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## The implementation of first steps in four primary classrooms

Janet Hunter  
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**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF *FIRST STEPS* IN FOUR PRIMARY  
CLASSROOMS**

**BY**

**Janet Hunter B.A.**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Award of**

**Bachelor of Education with Honours**

**at the Faculty of Education,  
Department of Language Arts Education,  
Edith Cowan University**

**Date of Submission: 25th March, 1997.**

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

The *First Steps* Project was developed by the Education Department of Western Australia to facilitate literacy learning of students who were perceived to be "at risk". The project has resulted in state-wide professional development for teachers, and the subsequent marketing of the program interstate and overseas. The purpose of this study is to present an insight into the various ways that teachers use *First Steps* in their classrooms and to discover where different teachers stand within the theoretical framework of language learning, and what orientation and experiences lead them to make the planning, teaching and evaluation choices they make.

The study examined the literacy teaching practices of teachers in four classrooms in Perth metropolitan schools. In two of these classrooms, two teachers taught together in team-teaching situations. The teachers reflected a diversity of professional development experiences related to *First Steps*. One teacher had received *First Steps* professional development in a Core School, which was supported by four Collaborative Teachers. Another teacher had learned about *First Steps* as part of her teacher education program at University. The other teachers in the study had received their professional development through Central or District Office, and two of these had received further training as *First Steps* Focus Teachers.

Data was collected through participant-observation and interviews. Using a form of educational criticism (Eisner, 1985), a case-study was constructed for each classroom and a cross-case analysis was performed to identify patterns of shared or conflicting understandings and the ways in which these understandings influenced language learning events.

All the teachers in the study used a variety of *First Steps* teaching strategies, and all teachers, to varying extents, used the *First Steps* developmental continua. Teachers who appeared to have a deeper understanding of the philosophies of literacy development underpinning *First Steps* were more able to manipulate *First Steps* resources and teaching strategies to suit to needs of their own particular teaching situation. While all teachers made planning decisions on the basis of the assessment of their students' progress, this process most often happened in teachers' heads, rather than being recorded in any documents. Teachers who demonstrated a deep understanding of *First Steps* theoretical principles appeared to have internalised the *First Steps* developmental indicators as part of their tacit monitoring system. Other teachers seemed to have their own sets of indicators, which they translated to "*First Steps* language" when the time came to record students' progress on the developmental continua.

The study demonstrates that, while all case-study teachers used a variety of *First Steps* practices in their classrooms, both for teaching and assessing students' learning, the extent to which teachers used and adapted *First Steps* materials was influenced not only by their professional development experiences, but also by their own life-histories and the context of their teaching situations, and the ways in which these factors impacted on their understandings about the nature of literacy development.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or a diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature.

Date...25 March 1977.....

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

The W A Education Department's *First Steps* project was conceived in 1988, "in response to a growing perception in schools and the Central Office of the Education Department that many children who were experiencing difficulties in learning Literacy [sic] were not having their needs adequately met." (Deschamp, 1995a, p.1). The State Government at the time allocated a large budget to facilitate the implementation of *First Steps*, the purpose of which was to raise standards of literacy among Western Australian school children, particularly disadvantaged primary students. This resulted in the largest professional development program undertaken by the Education Department of Western Australia, with professional development in *First Steps* eventually being made available to all government schools in the State.

The Education Department of Western Australia (n.d., p.1) describes *First Steps* as "a resource designed to help schools, teachers and systems achieve the literacy objectives and goals they adopted for their students." Three elements of support were offered to schools through *First Steps*; school development, professional development and curriculum development.

The school development element of the program provided schools with the opportunity to formulate whole-school policies relating to the implementation of *First Steps* and the use of the *First Steps* materials. In this way, the school as a community was able to share information and ideas to ensure continuity and cohesion, and to set and strive to achieve shared goals. Initially, schools were required to agree to a whole-school commitment to *First Steps* as a condition of their involvement with the project, although this condition was not imposed on schools which received their professional development some years later.

Through the professional development element of *First Steps*, systems were set up through which teachers could be provided with high quality professional development and on-going support. The curriculum development element recognised that literacy education in Australia was at that time moving away from the sequential teaching of content from a syllabus, towards a greater emphasis on student outcomes. The hypothesis that all children can be more effectively helped to progress when teaching is directed to their individual point of need, formed the basis for the creation of developmental continua that would help teachers clearly assess what their students were able to do with language in its various modes, and what teaching they would need to progress from that point. Linked to these assessment materials were resource materials which created a practical link between assessment and teaching.

Deschamp (1995a) documents the following history: The project was trialed in 1989/90 in those school districts which were seen to have the greatest need, that is, high numbers of students who were identified as being "at risk". Each participating district allowed for four **Core Schools**, which would receive total support because of their high degree of need; and five **Cell Schools**, which would receive partial support because of a lesser degree of need. Teachers in Core Schools received substantial, ongoing professional development and the support of specially trained "Collaborative Teachers". The role of the Collaborative Teacher was to provide in-class support for teachers who had undertaken professional development in *First Steps*.

As an outcome of what was seen, there was a high demand from other schools to be provided with *First Steps* professional development. The Education Department attempted to meet these needs by providing in-service courses, but these schools were not resourced with Collaborative Teachers. The cost of these in-service courses was covered by the schools' own professional development resources.



An increasing number of schools requested involvement in the project, and in 1991 Focus Teachers were introduced, so that in-school support could be maintained for project schools, albeit spread more thinly. Focus Teachers received similar training to Collaborative Teachers, but undertook the role of Focus Teacher alongside their normal classroom duties, with some relief to allow additional professional development and support for other teachers. In response to a growing demand from schools wishing to be included in the project, in 1994 these teachers became Focus Teachers A, and Focus Teachers B were introduced. Focus Teachers B also undertook professional development in *First Steps*, and, in addition, took part in a 'Train the Trainer' program, so that they could administer professional development in *First Steps* within their own schools. The aim was to ensure that there would be a Focus Teacher A and a Focus Teacher B in every government school by the time funding to the project ceased.

At the same time, there was a move towards school-based planning in schools. Therefore, although it was up to individual teachers to take on board whatever elements of the program they felt they needed, the commitment to the implementation of *First Steps* in the school often became part of the School Development Plan, thus providing a whole-school focus.

The *First Steps* project subsequently aroused interest in non-government schools and other educational institutions interstate and overseas. This resulted in the publication of *First Steps* materials by Longman Cheshire. Heinemann has obtained the international rights, and *First Steps* materials are currently being marketed interstate and overseas.

## **Purpose**

Fundamental to the implementation of *First Steps* is the theory that language learning is developmental, and that careful monitoring of children's progress will enable teachers to plan their teaching to cater for the developmental needs of their individual students, thereby ensuring that they are facilitating the progress of all the students in their class. Indicators are used to plot children's progress in literacy on developmental continua in the four modes of language. Thus, progress can be monitored and teaching can be directed to the specific developmental needs of the child.

As a student teacher, and subsequently as a relief teacher, I have worked in many different government schools and have observed *First Steps* materials being used in a variety of ways. I have talked with teachers about their perceptions of *First Steps* and, while they generally appear to have positive attitudes towards *First Steps* teaching strategies, it seems that the use of the developmental continua is being met with some resistance, and that there is some confusion about the relationship between the *First Steps* developmental indicators and the Student Outcome Statements.

It was my perception that rather than the being used as an on-going monitoring device and a starting point for planning and teaching, the developmental continua were more commonly used as a tool for evaluating learning outcomes. Conversations with teachers indicated that the way in which they used *First Steps* materials may have differed according to the understandings they held about language and literacy learning when they entered the program. It was possible that the diversity of professional development practices may have had some bearing on this; that teachers who received more in-depth professional development had a greater understanding of the literacy learning theory that underpins the *First Steps* program, and therefore used the continua in ways that were more directed towards their planning and teaching, rather than their own accountability.

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which different teachers were using *First Steps* developmental continua and resources, to find out why they used them as they did, and what conditions and understandings had led them to make the choices they made, as they planned and taught their language lessons.

### **Significance**

*First Steps* developmental continua, resources and professional development were introduced into many Western Australian schools at the same time as other changes in the area of language education, for instance the introduction of the National English Curriculum Statement and Profiles, and the trialing in Western Australia of the Student Outcome Statements. Running parallel to this has been the discussion of the issue of devolution and the perceived need for greater accountability.

From the original introduction of *First Steps* as a top-down implemented program, with substantial, ongoing professional development, responsibility for implementation has gradually devolved to schools, and there is now some evidence that some schools are modifying the continua to their own specifications (Deschamp, 1995b).

Since its initial introduction in 1990, *First Steps* has been the subject of research by various organisations. The Australian Council for Educational Research, at the request of the Education Department of Western Australia, has conducted various evaluations on the reliability of the developmental continua, (A.C.E.R., 1993a; 1993b), the impact of *First Steps* on schools, teachers and students, (A.C.E.R., 1993c; 1993d), and the role of Focus Teachers (A.C.E.R., 1994).

More recently, research has been carried out to survey the implementation of *First Steps* in Western Australian schools generally (Deschamp, 1995d) and in English Language and Numeracy Project (E.L.A.N.) schools, where there are high proportions of Aboriginal students (Deschamp, 1995e). At the same time, Deschamp

also carried out a survey of the effectiveness of Focus Teacher B training (Deschamp, 1995c), conducted case studies of the implementation of First Steps in twelve schools (Deschamp, 1995b) and documented the development and implementation of the *First Steps* project in Western Australia (Deschamp, 1995a).

While these reports have produced a great deal of relevant and worthwhile information, this information took the form of surveys, which provide a general "big picture". Data was collected using questionnaires, and this has given little insight into what is actually happening in individual classrooms; which elements of *First Steps* teachers do take on board, how teachers incorporate these elements into their practice, and what motivates them to do this in the ways that they do.

During the initial period of implementation, *First Steps* was subjected to extensive action research in trial classrooms (Dewsbury, 1994). *First Steps* has developed along an evolutionary pathway. It could reasonably be expected that as teachers use the ideas and resources which they have gathered from their professional development in *First Steps*, they will informally and intuitively conduct some form of "action research" in their own classrooms, modifying *First Steps* resources and teaching and assessment strategies to suit their needs, those of their students, and those of the wider school community.

The ways in which teachers adapt *First Steps* materials will be influenced both by their understanding of the nature of literacy learning, and by their perceptions of how *First Steps* fits in with this personal theoretical framework. In turn, these perceptions may be shaped by their professional development experiences in relation to *First Steps*. In this way, it could be expected that *First Steps* could evolve further, and that these evolutionary pathways would differ according to the varying needs of schools, teachers and students. This suggests that what is happening in individual classrooms

should be examined and reported in order to provide important insights into current literacy pedagogy in Western Australia.

### **Research Questions**

The diversity of professional development experienced by teachers, and the perceived diversity of teaching and monitoring practices carried out and identified as *First Steps* practices, prompts investigation to discover where different teachers stand within the theoretical framework of literacy learning, and what orientation and experiences lead them to make the planning, teaching and evaluation choices they make.

In order to investigate this, the following research questions emerge:

- How do teachers make use of the *First Steps* developmental continua as they plan language learning in their classrooms?
- How do teachers record progress using the developmental continua?
- How do teachers select teaching strategies in relation to the developmental continua? What teaching strategies and practices do teachers use as an outcome of their monitoring children on the developmental continua?
- What, if any, teaching strategies and assessment tools do teachers use which are not related to *First Steps*?

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, a review will be made of the literature which relates in three specific ways to the subject under investigation. Firstly, there will be a discussion of the literature relating to the naturalistic and holistic view of language learning and the monitoring procedures which have arisen from this perspective and strongly influenced the development of the *First Steps* program. The second area for discussion is the literature relating to the *First Steps* program itself; and finally, a review will be made of research that examines effective professional development practices.

#### **The Holistic, Naturalistic View of Language and Literacy Learning**

##### The development of literacy

Over the last twenty years, literacy instruction has undergone something of a revolution. Until this time, reading and writing were commonly treated as separate subjects, each broken down into a series of unrelated subskills in which students received instruction and practice. Holdaway, (1979, p.24) states that "teaching methodologies were developed for each subject as if a quite different type of learning was involved." He further states that emphasis was placed on perceptual and performance skills, which were seen to be superficially different in each mode of language, and could easily be measured. Common features which occurred in all modes of language were overlooked.

This view was challenged when educators began to explore the phenomenon of how, without any formal instruction, children learn to speak. Holdaway (1979) suggested a model of developmental learning, which he described as "...highly motivated, consistently purposeful, globally activating, powerfully reinforced both intrinsically and extrinsically, and meaningfully related to other aspects of development." (p.22.)

Just as very young children achieve their initial language competence through purposeful, contextualised interactions with more proficient users of language, so it was thought that children would become literate as they used print in purposeful, meaningful ways, having their attempts accepted and scaffolded by more proficient users. Goodman (1986) suggests that written language has been created to serve a social need, and that written language is most effectively learned in the same way in which oral language is learned, "...by using it in authentic literacy events that meet [people's] needs." (p.24.)

Cambourne (1988) emphasises the importance of the learner's interaction with more proficient others when learning language: "...young learners are always in close proximity to proficient users of the language." (p. 32.) Further, the learner usually has access to a range of more proficient users, or "experts". Cambourne (1988, p.33) proposed a series of conditions which he believed would provide the optimum environment for literacy learning: Learners need to be *immersed* in literacy; they should receive many *demonstrations* of how to use and construct texts; there should be the *expectation* that the learner will also become a proficient user of literacy; the learner should take the *responsibility* for deciding what needs to be learnt; the learner needs many opportunities to purposefully *use* literacy and *approximations* should be accepted. Finally, there must be a *response* from the "expert" to provide feedback to the learner.

This view of the part played by an "expert", or more proficient other, is further supported by Vygotsky's (1987) theory of the 'zone of proximal development'.

Vygotsky theorised that interaction with more proficient others provides learners with the scaffolding they need in order to progress to a level of development which they would be unable to achieve alone.

Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) noted that young children begin to interact with print in the environment long before they begin any formal literacy instruction. They suggested that learning to use written language is a process of problem-solving in which hypotheses are constantly formed and tested as children repeatedly encounter print in their environment: "...each encounter will allow [the learner] to test out the validity of [their] current hypotheses and to reconstruct a new set at a level far above our assumptive imaginations." (p.9.)

### Two aspects of writing.

Arising from this more naturalistic position of literacy learning was the notion of writing as a craft, which involves a process. Graves (1983) defined "process" as that which "...refers to everything a person does from the time he first contemplates the topic to the final moment when he completes the paper." (p.250.) He further suggested that teachers of writing should be practitioners in the field of writing, just as teachers of other crafts are practitioners. In this way they can adequately demonstrate the process and provide scaffolds for the learner. This gave rise to the idea of "conference" as part of the process; the important part played by either teacher or peers as ideas are shaped and reshaped.

Walshe (1981) extended the idea of the writing process to take writing through many steps, rather than a simple three-step pre-writing, writing, post-writing process. This view took into account the notion that as writing serves many and varied purposes, each purpose would require a different degree of refinement using the writing process. A list or note, for example, may remain in draft form, whereas a business letter or an article for publication may go through many stages of refinement and reshaping.

A later development in the teaching of writing has been influenced by the work of Rothery (1986), Martin (1990) and Christie (1990). The genre of a text, or the way that a text is structured, and the type of language used within a given text, is dictated



by the purpose of the text and the audience for which it is intended. If students are to learn to write effectively, they need to be able to control these structures and linguistic devices in the production of their own texts:

...genres are...part of our social knowledge which we acquire as members of a particular sociocultural community. The more genres a person can handle competently, in speech and writing, the greater the range of activities she can participate in, both in educational and community contexts. (Rothery, 1986, p.4.)

### Spelling development.

The development of control over spelling has been closely studied. Gentry (1984) states that "learning to spell,...like learning to speak, is developmental." Research (Gentry, 1982; Henderson and Templeton, 1986) has revealed that learning to spell, like other aspects of language learning, is a process of hypothesis-forming and testing, as learners get to grips with the complexities of English orthography. This research also shows that developing spellers can progress through five predictable stages of spelling development and that these stages can be identified by closely monitoring error patterns, which result from the different strategies learners use at various stages of development. Although this progression may not be smooth and may be punctuated by spurts and plateaus, there is evidence (Gerber and Hall, cited by Gentry, 1984) that all learners follow the same pattern.

Because learning to spell involves making generalisations about letter patterns and relationships, reading and writing are part of the process of spelling development as learners become familiar with the general patterns of words; phonic, graphic and morphemic; as well as develop an awareness of etymology.

### Reading instruction.

Harste (1989) claims that reading instruction which is based on research undertaken in clinical conditions is invalid, because the situation has been stripped of context, and reading in real life is never context-free. Because language learning is a contextually constructed act which takes place under natural conditions, Harste asserts that language instruction should take place in situations that simulate natural learning environments: "Instructional policies should encourage teachers to set up functional reading and writing environments, to introduce and explore a variety of print settings, and actively to encourage children to use reading and writing to learn." (p.33).

Clay (1991) defines reading as a "message-getting, problem solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced." (p.6). The reading process involves the integration of extracting meaning from semantic and syntactic cues within the constraints of the printer's code (sound to symbol representation, combined with other concepts of print, such as left-to-right, top-to-bottom orientation). Clay further states that "Reading acquisition involves learning to use all these...sources of information in texts to problem solve the meanings....It is a multifaceted learning task in which the relationship of one facet changes in importance at different stages of the acquisition process." (p.14).

Adams (1992) suggests that cracking the printer's code is the first step towards extracting meaning from the text: "The ability to read words, quickly, accurately and effortlessly, is crucial to skillful reading comprehension." (p.3), and claims that "studies suggest that ... [programs] that include systematic phonic instruction generally give young readers an edge in spelling and word recognition skills. (p.7).

Flood (1986) states that comprehension is an interactive and constructive process, in which "readers .... create meaning through negotiations with authors." (p.784). He claims that in the past, texts have been approached as though they had "single,

unalterable meanings, as though they were the sole determinants of comprehension success", and that this notion fails to recognise the part played by the student or the teacher in the act of comprehension. (p. 784.)

Palinscar and Brown (1986) suggest that successful reading involves not only comprehension, but also comprehension monitoring, or an awareness of metacognitive strategies, on the part of the reader. In order to develop proficiency in monitoring comprehension, they suggest a model of "reciprocal teaching" which teaches and develops predicting, questioning, summarising and clarifying skills.

Other effective reading strategies have concentrated on activating background knowledge, using the structure of texts and the organisation of concepts as an aid to comprehension. Morris and Stewart-Dore (1984) have developed a model that involves preparing, thinking through, extracting and organising, and translating information.

#### Assessment in language development.

Harste (1989) claims that evaluation which focuses only on testing skills gives little information about what is actually happening in a language environment, in terms of both language development and instruction: "...a good program of evaluation needs to be multidimensional and reflective of the entire program, not just the skills aspects."(p.360).

Cambourne and Turbill (1990) also support this view:

Those who adopt a fragmentationist view of literacy education believe that literacy is a single megaskill that is made up of hierarchies of subskills, each of which can be regarded as a complete system in its own right and each of which can be measured along linear scales of some kind. This ...demands a quantitative, measurement-based approach to assessment. (p.338).

In their article, Cambourne and Turbill identify a model of evaluation known as "responsive evaluation", which was established by Stake and built upon by Guba and Lincoln, in which the evaluator becomes part of the context of the assessment situation, and in which the judgements of the evaluator are valid.

Cambourne and Turbill (1990) and Rivalland (1992) suggest that in the natural learning environment parents continually make informal assessments of their children's development by building a profile of their strengths and weaknesses, using developmental markers or "indicators". On the basis of these assessments, parents make decisions about what they should do to progress that development. Just as parents do this with their children's development in a general natural learning environment, this should be the basis for assessment and planning of instruction within a literacy learning environment which is based on developmental principles.

In order to be able to effectively use this model of instruction to provide appropriate guidance to further their students' progress, teachers need firstly to accept this view of emerging literacy, and secondly, they need to be knowledgeable observers of children's language development, in order to recognise developmental markers. Clay (1991, p.19) asserts that "...if teachers are to go to wherever each child is and take his learning on from that point then they need to be astute observers of children's interactions with literacy tasks..."

Harste (1989) presents a model of curriculum which demonstrates a dynamic relationship between language learning theory, evaluation and instruction. Teachers use what they know about how language is learned and the developmental process of language learning to make judgements about how their learners are performing. Using this assessment, and reflection upon their knowledge of language learning, teachers make decisions about the best possible instruction to progress language development.

The *First Steps* developmental continua have been developed in order to provide teachers with a map of the territory of language development in each of the four modes of language. The purpose of these documents is to assist teachers in the identification of children's developmental "indicators" (Cambourne and Turbill, 1990; Rivalland, 1992) and direct their decisions regarding instruction, as suggested by Harste's (1989) model of curriculum.

*First Steps* resource materials have been developed to bring together a range of teaching strategies based on recent research in all modes of language which can be used to support language and literacy learning under the broad umbrella of a "whole language" approach. Because these teaching strategies have emerged from many different directions, there is no single, clear pedagogical framework underpinning *First Steps*. Rather than moving from theory towards practice, *First Steps* teaching strategies have been drawn from some of the best practice in classrooms and a theoretical framework has been developed from this.

The *First Steps* developmental continua (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994a) identify five important factors which facilitate effective learning, and these form the framework for *First Steps* teaching and learning activities. The first of these factors is **problem-solving**, which will enable both students and teachers to explore, clarify and extend understandings. Secondly, **embeddedness**, or contextualisation provides purpose for learning and facilitates meaning. The third factor is the use of **working memory**. *First Steps* contends that children will use their working memory in different ways and proposes the provision of opportunities for guided practice, thus allowing children to assimilate new information and consolidate new skills at their own pace. The fourth factor is **interaction**, which provides scaffolding by peers, parents and teachers. Finally, *First Steps* contends that students need sufficient **time** to integrate and consolidate new skills and understandings before they can move on to their next level of development.

It should be noted however, that the most recent thinking in the area of language learning, that of critical literacy (see for example Luke 1993) and the role of the reader as a text-analyst (Freebody 1993), has not been embedded in *First Steps*, because this area of research has opened up since the introduction of *First Steps*. As time progresses, and ideas about the nature of language learning develop, teachers will need to be aware of new research so that their teaching from *First Steps* can be supplemented to include these new ideas.

More recently, Comber (1996) has critiqued the progressive pedagogic practices which play a major role in *First Steps*. She observed that the developmental and metacognitive discourses which are evident in *First Steps* have led to a managerial discourse in classrooms which tend to leave much of the responsibility for literacy learning with the students. Further, when developmental language is used to record children's progress, Comber's (1996) data suggests that reporting to parents in this manner fails to provide useful information about their child's progress, because the information is couched in the positive language of what the child is able to do, rather than what (s)he cannot do. Because parents are unfamiliar with this discourse, they believe their child is progressing well, when progress may in fact be very slow.

### **How *First Steps* has been Viewed To Date**

#### **The developmental continua.**

The theoretical perspective discussed above demonstrates that the plotting of students' progress on the developmental continua is a crucial factor in the use of the *First Steps* program, not only in terms of learning outcomes, but most importantly in terms of the planning process. In Deschamp's (1995b) case studies of the implementation of *First Steps* in twelve schools there is some evidence to support the perception that the continua are, in some cases, not being used for planning learning experiences: "*I don't look at the continuum from last year. It colours your judgement about the child: .... I only look at the continuum to complete it.*" (p.13).

Deschamp (1995a, p.37) also reports that a common comment from teachers was "*Many teachers do not know how to use FIRST STEPS continua for further planning.*"

However, there is also evidence to suggest that the use of the continua for planning was seen as important by the project team, and that this was conveyed to schools (Deschamp, 1995a, p.43) because the extent to which "schools use the Continua as a base to plan and resource programs" and "teachers use the Continua as a base for classroom planning" were suggested to schools as performance indicators. Case study schools (Deschamp, 1995b) also reported that there was some confusion about the interpretation of the continuum "*Our two Focus Teachers disagree about the continuum*" (p.13) and that some schools felt that there was a need to modify the indicators or develop a continuum to be more suited to their own situation.

In 1992, the Education Department of Western Australia commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (A.C.E.R.) to conduct several research projects to look into various aspects of *First Steps*. Several reports were produced as a result of this research, including a *Report on the Empirical Validation of the First Steps reading developmental continuum* (1993a) and the *Evaluation of the Validity of the First Steps writing and spelling continua* (1993b). These reports state that the sample of teachers using the reading, writing and spelling continua generally see the continua as adequately depicting children's development in reading, writing and spelling. In part two of each of these studies, teachers were asked to identify which continua they had been using. In the study which focussed on the writing and spelling continua, which was carried out in August, 1992, 73% of teachers in the study reported that they had used the spelling continuum, 73% the writing continuum, 47% the reading continuum, 29% the writing learning continuum and 9% the oral language continuum.

In the study which validated the reading continuum, participating teachers were asked which continua they had used during 1993. The spelling continuum had been used by 85% of teachers, the writing continuum by 80%, and between 35% and 40% of teachers had used the writing learning, reading and oral language continua.

The initial report states (p. 47) that "...it can be concluded that...classroom teachers are most frequently focusing on developing those skills required to get ideas onto paper (spelling and writing)." These comments do not appear to take into account the fact that in most schools, professional development began with the spelling and writing continua and supporting modules, therefore it would be logical to expect more teachers to be using these continua.

#### The impact of *First Steps* on students.

A.C.E.R. also looked at the impact of *First Steps* on the reading and writing ability of Western Australian students in Year 5 (1993c). Because of the design of the study and the size of the sample, the findings of this study were somewhat inconclusive.

The study compared the reading and writing abilities of students in schools which had been using *First Steps* for more than one year (old *First Steps* schools) with those of students in schools which either had been using *First Steps* for less than one year (new *First Steps* schools) or which officially did not use *First Steps* (non *First Steps* schools). Due to various constraints, the researchers were not able to collect data using a pre-test, post-test design. From the data collected, they were able to draw the conclusion that:

If students in old *First Steps* schools had lower average levels of reading comprehension (and writing) ability than students in new or non *First Steps* schools before *First Steps* was introduced, then it is likely that *First Steps* has led to an improvement in the reading (and writing) ability of those students exposed to the program. (no page no.)

The researchers also came to the conclusion that there was some evidence to suggest that *First Steps* could be making a difference to the reading ability of some students.



Oliver and O'Donoghue (1994) have critiqued the theoretical underpinnings of one *First Steps* document, namely the Oral Language Developmental Continuum. They claim that there are problems with this continuum in four major areas: Firstly, they claim that the Oral Language Developmental Continuum does not adequately represent the complexity of the pattern of oral language development, and that children do not progress neatly through the stages, "Rather, gradual progression forward is accompanied by backslides, plateaus and leaps forward." (p.17.) They further claim that the continuum gives the impression that a student is likely to belong to one discrete stage, where it is more likely that (s)he will fit into two or more stages.

Secondly, they feel that the descriptions of behaviours that are reflected in the indicators are too broad to adequately characterise each one, or to clearly differentiate between them. Thirdly, Oliver and O'Donoghue claim that the Oral Language continuum is not appropriate for children who do not use Standard Australian English, as some non-standard forms are used as indicators. They state that these non-standard forms are not necessarily an indication of development, rather an indication that the user uses a non-standard form.

Finally, they state that the continuum does not sufficiently take into account the differing processes of first and second language acquisition, with the result that children for whom English is not their first language may not easily be placed on the continuum. In conclusion, they question the purpose of placing students on the continuum at all. While they acknowledge that teachers' awareness of abilities is essential for further planning, they feel that teachers are more efficiently able to do this without the use of the continua, because this allows teachers to take into account students' individual learning styles.

In her reply to this analysis, Dewsbury (1994) argues that the critique applies to 1992 pre-publication *First Steps* materials. Whilst she acknowledges that some of Oliver and O'Donoghue's (1994) comments are valid, Dewsbury points out that since the document which they examined was produced, *First Steps* materials have been subjected to extensive action research in Western Australian classrooms and evaluations by A.C.E.R. Dewsbury further claims that the 1994 publications of *First Steps* materials by Longman Cheshire have incorporated many changes which address the problems outlined by Oliver and O'Donoghue (1994) and brought to light by the A.C.E.R. evaluations and action research. The rationale of the (1994) Oral Language Developmental Continuum now explicitly states that "children seldom progress in a neat and well-sequenced manner; instead they may remain in one phase for some length of time and move rapidly through other phases." (p.2). The same document further states that "For children who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds it is inappropriate to use the Oral Language Developmental Continuum." (p.16).

Teachers who initially received pre-publication documents have been provided with supplementary materials: "They have amassed files of extraneous 'hand-outs' designed to fill gaps, amend statements, provide additional information and share current thinking on a range of issues." (Dewsbury, 1994, p.9.) Further, Dewsbury states that no *First Steps* materials are designed to stand alone, but in the context of information provided in other *First Steps* documents and at professional development sessions.

Dewsbury explains the purpose of the indicators by stating "They do not represent what children ought to be doing. Rather they describe what children actually do as they interact with others and with texts in familiar situations." (p.12.) In reply to Oliver and O'Donoghue's (1994) comments regarding the use of the continuum as an aid for further planning, Dewsbury makes two points: Firstly she states that "indicators are not standards-based criteria against which children are judged. They

reflect behaviours that children may or may not be exhibiting." (p.12.) Secondly, she states that use of the continua provides information to all those involved in the learning community: "Continua are also used in schools in the context of school-based decision making and ongoing school development." (p. 12.)

When data was collected for Deschamp's (1995b,d) reports, data from ELAN schools (those with a high proportion of Aboriginal students) was extracted and compared with the mean, and this data formed the basis of a further report surveying the implementation of *First Steps* in ELAN schools (Deschamp, 1995e). Seven of the twelve case study schools (Deschamp, 1995b) were ELAN schools.

This data suggested that *First Steps* was valued more by teachers and had made greater impact on students in ELAN schools than in other government schools where data was collected. Three of the seven case study schools, however, made the comment that the Oral Language Developmental Continuum "was not suitable for" or did not "fit" Aboriginal children, or that they were using only the teaching strategies from the oral language component. (p18.) These findings appear to give some weight to Oliver and O'Donoghue's concerns regarding children who do not use Standard Australian English, particularly Aboriginal children. At the same time, however, other ELAN case study schools reported that they were using the Oral Language Developmental Continuum and did not state that they had encountered problems. This is an issue that needs to be looked into further.

An action research project at Highgate Primary School (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994b) recognised that *First Steps* materials and ideas arose from research into the development of oracy and literacy of English speaking children. In light of this, the Highgate project was conducted with the purpose of determining whether the *First Steps* developmental continua were appropriate for mapping the progress of learners for whom English was not the first language; identifying developmental indicators which were inappropriate or would need modification; and

examining the effectiveness of the teaching and learning strategies suggested in *First Steps* resources, as well as identify those strategies which were particularly effective for learners for whom English is a second language.

The members of the project team acknowledged that "teachers...have generally found the indicators on the Oral Language Developmental Continuum too general for students learning English as a second language." (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994b, p.72). In response, they developed the Oral Language Learning Continuum, which provides a general description of the development of control that can be expected to be demonstrated by bilingual children over a range of forms of language which may be commonly experienced in the classroom situation.

#### The role of Focus Teachers.

A.C.E.R. also looked at the impact which Focus Teachers had on the implementation of *First Steps* (1994). Performance indicators were used to assess the effectiveness of Focus Teachers within the sample schools. These performance indicators included such criteria as the extent to which teachers used *First Steps* materials and strategies in their classrooms; the extent to which teachers monitored their students' progress by using the continua; and the extent to which teachers used the continua to influence their further planning. The report states that "it is difficult to draw any generalisable conclusions from the data...because of the small and possibly atypical sample used" (p.13.), but notes that, generally, classroom teachers and principals appear to have a positive attitude to Focus Teachers. The role of the Focus Teacher had included working collaboratively with classroom teachers to place students on a continuum, clarifying indicators, providing time for classroom teachers, and helping teachers collate data. The report further notes that there is some evidence that Focus Teachers found less experienced teachers (that is, teachers with less than five years' experience) and junior primary teachers more receptive to *First Steps*.

### The impact of *First Steps* on schools.

Finally, A.C.E.R. investigated the impact which *First Steps* had on schools at three levels; the school, the teachers and the students (1993d). Data was collected from a total of 24 schools with varying involvement in the *First Steps* project. It was hypothesised that differences would exist between old *First Steps* schools and new *First Steps* schools, due to old *First Steps* schools' longer involvement in the project. There was, however, no suggestion that teachers' differing professional development experiences were taken into account.

