CHAPTER 1

Setting Teaching and Learning Goals

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How can standards help you to set learning goals?
- How can you combine information from standards with knowledge of development to set up a classroom assessment plan?
- What assessments are essential at each of the early primary grades?
- How can you make a reasonable plan for conducting assessments and using the results?
- How can you set goals for your own learning?

As we write, a new school year is starting all around us. Many parents are grudgingly getting back into bedtime and bus routines, some of them for the first time. Children are settling in to classrooms with new peers and new expectations. More importantly, though, teachers, both novice and experienced, are building new classroom communities and new communities of practice with their peers. As we have engaged in these processes with teachers over the years, we have seen both the promise of the new year and its perils. We have witnessed first-hand the research finding that "grit, defined as passion and perseverance for long-term goals, predicts both teacher retention and effectiveness" (Robertson-Craft & Duckworth, 2014, p. 22). In this chapter, we will be "beginning with the end in mind" (Covey, 1989). We want to enhance your chances for a great year so that you will find teaching a long and rewarding career.

Let's start with some facts. Figure 1.1 provides a visual.

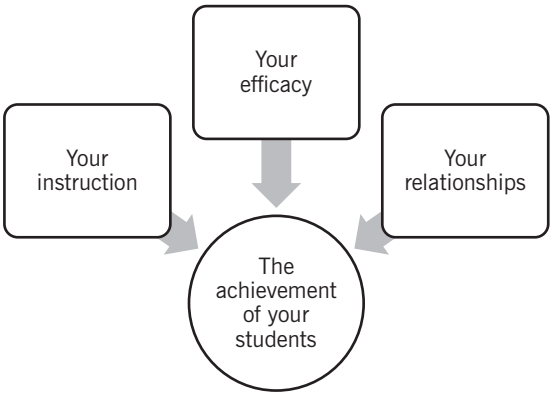

FIGURE 1.1. Teacher effectiveness, efficacy, and collaborations.

- Your personal work in your own classroom, more than your years of experience or your academic training, matters to the achievement of your students, both this year and in the future (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).
- Your self-efficacy, your beliefs that you can perform the tasks required of your job well and that you can personally influence the achievement of your children, regardless of their backgrounds, matters to the achievement of your students. Your positive beliefs about the efficacy of the teachers you work with also matters (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000).
- The relationships that you build with peers and administrators in your school matter to your feelings of efficacy (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012).

Because we know that these things matter, it makes sense for us to foster them. In this book, we will do that by sharing lessons that we have learned from other researchers and from the many teachers, teacher leaders, and administrators we have worked with in the field. We will argue that instruction, efficacy, and relationships can be enhanced by a coherent organizational plan. So let's get started.

Setting Goals for Learning

In the early primary classroom, teachers with high levels of personal efficacy set goals for their children based on standards while they attend to students as individuals capable of growth. Perhaps that is the underlying mechanism by which efficacy and achievement are related. Standards can be very useful here. While efforts to enact consistent standards across states have proved controversial, we have no quarrel with the content of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National

Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010). In fact, we see them as potentially powerful levers to accelerate children's early reading performance *and* enhance their background and vocabulary knowledge from the first years of school.

Let's look at the CCSS conceptually first. Figure 1.2 provides an overview of the topics included in the Standards. Think about whether an early primary teacher would quarrel, in general, about considering any one of these an important target. Who doesn't want children to grow in their foundational skills? In their ability to speak and listen? In their achievement as readers and writers of different types of text? Then think about whether you find it realistic to devise your own goals in each of these areas. We don't. We tend to take standards at face value to help us to organize our time, our resources, and our expectations. Standards, in any form, allow you to "begin with the end in mind" and plan your work. We will get more specific in later chapters, but we think your goals for student literacy learning should be informed by the standards in your state.

