Portfolio assessment in kindergarten

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Portfolio assessment in kindergarten

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of portfolios with emergent writers in kindergarten as an alternative method assessing and reporting student progress. Professional literature describing emergent writers and nurturing language arts programs, offering a rationale for portfolios as a means of writing assessment, explaining the implementation of portfolios in the classroom, and suggesting the role of portfolios in reporting to parents will be presented.

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Portfolio Assessment in Kindergarten

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More than ever before teachers are asked to be accountable for their students' achievement in reading and writing. Regardless of the grade level, teachers need to develop an appropriate appraisal of each student's growth in their classrooms.

The trend to focus on students' involvement in the thinking-language processes necessitates a descriptive, or qualitative, form of assessment, rather than standardized testing, or a quantitative form. One descriptive form--portfolios--empowers students as well as the teacher by allowing them to collaborate in assessing and then in setting goals for learning experiences. Portfolios are also a means of enabling a three-way partnership to be established among students, teachers, and parents.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of portfolios with emergent writers in kindergarten as an alternative method assessing and reporting student progress.

Professional literature describing emergent writers and nurturing language arts programs, offering a rationale for portfolios as a means of writing assessment, explaining the implementation of portfolios in the classroom, and suggesting the role of portfolios in reporting to parents will be presented.
Emergent Writers and Nurturing Language Arts Programs

Children enter school believing they can write. During their preschool years, most children have engaged in the writing process even though they use few of the language conventions (Graves, 1983).

Clay (1975) relates that until she began observing five-year-old children closely, she had no idea that they took stock in their own learning so systematically, that they spontaneously made lists of what they knew, or that they consciously ordered their language.

As children grow and engage in language experiences, they will learn much more about written language, such as symbols represent an author's meaning and the mechanics of language are used to create meaning with ease and clarity (Clay, 1975). If young children are supported as they engage in the writing process, their progress in acquiring thinking-language abilities is usually remarkable. They pass through several stages that have been described and replicated in many research studies. Gillet and Temple (1990) suggest these stages: (a) generitivity - a few symbols can be arranged in a variety of ways, (b) concrete hypothesis - a concrete relationship exists between writing and the object it represents, and (c) syllabic hypothesis - letters represent syllabic units.
While involved in the writing process, young children invent spelling. They move through many stages of spelling: (a) prephonetic - scribbles that are usually letter-like forms and are unreadable, (b) early phonemic - only letters and often only one letter that represents a word, (c) letter-name - intelligible characterized as usually incomplete but often containing consonants and long vowels, (d) transitional - overuse of rules, and (e) derivational - mostly conventional spelling (Gillet & Temple, 1990).

Children usually enter kindergarten in the prephonetic stage. Rapid learners' responses will often be in the early phonemic stage and will progress rapidly to the letter-name stage. A few children will enter at the transitional stage. By the end of the kindergarten year, many children's responses will be categorized as the letter-name stage. Slower learners frequently reach the prephonetic stage. Some children will have achieved the transitional stage (Dyson, 1982).

In developing language programs for young children, their natural urge to write needs to be the focus regardless of their level of response. Teachers need to provide a learning environment in which children can continue to be involved in the functions of language to create meaning (Dyson, 1982). By extending the opportunities to write throughout the school
program, children's emerging literacy can be greatly encouraged (Sulzby, Teale, & Kamberelis, 1989).

Exposure to many quality literature experiences is another element of a rich learning environment that nurtures children's emerging literacy. Quality works read aloud provide models of language. Children's writing reflects their literacy experiences, for they use the language conventions of these texts (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1987).

### Rationale for Portfolios as an Assessment Technique

Portfolios are a collection of exhibits that gives evidence of students' progress in one or more areas (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). They are a systematic collection of students' ongoing responses to the instructional program compiled by students and teachers. They can provide assessment that takes into consideration the processes that readers and writers have engaged in, the products they develop, the improvements they achieve, and the placement of their responses within the range for readers or writers of that age level (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

According to Tierney et al. (1991), the purpose of a portfolio in the elementary school is to engage students in periodical self-evaluation of their achievements so they can establish future goals for learning.
Implementation of Portfolios

Before initiating writing portfolios, teachers need to consider a number of questions about their establishment: What kind of structure will they have? What will go into them? How and when will items be selected to be included? How will they be evaluated or scored? What will be done with them at the end of the year? (Vavrus, 1990).

