increase in student achievement (Fullan, 1998). The Reading First timeline was viewed as being unrealistic for a system that had not developed an infrastructure for dealing with the complexities of the change process. The respondents theorized that the grant would have created a chaotic situation in which the staff was being held responsible without being given reasonable time to build capacity. Accountability without reasonable support would not have resulted in increased student achievement. It would have only served to put the district in a paralyzed position. In other words, heavy accountability demands should follow capacity and not precede the development of deep understanding and skills on the part of implementers.

Strategies for Ensuring that Accountability Demands are Balanced with the Opportunity to Build Capacity and Mastery

The following strategies may prove useful for future reform efforts in balancing accountability demands and opportunities to build capacity and mastery:

1. Use of the entry plan to ascertain the status of the district in terms of student achievement, resources, political realities, and district cultures. The data gathered via the entry plan can then inform a timeline for accountability.
2. Informing all stakeholders of the rationale, goals, roles and responsibilities that will be involved in the reform effort via professional development activities.
3. The establishment of an assessment plan.
4. Using the professional development plan to provide opportunities in which participants develop an understanding of and proficiency in administering assessments.
5. Utilizing student achievement data to guide the content of ongoing professional development.
6. Incorporating time for discussion, reflection, experimentation and critical feedback of new teaching practices into the professional development plan.
7. Monitoring the capacity of the system to support the changes in classroom practices and, based on feedback, making adjustments to the system.

Lesson Six

*Mandates imposed by external change efforts sometimes have value in overcoming obstacles within the context.*

The findings of the study indicated that an advantage of the grant was that certain Reading First requirements enhanced the existing infrastructure of the district by overcoming barriers that existed within the school bureaucracy and culture. For example, mandating the establishment of the 90-minute reading block and common planning time along with earmarking money for materials and services such as literacy coaches and tutoring programs added strength to the literacy program. This latter benefit of the additional money that funded literacy coaches was of paramount importance to the continuity of the work started via the Guided Assessment Project. The Guided Assessment Project had developed a firm foundation for literacy instruction within the district and had built capacity in both individuals and the system; however, the district budget did not allow for additional personnel which were needed to support full implementation of comprehensive literacy in all K-3 classrooms. The Reading First funds allocated to the funding of literacy coaches completed the implementation cycle and allowed for critical data work and teacher support to occur. Reading First also helped to standardize elements and conditions across schools that promoted a focus on student learning, such as using formative assessment data to guide instruction, by removing the implementation of those elements and conditions from subculture influences. Reading First also helped teachers and administrators deal with work culture issues. For example,
principals used the grant as the reason that they were forced to implement certain changes which may have been perceived as negative by their faculties. This reality seemed to take the pressure off of administrator-teacher relationships.

Strategies for Using Reform Efforts to Enhance the Instructional Program

The following strategies may prove useful for future reform efforts in using those efforts to enhance instructional programs:

1. Using entry plan findings, such as district characteristics and district cultural norms, to determine district-based negative elements that undermine effective educational practices. These elements may then be addressed by the requirements of the change effort.

2. Using entry plan findings to determine district-based strengths that support effective education practices. These elements may then be used as foundational qualities upon which further improvements are built.

3. Monitoring participants’ reactions to the changes and using a phenomenology of change framework to gather information to understand resistances and barriers.

4. Using this knowledge to build support systems that will encourage informed implementation.

Lesson Seven

*The criteria used to assess the effectiveness of change efforts should be based on student performance and not ideological values.*

This lesson was evidenced within the study when the district administrators voiced their frustration with being held accountable for requirements that were not part of the grant such as the issue of not adopting a basal series. The grant references that a ‘learning system’ must be in place that results in high student achievement as measured by designated summative assessments. By definition, Reading First was supposed to be
all about data; however, the district’s high proficiency scores did not decrease the number of conversations that continue to this day about not having a basal. The district administrators continue to question why the district’s success has not been acknowledged and celebrated, thus, this situation has lowered the credibility of the national reform effort in the eyes of district personnel and has contributed to a wary attitude toward future reform efforts.

Strategies to Ensure that the Criteria Used to Assess the Effectiveness of Change Efforts is Based on Student Performance and Not Ideological Values

The following strategies may prove useful in ensuring that the criteria used to assess the effectiveness of change efforts is based on student performance and not ideological values:

1. Developing the background knowledge of change efforts’ leadership and policy personnel relevant to the content of the reform.
2. Assigning personnel with the appropriate backgrounds to leadership and policy positions within reform efforts.
3. Creating small group discussion forums that include reform effort leadership personnel and participants from the targeted districts. These forums would occur on a regular basis throughout the grant’s tenure with the goal of promoting positive working relationships, a reciprocal communication system, a venue for problem-solving, and the development of common ground.

