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Portfolios as a qualitative writing assessment technique in a first grade classroom

Nancy F. Miller
University of Northern Iowa

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Portfolios as a qualitative writing assessment technique in a first grade classroom

Abstract

Writing is a process. To assess involvement in a process, it needs to be described. Therefore, qualitative assessment needs to be applied. Portfolios, supported by other descriptive techniques, can be used not only to assess children's writing progress and instructional needs but to connect instruction and assessment. A collection of writing exhibits in a portfolio collected over time can show children, their teachers, and their caregivers progress and can assist them in setting goals for language activity and instruction in the future. Use of qualitative assessment rubrics, surveys, and parental involvement in the process of self-assessing are techniques from which instruction can come.

Writing portfolios were implemented in a first grade classroom. Three writers were focused on as they developed their writing portfolios. Selections included analysis from the teacher and parents, and self-reflections from the students. As the students examined their writings, they began to understand their progress, instructional needs, and set goals for future writings.

Portfolios as a Qualitative Writing Assessment Technique
in a First Grade Classroom

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Nancy F. Miller

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Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

Jeanne McLain Harms
Director of Research Project

6/29/30
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms

Jeanne McLain Harms
Graduate Faculty Adviser

6/28/00
Date Approved

Rick Traw

Rick Traw
Graduate Faculty Reader

6/28/00
Date Approved

Rick Traw

Rick Traw
Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

Abstract

Writing is a process. To assess involvement in a process, it needs to be described. Therefore, qualitative assessment needs to be applied. Portfolios, supported by other descriptive techniques, can be used not only to assess children's writing progress and instructional needs but to connect instruction and assessment. A collection of writing exhibits in a portfolio collected over time can show children, their teachers, and their caregivers progress and can assist them in setting goals for language activity and instruction in the future. Use of qualitative assessment rubrics, surveys, and parental involvement in the process of self-assessing are techniques from which instruction can come.

Writing portfolios were implemented in a first grade classroom. Three writers were focused on as they developed their writing portfolios. Selections included analysis from the teacher and parents, and self-reflections from the students. As the students examined their writings, they began to understand their progress, instructional needs, and set goals for future writings.

The aspects of the language arts (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are processes by which children can create meaning. Engaging in the language processes promotes children's thinking and language abilities (Goodman, 1986). As children write, they compose meaning that can be shared with others (Graves, 1994).

Because writing is a process, it needs to be described; therefore, qualitative assessment techniques can be used in assessment to connect it more closely with instruction and to provide an ongoing view of children's writing progress and instructional needs (Graves, 1994; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Portfolios can also support children's emerging personal-social development as they assess their writing accomplishments.

Portfolio Collection as Qualitative Assessment of Writing

Writing portfolios are collections of exhibits selected over time by individual writers (Tierney, et al., 1991; Valencia, 1990). Children, as they develop writing portfolios, have opportunities to reflect on their growth and instructional needs and then to set goals for further writing and instruction (Courtney & Abodeeb, 1999). Portfolios also can support children's personal-social development as they assess their writing accomplishments.

Children's portfolios offer concrete evidence of their involvement in the writing process that can be viewed by teachers and parents. By

surveying these collections, children's interests, the types of writing engaged in, the writing components used, and their knowledge of writing elements can be observed (Tierney, et al., 1991). Portfolio collecting allows teachers to individualize instruction for their students (Frank, 1994).

Implementation of Portfolios

The teacher when introducing portfolio collection to children should discuss the concept of portfolios and the procedures for collection and show examples, such as other children's portfolios from previous years or the teacher's writing collection (Tierney, et al., 1991; & Galda, et al., 1997). The students need to understand that many different types of writing samples can be included, for example; journal entries, letters, stories, poems, literary response pieces, and writing from the content areas. The teacher's anecdotal records from conferencing also can be included (Tierney, et al., 1991).

A summary sheet should be attached to each writing exhibit. It should include the date of selection, the type of piece, the reason for selection, the progress made, instruction needed, and goals set (Valencia, 1990). Teachers can use a rubric, which can be kept in the portfolio, to assess each piece that is chosen for the collection (Galda, et al., 1997).

The portfolio exhibits can be housed in large folders. They need to be accessible at all times to their owners, the children who are compiling them (Tierney, et al., 1991). The number of portfolio compiling conferences can vary, but a minimum of one each grading quarter should be held.

