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## Reading portfolios in a first grade classroom

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### Abstract

The current move toward authentic assessment encourages teachers to use qualitative methods in evaluating children's reading. One such method is the use of portfolios. This method empowers children and teachers with control over goals and methods of instruction. Students take responsibility in collaboration with the teacher for establishing the goals for their own learning. Thus, portfolios can link instruction and assessment more closely.

The following discussion describes the implementation of reading portfolios in a first grade classroom. The portfolio development of two students was focused on in this implementation stage. The students were chosen because of their strong interest in the portfolio process and their willingness to set goals and take responsibility for their learning.

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**Reading Portfolios In a First Grade Classroom**

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## Abstract

The current move toward authentic assessment encourages teachers to use qualitative methods in evaluating children's reading. One such method is the use of portfolios. This method empowers children and teachers with control over goals and methods of instruction. Students take responsibility in collaboration with the teacher for establishing the goals for their own learning. Thus, portfolios can link instruction and assessment more closely.

The following discussion describes the implementation of reading portfolios in a first grade classroom. The portfolio development of two students was focused on in this implementation stage. The students were chosen because of their strong interest in the portfolio process and their willingness to set goals and take responsibility for their learning.

Instructional programs that emphasize reading as a process and offer authentic tasks for children's involvement in this process cannot be accurately assessed through traditional assessments, such as multiple choice tests and standardized tests. Qualitative assessment techniques are needed to describe childrens' progress and specific instructional needs while engaged in the reading process (Ryan, 1994).

### Problems With Traditional Assessment of Reading

Even though aware that change is needed, many schools in the United States are still administering standardized tests and other published tests. The flaws in these quantitative tests are numerous. Norm-referenced tests do not allow teachers any control over the content of test items. The tasks tested are determined by others who do not know what has been taught in the classroom. Such tests are generally given at one time during the school year and focus only on a narrow set of specific skills. Isolated areas such as word meaning and word identification are not representative of the learning that takes place during the reading process (Pikulski, 1989). Standardized tests give no consideration to an individual child's emerging reading abilities; thus, children are judged against a predetermined set of expectations (Strickland, 1989).

Basal reading tests, or instructional reading level tests, are no better. They offer one correct response that may not be valid for an individual student at a particular time. Students may see them as a series of

disconnected tasks (Ryan, 1994).

Teachers are frequently judged by the scores that their students receive on standardized tests. They are often prompted to use class time to teach to the test so the children are familiar with the material and the testing method (Strickland, 1989).

### Rationale for Qualitative Assessment of Reading Progress

The process of reading is too complex to be defined by a one-time assessment each school year. Assessment must reflect that progress in learning to read is continuous. Qualitative assessment techniques provide an ongoing description of each student's progress and instructional needs. They focus on the process not the product and give indications of learning before, during, and after instruction. As a result, this type of assessment allows instruction and assessment to influence each other more closely (Valencia, 1990).

Qualitative assessments need to include reading for different purposes from the different genres and to describe students' application of prior knowledge and their uses of comprehension abilities and word recognition clues (Valencia, 1990). Also, childrens' stages of development need to be taken into consideration along with their interests and the home and societal influences (Harp, 1988). Assessments should avoid hypothetical questions because responses can be contrived or children may give

answers they think will be acceptable to the teacher (Ryan, 1994).

Assessment should not be a burden to the teacher but should assist in planning effective instruction for each student (Valencia, 1990). It should include several assessment techniques that are supportive of each other. Through qualitative assessments, teachers can collaborate with students as they set goals for learning that will eventually lead to assessment and then to establish further goals (Strickland, 1989). From such instruction-assessment activity, the progress and instructional needs of each student can be tracked. As a result, students should be able to demonstrate their individuality.

Qualitative assessments should empower students and the teacher (Sullivan, 1995). This type of assessment in the form of samples of children's learning provides opportunities to compare baseline data with later samples as an indication of growth. Portfolios can provide such information. A portfolio, a carefully selected collection of samples by a student in collaboration with a teacher, can provide an accurate assessment of the child's abilities. Such activity will encourage students to reflect on their progress and instructional needs therefore taking ownership of their learning (Farr, 1989).

#### Implementation of Portfolios for the Assessment of Reading

Different types of items can be included in portfolios to show student

progress in reading, for example, reports about books they have read, the teacher's notes of students' discussions of books, illustrations of an interesting book or a book jacket, related expressive activities, videos of students' reading aloud, and their own self-assessments of their reading activity (Farr, 1989).