The study found that teachers in old *First Steps* schools more frequently used the developmental continua to record the progress of 'at risk' students. The data showed that 75% of old *First Steps* schools, 55% of new *First Steps* schools and 20% of non *First Steps* schools were using the continua for 'at risk' students. However, it was noted that all teachers, regardless of their orientation to *First Steps*, "...continue to use a variety of methods for recording development." (p.13). These other methods include "testing, keeping anecdotal records, using checklists, using observation and collecting work samples." The report further states that:

It is not clear from the data taken from the surveys to what extent and in what ways the developmental continua are replacing some of the methods used by teachers for identifying 'at risk' children, recording their progress and reporting this progress. (p.15).

The report found that some teachers held negative feelings towards *First Steps*. Where this was the case, these feelings were largely due to the perception that the use of *First Steps* presented an excessive workload, due to the amount of time spent on professional development and the time taken to place children on the developmental continua. The report suggests that although *First Steps* materials propose that teachers use only the key indicators for most students and minor indicators only for those students about whose progress they are particularly concerned, "It is possibly the case that teachers feel pressured to place all children on a continuum or continua

using more than the key indicators as a result of other pressures in or upon schools." (p.21)

#### Professional development.

The (1993d) A.C.E.R. study found that in general, irrespective of the type of school or length of involvement, the quality of *First Steps* professional development was regarded favourably, although many teachers commented that they were required to absorb too much information in too short a time. Page 33 of the report states that, "...an important part of the Professional Development involves communicating an understanding of the developmental processes that children go through as they acquire literacy skills." It is interesting to note that the report also states that, "Of the 9 comments made about how the Professional Development had improved teachers' understandings of child development, 8 came from old *First Steps* schools." (p.33.) Although the study did not collect data relating to the differing types of professional development received by schools, this could be an indication that schools which joined the project in the earlier stages and received support from Collaborative Teachers, also received a more thorough grounding in the theoretical understandings on which *First Steps* is based.

Deschamp (1995a) quotes the following from the A.C.E.R. report on the Empirical Validation of the *First Steps* Reading Continuum: "Data suggest that teachers who work in the old *First Steps* schools are more likely to report that they teach language better than any other subject than teachers in new *First Steps* schools." This perception could have been brought about by the differences in the professional development undertaken by old *First Steps* schools, as opposed to new *First Steps* schools.

Deschamp (1995a) cites the *First Steps* working documents in which it is acknowledged that many professional development programmes are ineffective. The

project team considered the professional development component to be a crucial factor in the implementation of *First Steps*. It was decided that the program would involve the whole school community, and as such, the project team required that there be a "whole school commitment to Literacy [sic] as a priority area and teachers at all year levels had to have decided to adopt the First Steps approach" (p.7). The *First Steps* program would then become one of the components of the School Development Plan.

### **Effective Professional Development**

Fullan (1991) asserts that staff development and school development cannot be separated from each other; that the collaboration of teachers and the support provided by a School Development Plan contribute to teachers' willingness to accept and implement new ideas and methods.

Stallings, cited by Fullan (1991) identifies conditions for professional development under which teachers are more likely to accept and effectively implement new ideas:

The cornerstones of the model, according to Stallings, are:

- Learn by doing - try, evaluate, modify, try again
- Link prior knowledge to new information
- Learn by reflecting and solving problems
- Learn in a supportive environment - share problems and successes. (p.320).

The initial professional development associated with *First Steps* would seem to have embraced these principles, in that the professional development took place over a substantial period of time (three lots of five day blocks, each interspersed with a week in the classroom for trialing of new methods); Collaborative Teacher support was provided in the classroom to free teachers from routine duties and provide extra time to attend to new routines; and a whole school approach was adopted to facilitate sharing of successes and problems.

Louden (1995) has identified four aspects of the *First Steps* professional development program which seem to have specifically contributed to its success. These aspects are: "...seeing the old in the new, making connections, working together, and being explicit." (p.12). These ideas would seem to further support Stalling's (cited by Fullan, 1991) view of the optimum conditions for effective professional development.

It would seem, then, that there are three levels of conditions that appear to be critical in the implementation of professional development programs: Firstly, at the administrative level, change is incorporated into the school's development plan. This demands a whole-school commitment to achieving shared goals, together with a clear, shared understanding of what these goals are. At the second level, teacher relationships and the culture of the school play a part in the implementation of new ideas. Finally, there is the part played by the teacher as an individual.

#### The School Development Plan - shared goals

Rosenholtz (1991) argues that the culture of the school largely influences the ways in which teachers construct themselves as part of the school community, and in turn as:

teachers' attitudes, cognitions and behaviour have less to do with the individual biographies teachers bring with them to the workplace than with the social organization of the workplace itself - social organizations that are not characteristics of individual teachers but that teachers have helped to shape; social organizations that then have consequences for teachers' perceptions and behaviours. (1991, p.4)

Further, Rosenholtz nominates teacher uncertainty and threats to self-esteem as recurring themes in teaching. Teacher uncertainty occurs when there is an absence of "technical culture, the processes designed to accomplish an organization's goals" (p.4). A consequence of teacher uncertainty is the threat to self-esteem. Where teacher self-esteem may be threatened, the natural line of defence is to avoid situations which may challenge the adequacy of teacher performance, and erode self-esteem.



A school community which sets and strives to achieve shared goals and ideals builds teacher certainty and provides a supportive environment for change and experimentation. However, it is not enough to simply set goals. The precise nature of these goals must be negotiated and defined to mean the same to all participants, since each participant may have a different construct of what is to be achieved. As Rosenholtz (1991, p.17) observes, "...schools, after all, are nothing more than collections of independent teachers, each marching to the step of a different pedagogical drum."

### Collegiality and collaboration

Rosenholtz (1991) holds the view that collaboration is also an important element for effective professional development, and further observes that each encourages the other. Her study found that in schools where frequent professional development took place ("learning-enriched schools"), learning to teach was seen as an infinite, ongoing process, there was more open-mindedness and acceptance of new ideas, and frequent sharing of resources and ideas between teachers. On the other hand, in schools where little professional development took place, (which Rosenholtz calls "learning-impooverished schools") an average estimate of the time it took to learn to teach was 2.3 years. In these schools, teachers felt that once they were familiar with the curriculum and the textbooks, and had established control over their students, they had learned their craft.

As Rosenholtz points out, the isolation of the teacher in the classroom can present a barrier to adopting new methods of teaching: "Their opportunities for learning are circumscribed by their own ability to discern problems, develop alternative solutions, chose among them, and assess the outcome." (p. 73). Without a shared pool of ideas, teachers are more likely to return to tried and tested methods when problems are encountered.

In a study designed to identify which aspects of staff development may contribute to the success of schools, Little (1982) identified four "critical practices of adaptability" which occurred in more successful and adaptable schools. Firstly, teachers regularly engaged in discussion about their teaching practices, and as a consequence, constructed a shared language which they could use to talk about what they were doing. Secondly, they regularly observed each other teaching and offered feedback. Thirdly, they worked together to plan, evaluate and prepare teaching materials. In this way they shared the "burden of development", confirmed their emerging understandings, set attainable goals and turned theory into practice. Finally, teachers often took on the role of instructor to their peers.

Little (1982) further observed that in the most successful schools, these "critical practices" occurred in a variety of locations throughout the school, at regular and frequent intervals. Talk about teaching focussed on specific practice. Lortie concluded that in successful schools, teachers had built a "shared technical culture" (Lortie, cited by Little, 1982) and that:

the more concrete the language known to and commanded by teachers and others for the description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of teaching practice, the greater the probable utility of the interaction and the greater the potential influence on teachers' practices. (p.334).

Other situational factors identified by Little (1982) were that professional development must be relevant to teachers' situations and be tied to the improvement of practice; that interactions about teaching should be reciprocal, regardless of the status of the participants; and that any new innovation should include all staff concerned. The four sets of "critical practices", together with these situational factors, combined to sustain within successful schools both the norm of collegiality and the norm of continuous improvement.

The professional development received by teachers in those schools which were involved in the early stages of the *First Steps* project appeared to meet many of the

criteria described above for the successful implementation of educational change. As responsibility for implementing *First Steps* devolved to Focus Teachers, it could be questioned whether classroom teachers continued to receive the same high levels of professional development and support. Schools which received their professional development in *First Steps* in the very latest stages of the in-service program no longer needed to pledge their whole-school commitment to *First Steps* as a condition for their professional development. Deschamp's (1995c) survey of the effectiveness of Focus Teacher B training tends to focus on the presentation skills of Focus Teachers, rather than the effectiveness of Focus Teachers as a medium for professional development of others.

#### The teacher as an individual

At the third level, there are factors relating to the teacher as an individual, which will have some bearing on the success of any professional development program. Teachers bring to their practice many ideologies and understandings which have been shaped and influenced by their pre-teaching experiences.

Raymond, Butt and Townsend (1992) claim that teachers' pre-teaching experiences, for example, their school, family, or cultural influences, affect the way in which they construct their identity as teachers, even though this construction may be confirmed, challenged or invalidated by later events. This "personal ground" forms a backdrop against which further experiences are taken on board.

Raymond, Butt and Townsend further claim that the impact of these pre-teaching influences is indicated by the kind of language that teachers typically use when talking about these experiences:

Teachers' words for the kind of impact on their teaching and for the processes by which this impact is felt to have been achieved point to the strength, depth and persistence of personal pre-professional history in shaping their development as teachers. (p.151.)

In order for teachers to be able to assimilate new ideas and information gained through professional development, Raymond, Butt and Townsend (1992) argue that teachers must be able to maintain this personal identity which they have constructed of themselves as a teacher. They must be regarded as the expert in the reality of their own classroom and their own personal teaching style must be seen to be valued. The more adaptable new information is to their own style of teaching, the more likely it is that this new knowledge will be sustained.

Hopkins (1990) conducted a study which extended the work of McKibbin and Joyce (cited by Hopkins, 1990), who had concluded that there was a high correlation between the psychological state of a teacher (as defined by Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs) and their incorporation of training information into their practice. Hopkins added to his study the variable of school climate, and found that teachers who were operating at higher psychological levels in more democratic schools were more likely to take on board new ideas.

Teachers at the highest levels (4 and 5) were typically happy in their work, tolerant and supportive of their colleagues, were not trapped by their self-concept and had qualities of self-understanding and self-acceptance. They did not feel under undue pressure, translated autonomy into creativity, and saw personal growth as requisite. These teachers were seen to adopt new ideas into their classroom practice at a "routine" level in that they demonstrated a sound knowledge of the philosophy behind the ideas and they actively sought new ideas and collaborated with experts.

The second group of teachers, (level 3+) were found to be generally open to new ideas and easily involved in activities. However, they were more prone to pressures of conformity and sometimes held back by the organisational climate of the school. A third group of teachers (at level 3) were seen to be relatively happy in their work and had a sense of belonging to the staff group; perhaps a member of a particular

reference group. These teachers typically required some stimulus for new activity and had difficulty breaking out from their routine classroom practices. It was found that these two groups of teachers tended to use new ideas in a "mechanical" way; they aimed for emulation rather than understanding, and the way in which they used ideas was poorly co-ordinated and user-oriented.

Hopkins' (1990) fourth group of teachers, operating at levels 2 and 1, were found to typically demonstrate feelings of ambivalence and isolation. They were often depressed, confused and lacked confidence. They demonstrated inconsistent work patterns and generally viewed the introduction of new ideas as a threat. These teachers were difficult to involve in the implementation of new ideas and they often actively attempted to weaken organisational spirit in the workplace.

As a result of the data gathered from this study, Hopkins (1990) suggests that:

Educational ideas must be differentially introduced into schools on the foundation of clarity of the concepts being used, an understanding of the processes involved, and an understanding of the school climate and psychological state of the individual teacher. Successful use also requires teachers to relate their educational aims to a particular curriculum innovation and to carry out a detailed and systematic analysis of their inservice needs. (p. 64.)

Huberman (1988) has identified various phases in teachers' career life-cycles, and suggests that movement through these phases will impact on the extent to which teachers take on and adapt to new ideas. The boundaries between the phases are by no means discrete; the approximate dividing lines suggested below are proposed by Fullan (1991, p. 125).

According to Huberman, the initial years of teaching (years 1-3) are years of discovery and survival. Huberman suggests that beginning teachers have two kinds of experiences; easy beginnings, typified by positive pupil relationships, pedagogical mastery and enthusiasm for teaching; or painful beginnings, dominated by overwork,

demands on time, difficult pupils, close monitoring by superiors and feelings of isolation.

The next phase of Huberman's (1988) suggested career life-cycle (years 4-6) is a phase of stabilization, where teachers achieve consolidation of a basic repertoire of teaching materials and strategies and are now able to adapt this repertoire to meet the needs of differing students and situations. They gain confidence and security in their own ideas and approaches and with this comes a commitment to teaching.

In the third phase, (years 7-18), Huberman suggests that a need for experimentation and diversity leads from basic mastery, and that this experimentation typically reaches outside the classroom and involves collaboration with others.

The final phase (years 19+) can be divided into three subpatterns: 'positive focussing', where teachers are seen to focus on specific age groups of students, specific subjects or specific interests; 'defensive focussing', where teachers are critical of change and have defined a comfortable space for themselves in terms of their socialisation within the school and their practice within the classroom; and 'disenchantment', typified by a sense of bitterness, fatigue and betrayal.

### **An Individual Construction of *First Steps***

This review of the literature demonstrates that over recent years the theories of language development and instruction have emerged from a variety of directions, and therefore teachers may have quite differing orientations towards the teaching and learning of language and literacy. These varying understandings may be shaped by a number of different factors: their pre-teaching experiences, the prevailing philosophies of language learning and teaching at the time they were trained, their construction of themselves as a teacher and as a member of the school community, and their

professional development experiences over the years. It could be expected that the framework of theoretical understandings underpinning *First Steps* may fit more neatly into the schemata of some teachers than it does others with a different orientation.

Teachers in Western Australian schools have been exposed to a variety of professional development experiences relating to *First Steps*. An examination of the literature relating to effective professional development indicates that a great deal of effort was made to ensure that schools received the most effective professional development that resources would allow, but it could be expected that it was more effective in Core Schools and Cell Schools, which received more support. However, the literature also suggests that regardless of the extent and type of professional development implemented in the school, other factors, such as the culture of the school and the degree of collegiality amongst teachers, would have a bearing on its effectiveness. The type of professional development, together with factors such as the culture of the school and incorporation of *First Steps* into the school development plan, could influence the way that *First Steps* has been constructed, by both the whole school and individual teachers.

Because *First Steps* has emerged from a variety of different theoretical perspectives, it could be that some teachers are concerned that the practices they adopt do not conform to what they see as the orthodoxy of *First Steps*. It could also be expected that *First Steps* materials and practices have been modified by various schools to more closely fulfil what the school sees as the requirements of students, teachers or administrators.

The research that has already been undertaken in relation to *First Steps* indicates that there is some evidence to suggest that schools are modifying *First Steps* materials to more closely suit their needs (Deschamp, 1995b) and that some teachers have

negative attitudes towards the developmental continua (Deschamp, 1995b; A.C.E.R., 1993d) and are therefore using materials selectively.

It seems, therefore, that to be "using *First Steps*" could mean something different to each teacher. The most effective way to determine how individual teachers select, use and modify First Steps teaching strategies and resources is to closely examine what is happening in individual classrooms.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

#### **Design of the Study**

It was proposed to answer the research questions by presenting a "slice of life" in each of four classrooms where *First Steps* is currently being used, and tracing events back to the influences of the teachers' understandings and experiences connected with language learning; Elmore, cited by Hawthorne (1992), uses the term "backward mapping".

In order to understand the events of the classroom, one must be able to vicariously experience the happenings that take place. Eisner (1985) suggests that an effective way of doing this is by the use of educational criticism. He believes "that the creation of educational criticism, a form of criticism not unlike that found in the arts but directed to educational matters, could provide a kind of utility that scientific studies and quantitatively treated phenomena neglect." (p. 219). He proposes that this form of criticism is "the art of disclosure" (p. 219), and further, that this type of criticism should "...create a rendering of a situation, event or object that will provide pointers to those aspects of the situation, event or object that are in some way significant." (p.224).

Eisner (1985) identifies three elements of educational criticism; descriptive, interpretative and evaluative. The role of description is to adequately portray and characterise the situation under examination. The interpretative aspect asks questions about what the situation means to the participants: What understandings are influencing the action, and what understandings are being constructed by the action? Finally, in the portrayal and interpretation of events, judgements are an inevitable part of the process. As Eisner (1985, p. 235) says, "One must inevitably appraise the value

of a set of circumstances if only because, in the process of description, selective perception has already been at work."

### **Locating Participants for the Study**

At the beginning of the 1996 school year, teachers were approached through the *First Steps* Focus Teacher network system, and volunteers were sought. An open letter (included in Appendix A) was sent to Focus Teachers explaining the purpose of the study and what the study would involve. Focus Teachers were asked to invite volunteers from their own schools, so that teachers in the study would not necessarily be Focus Teachers. However, because they would be volunteers, it was anticipated that the teachers in the study would be comfortable using *First Steps*.

Volunteer teachers would be asked to provide details of their professional development in *First Steps*, so that four teachers could be selected to reflect a variety of professional development experiences. Permission to carry out the research would then be sought from selected teachers and the principals of their respective schools. To ensure anonymity, teachers, students and schools used in the study would be given pseudonyms.

It was proposed to select teachers who were teaching year four and above. The reasons for this were twofold: First, Deschamp's (1995b) study shows that a whole-language approach is a more recent innovation in an upper school classroom than it is in a junior primary classroom. Out of the twelve schools studied in his report, only one school reported to have been using a whole language approach in the middle school prior to the introduction of *First Steps*. Therefore, middle and upper primary teachers may have been required to step out of their 'comfort zone' to accept the philosophies of *First Steps*.

Secondly, data generated by the Monitoring Standards in Education Project for 1992 (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993) indicate that an area of concern are the approximately 5% of Year 7 students who "demonstrate skill levels [in reading] significantly below the average skill level for their year group." (p.22), and 5% of Year 7 and 10 students in writing who [are] "working well below the average skill level for their respective year group..." (p. 48). Data also shows that the most able Year three students are operating at a more advanced level than some Year 10 students in both reading and writing, although this is most pronounced in writing. One could conclude that less able students are more likely to be left behind in the middle and upper primary years, and therefore there would be a greater population of "at risk" students, who were the initial targets of the program.

It should be noted that 1995 had been a year of prolonged industrial action in government schools. One of the issues behind this industrial action had been that the time allocated for teachers' duties other than teaching was insufficient for the numerous extra-curricular duties which they were expected to perform, and that what little time was allocated was often encroached upon by unexpected events. Given that this had been a major issue, and that in order to participate in this study teachers would have to give up some of their personal time to be interviewed, I offered to compensate them by undertaking unpaid relief teaching in their classrooms at a mutually convenient time.

Although when approached, Focus Teachers had indicated that they thought some teachers in their schools would be interested in participating in the study, this method of approaching teachers proved to be unsuccessful, as no prospective participants came forward. A similar letter was then sent to approximately thirty five schools in the metropolitan area, and each letter was followed by either a telephone call or a personal visit.

Although some teachers expressed interest in the study, most declined the invitation to participate. Reasons teachers offered for their inability to participate included lack of time, other commitments such as having a student teacher in their room, or teaching in a part-time or job-sharing situation. However, a prevailing theme was that teachers simply did not want to have an observer in their classroom. It appeared that many teachers believed that they used *First Steps* in ways which they perceived as "unorthodox", and they did not wish their actions to be reported.

Finally, four volunteer teachers were located to participate in the study. Two of these volunteers were secured as a result of me personally visiting their schools as a follow-up to sending the introductory letter; two teachers were secured as volunteers through personal contacts. One of these latter teachers had offered to pilot the initial interview questions, and because the data collected during the pilot interview appeared to be very relevant, this teacher was asked to remain in the study.

### **The Participants**

The participants reflected a variety of professional development experiences in relation to *First Steps*. There was also a considerable range in the number of years teaching experience held by participating teachers. Three teachers were teaching in government schools and one in an independent school; two teachers were operating in what they described as "team teaching" situations. Table 1 below gives a summary of these details, which are expanded further in each case-study. All teachers have been given pseudonyms, as have any students who are mentioned by name in the case studies.

Table 1  
Participants in the study

	Angela	Mike*	Helen	Claire*
Type of School	Government	Government	Independent	Government
Year level	7	2	7	5
First Steps P.D.	District Office, then Focus Teacher. Funded by school.	Core School, Collaborative Teacher. Funded by Central Office.	University Teacher Ed. Course, then Focus Tchr.	District Office, then Focus Teacher. Funded by school.
Years Teaching	18	12	1	8

\* Teaching in a "team" situation.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place during the first two terms of 1996. As soon as a teacher agreed to participate in the study, data collection began, and a timetable was negotiated with each teacher to suit themselves and their class routines. Once a teacher had agreed to participate, a time was arranged to conduct an initial interview according to the interview protocol included in Appendix B. This interview was audio-taped and later transcribed. As all these interviews occurred in the classrooms of the respective teachers, notes were made relating to the environmental features of the classroom; for example, charts, instructions, displays of children's work, learning centres, and resources.

Subsequently, in order to observe a wide range of practices, teachers were each observed during three language sessions. During these sessions, lessons were audio-taped, using a PZM microphone. At the conclusion of each observation, field notes were written, using both the tape recording, and notes made in situ. Continued observations were made relating to the classroom environment. Informal discussions

also formed part of the data. Finally, after observing three language lessons, a follow-up interview was arranged with each teacher to discuss issues that arose from the observations.

Where teachers were in "team teaching" situations, data was also collected from each teacher's teaching partner. In Claire's case, her partner, Chris, participated with Claire in each interview. Mike's teaching partner, Ann, was interviewed separately. These differences occurred because of each teaching team's different construction of "team teaching".

It was originally anticipated that permission would be sought to view teachers' planning documents, *First Steps* developmental continua, and evaluation documents, but in the light of the difficulties experienced in locating participants, and the perceived reasons behind this difficulty, it was felt that this was a sensitive area. In most cases, teachers volunteered to show these documents during the course of data collection, but where these documents were not voluntarily shown, teachers were asked instead to describe how they used the documents.

From the data, a case study was constructed for each classroom. Using the technique of educational criticism described by Eisner (1985), which includes "thick description" (Ryle, cited by Eisner, 1985), a portrayal was made of each classroom and the teaching events which took place. From these renderings, a cross-case analysis was then performed to identify patterns of shared or conflicting understandings and the way these understandings constructed teaching events.

The table below presents a summary of the specific data that was used to answer each research question:

Table 2  
Data to be used to answer research questions

How do teachers make use of the <i>First Steps</i> developmental continua as they plan language learning in their classrooms?	Interviews Documents
How do teachers record progress using the developmental continua?	Interviews Documents
How do teachers select teaching strategies in relation to the developmental continua? What teaching strategies and practices do teachers use as an outcome of their monitoring children on the developmental continua?	Interviews Observations Tape recordings
What, if any, teaching strategies and assessment tools do teachers use which are not related to <i>First Steps</i> ?	Interviews Observations Tape recordings

### **Reliability and Validity**

Eisner (1985) states that a frequently raised question concerning the use of educational criticism is that of objectivity. His response is to comment that "All of us construct our conception of reality by interacting with the environment....And that construction is influenced by our previous experience, including our expectations, our existing beliefs, and the conceptual tools through which the objective conditions are defined." (p. 240). He asserts that what is important is to demonstrate verisimilitude within a community of believers; that is those who have shared understandings and a shared construction of what is real. Further, he suggests two ways of doing this; through the use of structural corroboration, and referential adequacy.

### **Structural Corroboration**

Structural corroboration is the process of gathering data from a variety of sources and establishing links that build a whole picture, with each piece of information supporting the other and creating a structure which holds together as a true picture, rather like fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to create a picture that makes sense. In other words, the events observed in the classroom should support the information given by the teacher during interviews.

### **Referential Adequacy**

The term referential adequacy deals with the relationship between the phenomena under investigation and the way in which it is presented by the critic. If the description of the event is referentially adequate, the portrayal presented will "ring true" and fit with the experiences of others who are familiar with the phenomena.

### **Member Checking**

Besides using structural corroboration and referential adequacy, credibility was further tested using member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is the process of returning to the participants of the events observed to check that the reconstructions are recognisable. Once each case study had been constructed, a copy was given to the teacher or teachers involved, and they were given the opportunity to comment on the events described and correct any representations which they felt to be inaccurate. In each case, participants agreed that the case-studies depicted a faithful portrayal of life in their classroom.

### **Limitations of the study**

The scope of this study imposed some limitations on the research design. Eisner's (1985) intention is that educational criticism should be carried out by a "connoisseur", that is, someone who has sufficient knowledge and experience in the field to be able to see beyond the superficial; to perceive rather than to recognise. It could be argued



that my own teaching experience would be not be sufficient to describe myself as a "connoisseur". Whilst it acknowledged that this is a limitation of the study, I would also counter the argument by saying that my experiences as a relief teacher have placed me in a wide variety of teaching contexts and that this should not be discounted.

A further limitation of the study was that, because of the difficulty in recruiting participants for the study, data was not collected in each classroom at the same time of the school year. The dynamics of a school or a classroom can differ greatly throughout the school year and this inevitably has an effect on the events that take place. Most of the data collection took place during the first half of the school year; those classrooms may have been very different places by the end of the year. It was originally anticipated that all data would have been collected by the end of the first term. In the event, I believe that the imposition of having to collect data over a longer period of time has actually produced a more accurate rendition of each classroom and the developments that took place as the school year progressed.

Also as a result of the difficulty of recruiting participants for the study, one of the classrooms involved was Mike's year two classroom. It was not originally intended to include a junior primary classroom in the study, and because of the difference in the age and level of development of the children, most of the teaching practices observed in this classroom cannot be compared directly with those observed in middle and upper primary classrooms. However, I believe that the data collected in this classroom warrants its inclusion in the study.

A further limitation is that with the exception of Helen in the independent school, all the teachers participating in the study were teaching at schools in the same Education Department District. This means that Claire and her teaching partner Chris, Angela, and Mike's teaching partner Ann had all received their *First Steps* professional

development at around the same time from the same District Office. Mike had received his professional development at a Core School and had since moved schools. The fact that three of the schools were in the same District also meant that there was little diversity between these schools in terms of socio-economic status.

Another issue in relation to generalisability is related to the volunteer nature of the participants. This makes it likely that these case-studies represent teachers who feel most confident with *First Steps*; this may well not be representative of how *First Steps* is used by other, less confident teachers.

The methodology employed to conduct this study has resulted in the production of a thesis which is considerably larger than might normally be expected. The use of "thick description" (Ryle, cited by Eisner, 1985) and the employment of narratology to construct the portrayals of classroom life in each of the case-studies, demands a rendition of this size. It could be argued that, given the difficulty of recruiting participants for the study, the number of case-studies could have been limited to two, thus making for a smaller thesis. However, I believe that the richness and diversity of data represented in this study justifies the inclusion of all four case-studies, and correspondingly, the length of the thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR  
MIKE AND ANN

***Working Beyond First Steps***

Mike and Ann team teach. This often seems to happen in classrooms all over the Perth metropolitan area where there is more than one class for each year level, but Mike and Ann's version of team teaching was different from others that I have seen. What I usually see is one teacher teaching both classes while the other teacher looks on, helps with crowd control, or attends to other administrative duties. This is not the case in Ann and Mike's room. The children work in groups, and both teachers are teaching at the same time, perhaps on the same topic, perhaps not, but usually at different levels. Planning, teaching and evaluation are carried out with the two teachers working together as a team.

Mike and Ann welcome visitors to their room. They have drawn up a parent roster so that there is always a parent-helper in the room, sometimes two or three. As Mike said, "It's open house here - anyone can come in - but they will always end up with something to do..." They are enthusiastic about what they are doing and consistently welcome opportunities to share the children's work with others. Every time I arrived on their doorstep, either by appointment or unannounced, I was greeted with enthusiasm, and either Mike or Ann would whisk me off to show me the wonderful work the children had produced. On each of my visits to their classroom, they had introduced another new innovation to promote learning. When I arrived to observe, I was always included as part of the class. The children thought I was just another parent. One of them even asked me whose Mum I was.

### **Pre-service Training and Professional Development**

Mike is in his thirteenth year of teaching. He trained at what was then Churchlands College of Advanced Education and specialised in Junior Primary teaching. Mike has taught in a range of contexts; country and Priority schools, in junior, middle and upper grades. The school where he was teaching at the time of the study was in a coastal suburb in a middle to high socio-economic area. Mike had taught the upper primary grades in this school since he moved there two years ago, but this year he was teaching a year two class.

Mike did not receive his professional development in *First Steps* at this school. At that time he was working at another school not far away, which was a *First Steps* Core School. As a Core School, the staff received maximum support from Central Office in their efforts to implement *First Steps*. Mike said that he considered himself to be fortunate in terms of his professional development in relation to *First Steps*, not only because he and his colleagues had ten full days professional development spread over the course of one year, but following that, his school had four Collaborative Teachers working alongside the teachers. Mike described how these teachers were used:

Now, we used them differently at Hillside. Because we did not have them collaborating with a teacher. We had them as a bank, and people would go to the bank, and literally sit down with this bank of teachers, and brainstorm and do all these things, because, funnily enough, all the Collaborative Teachers still had their own ideas of what certain things meant. And by sitting there with the whole lot of them, we forced them to come to some form of agreement. We would go in teams of two or three, depending on the year levels, and sit down with them, so basically we had a whole year of being able to in-service ourselves...

Mike's teaching partner, Ann, did receive her professional development in *First Steps* at this school. This particular school was one of the last schools in the state to come into the *First Steps* project and initially completed professional development sessions in spelling and writing. Their professional development in oral language and reading is on-going, and is being carried out by Mike, who is the *First Steps* Focus Teacher B.

Ann's experiences appear to be quite different from Mike's:

It really just involved a number of sessions on PD days, when we had somebody from District Office who came with the spelling materials and took us through the spelling, and some sort of graphophonic stuff, and a little bit of, I don't remember doing any oral... Yes, so virtually they just walked us through those yellow documents, that we had at the time, and I think we probably had maybe three sessions.

### **The Classroom**

Mike and Ann's classrooms are like many other classrooms in WA state schools; two rooms are separated by a concertina partition, which can be closed or opened to suit the class situation. The concertina doors between the two classrooms are open, and the two rooms operate as one. In Ann's side of the room, there is a large mat area (which at the beginning of the year was defined by masking tape stuck to the carpet), and there are three or four groups of desks pushed together to make large tables. Mike's half of the room is full of desks. Some are in lines, and there are about eight desks pushed together to make one large, long table. Between the two halves of the room there is a Writing Centre. This is simply a table, well stocked with crayons, coloured pencils, textas, some animal stencils, and baskets containing card, scrap paper, and partner testing booklets for spelling.

On the wall between the two rooms are four large posters with the *First Steps* frameworks headings 'Where', 'When', 'What' and 'Who'. Under these headings are examples, which have been taken from children's work, for instance, under the heading 'where' are the phrases *at school, at Daniel's house, at the zoo*. There is always a lot of children's work on display, and this is changed regularly according to the topic currently being studied. On my first visit the walls were covered with the children's science reports, which were about various animals; I noticed frogs, snakes, spiders and kookaburras.

### **Teachers Working Together**

Mike and Ann decided to teach together because they believed they could learn from each other. Ann's major strength is maths, and Mike's is language. Each teacher takes the main responsibility for planning and monitoring in their nominated area, with the support of the other teaching partner. Mike described it in the following way:

I came to teach with Ann, to look at how she did her maths, and how she does her art, how she has a really good rapport with the kids. And amongst other things, I'm learning a lot more; I've learnt a lot already about things like this. And also the final touches, the organisation, now I'm learning a lot. And hopefully, she's learning equally as much from me, of my skills that I have...

...Ann's real strength is maths. She's got a vision of where she wants her kids to be with maths, and I've got my language vision, where I want the kids to go with language. Each person is trusting the other person. I think that's a good word. She trusts me with the language, and I trust her with the maths and the art and whatever else. And, she trusts me with certain ways of getting things across, and keeping a lid on the kids' behaviour, and I trust her with the organisational matters, and things like that. So, a lot of trust is involved, and it's amazing how it comes out, because we've seen the outcomes and been like a sightseer on what the other person's doing....And then you start coming in with your own help, your own suggestions.

