Portfolios: an implementation report

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Abstract
Today's educators are acquiring a clearer picture of student learning and growth. To achieve a more comprehensive assessment of student growth, teachers are turning to alternative assessment tools. One such tool is a portfolio. What is a portfolio? What is the purpose of a portfolio? How does one design and implement portfolios? The purpose of this article is to answer these questions and to study, first hand, how elementary teachers in Charles City, Iowa are designing and implementing portfolios.

After reviewing published literature and research, a survey instrument was created to answer questions concerning design, implementation, and other elements of portfolio assessment. Most importantly, teachers were given the opportunity to acknowledge the impact portfolios have had in their classrooms. The designs and methods of implementing portfolios varied to fit a variety of purposes and different classroom environments. Teachers commented that the greatest impact of this form of assessment centered around growth in student work, student reflection, and student ownership.
Portfolios:
An Implementation Report

A Journal Article
Submitted to the
Division of Elementary Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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Master of Arts in Education

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Anna Burnham
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Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

Today’s educators are acquiring a clearer picture of student learning and growth. To achieve a more comprehensive assessment of student growth, teachers are turning to alternative assessment tools. One such tool is a portfolio. What is a portfolio? What is the purpose of a portfolio? How does one design and implement portfolios? The purpose of this article is to answer these questions and to study, first hand, how elementary teachers in Charles City, Iowa are designing and implementing portfolios. After reviewing published literature and research, a survey instrument was created to answer questions concerning design, implementation, and other elements of portfolio assessment. Most importantly, teachers were given the opportunity to acknowledge the impact portfolios have had in their classrooms. The designs and methods of implementing portfolios varied to fit a variety of purposes and different classroom environments. Teachers commented that the greatest impact of this form of assessment centered around growth in student work, student reflection, and student ownership. Other impacts were student accountability, self-assessment and reflection, and communication with parents about their student’s progress. Those elementary teachers who are not currently implementing portfolios (48%) focused
concerns on the lack of training and on the time it takes for designing, implementing, and conferencing with students (concerns that coincided with the research). However, despite the lack of formal training programs, the majority of elementary teachers in Charles City (52%) are designing and implementing portfolios. These teachers are acquiring their training from professional readings, workshops, and study groups. On their own, these teachers are creating assessment tools which enable students to exhibit growth and learning, and to take more responsibility for their own learning.
Portfolios: An Implementation Report

In elementary schools in Charles City, Iowa, many students are learning to improve their performance through the analysis, reflection, and goal setting they do in their portfolios. Students and teachers are using these strategies to improve learning and teaching. Students, along with teachers and parents, reflect on their learning experiences and assess their growth. This article will examine how these elementary teachers in Charles City are designing and implementing portfolios and what impact portfolios have had in their classroom. This inquiry will provide first hand information on how portfolios are use in the elementary classroom. In addition, these teachers are provided with an opportunity to voice their thoughts regarding portfolios and to support their use of this method of assessment.

WHY PORTFOLIOS AND WHAT ARE THEY?

To achieve a more complete and comprehensive assessment of student growth, teachers need to use forms of evaluation to seek out more than just knowledge and recall (Grady, 1992; Stiggins, 1988). Teachers need to use not only standardized norm reference and commercial tests, but also they need to use assessment strategies or methods that are relevant and provide a clear view of a student's "learning profile" (Stiggins, 1988). Such methods include the use of
performance assessments, opinion and observations of teachers and students, student self evaluation of relevant thinking, and problem solving (Grady, 1992; Stiggins, 1988).

To acquire this clearer picture of student learning and growth, educators are turning to alternative assessment tools. One such tool is the portfolio. A portfolio has been defined differently by many education professionals. The simplest definition of a portfolio is merely a container of documents that provides evidence (Collins, 1992). A more precise definition of a portfolio is a student maintained collection of one's best work, a representation of one's academic success (Grady, 1992). An even more explicit definition states that portfolios are a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress, self-reflection, and achievements in one or more areas (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Vavurs, 1990).