Writing Program for a Looping Organization in Grade One

My first grade class was involved in a looping organization that involved kindergarten and grade one so I had had over half the students during their kindergarten year. As kindergarteners, they had engaged in much writing, such as group writing experiences directed by the teacher, writing as individuals, and journaling as a group. As individual children spent time writing, the teacher met with individuals or small groups for informal instruction and took anecdotal records noting specific elements the students needed work on, for example, punctuation, spelling, spacing of words, or sentence structure. Each individual student had a folder in which to keep their works in progress.

Introduction of Portfolios

In grade one, the teacher modeled the writing process through use of a daily newsletter, dictated stories, and group interactive writing. Each morning, I wrote a letter to the boys and girls letting them know what was the agenda for the day. At the beginning of the year, I read

the letter aloud to the students. Then, the students and I re-read the letter aloud. As the year progressed, students were able as a group to read aloud the letter independently.

Through these writing experiences, children were able to see their ideas transposed to written symbols and to understand why spacing of letters and margins were important and how punctuation and capitalization were used as meaning signals. Letter formation was also taught. We talked about the elements of writing daily so that the children incorporated them naturally into their writing. The students developed pictionary as references. During the writing time, the teacher conferenced with individual students or small groups and taught mini-lessons to those who needed assistance on specific aspects of writing.

Ideas for writing were never a problem. Students wrote about things that were important and meaningful to them.

The writing center was established to offer supplies for the students' writing, such as writing utensils, different kinds of paper (lined, unlined, and story-size), staplers, date stamps, a Rolodex with children's names, pictures, and charts of common words representing the concept study of themes and units across the curriculum. Bookmaking materials were also made available. The children were shown the organization of

materials and encouraged to take responsibility for maintaining the center. The center was available for use throughout the day. The computer lab was available a period each week for the students to publish their writing.

The students were given spiral-bound journals to record important experiences. At the end of the day, using the overhead projector, we recorded a summary of the day's important experiences. The children then recorded their personal responses in their journals.

Assessment from Portfolios

The children filled out a writing survey at the beginning of the school year that focused on how they viewed themselves as a writer (see Appendix A). Students also responded to what I can do in my writing and what I am working on each quarter (see Appendix C).

The students chose pieces to include in their portfolios each quarter. When choosing a piece for the portfolio, the children filled out a form stating why they chose the piece and noting their progress. The teacher in conferences discussed with the children their progress and instructional needs and then collaborated with them on future goals for their writing.

Assessment of the students' work was done using a revised version of a rubric found in Batzel's book (1992) Portfolio assessment and

evaluation: Developing and using portfolios in the classroom (see Appendix B). Ideas, organization, word choice, sentence structure, and mechanics were areas that the teacher focused on when assessing the students' writing piece.

The parents were introduced to the writing program and portfolio assessment at the first of the school year during the first parent-teacher conferences. The parents wrote comments on the children's first writing exhibit in their portfolios. Two "Writers Nights" were held for parents. The parents had an opportunity to come to school and participate in a writing workshop with their children. Writing guidelines were distributed to the parents. Each child and his or her parent chose a topic together, and then they wrote a story. Also, the parents had an opportunity to respond to the children's writing in their portfolios.

Study of First Graders' Portfolio Collections

At the beginning of the school year, I chose three students' portfolios to focus on in order to more clearly understand the portfolio collection process. These children had different abilities, experiences, and interests in writing.

Student A

This student appeared to be of average thinking-language and personal-social development. Her response to a writing survey given by the teacher at the beginning of the school year indicated that she considered herself an author because she liked to write her family's names and draw images of them. She believed that people write to learn more and to learn to read. She thought most people like to write. Her parents usually write letters for the church and grocery lists. When asked how she decided upon a topic for writing, she answered that she used her head to think and wrote about what she knew. Her favorite topics to write about were family and friends. She stated that she liked to write in her journal at school. When asked what helped her write, she responded, "Your mind."

First quarter. Student A's first portfolio selection in October was about her dog. She was able to write about something meaningful to her and had a general focus in this selection but few supporting ideas. Her word choice was limited but her sentences were complete with few mechanical errors. She was able to spell most words correctly and used capital letters at the beginning of her sentences.