Mike explained that a major benefit that he and Ann saw coming from their teaching together was that they hoped it would make it easier for them to direct their teaching to the levels needed by individual children, so that each child would be receiving instruction appropriate to their level of development:

...because we said, one thing we can do by the end of this year, is take a [struggling] kid back to the starting point, start again with that kid, and hopefully this situation will allow us to do that. Then we will have done our job.

### **Children Working Together**

Mike and Ann use groups in their classroom to make the most of group dynamics and peer interaction. At the beginning of the year, the children were placed in mixed ability groups. The children worked in these groups, mainly for maths, but also for other subjects, including language. Mike explained that at this point, the important thing was simply to get the children used to working in groups: "at this stage with the

group work, participating in the groups and learning how to rotate in groups, is far more important than the actual content of what they're learning."

A few weeks into term one, Mike felt he had been able to monitor the range of development of all children in the class and establish ten separate reading groups, so that the children's independent reading could be directed at their own levels. These groups were then allocated to two larger groups for general language work. Mike explained that he had done this by listening to the children read, and from looking closely at the children's work samples and using the *First Steps* indicators to assess their writing and spelling during the first few weeks of the term. He feels that it is important that children are assessed using activities that have not been teacher-guided:

...not saying, well what do we know, but what can you do without any help, which again, is a key to *First Steps*. Understanding what the kids can do by themselves. Then without any help, the simple instruction was do a recount, using that word, even though they don't know what it means...so these kids, they just had to basically do a written retell of the activity....And it ranged from nothing, to two pages, and then we've used some of the key indicators, and I used three levels: they did really well, they at least attempted to do it, or they did not attempt or weren't up to that. And then I just chose the key indicators, so for instance, for spelling, we had *represents most obvious sounds* or *represents all essential sounds*. Just the main key indicators of the first two stages. And all we're doing this for is to identify those kids at risk, and those kids who are doing exceptionally well.

### **Teaching Spelling Procedures**

Language activities usually take place in the first part of the morning. A typical morning would start with Ann seated at the mat area reading aloud. During term one she read Roald Dahl's *The Witches*; by term two she was well into *Matilda*. As the children completed their various before-school tasks, they came and joined her on the mat. They were attentive and clearly engaged in the story. The minimum of fuss that surrounded them getting themselves organised suggested that this was a well established procedure. Mike explained to me that this reading helped settle the children, and demonstrated his own and Ann's love of reading, as well as providing good reading models for the class.

This reading session would last for about twenty or thirty minutes. During term one, Mike and Ann were teaching their class the processes involved in spelling: "our spelling for instance, is hard yakka at the moment, because the kids are learning the process, which is more important than the content, at this stage, until they learn the process and then we can focus in on the content."

On the whiteboard were two lists of words:

<u>Mr Woods</u>	<u>Mrs Penhaligon</u>
what	what
slap	hair
pot	claws
skip	ear
can	point

Mike drilled all the words with the whole class - that is the whole class spelt them out (using letter names) in chorus: W-H-A-T what. Then Mike pointed randomly to the words and the children read them in chorus. The first few times, only a handful of children joined in the chorus, but more children began to join in after a few turns. Mike returned again and again to the words that not many children were reading.

Mike then sent the children back to their desks to copy their words into their "words to learn" books. He didn't have to give them specific instructions; all children immediately seemed to know the routines, based on the procedure for using the *First Steps* spelling journal. The children have to have their words sighted and initialled by an adult when they have written them into their books, to make sure that they are actually learning the correct spelling. Mike, Ann and I went around checking this. About three or four of the children I checked had to re-write their words because they had copied them in wrongly, but they seemed very aware of the importance of getting them correct.



I asked Mike how he decided which words would be included in the list. I was particularly intrigued because there were two lists, and each child seemed to know which list was theirs. Also, both lists began with the same word, 'what'. Mike told me that each of the larger language groups had their own list. They knew which list was theirs because they were working with that teacher for language this week. 'What' was a word which he and Ann had noticed, from their writing, that all the children needed to learn, so it was included in both lists. The other words came from their language work, for instance that particular week, Mike's group were working on phonics and the letter/sound *p*. Ann's group had read *The Bunyip of Berkeley's Creek* and were now designing and describing their own Bunyips.

### **Mike - Building Phonics Skills**

When they had completed their spelling activities, the two language groups would separate, and one group would go with Mike, the other with Ann. The group that went to Mike would then do an activity that explicitly taught some aspect of graphophonics and culminated in some writing, while the other group would work with Ann on activities which would start with a shared reading at the beginning of the week, and as the week progressed would then lead through modelled writing, shared writing, working on independent drafts, conferencing and editing, leading to a published piece of work by the end of the week. This process is closely aligned to the whole-part-whole action recommended by *First Steps*.

The following week, the groups would be reversed, with the stronger group working with Mike on a different set of phonics activities aimed at their point of need, and the weaker group working with Ann on the same activities as the other group the previous week, but modified to suit their level of development. Mike felt that this way the children were getting a good mix of explicit teaching, and activities in which they could apply those learned skills. Because they were able to split the class into two levels, the children were receiving instruction more suited to their particular

levels of development. He said that ideally he would have liked to have had about five different groups.

On this day, Mike's group were investigating the letter *p*. He handed out some worksheets. On the worksheet was a poem about popcorn, then two tasks to be completed by the children. The use of poetry for teaching spelling is a popular activity modelled by *First Steps* facilitators. As Mike handed out the worksheet, he directed the children to look at the sheet of paper and silently read the poem, to see if they could work out what it said. "As you're reading it, try and work out which words you know, and which you don't."

Mike invited volunteers to read the poem line by line. All attempts were praised. The child who attempted the last line was a confident reader, but made a small mistake:

C *Eat it well it's hot.*

M Now, almost, so *eat it something it's hot*. Eat it what? Who can say that word?

C Hot

M No...

C While?

M *Eat it while it's hot.*

Mike then got the children to chorus read the poem together, and instructed them to finger point while reading, "So I know you're following it." The children in the front row did this, but not many of the others did. The chorus was a bit ragged. Mike said, "Now, I'd like to speed it up a little bit, OK? And make it poppy!" He demonstrated what was required by reading it himself. The class read it again. This time there was a much better response.

Mike instructed the children to look at the first task on the sheet. They had to find the words in the poem that started with the letter *p*, and there were three spaces to write them in. The children identified the words and Mike set them to write them into the spaces. There were actually four words, so any three of the four were accepted.

Mike heaped praise on the children as they completed the task. Some of the children did have a problem identifying three different words. There was quite a lot of discussion amongst various children who compared the words they had found to see if they were the same. Mike requested verbal answers from various children ("Hands up if you found a *p* word. One starting with *p*, and the sound 'p'.") and gave feedback. The class then read the poem again together.

The second task required the children to finish the words with a *p*:

All I want you to do is write the letter *p* in the space - BUT, but as you're doing it, you might have to be able to read out the word that you've made... You might recognise them. I wonder if you can recognise where they came from.

After a few minutes to work independently, Mike asked several children to give him the answers and praised those that were correct. The children responded enthusiastically. Mike finished by getting all the children to read all the words together. The second attempt was much better than the first.

In the centre of the classroom cluster there was an open activity area. Mike moved his group into this area, where he had set up two electric frypans. The children watched as he poured in some kernels of popping corn. The pans weren't hot enough, so Mike had to put the lids on. Soon, though, the sound of corn popping could be heard. Mike warned the children to sit well back and took the lids off the pans. The corn was popping, and several pieces went on the floor. The children thought this was great fun and willed the corn to pop right out of the pan and over to them so that they could catch it and eat it!

Back in the classroom, Mike gave out sheets of paper and told the children they were going to write about what had happened. He had told me earlier, that all he was aiming at was getting them to write one good sentence. He started by reminding the

children that the previous week they had written about making damper, and that they had written an introductory sentence. The sentence had included the *First Steps* framework elements *when, who, what* and *where*. "Now I'd like to do another of those sentences today, together as a class... What would be a good way to start our sentence off?" When the responding child suggested "We made some popcorn", Mike said "Hang on, the first thing is when." The child amended the phrase to "This morning we made popcorn". Another child suggested, "Today we made popcorn". Mike talked as he wrote on the board: "When? This morning, or today...Who?...we...now, what did we do?...is it we did? ...made some popcorn...where?...in the wet area. We'll put the wet area. I like the wet area." Mike wrote:

This morning  
Today we made some popcorn in the wet area.

He explained to the children they could choose whether they wanted to write "this morning" or "today". He drew the children's attention to the use of a capital letter at the beginning and a full stop at the end.

The children got to work. Many of them put capital letters in the middle of the sentence, and some were also leaving very large spaces between their words. In some cases the spaces were bigger than the words. I could hear the frustration in Mike's voice as he said for the umpteenth time, "The words are there for you to copy off the board....don't leave so much space!" Mike commented to me that what he was getting out of this exercise was that several of the children had no sense of what a sentence was. One of them, he felt, did not even realise that words conveyed meaning.

On another occasion, working with the more advanced group of children, Mike produced a worksheet. The sheet was about "magic" *e* that changes vowel sounds,

and the sound they were looking at today was *a*. Mike started off by saying that this was very complicated, and that it might not make sense to many of them, but that as they went through the year, they would begin to understand. Firstly he talked about vowels and got the children to recite the vowels. They were able to do this. He then talked about the letter *a*, and asked the children what the letter name was, and what sound it made. He then went on to explain about "magic" or "fairy" *e*, and how it changes the vowel so that it says its name instead of its sound.

After completing a worksheet, this lesson also culminated in a shared writing activity, as the children wrote a list of things that they would need to do for a party at the end of term, and wrote invitations to their class-mates. This lesson again used the whole-part-whole format recommended in *First Steps*.

Mike used activities from *Spell Well*, books 1 and 2 for his phonics lessons, but he used the books as a resource from which he could select ideas and then used these ideas to make up his own worksheets. In this way, he could tailor the activities to suit the needs of his students and fit into his current theme.

### **Home Reading and Parental Involvement**

As the children in their classroom became practised in their procedures and routines, Mike and Ann slowly introduced more. At the beginning of term two, they introduced a borrowing system for home reading. This focussed on the ten reading groups that Mike had identified in term one. One day, I arrived to see a new chart in the corner of the room. It was made out like a grid, with the days of the working week down the side, and running across the top were ten spaces with the names of the planets, (except earth) sun, and moon. Each square had either *library*, *computer* or a number written in it in black, and either *B* or *R* in red.

Mike said that they had set up the system the previous week. I commented that the chart looked complicated, but he said that everyone had got used to it remarkably quickly. The groups were the ten reading levels he had identified during term one. The computer that was in the classroom was set up with books on CD ROM. There was a bookshelf nearby, and these books were mostly basal reader types, various levels and topics, and from various reading schemes. I noticed *Sunshine*, and *Story Box* readers. The numbers on the chart referred to the boxes in which these books were stored. The chart was to tell children if they were to borrow from the reading shelves, the class library that was set up last term, or to use the CD ROM. A *B* on the grid meant they were to borrow that day, an *R* meant they were to return. Each child had a large snap seal plastic bag in which to keep their book and take it to and from home.

Mike told me that he felt that the home reading was going well, but he wished he had reading materials to use other than the basal reader type books, such as magazines and comics. He and Ann were planning to send home a parent survey in about three weeks' time, to get some parent feedback about how the scheme was going, and to try to iron out any difficulties. As well as this, although they had tried to be accurate when assigning reading materials to each child's level of reading, he thought it would be useful to have parental feedback about whether their reading material was felt to be too easy or too difficult.

As well as the home reading, Mike had also introduced some phonics homework for the weaker readers. He described it to me:

Well, this is the sound book. Now basically what I said to the parents was, it's very simple, the kids haven't got the small building blocks. In their heads. And if we can give them the small building blocks, they'll start putting together the big building blocks. As they do, they will start to read. Without any doubt. They will start to read. If they know all the little building blocks off by heart, as we progress, they'll just pick it up so much easier. ...So basically at the top of each page they have just single letters. They have to say the letter name, like, *c, d, n, p*, and then they have to say the sound name, *kuh, duh, nn, puh*, and so

forth. That's trying to teach them that *a* can say two sounds, but most of all, when you ask them to read it, they still sound it out.

...Every word that they write on their skill sheet, they have to read it. Out loud, to a parent, who ticks it. Every word written is ticked. Again, a lot of ticks in here, a lot of ticks in the sound books, a lot of ticks on the page, very positive.

Mike and Ann see parental involvement as being very important, and place great value on the role of the parent as a teacher of language. Mike feels that as well as being able to use them as a resource in the classroom, perhaps more importantly, having parents come into the classroom is effectively showing them how to teach their children:

Well, the first thing that we have been able to do, with the parents, is first of all, we're teaching them how to teach. ... they're coming into the room, and they're learning strategies to get messages across to kids in a positive manner. We're teaching them where their kid is at, and that success, it doesn't matter what level, we're teaching them that their kid is achieving, even though it's at their own level.

Mike and Ann feel that involving parents to the extent they have has been very successful. Ann described a situation the other day when some parents had been in the room during the afternoon, helping to sort out finished work. The three or so parents were all on the floor, sorting out the work into subject areas, when one parent's mobile phone rang. She answered it, and had to write something down, so she moved over to Ann's desk to write down whatever it was. Ann said, "I just thought how wonderful, that she should feel so relaxed in the classroom that she felt it was perfectly OK to go and sit at my desk when she needed to." Mike described another day, when one parent came in laden with shopping bags and announced, "Here's Ann's shopping." The 'shopping' was plastic folders, and other stationery items for the classroom, but being able to use parents as a resource to help with these tasks has meant that Mike and Ann can more effectively use their time. They also get their parent helpers to do their photocopying.

### **Working with Ann - "Applied Language"**

When the children are working with Ann, she provides them with the opportunity to use the skills they have covered with Mike and apply them to meaningful and purposeful language activities. Work is carried out around themes, and so that they are meaningful, Ann and Mike follow the children's current interests when they choose their topics:

We were going to do the shopping [topic] which we're going to do next week, we were going to do that way earlier. But Ann came up [to me] and just said, no, a good topic for this would be toys, and I just said, oh, you're dead set right. There can't be any better to follow on, it just clicked, it was such a natural progression.

The work with Ann leads to a published piece of writing, and this writing is scaffolded using writing frameworks and sentence starters, as suggested in *First Steps*. I asked Mike what genres he had covered, and how he went about preparing frameworks for the children's writing:

I just look at the topic and if I can see an opportunity to cover any [genre], I will cover it. So this year already, we have done recounts, descriptions, procedures, expositions, explanations, and many others. Because I have a good understanding of the various parts that go into making them, then, when I see an activity, I say oh, you have to do an explanation for that. Of that particular thing. And we have done narratives, we've done some superb narratives, but they are much harder for the kids, especially at this stage, without the writing skills to do it, writing an informational text is much easier, because it's more in that point form fashion of giving the information back. And the kids actually feel a lot safer, even in the upper primary, I found that they found it a lot safer.

Mike felt that because he knew the *First Steps* writing frameworks so well, he was able to modify them to suit the topic and the level of development of the children he was teaching. Further, because he was so familiar with them, he could focus on one particular part of writing that might need more explicit teaching:

Now, I can call upon [any framework] and modify it to suit the activity. Because I'll say, Oh, here's a chance, but I don't want the kids to do a full-length description all the time, so let's just do the first bit. Or just let's do the end bit. Or a recount. Okay, we might really need the kids to build up their skills in writing... the meat of it, the middle part. I call it the meat in the sandwich, because it's got the orientation, it's got the events, and then it's got the summary at the end, or the personal statement. Well, we might just look at the meat.



On the day I observed Ann teaching, the children were working on the "toys" topic, and they were writing descriptions. On the whiteboard in Ann's room there was an explosion chart with the word *toys* in a cloud in the middle. Around this were words relating to all sorts of toys, which had been sorted according to various classifications; for instance, *Lego*, *Meccano* and *Duplo* were in one group, trucks, cars, racing cars and motor bikes in another, *Barbie*, *Ken* and *Power Rangers* in yet another. On the easel was pinned an A3 sheet with the heading *My Toy Brainstorm*. This sheet had the cloud in the middle with *toys* written in it, and lots of empty clouds around the outside.

Ann's group was sitting in the mat area and Ann sat on a chair with the easel beside her. Most of the children had a toy which they had brought with them to school that day. Ann had a plastic carrier bag, and from this bag she took a box. She explained to the children that she didn't really have many toys, because she was a bit old, but every now and again she would buy something because she thought that one day she might have grandchildren who would like to play with them. Ann opened her box and showed the children some doll's house furniture that was in the box. There were several pieces, and she took them out to show the children. She said, "My toy is doll's house furniture. It's made out of wood. It's got drawers that work and doors that open. I really, really like this doll's house furniture because I'm going to use it when I have a grandchild." Ann then brought out of her bag a little tiny teddy bear. She said,

This is another one of my toys, and this one is a little baby bear. It's a small, cuddly bear. It's made of fur. This bear's got arms and legs that move. It's got eyes that are made out of little glass beads, it's got a little sewn on nose, and little stitched, they're like little stitches for its mouth, and it's got cute little ears made of fur. I really like this little toy because I think he looks cute and cuddly.

Ann said that now it would be the children's turn to talk about their toys. She wanted to see if they could use a special way to talk about their toys, and introduced the worksheet, which she had enlarged to A3. A copy of this worksheet appears in

Appendix C. She said that this would help the children to give a description of their toy; that it was like having a plan. She used, and stressed, the word *description* quite a few times. Ann explained the worksheet to the children. She said that later, they would be using it to write a description of their toy, but for now, they could use it to talk about their toy. It had sentence starters on it; *My toy is..., It is..., It has..., I like my toy because....* She demonstrated describing her bear using the sentence starters, then she said she would give the children a couple of minutes to look at it so that they could practise in their head what they were going to say.

Ann read out the sentence starters and modelled what was required; "My toy is, ..... It is....something about what it is, and then it has (picking up a child's Barbie doll) ...long blonde hair, frilly skirt, a body that moves around, earrings too, and then, why you like it." She gave the children a minute to think about it, and then invited various children to come and describe their toy to the class. Several children came out to stand by Ann and describe their toy. The first child's description was typically oral language; the child described his toys by saying "It's kind of like..."; "It's got this there." Several more children described their toys, some with help from Ann. Ann called on a boy who had been fidgeting. He said; "My toy is a sword. It is an electric sword. It has a red button here. I like my toy because it keeps bullies away." Ann praised his description and said that that was a very good reason to like his toy. She called on a further three children to describe their toys, and they were all able to do this using the plan. The last boy had left his toy at home and was able to do it from memory.

Ann then directed her group to make groups of three or four, with whomever they were sitting next to, and to take it in turns to use the plan to tell the people in their group about their toy. After five minutes or so, Ann called the children to attention and asked several children to repeat descriptions that other children had given them.

She then selected a couple of children to repeat their own description. Ann said,

Now, I'm going to give you a plan, and you're going to go, this is a draft, so I'll come around and put the draft stamp and the date on it, your name goes there, make sure you do that, and then, I want you to just have a go at the spelling. At this stage the spelling doesn't matter. So you just have a go, and then, when we get to the stage of editing it, then we'll look at the spelling. Okay? You might be able to find some of the spelling words on the brainstorm here. So that could save some time later on. So if the spelling's not there, you just have a go. But you might be able to just go and see if it's there, because there's quite a few of the words you might need to use.

One child suggested that some of the words he would need were actually written on his toy. Ann said that was a good idea and pointed out the possibility to the other children. The children moved over to the tables and got down to work. A few children had lost their pencils or needed to sharpen them. Ann had a stack of spare pencils in a tin and just handed them out to these children. She told me that she built up the supply in her tin every day from the pencils she found lying about the floor.

Ann went round the desks with the draft stamp and a date stamp. The children passed these round and stamped their own work. Some of the children completed their writing quite quickly, and Ann told these children to get a highlighter pen or a texta and underline any words that they thought may need attention with the spelling. She pulled a chair out to the centre of the room and said that she was available to conference with children when they were ready. She told me that recently the children had been very accurate at using *First Steps* techniques to identify words which they had misspelt, and that she felt that this was an indication that they were becoming very practiced at recognising when a spelling was correct and when it was not. She said that even the weaker children were developing this skill. Sure enough, when the first child came out to conference, she had identified all the words that needed to be corrected. Ann read her description aloud and corrected spelling mistakes, full stops and capital letters. She gave her a piece of lined paper and said that now she was ready to do her good copy.

Mike came over to have a look at the children's work. He praised several children and made comments about their toys. He pretended to have a play fight with Peter, the child with the sword. He and Ann briefly discussed how the work would be displayed. Mike suggested, "they can draw a picture of their toy and then put both of them onto a piece of A3." Ann said, "We can put them on the wall over there, those things can come down now" and Mike replied, "Yeah, and then when they take them down, they can just fold it in half so it's like a book."

### **Using the *First Steps* Developmental Continua**

Mike does not use the developmental continua in any formal sense. However, he feels that he knows the indicators of the various stages in the developmental continua so well that this enables him to constantly make informal judgements about the developmental levels of the children he is teaching:

...the indicators, sort of enhanced my understanding of what a kid would do. And how a kid would progress through. So the knowledge for instance of the writing indicators, from the very first ones, right through to advanced, and, knowing those indicators almost off by heart, has helped my ... teaching of writing. ....the **knowledge** of the continuum is more important than continuums themselves.

Mike feels that a contributory factor to this knowledge is the negotiation of meaning that he was able to participate in during his initial encounters with *First Steps*, both with the Collaborative Teachers and with the other teachers in his school at the time. Mike told me that he would go to the Collaborative Teachers with a piece of writing and go through it in detail with them. "...I'd go to all four, and ask, what do you think about this, what do you think about this, and then I would come to my own conclusion. Based on what they told me."

Mike has been able to use the indicators to meet his needs in the classroom. Although he has not formally placed each child in his class on the developmental continua, he is aware of where each child is and is able to direct his teaching to that level. When he

spoke to me, Mike referred several times to the fact that many children in his class did not have a sense of what a sentence was, and much of his teaching was focussed on the development of that concept.

Mike used his knowledge of the continua to identify those children who would need extra phonics instruction and practice, and to place the children in their reading groups. He has also used the *First Steps* indicators for reporting children's progress to parents:

What I've done, is that the parents have got a sample of their child's written work, a narrative, and I'm putting on, the positive things their kids are doing. Which are basically the indicators. But, re-worded in my own simple language, for them. And then, below, are the indicators that they need to [work towards], again in the same, more basic language. So once again, it's just the knowledge of the continua, looking at the sample of work; these are the positive things the kids are doing, they're spacing their words out correctly, or if they're having a go at certain sounds, and so forth. So I'm combining the writing, the spelling and the handwriting, all together, in one work sample.

Because Mike is possibly the only teacher in the school who is using the *First Steps* developmental continua, he uses them for his own purposes only and is not under any of the constraints imposed by a whole-school approach. He is not required to pass his *First Steps* documents on to anyone else, so that he is not under any pressure to complete continua in a certain way, by a certain time, or even at all.

Although the school has received professional development from District Office, and he, as Focus Teacher, is continuing that professional development, many teachers at his school see the use of the continua as an unnecessary amount of work. Mike feels that part of the reason for this is that they have not been involved in the kind of professional discussions in which he was able to participate, and this has led to them not having the depth of understanding that he feels he has:

we were lucky that we had one of the originals, I suppose, the people who had sat down and come up with the basic philosophy and had had agreement. But, people, through this idea of Chinese Whispers, one person tells another, it has changed.

Part of the change from the original concept is that it seems that some schools have tried to use the developmental continua as part of their whole-school monitoring. Mike feels that problems are likely to occur when the developmental continua are used either for accountability, or when they are passed from one teacher to the next with no real negotiation of what the indicators mean. As a Focus Teacher, he has encountered other teachers who have been required to complete developmental continua for accountability purposes:

...I go to *First Steps* meetings...and I see these people...they're being forced to make it an accountable document rather than a teacher-user document.... They've missed what it is. They have missed the fact that it is ...only a part of your teaching, and they are so worried about getting the kids on the continuum and moving them along the continuum, again, they're forgetting that the kids will move along the continuum. They will learn along the continuum, at their own pace. And you can't force the kids along the continuum, you have to guide them along the continuum.

In the lower grades, where children often make rapid progress through the developmental stages, passing the documents on to another teacher is rarely a problem, but in the higher grades Mike feels that children tend to reach a plateau and progress is not as rapid. This results in teachers being over-generous when placing older children on the continua, so that it can be seen to reflect the amount of work done by the teacher:

Because if a person gets them up in Year five and Year six, and they're in that [plateau] stage that I talked about, it is very hard to see any improvement on those kids. All of a sudden, you've got this big block in the phonetic spelling, and in the middle stage of their writing. Early writing, I think it is. And you've got all these kids blocked in there. If you look at their work, you can see the improvement, but on the sheet, you can't. Because they could be doing a simple and a compound sentence. And that would come through in their work. ...But if they're not doing the complex sentence, they can't move on. And so you get this big traffic jam.

By using the developmental continua in the way that he does, Mike has been able to tailor his teaching to the needs of the children in his class, yet avoid the pitfalls sometimes encountered in a whole-school approach. Although he does not complete the continua in any formal sense, Mike's informal observations and anecdotal records are expressed in terms of *First Steps* indicators, because both the terminology and the

awareness of the behaviours have become part of his in-head knowledge. For accountability purposes, he finds it a simple matter to use his records to complete the Student Outcome Statements.

Although Mike and Ann's classroom is based very much on a whole-language philosophy, Mike seems to be very aware that many children will be unable to meet the technological demands of reading and writing without some explicit instruction in decoding. Mike's phonics sessions and the 'sound book' activities are contrived to meet these needs.

The 'whole-part-whole' structure of Mike's phonics lessons as he started with the context of the learning topic, focussed on the phonics skills, then returned to the context, meant that the phonics work remained embedded in the context of the current learning topic, and therefore continued to be purposeful and meaningful to the children. This notion of 'whole-part-whole' has become so embedded in *First Steps* practice that it seems to have become part of the terminology.

Mike's motivation and ideas seem to be drawn from a variety of sources; not only his knowledge of *First Steps* materials and theoretical underpinnings, but also his own teaching and learning experiences and his discussions with collegiate and superordinate others throughout his teaching career. His self confidence and openness suggests a teacher who is very comfortable with change. Mike appears to fit the profile of a teacher working at the highest psychological levels, according to Hopkins' (1990) study. He has adopted new ideas and seems to be using these at Hopkins' (1990, p.37) "routine" level. He actively seeks new ideas, collaborates with others and demonstrates a sound understanding of the philosophy on which *First Steps* is based.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CLAIRE AND CHRIS

#### **Remaining within their 'Comfort-Zone'**

##### **The Classroom**

Claire and Chris both teach year five. There are only two year five classes in the school, and they are housed in adjoining classrooms, separated by a concertina door. They have opened this door up, so that the rooms form one big classroom, and they teach both classes as one. The previous year, Claire was teaching year three, but she had wanted to teach year five, and this year she had been able to make that move. Both Claire and Chris are *First Steps* Focus Teachers; Chris holds the positions of both Focus Teacher A and Focus Teacher B, and Claire is also a Focus Teacher B. Prior to this year, they had often discussed with one another their personal philosophies of teaching, and had reached a decision to try teaching together. It was something Chris had wanted to try for some time:

I've always wanted to give it a go, I've never done it before, and I thought, there's got to be a better way of doing things, to get together and combine your resources, and I think the kids get more out of it. .... It's something I've wanted to try ever since I've been here and nobody would do it. And now, Claire said yes, she'd give it a go, and we thought well, we'll try it, we didn't know if it's going to work.

Claire had worked in an open situation at a previous school, but not on a permanent basis:

Last time I did it, I had a four/five, and the teacher I did it with had fives, so when we were doing things that were complementary, we would open the doors, and teach together, and then when it wasn't complementary we just closed it and did our own thing. This is the first time permanently open, and I think when we first started, we envisaged that we would possibly close the door at times, but we never have.

Both Chris and Claire feel that the experiment has gone very well so far, and they attribute this to their similar approach to teaching. There is also a third person



involved in their teaching team, Madeleine, who teaches Chris's class on Fridays, and when Claire goes on leave in the final term of this year, she will step in and take Claire's class.

The classrooms are arranged so that each is a mirror image of the other. Each has a line of desks facing what would be the concertina wall and with their backs to the fixed chalkboard, and rows of desks running at right angles to these in the central part of each room, facing the windows. Between the two classrooms, facing back into the room and backing on to the window, is a portable blackboard. This has a table up against it holding chalk, dusters, two jars of marbles, and other assorted classroom paraphernalia, so that board space is somewhat limited. The two blackboards at either end are used by the teachers, but it seems they are used more for 'housekeeping', than instructional purposes. Each board had that day's date on it and also two columns for names of children who displayed either good or bad behaviour.

In a corner of Chris's room there is a computer. At the back of the rooms, where the doors are, there are pinboards stretching the whole length of the walls. On these were pinned various commercially made posters connected with farming: *Wool in Australia*, *Wheat, Growing and Harvesting Sugarcane* and *The Paper Cycle*. Underneath these pinboards were the children's drawers and benches on which were piled various class sets of text books; (maths, social studies, science) and exercise books.

### **Training and Professional Development**

Chris trained as a teacher "over thirty" years ago. Initially she trained for two years at one of the teachers' colleges, and later she did a conversion course, also at that teachers' college. Claire, on the other hand, has been teaching for about eight years. She had a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in history and ancient history, and then

studied for a Graduate Diploma in Education at the Western Australian College of Advanced Education.

Both Claire and Chris received their professional development in *First Steps* through their current school. When many schools were receiving their professional development in *First Steps*, the teachers at the school realised that none of them really knew anything about it, and approached their District Office to come and carry out their professional development. Claire and Chris were both interested in what they saw as the philosophy behind *First Steps*, so they nominated themselves to become the Focus Teachers for the school.

Claire said that she found the initial professional development sessions confusing. She feels that this was because she was trying to assimilate too much information at once. "they wouldn't let you have the modules until you did the in-service. But unfortunately if you'd never seen it before, they're sprouting at you, trying to walk you through the documents, and you never have time to absorb [it]." By the time she received her further training as Focus Teacher, she had had time to try out some of the strategies, and she began to understand it more. "It all just started to click into place, it was ...really making sense."

Chris liked a lot of the ideas that she saw when she was first introduced to *First Steps*, but she feels that she tried to take on too much in too short a time. "...when we had PD, I thought, that's a good idea, so I just tried things out in the classroom, ...actually, I went in head first, I tried to do too much when I started."

Both teachers agreed that the school administration had been very supportive of their involvement in *First Steps*, as they had been given whatever time they needed to complete their further professional development, and attend network meetings. Although the whole school have been in-serviced in using the writing and spelling developmental continua and supporting modules, and this year are being introduced to

the oral language materials through Claire as Focus Teacher B, it is up to each individual teacher to decide how much they want to use *First Steps* in their classroom. Claire and Chris, as Focus Teachers, see themselves as a resource to be there for the rest of the school if teachers need them. Chris explained that they had initially tried to obtain a whole-school commitment to some aspects of *First Steps*, but this had not been successful:

...we actually did impose some writing forms on people initially, but it really didn't work very well, we found a lot of antagonism ...they didn't want to use it, so we gave up that idea. And felt that well, it was really our job to pass on the information, if we'd done some PD, ourselves, then it's up to the class teacher to take it on board if they want to. It is the school policy to do *First Steps*, so in actual fact that's what they should be doing, but, we can say to them well, you know, we've taught you this, now you've got to go and do it. It's not our job to convert them, it's just dissemination of information.

### **Planning the Language Program**

Chris and Claire start the planning process by referring to the Focus Points in the (1989) *English Language K-7 syllabus*, which gives them an idea of what the children should be able to do. They then look at what the children actually are able to do, and this shows up areas of need. In this way, they feel they are able to cater to the specific areas of need that emerge in their particular class. They stated that they determine what their students are actually able to do either by looking at the *First Steps* continuum, or by looking at their work: "...you may not mark it, as such, but you're looking at it. You know, you're going around, watching what they're doing..."