Preschool teachers are in a challenging spot. The CCSS start in kindergarten, but preschool teachers work with children before that milestone. Are they

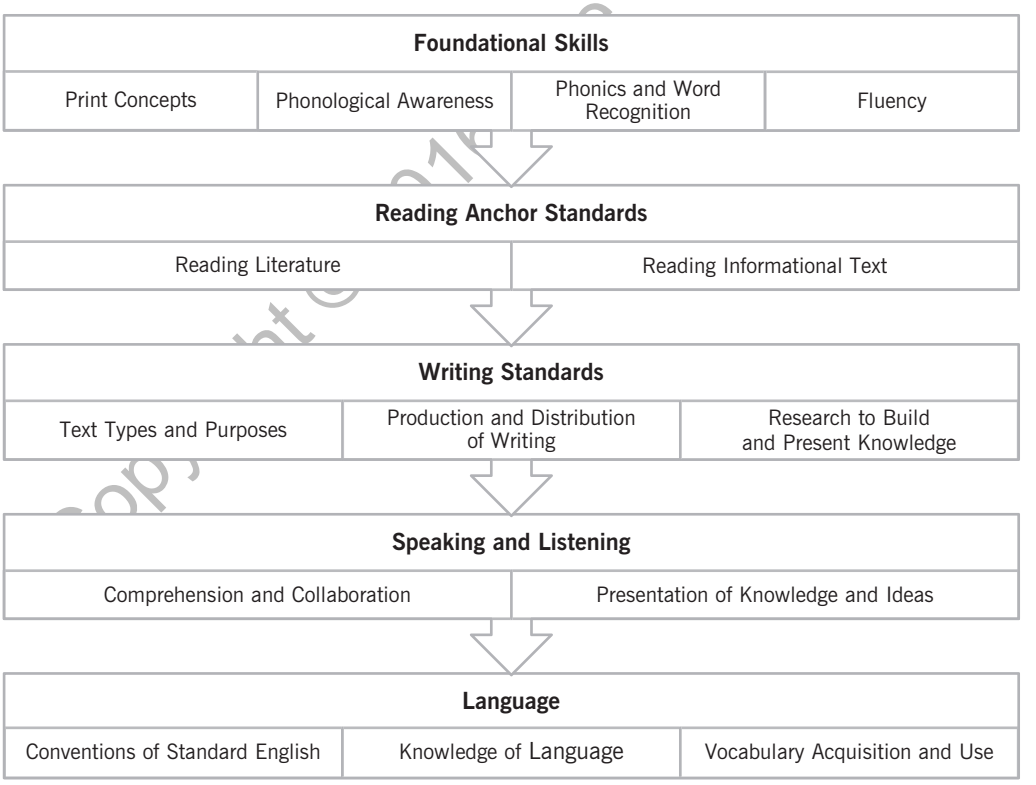

FIGURE 1.2. Overview of the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts.

without standards? Not exactly. There are early childhood standards in many states. Research in preschool identifies very specific areas as targets: print concepts, phonological awareness, beginning alphabet knowledge, emergent writing, and many aspects of speaking, listening, and language. Those connections to CCSS are easy to see. What may be less visible (but more exciting!) is the potential for engaging preschoolers in higher-level thinking. Early childhood educators (see, e.g., Hoffman, Paciga, & Teale, 2014) applaud emphasis on knowledge building through interactive read-alouds of more complex narrative informational text and on writing, but they remind preschool teachers not to lose sight of developmentally appropriate and play-based settings. We recommend that preschool teachers consider kindergarten standards and early learning standards in their state and focus on including the high-level outcomes of language, knowledge, and writing—not foundational skills that will be more easily developed in kindergarten.

Using Data to Size Up a Class

Once you know your overall standards-based goals, it makes sense to assess your students' initial status. Early primary teachers need an assessment toolkit matched to the expectations and standards for the children they teach. Because reading and writing are developmental, we fill that toolkit differently at different grade levels. You will see that some of the assessment tools in your toolkit are more formal than others. The tools are identified by emphasis in Figure 1.3.

Don't worry—it is unlikely that your school won't already have most of these bases covered. The most important first step is to conduct an audit of the existing (and especially the *required*) assessments (Stahl & McKenna, 2013). Go beyond the names and ask yourself what aspects of literacy are actually being assessed and whether any assessments can do double duty. For example, many schools use a storybook reading task at the beginning of kindergarten to assess concepts of print (front to back, left to right, top to bottom, and concept of word). If you recorded the assessment, you could also gather some baseline data on speaking, listening, and language. Many first- and second-grade teachers are required to use leveled book assessments of comprehension. If you recorded oral reading during those assessments, you could also garner words correct in 1 minute.

After you audit your required assessments for their match to these standards-based requirements, think about your report card. In our experience, reporting progress to parents is still a very hot issue in schools. Some schools report progress only, with a developmental rubric, in the early primary grades. Others have fairly traditional grades on an A–F scale. Still others have a mastery reporting system, with each individual grade-level standard listed.

