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Writing portfolios: Descriptive assessment of children's writing

Abstract

A trend in the language arts program is to focus on nurturing children's emerging thinking-language abilities while they are involved in the language processes. This view of language learning places children at the center of the instructional program. A school learning environment that supports such activity promotes risk-taking and a sense of ownership. Assessing children's responses in this type of learning environment requires descriptive techniques (Johnston, 1987). In respect to the writing component of the language arts program, descriptive techniques facilitate the appraisal of children's responses as they write to create meaning. Assessment, then, becomes an integral part of the writing process with teachers collaborating with students to describe their emerging writing abilities and to ascertain their instructional needs.

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Assessment of Children's Writing

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A trend in the language arts program is to focus on nurturing children's emerging thinking-language abilities while they are involved in the language processes. This view of language learning places children at the center of the instructional program. A school learning environment that supports such activity promotes risk-taking and a sense of ownership. Assessing children's responses in this type of learning environment requires descriptive techniques (Johnston, 1987).

In respect to the writing component of the language arts program, descriptive techniques facilitate the appraisal of children's responses as they write to create meaning. Assessment, then, becomes an integral part of the writing process with teachers collaborating with students to describe their emerging writing abilities and to ascertain their instructional needs.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the use of portfolios as a descriptive technique for assessing children's involvement in the writing process. A review of professional literature will be presented as a basis for the proposed implementation of writing portfolios in a third grade classroom.

Review of Professional Literature

Portfolios as an educational assessment tool are in their infancy when compared to their use in other fields. For years, photographers, artists, writers, and models have compiled portfolios to showcase their abilities and achievements. Portfolios have been vehicles to assess their abilities and proficiency (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Portfolio assessment of children's writing provides collections of their work that exhibit effort and achievement in the composition process (Frazier & Paulson, 1992). Writing portfolios can reflect children's self-evaluation and their goals for future growth (Tierney et al., 1991).

This review of professional literature will summarize the goals proposed for writing portfolio assessment and will describe different types of portfolios and the roles of students and teachers in portfolio assessment.

Goals of Writing Portfolios

The overall goal of writing portfolios is to promote children's thinking-language abilities. First, the primary goal is to provide opportunities for self-evaluation. Students can become reflective practitioners and can come to realize that they are ultimately responsible for their own learning (Tierney et al., 1991). Johnston (1987) states that self-reflection is at the very center of the revision process in writing. Without this

monitoring activity, students cannot engage in extending, combining, omitting, and refining elements of their writing (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, & Herman, 1990).

A second goal is to assist children in developing a sense of ownership for their writing. To realize this goal, portfolios should be viewed as the property of the students and not the teacher. Students with the support of teachers can select pieces of writing for inclusion that represent their strengths as writers. In the process of selecting works, students can identify their writing strengths and needs and can set instructional goals for extending their abilities (Tierney et al., 1991). Johnston (1987) refers to self-identified needs as "teachable points" in students' development as writers. Therefore, learning begins with an awareness of the need to change.

A third goal of portfolios is to provide authenticity to assessment by offering a collection of students' efforts from their involvement in the writing process (Valencia, 1990). These exhibits need to reflect both the processes of learning and the products of knowledge; each is essential in the assessment of children's progress (Winograd, Paris, & Bridge, 1991). With authentic examples, assessment and instruction become an integral part of the language arts program (Valencia & Pearson, 1987).

A fourth goal of writing portfolios is to provide an ongoing assessment of students' growth in writing. Valencia (1990) states, "No single test, single observation, or single piece of student work could capture the authentic, continuous, multidimensional, interactive requirement of sound (portfolio) assessment" (p. 339). Writing portfolios can broaden a teacher's knowledge-base of their students' writing processes. They provide a window into assessment that informs instruction (Valencia, 1990).

Types of Writing Portfolios

Although each writing portfolio will reflect the unique personality of its owner, the instructional focus of this collection must be considered before assessing children's involvement in the writing process. Such an approach will help determine the type of writing portfolio that will be crafted. For the purpose of this paper, two types of writing portfolios will be addressed. The first is the sustaining portfolio, and the second is the progressive portfolio that is passed from one grade level to the next (Tierney et al., 1991).