The language program is usually constructed around a theme, which would be chosen according to the interests of the children, and the availability of resources. The choice of a particular theme may occur because a commercially produced program is available, or because either Chris or Claire has successfully used that program of work in the past. When I first interviewed them, Claire and Chris had just started a program of work based on Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. "...we're doing *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* at the moment simply because there's a

whole program came out on it, we've got the book and it looks fun, it's a great story..." The previous term, the class had completed a program of work around fairy tales. As Chris explained, the motivation behind this had been that the resources were readily available, the theme had been successful in the past, and they had identified a need in that the children did not appear to be familiar with many fairy tales:

We did fairy tales, last term, so then we had a bulk loan from the library, so the kids got to read a variety of different versions....I've used it before and I thought it worked well, so we thought we'd do it again.....And the fact that they don't seem to know many fairy stories, either, I mean, we found that... some of the really well known ones, they didn't even know these.

When they use a commercially produced package to construct their language program, Claire and Chris will go through the program and select the activities which they think will address the children's needs, and those which they will feel comfortable using. They feel that some of the advantages of using a commercially produced program are that these programs generally follow the syllabus, and that many of them have activities that cross into other curricular areas:

**Chris** ...A lot of these books have an actual program of work, right across the board, they have maths, they have social studies, they have art. So if they're there, then we use that as a basis anyway.

**Claire** We pick and choose. And add to. I mean most of them are set to the syllabus anyway, so you don't have to worry about the syllabus so much. So you just adapt it to the children's needs.

### **Chris and Claire Teaching Spelling**

Before coming to her current school, Claire had worked in a school in the north-west of the state, where she had received professional development in using the spelling journal:

Apart from the continuum, I had been using *First Steps* philosophy and structure and strategies and everything with my spelling before I came to this school. Not having a label of *First Steps* on it though. I had workshops and things with spelling up in Bluff Harbour, and I'd learned how to use the journal. And of course when it came to *First Steps*, that was all the philosophy of *First Steps*; that

I'd been doing *First Steps*, not realising it was *First Steps*. So I had spelling pretty well covered, right from my first day out of College.

Claire felt therefore that it was an easy matter for her to begin using *First Steps* spelling, because as she saw it, she had been using it for some time anyway.

The students in Claire and Chris's classes have two spelling lists in their journals; a personal list and a class focus list. The students' personal list is generated by identifying words from their own writing which they have difficulty spelling. Their class focus list may be generated in either of two ways: firstly, if the class are working from a commercially produced program, such as when they were working on *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, there will often be spelling or vocabulary lists included in the program, and Claire and Chris will use these lists. The second way that they generate a class spelling list is to identify a topic that the class is studying in another curriculum area, for instance, social studies, and to ask the students to brainstorm as many words as they can think of which are connected with that topic. When they have thirty or forty words written up on the board, the students vote to nominate twenty words which they think they need to learn to spell. These words become their focus list for the next two weeks.

Once the list has been settled, the children will spend the next two weeks working on various spelling activities with those particular words. Activities which Claire and Chris mentioned included crosswords, word sleuths, synonyms, syllables, spellamadoodles and posters. Claire explained what she meant by a "poster":

A poster is where they have to put the word up the top, they have to draw, illustrate it, and then at the bottom they have to put the word into a sentence, so, and it goes up on the board, and it's there for them to consult if they want to.

Many of these spelling activities are included in the *First Steps* word study module (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992a). Claire and Chris rotate these spelling activities. Often the children will nominate the activity that they want to do;

at other times, Claire or Chris will choose a particular activity because they have identified a specific gap in the children's understanding:

A lot of it, actually is generated by the children, because we'll say to them something along the lines of, what would you like to do today, in your spelling, and they'll say, oh we want to do a word sleuth or we want to do a crossword or whatever. Other days, we'll say things like, no, today we're going to do work on it, because we need to do work on that.

These gaps in their students' understandings seem to be identified from Chris and Claire's informal observations rather than by reference to the developmental continuum.

At the end of the two weeks, the children are tested on their focus words. Any words which they continue to misspell are then transferred to their personal lists, "Because they're the one that can't spell it; the rest of the class can spell it but they can't."

There is a small group of children from both classes which Chris and Claire call their "special group". These are children who have been identified as in need of particular help with their spelling. They work on a different spelling program from the rest of the class, and this program is very much based on Direct Instruction. Claire explained the program:

It's a remedial program that they just work through. The whole idea of the thing is that they don't have to learn how to do the activity. ...they're boring, and they're the same ones, every list you just go over the same ones. But that's actually a good thing, because those kids don't have to work out about the rules of how I do this activity, all they have to do is worry about the words that they're looking at. So that's all it is, repetitious and boring. But it takes the strain off them having to learn how to do it.

Sometimes, the "special group" will do the same activity as the rest of the class, but they will be working on their own set of words: "If we're doing word building, they do word building, but they use their words....There's no point in getting them to do a

rhyming word or a word building or a syllabification for a word that ...is beyond them."

I asked Claire and Chris how they identified children for the "special group":

**Chris** The ones that can't spell!...it's as simple as that.... they get too many errors...

**Claire** I think, too many obvious [errors]. I mean, these kids can't spell *they*, and *with*, and you know, the base words that by year five they should have...

There is room for movement in and out of the "special group". At the beginning of the year, there were about ten children who were identified as requiring special instruction, but many of them have now gone back into the main group and are managing to keep up. If they find that they are struggling again, they can move back into the "special group":

That special group is flexible. We've got a core of three that have been in it the whole year,....And they've just gradually gone back to their class, to the main class...One of them, the other day was having a little bit of trouble with the main class work, and I said to him, do you want to go back to the other group, and he said no, he didn't want to, and could he stay in the class if he kept the words up, and we said fine,...because the need wasn't really [there]...he was just slipping a bit. Being careless.

### **The Spelling Lesson**

I had arranged with Chris and Claire to watch them teach spelling one morning.

When I arrived, they were concerned because a football clinic had been arranged for that morning. As the two classes are treated separately for administration purposes, each class would go to the clinic separately, and this meant that each teacher would be taking her own class for the same spelling lesson. Claire and her class went to the clinic first, leaving Chris to start the lesson with her class.

Chris told the children to start with 'look, cover, write, check', then to go on to synonyms. When the children were working at their desks, I noticed that some had their spelling journals open at the page on which their spelling list was written; others did not seem to be referring to their spelling journals at all.

When the children had completed the 'look, cover, write, check' procedure, they brought their list to the teacher to be checked again. If the children had any words spelt wrongly when they brought to the teacher the words that they had supposedly checked, they had to write the offending word out twenty times. They put their name on the board so that the teachers could keep track of them. I asked Chris how she made sure that the children had actually copied their words correctly into their spelling journals. She said that she and Claire check them when the children write their words in, in the same way that she was checking them then.

As soon as the children had had their 'look, cover, write, check' words ticked off, they started looking up synonyms for their words. Some children had their own Macquarie thesauruses, others used those from a class set, which were in a box at the back of the room. These were Collins "gem" size, and several of the words were not in this edition. Some children had difficulty because the word they were looking for was not represented in the thesaurus as the same part of speech as the word in their list; for example, one of their words was *desperately*, which was not in the thesaurus, but the words *despair* and *desperate* were listed. It also seemed that the children did not understand the notations in the thesaurus. Many of the children were noting down the numbers of the pages where the words appeared in the dictionary and the thesaurus. This seemed to be quite important to the children, and it appeared that this practice was based on some agenda of their own. There were a lot of comments like, "I can't find ...." and, "it's on page ....".



Although they had not been instructed to, most children appeared to be working in pairs to complete this activity, and there was a good deal of negotiation going on about which synonym would be the most appropriate to use. Some children appeared to complete this exercise quite quickly, and I noticed that when they had finished, several of them were working on making up a word sleuth using the list words.

The time came for Chris's class to make their way to the football clinic. Within minutes of them leaving the classroom, Claire's class returned. Once the children were settled, she told the children to get out their spelling journals and do 'look, cover, write, check'. She spent some time sorting out two or three children who needed new pads, and she gave out some pink covered pads to her "special group". By this time, children had started to come out to have their words checked off. I heard Claire say to one child, "You look at them, you read them, cover them, spell them." Some children finished very quickly. One of them asked Claire if he could do his word sleuth. Claire said, "Yes, when you've finished, go on with your word sleuth." Another child said, "I haven't even done my definitions yet. Did you start them on Monday?" Claire answered that they had been started on Monday and had been finished on Tuesday, and wanted to know why he had not started. He explained that he had been absent on Monday and at PEAC on the Tuesday, so Claire told him that he would have to work on his own to catch up on what he had missed.

One of the children who brought his words out to me to be checked had another list of words tagged onto the end of his class list. I asked if these were his personal words and he agreed that they were. Claire heard this and it must have jogged her memory, because she then asked who it was who needed some new personal words. One of the boys identified himself. Claire said, "When you've finished 'look, cover, write, check', put your spelling journal, with your writing journal, on my desk, so I can give you some new words." Claire asked the child to do this so that she could

look through his writing to identify misspelt words and transfer them to the personal word list in his spelling journal.

By this time, most of the children had finished 'look, cover, write, check', and while waiting for the stragglers to finish, Claire was writing sentences on the board. She had her copy of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in her hand and she was copying the sentences out of the book. They were sentences which had the spelling list words in them. In each sentence, the spelling list word was underlined. Claire wrote four of the sentences on the board, which was all that would fit. When she had completed this, she stopped the class and called them to attention. She told the children to read the sentences on the board, and that they were going to try to find synonyms to substitute for the underlined words. She asked who could remember what a synonym was. About five hands went up. She asked one of the children for a definition, which was "it's a word similar in meaning". Claire accepted this and said that they were going to try to substitute the underlined word with another word which was similar in meaning. The word had to be substituted by one word only, and the meaning of the sentence had to be retained.

Claire cited the word *belching* as an example of where the meaning could be changed. She asked for another meaning for *belching*. One of the children suggested *puffing*. She said, "no, no, what's another meaning, not the meaning used in that sentence, another meaning." One of the children answered, "Burping." Claire accepted this, and said, "but that's not the meaning for this, is it? No. So you've got to keep that in mind. So keep the story in mind when we come to a new word."

Claire read from the book the few sentences before the first one that she had written on the board, and included the sentence itself, which was:

*There wasn't even enough money to buy proper food for them all*

"Now what we need to do is we need to come up with a new word for *proper*. We want to get rid of *proper*, we want to put a new word in there, but we still want to keep the same meaning." Various children made suggestions. With each one, Claire re-read the sentence, substituting the suggested word for *proper*. Accepted words included *real*, *good*, *suitable*, *better*. *Original*, *ordinary*, *a variety of*, *tastier* were all suggested but rejected.

It seemed that Claire had a specific word in mind, but no-one had yet suggested it. She said, "What does *proper* actually mean? Let's get back to that." Someone suggested "decent". Claire said, "Ah! decent would be good. Yes.... There's another word I'm thinking of. It starts with *c*, and it actually means *proper*, when you behave properly. When you do things properly." A child put up his hand. He said, "It's not the *c* word, but..." Claire interrupted, "No, I want the *c* word." The children began to guess all sorts of words that did not fit. Claire wrote the first two letters on the board; *co...* Someone suggested *continental*. Someone else suggested *cow*. Claire said, "Oh, how could you have *cow* in there?" Eventually one of the children got the word; *correct*. Claire wrote the word in, and read the sentence again.

The lesson continued in much the same way with the other sentences, until Chris's class began to drift back, so Claire brought her lesson to a conclusion. Once all Chris's class were settled in their seats, she told them that they would need eight yellow cards which they had been given the previous day. There was a flurry of activity as children searched for their cards.

Claire sorted the children into groups of four and explained the next activity:

...you're going to have cards with a word on it, and another card with a definition on it, to match that word.....After we've done that for every word on our list, there's fifteen of them and we're going to add one more word, then you actually play the game where you put them face down, and you take turns in picking a card.

She demonstrated how to play the game by drawing a diagram on the board. Each child had eight cards, and they would be in groups of four, so each group would have thirty two cards; sixteen words and sixteen definitions.

They needed another spelling word, and after a quick conversation, Claire and Chris decided to use the word *draft*, which was in the vocabulary list in the teachers' resource book, but which they had not included in the children's list. Chris said that this had been because they could not find this word in the actual text, although they had found the word *draught* in the sentence "...freezing cold draughts blew across the floor..."(p.16). I suggested that this might be because the teachers' resource book was an American publication, and that the American edition of the book would have American spellings. They concluded that I was probably right, and gave the children the word *draught* to be included in the list of words.

The children all got to work, and there was quite a lot of chatter and negotiation as they decided who was going to do which words. Some of the children had to be told to use larger writing, as they wrote their word in tiny letters in one corner of their card! By recess time, most children had finished their cards, and they put them away, ready to play the game the next day.

It seemed that Claire and Chris had taken the idea for this activity from the Teachers' Resource book that they were using for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. When I had been looking at the vocabulary list, trying to work out the dilemma with *draft* and *draught*, I noticed that several spelling activities were suggested, including the one that I had just seen.

### **Using the Writing Frameworks**

Both teachers felt that the *First Steps* writing frameworks were extremely useful in that they provided a firm structure through which they could teach the writing of

various kinds of texts. The introduction of the writing frameworks has also extended the repertoire of genres that they were teaching, "Because we'd mainly tended to do letters and narratives and poems and that's about it, and now we're doing reports and recounts and procedures and whole lot, which is, I think it's much better."

During the time of my observations, Claire and Chris were teaching their children how to write scientific reports. Few of the children had much experience with reports prior to this lesson; Claire said she thought it was perhaps only the third one they had written, although some of the children would have done reports with her when they were in year three. The children had not read many reports, but Claire had modelled reports with them prior to this lesson.

Claire had erected a white screen in front of the portable blackboard, and she wheeled out an overhead projector on a trolley. She told the children to sit so that they could see the screen. Once the children were settled, she said, "Okay, what we're going to do today is another... wait for it, don't get too excited... report!" Groans from all the children.

Claire continued:

We're going to do it in several stages. First off, you're going to have a piece of paper, and on your piece of paper, you're going to brainstorm. And we'll actually do it all together, and then you'll be given a few minutes to do your own. Who can remember what a brainstorm is?

Most of the hands in Chris's part of the room went up; some hands went up in Claire's room. Claire selected a child. "Michael?" Michael answered, "You write down all the words of the topic that you're doing, like if you're doing about farming, you do like, write down cows and sheep and all the things that are to do with the topic." Claire said this was an excellent answer. She asked another child for his ideas. He replied that you put the topic in a balloon in the middle of the page, and then you put sub-headings going out from the balloon, and then write the words under the headings. Claire said that that was the next step, after initially brainstorming all the

words. She suggested that you could also use a coloured pencil to circle all the words that go together in one colour.

Claire demonstrated folding the paper in half and said that one half would be for the "brainstorm", and on the bottom half they could put the words into groups. She was just about to announce to the class what the subject of their report would be, then she broke off as something else occurred to her:

I'll make this very clear to you, because last time some of you misunderstood. You're working in groups, and you're helping each other, but every one of you has to write your own report. It's not just one report for the group. Okay. D'you want to know what our subject is? You're going to love it, you're going to love it! The respiratory system!

More groans from everyone.

Claire started the brainstorm by asking the children to put up their hands and suggest words. They did, and Claire went round the room asking for contributions. She didn't write them on the board, but expected the children to write them down as they were suggested. She spelt out the more difficult words, such as *trachea*, *bronchi*, *bronchioles*, *pharynx*. She said not to worry about the spelling, because they would be given some books from which to research, and they could use those to check spellings. Having started the children off with their brainstorm, Claire said she would give them another minute to continue brainstorming in their groups. She and Chris moved around the groups, encouraging some and directing others.

Claire stopped the class. She immediately took the children on to the next step.

Using the overhead projector and a blank overhead projector sheet, she started with the heading *Respiratory System* in a circle in the middle of the screen.

Claire What are some of the headings that we will do?

Student Oxygen? Em, I don't know.

Claire Okay. We want to do oxygen. What would that come under?

Student Air? Breathing? Breathing.

Claire Okay, we'll put it under breathing. I would have chosen another heading, but that's the one you chose, so that's the one we'll use. (writes "breathing" on overhead.) Okay, give me another heading.

Student Nose?

Claire Er, I'd put nose under something else, another heading.

Student Nasal  
 Student Nasal cavity?  
 Claire Monica?  
 Monica Organs?  
 Claire Oh, good girl. Organs. (writes on overhead)  
 Student Lungs?  
 Student The lungs are an organ.  
 Claire What are the lungs part of?  
 Student The em, heart thing? And em, another subheading might be brain? Because your brain controls everything.  
 Claire Okay, we'll put brain as a heading. Anyone else?  
 Student Kidney?  
 Claire The kidney's an organ. But it's not part of your respiratory system.  
 Student Windpipe. Trachea.  
 Claire I would actually like, your nose and your windpipe and your lungs and all those under... "Parts" is a nice easy word. The parts of the system. Anything else, any other headings?  
 Nicola? Brad?  
 Brad System?  
 Claire Okay, well we've got system there.

By this time, Claire's overhead had the words *respiratory system* in a circle in the middle of the screen, with four headings coming off it: *parts of system*, *brain*, *breathing* and *organs*. She said to the children, "You will decide if you suddenly have a word on your list that doesn't come under any of those headings. So put that down the bottom, and then start to put all your words under those headings. Go for it." The children got to work. At first, they worked in silence as they copied from Claire's overhead, then, as they began to classify their own words, they began to negotiate between themselves about under which heading their words should go.

While the children were working on this, Claire and Chris were giving out two books and a photocopied sheet to each group. The books were both from the Ashton Scholastic *Bookshelf* series; *A day in the life of your body* (Stage 5) and *The body detectives* (Stage 7). The photocopied sheet had information on both sides, and it had been taken from the Year 5 Teachers' Guide from the health syllabus. Claire had cut and pasted the parts that she thought were relevant.

Once the texts had been handed out, Claire stopped the children. By now, she had put up an overhead copy of a report plan which she had copied from the *First Steps*

*Writing Learning Continuum*, (an example of this is shown in Appendix D) and as she went through the various sections, she was writing in notes. She said to the class:

This is where we try and get our research together, and we start to put it into an order we're going to write it up as. This is our plan, that when we put our notes in here, will form the basis for our introductory paragraph in our report. Then we have a description paragraph, we have a time or place, in our case it won't be time, will it? Except that time can come into it a little bit, who can tell me how it can come into it a little bit?

Claire continued to work through the sections of the report plan, taking suggestions from the children. They did not seem to be clear about how the respiratory system worked. Claire went on to the summarising comment and asked, "What type of summarising comment could we have for a respiratory system? What type of things could we say in there?" There were a few suggestions. Claire said, "Think of some of those things we talked about yesterday about not being able, why we can't do without oxygen and that type of thing." There were several more suggestions, mostly around the theme that the respiratory system was very important. Claire said, "So our respiratory system is very important, what's a really good word instead of very important?" The children suggested several alternatives; essential, lifesaving, good, desperately important. Finally, Claire said, "Well, we'll put essential. I was actually thinking of vital."

Many of the children seemed to be having trouble with the description section, so Claire suggested that they should all do it together. She took suggestions from the children and wrote them in on the sheet which was on the overhead projector. She ended up with the following points:

- Lungs like a balloon
- Lungs size of basketball court when spread out
- Lungs white creamy colour
- Like sponge. Absorbs air.
- Made up of lots of small parts.



Claire said that the points were not necessarily in the correct order. Someone raised their hand and suggested that you could number the points in the order that you wanted to write them. Claire agreed that this would be a good way. By this time, the children were scheduled to go out for sport, so Claire brought the lesson to a close and said they would continue the following day.

Claire had structured this lesson around the format suggested in the *First Steps Teaching children how to write informational texts* module. She worked through the plan in the way suggested in the module, but the students still seemed to find it difficult to organise their information. These difficulties may have been caused by the use of the report format to organise the information, when in fact an explanation format may have been more suitable for the task. Claire had chosen the report format because she specifically wanted to teach the children how to write reports, and she had chosen to do a report on the respiratory system because the children were studying the topic in health. In this way, Claire was using *First Steps* ideas to teach content across the curriculum. However, the selection of this particular genre to convey this particular information suggests an understanding of *First Steps* writing frameworks which could be further developed.

### **Monitoring Children's Progress**

Claire and Chris adapt their program as they go along, to take into account areas of need that become apparent as they are teaching a particular topic:

that's happened several times,...where we've just abandoned a whole lesson because at the beginning, we've suddenly thought, we can't go on to this next step because these kids don't know this. So you just abandon the whole lesson, and work on that.

Much of this kind of monitoring occurs incidentally and is not necessarily recorded in any formal sense, but this information will influence what Chris and Claire teach next:

...you're going around, watching what they're doing, and I don't necessarily mark their journals, their writing journals, and their spelling journals and I don't

necessarily mark that, but I read it. And I take note of common errors.....I just carry it around in my head.

Claire and Chris monitor "individual components of language...proof-reading, editing, grammar, spelling" and would record this formally by using anecdotal records and checklists. Chris said that although she did not always use checklists or assessment tools that were supplied with *First Steps* materials, she would usually try to if she could, "...because I think, why re-invent the wheel, kind of thing? You know, if it's there why not use it?"

### **Using the Developmental Continua**

When I first interviewed Claire and Chris at the beginning of the year, they stated that it was their school's policy to place every child on the spelling and writing continua twice each year, at the beginning of second term and at the beginning of fourth term. Oral language had been introduced that year, but because placing every child on the continuum was seen to be a great deal of work, it had been decided to place only children who were seen to be "at risk".

The various developmental continua move through the school with the child, so they are passed on from teacher to teacher. When the children move on to high school, or when they leave to attend another primary school, the continua are sent on to the new school.

Claire and Chris use the children's writing samples and their 'have-a-go' pads to help them complete the spelling and writing continua. Because of the storage problem created by keeping many writing samples, the school has developed a policy that when a teacher includes a new writing sample, (s)he should remove the oldest sample.

In this way there are only ever three samples of writing for any particular child:

When we put in a work sample, we take out one. So that you only ever have three in the thing at once. So it doesn't accumulate and get very thick.... And it works out that the samples that are in there are generally, there's at least one that's twelve months old. So you do it two or three times a year, and you just take the oldest one

out, and put the newest one in the back, so that we've always got some work that's from the previous year, but we've also got some from the beginning of this year.

When Chris completes her continua, she uses only the key indicators. She feels that it creates a lot of time-consuming work to look at each individual indicator, and sees that what is important is to decide which phase of development the children are currently working in:

Personally, I only look at the key indicators. Some teachers do it, look at all the indicators. But I just find it's just too time consuming, and I don't think it's necessary, I think the idea is to get the kids in a phase. So you know basically where you're working from.

Chris stated that many teachers she had come across saw the continua as a great deal of unnecessary work, and this had created some very negative attitudes towards using

*First Steps:*

People can't get past the continuums. People are just bogged down on the continuums. And they didn't realise there was a life after it, ...so we're in this phase, now let's look at the strategies, let's do some teaching. This is what annoyed me. They couldn't get past it. And arguments, and people being so pedantic about the indicators. You know, it wasn't that important to my mind. I just felt, the idea was to find out what phase the children were in, so you knew what strategies to use...it's meant to show you where children are at. And that's it. It's not meant for a diagnostic thing really.

Claire and Chris both felt that too much emphasis was placed on the continua at the professional development sessions; "...so nobody got past it, they didn't look at the strategies and see how you could actually implement it, they just sort of, oh, I've got to do this document, help!"

Later in the year, Chris and Claire had attended a meeting and reported that the way some schools used the continua appeared to be changing:

This meeting we went to,...a lot of the schools are not, they're using the continuum but it's not a document that's being passed on, because I think people have got this thing about continuums, and it's just created so many problems, even we've backed off in that with our oral language we're just doing kids at risk....They can still do the whole class if they want to, but we've backed off.

Chris and Claire admitted that they had not used their developmental continua much this year. Chris had updated the continua for a couple of children who had left the

school, and Claire said that she had consulted them to help plan for the "at risk" spellers.

Both teachers thought that a particular problem with the continua was that teachers saw them to be very subjective. Their professional development had not specifically provided teachers with the opportunity to sit down together as a school to negotiate a shared interpretation of the indicators. Chris said that often she might not agree with the way in which another teacher had interpreted an indicator, so that she may not have ticked the same indicators for a particular child:

...you know, people have got different ideas of what the indicators mean, and quite often I find a problem when I'm going through them, I think, I don't agree with that, whether it's lower or higher, or whatever.

Claire agreed. She felt that the interpretation of some of the indicators had caused her some difficulty. As Focus Teacher, she had been approached by other teachers in the school who had asked her to mediate in discussions on the interpretation of certain indicators, which she had done, but she was unsure if the rest of the teachers in the school would have interpreted them the same way:

I actually find sometimes, I've always had trouble with the spelling continuum, understanding what they mean, by some of those indicators, and I've had to put my own interpretation on it, and just hope that I'm right.....When I was down in junior primary, because I was the closest to them, Mary and Danielle and all those used to come to me and say, Claire what does this mean? And I used to have to say, well, I think it means, such and such. So they would go along with that, because you know, I was the Focus Teacher and that was my interpretation. But the rest of the school maybe weren't interpreting it the same way.

Chris and Claire appear to have moulded the way in which they use *First Steps* materials, so that they achieve their objectives in ways with which they feel at ease. They select the teaching strategies that they feel comfortable using, together with those that they feel are best suited to address the needs of their students. Although the continuum is useful for particular students, or in particular circumstances, neither teacher seems to view the continua as essential to using *First Steps*; rather they find

particular *First Steps* strategies most useful and fit these into their planning, which emerges from their own informed assessment of students' needs, based on their intuitive hunches. They use *First Steps* materials together with strategies, ideas and assessment methods drawn from other sources, as they see a need.

In Claire and Chris's school, no school-wide methods of use of *First Steps* are imposed, either in terms of teaching strategies or use of the developmental continua, but these materials, and the Focus Teachers, are there as a resource when teachers want to use them.

Claire and Chris both appear to be operating somewhere between Hopkins' (1990) levels 3 and 3+. They are open to new ideas, (level 3+), but only to the extent that these ideas fit with their ways of teaching and the structures already in place within the school. However, Claire's approach to teaching the *First Steps* writing frameworks appeared to demonstrate a "mechanical" approach, which fits Hopkins' (1990) level 3, rather than the clear understanding he claims would be demonstrated at level 3+.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ANGELA

#### ***Fitting First Steps into an Existing Pedagogy***

Angela graduated from Churchlands College of Advanced Education eighteen years ago. Since then, she has taught in government schools in the metropolitan area, including a priority school. At the school where she was teaching at the time of the study, Angela had taught year five for a number of years, but this year, she was teaching year seven. This meant that she had taught most of the children in her class two years previously, when they were in year five, and consequently she felt that she knew them very well.

#### **Angela's Introduction to *First Steps***

Angela received professional development in *First Steps* through this school. Initially, the staff were in-serviced in spelling and writing by having people come into the school from District Office or Central Office. They were not a Core School or a Cell School, and the school was required to make a considerable financial commitment to their professional development in *First Steps*. At the time of the study, the school were receiving professional development in oral language through their Focus Teacher B, and oral language was a priority area.

At about the time that *First Steps* was being introduced to her school, Angela was teaching part-time as part of a tandem pair. Her tandem partner was the language co-ordinator at that time. It seemed to Angela that her teaching partner already knew a lot about *First Steps* and was knowledgeable on the subject of language development in general:

She knew an awful lot about *First Steps* and actually applied for a *First Steps* job, but didn't get one, ... she was the co-ordinator for language, and really got things off the ground and got

them going, and, and as part of the department's requirements that we should be at a certain stage by a certain year, we really had to get things moving. As a staff, as a school, we had to be at a specific point by such and such a date. So we therefore had to get off the ground. The department said you have to be at this stage by the year such and such.

Angela described the professional development sessions; "Basically, we received the booklets, we were guided through the booklets ... the people who had were clued up, they brought in interesting examples, they had charts, they presented themselves extremely well..." Angela felt, however, that little on-going support was provided once the school actually started to implement *First Steps*. The school had to provide this support for themselves, and because there was a whole-school commitment to the implementation of *First Steps*, the staff would get together to "nut-out" problems with implementation, and the interpretation of the indicators:

The people who came from the District Office and from Head Office to speak to us, you didn't get much from them, apart from they fed you with this and off they went. Then, through discussion with one another, just amongst all the people on the staff, and people asking me, well, what do you think? And me saying to them, well, how did you take it? I took it like this, how did you take it? ...And interpretation took many hours of discussion, many hours of coming back to the leader person and saying, don't you take it like this though? Or, do you take it this way? Or, I've done it this way.

Angela saw this whole-school commitment and negotiation of understanding as an important element in the process of implementation. To save money, the school shared some of the professional development sessions with a neighbouring school, but the result of this was that the presence of teachers from the other school prevented this negotiation from taking place at the time of the professional development sessions, when the presenters may have been able to make their contributions:

Sharing with another school doesn't work, we shared a few times with another school. Okay, it cuts the cost, but it doesn't work in terms of getting together as a staff and making a commitment; ...whereas if you do it as a single staff on your own, you have discussion at the time and you get commitments within your group amongst yourselves, at the time, and you sort out which way are we going to do it. You can't do that when there are people from another school there.

Angela felt that she had a particular benefit in that her tandem teaching partner was so knowledgeable about the theory underpinning *First Steps*. "...I got the advantage of someone who had read every single book from front cover to back, about the theory,

about the systems, about the methods." Later, when she returned to work full-time, Angela was teaching next door to a teacher who had taken on the job of Focus Teacher B, and this situation offered further opportunities for Angela to become familiar with aspects of *First Steps*:

Our Focus B person, she was my next door neighbour teacher and we would often discuss things. ...We would work together with both classes, and I might say, let's do such and such and such and such, and she would say oh, well that fits in to, whatever it is, in *First Steps*, and that's called, and she would use all the jargon, and I'd think to myself, Oh, righty-oh! That's the jargon, that's what it's called. ...Focus people have learnt the jargon...

Another aspect that Angela saw as having been particularly beneficial to her is that she was teaching part-time when *First Steps* was introduced into the school. This meant that she had more time to reflect upon what she had learned at the professional development sessions, what she had discussed with her colleagues, and how she was going to incorporate new ideas into her own teaching practice. Because she had more time for preparation, she was more willing to change some of her practices:

Because I was probably at the stage after ten years straight teaching, you tend to get, not at one school, but you tend to get into the mode of this is the way I do things, and to work part-time and have more time to spend on preparation, and taking on a change, you're prepared to spend some time thinking about, well, how could I do it according to what they're saying, and still feel comfortable about controlling my classroom. And being part-time, helped, for me. I was able to improve a lot of my teaching.

Having time for reflection appears to be important. Angela felt that half-day professional development sessions were preferable to full-day sessions, because the information that was passed on at full-day sessions was too much to be easily assimilated. Although teachers at her school received little on-going support from Central Office as they implemented *First Steps* in their classrooms, Angela saw this as having been a benefit rather than a disadvantage, because it meant that they could proceed at their own pace:

[With] the full-on, full day sessions you were just bombarded with it. And, in a way I'm glad we weren't a Cell School because we were able to go away and reflect upon what we'd been bombarded with, then make some decisions together. And we actually progressed just as rapidly, or more rapidly as those schools who were having it hand-fed to them, by the people being in their school doing it for them all the time. So that, our growth has been personal and individual and collective in terms of the staff....We are just a school that had to feel our way and do it ourselves, and I believe that we've got commitment, we've got understanding,



because we've had to do it ourselves, and put it through and sort it out for ourselves, and make the school decision group make school-based decisions, that everyone's ended up being committed to.

### **Angela's Classroom**

There are two year seven classes at Angela's school. The two classrooms are adjoining, and are separated from each other by a concertina door. The doors are pulled right back, so that there is one large room, and both classes are open to each other. This particular year seven has been in this kind of open classroom since they were in year five. They appeared to be used to the open classroom and not only were they able to work without disturbing the other class, but they also appeared to be able to ignore little distractions that occurred when the other class moved around. Angela and the other year seven teacher teach their classes separately most of the time, but join together for subjects such as social studies, science, art and health.

In Angela's room, the desks have been pushed together to make three large tables in the centre of the room, with about eight or ten children sitting at each table. Apart from one boy, the first group are all girls. The second group is mixed, with the boys sitting down one side of the table, and the girls down the other, and the third group, nearest to Angela's desk, are all boys.

As early as the first week of term, one of the pinboards on the classroom wall was already filled with newspaper cuttings about the forthcoming Federal election. Below this was a display of books about Parliament and politics, which included a biography of Martin Luther King.

As time went on, these displays were added to. Taped up on the cupboards were some completed assignments. These were photocopied pages for various days of the year, with some related research project for the children to carry out. The newspaper cuttings that had been collected relating to the general election remained on the

pinboard, even after the election had taken place. Above the pinboards, there were some large commercial posters about looking after the environment. On another pinboard were examples of the children's artwork. Also on display were various recounts about the holidays, under a banner that said *Reflections on the holidays*.