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW MORE: GOALS AND PURPOSE

After reviewing the definitions of a portfolio, I began to research why and where they are being employed. I found portfolios were being implemented across the curriculum (reading, writing, math, social studies, and more), in all grades K-12, and in varying design.

I next sought out the purposes and hows of portfolios. While studying the literature I was able to develop a list
of goals or purposes for the use of portfolios. The list is as follows:

* To construct a more authentic portrait of what students learn, a representation of academic success. A clearer picture of growth is given through examples of students’ work completed throughout a given period a time, whether it be a week, month, or the entire school year (Vavurs, 1990).

* To create ownership. Student selected work gives students the sense of ownership and pride in their work (Grady, 1992; Wolf, 1989).

* To develop the life long learning skills of goal setting, self-reflection and evaluation. Students invest time and interest reviewing, revising, reflecting, and evaluating their products. Students become active learners and assume some control of the learning process (Grady, 1992).

* To give students the opportunity to become partners with teachers in the assessment and evaluation process. As partners, students and teachers communicate with parents, whether it be conference time or other scheduled times throughout the year. (Goldman, 1989; Krest, 1990).

CARRYING OUT THE PROCESS: THE HOW TO, WHO, WHAT AND WHERE

All of these ideals sound great in theory but how does it all work in an elementary classroom? To find what
methods are being used in implementing portfolios, I went straight to elementary teachers in my own school district of Charles City, Iowa. I knew portfolios were being implemented by some elementary teachers because of my own experiences as a parent and substitute teacher in the school system.

I had learned that there are so many different models and implementations of portfolios. Therefore, my question was how are the elementary teachers in Charles City designing and implementing portfolios? And most importantly, what impact has the portfolio had in their classrooms?

The best way to answer these questions was to design and conduct a survey for the elementary teachers. After reviewing several articles on designing portfolios (Collins, 1992; Paulson, et al., 1991; Valencea, 1988) I created a letter of consent and designed a survey instrument to answer questions concerning design, implementation, and other elements of portfolios (Appendix A, Appendix B).

In the months of November through January of 1995, I presented the instrument to the faculty of the three public elementary schools at one of their monthly staff meetings (I felt the response might be better if I personally delivered and reviewed the survey). A total of 66 surveys were distributed. A 44% response was obtained, with 52% of these
respondents currently implementing portfolios. The subject profile of teacher respondents, by grade level, was preschool 3%, kindergarten 7%, first grade 10%, second grade 15%, third grade 15%, fourth grade 10%, fifth grade 10%, special education 21%, and others (band, art, counselor) 10%. The average classroom numbered 21 students.

The opening statement of the survey defined a portfolio as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the students' efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas (Paulson, 1991; Vavurs, 1990). The first inquiry was to determine how many elementary teachers were currently implementing portfolio assessment, and for how long. I learned that 52% of the respondents currently implement portfolios and 80% of these teachers have been employing portfolios for one to four years.

Research indicates that the concept of portfolio assessment may be implemented in only one area of the curricula or the entire curriculum (Collins, 1992; Grady, 1992). The areas of the curriculum that Charles City elementary teachers are assessing with portfolios include, language (including creative writing), reading, math, science, social studies, and art. One respondent is currently assessing all areas of the curriculum while the other teachers are only assessing one or two curriculum areas (Appendix C, Table C1).
A key question in designing a portfolio is who will decide the purpose of the portfolio - the teacher, the student, student groups, or the teacher and the students working together (Collins, 1992)? What the portfolio will be used for must be meaningful and follow a set purpose or purposes. Keep in mind that whatever evidence is exhibited it must be meaningful, related to the purpose, and illustrate what has been learned (Collins, 1992). The teacher needs to decide the purposes for the portfolio. Will it be used for self-reflection, evaluation and grading, to show parents what is being learned, to assist in planning individual needs of students, to provide a sense of student ownership, or will it serve several of these purposes (Collins, 1992; Valencea, 1990)? In Charles City the 50% of the responding teachers replied that the teacher and student work together on determining the purpose of the portfolio, 44% have the teacher alone decide, and 6% let the individual student decide the purpose of his/her portfolio. Sixty-seven percent of these teachers reported that the purpose of the portfolio is the same for all students, and 33% of the teachers communicated that the purpose of the portfolio is individualized (these were in special education). In
Charles City, the elementary teachers are designing the purpose of portfolios to meet curriculum and individual students' needs.