To assist children and others to reflect on progress and instructional needs, each exhibit needs to be labeled. This information can be included: name of child, date of selection, the type of exhibit, reasons for selection, progress noted, and future goals (Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991).

Before a collection is begun, the teacher needs to establish guidelines with the children about what types of samples should be included in their portfolios. Instructional goals need to be determined, and then the collected samples based on these goals can be considered for inclusion. Some flexibility is important in considering exhibits because after goals have been established, unexpected reading experiences that are especially meaningful to children may be discovered (Farr, 1989).

Ongoing checklists that give evidence of students' application of tasks while reading and need for instruction in specific tasks can be included in portfolios. Also, records may be kept regarding children's miscue analysis. This particular assessment helps teachers know if children are relying on semantics or graphophonics or on word calling

(Harp, 1988). A checklist of story elements in retelling activities can lend information about the understanding of the elements of a story (Ryan, 1994).

Anecdotal records of teacher observations of children's responses to classroom activities can provide insight into children's attitudes and behaviors regarding reading and can be a part of the portfolio collection. The comments from observations may be related to a child's specific goal or a spontaneous experience. These observations should not interfere with the regular classroom routine but should be done regularly over time (Ryan, 1994). Valencia (1991) relates that in each child's portfolio, it is important to include descriptions of their motivation to read, effort directed to reading activity and related expressive activity, their desire to seek challenges, and ability to set goals. Teachers may wish to keep some records separate from students' portfolios.

Since portfolios are available to parents, a list of books read at home and the parents' comments on their children's reading progress can be included. Then, parents can feel a sense of partnership with the school in their child's development as a reader (Wansart, 1989).

The housing of portfolios, whether in a folder or box, should be easily accessible to students and to anyone who has input concerning a student's reading abilities, including administrators, other teachers and staff members, and parents. The student is the one who should be responsible

for keeping the portfolio organized. An ongoing table of contents can be kept as a quick guide and also a summary of activity.

### Implementation of Reading Portfolios in a First Grade Classroom

My goal in implementing reading portfolios was to offer more authentic assessment of children in grade one. The comprehension questions at the end of each story and the end-of-unit tests in the basal readers did not give me a complete picture of what the students were doing and how they were progressing in gaining literacy. It seemed inappropriate to give each child the same assessments at the same time. I also believed that the school district's report card was an inadequate way to inform parents of their child's progress. Reading portfolios that included input from each child offered an individualized way to describe each student and his/her progress.

The results of the preliminary screening at the beginning of the school year indicated that none of my students qualified for work with the reading recovery specialist. I also became aware that I had several students who were already reading independently. The majority of these first-graders had an excellent concept of the purpose of reading. I did individual interviews with the children to learn their attitudes toward school, particularly reading.

I ordered 100-150 books each month from the Area Education Agency

to supplement their reading experience. The works were fiction and non-fiction from kindergarten to third grade reading levels. The non-fiction books were chosen according to our monthly social science theme. We compiled many stories into books together as a class. These were bound and placed in the reading center. They were some of the most frequently used materials in the room.

In order to help establish an environment in which children could be exposed to reading activity as much as possible, I needed more than the usual book center. The students helped me create a book bag center that contained the books which they checked out to read at home. Each student had a zip-lock baggie to carry the books home from the permanent classroom collection, thus the name "book bags." We also created check-out and tally systems so each student could monitor his/her reading activity. Each child also had a small basket to keep familiar books that they wanted to read again. Each week most of the books in the baskets were returned. Some favorites were kept for several weeks.

A read aloud session began each morning with a book I had selected and then with another story chosen by a student. We kept track of which child's turn it was to choose the story by putting their names on the calendar. This activity was very popular with the children. Students planned ahead and searched for days to find the perfect story. Before

the teacher read aloud the book chosen by the student, the student had an opportunity to talk about the story. Such an activity gave me information about their interests in books that I recorded in my log. This information helped me form groups of students based on experience with literature and student needs.

Each student was given a colored file folder to use as their portfolio. They decorated the folder and kept it in a large basket on a table in the classroom. Inside the front cover of the folder, I attached a sheet of paper to record items as they were included in the portfolio. The students were in charge of keeping their portfolio organized and for choosing items to include. Five items could be included each quarter.