Sustaining portfolio. A sustaining portfolio provides an informative view of the learner as a writer. Housed in accordion-type folders, scrapbooks, or possibly boxes, these portfolios become rich data banks as they offer a representation of a student's capabilities, progress, and instructional needs

(Tierney et al., 1991). Using curricular and instructional priorities as a framework, students can discuss with their teacher selected examples of written works, define goals of instruction, and set criteria to guide selection and assessment of exhibits in the sustaining portfolio. This interaction empowers students and gives them ownership of their writing assessment (De Fina, 1992; Au, Scheu, & Kawakami, 1990).

Sustaining portfolios should be kept in a central place so that students have access to them (Batzle, 1992). Then, they can review their writing goals and progress at any time.

In developing portfolios, Batzle (1992) suggests that students with the support of their teacher select samples from their writing folders each month in order to create an informative picture of their emerging writing abilities. Others who have studied portfolio assessment recommend that students update their portfolios quarterly. During this updating process, students can add pieces to their sustaining portfolio that showcase their progress toward their writing goals (Tierney et al., 1991; Wolf, LeMahieu, & Eresh, 1992).

The exhibits should include writing from a variety of genres, and from time to time, can also include a piece in the various stages of writing from prewriting to publishing (Batzle, 1992). Tierney et al. (1991) suggest that students' reasons for selecting pieces for their portfolios should be recorded on their

selections. Teachers can also add anecdotal notes, parent comments, composition rating scales, writing inventories, and checklists in order to provide a clearer picture of children's growth and involvement in the process of writing (Batzle, 1992; Wolf et al., 1992).

Progressive portfolios. This type of portfolio consists of samples that reflect the school-wide goals for writing instruction and are passed on to the next grade level. This collection has potential for providing the next teacher with a wealth of information about each child's involvement in the writing process (Batzle, 1992).

Progressive portfolios should not replace sustaining portfolios in the classroom, for they have different purposes and are complementary to each other. While the sustaining portfolio is largely a vehicle for student and teacher reflection, the progressive, or ongoing portfolio, can serve as a vehicle for resource teachers, next year's teacher, and administrators (Tierney et al., 1991).

Progressive portfolios may be more structured because they contain only representative pieces. Teachers and students can choose samples from the sustaining portfolios that provide evidence of children's progress in learning essential writing tasks (Wolf et al., 1992). Children can also make other choices from among their pieces, such as the two most important pieces

and their accompanying self-evaluations and writing samples from the beginning and the end of the year. Teachers can include summaries of anecdotal notes, dated writing inventories, and portfolio summaries (Batzle, 1992).

Student and Teacher Roles in Writing Portfolio Assessment

In developing writing portfolios, students and teachers need to take collaborate roles, establishing themselves as partners in learning (Valencia, 1990; Schwartz, 1991). Through organizing portfolios, sustaining and progressive, students are given an opportunity to grow as self-evaluators (Graves, 1992). As children become involved in reflecting on which samples of writing reveal their growth as writers, they are often surprised and pleased by the revelations (Tierney et al., 1991; Frazier & Paulson, 1992). Students involved in developing portfolios no longer have to ask, "How long does this paper have to be? or What do I have to do to get an A?", because they are asking these questions of themselves, thus facilitating their own learning (Batzle, 1992). As a result of this self-assessment process, children learn to set goals and discover that they are responsible for their learning (Tierney et al., 1991).

Through supporting students in developing their portfolios, teachers, too, have opportunities to become self-evaluators. They can acquire concrete evidence of their students' writing proficiencies based on exhibits in portfolios and from

conferences with students in the process of portfolio building. From this evidence, they can make instructional decisions (Tierney et al., 1991).

Writing portfolios empower teachers as well as students. As teachers collaborate with their students about their writing portfolios, teachers come to realize that their judgment is important and respected (Tierney et al., 1991). Goodman (1989) states that empowered professionals are confident about their evaluations because they are based on a continuous search to understand what the interactions in the classroom mean in relation to their students' emerging thinking-language abilities.

Implementation of Writing Portfolios in a Third Grade Classroom

After completing a two-year sabbatical to teach undergraduate courses in education at Luther College, the author of this paper will be returning to a third grade classroom in the fall. Therefore, a plan for implementing writing portfolios into an elementary classroom will be proposed. These portfolios will be initiated as a method of describing children's emerging thinking-language abilities.