The teachers in Charles City who implement student portfolios use them to serve multiple purposes. Thirty percent are using portfolios to show evidence of learning to parents at conferences, 25% of the teachers are using it to render student ownership, and 20% use it for student self-reflection. Of this 20% all respondents are using portfolios to have students reflect on their learning and to set goals, while 36% of the respondents use the portfolio for teacher reflection as well.

CONTENT AND REVIEW PROCESS

The type of evidence or sample work displayed can vary depending on the purpose of the portfolio (Collins, 1992). One type of evidence is the material a student produces during a unit. Another type of evidence is when students can show how much growth occurred during a project or unit. Examples of such evidence would be first drafts of a report accompanied by the final writing, and or data used in a lab report attached to an essay question analyzing what was learned from the data and how it related to the unit of study. A third type of evidence is produced by someone else, for example a note of appreciation or congratulations from another student, teacher, or staff member.
The response from the elementary teachers in Charles City to the question of evidence exhibited was as follows: 93% of the students' portfolios exhibited evidence of student progress showing growth and change, 7% exhibited evidence of the students' own choice of work showing a variety of materials as examples of their finished work.

Who chooses the work exhibited in the portfolio can vary as well. The student may select the materials, the teacher could select the items, or both the teacher and student could work together to select the evidence. The respondents in the Charles City elementary schools revealed that 20% of the teachers allow students to select the evidence, 47% of the teachers choose the materials, and 33% have both teacher and student cooperatively select the sample works. To develop a sense of personal ownership and to portray personal growth, it is strongly suggested that the teacher and student work cooperatively. According to the research literature, the teacher determines the form and the student determines the content (Collins, 1992; Paulson, 1991).

Another varying factor in designing a portfolio is how often are the portfolios reviewed and by whom. The review can take place as seldom as each trimester to as often as biweekly. In Charles City, elementary teachers are implementing portfolio reviews with the following frequency:
by trimester (52%), from project to project (13%), monthly (13%), bimonthly (9%), weekly (9%), and biweekly (4%) (Appendix D, Table D2).

Who reviews the portfolios is even more varied. Of those who responded by trimester and from project to project, the teacher, students, and parents equally review and appraise portfolios. Monthly and bimonthly appraisals are completed by student and teacher. And the weekly and biweekly reviews are performed by the students only.

STORAGE CHALLENGE

Whether the portfolio dwells in the classroom or with the student is a decision based on the type of classroom environment the teacher is trying to maintain (Collins, 1992). Storing portfolios often is cited as a problem (Morton, 1991). The greater the number of students the more space is needed for storage. Forty-four percent of the Charles City respondents reported that portfolios are kept by the teacher in his/her own files, 38% of the teachers have student managed files, and 19% keep the portfolios in "file areas available to students at all times" (open files, bulletin board). Atmosphere and number of students will be the deciding factor regarding storage. Some respondents
commented that for privacy reasons, it is best to keep the
portfolios in teacher maintained files. Again, the
teacher's view on the climate of the classroom will
determine the management of the portfolios.

TRAINING

One of the major reasons teachers do not implement new
strategies or methods is the lack of training (Morton,
1991). To feel more confident and self assured, teachers
voiced a need for models and training in portfolio
assessment. Those who are implementing portfolio assessment
in Charles City replied that the number one source for
training was their own professional reading (36%), followed
by workshops (24%), materials from Area Edution Agency
(20%), course work (8%), and Phase III study groups (8%).
One teacher responded that she has had no training at all
and has been designing her own portfolio assessment method
to fit students' needs.

IMPACT

It appears by the survey results that teachers in
Charles City have designed and are implementing portfolios
in a variety of ways, making them fit the purpose and
climate of their classrooms. Comments on the biggest impact
this form of assessment has in the classroom were centered
around growth (or regression) in student work, student
reflection, and student ownership. Many teachers use
portfolios as a "concrete way of seeing where student abilities fall." Other impacts are noted in student accountability, self-assessment and reflection, and in communicating with parents about their student's progress.