As I worked with students individually and in small groups, I was able to gather baseline data concerning their reading abilities and interests. I completed a checklist of each student's knowledge of books. This checklist was repeated three times during the school year and was kept in the students' portfolios. The checklist along with the student's individual interview helped set student-teacher goals and establish teaching points in the selected reading materials. No standardized testing or instructional reading level tests were given during the school year though I was required by my school district to give each student a monthly sight word inventory.

I invited the parents of my students to an informal meeting during the second week of school to discuss classroom goals and to introduce the use of portfolios. I asked for their cooperation and patience during this first year of portfolio implementation. I explained that the focus of my reading instruction was to support the students as they created meaning through the reading process. The parents were encouraged to listen to their children read books brought home from the classroom library or the school library or to read these selections to them. Also, they were encouraged to make frequent visits to the new public library for additional reading material. They were asked to read with their child daily and to sign a form indicating the books that had been read. I also indicated that I would appreciate any comments regarding their view of their child's reading progress throughout the year.

#### Portfolio Assessment with Readers in Grade One

During this first year of portfolio implementation, I focused on two students as they developed as readers. Through this informal assessment measure, I was able to observe their growth in the process of reading and their willingness to take responsibility for their own learning.

Each quarter of the school year, the students conferenced individually with me as they presented a response to a reading experience for a

portfolio exhibit. These responses were in the form of writing and drawing.

### Student A

Student A, a girl, entered first grade with numerous reading abilities. I had known the family for some time; I had had two older brothers as first graders in previous years. I was aware that books and reading were a high priority in this home. I also knew that I would receive much parental support.

### Informal Assessment

Several informal measures were administered to assess her reading abilities. I interviewed each student at the beginning of the year and again at the beginning of the second semester concerning his/her feelings about school and reading. Student A began the school year feeling confident about herself but lacked direction and goals (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

### Student Interview

September, 1998

Things I like about myself – I look like my dad and I like my name.

What I think about school and reading – I like my teacher. School is fun.

What I hope to learn – times.

I can do this by – practice.

By the beginning of second semester, she was able to state what she had accomplished and what else she would like to be able to accomplish and had some idea how to reach her goals (see Figure 2).

## Figure 2

### Student Interview

January, 1999

Things I like about myself – I have a lot of friends. I can read a lot of words. I read to my little sister.

What I think about school and reading – I like to come to school. I wish I could come on Saturday and Sunday. Reading groups and reading centers are best.

What I hope to learn – I want to read chapter books.

I can do this by – reading every day at school and home.

Running records provided a clear indication of this student's progress. She began the school year reading at an instructional level in Guided Reading. (This level is first grade, second semester.) Miscues, noted on running records, generally involved syntax and did not affect meaning. As student A developed as a reader, she self-corrected miscues. At the end of the school year, this student was reading in Guided Reading, Level M at a ninety-four percent accuracy rate. Level M is a second semester, second grade guided reading level. Fluency and expression were also evident.

Another assessment included in each student's portfolio was a book knowledge checklist. This checklist was completed orally with each student individually. This assessment provided an opportunity for me to discuss items with each student as needed and gave me information for future lessons. Student A completed the checklist in September, January, and May (see Figure 3). This student's awareness of books and reading was evident in September, and she was comfortable with all of the required

pieces of information by January, except for using a table of contents. This piece of information was in place when this checklist was given again in May.

Figure 3

### Prior Knowledge Checklist

	Sept, 1998	Jan, 1999	May, 1999
I know what books are.	yes	yes	yes
I know why people use books.	yes	yes	yes
I know what the title is.	yes	yes	yes
I know what an author is.	yes	yes	yes
I know what an illustrator is.	not yet	yes	yes
I know how to hold a book.	yes	yes	yes
I know where to start reading.	yes	yes	yes
I know where to go when I reach the end of the page.	yes	yes	yes
I know where to find the end of the book.	yes	yes	yes
I know how to use a table of contents.	not yet	not yet	yes

The student completed a letter name/sound identification survey in September. She correctly identified all twenty-six lower case and capital letters. She also was able to correctly identify twenty consonant sounds and all short and long vowel sounds. She was able to correctly identify all twenty-one consonant sounds by the beginning of second quarter.

### Portfolio Assessment

One portfolio selection for the first quarter was an illustration of this student's favorite part of "Franklin Goes to School" by Paulette Bourgeois (see Figure 4).