Writing Portfolios as a Part of School Assessment

As an assessment technique, writing portfolios are in harmony with the school's assessment philosophy. The author's school district abolished letter grades in favor of descriptive

progress reports; thus, writing portfolios are congruent with the school's belief that children develop as individuals and should be assessed as such. Writing portfolios will give authentic documentation of the learner's progress and will provide sound evidence for the teacher's judgment in planning instruction.

At the beginning of the year, the teacher will explain *portfolios as a descriptive assessment to parents and to the administrator*. Parents will be kept informed through newsletters and conferences, and the principal will be invited to observe collaborative conferences and to review sustaining portfolios.

The school also encourages students to participate in parent-teacher conferences to assess their progress toward learning goals. Since writing portfolio development fosters self-reflection, students have information about their emerging writing abilities that can enhance conferences.

Portfolio Development in the Classroom

The atmosphere of the writing environment will greatly influence the success of students' portfolio building. Risk-taking will be promoted, and many models of quality writing will need to be provided for a print-rich learning environment. Sole ownership of writing assessment will be relinquished by the teacher in order to create an environment that encourages teacher-student collaboration. Students will be encouraged to grow as active decision-makers. They will have responsibility

for selecting exhibits for their sustaining portfolios. These portfolios will become the basis for collaborative teacher-student goal-setting.

The print-rich learning environment will be supported by the classroom library which contains quality children's literature representative of many writing genres. Poetry charts will be hung on the walls not only to serve as models of writing but also to enrich children's appreciation for the melody of language. The teacher will read aloud daily to the students from different genres providing a pleasurable experience that will enhance their knowledge of language. The students will be given considerable time to engage in silent reading of self-selected literature works and then to share their reading responses with others. Also, the students will have opportunities to read their writing to others. Bookmaking can facilitate students' reading of their peers' compositions.

At the beginning of the school year, children will be introduced to writing portfolios. An art student from the local college will be invited to share an art portfolio with the students. Then, the use of portfolios to assess writing progress will be presented.

Students will also complete a questionnaire that documents their attitudes toward writing at the beginning of the year. This assessment device will again be administered at the end of

the school year as a means of gauging growth. The teacher will interview each child using this survey (Rhodes, 1993):

How did you learn to write?

Why do people learn to write?

What do you think a good writer needs to do in order to write well?

What kinds of writing do you like to do?

How do you decide what to write?

Do you ever revise or edit a piece of writing? If so, describe what you do.

Do you ever write at home just because you want to?

If so, how often do you write at home (just because you want to)?

Who or what has encouraged you to write? How?

Do you like to have others read your writing? Who?

How do you feel about your writing?

Students will be given writing folders in which to keep their works-in-progress and finished works. These folders will be kept in milk crates and will be placed in an area that is accessible to students. From this collection, exhibits for their portfolios can be selected.

Accordion folders will be used to house students' portfolio exhibits. Such a large container can hold bulky items such as books authored by the children, photographs of writing projects,

and audio/video tapes of children reading their writing. The front of the folders can be personalized with a photograph of the child and by their artwork. The portfolios will be kept on shelves near the classroom library to allow for easy access, so the students can frequently examine their contents.

Every eight weeks the students and the teacher will collaborate in selecting four exhibits to be included in the sustaining portfolio. In selecting their portfolio samples, students will be engaged in the act of reflecting on their work which can make them increasingly responsible for judging the quality of their own work and for enabling them to take control of their own learning. Students will be asked to make decisions about which pieces of their writing show their interest and progress in writing. Large post-it notes entitled "Why I chose this piece?" can be attached to each exhibit explaining the reason for inclusion. Students will also complete an open-ended questionnaire which will encourage them to reflect upon their writing progress during the last eight-week period (Rhodes, 1993):

When you (teacher) are evaluating my writing, I would like you to look most carefully at the following piece(s) of writing, which I consider to be my best for this eight weeks:

I think that the above piece(s) of writing is(are) my best effort this eight weeks because:

In my writing during the last eight weeks, I have worked hardest on:

I feel that I have/haven't met the goal(s) in writing set eight weeks ago. My goal(s) for the next eight weeks are:

After the selections are made for the portfolio, students will sign up for collaborative conferences with the teacher. These conferences can involve the assessment of writing progress based on prior goals, the sharing of checklists compiled by the teacher, and the formation of goals for writing during the next eight week period. This assessment will also define teacher instruction for students that will be carried out in specific mini-lessons to meet the writing needs of particular children.