Not only was there an impact on student assessment and growth but teachers saw growth in themselves. One teacher stated, "Portfolio assessment has helped me as a teacher to hold myself accountable for developing lessons that ensure students get the skills and tools they need to improve their growth."

TEACHERS WHO SAY NO TO PORTFOLIOS

The survey also provided an opportunity for those teachers who are not currently implementing portfolios in their elementary classroom to give their thoughts regarding portfolios. The largest concerns expressed by those not using portfolios were centered around the lack of training and the time it takes to design, conference with students, and implement this type of assessment. A second grade teacher remarked, "I don't believe the time spent going over materials, sorting, and such, is equal to time spent in other areas of the curriculum. Too much time is taken away from the curriculum to train students and conference with students. I have tried to use portfolios several different times with the same results." Other teachers see problems managing the amount of materials with the number of students
they serve and the storage space needed to house the portfolios. These comments and reasons for saying no to portfolios by the Charles City elementary teachers (48% of the respondents) coincide with research and the review of the literature (Morton, 1991).

IN CONCLUSION

This survey revealed some interesting information about the implementation of portfolio assessment in the Charles City elementary schools. One of the most surprising bits of information was that a little more than half of the teachers (52%) are designing and implementing portfolios, with the majority of their training coming from professional readings, workshops and study groups (68%). These teachers, on their own, are creating assessment tools which enable students to exhibit growth and learning. The designs of these portfolios vary to fit a variety of purposes and different classroom environments. Although implementing portfolios takes time, "the benefits surpass the time used." Teachers are witnessing improved performance by their students. Several teachers stated students are "taking responsibility for their learning, and are more aware of what they have learned."

As a result of this research, I will be designing and implementing portfolios in my fifth grade classroom. The students will know these portfolios as "Friday Folders".
Beginning on the first Friday of the school year, students will be given a reflection sheet, "The Week In Review" (Appendix E). With guidance each student will record one long term and short term goal for the following week. Additional space will be provided for students to indicate what they see as their strengths and areas that need improvements. This sheet will be taken home as homework. The students will review their reflections with a parent or adult care giver. Once they have completed the review both parent and student will sign the reflection sheet. The next school day students will return the signed "The Week In Review" to their portfolio.

During the next week all complete assignments, positive notes of congratulation or appreciation, and or notes of concerns will be added to the students' portfolios. At the end of the week, students will assess their week's work and previous goals. Once again students will set goals for the coming week, take home the file of completed work to be reviewed by a parent, and acquire the needed signatures. This process will continue each week with a teacher/student conference occurring monthly.

I believe this Friday Folder will be a great tool for communicating with parents. In addition it provides the teacher, students, and parents an opportunity to reflect and evaluate weekly learning. It will also enable students to
acquire skills in accountability, self-assessment and reflection, and goal setting. These portfolios are an excellent alternative assessment tool to achieve a more complete indicator of students' growth.
References


Appendix A
Dear Charles City teachers;

I am a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa majoring in elementary education. The enclosed survey is being conducted as a part of a descriptive study I have designed. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of portfolio assessment in the Charles City School system.

You have been selected to be an active participant in this study because you are a teacher in the Charles City School system and you can provide useful information. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse or discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

The survey questions pertain to the implementation of portfolio assessment. If you are not currently implementing portfolio assessment in your classroom(s), please answer questions #1 and #14 accordingly and complete the subject profile information on the last page. However, if you are implementing portfolio assessment please take the time to complete the survey. I realize your schedule is a busy one and that your time is valuable, but I'm sure the use of portfolio assessment has been of great importance to you and your students. The data compiled in this survey will be used to complete my study and may be shared for future studies portfolio assessment. Confidentiality and anonymity will be assured. The study has been approved by the University Human Subjects Review Committee. You may contact the office of the Human Subject Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, (319-273-2748), for answers to questions about the research and about the rights of research subjects. Or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Marc Yoder, Dept. of Education, University of Northern Iowa (319-273-2368).

