



The Children

**Set Reading Goals
for Individual
Students First,
Then the Group**

By Jennifer Serravallo

in Front of Us

Like many people studying to be a teacher, I spent a lot of time in my college methods classes crafting beautiful units. To prepare for one fifth-grade social studies unit, I read through stacks of texts on the formation of the U.S. government, planned field trips to the New York state capital, and gathered up Schoolhouse Rock videos. I planned mock trials, debates, quizzes, and tests. I wrote out carefully scripted lesson plans that earned accolades from both my university supervisor and cooperating teacher.

Looking back on that experience, my students had a lot of fun and a bunch of them learned, but if I knew then what I know now, I'd have sent myself back to the drawing board. All that curriculum planning, completely devoid of the students in front of me.

I'd like to say this was a mistake I made only in my role as student teacher, but I actually repeated it time and again through my first years as a classroom teacher. Some years, I reluctantly admit, I had groups of students who made very little progress. I could never quite put my finger on why this was. I didn't understand the difference between assessing students to check for understanding and assessing students to formulate my teaching plan. Whether teaching social studies, science, reading, writing, or math—I didn't quite understand then as I now do the difference between *teaching a class of children* and *covering curriculum*.

Now I'm on a mission. I want to help teachers feel that they know every child really well and that it is from those understandings that whole-class, small-group, and individual plans are made. In my roles

as literacy consultant and author, I'm trying to help shift teachers' thinking about what it means to plan and execute instruction. In this era of the Common Core State Standards, it's more important than ever that we don't have our eye strictly on the end—the end of unit project, the end of year benchmarks, the end of grade-level standards. Instead, I want us to look carefully, analytically, at the children in front of us and make plans that will truly make a difference.

Redefine Data

We use the phrase “data-driven instruction” constantly. However, the types of data that we often pay closest attention to and that we use to plan aren't the types of data that will help us teach.

State- and district-mandated assessments often score students, assign them numbers and letters, give rankings. We can create graphs and charts from the data we receive. But we lose the nuance of what readers do when they read.

I'd rather have a student work artifact over a test score any day. Real artifacts of student learning—reading notebook entries, jots on sticky notes, running records, a transcript of a student talking about a book with a partner—these are the essentials for data-driven instruction.

The patterns that you and the student notice are often the areas most essential to focus on. These patterns become the goal.

Determine What's Goal-Worthy

I find it most helpful to look across multiple artifacts of student work and triangulate the data. By this, I mean it's helpful to look for patterns across three or more actual artifacts of student work; the patterns that you and the student notice are often the areas most essential to focus on. These patterns become the goal.

Goals affect accomplishment—from diets to marathon training to learning how to knit, when we have a clear sense of what we want to accomplish, how we will attempt to accomplish it, and our deadline for accomplishing it, we are more likely to be motivated to succeed (Pink 2009).

Reading is no different. Hattie (1999) and Petty (2006) have shown in their research on effective teaching that “achievement is enhanced to the degree that the students and teachers set and communicate appropriate, specific, and challenging goals” (Petty 2006, 63). In a reading workshop, goals help focus students and teachers, bringing clarity and increased purpose to conferences, small-group instruction, and students' everyday work during independent reading.

Make Plans for Individuals First, Groups Second

Many teachers plan by thinking about the whole first and then the parts. What am I going to teach the whole class on days 1, 2, 3, and so on of my unit? I've found it most effective for teachers to think from part (individuals) to whole (class).

Once we've determined goals for each student by looking across multiple pieces of data and identifying patterns, it's time to make plans for groups—the class as a group, or smaller groups within that large group. Compare the class' list of goals against the curriculum you're using as a resource, or standards you're trying to accomplish, and then consider what would make the most sense to teach. Think about how individual and group goals dovetail with whole-class goals.

Ground your teaching in the data that matter most—student work. Study it, plan for individuals by setting goals, and plan curriculum from there. This way, your students will see relevance, and themselves, in your whole-class units of study.

Hattie, J. 1999. “Influences on Student Learning.” Available at: <http://www.teacherstoolbox.co.uk/downloads/managers/Influencesonstudent.pdf>

Petty, G. 2006. *Evidence-Based Teaching: A Practical Approach*. Cheltenham, UK: Nelson Thornes.

Pink, Daniel. 2009. *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead Books.

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