In a corner of the classroom, by the door, there was a book stand stocked with a variety of books. Most of the books were novels, and amongst them I noticed A.E. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* and *Chadwick's Chimney*, by Colin Thiele. There was also a junior encyclopaedia and there were multiple copies of various Aboriginal legends.

### **Beginning the Year - Planning for Year Seven**

In the past, having taught year five for several years, Angela had been able to base her planning on work that she had covered the previous year. This year, because she had changed year levels, and was teaching year seven for the first time, Angela had to become familiar with resources at the year seven level. She tries to plan her language so that it will complement the content that she is required to cover in other subjects, such as social studies or health:

Either because it fits in with social studies or it fits in with health, or sheerly because it is of interest and its a current topic that the children are interested in. In this instance, because the Federal election is occurring and it ties exactly in with an awful lot of year seven work, and this [reading] series has books that tie in with it as well, that's what I'm using.

The Federal election had just been announced and was due to take place during term one. Angela was delighted, because this is one of the topics covered in the year seven social studies syllabus. Angela saw this as an opportunity to look closely at the media coverage of the event and include some critical literacy.

The children had been taught debating skills in year six, using a set of video recordings for instruction (Cameron, 1995). Angela thought it would be interesting

for her class to watch the leaders of the political parties at work, and monitor the debates that would be held.

As well as this, year seven children were required to nominate for the positions of Head Boy, Head Girl, and Faction Captains. Every child in year seven would be required to write a speech for this purpose, but only those who wished to nominate themselves for a position would be required to actually make the speech to the rest of the students in year seven. On the basis of these speeches, the year sevens would vote for candidates to fill the positions. Angela saw this as a convenient parallel to the Federal election.

She had found a series of texts that would be suitable for her theme of Federal Government, and had chosen to read a novel to the class which she hoped would complement the themes she planned to cover in health:

I'm going to use Jacaranda series *Law makers, law breakers* and that section, which has a lot of structured overviews and graphic outlines and expositions as well, and narrative genre and activities and so on to do with law-making and law-breaking, which fits in with our Federal Government election and the fact that the Federal Government are our law makers....And in literature we're reading *I am David*, which fits in with the health themes about feelings, about the struggle to survive, just the feelings and understanding, accepting feelings of your own and of other people, and so on, which also fits in with all this voting that we have to do in that it, it's OK to vote for who you want and those sorts of things...

Angela said that she would use the teachers' resource book that went with the Jacaranda English texts to plan her language activities. However, she would only use their suggested activities if she felt it would achieve what she wanted to achieve in terms of learning, and she also had to take into account the developmental level of the children in the class, classroom management issues, and the amount of resources available to her in terms of copies of the various texts:

I read the Teachers' Book, and then I decide whether I think that really suits me in terms of what the text says and what they're suggesting, and I usually modify it to suit me and my classroom and the levels of the children in the room. Some activities are just straight from the book, lots of activities, according to how many books we have in school and so on, I modify to suit me, and what works well for me in my control.

Angela's planning also has to take into account the various interruptions that she can expect to the school timetable. She explained to me that her class would be involved in swimming lessons during weeks three and four of term one, and that this would upset her normal program. Some of the children would not be taking part in swimming lessons, and so they also would need to be catered for with extra work that they would be able to do by themselves:

We're going to be interrupted for half a day, with swimming, for two weeks, during weeks three and four. So I need things that will allow for them to sit down and work on it by themselves a fair bit, in terms of those two weeks. So I'm likely to be pulling out the worksheets, because the time's going to be limited, the interruptions are going to be there, and up and down, backwards and forwards to swimming and the rest of it and there are some children who aren't going to swimming as well, who, I'm not sure what's happening to them... So they'll need some sort of work that can be called contract work that they can go on with.

Angela was concerned that this would be the last year in primary school for the children in her class. She sees that part of her job as a year seven teacher is to prepare them for high school, and has tried to find out what kind of skills they would need. The other year seven teacher had been to a meeting at the high school at the beginning of the year and had come back with the information that as *Stepping Out* strategies were used at the local high school, the children would be expected to be familiar with certain strategies, and this also had an influence on Angela as she planned future activities:

Apparently *Stepping Out* are right into, they want them to be able to do graphic outlines and structured overviews, and I was thinking one of those worksheets there actually lends itself, oh actually, several of the newspaper articles and the video clips that we've been seeing of the news lend themselves to a character traits retrieval chart for the leaders of all the parties...

### **Using the *Jacaranda English Resources***

In Angela's room, language has been separated into various discrete subjects, so that written expression takes place at a certain time on certain days of the week, reading activities at another time, spelling at another time, and so on. However, reading activities often include writing, writing activities include reading, and because oral

language is currently a priority area, oral language activities appear to be included at every opportunity.

When I went to see Angela to arrange to observe lessons, she flicked through her daily work pad and asked me what I wanted to see. I said I wanted to see a variety of practices, so perhaps a reading lesson, something that would involve writing, and something that would involve oral language. Angela immediately found an oral language lesson the following week, and then said she could do a reading lesson on the Friday with the big book *Strictly for kids* from the *Jacaranda English* kit. She flicked through a display book with black line masters in it, identified a sheet, and said, "yes, we'll do this, from the big book."

The lesson I had arranged to see took place immediately after a school assembly. The class had just returned from assembly and Angela had a few 'housekeeping' tasks to attend to, so when most of the children were seated at their desks, she handed out story maps that the children had completed in a previous lesson. These story maps were duplicated from a teachers' resource book belonging to a commercially prepared unit of work called *Law makers, law breakers*, (Jacaranda English). Although this is a published program, it does include many of the recommended *First Steps* strategies, and this appears to be a feature of many of the more recently published commercial resources. The story maps had been photocopied onto A3 sheets of paper. The story they related to was called *The Highgate Hill mob*, which was included in the focus book that came with the package. There were pictures depicting the various events in the story and lines for the children to write on. The events were numbered and some of the events were described, with gaps for the children to complete, so that part of the story map was rather like a cloze activity. Although story maps are a feature of *First Steps* reading strategies, this one appeared to be very structured, particularly for year seven children.

The story maps had been marked and each child had a mark out of 16. There was a lot of discussion about who got what mark, and comparing of what had been written. Quite a few children appeared to have 16/16. It seemed that the story maps had been completed in preparation for an oral language activity and Angela had decided to use this time as further preparation time. Angela said,

While I'm collecting this money, each of you is to look at your story map, and think about what you're going to say. Remember the story map item number one, only reminds you about the first event. It doesn't put in sentences, what you would say if you were telling the story, does it? So you need to think about the words and sentences you will use as you tell the story. There's more detail than that, isn't there? This helps to remind you. When you're in your groups, in your little circle, each of you is going to tell three bits of the story and the next person will continue on with the next three bits, and the next person will continue on with the next three bits and so on....Now, while I collect the money, I want you to think it through. Look it through and think about how you'll tell all the different bits of the story.

When she had completed her tasks, Angela collected the story maps again. Then she told the children to come down on to the floor where they could see the big book. Those who could see from their seats remained where they were; others who sat at the back or sides of the room came down and sat on the floor. There is no easel in the classroom, so Angela stood up with the book. This book was the big book that went with the *Law makers, law breakers*, series, and it was called *Strictly for kids*. The subtitle was written across the top of the cover: *A dictionary of legal terms*.

Angela began by questioning the class about the features of a big book, and then went on to ask them to make some predictions about the content of the book. She began to read from the book, starting with the title, the author, the illustrator, the publisher, and then read the first heading and paragraph. She chose a child sitting close to the book to read the next paragraph. The paragraph was about laws being there to protect our rights. Angela asked the children if they felt they had rights. They agreed that they did. Angela selected another child to continue reading the next paragraph. This was quite a long passage about the organisation of government, and Angela summarised this by saying, "So that's an overview of everything we've learned this term in social studies, isn't it?"

Angela explained that the class would not be reading through the whole book together, but they would simply flick through the book to get an idea of what was in it, and then they would look at the worksheet. She then simply read out the headings on the first two pages: "*Aboriginal law, access, adoption, animals, arrest.* So what do you predict already about the rest of the book?" Hands went up, and someone answered "It's in alphabetical order." Angela continued to read through the headings, sometimes stopping to read out definitions that might be of particular interest. For example, when she came to *offensive behaviour*, she said,

Ah! Offensive behaviour, we were discussing this one. '*Society, through its laws, reflects standards of language behaviour and dress. Breaches of any of these laws may amount to a criminal offence. Topless bathing at most beaches, and nudist bathing at special beaches are no longer criminal acts. However, swearing in public and unruly behaviour are.*' Right? We had a bit of a discussion about that, didn't we? So there it is, we know for sure, now, that no, you are not allowed to swear in public and yes, it is an offence, and it is against the law.

Angela continued to skim through the book in this fashion. When she had finished going through all the headings, she pointed out the glossary, and asked what it was for. There was some discussion of this, and some discussion of some of the words in the glossary. Angela asked if the book needed an index. One child replied that it didn't because all the words were in alphabetical order, and another said that it didn't because it was a dictionary.

Angela had some worksheets which she had photocopied from the black line masters book that went with the series of books that she was using. The worksheet was set out as a grid with the headings *Situation, Action* and *Outcome* across the top. Down the side, under the heading *Situation*, five different scenarios were described. The first one was *A cricket ball smashes your window*. The idea was that the students would use the book to complete the blank spaces under the headings *Action* and *Outcome*.

There had originally been four small copies of the big book in the pack, but another teacher had been using them and when Angela had asked her for them, she had only been able to find the big book and one small copy. This presented something of a problem because it meant that there were only two copies of the book available to the class. Angela divided the class into two large groups and allocated two situations to each group. She demonstrated what was required by completing the first situation with the whole class.

Angela read out the first question, "A cricket ball's smashed the window. What's your action going to be?" Several suggestions were put forward by various students, and eventually a consensus was reached as to the best course of action. This involved contacting the police. Angela asked one of the children to look up '*police*' in the book and read out the definition. He did this, but the definition did not supply any clues about what action to take in these circumstances. Again, there was some discussion about what would happen next and the children decided that the offender would have to go to Court. Angela told someone to look up '*offence*'. The children wrote down these steps on their sheets as agreement was reached, but again the book did not appear to provide the information they were looking for. The *outcome* section was negotiated in the same way. They wrote down '*The judge hands down the sentence*', and someone looked up '*sentence*' in the book.

Angela then split the class into two groups and allocated two situations to each group. She handed one group the big book and the other group the smaller copy. There were about ten or twelve children in each group. Angela told the groups to "remember the rules of group speaking". The class had previously negotiated their rules for group work, according to the procedures outlined in the *First Steps* oral language materials.



There was much discussion in each group about what they could do in the situations they had been given to explore, but these suggestions seemed to come from personal experiences or the children's own knowledge, rather than by referring to the book. The group that were required to complete a section relating to dog attacks appeared to draw on recent news stories about dog attacks for their information.

The siren for recess went before all the questions were completed. Angela directed the children to write their names on their worksheets and collected them up. On the way to the staffroom, Angela commented that she did not think the worksheet had worked very well because the required information was not in the book. The children were bringing their own knowledge into the activity, but they did not have enough to be able to complete the activity properly. Angela said that she had not looked in the teachers' resource book to see what activity was suggested, but we went to borrow it from the other teacher and looked at it over morning tea. The suggested activity in the book was almost exactly what Angela had actually done.

### **Angela's Oral Language Lesson**

Because it has been nominated as a priority area, there is a strong focus on oral language throughout the school. Angela uses group work wherever she can to promote discussion. She explained that although the children sit in certain groups in the classroom, she does not always work in those groups, but changes them around to suit the activity and her purposes. At the beginning of the year, she was also testing out various group dynamics to see who worked well together. Also at the beginning of the year, Angela was reminding her class about already established rules for group work:

I reviewed the rules, with them, so I just asked what sort of rules do we need, and they came out with all these rules, which obviously they knew from last year and the year before, and so I just reaffirmed those rules. They were appropriate, so I just stuck with them.

Angela knew that she had established these rules with the class when they had been in year five, and that these would have been continued last year. At the beginning of year seven she had simply reviewed them:

[I] said, when we do oral work, we need to have some rules so that things can run smoothly, and they agreed. What sorts of rules do you think we need to have? And we just blackboarded it and then made a chart. The rules came from the children.

Angela's class regularly watch *Behind the News*, which is an ABC Schools television program. The program presents coverage of the week's main news events, provides detailed background information relating to most of the events, and looks at the various issues from the point of view of adolescents or older children. The program is aimed at an upper primary and lower secondary audience. It was one of these viewing sessions that Angela had nominated as an oral language lesson.

A spare classroom at the school has been converted to a television room and the class moved into this room for the lesson. The television has been mounted high up on the wall. The children sat on the floor to watch the program as it went out to air, rather than having it taped for later viewing. They had each brought with them a piece of paper and a pen, and most children had brought an exercise book or a clipboard to lean on. Angela reminded the children that they would be required to take notes on all the news items that were discussed. Everyone seemed quite clear about what was required, and Angela had only to issue a minimum of instructions. This suggested that this was a regular activity with the class.

The program ran for about twenty minutes and covered several news issues, including the conflict between China and Taiwan, Mad Cow Disease, and the koalas on Kangaroo Island. These topics were covered in some depth, with substantial background information provided. Other topics were covered in less detail. The children were required to take notes on all the topics presented. Because the program

was being viewed as it went to air, they had to get the main points quite quickly, to avoid missing the next topic.

When the program finished, the amount of notes taken by the children varied from three or four pages, to a line about each topic. Angela explained to me that the reason they watched the program as it went to air was to encourage the children to take notes by writing key words, instead of full sentences. *First Steps* materials suggest the use of key words to develop note-making skills.

At this point, Angela picked out two girls who had been absent the previous week and told them that they would be required to do last week's activity, which was to choose one of the news items that they had just watched, and "work individually to write a cohesive paragraph about the topic of your own choice." She sent them back to the classroom to get started. The rest of the class had completed this activity the previous week to produce a piece of writing for their work sample files, which would be going home to parents at the end of term.

Angela told the class that the rest of them would be working in groups, and that each group would be working on a different topic. The topics allocated were: the Taiwan/China conflict; Animals, which covered two topics, the Mad Cow Disease and the koalas on Kangaroo Island; Uranium mining; the ALP, which covered two elements of news, the election of Kim Beazley as leader of the Opposition, and a profile of Paul Keating; and finally a profile of aerobics champion Patsy Tierny.

Angela then launched into a lengthy and detailed caution about trying to copy the aerobic moves that Patsy Tierny had been shown performing. She warned her class that aerobics champions spent many years building up body strength and flexibility in order to be able to execute their moves without injuring themselves. She concluded

this warning with a prediction about the damage that these sports people would have done to their bodies by the time they ceased to perform competitively.

Returning to the lesson, Angela proceeded to split the children into four groups. She did this by walking around the room and giving each child a number, from one to four. Then she allocated a part of the room for each number and directed the children to go to their spot. She then allocated a topic to each group. There were about five or six children in each group, and all groups were both boys and girls. Angela briskly ran over the rules for the exercise; one person to be scribe, one person to be the director of the group and keep order. The allocation of a specific job to each person in the group is a group-work strategy suggested by *First Steps*. Each group was required to write a cohesive paragraph about their topic, which would later be typed out using the computer. Angela said that at lunchtime she would get the newspaper from the staffroom, and the children could find newspaper articles relating to their topics, cut them out and display them with their own writing.

Angela reminded the children that their paragraph would need to have an introduction, and that their writing would need a title. She challenged them to think of a "catchy title". "I want you to catch my attention. What's this about? I'm interested in reading it." She said that they were already really good at writing their paragraphs, now she was challenging them to think of a catchy title.

The group that were writing about Taiwan and China spent quite a lot of time discussing what their title would be. One boy started to write down suggestions. He appeared to have been elected scribe by unspoken consensus. The group spent some time negotiating their understanding of what actually was happening between China and Taiwan. Eventually, they began to formulate their writing. Several people made

suggestions, and others suggested improvements:

Student 1      Until U.S.A. sent ships and weapons down to Taiwan Straits and said to China we're warning you off Taiwan.

Student 2      No, America sent in two aircraft carriers.

In the group who were writing about Patsy Tierny, the girls were doing most of the work. Two boys were playing naughts and crosses, and having a discussion of their own. Eventually, one of the girls interrupted their conversation; "Who cares about your guitar? We have to get this done." One of the boys then joined in with the girls; the other continued to find other distractions.

In the group that were covering the animal topics, one of the girls was acting as scribe. The rest of the group did not appear to be contributing in any way. When I asked this girl how much help she was getting from the rest of her group, one of the other group members said, "oh we've given her our notes, that's the way she wants to do it." The scribe said that she found it quicker and easier to work that way. She stopped to read out what she had written so far. No-one made any comment. The rest of the group decided that they would work on the title, but after some attempts to find a title for the Mad Cow Disease article, this discussion degenerated into a discussion about the merits of Macdonald's beefburgers over Hungry Jack's. When I pointed out that there were only five minutes before the bell went for lunch, two of the group realised that they had only so far covered the Mad Cow Disease topic, and set to work together to compose something about the koalas on Kangaroo Island.

At this time, Angela stopped the class, and went round the groups, asking one member of each group to read out their paragraphs in turn. This procedure was twice interrupted by messages from the administrative staff being relayed over the P.A. system, followed by the siren signalling the lunch break. Angela collected everyone's notes and the summaries, then dismissed the class.

## **Developing Listening and Summarising Skills**

Angela's class watch *Behind the News* every week. As well as making the children aware of current affairs, watching the program provides opportunities for practicing note-making and summarising skills, as well as developing listening skills. Angela varies the activities that she organises around the program:

We watch B.T.N. each week. Today, for example, they did a quiz. So from that I can ascertain [their] listening skills. Because some of them, I've already looked, some of their notes have got almost nothing written down and yet they've got the right answers in the quiz, so the listening skills are there. So that develops listening skills. We've been doing quizzes a few times this term.

Angela feels that the quiz extends the children's note-making skills, in that it gives them practice at deciding what is important to write down in their notes:

The first time we did the quiz, I asked them for the name of the person [who had been speaking]. And of course it has on the screen, the name of the person [was] written, and who they're representing. And they hadn't written these things down. So they picked up from that, oh, perhaps that's an important thing we should get down. ...So they've picked up, that's improved their note-taking, in that they realise well I don't really need to write down some of the other stuff, what they were saying, because I can remember that.

Angela collects the children's notes and looks through them so that she can assess the quality of their note-making. Writing summaries and taking part in the quiz have provided purposeful practice for note-making. As well as this, Angela provides feedback to indicate to the children where she feels they have used their notes well; "...by me, by sharing it, and by me picking out, well that's well written because... That's a good introduction, it includes all the information so you've clubbed together with your notes and you've got all the information..."

## **Spelling**

Angela has altered her timetable so that spelling lessons take place immediately after lunch. The year seven students are frequently required to go and do various jobs in the school, and this meant that some children were constantly missing out on instruction because they were somewhere else in the school carrying out these

responsibilities. Angela has now told the rest of the school that her students are only available from 1.15 to 2.00, when she has spelling. This is because the children practically run their own spelling lessons, and if they miss out because of their other duties, they are required to catch up in their own time.

The spelling lesson followed Uninterrupted, Sustained, Silent Reading. Angela instructed the children to put their reading books away and get out everything they needed for spelling. There was a flurry of activity whilst everyone got organised, but each child seemed to know what to do. Without being asked, one person from each group gave out copies of *Spellit* - one copy between every two people. The children also had on their desks their language pads and their spelling journals. Angela flicked through a copy of *Spellit*. "Ah, good," she said. "Prefixes and suffixes being reviewed. Please turn to page 27." She asked the class for a definition of both a prefix and a suffix. About half the children in the class put up their hands each time. After eliciting the correct answer for each, Angela then talked about the morphological aspects of prefixes, "they often have a meaning, so that when they're added on to the word, they change the meaning of the word."

This activity seemed to be a follow-on from the spelling activity that the children had completed the previous day, and was concerned with whether consonants had to be doubled before adding a suffix (as in control). There followed a fairly lengthy review of the rule for this, followed by numerous examples supplied by Angela. She gave the instruction that once they had completed the *Spellit* exercise, the children were to do "look, cover, write, check" with their personal spelling words from their journals, and then find a partner to do partner testing. Spelling journals and partner testing are both *First Steps* spelling strategies.

The class got to work. There was a low level of noise in the room as children frequently referred to each other for clarification of the rules. Sometimes they called

on Angela to confirm that what they had decided was correct. At one stage, a child got up from his seat and used the large Macquarie dictionary to check something. Someone else asked Angela something about the word *terror*. The exercise required the children to find the base word of *terrific*, and the student could not see how *terror* could be the base word of *terrific* when the meaning was so different. Angela confirmed that the base word was *terror*, but said that "perhaps we use the word *terrific* in a way that it wasn't originally made out for." She asked for the big dictionary to look the word up. She discovered that one of the definitions for *terrific* was actually the opposite of its usual definition (that is, meaning something bad instead of something good), and read this definition out to the class.

When the children completed their *Spellit* exercise, again without being asked, they took their exercise books over to Angela's desk and left them in a pile, open at the page they had been working on. To do "look, cover, write, check", they got a piece of scrap paper and wrote out each of their current words three times. Some children were writing new words into their spelling journals, and marking the key features. One child brought his journal over to me and asked me to check that he had written a word correctly into his journal, then he asked me to initial the word to show that I had checked it. The children found their own partners for partner testing, usually someone else in their group who was ready to test. One tested first, then they swapped over. The children marked each other's work and signed it.

Angela explained that she works through *Spellit* from cover to cover, because her spelling program gets interrupted so much, and that way she can be sure that nothing gets missed. "I work through from cover to cover because things like the last two weeks happen, where we haven't opened it for two weeks. And so, I'll never know what we've done or not done."



The words that go into the children's spelling journals come from their writing, or they are 'topic words', taken from other subjects, such as health, science or social studies. Angela may choose a word herself and direct everyone to include it in their journal, or she may identify words as she marks children's work: " I underline it in their science book and it ends up in their margin in their science book." When this happens, the children know that this word is to be included in their spelling journal.

### **Using the Developmental Continua and Monitoring Students' Progress**

When the school began to use *First Steps*, they made a decision to begin using the continua slowly, and to build on this as time went by. Five children were selected at random from each class and plotted on the spelling continuum. The following year, all children were plotted on the spelling continuum. In the third year, all children were plotted on the spelling continuum twice a year, and five children selected at random to be placed on the writing continuum. The year after this, Angela had been away on long service leave for the first term of that year, and so she decided to plot every child in her class on both the spelling and writing continua. She found this to be a lot of work, but she also found that carefully plotting the children on the *First Steps* continua gave her the detailed information she needed to be able to write reports for children that she had not been teaching for very long:

I arrived back, and in six weeks I had to have stuff for reports; honest and carefully evaluated. And so I did writing and spelling for every child in the class, very thoroughly, and I used not three pieces of writing, but four pieces of writing, so virtually every piece of writing they did from the minute I arrived back got assessed, and they all got put on the continuums...It takes, and this is definite, very careful timing, it takes ten hours to properly do twenty eight children on spelling and writing continuums. Ten hours straight...And that's one hell of a lot of work, but, if you need to have good, thorough, comprehensive information, for reports in six weeks, you've got it....And it's fair and it's honest and it's up to date and it's correct.

Although she found it useful to plot each child in the continuum in this case, Angela feels that under normal circumstances, this kind of close scrutiny to extract such

detailed information is unnecessary:

But I don't think that's necessary, if you already taught the children, and I already did it for these children in year five, for the whole lot, spelling and writing. I know these children inside out and back to front.

Angela does, however, see a case for using the continua for children who are identified as 'at risk':

I will do the at risk [children], I feel that's totally necessary....It's good for identifying just exactly, precisely. There's a gap here. Or a gap there. And it identifies the gaps. More than anything, it identifies gaps. If you think a kid's got gaps, and you're not too sure exactly where they are, you'll get it by doing some continuums. And going right back into their work...you'll get it.

At the beginning of the year, Angela expected that she would be required to plot at least some of her children in the oral language continuum as well as the spelling and writing continua. It seems, however, that the school has this year changed its policy and now only requires teachers to plot children who are 'at risk'. The principal of the school has told his staff that continua should be completed for teachers' own use, rather than to satisfy him:

The reason we're sending things to the office should not be sheerly to satisfy something for him, or that we imagine is going to satisfy him, and he has told us, I don't want you doing those continuums if you're not using them. I don't want you to do anything that's useless to you, because you're going to get enough, that I'm going to insist you do.

In Angela's school, the continua follow the children as they move through the school, together with the work samples that have been used to plot the children on the continua. This has created a storage problem, but Angela considers it necessary to keep the children's work samples:

Originally, at the end of each year, three pieces of work would be kept and the three pieces from the six-monthly look thrown away, but now we have to keep the lot...Because they're going to be in transitional [phase] for about three years, you need to keep all the pieces of work from that, because there is progress. The only way you can see that progress is by seeing the pieces of work, because the chart's not going to show you, particularly. Especially if the first person was really generous, and filled it in back in year two. So now, those files are going to cause a huge storage problem, because they're getting fatter and fatter, and mine wouldn't shut. By the end of last year, mine wouldn't shut.

One of the problems that Angela has encountered with the continua following the children through the school in the way that they do, is that previous teachers appear to have sometimes been over-generous when they have plotted children:

When they were in year four, the year four teacher filled them all in! For what they are for year seven. So they're already all filled in...So what I do about that is, when I look at them, if I agree that was true, that that is true and correct now, I put my colour, down the left hand side....And basically, let's face it, it is subjective, and it is in my mind. But I try to stick to, I do have this evidence here. I do try to stick to that, but it is difficult sometimes.

Angela is concerned about what she sees as subjectivity when she monitors children:

My reports reflect how they perform for me. I cannot compare that, how they might perform for someone else, might have been five hundred times better, might have been five hundred times worse. And if they're not performing well with me then I need to look at all of the aspects, personality wise as well....And do something about it.

Although the school have not yet received any professional development in reading, Angela has used the continua to plot children who she has seen as 'at risk' in reading. When she did this however, she was not plotting the children for her own use, but for that of another teacher who was working to improve the children's reading skills. She found this difficult:

Because of the special behaviour problems with three of those children, the actual continuum didn't really allow you to put what the reality was. Such as, the child extracts a different meaning because they skip words all the time. ...When you asked them to even retell what they had read, they had a totally different point of view of the whole story because they left out the one word *not*. And the continuum does not allow you to record that. So I had to write all over it, that due to omissions, the child missed understanding what she'd read.... It doesn't take the full picture. It does not give someone else the full picture of that child. The only full picture you've got is teaching that child.

This year, Angela has not yet plotted any children on the continua. At the end of each semester reports are sent home to parents, and at the end of each term a work sample file is sent home. Included in this work sample file are any teacher-made tests that Angela has administered to check children's knowledge and understandings in all content areas.

The *First Steps* developmental continua have always been supplementary to Angela's usual testing and record keeping. However, she feels that having been through the process of plotting children in the past has made a difference to the kinds of records she keeps:

I personally have moved on from that, and developed, oh, a much better developed system. And out of *First Steps* comes modification and a much better developed system. I never used to have very good records like I have now. Nowhere near as comprehensive as now. And the one thing I never, **ever** used to do was anecdotal records. And now I'm starting to turn towards them, they're more useful.

Initially, Angela expected to be monitoring her students' oral language using a checklist that would be generated by the school's oral language committee. However, this checklist was not forthcoming and most of Angela's monitoring appears to be anecdotal. Rather than looking for specific indicators, Angela seems to prefer to monitor more in terms of anything that particularly stands out. She then transfers this information to a checklist, if appropriate:

I just wrote down, well, I put it in the report terms; excellent, above average, average, below average, cause for concern. And I just jotted that down as I went around and if somebody stood out, like very expressive, or great vocabulary, I just put that comment....I've recorded in terms of stance, volume, and stuff like that that I was looking for. I just had a piece of paper. Scribbled it down. But that will probably end up on a checklist. Later. Actually, the checklist will be the report, this time.

Much of Angela's monitoring takes place as she marks the work done by the children in her class. She then tries to step back a little and reflect on exactly what is happening in terms of her students' learning. This forms the basis of her on-going planning:

I personally, really take notice of what I'm marking, and it gives me feedback, and in my records book, I write, underneath, so and so and so and so need extension in such and such, they're very able. I identify children, other children. They are going to need remediation in, it might only be this bit. The whole class needs to work on, whatever....I need to find another way of teaching such and such, because it's not getting through. Find another idea, try again, whatever. So I use it for myself, to know I've got to pick up on this, to identify what needs to be picked up, especially as this is their last chance, in year seven. And, go ahead and follow on my daily planning, from there.

Time for reflection appears to be very important for Angela. She feels that she can give a fairer, more accurate assessment when she has had time to look closely at a

child's work and then step back and give some thought to what is really happening in her classroom:

It's something that comes to me in reflection, it's something that, right now you're so engrossed in this marking, in getting it assessed and getting it on that report, the reflection isn't happening now. I tend to have these brainwaves and ideas and reflections during the holidays....Even like my marks book, I really prefer to write my comments in there a week later....I really don't think my thoughts are in order properly until I've walked away from it.

Angela's approach to teaching her class is brisk and businesslike, and this seems to be reflected in the attitude of her students. Angela's prime purpose is teaching the children the things they need to know in order to get the job done, and done well. After eighteen years of teaching, she believes that she has worked out what is important for her students to learn. Where *First Steps* teaching strategies fit into her already established pedagogical framework, Angela makes use of them. Those teaching strategies which do not fit, she disregards.

Angela's framework for assessing her students' progress appears to have evolved through her idea of what counts as important, which in turn has been influenced by her experiences as a teacher over the years. However, Angela seems to be constantly modifying this assessment framework on the basis of her teaching and professional development experiences, and there can be little doubt that her experiences with *First Steps* have influenced this framework further. Although Angela seems to base much of her assessment on her own intuitions and understandings of her students and their needs as they develop, she sees the *First Steps* developmental continua as a useful tool when her own intuitions do not give her the detailed information she needs.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### HELEN

#### **Moving from Theory into Practice**

Helen is in her early twenties. She graduated from Edith Cowan University (Churchlands) in 1994 with a high academic average, an outstanding ATP mark, and after references and Education Department interview she ended up with a very high graduate teacher rating. She had originally planned to go straight into the B.Ed. (Honours) program in 1995, but was offered a job at a state school in a northern coastal town, which she accepted. This job was as a music specialist, and she also provided support as a remedial/extension teacher. At the end of 1995 she applied for a job at a small Independent Ethnic Community school in the metropolitan area, and was given the appointment. Helen was teaching at this school when she took part in the study.

The school is about four years old. This is the first year that there have been sufficient enrolments at the school to make up a separate class for each year level, but class numbers are still small. Helen is teaching a year seven class of sixteen children. She commented that although there were only sixteen children, there was a vast range in their abilities in both language and mathematics.

All the children in Helen's class are being taught to speak, read and write in their mother tongue. For two or three children, their mother tongue is their first language and English their second, for the rest, English is their first language. For some children, their mother tongue is their parents' first language.

### Learning to use *First Steps*

Helen was introduced to *First Steps* in the second year of her teacher education course at University. As part of her course in Language Arts, she was required to use the *First Steps* Continua to assess a child's strengths and weaknesses in language, and to use that information to plan a program of learning for that particular child: "I think as we broke them down, individually, I learnt about them that way. And I think I learned a lot from having to program from a *First Steps* continuum."

In the third year of her teacher education course, Helen participated in the Assistant Teacher Program, when she took responsibility for teaching a class for a full term. Helen's supervising teacher required her to use *First Steps* materials for teaching language:

I think that's then, when I really learned how to use the *First Steps*. I might have known about it before, I think probably, I really learned from it, from having to plan from it. And link up all the different stages with the strategies, and all those sorts of things.

Helen did not use the *First Steps* developmental continua for the particular children for whom she was programming when she planned for her A.T.P. because she was assigned to teach year one children and the information from the continua was not available. However, she read through the continua to make herself familiar with the indicators, so that she could be aware of the possible levels of development of the children she would be teaching. Her supervising teacher gave her some advice:

She said, just don't assume that all of them don't know anything. You will have to cater for the fast ones and those who are a bit more advanced, so they've sort of passed that experimental phase, going past that stage and they're fitting into more, with their phonics, and can sound out and stuff already. So I think I just looked at where the stages were at, and read through all the, what are they called? The indicators, and found it that way.