We are often asked whether we favor standards-based mastery reporting. Our answer is, "Sort of." The nature of literacy is such that foundational skills can be mastered, and they can be mastered by all children on time. They are what Scott

	Foundational Skills	Reading	Writing	Speaking and Listening	Language
PreK	Concepts-of-print assessment Rhyme recognition task Alphabet recognition		Drawing prompt	Dialogic reading, audio recorded	
K	Concepts-of-print assessment Letter-name task Letter-sound task Phonemic segmentation and blending task Consonant–vowel–consonant decoding task Consonant–vowel–consonant spelling task		Handwriting sample Writing prompt	Dialogic reading, audio recorded	
1	Letter-sound task Phonemic segmentation and blending task Decoding inventory Spelling inventory High-frequency word inventory Oral reading fluency task	Story-mapping task Informational text retell task	Handwriting sample Writing prompt	Informal assessment during read-alouds	
2	Decoding inventory Spelling inventory High-frequency word inventory Oral reading fluency task	Story-mapping task Informational text retell task	Writing prompt	Informal assessment during read-alouds	

FIGURE 1.3. PreK–2 assessment toolkit.

Paris (2005) calls "constrained" skills. It makes good sense to report progress at the mastery level on those skills. Concepts of print, phonemic awareness, decoding and word recognition, and even most aspects of fluency are constrained. Reading comprehension, writing, speaking and listening, and language are unconstrained skills. They develop over a lifetime; they are never "mastered." These areas are not well matched to mastery-learning or standards-based reporting.

Classroom Goals

We view early-year assessments of both constrained and unconstrained skills as variables in an algebraic distance equation. The unknown to solve for is the amount of progress that you must foster, collectively for your class and individually for each student, through your teaching efforts. Either directly or conceptually, initial assessments help you to get a sense of the learning distance to be traveled by your

students. Once you know where you need to go, you can better allocate time and attention. Generally, with all data, you have to collect it quickly, summarize it logically, and think about it. Of course, that is easier said than done.

As schools have institutionalized response-to-intervention (RTI) frameworks, they have increasingly adopted assessments that allow teachers to identify levels of risk for students. You will often see assessments of constrained skills reported this way. DIBELS, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, are a good example. Some portion of students score at benchmark, both within and across subtests. That means that given their score at this time of year and their access to instruction, they are "on track" for meeting end-of-year goals. Some portion of students have scores that are called "strategic" or "some risk." That means that given access to regular instruction, they may or may not meet end-of-year goals; it may be wise to keep a close eye on them and to provide some additional support. The remaining children's scores yield the label "intensive." Without some opportunities in addition to regular instruction, they are highly unlikely to meet end-of-year goals.

We recently met with grade-level teams in an elementary school to review their beginning-of-the-year data for constrained skills. Figure 1.4 presents a visual summary.

These data present a powerful picture, and it is both retrospective and prospective. Retrospectively, here is the story: Most children (72%) entered kindergarten with strong foundational skills. In this case, we also knew that 60% of them had attended preschool, and teachers reported that that trend was associated with better beginning-of-year scores. Only a third of the children who entered first grade were on track, however; unless a large number of children transferred

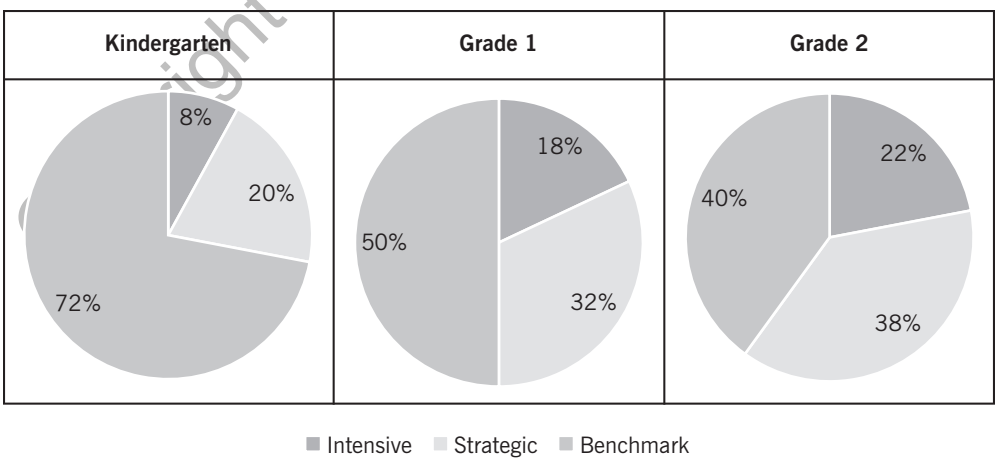

FIGURE 1.4. Grade-level data, beginning of year.