Portfolios should be student-centered with each folder representing works that a child in collaboration with the teacher has selected for inclusion. The collection is based on criteria for selection and for judging merit (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

As the portfolios unfold, the process is much more important than the product. The maintenance of portfolios is an ongoing process that results in a collection of examples from students' involvement in the writing process. Periodically children contribute writing samples to their portfolios. This collection provides students with data upon which they can collaborate with their teachers in reflecting upon their emerging writing abilities (Tierney et al., 1991). Many of the errors in children's writing in kindergarten are indicators of their experimentation with language which needs to be encouraged (Clay, 1975).
Role of Portfolios in Reporting to Parents

Prior to formal schooling, it is the parents who know and can discuss their children's strengths and weaknesses in terms of language acquisition, their preferences in literature, and their favorite book characters. All too often, with the advent of formal schooling, parents lose the intimate knowledge they have of their children's language development. Portfolios offer parents an opportunity to continue their involvement in their children's language growth and to be active participants in the assessment process (Tierney et al., 1991).

Parents need to be informed of how the portfolio process works, not just expected to be part of it. They can be encouraged to collaborate through newsletters, workshops, and conferences. By examining their children's portfolios, parents can participate in evaluating their children's growth. This involvement can help eliminate many misconceptions and misinterpretations concerning children's emerging literacy (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990).

As the lines of communication are established with parents, a cooperative team will emerge that enables children to live up to their potential. A shared vision of what education can be will be developed (Levi, 1990).
Implementation of Portfolios into a Kindergarten Instructional Program

The writer's school district has taken steps to assess the writing process through informal means. This descriptive account of pupil growth is carried out through portfolios. A simple format has been established: A manilla folder for each student holds the ongoing collection of writing. A piece of writing is added to it each month.

Adaptation of Portfolios in the Kindergarten Program

In the kindergarten program, the collection of children's writing samples for the portfolio has been extended. Each week children choose a piece of writing to share with the teacher and then place it in their folders. During the week, the teacher can also ask a student to contribute a piece to the portfolio because the child is consistently using a new skill, is experimenting with new skills, or is very proud of the work, or it is a good example for the other students. At the end of the month, the teacher and each student look at the pieces that were chosen, and then the student decides which pieces are kept in the portfolio. Occasionally students in kindergarten are reluctant to place a piece in the portfolio because they identify with it closely, so a photocopy is made for the folder.

As the pieces are chosen for inclusion in the portfolio during the second semester, the teacher asks the student to
explain why he/she chose a particular piece and records this information on an index card that is taped to the inside cover of the portfolio. Short abbreviated notes concerning the piece include the date, the topic, the medium of the piece (a picture, a list, a story, or some other form of writing) and the stage of writing and spelling. It also includes conference notes on specific pieces, aspects of writing taught through mini-lessons, children's work habits (whether or not a child works cooperatively and independently), and the degree of success in reading a piece to the teacher or class.

From the portfolio assessment that is conducted through conferencing, the children supported by the teacher set goals for further writing experiences. These conferences also provide opportunities for mini-lessons.

During a conference, the teacher starts with a lead question to get the student talking, and then sits back, listens, and records what the student has to say. More questions are interjected as the conference dictates. During conferences that were held after students wrote books about berries, these are examples of responses that were recorded: "This is really good because I really worked hard." "I wrote down everything I know."

As the children progressed through the school year, their reasons for selecting pieces for their portfolios became more
mature. For example, at the beginning of the year, Britney chose a piece of writing which involved practicing the letter "a" repeatedly. This reflected the study of letters in the program. A few months later she remarked in choosing a story to place in the portfolio, "The last one is the best because it has a story and the others don't." Amy, at the beginning of the year, chose a picture of a bear that she had colored, saying, "I chose it because it looked nice." Toward the end of the year, in selecting a story, she said, "I wrote my letters the right way." Also at the end of the year, Megan evaluated her story by saying, "I worked hard and I put all of the stuff down here."