Both the school at which she taught last year, and Helen's present school are newcomers to the *First Steps* project. "Last year, our school, it was the first year they did *First Steps* as well, so this year I've come to this school, it's the first year they're doing *First Steps*." Because of this, Helen feels that she is more familiar with the

materials and the philosophies of the program than many of the teachers with whom she has been working. She has attended professional development sessions, both at this school and her previous one, and she felt that for her, they did not have any new information to pass on:

I felt it was a waste of time, because we did so much of it Uni, and even the handouts we were given, we got at Uni. They were basically straight from Uni books and stuff ... and you feel like you know more than the people who are talking to you about it.

Helen described her professional development experiences at her previous school, and was somewhat critical. The teacher responsible for co-ordinating language had been to a conference to learn about *First Steps* and had brought back what she had learned to the rest of the school:

she had stuff pinned up, and gave out examples of this and examples of that, and, yes, it was very informational if you didn't know anything about *First Steps*. If you knew about *First Steps*, it was boring, because you'd done it all before, in fact, a lot of it was even too basic....I find a lot of people with *First Steps* focus too much on the junior primary....They always give examples from the junior primary. They don't ever really give examples from upper primary, of things you can actually go away and do... I just found they went through all the basic things, like your genres, and they didn't even touch on stuff like how to teach children with difficulties, and all that sort of stuff.

Since the teacher who had the job of *First Steps* co-ordinator left Helen's current school at the end of term one, Helen and another teacher have taken over this position together:

Donna next door,...she's only been teaching one more year than me, she was her *First Steps* co-ordinator last year down at Red Gum Creek, and she went off and did all the in-servicing .... It's hard, because you're so brainwashed, Donna and I are just brainwashed with *First Steps*. I don't think we'd even know any other strategies....We've just been brainwashed.

### **Planning for Year Seven**

Helen starts her planning for language by choosing a theme around which all her work for the term will be based. This theme is usually suggested by the knowledge and understandings that she is required to cover in other topic areas such as science, social studies or health. In this way, she achieves her objectives for these curriculum areas through her language program. She begins by having a brainstorm session and jotting



down anything that she feels she could do relating to the topic. From this, she decides which writing genres she wishes to cover and works out activities to generate those. She then turns to the focus points in the *English Language K-7 Syllabus* (1989) to find out what she should be teaching. She has all her *First Steps* modules out in front of her, and flicks through to find activities that will achieve her objectives:

I just went through and sort of, picked out the actual [focus points] numbers that would be applicable, and then I just go through and I think, well, with my theme, there's obviously going to be heaps of stuff on spelling,...then I look at my *First Steps* books, and look for specific little games...I'll go to my *First Steps* and I'll get the spelling section out, spelling journals and all those ones, word study, and then I'll just brainstorm from there, so I actually have books in front of me, while I'm just writing down everything that I can think of that I think might be good. But mainly, I think about the theme, and what genres I want...So I've just gone through these books, and I've just picked out stuff.... I do a lot of informational writing, not just narrative writing....I get all the [*First Steps* modules] books out, covered over the desk, and flick through, and find out which ones I'd like to use.

### **Modifying Plans Over Time**

As she has worked with her children during the first part of the year, Helen has modified her program to suit their particular needs. In particular, she has discovered that spelling is an area of weakness for many of them:

I know my kids are very weak at spelling, so if you look through my language program, a lot of it is based on going back and I've planned it that I'm going to sort of "oh, look at this" incidentally come across lots of spelling things. Every time we do an activity, I know that I have to be very conscious about picking up things, just like capital letters at the beginning, full stops, commas, trying to be very critical, like that. And, so I go with their, definitely what their needs are.

Helen spent the first term getting to know the school and her class. As she taught her class, she made notes about their interests, about those activities which were successful and those which were not, about her students' particular needs. She watched them carefully and made up sociograms to show who worked well together. When she came to plan for the second term, Helen stated that she had not consciously looked at these notes, but that by writing them down, she had made herself aware of

the points she wanted to remember:

Just if things came into my head, I'd just jot them down, and think oh yeah, we'll have to consider that next time...second term, I just, I suppose I didn't even really look back at what I wrote. But, by writing it down I think it sticks in your mind more, you think about it when you come to plan next time.

Later in the year, looking back at her first term, Helen felt that she had tried to cover too much in her program, with the result that she had not focussed as much as she would have liked on specific skills, and her students had not had the time they needed to consolidate what she had taught them:

I crossed stuff out, that I probably wouldn't do next time...I tried to do everything, as far as writing your letters to the Government, doing a poster, doing something in a shopping centre; it could have taken up two terms...and [then] they would have been able to perfect everything, and really get it done, whereas what I was having to do when I looked through their files, was get them to go home and complete their final copies, which is never as good, because you can't be there to stand over them and help them more.

### **Working in Groups**

Helen had planned her program around group and partner work. When I visited her early in term one to interview her, the desks in her room were arranged in four groups of four. However, a week later, they had been re-arranged into three lines, because she had found the class hard to control when they sat in groups. I commented "You've had a change around." Helen's answer was "Yes, we had to." In a previous conversation she had commented that the children were "rowdy". She described the kinds of group interactions she had planned to make the most of peer learning, using *First Steps* group work strategies:

We might have a scribe and stuff like that, so each activity will be done slightly different. I do a lot of group, or partner stuff, such as spelling, and if they're unsure of a word, before they come to me, they've got to think of it themselves, go through the strategies that are out on our board over there, which we revise a couple of times a week. And then they talk, they ask a partner, or they go to the people that are in their group, to try and work through with their group members first, try and learn together, before they come up to me.

Although the children enjoyed group work, Helen found initially that she was not achieving her objectives because her students did not yet have the skills to use group work effectively. When she had tried group activities, the result had been that two or

three children had taken over and run the activity, while others in the group had not taken part at all.

There's kids who just...never ever say a thing, but just copy down what everyone else is saying. And then there's other kids who never accept what the other person's got to say...I had four kids, basically, in this class, who would just take over and run the whole activity. And the others, they get annoyed and they just sit there and then don't do anything. Or they get loud,...they get off-track.

Helen had rearranged the desks back into rows to make behaviour management easier in her classroom, but she still persevered with partner and group work in her teaching activities. By second term, she had decided that she would have to explicitly teach the children how to work in groups. She was helped in this by the fact that the school had decided to use *Primary Science Investigations*, which is a science program that uses groups and allocates a job to each person in the group. Helen successfully used this as the basis for teaching her class how to work in groups:

I told them, you still have to have someone designated to do these different things. It doesn't mean you have one person who is the boss, but you've got to have different jobs...the first few weeks of term two, we actually went through group skills. And everything we did, I forced them to go into groups. Instead of steering away from it like I said I was going to, ...I thought, no way, I'm going to get them used to groups, and I was a wreck by about week three of term two. ...They were terrible, but I persisted, and I persisted all term, and now, I put them in groups and they work well. They know when to be quiet and when to get on with their work.

### **Reading in Context and Using *First Steps* Writing Frameworks**

Helen has the first part of the morning set aside for language activities, and covers whatever comes up next in her program. During term one, she was working on the theme of 'the Environment'. All Helen's reading instruction is context-related. She will search the library for books related to her theme, and will take her reading activities from those books. There are some *First Steps* reading activities that Helen particularly likes:

I like the things like character interviews and portraits, character portraits and story maps and all those.... I think it's very concrete....With the character interviews you can always start at the beginning of the year, not doing a character interview of the person in the story, but doing one of themselves, so they've already probably done that sort of format before, and when they're doing about the character in the story, I reckon it's a good way, they like doing the picture and it looks like a poster, they like being able to pin it up. They like being able to see

it afterwards, and be constantly reminded about what's in the book. So, I think it's just a good way of trying to break down the characters. And a story map, well, I suppose in a way it sort of is showing all the other kids that everyone can have a different perception of how the book can be interpreted.

Helen's writing instruction also occurs in the context of her theme. She tries to make her writing as purposeful as she can:

We've just, we've done things like word sleuths with environmental words, this week we're writing a letter to a fertiliser company, because we're up to soil, now in social studies and science, so it relates....I do a lot of stuff for informational writing, not just narrative writing.

As part of her 'Environment' theme, Helen and her students were writing a scientific report about trees. Helen often uses the strategy of shared writing with her students, so that she can model the writing process, using a 'think aloud' procedure, and the whole class had written a report together. A few days later, when I was observing in the classroom, the children were given the opportunity to put into practice what they had learned, and write notes for individual reports. This strategy of modelling a procedure with the whole class and then moving on to let students work individually is one which is embedded in *First Steps*.

Helen started her lesson by asking her students to get out a photocopied sheet with which they had been working the previous day. There was a flurry of activity as children hunted in their desk trays, their drawers or their bags. Helen praised and rewarded a student who had organised herself quickly, and stated the behaviours that had merited this praise: "She's waiting with her eyes to me, and her sheet's out on her desk." After a few more minutes, all students were ready, and the chatter died down. Helen gave out faction points.

Helen reminded the children that a couple of weeks ago they had looked at a format for writing a report. She questioned the children about the various elements that were required for a report. There was some confusion when one of the children suggested that a report needed a setting. Helen said, "No, you're confusing it with a recount."

Another student suggested that a report needed a time and place. The girl who had suggested setting said that that was what she had meant by 'setting'. Helen referred her to the *First Steps* writing genre frameworks which were pinned up on one of the pinboards and pointed out that 'setting' was actually listed there as part of the framework for a recount. She continued to use the report framework on the wall to lead the children through the various elements of a report format. The frameworks that were up on the wall were only A4 size, so the children could not have been able to read them from their seats.

Some of the children had successfully memorised some or all the elements of a report format, others did not appear to know any. Helen then went through each point in turn, writing the framework on the whiteboard, and detailed the kind of information that was required. When she talked about describing a tree, she said, "It won't be enough to just say that it's brown and green, you have to describe it so that someone who had never seen one before would know what it was from your description." Helen continued to go through each point, giving examples of the kind of information to be included. Several children offered their own suggestions, and all were accepted. When she came to the *dynamics* (what does it do?) section, it was obvious that most of the children were very knowledgeable about trees and that the class had done a lot of work on the subject.

Helen asked for examples of a summarising comment. There were a few tentative suggestions: "You could pick the important bits from all the other sections and put them all together"; "You could give your opinion". Most of the children seemed to find this quite difficult. Helen gave some further possible examples. She cautioned the children that the summarising comment would not just be their opinion, but,

...your wrapping up, your winding up, your tying together of all these things. Okay? And then you can give a little comment maybe at the end, such as, trees are very important and we need to look after them, or try and keep planting them, or whatever your opinion is.

Helen gave out a sheet of paper which she called a report format. She explained to the children that this was different from the one they had done on the board the other day. From what she said, I gathered that the report she had modelled on the board had had all the sections in order, whereas the format that she had just given the class was laid out as four quarters of the paper. A copy of this report format is shown in Appendix E.

Helen gave out what she called information sheets. These were pages photocopied from informational texts on trees. There were four different A3 sheets. These had the headings: *These trees make a forest*, *How do trees grow?*, *How we use trees*, and *Why do trees shed their leaves?* She told the children to read through these to get their information, as well as "what you know in your heads, and what you've read in the papers." She told the children to work in groups or partners. They were each required to fill in their own sheet separately, but they could collaborate and work together to find their answers.

Before they started to do this, Helen flipped over the whiteboard and revealed a diagram of a tree which she had drawn earlier. There were giggles from the class - it seemed that there was an ongoing classroom joke about Helen's (lack of) artistic talents. Helen told the children that when you write a report about something, it's good to accompany it with a diagram; "it's not a picture, it's a diagram. A diagram is something that shows particular parts, it labels things."

Helen had put arrows to the various parts of the tree on her diagram, and together the class labelled the different parts. The children called out the answers in chorus, and Helen wrote in the labels. There was some discussion about the rings through the tree and how they can indicate the age of the tree, how much growth has taken place in a year, and how the size of the rings can give an indication of the conditions for growth in a given year.

Helen set the children to work. They seemed to drift into groups; there were four separate groups and they were all single sex groups. Two children, one boy and one girl, chose to work alone, despite Helen trying to persuade each of them to join a group.

### **The Classroom**

While the children were at work I looked around the room. On the back wall was a class notice board, with a timetable, a canteen menu and a few other general notices pinned on it. Around the outside of it were children's acrostic poems, using the word ENVIRONMENT. Next to this was another pinboard and on this was the notice "Maths Activity Centre". Under this label, a series of clear plastic folders were pinned by the corner, and in these folders were various maths worksheets. On the floor, below this, were several boxes of maths equipment.

Also against the back wall there was a table on which were displayed a number of books, all with an environmental/conservation/pollution theme. Above the table were pinned some commercial posters relating to the environment, and below the table were what looked like the children's science work in progress. These were models of rain clouds and water catchments. There were also some posters that the children had made, promoting conservation of water.

In the corner of the room was a bookshelf, stocked with both novels and informational texts, and a pile of games, which included *Scrabble*, *Connect Four*, and *Trouble*. Hanging from the ceiling were some papier maché models. They looked as though they were meant to be insects.

Along the next wall was another pinboard, and on this was a label, *Our special work*. All kinds of work was displayed here, from rough drafts and explosion charts, to neatly presented final copies. There were poems, recounts and a report. Further

along on the pinboard were A4 posters of all the *First Steps* genre frameworks. Below this noticeboard were the children's drawers, and on top of the drawers were three book boxes. One of these was stuffed full with copies of *Earth 2000* (a weekly liftout from the *West Australian* newspaper), another was full of travel magazines, and the other contained various brochures. Next to the book boxes there were two large trays, one labelled *scrap paper* and the other labelled *spare sheets*.

Next to the drawers, there was another table, and over this was the notice "publishing centre". On the table there were pens and textas, and pinned to the wall above the table were various posters labelled *spelling hints*.

Hanging from a line below the ceiling were children's work samples of a story grammar of *The Silver Sword*. The story grammar sheet was the one from the appendix of the *First Steps Reading Comprehension Module* (1992). Under the whiteboard there was a big poster with a list of class rules on it. There was also a small notice board with a list of monitors, and more environment posters. The corner of the classroom opposite the door has been given over to displays relating to the children's ethnic background, with pictures and posters written in their mother tongue. The classroom is used on the weekends by the Ethnic Community.

### **Note-making for a First Draft**

The children had been busily working for some time. Helen continually stressed that the purpose of this exercise was to write notes and key words only. Several of the children had written full sentences. Helen said that this was common, and that she was trying to get them to realise that for the purposes of note making, key words were sufficient. However, she commented that she was finding it hard to get this message across. Eventually, Helen stopped the class and read out the classification section from one child's work because it had all the required information in it. He had, however written it as complete sentences.



Helen commented on his description, saying that it was a very general statement to state that a tree had green leaves. There followed a general class discussion about the various colours of leaves. Helen once again reminded the children that they should be writing in note form - she called them "dot points". She said that when they had completed this they would be starting their first draft, which would be in sentences. She said, "whenever you do a report, it always needs at least one draft, before you write up your final copy. At least one draft." When she came across a girl who had drawn a diagram in her description section, Helen praised her to the rest of the class; "What better way of describing something than drawing a diagram?"

Helen said that she would give the class another five minutes to write notes, then they would come together and share their ideas, then she would give them more time to work on their notes, because they could use other people's ideas to add to their own. When she called them together, they all sat down to the floor, at the front of the classroom, in a large circle. Helen went round the circle briskly, asking each child to read out what they had written for the first two sections. Although she questioned or corrected some contributions, she was very positive, and found something good to say about each one.

For the final two sections, she told the children to stay where they were on the floor, but to sit next to someone they hadn't been working with and share their ideas. Quite a bit of direction was needed to get the children to move away from the people they had been working with and share with others. It seemed that the children were reluctant to move out of their chosen groups. When they were arranged to her satisfaction, she set them to work: "Share your ideas, I want to hear talking. Go!"

There was talking. Perhaps because the children were all concentrated in one part of the classroom at this point, it seemed to be louder than it had been during the previous part of the lesson. Helen told the children that when they were satisfied with the

information on their sheets, they could turn the paper over and on the back, write their summarising comment.

Helen brought the lesson to a close, telling the children that there were five minutes to go until recess, and they needed to have their desks tidy, and their summarising comment written. The year sevens are responsible for ringing the bell for recess, so the children who had that job had to clear away earlier. As they went off to ring the bell, Helen went briskly round the room, asking various children to read out their summarising comments. She gave positive feedback, collected papers and dismissed the class.

Helen explained to me later that she had only recently started working with the children on reports. Before getting them to attempt to write their own, they had read a number of reports around the 'environment' theme and deconstructed them:

We'd probably only done two relatively short lessons, but then they'd read a fair few reports, because we'd been doing environmental studies, so obviously a report format was pretty much into it...We had gone through, and like they show you in the *First Steps* module, you go through and you say, well this is the classification, this is the, you know. We'd done that, and we did that with recounts as well. We broke down the what is this and this is the what, where, and this is the who, why, and this is what I thought about it.

### **Word Study: Spelling and Building Vocabulary**

Helen very quickly identified spelling and grammar as areas of weakness for many of her students, and in part, attributes this weakness to their simultaneous exposure to two languages. "a lot of the time you read their writing, they get the words mixed around the wrong way....It's exactly like they talk....They get their past tense, future, all their different things around the wrong way. "

Helen also wanted to build the children's vocabulary, and has been using *My Word* book to generate word lists for the children to learn:

Some of these kids have got a very small vocabulary. They use the same words all the time....We've done interesting words, we've done all that, we've got environmental words, they're in their spelling journals and ... as they write more words, they go into their spelling

journal...*My Word* is totally **not** *First Steps*. But it does give you a list of vocabulary which is applicable for that age group. And a year seven *My Word* book is really sort of focussed on words that they should be starting to encounter in their natural language.... So then I bring in, **then**, I bring in the *First Steps*. Ideas. So it's still linked.

One of the things that Helen likes to do with her class is to explore word origins. She believes that training her students to think about words and their meanings will help not only their spelling, but their reading as well:

They still don't, when they're reading, stop, and that's what I wanted them to do, was to get them into the habit of when they're reading, stop, and look back, and read that word and try and think, well, what's that word, where's it come from, ...look at the main word in it, and then add on the next bit ... you've got to break it down, but they can't, they can't break it down, that's what I was trying to get them to do.

Helen introduced this idea at the beginning of the second term. Her theme for the term was "The Olympics". By this time she had decided to persevere with group work, and the desks were now arranged in two large groups, one boys and one girls.

The lesson which I observed took place after morning recess. The children had been outside for physical education for the first part of the morning and they took some time to settle. The previous day's work was still on the board. In one corner there was a heading with a list of words written beneath it:

**Spelling test.**  
weightlifting  
gymnastics  
swimming  
sprinting  
equestrian  
energetic  
lithe  
stamina  
agile  
ver/sat/ile

The last word on the list had been split into syllables.

As the children got themselves settled for the lesson, Helen began giving out worksheets which she had photocopied during recess. Once the worksheets were

distributed, Helen called the class to attention and reminded them of the work they had been doing the previous day. "We were looking at words that had the same beginnings or the same endings. What were some of the words that we looked at yesterday?" A student answered that they had looked at *ology* words. Helen answered that not only had they looked at words that had ended in *ology*, but they had also looked at words with the same beginnings. Some of the words that the class had explored the previous day were *paediatrician*, *physiology*, *physiotherapist*, *psychologist* and *archaeologist*. Helen asked the class if they could remember what *ology* meant at the end of a word. Someone suggested that it meant you discover things. Someone else said, no, it meant you study things.

Helen asked for a volunteer to spell *chiropractor*. She selected one of the boys to come out to the whiteboard and spell the word, then she asked the rest of the class if his spelling was correct. The class chorused a "yes", but the child who had written the word decided it was incorrect and started to alter it. Helen stopped him, "No, no, that's correct. Well done." She selected someone else to spell *chiropodist*. She said, "And I want you to tell me what a chiropodist is." One of the boys sitting near to the front, sounded out the word, "Chir-op-o-tist." The child at the board spelt the word *cheropitist*. Helen asked for another volunteer. She told the student to write her spelling underneath the other one so that the class could compare the words. This child spelt the word correctly.

Helen pointed out that the beginning of the two words *chiropractor* and *chiropodist* were spelt the same, yet they were pronounced differently. One of the children suggested it could be because they studied the same thing. Helen asked the class if they knew what each word meant, and there followed a discussion about chiropodists, podiatrists, chiropractors and physiotherapists, and the differences between them.

Helen directed the class to look at one of the worksheets, which gave the definition for the word *etymology*. "We obviously know that it's the study of something, because it's got that 'ology' suffix on the end of it, okay?" She asked one of the children what a suffix was. He was unable to supply the answer, so she reminded him that it was something added to the end of a word, and then she asked another child for the definition of a prefix. This person was able to supply the answer. A student had looked up the word *etymology* in the dictionary. Helen said "Excellent. Read what the dictionary says about it." There were two definitions, and the child read out both. One of the definitions was *the study of the origins of words*.

Helen asked what *origin* meant. She reminded the class that they had looked at that word a couple of weeks ago. Someone supplied the answer. Helen went on to ask what other words came from the same root. *Original, originate, originality, and originated* were all suggested. One child suggested *organic*. Helen said, "No, not organic, that's different." She said she wasn't sure if *originality* was a word and asked for someone to look it up in the dictionary. One of the girls looked it up, and another girl said, "It is, I heard it on the news once." The girl who was looking in the dictionary found the word and said, "Yes, it's in here."

Helen told everyone to get out their dictionaries and look up the entry word for *origin*. Helen asked for all of the sub-entry words listed. One of the girls read them out. Helen wrote them all on the board. One of the words that the children had not suggested was *originator*. Helen said, "What do you think an originator is going to be?" She received the answer, "Someone who originates things".

She returned to the worksheet and asked one of the children to read what was written on the sheet. The sheet talked about how to use the dictionary to find out from which language our modern words are derived. It cited the *Chambers Essential English Dictionary* as an example. Helen said that they didn't have a copy of this dictionary,

most of them had the *Oxford Australian School Dictionary* (in fact there were a variety, including the *Macquarie*, *Collins* and the *Collins Gem* size), but she wanted them to investigate whether dictionaries differed. She asked who thought they did. Most of the class agreed that they did. Helen commented that she thought year sevens should probably have a more sophisticated dictionary than the ones that they actually had.

Helen then asked the class to look up in their dictionaries the word *aquamarine*. She said, "Remember, we talked about if you don't know how to spell it we've got to try and guess, so that you can make assumptions of where it's going to be in the dictionary." When it looked as though all of the children had found the correct spot in the dictionary, Helen called one of them out to the board. "Come and write on the board, using your dictionary, some of the words that are underneath *aqua*. *Aqua* is the root word, okay? I wonder what *aqua* means?" Helen asked one of the other children what definition the dictionary gave for *aqua*. Instead of this particular child supplying the answer, Helen received several answers from various other children; most of them giving the definition as a colour.

Helen called for order and went round each child in turn. Some children supplied the definition as a colour, others defined it as a precious stone. Helen said, "What I want you to look at, is where has that word actually come from? Has it come from France, Germany, does it say, in your dictionary, in brackets, where that word has derived from or originated from? What country, or where is it from?" Several children called out that it was Latin. Others said that it didn't say anything in their dictionaries. Helen restated that they needed a more sophisticated dictionary. Mark was still writing *aqua* words on the board. Helen asked the class to suggest what the *aqua* part of the word could mean. Someone said that it meant *water*.

The lesson continued in this way until Helen directed the children's attention to a worksheet with the heading, *Discovering the Roots*. There were six sections to the

worksheet and each section had a list of words with the same root. The idea was for the children to use their dictionaries to look up the words in the lists, and from that information, draw some conclusions about what the root word meant. Helen asked one of the girls to read out the directions at the top of the page, then set the children to work.

The class settled down to work. One of the group of girls complained that the definitions in the dictionary were too long to fit in the spaces. Helen told the children they would have to summarise the definitions. They seemed to find this difficult. The group of boys were looking up definitions for the words *photograph*, *telegraph*, *geography*, *graphics*. They were discussing what the root *graph* could mean. One of them commented that he knew that *grapho* was Greek for *write*, but no-one made the connection.

The children seemed to have quite a lot of difficulty with this exercise. They seemed to be unable to synthesise the information that was available to them and draw logical, sensible conclusions. One child had written down the definition of a pedal as *a lever*. What the dictionary actually said was *a lever worked by the foot*. The word *astrophysics* was not in any of the children's dictionaries. It did not occur to any of the children to look up *physics* and work out what it might mean. They seemed to be easily distracted by other issues. The girls spent considerable time discussing how many legs a centipede would have.

The class had not completed the exercise when Helen brought the lesson to a close. She told the children that they would have to complete the sheet for homework, and they would go through it the next day.

Investigating the origins of words is a strategy which is recommended by *First Steps*. Helen told me that she had decided to include a lot of dictionary work because she

had discovered that the children were not able to use their dictionaries well; they took a long time to look words up, and did not understand how to use all the information. She said that she felt the children had trouble finding words because their knowledge of phonics was generally weak, and their spelling reflected their pronunciation, which was often not Standard Australian English. Even the children who speak English as their first language, speak with quite a distinctive accent.

During first term, Helen had been wondering whether to introduce the *First Steps* spelling strategy of using 'have-a-go' pads with her students, but thought they might object because they would perceive them as babyish. In the end, she solved this problem by giving them scrap paper to use in the same way:

So instead of writing the word down wrong, if they're unsure, I've just got them to use scrap-paper because I haven't made up a proper pad for them, and they think that that's more mature, just being able to just write down on a piece of paper. So that's how we've been doing it, but it's basically a 'have-a-go' system. ....Because I was just sick to death of them bringing me stuff that if they looked at it, they surely could've worked it out.

Helen had reasoned that this approach would work well, because it was a strategy she used herself, and modelled regularly in front of the class:

When they come and ask me for a word, I get out my scrap paper and do it...I have to actually write it before I can think about how it needs to be spelt. So they see me doing it, all the time, so I said well, I do it, so you're going to do it before you come up to me. And then, if you can't, you ask your partner next, and then you can bring it up to me and I'll check it for you before you write it down.

By the middle of the year, the school had introduced a Direct Instruction spelling program for five children from years five, six and seven, who had been identified as being particularly 'at risk'. Two of the children were from Helen's class. A parent came in to the school every Wednesday and Friday for twenty minutes to carry out the instruction. "It's only twenty minutes, they just go out, and they go out on a Wednesday morning and a Friday morning, I mean they don't really miss anything else, they come back and they just catch up." Helen simply sees this as supplementing her own spelling instruction by giving these particular children some more explicit teaching. "It's just a bit more one on one for them, which I can't always give them."



## **Monitoring Children's Progress**

Helen mainly monitors the progress of her children by keeping samples of their work. At the beginning of the year, she set up a work sample file for each child. These sample files go home regularly, and Helen also refers to them when assessing her students, to supplement her anecdotal records and mark off indicators on the *First Steps* developmental continua:

Any time I can go back to their books, and just grab their books and have another look through if I'm unsure about a particular kid when writing reports or something. And if ever parents come in I straight away go and grab their books. Because it's just the best way to back it up....I go through, probably about every two weeks or so, and just check that they haven't achieved any more or they have achieved more, then I mark it off on the indicators. But most of the time you sort of, you know if Anna's all of a sudden got certain types of spelling rules and things, and you just think oh, I'll go and mark that off now. So, I'll do it while they're doing something.

Although Helen says that she does not like to administer tests, at this school she is required to allocate marks in order to complete parent reports. She also feels that getting the children used to testing will prepare them for high school: "Why not do testing when they have to do tests at high school? You may as well prepare them for it."

Helen's testing often takes the form of quizzes to test knowledge and understandings. She has also "tested" her students' control of recount writing by setting them a specific recount activity to complete without her guidance. Although she allocated marks for this activity, the activity was assessed using *First Steps* indicators, and feedback was given to the children in terms of the writing frameworks and the indicators from the writing developmental continuum:

Some of them forgot the 'who', so some of them I just ticked where, when, why, but they didn't do who they went with, or what they did....Using new paragraphs, setting out their work was a bit of a problem I felt, they don't use a new sentence, an idea, they don't use a new paragraph for each idea.

Helen wanted to involve the children themselves as much as she could in monitoring their own development, and planned to share with them the indicators from the

developmental continua, as goals towards which they should be aiming:

Each of them are going to have their little, a record of writing development. And they're going to keep it in there which they are able to have a look at....I would like to do it every two weeks, they come to me and we talk about, do they think they've reached this stage, how do they think they're going, have they improved on certain things, because each week, I write something in a diary that they've got to work on for the following week....So they are ticking with me in their evaluation, because I don't think it needs to be secretive...

### **Using the *First Steps* Developmental Continua**

Helen almost exclusively uses the continua for her monitoring of language development. She sees little point in using other assessment tools when the continua provide her with everything she needs:

Why have all checklists like this? I only have them for my maths and stuff, I don't have them for my language. Why have them for your language? ...They're already there, you're making more work for yourself....Why do you have to double up and do checklists, and then go and do your *First Steps*?

Helen sees main reason for using the developmental continua for monitoring language development is that it enables her to select the most appropriate teaching strategies for her students' levels of development:

Any idiot can pick up a book, I reckon, and read the strategies that they need to do. To me, it's more the monitoring side that needs to be worked upon. Anybody can pick up a book and go, oh, what strategies should I use for this kid? But if you don't know where your kid's at, which strategies should you be using...

Helen marks off indicators on her developmental continua incidentally, as she notices her students achieving them. She continually refers to her continua to make sure that she is familiar with the indicators that she should be looking for, and when she sees a child display an indicator, she will watch closely to find out whether (s)he applies it consistently. Because she is familiar with the indicators, she finds this easy to do.

Helen was perplexed by the way that she had observed teachers using the developmental continua at her previous school:

They all got towards the end of the term, about two hours, to sit down and do their *First Steps* continua. Now, shouldn't they be getting done as you're going along? As you're noticing things?...But they all got two hours to sit down and someone else would take the class ... just

to sit and do their *First Steps*. Now, to me, that's a waste of time....So I can't see why, today I noticed Nick doing something with his spelling, which was much better than normal. Why don't I just go to his *First Steps* spelling continuum, highlight what he's done, or put a dot next to it, thinking, well, that's what I'll be watching next time he does a piece of writing....If he has achieved it next time, if he's achieved it three times in a row, then I'll tick him off.

To some extent, Helen has experienced this kind of approach at this school also.

Rather than marking off indicators incidentally, she finds that teachers see it as a chore to be put off until they can find a large enough block of time for them to sit down and do it. Because they are not using the developmental continua as a tool for their teaching, they see it as a waste of time:

Everyone's finding it a chore. Why do you have to go through this big chore, that's the whole impression of, that it's a chore to do it....They reckon all this for each individual child, is a waste of time. But to me ... I think people try and make it too much, why can't you just jot down notes about them and stuff that you see.

At Helen's current school, the developmental continua are passed on from teacher to teacher as the class moves through the school. Helen received the spelling developmental continuum from the previous teacher and did not entirely agree with where this teacher had placed some of her students on the continuum. She commented that she thought that the previous teacher may have been over generous, and attributed this to the teacher's lack of experience with *First Steps*:

I've got them down here, on the spelling continuum, from the teacher last year. Now I have looked through this, and I would have monitored them differently. However, the lady who did it last year has never done *First Steps*, so I feel she's allocated them things a little bit differently to how I would, but that's every teacher....Because to me they've got to prove it often that they've achieved it. You can't just show one piece of work that they're doing the right thing, do you know what I mean? Because they go back to their old ways again.

When she had first taken over the class at the beginning of the year, Helen had been cautious about using the continua. However, she now felt that she had developed enough confidence to be able to mark off indicators as she saw them, and not be over concerned with how others would judge her from looking at that document:

What's changed from first term, is I've just developed the confidence now that I am the person who knows, what these kids, where they are, not worrying about who had them last year and who's going to have them next year.

Helen agreed with me that a possible problem with passing on the developmental continua from teacher to teacher was that teachers would feel that their standard of teaching may be judged by what was on their students' developmental continua. If the teacher had been able to mark off only a few indicators, then it would look as though the students had not been taught anything new over the year. Helen feels that the other teachers at her school see that the reason they place children on the developmental continua is more for the information it gives to the next teacher or for the principal, than for their own information, and she has tried to dispel this attitude at her current school:

I think what a lot of people see it as, is having the thing to be passed on to the next teacher. That's what I perceive everyone here thinks....It's only something you're doing for the next teacher. But as I tried to say to them, it shouldn't be that, it should be so you can provide the right strategies, for those kids.