During the portfolio selection conference, she said that the story reminded her of her dog. She thought her writing showed good ideas

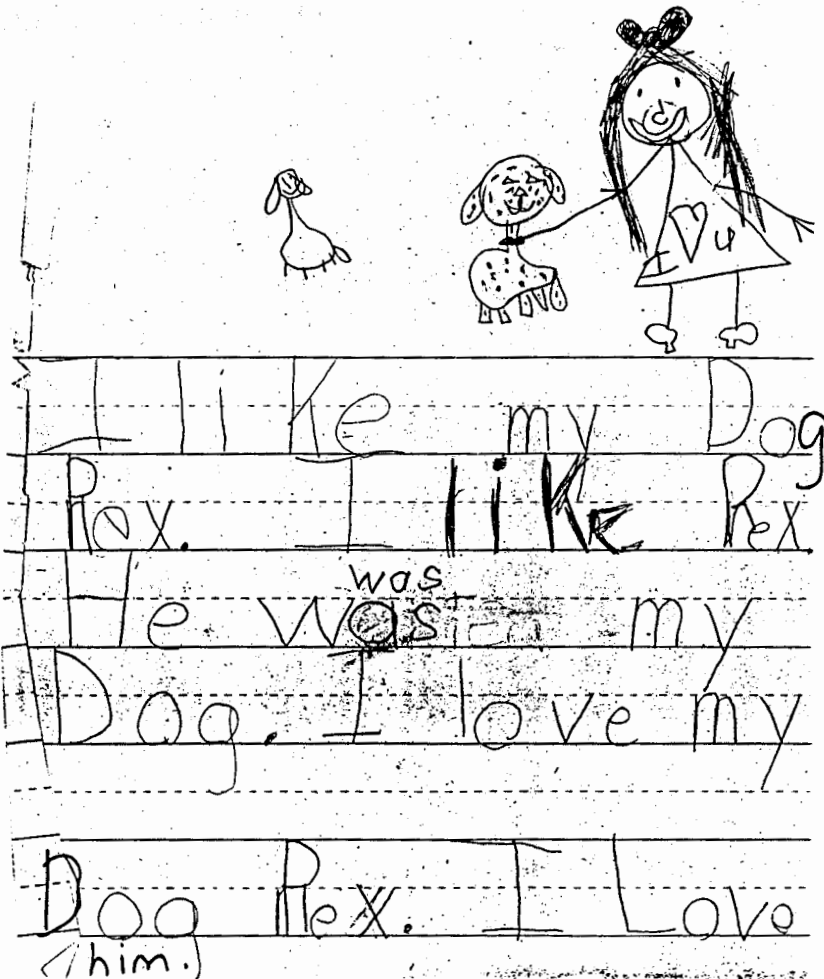
and progress in sounding things out and using spaces between words.

At the end of the conference, future goals included expanding the ideas of her writing (see Figure 1).

Her parents during the conference time thought their child's writing was progressing. They stated that she was using more vocabulary and that the piece showed her interest.

Figure 1

First Quarter Selection



Second quarter. In assessing this piece about her family, Student A had a general focus. She generated ideas independently and included some details about what she likes to do with her family. She attempted to present a sequence of ideas. Her word choice was limited, but she used complete sentences. She had some mechanical errors, yet she experimented with punctuation, for example, using periods after groupings of words. She had learned about spacing.


Student A said she chose this piece because she believed she knew what her family liked to do. She thought this piece showed progress from her past writing because of the explanation of the things her family members do. She stated she was able to spell some words easily. In her self-reflection, she stated that she realized after writing the piece that she needed spaces between words; therefore, she drew faint lines where the spaces should have been.

At the end of the conference, the child commented that she was working on writing more stories about her family and trying to use different kinds of punctuation. She was listening to her voice so that she could use sounds and spell known words. Her future goals included consistent use of spacing, punctuation, and development of a story (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Second Quarter Selection

I love my famole. I love my cat.
 and my dog we play weth rex we play.
 weth his Ball and his frisebe. and
 I play weth Mindy we play
 Barbies.



When she shared her story with her parents, they believed she had a fine story, that her handwriting was acceptable, and her message was clear. They believed it was a fine story.