## Figure 4

### First Quarter Selection

This picture is about Franklin. He painted his new friends at school. I have new friends at school.

(dictated by student A)

She was able to recall details from the story, include them in her drawing, and relate them to her own experiences.

A second quarter selection was in response to reading “Stellaluna,” by Janell Cannon. Classroom discussions focused on the numerous problems that Stellaluna encountered in the story. Student A made a small flip chart showing a character from the story, a problem, and its solution (see Figure 5). As we discussed her project, she was able to identify Stellaluna as the main character. She indicated that staying with the birds and not being able to land on her feet was a problem for Stellaluna. She also said that Stellaluna was able to find her mother and no longer needed to live with the birds was the solution to having to behave like a bird. Her illustrations are descriptive.

**Figure 5****Second Quarter Selection**

By the third quarter, student A used illustrations to respond to literature, but she also began responding through writing. She told me that one of her favorite stories was “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” by Eric Carle. Her mom had read it to her for as long as she could remember. She chose to paint and write about this story during her project time. Her illustration was painted with great care, and she even put glitter on the caterpillar (see Figure 6). This illustration supported student A’s oral retelling of the story.



This fourth quarter selection was written in response to the book “Me and Neesie,” by Eloise Greenfield (see Figure 7). The amount of growth observed in this student was observed in many ways. The writing provided evidence that the student comprehended the meaning of the story. It allowed the student to relate an experience and extend her thinking-language ability. Classmates responded positively by sharing similar experiences.

Figure 7

Fourth Quarter Selection – This selection is typed from the original.

My special friend was. A dog who would always come outside with me. And he would come outside in the winter with me and he would play with me. But when I was on a vcashon he was with my step dad he ran out on the street and. A car was comeing he got hit by the car and I was relly sad but I always think about him. I liked him a lot. And we barede him undeer a prety tree. I miss him a lot.

Student A began the school year with some basic reading abilities. She was a motivated learner and ended the year with an expanded vocabulary and in increased interest in different authors and illustrators. She developed an understanding of plot and the significance of illustrations and was able to demonstrate comprehension through numerous methods.

### Student B

Student B, a boy, entered first grade with numerous behavior problems. Although his kindergarten teacher believed that he had the ability to make good progress, his reading abilities appeared limited. He was from a single-parent home with a mother who was in the midst of a third divorce

and did not appear to give her son adequate support.

### Informal Assessment

When interviewed about school and reading, a marked difference in student B's attitude between September and January was apparent. He started school with little direction regarding reading. Recess seemed to take priority. In January, he showed an interest in reading and seemed to understand that he had some control over the amount of learning that took place (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

### Student Interview

September, 1998

Things I like about myself – I do math good.

What I like about school and reading – School is fun. I like recess.

What I hope to learn – I want to shoot baskets.

I can do this by – I don't know.

January, 1999

Things I like about myself – I am in Tyler's reading group. I can read harder stuff than that other group.

(The group he was in at the beginning of the year).

What I think about school and reading – I can read the books I get at the library. Sometimes my mom helps me. I like math, too.

What I hope to learn – I want to read the dictionary like Sam does. (Sam is one of his classmates).

I can do this by – Reading at Silent Reading Time with Sam and doing more Book Bags.

The use of running records helped me to determine the type of miscues that student B was making and to decide on teaching points from this information. Beginning the school year in Guided Reading, Level B, this student was unwilling to take risks and did not attempt unknown words. Level B is a first semester, first grade guided reading level. He would stop when he came to a word that he did not know and wanted to be told the word before continuing to read. Such responses continued through Level C with different types of miscues. Level C is also a first semester, first grade

guided reading level. He primarily relied on graphophonics; meaning was secondary. By the end of the first semester, this student's instructional level was Guided Reading, Level E. Level E has a guided reading level of second semester, first grade. At this time, a marked difference in his attitude toward reading was observed. He took an active part in the reading process: He wrote down unknown words during silent reading time and asked for help in identifying them. He kept a large number of these words in his desk, and as indicated by his mother, took these words home and placed them on the refrigerator. At the end of the year, the student's instructional reading level was Guided Reading, Level K. This is a first semester, second grade guided reading level. He corrected miscues ninety-eight percent of the time. It was evident that meaning was important to him because he would stop reading and consider the author's meaning. He also asked many questions to clarify his comprehension of a passage.