Lesson Eight

*Literacy policy has major implications for determining the appropriateness, relevance, and eventual success of national reform efforts in literacy. It is important that the policy is not limited by ideological values.*

The findings of this study indicate that the Theodore Roosevelt School District’s
effort in literacy education was informed by both the Guided Assessment Project and the Reading First grant; however, the Guided Assessment Project had provided the knowledge and opportunity to develop an understanding of comprehensive literacy. It was the district’s background knowledge in literacy that allowed them to develop a literacy program that far exceeded the five essential elements of reading as determined by the National Reading Panel and required by Reading First.

Strategies for Developing Literacy Policies That Are Not Limited by Ideological Values

The following strategies may prove useful in developing literacy policies that are not limited by ideological values:

1. Provide a comprehensive conceptual framework of literacy so that educators may develop a personal understanding of the “Big Picture” of literacy development and instruction and not be limited by incomplete recommendations.

2. Develop policies that allow for and provide structures, resources, and accountability requirements that would lead change agents and their practitioners to make sense of literacy within their own context.

3. Provide support from the state departments of education that helps districts to interpret policy in contextually sensitive ways.

Lesson Nine

Skilled leadership is an essential component of the change process. The relationship between leadership and change is reciprocal. Effective leaders are needed to implement change and effective change builds skilled leaders.

The findings of this study indicated that leadership within the district played a critical role in implementing the Reading First grant and it continues to be an issue within the Guided Assessment Project. The leadership of the federal and state personnel also
played a factor in the implementation of the Reading First grant, although, in this case it was primarily viewed as a negative factor except for the leadership provided via the regional technical assistance system. Leadership within the district also emerged as a factor in teacher development and teacher satisfaction. However, an unanticipated finding of the study specified that participation in the Guided Assessment Project as a teacher provided significant job-embedded training for one day moving into a building administrator position. Those principals who had been teachers throughout the Guided Assessment Project and then moved into elementary principal positions exhibited the required knowledge in curriculum and instruction, specifically in literacy education, that they needed to successfully guide their buildings in a continuous improvement effort. Specifically, they had a working level of knowledge of literacy education, the experience necessary to know what needed to be done to continually guide the faculty, and the respect to learn what they needed to know. Furthermore, participating in a long-standing focused initiative was also considered a training ground for many of the principals who had not had the advantage of being a classroom teacher in the Guided Assessment Project. Essentially, the project provided meaningful, job-embedded professional development for the present-day principals and for future principals.

Strategies for Developing a Reciprocal Relationship Between Change and Leadership

The following strategies may prove useful in developing a reciprocal relationship between change and leadership:

1. Participation in a research-based, long-term systemic change initiative that provides a model for effective change.
2. Making systems, components of systems, and their relationships explicit. This helps to ensure that participants are developing a conscious awareness of the complexity of working in schools.
   a. For example, having a requirement within the project that mandates
principals’ attendance at trainings in literacy instruction makes it clear that being an effective instructional leader involves a focus on classroom instruction.

b. Their attendance builds credibility of the reform effort in the teachers’ eyes and also helps to ensure that their principals will know what they are seeing when they enter a classroom.

3. Having focused district leadership that provides coherence for the system in relation to the change effort.

4. Being explicit about the change process and the phenomenology of change with all stakeholders as the district personnel progress through the change effort. For example:

   a. Teach about the implementation dip when teaching about change at the beginning of the implementation process and then identify when participants are in the dip and relate it back to their learning on the change process.

   b. Identify when the participants are experiencing anxiety and/or problems are arising and relate back to what was learned about the role of anxiety and problems within a successful change effort.

5. Creation of concrete systems that are applied across the district such as the assessment plan, the schedule of assessments, a standardized classroom walk-through instrument, a coherent and relevant method of doing weekly lesson plans, a flexible schedule for the literacy block, a protocol for grade level meetings, and protocols for analyzing student formative assessment data.

Lesson Ten

*Technical assistants are change agents that provide critical leadership within a systemic change effort. Their background requires expertise in a multitude of areas.*

The technical assistant position proved to be one that was valued by the
participants and provided a source of leadership that mediated the frequent changes in state leadership. Furthermore, the position was instrumental in leading the district through the change process.