Third quarter. Student A's selection for this quarter indicated that she was applying much of the instructional program. Her writing was focused on a topic that was developed with a logical sequence and supporting details. Her story showed that she clearly understood the structure of a story - - beginning, middle, and ending. She had expanded her word choice, used simple sentences that were complete, and had some errors in spelling and punctuation. Her instructional needs include development of the story, consistent use of correct punctuation, and more attention to correct spelling (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Third Quarter Selection

I like Anthony.
 he has green ^{eyes} ~~ears~~.
 and a ^{lizard} ~~lissre~~ ^{shirt} ~~sort~~ on.
 I play with him at ^{recess} ~~ryess~~.
 We play ^{er} ~~tigras~~ at ^{recess} ~~ryess~~.
 we like to play with.
~~xjaver~~ ^{cock other} we play ^{teenagers} ~~tyhajes~~.
 me and Anthony like to.
 play at ~~ryess~~ The End.

After reflecting on her work, Student A thought that her story showed that she could develop the characters in her stories. Her comments on her self-reflection centered more on mechanics than the content of the story. Her self-reflection label is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Self-Reflection Label

I chose this work because: I know Anthony

It shows my progress because: I can spell,
put it in punctuation and space.

My goals are to: spell more words

Student B

This student appeared to be of average thinking ability. Her oral ability was much more developed than her written language. In her kindergarten year, she enjoyed being read to and could orally tell complete stories. As she told stories, she was animated and imaginative. The loss of her father late in her kindergarten year inspired her to write many stories about him.

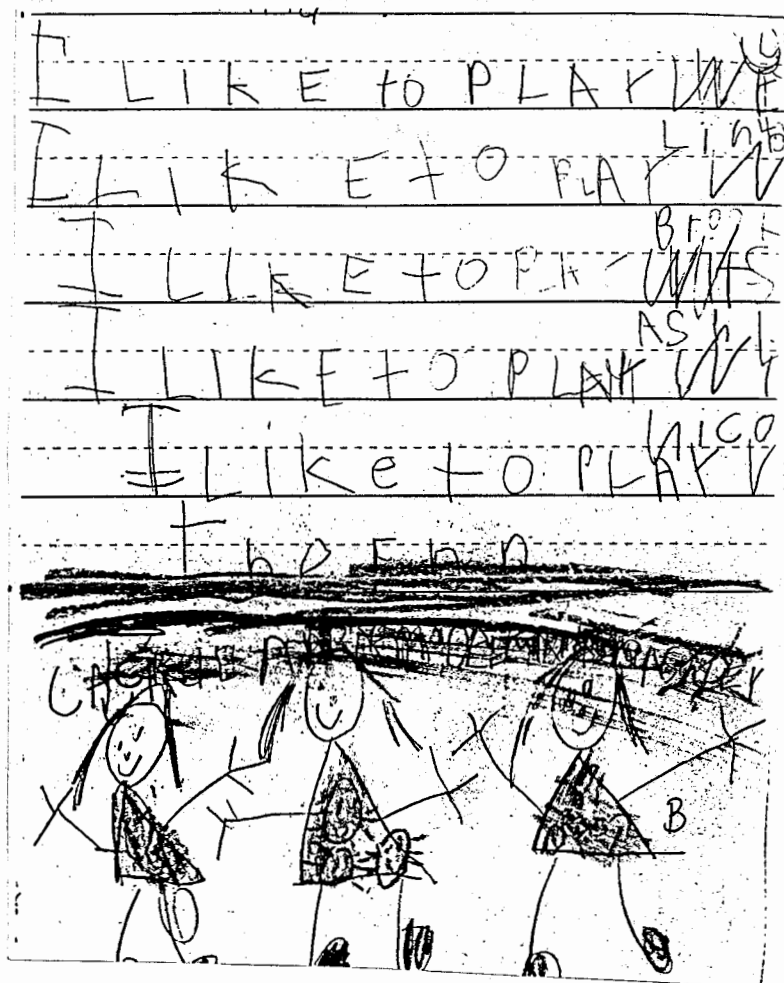
At the beginning of first grade, Student B responded openly to the writing survey. She did not consider herself an author because she did not feel like one. She thought people wrote because they wanted to

write a book or two. She related that her parent had a journal diary. Student B said she made writing decisions by using her imagination and making things up. Her favorite topics to write about were her friends. She liked to do writing at home. When the teacher asked her what helped her to write, she responded, "God." Student B had some difficulties concentrating on work and understanding written form as she began grade one.

