In the summer of 1999, twenty teachers and site directors from National Writing Project sites all over the country gathered outside Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the first annual NWP Professional Writing Retreat. They wrote of summer institutes and National Board certification, of writing prompts and parent participation, and of pop culture as a curriculum tool.

Two of the participants, Donna Vincent and Kevin Lavey, considered issues raised when decisions about curriculum, standards, and testing are made far from the classroom. The subtext of both pieces: Teachers know things. Ask them.

What’s Fair
The Story of Gifted Gail and Special Eddie

DONNA VINCENT

As our state of Kentucky becomes increasingly involved in education reform, I think more and more about fairness. Some feel that fair means equal. In a “fair” classroom, all children receive the same instruction, the same assistance, the same chance to pass (or fail). If students in special ed classes and gifted students receive the same portfolio scores as a part of our state assessment, for example, there’s an uproar among some parents and teachers. How could it be? “Special Eddie” must be receiving too much help.

But that’s not fair. Fair varies according to need. Recently I worked with a fourth grade class as they edited their short stories. Two students were having trouble with punctuation. One wrote sophisticated sentences and used dialogue with speaker tags (i.e., said Sally) separating the quotes, which meant she needed almost twice as many quotation marks and commas as most kids in her class. This complexity was causing her difficulty. The other student was also having punctuation problems. But his sentences were very simple. There was no dialogue. There were no periods, either.

For Gifted Gail, I counted the mistakes in each line and indicated how many there were by placing that number of C’s (capitalization mistakes), U’s (usage errors), P’s (punctuation problems), and S’s (misspelled words) in the margin. I did a two-minute mini-lesson on punctuating dialogue with her. She was then able to go back to the computer and, without any other help, find and correct every mistake she had originally made.

Special “Eddie” had different needs. He hadn’t put one period on the whole page! There were other kinds of mistakes, too, but research and my experience have shown me that students are better served if we look for patterns of consistent mistakes to correct rather than to fix every error. Most children can’t internalize that many different concepts at once. Eddie needed me to sit with him, move the cursor, and ask, “Now, what punctuation mark goes here?” He read aloud. He paused in the right places. He punctuated. In this case I was trying to give both students what they needed. I think that’s fair.

But traditionally we haven’t tried to diagnose or treat needs. We have had a scope and sequence to follow. Our lesson plans indicated page numbers and worksheets to do. Monday was for commas in a series. Tuesday was for periods of ellipsis. Everyone did them. It didn’t matter if you already knew how to do the skill (like Gifted Gail) or if you still didn’t get it (like Special Eddie). Gail got the A. Eddie got the F. F is for fair?

What if doctors felt that fair meant giving the same treatment to every patient? You make an appointment for your sore throat, but it’s wart removal day and that’s the treatment you get. What, you don’t have any warts? No matter. It’s fair.

I can remember going into classrooms to start a writing lesson and noticing a student who didn’t make an effort to begin. I’d move over to his desk and try to give him some...
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personal attention, and the classroom teacher would whisper, “Don't worry about him. He's Special Ed.” Too much attention... TIME away from capable students. It wasn't fair.

Why did we not try to meet individual needs before? Well, it certainly seemed easier to herd students through chapters of books and stacks of worksheets. A good teacher had five folders on the corner of her desk labeled Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—manila folders with beautiful cursive letters. (I know. I had them.) A good teacher prepared ahead by filling these folders with multiple copies of worksheets to be done by all. All students needed the same skills. It was only fair.

We still have skills to teach, but when Gail and Eddie write, it becomes easier for a good teacher to see what skills they need and what skills they have. They've each created their own individualized “worksheet” to correct.

By using real language in the classroom, rather than confining ourselves to worksheets, we can now more readily identify strengths and needs. No guesswork. It's there, in black and white. We can address these needs in 15-minute mini-lessons that target, in small groups, the students who need to learn these particular skills. We can determine instruction the entire class needs, and we can pinpoint individual levels of attainment.

This approach to teaching is not only fairer, it's easier. In the past I've felt insecure and frustrated assessing the progress of individual students. Yes, I had grades in my grade book, but I still didn't know how much individual kids knew.

Is it fair that Gail and Eddie end up with the same portfolio score? I'm not sure that this is the question we should be asking. Instead, we should be asking these questions: Is Eddie getting the individualized instruction he needs? Is Gail finally challenged?

Good teachers identify patterns of need and target their lessons. When done correctly, Gail isn't stifled. Eddie doesn't fail. Is that fair? I think so.

Donna Vincent codirects the Western Kentucky University Writing Project in Bowling Green.