from different schools, their kindergarten experience was not successful in the areas assessed in early first grade. By second grade, a slightly larger percentage of children were beginning the year on track, but at the same time a slightly larger number were beginning with intensive needs. Our advice was to reexamine the organization of the curriculum in kindergarten and to plan for immediate interventions in first and second grade.

Looking prospectively, the kindergarten team was working from a position of strength. They had small numbers of children requiring immediate intervention, and they could manage that while accelerating the already strong development of the majority of the children. For first-grade teachers, a small number of children at benchmark was expanded by the number with strategic needs to 82%. That led us to recommend that teachers provide a quick review of foundational skills for all and then attend to rigorous grade-level instruction. We also planned for intervention times for the children with intensive needs (18%). The same general pattern yielded the same recommendations for second grade. We also suggested that students be tracked from the beginning of the year to the middle and end in order to monitor the trends at each grade.

The picture is fuzzier with unconstrained skills. That is because those skills are harder to assess quickly and easily, and the results don't conform to the numerical scales. They are better viewed qualitatively, with rubrics and descriptors. We think writing is the most important unconstrained skill for baseline assessment. You can collect a beginning-of-the-year writing sample fairly easily from your entire class. We have found the writing samples and assessments in the open-access website *achievethecore.org* to be a useful tool. You will see that there are writing prompts, beginning at kindergarten, that require you to read aloud a short text, engage your children in a natural discussion, and then draw and write to express an opinion or narrate a sequence of events. A series of dated writing samples collected under similar conditions will give you (and parents) a concrete picture of student performance over time. In the early years of school, these samples typically provide a compelling rationale for building the foundational skills (e.g., concept of print, phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, and handwriting) that underlie transcription (listening to oral language and writing it down). If children don't have the skills to put words to paper, they certainly can't compose coherent persuasive, informative, and narrative writing pieces.

Individual Goals

Once you have a sense of the overall make-up of your class, you have to think of students both in groups and one at a time. For constrained skills, this is easier, of course. And visuals help. Special educators have long used a tool called an aimline. It is simply an estimate of change over time in a specific skill. It is a line graph with scores along the vertical axis and time along the horizontal one. It shows that

some students have to make more progress each week or month than others. Figure 1.5 provides a simple example. A kindergarten teacher knows that letter-sound knowledge is important. She also knows that she wants all children to master this constrained skill by the end of November so that she can use that foundational knowledge to facilitate writing. She sets an aimline to begin at 0 for the start of the year and end at 26 at the end of November. Then she plots student achievement against that aimline.

Student 1 began the year with 5 letter sounds. By October, he had gained an additional 13, putting his progress above the aimline. Instruction was clearly working for him, and the teacher anticipated that she would meet the November goal with the same level of support. Student 2 began with no letter sounds and had learned only 5 by October. Without a change in her rate of learning, she would not be likely to meet the end-of-November goal, so she needed additional support. In constrained skills, measured numerically, aimlines are a powerful visual tool to track progress and guide instruction.

For unconstrained skills, like listening or reading comprehension and composition, numerical representations of discrete skills are less helpful. Instead, work samples, scored with rubrics, provide a better visual. Sometimes these rubric scores can also be represented in numbers, as growth over time. For example, the state of Delaware has developed open-access text-based writing rubrics. The writing is scored in four domains (reading/research, development, organization, and language/conventions) with four possible ratings.

Figure 1.6 shows one student's work represented in each of these domains at three time points.