First quarter. Student B said she chose the piece for her portfolio because it was the best she had ever done. It contained few original ideas and limited word choice. The sentences were complete, and most of the words were spelled correctly. She commented that she left space between the words, spelled some words correctly, and was able to make a story. In the story, she merely stated who she liked in a repetitive format copying the classmate names that were visible in the classroom. Her goal was to write different kinds of stories, maybe about her family (see Figure 5).

Her parent commented at conference time that she believed her child was making progress in writing. She was spelling more words correctly.

Figure 5

First Quarter Selection

Second quarter. Student B focused on an idea as she developed the piece, included some supporting ideas, and was beginning to develop a logical storyline. Her word choice had expanded though it was still somewhat limited. Most of the simple sentences were complete. She

used no punctuation and sometimes used capitalization of sentences incorrectly. Her handwriting showed upper and lower case letters. Many of the words were correctly spelled.

In the conference, Student B stated that she chose this piece because she was confident in spelling words correctly, left space between words, and wrote about an idea that was meaningful to her. Student B's parent believed that her child's vocabulary was growing and that she was expressing her feelings well. This student's goal was to use more correct spellings, concentrate on punctuation, and expand her stories (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Second Quarter Selection

MY DAD is so Good
to me. Even though
He is in Heaven
But I Love Him
In Heaven I Love my
Dad in Heaven when
He is in Heaven
I think of Him a lot

Third quarter. Student B chose a piece about a friend. Her writing was focused on the topic and included some details but lacked a beginning, middle, or ending. Most of her simple sentences were clearly written. She was becoming aware of using a variety of sentences. She used consistent spacing between words and correct punctuation for the most part. The repetition in her story created a lyrical quality (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Third Quarter Selection

My friend is Haett.
She is nice to me.
She is My Best
friend. and Me and
Haett like to play.
Haett and Me are friends.

I like Haett. She is my
friend. And she is nice
to me. and she is my best
friend. She likes me.
She is my friend. And
she plays with me.
She is my friend.

Student B believed she had made progress in her writing. She was proud of the fact that she was remembering to use spacing and punctuation. Her self-reflection label is shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8

Self-Reflection on Third Quarter Selection

I chose this work because: my friend
is something I know
about.
 It shows my progress because: I leave
spaces and use
periods.
 My goals are to: write heater.
make longer
stories.

Student C

This student was competent and self-motivated. She applied elements of the language arts instructional program in her writing. The topics for her pieces were from her experiences. When the teacher asked in the survey if she considered herself an author, she answered, "Yes, I can read and make books." She believed people wrote so that they would know what a story was about and that most people liked to write. She stated that her parents wrote at work. Her favorite author was Marc Brown; he gave her ideas for writing. Other topics she enjoyed writing about included her family and how to do things. She said she liked to write at school and that books helped her to write. She also thought her brain helped her.

First quarter. Student C's first portfolio selection was about planting pumpkins. She illustrated her piece with an image of a clock to represent the time it takes for the pumpkin to grow and developed a diagram of the process. Her inclusion of visuals showed considerable sophistication. In this selection, Student C developed a topic with some details. Her ideas had a logical sequence. The simple sentences are clearly written. The student left spaces between words, experimented with punctuation, and had some words spelled correctly.

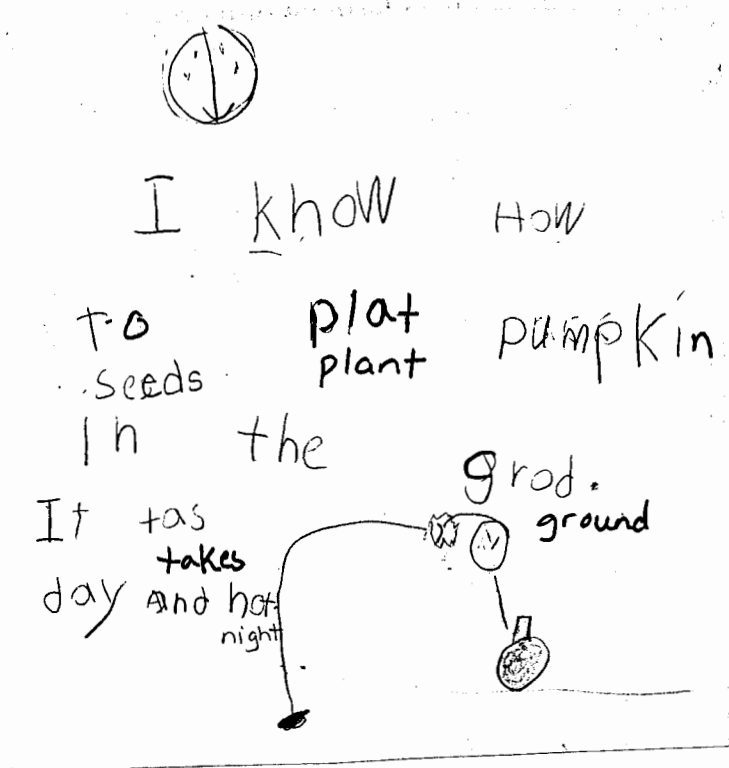
The student chose this piece because she believed that she had created a story. She thought her story showed progress because she had written different words, left spaces between her words, and used