Helen sees the use of the developmental continua as a considerable issue in teachers' acceptance of *First Steps*. While many teachers enjoy using the *First Steps* teaching strategies, they often fail to see the relevance of using the developmental continua: "A lot of people like *First Steps*, but they hate the continuums. They don't see why they have to do the continuums. And that's my general feeling."

Helen seems to draw on a number of sources for her teaching ideas. Although the *First Steps* strategies and the underlying theory that she learned at University form a basis for her teaching, she is now adding to this repertoire from other sources, such as *My Word Book*, or commercially prepared resources like the worksheets she used for her word study lesson. As she develops her own teaching style, Helen also draws on other, more experienced teachers as role models.

Helen also seems to be developing her own system of in-head monitoring. Because this in-head system appears to be based on her familiarity with the *First Steps* indicators, she is able to quickly and incidentally place her students on the

developmental continua without this being the chore she has seen it to be for others. Helen appears to be selecting and using *First Steps* strategies in the same "routine" ways as Mike, suggesting that she, too, is working at Hopkins' (1990) highest psychological levels.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

In this chapter, I conduct a cross-case analysis, in which I look across teachers' practices to identify commonalities, and attempt to trace these back to the influence of each teacher's understandings and experiences in connection with language learning as depicted by *First Steps*. From this analysis, several important issues will be highlighted.

The chapter is arranged in three sections; each section will explore a specific research question. Firstly, I shall look at how teachers planned for language teaching, both initially and subsequently, and what factors appeared to most affect the planning decisions that they made. Secondly, I shall look at how teachers monitored their students' progress; how they recorded this information; what use they made of it; and the ways in which they used the *First Steps* developmental continua as part of this process. In the third section I will look at the teaching strategies that teachers used, why teachers had chosen to use these strategies, and to what extent these choices could be traced back to *First Steps* materials. The fourth research question, which relates to teaching strategies and assessment tools which are not connected with *First Steps*, will be discussed as the issue arises within these three sections.

#### **Planning for Teaching Language**

*How do teachers make use of First Steps developmental continua as they plan language learning in their classrooms?*

It is interesting to note that all teachers in the study found themselves, at the beginning of the year, in a teaching situation which they had not previously encountered. Mike and Ann and Claire and Chris had formed their new team-teaching partnerships, Angela had moved from teaching year five to teaching year seven, and

Helen, besides having her own class for the first time, was new to her school. Given these new situations, they all agreed that in some ways, they were experimenting at the beginning of the year, and this inevitably had some impact on their planning. Even when teachers feel that they are practiced in the use of *First Steps*, each new situation or context demands a reconsideration of how they will go about using the *First Steps* materials.

#### Getting started.

Mike's planning altered over time. Initially, he planned his language activities around a specific resource; the *Australiana* (1994) resource package. Mike had arranged this, firstly because he wanted to be able to establish with his students some procedures for working in groups, and secondly because he wanted to have the opportunity to assess the children's developmental levels in language. Mike was the only teacher in the study who appeared to have deliberately set out to collect initial data about the developmental levels of the children he was teaching, with the purpose of using this information to direct his planning.

After these initial activities, Mike's planning became more thematic, with less emphasis on resources. Once he and Ann had identified a theme, which often came from the particular interests of the children, they would brainstorm various activities that could come from that theme. Having selected the activities that they thought would most suit the collective needs of their students, each activity was then adjusted to suit the developmental level of each group of children:

It was those processes we learned first, and then, when they'd learned the processes, then we started saying we'll now attack the content at their own level. And that's why we split the class into the two groups.....We split them up, so that with those weaker kids, we started again. We said, look, here's a chance to go right back to the start, and go from there.

Helen began by choosing a theme, which in the first term was 'the environment'. She then brainstormed activities that would fit around this theme, selected the writing

genres that she wished to cover, and slotted other activities in around this. Helen collected information about her students as she incidentally placed them on the developmental continua, and as time went by, she began to select activities on the basis of the information she had collected.

Angela, who had taught many of the children in her class in year five, felt that she had more to learn about the content of what she had to teach in year seven, than she had to find out about what her children were able to do. She began her programming by looking at the content of other areas across the curriculum, in particular social studies and health, and identifying resources that would support this. Having identified a commercially produced program that would particularly support her social studies program, she selected activities from this. She also brainstormed to include other activities which would supplement the program. Angela's planning appeared to be mainly driven by content and resources, and this did not appear to change as the school year went on.

Claire and Chris stated that they began by identifying the focus points from the *English Language K-7 Syllabus* (1989) and used these as goals to be attained by the end of the year. They then identified what the children needed to learn during the year to be able to achieve these goals. Although they stated that they used the developmental continua to establish what the children were able to do at the beginning of the year, they both admitted later on in the year that they had hardly consulted the continua. Their information then, must have come from some other source, most probably from their initial, informal observations and intuitions.

Once Claire and Chris had identified what they wished to teach in terms of skills, they built their program around a theme, which may have come from either a commercially produced program of work, or a program with which they had previously experienced



success. Claire and Chris's planning appeared to be goal-driven, but resources also played an important part.

#### Using topics and themes.

With the exception of Angela, all teachers in the study claimed to use a thematic approach to teaching language, and this was usually the starting point for their planning. However, the term 'thematic' appeared to have a different interpretation for each teacher. In Claire's classroom, the theme remained within the boundaries of the language program and could be as broad as a particular genre, for instance Fairy Tales, or simply revolve around a specific novel, as with *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. At times, parts of the language program seemed to step out of this 'theme', for instance, the farming words that formed the class spelling list came from the social studies program, and the report the children wrote on the respiratory system supported the health program.

Although she did not claim to use a thematic approach, Angela used thematic links with topics from other curriculum subjects, so that her language program supported the content of other curriculum areas.

Mike and Helen's thematic approaches were similar, in that their themes encompassed all other curriculum areas, possibly with the exception of mathematics. In this respect, Mike and Helen's thematic approaches appeared to be more consistent with a 'whole language' philosophy. Mike explained what the term 'whole language' meant to him:

'Whole language' is, I think, a shocking term, when used by most people. When I think back to my theme work that I used to do, when I was being junior primary trained, and I had to do a thematic program, and even not long ago when ... I saw a student do a 'pathway'. I used to think, oh, this is good. But it's not. Because it misses out. It misses out on that basic philosophy of what 'whole language' is. Because to me, it still sectionalises activities, as in, right, we're doing a social studies lesson, but we're doing it in reading time, sort of thing. To me, 'whole language' is that the kids not only are immersed in language, but all the bits and

pieces fit together, and the skills are just an integral part of [it]. Before the kids can apply them, and learn how to apply them, they've got to have them.

Both Mike and Helen appeared to be far less concerned with the content of their programs, but focussed more on skills and processes. Helen explained how she had adapted the content of her programs to suit her objectives:

...even the environment theme it's not really how I'm doing it, it's more interacting with the environment, when they [the social studies syllabus] talk about Netherlands and Thailand. I think that's what they're meant to be doing in social studies, for the environment, for year seven. But I haven't done that at all. Mine's just, the environment, Man's impact on the environment.

It seems that Mike and Helen used their thematic approaches to develop the language skills and processes which they felt their students most needed to develop, and made this the main focus of all their teaching. The content of other curriculum areas was covered incidentally, as it slotted into their themes. They looked at what their students were able to do and started from that point.

In contrast, Claire, who used the focus points from the *English Language K-7 Syllabus* (1989) as her starting point for planning, and Angela, who began by identifying what her students needed to know in other curriculum areas, appeared to start by looking ahead at the knowledge, skills and understandings which they wanted their students to have acquired by the end of the term, semester or year. In Claire and Angela's classrooms, planning appeared to be more resource or content-driven, because these were used as starting points.

#### Selecting and using resources.

Resources are an issue for Helen and Mike too, but there was evidence that they either adapted or prepared their own materials for their classrooms, rather than used those supplied by commercial programs or workbooks. By using materials that they have prepared themselves, Mike and Helen were more able to cater to the specific needs of their students by adapting materials from other sources. For instance, Mike

used material from the *Spell Well* series for his phonics instruction, but he used this as a resource from which he could extract ideas and tailor them to meet the needs of each particular group. Similarly, Helen used commercially prepared resources, but did not use them in the prescribed way. For example, she used the word lists from *My Word Book* because she perceived a need to build her student's vocabulary, and this resource supplied her with suitable lists of words. In this way, these two teachers were manipulating commercially produced resources to meet the needs of their children rather than applying them in a more prescriptive fashion.

### **Monitoring Students' Progress**

*How do teachers record progress using the developmental continua?*

*What assessment tools do teachers use that are not part of First Steps?*

#### **Monitoring for further planning - links with the developmental continua.**

All teachers monitored children's work as time progressed, and based further planning on information collected in this way. In most cases, this information was not formally recorded, but was carried around in teachers' heads. Of all the teachers, Helen seemed to be the most diligent in recording indicators on the developmental continua as she noticed them. There could be two possible reasons for this: firstly, she is a new teacher and therefore less practiced at keeping this information in her head. It is possible that the practice of recording indicators as she notices them is more automated for Helen, because she has always done it this way. Also, as a new teacher, she is possibly more likely to do things 'by the book'. Secondly, there are only sixteen children in her class; this makes it a less daunting task to keep on top of the amount of recording she is required to do. Helen seemed to rely on her "in-head information" less than the other, more experienced teachers. It is possible that as she becomes more experienced, she too will feel less need to commit this information to writing.

Mike, Angela and Claire all carried much of their day-to-day monitoring information around in their heads, and when they did record this information it was most often recorded as anecdotal notes. However, Mike differed from the other teachers in that he had internalised the *First Steps* indicators sufficiently to be using these terms as his criteria for monitoring.

In contrast, Angela, Chris and Claire appeared to each be using their own set of indicators, which seemed to have been formulated through their personal understandings and beliefs about language learning. During our discussions, Angela had nominated "fluency, expression and knowledge of vocabulary" as criteria on which she would base her assessment of children's oral reading. Perhaps because of this, Angela, Chris and Claire all seemed to focus their further planning on filling gaps they had identified in their children's knowledge, rather than their language development.

When the time came for placing their children on the developmental continua, as they were required to do according to school policy, Claire, Chris and Angela all appeared to translate the information which they had collected in their own terms into '*First Steps* language' in order to record it on the continua. This process of translation made it a very time-consuming operation to place every child in the class on each of the various developmental continua.

Although it did not appear that Claire, Chris or Angela particularly based their future planning on information collected by using the developmental continua, they all agreed that the continua were particularly useful for looking at students whom they perceived as 'at risk'. It seemed that by placing these children on the continuum, teachers were given a focus for looking closely at what the child was able to do, which in turn, provided a clearer picture of their specific needs.

### Reporting to others - passing on the information.

All teachers kept a work sample file for each of their children. This was sometimes in the form of writing samples kept to back-up observations made when placing children on the developmental continua; sometimes in the form of a folder of children's work samples, tests, or both; sometimes both of these data collection methods were used. Where work sample folders were collated, these were frequently sent home to supplement parent reports.

Of all teachers in the study, only Mike made any attempt to analyse these work samples in *First Steps* terms - build up profiles of his students. Because he also used his student profiles as a way of reporting to parents, Mike felt that it was important to explain to parents in their own terms how they could interpret this information, and he organised a parent information evening in order to do this. Although the *First Steps* materials do not explicitly state the significance of parental involvement, this importance is implied by the inclusion of notes for parents at every level in each developmental continuum. During 1991-1992, (Deschamp, 1995a) a parent pack was produced to further foster communication between parents and teachers.

With the exception of Mike, all teachers passed their students' developmental continua on, either within the same school, or to the school that the student would next attend. Until recently, both Angela and Helen were required to submit their developmental continua to their principals, although it is not clear what use the principals made of this information, or how the information would have been interpreted. This year, however, because Angela's school had decided to try to cut down on administrative paperwork, they had altered their policy to state that developmental continua only need be completed if the teacher felt it necessary to do so, and that this information need not be passed on to others.

In those schools where it was reported that the developmental continua were passed on from one teacher to the next, there was no evidence to suggest that case-study teachers actually consulted the developmental continua prior to their initial planning, or that they ever used the information other teachers had supplied in this manner. Teachers appeared to prefer to base their planning on their own judgements, and there was some evidence to suggest that teachers often disagreed with the judgements that other teachers had made when placing students on the developmental continua.

#### Other ways of assessing.

Both Helen and Angela conducted formal testing with their students. These 'tests' took the form of decontextualised activities which children were required to complete individually at the end of a unit of work. In Angela's case, the information that was gathered from testing her students appeared to contribute to her assessment of what her students were able to do and which areas needed further teaching, and this appeared to have some impact on her planning. On the other hand, Helen appeared to be less comfortable with the idea of formal testing, but carried it out because it was a requirement of the school, reasoning that similar testing situations would exist in the culture of high school, and that her students would need to at least be used to formal testing situations.

Although he did not test his students in a similar formal sense, Mike set up assessment situations in which his children would perform an activity without any teacher guidance. In this way, he could be sure that he was assessing what his students were able to do alone. He had audio-taped his students' individual oral reading so that he was able to be more thorough in his judgements about what his students were able to do. The information he gathered from these exercises provided the focus for his future teaching; for example, the home reading groups, the phonics skill building sessions, the language activities to develop an awareness of what a sentence was.

## **Teaching Strategies**

*How do teachers select teaching strategies in relation to the developmental continua?*

*What teaching strategies and practices do teachers use as an outcome of monitoring children on the developmental continua?*

*What teaching strategies do teachers use that are not related to First Steps?*

*First Steps* teaching strategies typically adopt a problem solving approach to language learning. Learning situations involve students taking an active part in meaningful and purposeful language activities. Collaboration with other students provides interaction and scaffolding, and self-direction is encouraged, as not all students are expected to work at the same pace.

Because all teachers used spelling strategies that could in some way be traced back to *First Steps*, it seems appropriate to look at spelling as a discrete issue.

### **Using the spelling journal.**

The *First Steps* module *Using a spelling journal in the language program* (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992b, p.12), states that "the purpose of a spelling journal is to individualise spelling on the basis of children's writing needs." Students should use the journal to record and learn words that they will need in their writing, including words that they have previously misspelt, subject-specific words, and words of personal significance. Once recorded in the journal, students should use a variety of strategies to help them learn how their words are spelt, including identifying key features of words, mnemonics, spelling hints, and word derivations. Students should also be encouraged to engage in some form of self-evaluation about their personal spelling development.

It is recommended that students learn words from their lists using a "look, cover, write, check" procedure, and time should be provided within the language program for children to test each other on words they have learnt. In order for children to identify words that they need to learn, emphasis needs to be placed on proof-reading, editing and using a 'have-a-go' strategy as an integral part of the writing process.

All teachers in the study used spelling journals. Mike's spelling journal was different to those of the other teachers because it was a booklet that he had made up himself, with room for only five words on each page. Mike's focus with the spelling journals was initially much more on teaching the children the procedures for using the spelling journal, rather than the words that the children were learning. Although each child only had one spelling list, their lists differed, according to the language group in which Mike had placed them. The words in the list were either words that Mike had identified as generally presenting difficulty, or they were words that occurred in the course of the theme work, and again in the children's phonics instruction.

All the other teachers in the study had both a class list and a personal list. Although in all cases, the students themselves appeared to be responsible for using their spelling journals with a minimum of teacher direction, it appeared that teachers took the responsibility for identifying the words for their students' personal lists. Angela stated that she identified words when marking work from other curriculum areas and wrote them in the margin of the child's workbook, and Claire at one point asked a child to put his writing journal on her desk so that she could go through it and find some more words for his personal list.

Helen, Claire and Angela always appeared to select topic related words for their class lists, and the lists usually consisted of about twenty words. Apart from Claire's system of brainstorming and voting for words, these words generally appeared to be selected by teachers. There appeared to be little in the way of teaching the children



strategies for learning words. Where key features were identified, this mostly seemed to be in the form of syllabification, rather than identifying key letter patterns or using morphemic knowledge.

#### Proof-reading and editing.

Having first established the procedures for using the spelling journal, Mike began to encourage his students to proof read their work. When the children completed their toy descriptions, Ann told them that they were writing a draft, and reinforced this idea by using the 'draft' stamp. She stressed that at this point the spelling was not important, and more than once she encouraged the children to 'have a go'. When the children had completed their drafts, she encouraged them to identify words that could have been misspelt.

Proof-reading and editing skills were clearly important for the other teachers in the study; Claire and Chris both had proof-readers' correction marks displayed on posters in their classrooms, and each of the other teachers provided opportunities for their students to read over their draft work to correct spellings, grammar and punctuation, or re-write parts of the text.

All teachers used some form of process writing, as evidenced by their pre-writing activities, such as Claire's and Angela's brainstorm activities and Helen's writing of notes for her students' report on trees. However, there was little or no evidence to suggest that words for students' personal spelling lists came from their draft writing, or that they were selected by students themselves.

#### Spelling instruction.

All teachers used some form of spelling instruction. In Mike's case, this took the form of explicit instruction in graphophonics, mostly in the form of investigating letter patterns. Again, Mike's graphophonic instruction was adjusted to the point of need

for each group, using words that the children would encounter in their current theme. Mike's graphophonics instruction appeared to follow the framework suggested in the *First Steps Teaching Graphophonics* module (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992k, p. 22). He began with his theme, or context, then moved on to focus on a particular symbol/sound relationship. This was followed problem-solving activities in the form of the worksheet. After that came the whole class activity in the form of the experience of cooking the popcorn, and the shared writing activity which followed this and provided a context in which his students could use the skills which they had just learnt.

Other aspects of Mike's graphophonics lessons could be traced back to this module, particularly his use of letter names rather than sounds to identify letters, and the way that he taught his children that these sounds could be changed, for instance, his lesson about 'magic' e.

Helen's spelling instruction appeared to be directed towards the words in her students' class word lists; using a problem solving approach, she explored the morphemic properties of words and word derivations, which is one of the strategies suggested for the transitional stage in the *Spelling Developmental Continuum* (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992e). In this way, she hoped to give her students strategies to spell and read unknown words independently. She had identified most of the students in her class as being transitional spellers, but was also aware that a few were still in the phonetic stage. "...They don't know phonics and that's their problem...That's what I've worked out, it's dawned on me." For these children, the school had instituted a program of Direct Instruction. Although she had identified that these children needed instruction in graphophonics, Helen appeared to be content to let the Direct Instruction program take care of this aspect of their needs, so that when they were working in her classroom, they were working at a level that was not suited to their developmental needs. Helen was also using *My Word Book*, which she

stated, "is totally **not** *First Steps*", but was using this to generate word lists in order to build her students' vocabulary in English.

Although Claire and Chris stated that they used a variety of spelling activities which could be traced back to *First Steps* resource materials, such as spellamadoodles and word sleuths, the evidence suggested that there was a strong focus on the meanings of words, as children wrote sentences using their spelling list words, and used dictionaries to write definitions and synonyms. This emphasis appears to have come from somewhere else, as it is not suggested in *First Steps* materials.

The students in Claire and Chris's class are often allowed to select their own spelling activities and, rather predictably, they select the ones which they enjoy, such as the word sleuths, posters and spellamadoodles. When Claire and Chris select activities because they have identified a particular need, this seems to be based on in-head evaluation. Their identification of students for their 'Special Group', "...too many errors" does not appear to be based on indicators from the spelling Developmental Continuum, although Claire stated that she had consulted the continuum in relation to her 'Special Group'. Instruction for the 'Special Group' appears to be contradictory: on the one hand, they are completing Direct Instruction activities, which rely on learning by repetition; at other times they are taking part in the same activities as the rest of the class, using their own words. These activities did not appear to be connected to their particular level of development; one would expect for instance, children in the phonetic phase to be exploring sound to symbol relationships, while children in the transitional phase would focus more on sight strategies, morphemic relationships and word derivations.

When Claire and Chris each gave the same spelling lesson, it was interesting to note the differences between the lessons. Chris's lesson involved much less teacher direction, and the children appeared to generate their own problem-solving strategies,

which included negotiation with their peers as they decided which of two dictionary definitions might be the most appropriate. Claire's lesson involved more modelling, and she employed a 'think-aloud' strategy, as she talked about why she would select a particular word in the context of each sentence. Both these approaches would be consistent with *First Steps* philosophies; the modelling and 'think-aloud' strategies used when introducing children to a particular activity; the more open-ended approach would be used to assess what children can do alone. The focus of each lesson appeared to be on building vocabulary, and little actual spelling instruction took place.

Angela's spelling instruction appeared to have no connection with her students' spelling lists, or with the context of any other lesson. Her main aim appears to be to teach her students spelling rules and to provide practice for applying them. Although *Spellit* activities are recommended by *First Steps* for consolidation and practice, Angela works through the year seven *Spellit* book from cover to cover, to make sure that nothing gets missed: "I work through from cover to cover because interruptions happen, as recently, where we haven't opened it for two weeks. And so, I'll never know what we've done or not done."

Angela had previously worked with Unit Progress materials, where reading books were assigned by a number to a given year level, and children simply progressed from one book to the next: "The main thing you had to remember is, Unit 1,2,3 is year one, 4,5,6 is year two, 7,8,9 is year three, there's three per year level, and that's what you do."

The Reading Outlines for Unit Progress (Curriculum Branch, Education Department of Western Australia, 1980) cite *Spellit* as a supplementary resource. Angela's approach to using *Spellit* seemed to reflect her previous experiences with Unit Progress reading materials, where students worked through a progression of workbook activities.

### Writing using the genre frameworks.

*First Steps* materials reflect a genre-based approach to writing combined with process writing, together with a strong emphasis on problem-solving strategies using modelled and shared writing. In this way, students come to realise that different forms of writing are appropriate for differing audiences and purposes.

All the teachers in the study used the *First Steps* writing frameworks. Although Angela did not use the frameworks at any time during my visits to her classroom, she had nominated the frameworks as one of the most positive ideas to come from *First Steps*. "I really like the use of genres, and teaching children how to use the genre, using frameworks..."

Angela had been exploring onomatopoeia prior to writing poetry with her students. She had used a brainstorm activity with the class to generate suitable words, and the class had read two poems which were used as examples. Angela's brainstorming activity could be traced to *First Steps* ideas for pre-writing, but the class had not examined the structure of the sample poems or generated any kind of framework on which the students could base their own attempts at poetry. Angela's lesson on poetry did not pick up the principles of genre writing and apply them to the genre of poetry; she appeared to rely more on a strategy of immersion (Cambourne, 1988) to convey to her students the appropriate structures for poetry.

Claire and Chris also stated that they thought that using the writing frameworks was one of the strongest teaching strategies to come from *First Steps*. They felt that now that they had these to work from, they were covering a wider range of genres with their students.

**Chris:** We'd mainly tended to do letters and narratives and poems and that's about it, and now we're doing reports and recounts and procedures and the whole lot, which is, I think, much better.

**Claire:** ...and we've been given a firm structure on how they should be done.

Claire and Chris had worked with their students to write a report about the respiratory system. They had used brainstorming to generate information to be included in the report, then they had used a structured overview to organise the information. Following this, Claire had used a report planning sheet from *First Steps* resources to model to the class how they could write their notes. The children had used this sheet to write their draft reports in note form. Later, they had used this to write their final copy.

Claire's report-writing lessons followed the recommended steps for teaching a report, but she seemed to be confused about which genre was appropriate. She was attempting to use a report to describe how the respiratory system worked. The subject matter would have been more suited to an explanation. Claire stated that her primary purpose was to teach the children to write a report and she had wanted to use familiar material, but in fact the children found the activity very difficult because of the mismatch between subject matter and genre.

Helen's class had also written a report during their work on the 'environment' theme. Helen had used shared writing, modelling and a 'think aloud' strategy to demonstrate to her students. The children gathered their data from various sources and used a report planning framework to organise their information. Helen had copied the layout for this sheet from one which she had seen used by a teacher at her previous school, but did not seem to have a clear idea of why she had chosen to use that particular layout.

Helen's students wrote their reports on trees following deconstructions of other report-type texts and explicit teaching of the various elements that make up a report. This directly relates to the teaching strategies which are suggested in the *Teaching Children how to Write Informational Texts* module. The children had completed a lot

of reading around the subject matter, and this became evident when they completed the 'dynamics' section of the planning sheet, which they were able to do exceptionally well. However, they all appeared to experience difficulty with the summarising comment.

Helen stated that she had also covered letters and poems, and this was evident from work displayed around the room, but it is not clear how she approached the teaching of these forms of writing.

Instead of explicitly teaching the writing frameworks, Mike was exposing his year two class to writing in a wide range of genres. His students' writing was scaffolded by using sentence starters that related to the various elements of any given genre. For instance, when writing descriptions of their toys, the students' worksheets had the sentence starters: *My toy is...It is...It has...I like my toy because...* Although Ann did not formally teach the children that they were writing a description, she used the term 'description' often during the lesson. It appears that Mike has taken his teaching back a step so that when his students come to deconstruct various texts at a later date they will already be familiar with the various structures and terminology. At this stage, Mike appeared to be immersing his students in a wide variety of writing forms and while he is not directly teaching his students the structures or the terminology relating to any given genre, he was constantly exposing them to this information, so that when it is explicitly taught, the ideas and concepts would not be new.

What appears to be important in the use of the genre frameworks is the teacher's understanding of how various types of texts are constructed differently, according to their audience and purpose, together with an understanding of the different types of linguistic structures demanded by each genre to achieve this purpose. A clear understanding of this notion enables teachers to manipulate materials and apply them to the needs of their students. In the lessons that were observed, there appeared to be

little emphasis on teaching which types of text were appropriate for a given purpose or audience. What appeared to be happening in some cases was that teachers were adopting a somewhat prescriptive method of using the writing frameworks.

Mike stated that he feels he understands this process sufficiently that he can synthesise this knowledge to produce an appropriate framework for whatever form of writing he chooses, and this means that he is not limited to the range of frameworks that are included in *First Steps* materials. He also stated that he would concentrate on particular elements of various texts if children's work samples demonstrated that they required further teaching or practice in any particular area. Mike also appeared to be using his in-head knowledge of the indicators from the *First Steps* writing learning continuum to assess areas of need when using the writing frameworks. None of the other teachers made any reference to these sets of indicators.

#### Oral language.

The philosophy of *First Steps* suggests that as oral language provides the foundation for other language skills, moving from an incidental focus on oral language to one that is more explicit, will extend students' language skills in other areas. *First Steps* materials separate the various aspects of oral language into three distinct areas; language for social interaction, literacy-related skills and language and thinking.

#### Group work.

Oral language had been nominated as a priority at both Angela's and Claire's schools. Although Claire's and Chris's students worked in groups at various times during language lessons, no other planned oral language activities were observed. The layout of the desks in the classrooms made it difficult for children to work in groups unless they moved their chairs around the room. At various times, they appeared to spontaneously work in pairs to clarify their thinking, as they did when they negotiated



the most appropriate word definitions during Chris's spelling lesson. This use of partner work relates specifically to the language and thinking aspect of oral language.

Angela had several activities planned around oral language. Her classroom was set up to enable her students to work in groups, and she appeared to encourage group work to allow students to clarify and extend their ideas, as demonstrated in both her lesson with the Big Book, when she divided her class into groups to complete the worksheet; and the lesson in which her students watched *Behind the News*, and then moved into groups to write their summaries. She had clearly established rules for discussion, and when the children had to work in groups, she expected them to allocate jobs to group members, for instance asking one person to act as scribe. Both of these strategies can be traced back to *First Steps* ideas. What in fact happened was that in each group the children themselves appeared to negotiate their own process for achieving their objective: in one group the children all worked together on one piece of writing; in another, only the girls worked together; in another, one person wrote the summary using the others' notes.

Helen also used group work with her students, not only to generate ideas, but also to generate vocabulary and develop social interaction. She saw particular importance in this, because of her students' simultaneous development in two languages. Helen had identified that language of social interaction had been an area of need and had taken steps to address this. She had found it necessary to teach her students how to work in groups and had found the technique of allocating a specific job to each group member useful. Helen stated, however, that she had extracted this idea from the *Primary Investigations* (Australian Academy of Science, 1994) science materials, rather than by reference to *First Steps* materials.

Mike also had explicitly taught his class to work in groups. His students work in mixed ability groups during their maths and applied language activities in order to

generate language and explore thinking. Before writing, students are provided with many opportunities for oral rehearsal, as they were before writing their toy descriptions. Mike and Ann's problem-solving approach to all learning situations presents many opportunities for the children to engage in various oral language activities. Mike described an activity his class had done to define what a sentence was:

A very interesting activity we did...we've been working hard on sentence work. I'll go and get the chart. One of the things we wanted to do, by the end of this year, was for all the kids to be able to write a sentence. A good sentence, with all the correct sentence conventions. So we set an activity, and we said to the kids, what is a sentence? And, what does it need, and give me an example. ...it was just so interesting to see what the kids understood a sentence was. So we picked out the key responses which we thought were pretty good guesses by the kids and made them into a chart.

#### Other opportunities for oral language.

Angela also used her students' position as year seven students to generate meaningful oral language activities, for example, running assemblies and making speeches to nominate themselves for positions as Student Councillors. Her students had learned the skills of formal debating when they were in year six, and Angela provided a meaningful context for these skills by getting her students to demonstrate and teach their debating skills to the current year six class. Angela used media personalities and politicians as models of oral presentation and attempted to involve her students in some critical analysis. All of the oral language activities in which Angela's students were involved can be traced back to *First Steps* activities and seem to cover all three areas. The types of activities appeared to be typical of Language for Learning, stage four, but it seemed that Angela had not chosen these particular activities on the basis of monitoring her students; rather, she had selected them as being activities which she thought year seven students should be able to do.

### Reading activities.

The *First Steps Reading Developmental Continuum* (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992g, p. vi) states that "Effective communication occurs when the reader has successfully interpreted and internalised the meaning of the writer." Reading needs to be purposeful, meaningful and contextualised and children need to be taught a range of strategies to enable them to read for different purposes. Typical teaching strategies would include decoding activities, literature-based activities, activities which examine the structure of texts, silent reading, and modelled reading.

All teachers modelled reading to their students. Mike and Ann read to their class every day from a current novel, which during my observations was *The Witches*, and later, *Matilda*. Angela read the novel *I am David* to her class and she related the theme of the story to the content of her health lessons. Chris and Claire read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to their classes, and the children also listened to other Roald Dahl stories on commercially recorded tapes. Helen said that she had read to her class from a novel which had been chosen for them to study before her arrival at the school, but she also stated that she preferred to keep her reading in the context of her theme. There were many examples of *First Steps* reading activities displayed on the walls of her classroom; for example, story grammars, character profiles and 'wanted' posters.

All teachers encouraged independent reading. In the older classes, children were allowed to select their own reading materials, usually for an uninterrupted, sustained, silent reading session, but in Mike's class, the home borrowing scheme ensured that as well as children being able to select their own materials, they were also participating in independent reading activities that were more specifically directed towards their individual reading levels. On certain days of the week, children were allowed to select their own reading materials from the wide range in the class library; on other days,

they were directed to select reading materials from a certain bookshelf. These books had been grouped to match up to various levels of reading development.

Mike's students also participated in shared reading activities every day, not only in the context of their morning language sessions, but also in the other curriculum areas, for example, mathematics and art, when they were required to read instructions and procedures. Around the room there were many charts and notices that the children were required to read in the course of their daily activities.

Angela's class regularly read the newspapers for articles of current interest, and there was a bulletin board where items of particular interest were displayed. Much of Angela's reading complemented work that was being undertaken in other curriculum areas, and reading activities were used which came from commercially produced materials, such as the story map used with the *Law-makers, Law-breakers* focus book, and the retrieval chart activity that came with the big book, *Strictly for Kids*. These activities were not always appropriate to the children's needs, or to Angela's teaching objectives.

Claire and Chris also used commercially prepared materials in their reading, but on the day I observed them, the children were constructing a flow chart to demonstrate the process of making chocolate. In order to construct this chart, the children were bringing together a lot of information that they had obtained from various sources. The children had been so interested to find out about the process of making chocolate that many of them had followed it up in their own time, brought pieces of information to school, and shared this with their colleagues. In this way, the whole class had become very knowledgeable about the chocolate-making process.