The graph reveals that the student is making strong progress toward a score of 4 in the areas of using research and reading, in development of an argument, and in language conventions. Organization is the problem area here and deserves special attention in writing conferences and in revisions. This type of data about

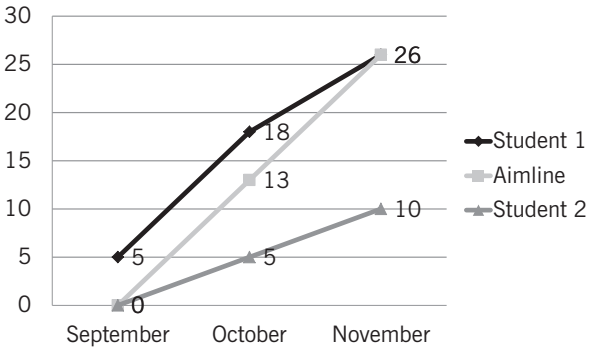

FIGURE 1.5. Aimline for letter sounds.

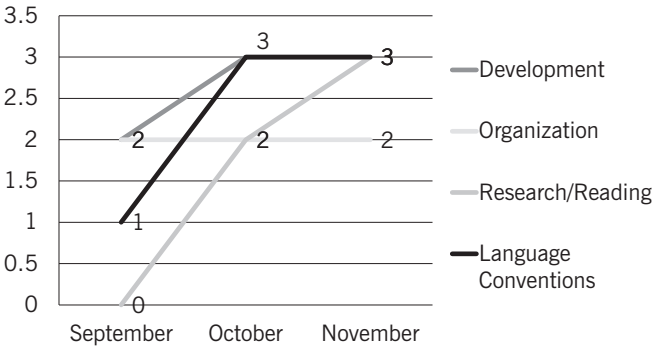

FIGURE 1.6. Student progress in persuasive writing.

writing is more useful when coupled with the actual writing sample so that all stakeholders (students, parents, and teachers) can see exactly what writing was associated with what rating.

A Classroom Example

This goal-setting business is a lot to envision. But it is also the normal work of preplanning time and the first weeks of school. Imagine Ms. Howard, a teacher with 3 years of experience in fifth grade, who transferred to first grade. She has to orient herself first to the differences in learning goals for students who are beginning readers. The foundational skills strand of the CCSS for first grade looks very concrete to her. She is accustomed to thinking about oral reading fluency as the only foundational skill to assess and track, but she sees from the standards that first-grade fluency is fueled by a very specific set of phonics and word recognition skills, which are in turn fueled by phonological awareness. She sees that the anchor standards in reading literature and information text are the same as the ones that she developed in fifth grade, but the grade-level indicators are very different. She sees very specific goals in speaking and listening and in language, but it is difficult for her to envision them in action because she has no experience with first graders.

Ms. Howard works with the first-grade team leader, Mrs. Farmer, to review the required assessments. She has to give the DIBELS Next battery, an informal decoding inventory, and a high-frequency word inventory. These required assessments seem well suited to cover the foundational skills, but she has no baseline assessment of reading or writing. She decides to add a task that she will use as a baseline for reading comprehension and for writing. She selects a simple narrative picture book. She decides she will read it aloud and then ask the children to draw about the beginning, middle, and end. Then she will ask them to write about the story for a classmate who didn't hear it. From this simple classroom task, she

hopes to get a sense of what her children can do in listening comprehension, and in handwriting and spelling. She anticipates that she will have a lot of work to do in these areas.

After reviewing the standards and setting up her initial assessment toolkit, Ms. Howard makes a schedule. She would like to have all of the baseline assessments done in 4 weeks' time so that she can start differentiated instruction during week 5. She also reserves the first week of school to establish rituals and routines—no assessments. She sets specific goals: By the beginning of the second week of school, she will be providing whole-class English language arts (ELA) instruction for 45 minutes. Then she will have students working at their seats, drawing in response to reading, practicing their handwriting, taking turns at the computer station, and using her classroom library to browse information books and magazines. While students complete these tasks, she will call individuals back for the DIBELS battery. When she finishes with DIBELS, she will give the phonics inventory. At the beginning of week 3, she will administer her baseline writing assessment. Luckily, this one is whole class, so she can include it during instruction, and still make time for individual assessments that day.

Setting Goals for Teaching

As you will see in later chapters, we think scheduling and apportioning time for instruction is a key variable over which teachers must exert control. We also think that now is the time to be honest about the differences that rigorous new standards, regardless of their name in your state, require of us. If we look at the new standards conceptually, they are very exciting to us. And they *are* very different from previous standards and from previous practice. Much has been made of the shifts in text difficulty, with much more challenging text assigned to each grade level beginning in grade 2, and these shifts are real. However, there are more fundamental ones to consider in the early grades.