periods. Her writing goals were to expand the ideas in her stories and to spell more words correctly (see Figure 9).

Her parents commented during conference time that she had used a lot of new words, along with words she already knew. They liked the way she spaced between her words and used complete sentences. They were impressed with her illustration.

Figure 9

First Quarter Selection



Second quarter. In conferences during this period, Student C stated that she had worked toward developing stories that described the characters she was writing about and some of the activities that they

liked to do. Her portfolio choice for the second quarter was a story about her two dogs that were special to her. She focused on her topic and included details about her dogs, such as their names and ages. Her story progressed in a logical sequence. She used clear simple sentences. She consistently left space between words, capitalized proper names, used correct punctuation, and spelled some words correctly.

Student C said she chose this piece for her portfolio because she likes her dogs and wanted to share this important information with others. She believed the piece showed progress because she left spaces between words, wrote names with capital letters, and spelled most of the words easily. Her future goals for writing were to continue to expand stories (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

Second Quarter Selection

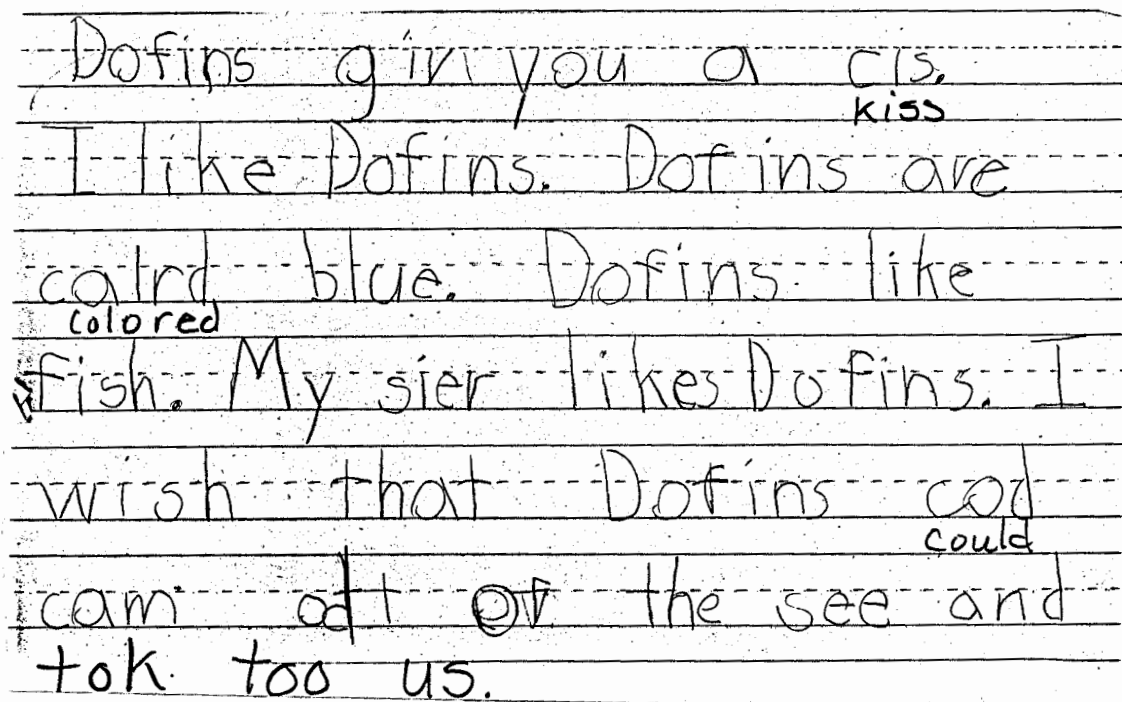
I have two dogs.
 I like my dogs.
 I was a lay with my
 dogs. you will like my
 dogs to. Dog is 1 our
 my dogs. Duke is the
 other 1. Dog is 4. Duke
 is 7. Duke is a color blind.
 I dot know