Portfolios will yield a wealth of authentic information about the growth and development of children's writing abilities. Pieces of writing from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the year will be chosen for an in-depth analysis of individual growth over time. Progress reports and quarter conferences will be enriched by the descriptive data that creates an accurate picture of each child's development.

At the end of the school year, the folders will be used to create progressive portfolios. Exhibits in the portfolios will

be carefully chosen by the teacher and the students so that they accurately reflect the learner and can furnish information about students' writing for the next teacher. This rich collection will contain authentic writing samples from the beginning and end of the year, two examples of students' self-evaluations, a list of published books, a writing inventory from the beginning and end of the year, a parent comment sheet, and two child-selected pieces of the "best" writing. Copies of children's stories and samples will be made for the progressive portfolio, so children can keep their original works to celebrate their progress as a writer in third grade.

The portfolios will be filed with the cumulative folders so that next year's teacher will have a rich data bank on which to develop a writing program for each child in the classroom. To provide a quick review of a child's progress in writing during the previous year, the following summary checklist with these ratings--observed (O), beginning (B), and proficient (P)--will be provided (Batzle, 1992):

Writing Process

Selects topics independently

Fully develops beginning, middle, end

Reads for information to include in writing

Develops writing topic with details

Summarizes information in own words

Writes within all domains:

narrative/descriptive

informative/expository

Understands own writing process

Enjoys writing and finds it meaningful

Prewriting or Rehearsal Strategies

Takes notes, makes lists

Collaborates, confers with others about a topic

Uses clustering, mapping

Uses outlines

Rough Draft

Writes for a purpose and audience

Takes risks

Uses a word processor

Revising

Initiates revision

Shares writing willingly

Gives and receives advice

Editing

Initiates editing

Uses editing conventions

Publishing

Sees self as an author

Shares finished pieces

Punctuation/Capitalization

- Uses ending punctuation
- Uses commas
- Uses quotation marks
- Uses appropriate capitalization

Form

- Uses verb tense agreement
- Uses subject/predicate agreement
- Uses paragraphs
- Varies sentence beginnings
- Varies sentence length
- Uses figures of speech

Spelling

- Spells a large collection of words correctly
- Marks approximations for later checking
- Uses resources to check spelling

Writing Portfolios as Part of Home-School Communication

When implementing writing portfolios, the role of parents in this small parochial school must be considered. Parents are genuinely concerned about their children's education, evidenced by the high attendance at quarter conferences and open houses. Their children's work is reviewed as items to be treasured. Writing portfolios will extend parents' appreciation of their

children's writing and will provide them more information about their children's development as writers.

The topic of the fall open house in September, attended by parents and students, will be portfolio assessment. The focus of the writing program--children creating meaning through the composition process--will be explained. Such an explanation can assist in answering parents' questions about instruction in form and worksheets. A video showing children involved in different aspects of the writing process will be shown. Writing portfolios will be described. Samples of writing portfolios will be presented, and children will share their own writing folders in progress.

To accompany the monthly Principal's Update, the parents will also receive a newsletter from the teacher. Through the newsletter, the teacher can keep parents informed about their children's writing development and instructional needs. Parent comments during conferences will be recorded on a form that is presented below (Rhodes, 1993):

How do you think your child is growing as a writer?

How can your child improve as a writer?

Does your child write at home? If your child writes at home, what types of writing are done?

What is your child's attitude toward writing?

What do you think has helped to create this attitude?

Do you have questions about your role in helping your child become a better writer?

Conclusion

Writing portfolios yield descriptive data for assessing children's growth as writers. Parents, students, and teacher will benefit from this valid information that is collected over the course of a school year. It will allow teachers to be more responsive to students' needs since their instructional strengths and weaknesses are documented.

Portfolios can facilitate the collaborative roles of home and school and of teacher and student, opening avenues of communication and cooperation. As a result, parents and teachers can work together to create a supportive learning environment for children's development as writers.

Though these benefits are noteworthy, the author of this paper believes that the most important outcome of writing portfolios is the nurturing of children's emerging literacy. Students' involvement with their own assessment will foster their ability to make decisions and to take responsibility for their learning. Through making decisions about their own progress as writers, children will become empowered learners as they reflect upon their work and set goals for their future writing development.

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