The book knowledge checklist also indicated that Student B was gaining information and self-confidence (see Figure 9). In September, he was unsure of basic information such as title, author, and illustrator. By May, he had knowledge of these items and all others covered by the checklist.

Figure 9

Prior Knowledge Checklist

	Sept, 1998	Jan, 1999	May, 1999
I know what books are.	yes	yes	yes
I know why people use books.	yes	yes	yes
I know what the title is.	not yet	yes	yes
I know what an author is.	not yet	yes	yes
I know what an illustrator is.	not yet	not yet	yes
I know how to hold a book.	yes	yes	yes
I know where to start reading.	yes	yes	yes
I know where to go when I reach the end of the page.	not yet	yes	yes
I know where to find the end of the book.	not yet	yes	yes
I know how to use a table of contents.	not yet	not yet	yes

Student B completed a letter name/sound identification survey in September. He correctly identified twenty-six capital letters and twenty-four lower case letters. He reversed “b” and “d” until the third quarter. At the beginning of the year, he was able to correctly identify four short vowel sounds, all long vowel sounds, and eighteen consonant sounds. All sounds were correctly identified by the second quarter.

Portfolio Assessment

A portfolio selection for the first quarter was an illustration in response to “My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother,” by Patricia Polacco. The picture shows details important to the student; it indicates that he listened and had accurate recall. Student B informed me that he liked this story because the brother and sister were friends at the end (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

First Quarter Selection

By the second quarter, I observed that the student was more aware of story structure. Figure 11 shows illustrations indicating the child's understanding of the beginning, middle, and end of the story "Gila Monsters Meet You at the Airport," by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat.

**Figure 11**

**Second Quarter Selection**

The following table shows the results of the selection process for the second quarter. The results are based on the selection criteria outlined in the selection process. The results are as follows:

Candidate Name	Score	Rank
John Doe	85	1
Jane Smith	82	2
Michael Johnson	78	3
Sarah Williams	75	4
David Brown	72	5
Emily White	70	6
Robert Green	68	7
Laura Black	65	8
James Gray	62	9
Alice King	60	10

The results of the selection process for the second quarter are as follows. The results are based on the selection criteria outlined in the selection process. The results are as follows:

During the third quarter, this student showed an increased awareness of print and the relationship of print and illustrations. His choice for our daily story was "The Doorbell Rang," by Pat Hutchins. I later asked him some questions about the story. His responses are recorded in Figure 12 and were included in his portfolio.

Figure 12

### Third Quarter Selection

Tell me what happened in the story.

Mom baked cookies but the doorbell kept ringing and more kids kept coming. Then Grandma came with a new batch of cookies.

What was your favorite part of the story? Why was that?

My favorite part was Grandma came and gave them some more cookies. I liked it because she was sharing.

Describe your favorite scene in the story.

I like when Jay and Simon come in with their four cousins. There are muddy footprints all over the floor. Just like at my house.

Tell me about one of the people in the story.

Mom is really nice. She makes cookies like Grandma, that's her mom. She doesn't get mad when more kids keep coming over and making a mess in the kitchen.

By the fourth quarter, this student's increased interest in books was evident. He used his free-choice center time to locate four books, by Kevin Henkes, and illustrated a scene from each one. Student B also used the computer to write a letter to Kevin Henkes (see Figure 13).

Figure 13

### Fourth Quarter Selection

Dear Kevin Henkes,

I love the story of Julius the baby of the World. I love the part were the people were avrer. I like Lilly that was screeming. I would like to read anutr book that you rote.

**Figure 13 (continued)**

This student began the school year unmotivated to read or participate in academic activities. He became excited about reading and interested in pursuing new vocabulary and became involved in the reading process. His

vocabulary increased, and he became committed to expressing himself and completing an activity.

### Conclusions

Reading portfolios in a first grade classroom has been a rewarding experience for the students and their teacher. The children were able to accept the responsibility of developing the exhibits for their portfolios. As their portfolio development progressed, they had evidence of their progress in acquiring reading abilities.

The children's ongoing portfolio collection allowed me to more closely connect instruction and assessment. I could make note to the students, as well as their parents, their progress and instructional needs. The parents' responses to portfolios as an assessment tool was positive. Many expressed appreciation for concrete examples of their child's work. They were able to observe their child's growth and to understand how they could nurture the child's reading abilities at home.

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