Third quarter. During this period, Student C had started to add personal insights in her story. She enjoyed writing about subjects of interest and even explored non-fiction books to supplement the

information that she brought to her stories before adding some personal details. She would benefit from assistance in using reference skills. Some of her ideas were original. In the selection for her portfolio, she focused on the topic of dolphins and included supportive details. Her ideas, for the most part, followed a logical sequence and were presented clearly in simple sentences. Her choice of words supported her ideas. She consistently left spaces between words, capitalized the beginning of sentences, and used correct punctuation. Her spelling had improved (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Third Quarter Selection



Dofins giv you a cis.
 I like Dofins. Dofins are
 colord blue. Dofins like
 fish. My sier likes Dofins. I
 wish that Dofins ~~cod~~
 cam at ~~of~~ the see and
 tok too us.

After reflecting on her work, Student C noted that she had developed her piece by adding factual information, therefore generating ideas about dolphins. Her self-reflection label is shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12

Self-Reflection on Third Quarter Selection

I chose this work because: I like dolphins.

It shows my progress because: I can spell better. I think better.

My goals are to: I want to make my stories longer.

Summary

The use of writing portfolios in my first grade classroom as a collaborative assessment technique among the students, their parents, and me proved to be a valuable learning tool. The connections between instruction and assessment provided information about children's ongoing growth in writing and their instructional needs. The children's writing abilities flourished as reflected in their portfolios. By assessing

students' writing, I was able to center instruction on those areas which needed developing. Ideas for stories, the organization of a story, correct spelling of commonly used words, sentence structure, and mechanics were all areas in which the selected students made growth.

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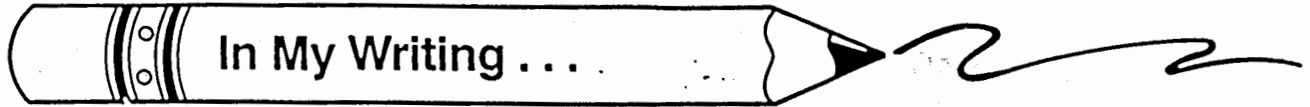
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Writing Survey

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Do you consider yourself an author? Why? Why not?
2. Why do you think people write?
3. Do you think most people like to write?
4. Do your parents write? If so, what do they usually write?
5. Who is your favorite author? Why?
6. Are there any books by a particular author that have changed the way you write?
7. How do you decide what you're going to write about?
8. What are your favorite topics to write about?
9. When and where do you like to write?
10. What helps you to write?



I can _____



I am working on _____



FOR THE PORTFOLIO

Name: _____ Date: _____

Student Comments:

I chose this work because _____

I think it shows my progress because _____

Parent Comments:

We or I think that _____'s work shows _____

Teacher Comments:

I think _____'s work shows _____

			Writing Rubric		
	Ideas	Organization	Word Choice	Sentence Structure	Mechanics
4	Original Ideas	Ideas Connect	Variety Used	Clearly Written	Few errors
	Focus on topic	B., Middle, End	Appropriate Usage	Complete Sentences	
	Supporting details	Sequenced	Words Support Ideas		
3	Some original Ideas	Some connections	Some Variety	Most sentences	Some errors
	General focus - topic	Beginning, M., End	Some appropriate use	clearly written	
	Some details	Most Ideas sequenced	Words support Ideas	Simple sentences	
2	Few original ideas	Few Connections	Common word use	Some unclear	Many errors
		Attempts B., M., End	Limited word choices	sentences	
	Little focus	Not always sequenced		Fragmented	
	Few supporting Ideas	or logical		sentences	
1	Incomplete	No Ideas connected	Little word choice	Sentences not	Errors
	ideas	Lacks B., M., End		clear	No variety
	Unfocused	Little Sequence		Frequent fragmented	
	Lacks details			sentences	
0	No Attempt	No Attempt	No Attempt	No Attempt	No Attempt