Other Informal Assessment Techniques to Support Portfolios

Observations of children within the writing process are conducted. These observations are kept on index cards and are taped to a clipboard that is kept at the teacher's side. Factors that affect children's responses in a writing session are also included such as "cannot sit still today," "has a cold," "stayed at grandma's." Checklists of interests and responses to reading can assist the teacher in fostering literacy. An adapted interest inventory from Portfolio Assessment (1991) is used. The interest inventory helps children in selecting topics for their composition activity, as well as giving the teacher new ideas for the creative play area.
Interest Inventory

Name of child: ____________________________

Date: _________________________

My favorite thing to learn in school is ____________________________

After school, I like to ____________________________

My favorite game is ____________________________

My favorite toy to play with is ____________________________

My favorite playtime activity is ____________________________

My favorite thing to do at recess is ____________________________

My best friend's name is ____________________________

The animal I like best is ____________________________

My favorite TV show is ____________________________

My favorite movie is ____________________________

My favorite book is ____________________________

The food I like best is ____________________________

The most interesting place I ever went was ____________________________

My best vacation was ____________________________

If I could meet a famous person, it would be ____________________________

If I could do anything I wanted to I would ____________________________
The writer uses this literacy checklist adapted from Francine T. Cuccia (1990):

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT CRITERIA

Name of child_____________________________________________________

Date

___ Enjoys listening to stories

___ Is able to share/respond to experiences

___ Participates in shared reading

___ Is developing a concept of story

___ Is able to retell a story

___ Is developing a concept of word

Word boundaries, word vs. letter, produce word-like form

___ Is developing a concept of letter

Points to letters, letter-like forms (alphabet)

___ Is developing directionality of print top to bottom

___ Reads pattern books

Begins word match, picture clues, memory, context, syntax

___ Knows print carries meaning

Begins to track print and to make meaning out of his/her reading

___ Reads some environmental print

___ Reads back own writing
___ In writing, shows left to right orientation
___ Selects reading as a choice
___ Selects writing as a choice
___ Is beginning to recognize words in context "Show me the word that you think is bear."
___ Begins sentences with capital letters
___ Ends sentences with periods
___ Leaves spaces between words

Items on the checklist are dated when the teacher observes that the student is performing a specific task.

Reporting to Parents

Based on the portfolio exhibits, conferences, and teacher observations, a narrative report describing each child's growth in writing, as well as other areas of the program, is sent home each month. The report informs the parents of any specific aspects of writing that are being concentrated on or that are being consistently demonstrated.

At the fall and spring parent-teacher conferences, the writer shares the children's portfolio with parents. The writer explains how the portfolio is used for setting individual goals, what goals were attained, and what the new ones are.

A poster is placed in the classroom describing the writing stages with accompanying examples of children's writing. Using this poster as a reference, the teacher and the parents can
discuss the progress of the student during conferences. An important piece of information that the teacher conveys to parents and that the poster illustrates is that children are not expected to spell everything conventionally.

Looking at examples of children's responses throughout the year at the spring conferences, parents are amazed at their children's growth in writing. Examples of parents' responses are: "I forgot that my child used to draw like that." "I can read that." "I cannot believe that she can write such a long story." "My, how much he has improved in spelling." "He does that at home now, too."

Summary

Portfolios, an alternative to traditional methods, represent a descriptive approach to writing assessment. In contrast to achievement tests that only reflect student outcomes in numerical units, portfolio assessment offers an opportunity to observe students in a broader context. Their involvement in the writing process can be described from examples of their compositions. Portfolios can also assist in integrating instruction and assessment.

From maintaining portfolios, students can assume responsibility in collaboration with the teacher for their learning. They are able to see progress in their learning and therefore, can acquire a sense of personal fulfillment. Their
parents can gain a clearer understanding, not only of their child's process, but what is reasonable to expect of kindergarten-age children.
Bibliography


