Understanding Context

When thinking about a specific piece of data, a teacher must also think about the context surrounding that data. Use the tool below to guide you as you select data that best represents student growth.

The Big Three

These questions are intended to support you as you choose which context pathway you want to use for your student data piece.

1. **What am I assessing?** Are you looking at a specific strategy/skill? How do you want this strategy/skill to be expressed? Do you need to see this student work through the strategy as a reader or a writer?
2. **What am I not assessing?** You should have a small, targeted focus when you are looking at assessment data.
3. **What do I know about this student?** What are the particular strengths and areas of growth for this student? Are the data pieces you are looking at known areas of growth or strength? Think about how that may influence the data.

Context Pathways

These context pathways represent the benefits and drawbacks to choosing different pieces of student data. These pathways help to provide context for why a student's work may reflect a particular level of achievement. Read through the pathways below and think about the data you currently use to evaluate students. What context pathways become apparent?

Context Pathway 1: Area of Growth

The piece of data you have selected is in an area of growth for the student. This means that the student struggles with the type of task they have been given in addition to the possibility of struggling with the strategy or skill you are trying to assess.

Benefits:

- The teacher may be able to intertwine two strategies and allow one strategy to support the work of another.
- The area of growth may show a relationship between two different needs.

Classroom Example:

Ms. Jackson wants to understand Anthony's ability to structure examples when writing an expository essay. She chooses the last expository essay he completed for her data. Expository writing is an area of growth for Anthony because his papers struggle with being cohesive. After reviewing his essay Ms. Jackson realizes that Anthony's examples are a symptom of his lack of cohesion. The examples have no structure because he needs support to stick to a central thesis.

Drawbacks:

- Other student growth needs may obscure how a student is truly performing.
- The student may lose confidence because being in an area of growth may exhibit poor performance that isn't reflective of their true abilities.

Classroom Example:

Ms. Jackson wants to evaluate Samantha's ability to make inferences about a character. She does this by using a multiple-choice test about character traits. However, Samantha often has test anxiety and does poorly on multiple choice tests. Ms. Jackson questions if this assessment is the best way to measure Samantha's growth.

Context Pathway 2: Area of Strength

The piece of data you have selected is in an area of student strength. This means that the student normally does well with the type of task you are assessing and is confident in their abilities.

Benefits:

- Any lack of understanding for an individual skill or strategy may be clearly apparent.
- The student may be able to tackle a more complex version of the skill because they are comfortable with the type of task that has been given.

Classroom Example:

Ms. Malik is evaluating Jose's reading response for an understanding of theme. Jose loves fiction texts and has been particularly excited about the book he is completing his reading response on. In addition, this task plays on his strengths which include citing text evidence and including his opinion on events from the text. When Ms. Malik reviews Jose's work she can immediately identify that Jose is struggling to find a theme that is supported across the entire text.

Drawbacks:

- It may be easier to view growth in the student's work if this is normally an area of strength.
- The student may be less open to feedback since they have done well on this type of task in the past.

Classroom Example:

Ms. Malik is reading Alexa's personal narrative and looking at how she elaborates on the most important events of the story. Alexa is a strong writer and has always done well writing expository essays in the past. Her elaboration in expository essays has always been on point and tied directly to the thesis. Ms. Malik reads through the essay and at first views Alexa's examples to be just as strong as her expository work, however, on a second read Ms. Malik finds that Alex is spending additional time elaborating on details that detract from the focus of the story.

Context Pathway 3: Snapshot Data

The piece of data you collected is assessing what the student can do with a short or timed task.

Benefits:

- The data is gathered quickly and provides immediate feedback.
- A skill can be more easily isolated by using snapshot data.

Classroom Example:

Ms. Williams is evaluating the class exit tickets on understanding figurative language. As she looks through student results, she noticed that the students were able to identify figurative language, but most struggled with being able to use that figurative language as a lens for character. She decides to create a lesson focusing on interpreting figurative language for her next class.

Drawbacks:

- The snapshot may not be reflective of a student's true understanding of a skill.
- The student may have an issue with timed tasks or may just be having an off day.

Classroom Example:

Mr. Weldon pulls a small group of students who struggled to connect the figurative language to a character trait. After having the students test out the strategy in the read aloud, he realizes that his students have a strong understanding of the skill, but they were confused by how the question was worded on the exit ticket.