Although all teachers demonstrated a range of reading activities which could be traced back to *First Steps*, and these reading activities often embraced the *First Steps*

principles of contextualisation, interaction and problem solving, there was little evidence to suggest that reading activities in the middle and upper primary classes were directed at any particular point of need according to the development of the students. The focus for reading in these classrooms appeared to be more on the transfer and organisation of information, rather than the development of reading skills specifically aimed at helping students to make meaning. There was no evidence to suggest that any of the middle or upper primary teachers explicitly taught their students strategies with which to develop their metacognitive skills, such as predicting, clarifying and questioning at various levels. Teachers often demonstrated these skills to their students as they asked questions before, during and after shared or modelled reading sessions, and Claire and Chris had their students complete reading journals as they read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, but at no time did any of the middle or upper primary teachers explain to their students how such skills as predicting, questioning and clarifying would aid students in the process of making meaning. None of the teachers appeared to use *First Steps* teaching strategies such as Directed Silent Reading or Three Level Guides, which teach these processes more explicitly. This possibly demonstrates some limitations in the teachers' own understandings of the various skills involved in the reading process. Teachers appeared to choose reading activities on the basis of how much their students would enjoy doing them, or how they would fit with the content of what they were studying, rather than with the aim of developing a specific reading skill.

The analysis shows that all the case study teachers incorporated many elements of *First Steps* into their everyday teaching practice. Although they all claimed to use the developmental continua, none of the teachers seemed to actively use them to plan their lessons. All the teachers in the study widely used a variety of *First Steps* teaching strategies from all modes of language. They all used spelling journals and the *First Steps* writing genre frameworks, and it seemed that these elements in particular had impacted on the ways in which they approached their writing and

spelling. The data seems to support the perception that teachers have incorporated the *First Steps* teaching strategies into their everyday teaching practices more readily than they have incorporated the use of the developmental continua.

## CHAPTER NINE

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I will attempt to draw out and discuss the main issues to have emerged from this study. Following this, I shall discuss the teachers' varying professional development experiences and how these experiences may have contributed to the way in which each teacher uses *First Steps* materials.

#### **Using the Developmental Continua - a Process of Translation**

All teachers in the study demonstrated that they monitor their students through the use of informal observations and base their planning on this monitoring. Monitoring for planning is not carried out in any formal sense, but based on information which is carried around in teachers' heads. This information seems to be based on teachers' own sets of performance indicators, which are linked to their own beliefs and understandings about what is important in learning language.

The introduction of the *First Steps* developmental continua seems to have influenced the way in which teachers keep records, in that anecdotal notes have become a more accepted form of record-keeping, but these notes are still made in the teachers' own terms. When the time comes for placing children on the developmental continua, either for writing reports, or providing information for Principals, teachers translate their anecdotal notes and their in-head knowledge to '*First Steps* language.' This translation process is time-consuming and is open to interpretation. The (1993d) A.C.E.R. report concluded that where teachers held negative feelings towards *First Steps*, these were largely due to the perception that placing children on the developmental continua presented an excessive workload. It could be that many teachers use this process of translation when using the developmental continua.

In this respect, Mike is different from the other teachers in the study in that he appears to have internalised the *First Steps* indicators sufficiently to be using these indicators as his in-head terms, therefore no translation needs to take place. Mike seems to have incorporated the indicators to the extent that they form much of his understanding about language development.

Helen appeared to begin this process when she familiarised herself with the indicators in preparation for her participation in the Assistant Teacher Program, and this could have been linked to the way she learned about language teaching. Although she consults her continua regularly as she incidentally places her students, she does not appear to have internalised the indicators to the same extent as Mike. This could be due to the many other demands she is experiencing as a new teacher. As a new teacher, she appears to be taking on ideas from other teachers, and so, in a sense, she is moving in the other direction as she assimilates these other terms and ideas into her picture of how things work.

### **The Security of "Evidence"**

Of all the developmental continua, teachers appear to be more comfortable with, and display most competence with the spelling and writing continua. There are several possible reasons for this: Firstly, in two classrooms, training in the use of the spelling and writing continua occurred first, therefore teachers have had more practice in using these. Secondly, in most cases, school policies required teachers to place all children on the spelling and writing continua, in contrast to the reading and oral language continua which now appears to be used on a voluntary basis and often appear to have been placed in the "too hard basket". In some cases, working with these continua in the early stages involved questioning and negotiation of interpretations with peers. Thirdly, children's writing samples provide concrete evidence and therefore provide a safety net to back up teachers' observations.



All the teachers in the study agreed that the continua are useful for those children who are perceived as being "at risk", or who are "a mystery", in that it demonstrates where what Angela called "the gaps" are. Teachers do not appear to refer to the developmental continua for planning unless they perceive that there is a particular reason to do so.

### **The Developmental Continua as a Formal Document**

Teachers often see the use of the developmental continua as a formal document and this presents problems. This notion of the continuum as a formal document is given validity by the existence of school policies which require the continua to be passed on from teacher to teacher as the child progresses through the school, the transfer of continua along with the student to either high school or another primary school, and the submission of the developmental continua to Principals at particular points in the year. More recently, the notion is further upheld by materials produced by Longman Cheshire, because each continuum sheet has eight spaces in which to record the year and the teacher's name or signature. The assumption leading from this is that this particular document will be passed on through eight different teachers, presumably over the eight years of K-7 schooling.

In the current climate of accountability, teachers appear to be uncomfortable with the practice of passing on the continua because they see as subjective the judgements which they are required to make about the children they teach in order to place them on the continua. While they seem to be comfortable making these judgements for their own informal purposes, once this information is transferred to what they see as a formal document for someone else's use, they feel that their own performance as a teacher will be judged on the basis of how they complete the continua, and indeed, all the teachers in the study made judgemental comments when referring to continua that had been passed on to them. Although Deschamp's (1995b) study did not look at the issue of teacher accountability in relation to the developmental continua, his study

found evidence that teachers did not always agree about the interpretation of the indicators: "*Our two Focus Teachers disagree about the continuum.*" (p.13).

Further, the (1993d) A.C.E.R. report states that *First Steps* recommends that teachers complete the developmental continua using only the key indicators for most of the children in the class, and that the minor indicators should be used only for those children whose development in language and literacy is causing concern. Although Ann, Chris and Angela all stated that this would be their preferred way of completing the continua, Angela stated that when she completed the continua, she had used both key and minor indicators. This would seem to confirm the suggestion made in the (1993d) A.C.E.R. report that, "It is possibly the case that teachers feel pressured to place all children on a continuum or continua using more than the key indicators as a result of other pressures in or upon schools." (p.21)

### **Selecting *First Steps* Teaching Strategies**

Although all teachers used many strategies that could be traced back to *First Steps*, there was little, if any, evidence that these strategies had been selected on the basis of information gathered using the developmental continua. This supports the data in Deschamp's (1995b) case studies and his (1995a) report on the development and implementation of *First Steps*, where it was reported that a common comment was that teachers did not know how to use the developmental continua for further planning.

Chris stated that she saw the purpose of using the developmental continua was to get a sense of the developmental level of the students and select strategies from that phase. Although Claire stated that she had consulted the continua in regard to their "special group" of spellers, it seemed that it was the content of the spelling lessons which had been adjusted to suit the different levels of development, rather than the teaching strategies.

Helen's selection of dictionary work, word derivations and word building activities also appeared to be highly appropriate to her group of students, but appeared to have been selected on the basis of her own informal judgements, rather than by any reference to the developmental continuum. However, the fact that she was able to make this observation could possibly be traced back to her internalised knowledge of spelling development and *First Steps* indicators.

### **Synthesis versus Prescriptive Use**

Mike selected teaching strategies in the same way as Helen, but he appeared to be able to do so in a more sophisticated way. What appears to be important here is the understanding of how the various teaching strategies are linked to the stages of development, and how the continuum provides the link between the two. When a teacher is as familiar with the indicators and the strategies as Mike is, he is able to use his in-head information to synthesise activities. Although a framework for a description is included in the (1992d) *Writing Learning Continuum*, Mike had not used that framework when he prepared the toy description for his class. He knew that the children in his class would need more scaffolding than was provided by the framework, and he used his knowledge of the indicators from the *Writing Learning Continuum* to design his worksheet with sentence starters so that the children would be able to produce a simple description.

Similarly, Mike does not feel restricted to the range of genres that are included in the *First Steps* resource materials. He is aware that the children will encounter many other genres, both written and spoken, both at home and at school; and he can use the same principles to teach any genre that seems appropriate. Mike does not feel that he must adhere religiously to the teaching strategies in the *First Steps* resource materials. Rather he uses them as guidelines on which to base his own ideas as he seeks to address the particular needs of his own students.

The understanding of the underlying philosophies of *First Steps* aids this synthesis, rather than teachers using the modules in prescriptive ways. Without a full understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of *First Steps*, teachers are able to be less creative in the ways that they apply *First Steps* teaching strategies.

Mike's demonstrated understanding of the underlying principles of *First Steps* seems to support Deschamp's (1995a) and the A.C.E.R. (1993a) findings that teachers in old *First Steps* schools report that they feel that they teach language better than any other subject. The A.C.E.R. (1993d) study on the impact of First Steps schools and teachers also reported that, "Of the 9 comments made about how the Professional Development had improved teachers' understandings of child development, 8 came from old *First Steps* schools." (p.33.)

A further contributory factor to the prescriptive use of *First Steps* materials which was sometimes observed in this study could be that teachers have been used to using Curriculum Framework materials, such as the various syllabi produced by the Curriculum Programmes Branch of the Education Department. The social studies (Education Department of Western Australia, 1981) and health (Education Department of Western Australia, 1985) syllabi which are currently being used in Western Australian schools are good examples of these. In the teachers' guides which accompany these syllabi, teachers are provided with specific learning objectives and a list of activities through which they can achieve these objectives. Teachers can simply work through the guide for the appropriate year level, without having to devise their own means of achieving the required learning objectives.

### **Using the Developmental Phases**

When teachers did use the developmental continua to monitor their students' progress, it seemed to be important to them to place children into a single phase. Chris felt that it was important to put her students into specific phases of development so that she

could select the "correct" teaching strategies. The validity of this notion seems to be confirmed by a section in each of the 1992 editions of the developmental continua, which states:

Children who are beginning to experiment with marks on paper are operating in the Role Play Writing Phase although they do not exhibit all key indicators. Beyond the Role Play Writing Phase, children are said to be working in a phase when they exhibit all key indicators of that phase. (Oral Language Developmental Continuum, Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992h, p.viii.)

In the (1994) edition of the Oral Language Developmental Continuum, published by Longman Cheshire, it is stated that "Individual children may exhibit a range of indicators from various phases at any one time." (p.2.) Further, the wording regarding placement of children in phases, has been changed to "Children are said to be working in a phase when they exhibit *all the Key Indicators* of that phase. However, the placement of a child in a phase must rest upon the teacher's professional judgement." (Oral Language Developmental Continuum, 1994, p.16.) Although the document appears to recognise that children are often unlikely to be operating in a discrete phase, the intention appears somewhat ambiguous. It should also be noted that many teachers would be working with materials published in 1992 or even earlier, and are likely to be unaware of subtle changes which have been made to later editions. Dewsbury (1994) states that "Teachers....have amassed files of extraneous 'hand-outs' designed to fill gaps, amend statements, provide additional information and share current thinking on a range of issues."(p.9.). It must be questioned, however, how many of these hand-outs have actually filtered their way through to individual classroom teachers, and further, how many of them have been read and their contents digested.

Although a child may be demonstrating a cluster of developmental indicators from a particular phase, it may be the one or two indicators which they display from the previous phase, which point to the most appropriate teaching strategy for that particular child. When teachers have a sound theoretical base regarding the

development of language and literacy, they can rely less on placing children in discrete phases and more on their own pedagogical knowledge to ensure the selection of teaching strategies appropriate to each student.

### **Professional Development**

All the teachers in the study saw themselves as confident in their use of *First Steps*. It is probably no coincidence that they were happy to let an outsider into their classrooms to observe them at work, and all teachers except Angela, and Mike's partner, Ann, were in some position of authority regarding *First Steps* in their school; either as a Focus Teacher or a *First Steps* co-ordinator.

The teachers in the study reflected a wide diversity of professional development experiences: Mike had had in-depth professional development at a Core School with the support of not one, but four Collaborative Teachers. Helen had gained a strong theoretical background from her Teacher Education course, together with guided practice at using the developmental continua, and using this information to select teaching strategies. Angela had received what appeared to be a more 'watered-down' form of professional development from Central Office, District Office and a Focus Teacher, but had the advantage of a whole-school commitment, and peer negotiation, together with collaboration with another teacher, her tandem partner at the time.

Ann, too, had received this 'watered-down' version of professional development, but until she started working with Mike, she had not had the benefit of a whole-school commitment to *First Steps*, or collaboration with another teacher. Claire and Chris had initially received the 'watered-down' version of professional development from Central Office and District Office, but this had been supplemented by their further training as Focus Teachers. Again, there was no whole-school commitment to *First Steps*, but besides collaborating together, they also appeared to collaborate with some other teachers at the school who were also using *First Steps* materials.

Although it appears that the type of professional development each teacher received has impacted on the ways in which the teachers have shaped their understandings of *First Steps*, it appears that there are other factors at work too. Of all the teachers in the study, Mike stands out in that he appears to understand the way *First Steps* works to the extent that he has been able to take his teaching beyond the suggestions in the *First Steps* modules. Mike received extensive professional development, but he also seems to feel that the way in which his Core School used their Collaborative teachers was an advantage:

...the fact that we could use them as an oral resource, and sit down and murder them, by sitting down there and going through a piece of writing time and time again, asking questions about indicators and all that, they were fabulous. Because I'd go to all four, and ask, 'what do you think about this?', and then I would come to my own conclusion. Based on what they told me.

Mike believes that his own approach to learning something new was also a contributory factor to his deeper understanding. He said that when he was at Teachers' College, "...the lecturers either used to loathe me, or love me, because I've never, ever, let things go through which I didn't understand...". Mike's approach to learning meant that he tried to get the most out of the resources that were available to him; in this case, the Collaborative Teachers:

The four [Collaborative] teachers, that were at our school, I believed I used them quite comprehensively compared with some others. A lot of teachers would just sit back, while I questioned. I never let someone get away with making a bland statement, and because of that, I was able to actually generate a lot more information from them.

The way in which Mike uses *First Steps* appears to fit well with Hopkin's (1990) description of a teacher working at the highest psychological state, as he incorporates *First Steps* materials and practices at a "routine" level. According to Hopkins, teachers working at the highest levels demonstrated a sound understanding of the philosophy behind new ideas and actively sought to collaborate with experts and adopt new ideas. Hopkins (1990) also stated that teachers operating at higher psychological levels tended to be working in the more democratic, supportive

workplaces. While this may have been true for Mike when he received his professional development in *First Steps*, it could be argued that this is no longer the case because only a handful of teachers at Mike's school were using *First Steps* materials, and there was no commitment to *First Steps* in the school development plan. As *First Steps* Focus Teacher, Mike had difficulty in getting other teachers involved, and his collaboration with Ann was his main means of professional support.

For Angela too, the notion of the negotiation of ideas appears important. For her, the most important factors in her developing understanding of *First Steps* were the negotiation with more knowledgeable others, such as her tandem partner at the time of her introduction to *First Steps*; and the negotiation generated by the whole-school commitment to a shared understanding of the indicators, and this is consistent with the findings of Little (1982), Fullan, (1991), Stallings (cited by Fullan, 1991), Rozenholtz (1991) and Loudon (1995). However, the teachers at her school did not have access to on-going support as they carried out these negotiations, and so, whatever conclusions were reached during these negotiations could not be taken back to the professional development team for feedback. Although there was a whole-school commitment to *First Steps*, and this was included in the school development plan, it seemed that teachers still disagreed about the interpretation of developmental indicators:

When they were in year four, the year four teacher filled them all [the developmental indicators] in! For what they are for year seven. So they're already all filled in...

Because Angela's teaching partner had been the language co-ordinator at the time of their initial *First Steps* professional development, and the person to whom people would bring their questions, it seems that Angela felt that she had some responsibility to be knowledgeable on the subject so that she could answer questions during her partner's absence: "And sometimes in the absence of my tandem partner when she



was the leader, I would have to answer, she being the leader and me being her tandem partner and us working together on things."

Although Angela was willing to commit herself to trying out *First Steps* materials in her classroom. "I made the commitment, you've got to give it a try", this commitment appears to have been modified by her own beliefs about what is important in teaching literacy, and these beliefs have been shaped by her family background and her own experiences at school:

My brothers, who are 52 and 51, ...they didn't do creative writing like we did. Creative writing. Thou shalt be creative, it doesn't matter how you do it. And we didn't do a lot of grammar and things until I had a more traditional teacher in year seven and six, I had him for both, and he used to make us do straight English grammar only. And we learnt. And we jolly well learned our verbs and adverbs and all the rest of it, and subjects and predicates and the works. And because my mother knew it, and she always corrected us in our oral language at home...she used to ram it down our throats.

Angela's words reflect the findings of Raymond, Butt and Townsend (1992), who claim that family and cultural influences shape the way that teachers construct their identity as teachers, and further, that the impact of these influences is represented by the language they use when describing these experiences.

For Helen, who had covered the theoretical understandings during her pre-service course, practical application appears to have been important. When she was in a situation where she could apply what she had learnt, the links between the theory and the practical application became more evident. However, once she left University became part of the school community, Helen saw an inconsistency between the way she saw others using the developmental continua and the way that she had learned to use it:

I reckon they did it a stupid way. They all got, towards the end of the term, about two hours, to sit down and do their *First Steps* continua. Now, shouldn't they be getting done as you're going along? As you're noticing things? Wouldn't you think? Well, this is what wasn't happening.

Although she was critical of the way that she saw others using the developmental continua, Helen, in her first two years of teaching, is in the "discovery and survival" (Huberman, 1988) phase of her teacher life-cycle. It would be natural, during this phase of a teacher life-cycle, to look to more experienced teachers as role models. Although she seems comfortable with the way she herself uses the developmental continua, Helen appears to view her repertoire of teaching strategies as limited, compared with teachers who were trained before the inception of *First Steps*. She felt that she and her colleague, who had had similar training, were limited to teaching strategies associated with *First Steps*: "Donna and I are just brainwashed with *First Steps*. I don't think we'd even know any other strategies, you know? We've just been brainwashed."

Practical application supported by further training, appears to have been important for Claire and Chris. They both reported that they had a better understanding of *First Steps* once they had had time to implement some aspects in their classrooms, so that when they returned for their Focus Teacher training, it all made more sense. Claire explained,

The biggest thing was the fact that we'd actually tried to use it in the meantime, so we knew what they were on about, whereas the first time we did it, they wouldn't let you have the modules until you did the in-service....What I think they should have done, is maybe they should have demonstrated *First Steps* to us first, so that we knew what they were on about, then given us the in-service.

This is consistent with the model for professional development suggested by Stallings (cited by Fullan, 1991). The conditions suggested by Stallings included trying out new ideas and being able to modify them, reflecting with others to share successes and solve problems, and linking new ideas to existing knowledge. Through their work together, Claire and Chris were able to offer each other support as they reflected on their successes and problems, and their further training as Focus Teachers had given them opportunities to try out and evaluate ideas, modifying them when necessary.

Both teachers admitted that they did not have a strong theoretical base in literacy development, with which they could link new information. Claire had completed a one year conversion course to obtain her teaching qualification, which did not allow for much time to be spent on anything. Further, she had found her language lectures confusing:

I got nothing out of my teacher training...I had what I considered was a very poor lecturer in language at college, and all she did was confuse me. So I felt I got nothing out of it....I only did a grad. dip. course, anyway, so it was compacted into one year.

Chris said that when she had undergone her pre-service training, there was little or no emphasis on theory. However, she felt that she had had a good grounding in actual teaching strategies:

I went to college so many years ago, it was totally different! I think we probably got more out of college in those days because it wasn't as academic, it was much more teaching method and, how to do it in the classroom....We did a lot of method stuff.

Even though she felt that much of what she saw in *First Steps* was not new to her, Claire said that her initial professional development had been confusing. This situation could have been a result of Claire's initial training experiences, which left her with a less developed theoretical background to which she could link the new information she received through her *First Steps* professional development.

Mike's teaching partner, Ann, had received her professional development through District Office: "somebody from District Office came and ... virtually they just walked us through those [1992 version] yellow documents..." She felt that she was learning much more about *First Steps* as she worked alongside Mike: "Mike and I get together, and it's terrific to be able to collaborate with another teacher."

## Conclusions

Harste (1989, p. 38) describes a model of curriculum, represented below in Figure 1, in which teachers use what they know about how language is learned and the developmental process of language learning to make judgements about the development of their students. Reflecting upon this monitoring, together with their knowledge of language learning, they make decisions about the most appropriate instruction to further this development. If teachers are to efficiently use this model, they then need to be knowledgeable about the developmental and learning theories of all aspects of language.

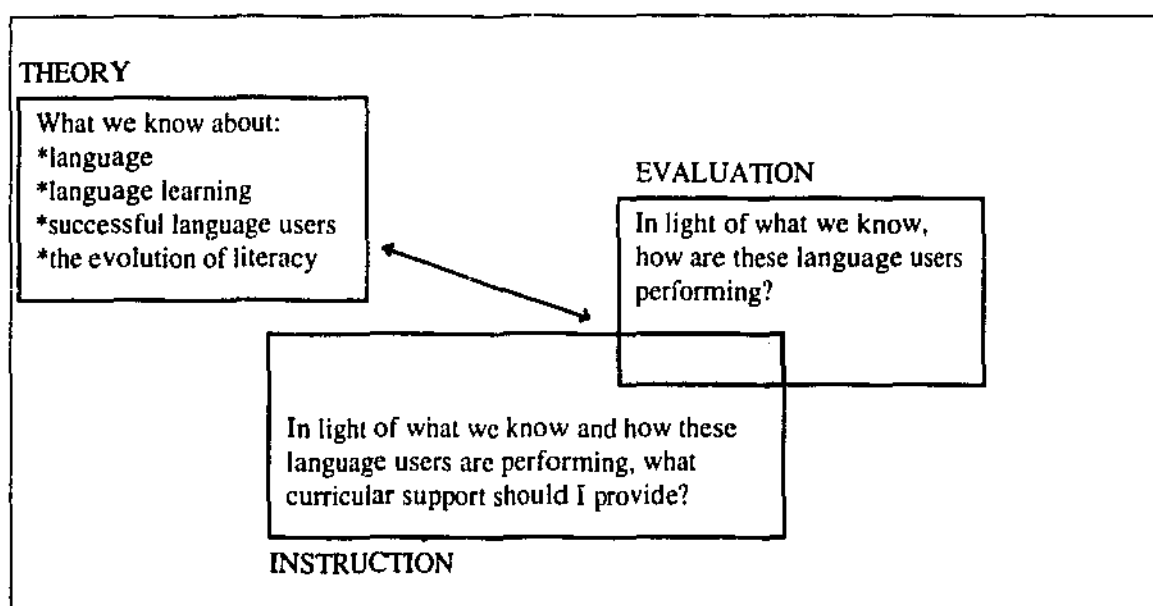


Figure 1. Harste's model of curriculum.

It appears that the developmental continua, which provide a "map of the territory" of literacy development; and the various types of professional development made available to teachers, have been designed to ensure that teachers have available to them the information they need regarding literacy development. With this information, they then should be able to make effective decisions about future instruction. The cross-case analysis of this study suggests that this view of curriculum development is modified by a hybrid view of literacy development. Teachers appear to supplement their theoretical knowledge of literacy development with ideas picked

up from other teachers, their own experiences both as a learner and as a teacher, and their reflections about what seems to work for them and their particular students. These views of the nature of literacy development are not always congruent with those mapped out by *First Steps* materials.

Mike, who had in-depth professional development and support in the implementation of *First Steps* at his Core School, appears to understand the dynamic relationship between his own knowledge of the development of literacy, the developmental indicators, and the choice of effective teaching strategies.

Helen's understanding of this relationship appears to form part of her subconscious knowledge. She seems to select teaching strategies on the basis of intuition, rather than deliberately linking them with the developmental continua. The links between the developmental indicators and the teaching strategies already seem to form part of her in-head knowledge. The next year or so will probably prove crucial for Helen in the direction that she chooses to take regarding her implementation of *First Steps*. If she continues to use the developmental indicators to monitor her students' progress, it is likely that she will internalise them in much the same way that Mike has done.

Teachers who have received their professional development from Central Office and District Office personnel, followed by Focus Teachers, do not seem to have been provided with a sufficiently deep understanding of the links between theoretical background knowledge, the developmental indicators and the teaching strategies to enable them to use *First Steps* materials as effectively as they might otherwise.

Teachers who received the most comprehensive professional development in *First Steps* appear to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the underlying philosophies. However, while it would seem that effective professional development supports teacher change, this change is made more complex by teachers' biographical and situational factors.

Teachers' willingness to embrace new pedagogical understandings is mediated by their own life-histories, their belief system about language instruction, and the instructional needs of their particular students in the context of their own circumstances. For the teacher at the 'chalkface', pedagogical choice is driven by what actually works.

Comber (1996) also found this to be the case:

Teachers worked to improve the standards of students' spelling in whatever ways they found practical and to which students responded positively, regardless of whether it was the approved, trendy method or not ....as well as resurrecting techniques from their own schooldays, teachers re-formulated methods for their own contexts. (p.300)

Comber further states that teachers build their own pedagogical approach from a combination of established pedagogies to meet the demands of their particular situation:

Teachers took from different pedagogical approaches whatever they found useful in meeting the often contradictory expectations of the principal, colleagues, parents and students. The literacy pedagogies...represented an amalgam of skills, process, genre, critical approaches and positions. (p.292)

While the inclusion of a commitment to *First Steps* through the school development plan has led to more collaboration, negotiation and sharing of ideas between teachers as they implement *First Steps* in their classrooms, it has also invariably led to the practice of passing the developmental continua on from one teacher to another, which in turn has had the effect of turning the continua into an accountability document. Further, in schools where formal testing of students has been abandoned, there is still a need to gather information for parents and Superintendents, and it appears that the developmental continua may be viewed as a means of providing this information. In this respect, the placement of students on the *First Steps* developmental continua becomes, in a sense, another form of 'test'. This situation is even further complicated by the introduction of the Student Outcomes Statements, which have been designed as a reporting mechanism, but which use the same kind of developmental language as the *First Steps* indicators.

Although the *First Steps* developmental continua were not designed as outcomes-based documents, they have facilitated change for many teachers as the Education Department of Western Australia moves from a Curriculum Framework towards Outcomes-based Education. Teachers have become used to the idea of developmental markers and have become more focussed in their assessment of literacy development. However, this has resulted in the continua being used in ways for which they were not designed. Because the trialing of the Student Outcomes Statements has occurred for many teachers at the same time as the introduction of the *First Steps* developmental continua, it seems that the distinction between the purposes of the two documents has, for many, become unclear.

In summary, this study demonstrates that teachers draw on a number of sources when constructing their individual pedagogical approaches, including biographical and situational factors. These factors, and the teachers' individual constructions of themselves as a teacher influence the ways in which they take on new ideas and approaches. Teachers who demonstrate a deeper understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of *First Steps* appear to be able to use *First Steps* materials more effectively and manipulate them to meet the demands of their own pedagogical beliefs, operating in the context of their own teaching situation.

While the use of the *First Steps* developmental continua has facilitated a major shift in teachers' thinking with regard to the assessment of their student's development in literacy, the way in which they have been used in some schools has meant that a document which was originally designed to help teachers make informed teaching decisions has been turned into a document for accountability. This imposes further limitations upon the ways in which teachers can manipulate the *First Steps* materials to suit their pedagogical style and their individual teaching context.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

This study has examined the practices of teachers in three classrooms in one District of the Education Department of Western Australia, and one independent school in a neighbouring District. The cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the students at the three government schools were very similar, and although the cultural background of most of the students from the independent school was clearly different, socio-economic status was broadly speaking, comparable with those of the government schools. A similar study which focussed on teachers in a range of different teaching contexts (for example, priority schools or rural schools) may provide further insights into the ways in which teachers adapt pedagogic change to suit their own teaching situations.

The introduction of *First Steps* in Western Australian schools has clearly influenced all teachers in some way. However, regardless of the effectiveness of a program of professional development, other complexities are brought into play to influence the extent and the ways in which teachers change their pedagogic understandings. It should be noted therefore, that pedagogic change does not always provide the answer.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**Letter seeking participants for the study**

Dear Teachers and Principals,

I am a qualified teacher currently conducting research for a thesis in order to gain a Bachelor of Education (with Honours) at Edith Cowan University. The topic of the research is "The Implementation of *First Steps* in four Primary Classrooms."

Consequently, I am seeking middle or upper primary teachers who would volunteer to allow me to undertake observations in their classrooms during term one, 1996. The purpose of the research is to investigate how teachers are adapting *First Steps* materials and strategies to suit their varying needs and the needs of their students.

**Confidentiality of information will be respected at all times. All schools, teachers and students mentioned in the study will be given pseudonyms.** The study will involve the following:

Observing the classroom interaction during language sessions on three separate occasions. The classroom interaction will be tape-recorded for later analysis. This will involve the use of a microphone in the classroom. The microphone, which looks like a flat disc, will be placed on the floor and is quite unobtrusive.

Informal discussion and interviews with the teacher about the lessons observed, professional development experiences related to *First Steps*, and about the planning, teaching and evaluating of language lessons in general. The interviews will be tape-recorded. To compensate teachers for their time, and subject to the agreement of the Principal, I am prepared to undertake unpaid relief teaching in their classroom at a time convenient to them.

Viewing of documents used in the planning and evaluation of language lessons, for example, programmes, daily work pad, lesson notes, evaluation records and *First Steps* Developmental Continua.

As an interpretive study, the intention is to acquire a sense of the implementation of *First Steps* from the point of view of the teacher. In this respect the study proposes to be of interest to all teachers, and your contributions to the study would be greatly valued.

If you have any questions about the project, or if you think you would be interested in participating in the study, please contact me on the above telephone number so that we can discuss the matter further and arrange the necessary documentation.

Yours faithfully,

Janet Hunter.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Interview Protocol**

**What were your professional development experiences in connection with First Steps?**

- How much of what you learned was new to you?
- Can you give examples of ideas that were new?
- Were you able to relate any of what you learned to what you already knew?
- Give examples of ideas that were not new to you.
- Has your professional development covered all strands?
- How much of a say have you had in how much professional development you have had, and in what areas?

**To what extent have you implemented First Steps in your classroom?**

- Describe the steps that you went through to implement First Steps in your classroom.
- How much support do you feel you have received from others, e.g.
  - Collaborative Teacher
  - Focus Teacher (A or B)
  - Administration (Principal/Deputies)
  - Other teachers
  - Other (e.g. University staff, District/Central Office)
- Give an example of something you found easy to do.
- Give an example of something you found difficult to do.
- What, if anything, do you intend to do next?
- For you personally, what have been the most useful aspects of First Steps?



## **How do you go about planning your language lessons?**

- Do your children work in groups? If so, what grouping practices do you use?
- How do you decide what text to use?
- How do you decide what teaching strategies to use?
- What other factors might influence your lesson planning?

## **How do you monitor the children's progress in language?**

- How do you record children's progress?
- What use do you make of this information?
- Is this information passed on to anyone else? Who? In what form is it passed on?

**Do you use any teaching and/or assessment strategies that are not related to First Steps?**

- Give an example of a teaching strategy you use that you consider is not related to First Steps.
- Why do you use this strategy?
- Give an example of an assessment strategy you use which is not related to First Steps.
- Why do you use this form of assessment?

## **How do you use the First Steps Developmental Continua?**

- How often do you place the children on the continua?
- Do you place all the children at once, do you focus on "at risk" children, or do you place a few children at a time?
- How do you use this information?
- What do you find most difficult about using the continua? Give an example.
- What, if any, are the benefits of using the continua?

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Toy description

APPENDIX C

Ann's description worksheet

My toy is \_\_\_\_\_

It is \_\_\_\_\_

It has \_\_\_\_\_

I like my toy because \_\_\_\_\_

## REPORT PLAN

	Title: _____
Headings	Key words - short notes
<b>Classification</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is it?</li> </ul>	
<b>Description</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What attributes does it have? (size, shape, features)</li> </ul>	
<b>Place/Time</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where is it?</li> <li>• When is it?</li> </ul>	
<b>Dynamics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does it do?</li> </ul>	
<b>Summarising Comment</b>	

# Report Format

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: ~~~~~

<p><u>Classification</u></p>	<p><u>Description</u></p>
<p><u>Time / Place</u></p>	<p><u>Dynamics</u></p>

APPENDIX E  
Helen's report framework