1. Building foundational skills is no longer the goal of the early primary years. Those skills are now positioned exactly where they should be—as low-level skills that children can master easily and quickly and on time. We can no longer teach them slowly or in dribs and drabs.
2. Building knowledge of all kinds is the most important goal of school. What children know (their background and vocabulary and language knowledge) is so directly linked to their reading and writing achievement that we must attend to knowledge building more systematically from the first day of preschool.
3. Writing is harder than reading, and writing achievement is now weighted equally with reading achievement in the standards. We have to link reading

with writing and we have to ensure that all children can write easily and early so that we can attend to the structure, content, and quality of their compositions.

We have been challenged in great new ways; we hope that you will join us.

Identifying Areas for Professional Growth

Remember that we began this chapter by reminding you that what you actually do in your classroom really does matter. The flip side is true as well: What you don't know or do matters too. Since standards are new and different, it doesn't make sense to argue that you were already doing these things or that you were well prepared in school to do them. They may not have been written when you were in school! Even if you graduated very recently, none of us in universities has fully grasped or enacted the standards even now. We are all learning together. And we are very excited about that.

"New Year's Resolutions": Making a Plan You Can Stick To

Many people make New Year's resolutions; few keep them. They are usually too numerous, too aggressive, too lofty, and made too quickly. "I'm going to be a more effective teacher this year" would fall into that category for us. What about these?

"I'm going to learn to accelerate foundational skills this year."
"I'm going to learn to use complex read-alouds to build knowledge this year."
"I'm going to learn how to teach handwriting and composition this year."

Any one of these might be a reasonable resolution. And over time, we hope many teachers will embrace all three. Notice, though, that these resolutions are about your own learning. That's what you can actually control. Of course, since your learning affects your teaching and your teaching affects your students, they will ultimately benefit.

Identifying a focus area is not enough. You do have to commit a portion of your scantest resource to the task. Learning new things requires a commitment of *time*. Lifelong learning requires the habit of learning. So start with what psychologists are calling a microhabit. A tiny step. What about this? Every Friday, before leaving school, commit to 15 minutes of reading in your goal area. If you do the 15 minutes, you will have met your goal. Over time, there will be days when you will lose yourself and spend an hour. Sometimes you will become really interested and read over the weekend. Some days you will come to school Monday with a really interesting idea to discuss with your teammates.

Getting the Support You Need

Some people think that teachers can learn everything on the job. We are not among them. We believe that deep learning requires looking outside your classroom and school. We will be providing you with strategies for finding and using resources in the next chapter, so reading Chapter 2 can be your first Friday microhabit accomplishment!

Classroom Example

Ms. Howard, our first-grade teacher, was in for quite a shock when she collected her classroom writing sample. Most of her children only drew a picture, and even the pictures were uninterpretable to her fifth-grade-teacher eyes. She decided that she would focus on learning how to teach handwriting and writing. Since she had been working with us, she first went to our free professional learning website (*comprehensivereadingsolutions.com*) where she watched a module on teaching handwriting. Since the module contained a free curriculum for teaching handwriting, she was relieved. She Googled the author of the module, our colleague David Coker from the University of Delaware, and noted that he had written a new book, *Teaching Beginning Writers* (Coker & Ritchey, 2015), which she ordered.

Next she Googled first-grade writing samples, and saw a link to Reading Rockets, a site she trusted. When she followed that link, though, she was disheartened. The writing sample pictured was much better than any she had just collected, and the context section indicated that the children had just read a book by William Steig. None of her children could read that well yet. The next link she followed was more helpful. She saw that *achievethecore.org* had an extensive collection of writing samples and included commentary on what the children's writing revealed over time. She also saw writing prompts that she could use to judge progress. When she looked up, an hour had passed! She checked off her first week's microhabit progress as a yes in her plan book.

Summary

Organizing for instruction can have a powerful effect on you and on your students. Organizing begins with standards and assessment, and it includes goals for teaching and for your own professional learning. It may require you to rethink how you use time and resources in your classroom. We will work with you so that you can learn lessons from research and from the many teachers we've been working with. We share your commitment to early success for your classroom of young readers and writers.