In this case, my role as the external consultant for the Guided Assessment Project set the stage for the type of technical assistance that the district received in Reading First. As the external consultant for the Guided Assessment Project, I connected the district with the knowledge base in literacy, systemic change, and assessment as well as developmental, differentiated, and scaffolded instruction. Furthermore, I was the primary professional developer as well as the lead change agent. These roles allowed me to have ready access to the classrooms and the administrative team and helped to develop my long-term relationship with the district, which proved to be advantageous in guiding the systemic change effort. My relationship also allowed me to develop an understanding of the school cultures and to gauge climate and responses as the literacy efforts progressed over time. Ultimately, the administrative team adopted me as a trusted member and allowed me to use my knowledge of systemic change to develop their leadership practices. Subsequently, my move to the Reading First technical assistant position was uneventful. My role essentially remained the same with the additional responsibility of monitoring the implementation of the grant.

Strategies for Developing Technical Assistants as Knowledgeable Change Agents

The following strategies may prove useful in developing technical assistants as knowledgeable change agents:

1. Select technical assistants that demonstrate a strong knowledge base and professional practice in the focus area of the reform effort; in this case technical assistants needed to be well versed in literacy education.
2. Identify technical assistants who work from a research base in the focus area.
3. Identify technical assistants who can implement and support relevant professional development activities.
4. Provide in-depth training in systemic change and in models of consultation for all technical assistants so that they understand the stages and dynamics of change as well as their consultative role. Such knowledge will support them in guiding districts through the non-linear and evolutionary process of change since it is essential that the technical assistants know how to “move” the system.

5. Select personnel who demonstrate communication skills that focus on building collaborative structures, negotiating conflict in positive ways, celebrating diversity in thinking, and keeping the big picture in mind at all times.

6. Identify technical assistants who feel comfortable working in classrooms as well as interacting with central office administrators in a positive and collegial manner.

7. Create support systems that allow technical assistants ample time for frequent, ongoing, and systematic school visitations.

Concluding Comments

This phenomenological case study of a Reading First district attempted to ascertain the experiences, beliefs, values, and interpretations of administrators and teachers in two elementary buildings who are participating in the national initiative. The study also asked how those experiences, beliefs, values, and interpretations of the administrators and teachers affected the implementation of the Reading First grant. It is my hope that the analyses of the data as well as the findings and implications have spoken to the goals of this study and that a thorough and accurate accounting has been presented. It has been a joy to put down on paper the experiences of the administrators and teachers as well as my own, understanding that our experiences may inform, and at best, ultimately enhance the work of systemic change in schools across the nation.
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Appendix A
Interview Schedule for Interview 1

Name__________________________________________________________
Date/Time of interview_____________________________________________
Start time/end time________________________________________________
School Building__________________________________________________
Present Teaching assignment_______________________________________
Number of years teaching/types of assignments_______________________
Number of years in Reading First school/assignments__________________

Tell me about your career as a teacher?

What are some of the highlights?

What are some of the lowlights?

How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

What was your teaching like before Reading First?

What was the school like before Reading First?

I’d like you describe the Reading First initiative to me in detail and pretend that I was not involved with it.
Appendix B
Interview Schedule for Interview 2

Name:

Date:

Please describe for me what it was like to be a teacher who was participating in the Reading First initiative?

How did participating in the Reading First initiative impact you personally?

How did participating in the Reading First initiative impact you as a teacher?

Please describe your approach to implementing the ideas/concepts that were focused on in Reading First?

Tell me about the role that leadership played in your experience with the Reading First reform effort.

What were the primary benefits of Reading First?

What were the primary drawbacks?

If you could go back and redesign the Reading First initiative and how it was implemented, what would you do?
Edwina Frasca-Stuart, M.S.

Education

Pennsylvania State University
- 1976  M.S.  Special Education

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
- 1974  B.S.  Special Education

Certifications

- Pennsylvania Curriculum and Instruction Supervisor’s Certification (2004)
- Pennsylvania Special Education Supervisor’s Certification (2000)
- Pennsylvania Principal’s Certification (2000)
- Pennsylvania Reading Specialist Certification (2003)
- Master’s of Science in Education (1976)
- Pennsylvania Permanent Teaching Certification-Special Education (Emotionally Disturbed K-12) (1978)

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