For your participation in this study you will, upon request, receive a copy of the survey results. Please return the completed survey via the school mail within the next two weeks, to Anna Burnham, Jefferson Elementary. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Anna Burnham
228-6732

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this letter and consent statement.

(signature of subject) date

(printed name of subject)

(signature of investigator)
A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the students efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas.

1. Are you currently implementing portfolio assessment in your classroom?
   
   _____ Yes             _____ No

   If yes, how long have you used portfolio assessment?
   
   How many semesters _____
   months _____
   years _____

   If no, what are your reasons for not implementing portfolio assessment? (check all that apply, then skip to question #14)

   _____ lack of training
   _____ time constraints
   _____ students lack skills
   _____ doesn't apply to subject area
   _____ other (specify __________)

2. The concept of portfolio assessment may be implemented in only one area of your curriculum or the entire curricula. Which area of the curricula are you implementing portfolio assessment? (check all that apply)

   _____ art
   _____ language
   _____ reading
   _____ math
   _____ science
   _____ social studies
   _____ all areas
   _____ other (specify) _____

3. Portfolio assessment can be an evaluation tool to cover a specific subject area as well as a designated period of time. How much of the school year are your portfolios evaluating? (check all that apply)

   _____ project by project
   _____ unit by unit
   _____ month by month
   _____ semester by semester
   _____ yearly
   _____ other (specify) __________

4. Who decides the purpose of the portfolio? (check all that apply)

   _____ the teacher
   _____ the student
   _____ group of students
   _____ teacher and students

5. Is the purpose of the portfolio the same for all students or individualized?

   _____ the same for all
   _____ individualized
6. What evidence do the students' portfolio exhibit? (check all that apply)

- student's best work only
- student's progress showing growth and change
- other (specify) ________________

7. What are the portfolios used for? (check all that apply)

- self reflection - student teacher
- evaluation and grading
- evidence to show parents/conferences
- planning needs to meet individual students
- student ownership
- other (specify) ________________

8. How often are the portfolios reviewed, and by whom? (check all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often?</th>
<th>By whom?</th>
<th>student</th>
<th>teacher</th>
<th>parents</th>
<th>other (specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>weekly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bimonthly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monthly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Who selects the pieces of evidence to go into the portfolio? (check all that apply)

- student
- teacher
- students as a group
- other (specify) ________________

10. Where are the portfolios kept?

- by teacher, in own files
- student's own file area
- other (specify) ________________

11. What kind of training have you had in portfolio assessment? (check all that apply)

- course work
- workshops
- AEA
- professional reading
- none
- other (specify) ________________
12. What is the biggest impact portfolio assessment has had in your classroom?

13. If you wish, please add any additional comments about your experiences implementing portfolio assessment in your classroom (problems, concerns, etc.).
14. (Reply only if your response to question #1 was no) Please give any comments or thoughts you may have regarding portfolio assessment.

*************************************************************************

Subject Profile:

Name of school ____________________________________________

Grade(s) you teach ____________________________

Number of students in your classroom(s) ________________

To obtain the reliability of this instrument, please submit documentation of your use of portfolio assessment. For example, a copy of a rubric used to evaluate students work, student evaluation forms, materials used to inform parents about portfolio assessment, and any other materials you wish to share.

---

If you are interested in the following options please check and complete this form and return it to me in a separate envelope.

1. _____ Check here if you wish a copy of survey results.

2. _____ If you are willing to be interviewed more in depth about your use of portfolio assessment please check here.

   Name ____________________________________________
   school phone ____________________________
   home phone ____________________________
Appendix C
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Curriculum Area</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Language (including Writer Workshop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>Other (fine motor skills, life learning skills)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D
Table D2
Number of Responses Regarding How Often Portfolios Are Reviewed and By Whom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>By Whom?</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Parent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trimester</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bimonthly</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biweekly</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Project</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E
Student’s name ____________________________

1. The Week In Review ____________________________
   date

2. STRENGTHS from this last week were ____________

3. This last week’s low point was ________________

4. GOALS:
   Long term goal ________________________________
   Short term goal ________________________________

5. COMMENTS:

6. QUESTIONS:

Parent signature ________________________________