Portfolio-based assessment in the language arts curriculum

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Abstract
The implementation of the whole language concept into language arts instructional programs has necessitated a change in assessment. This instructional concept focuses on children's involvement in the language processes to create meaning. Through engaging in these processes, children's language abilities are developed.
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The implementation of the whole language concept into language arts instructional programs has necessitated a change in assessment. This instructional concept focuses on children's involvement in the language processes to create meaning. Through engaging in these processes, children's language abilities are developed.

In order to guide children in language experiences, teachers need to be constantly aware of children's language abilities and areas of content and concern that are meaningful to them. To describe children's emerging literacy, an ongoing qualitative record needs to be kept. Standardized tests, the traditional method of assessment, are limited in their ability to provide this type of information, since they fragment language, provide little evidence of students' behavior while reading and writing, and therefore offer limited assistance to students and teachers in planning a meaningful instructional program. Reading and writing development is too complex to rely on any single index of achievement (Valencia, 1990a). A single test score does not indicate the progress that has been made (Flood & Lapp, 1989).

Purpose of the Paper

This paper will explore the use of portfolios in the eighth grade as a means of storing the information that describes individual children's progress in acquiring literacy as they engage in the language processes. Portfolios can offer a
comprehensive view of each student's language development: they have the potential for showing patterns of growth emerging over a period of time and can serve as a valuable tool in planning with students and reporting to parents and administrators.

Support for Portfolio Assessment

Effective assessment should reflect the current understanding of literacy learning. It should be process-oriented rather than product-oriented (Harp, 1988). As the whole language concept is extended in an instructional program, methods of assessment need to be changed.

Limitations of Traditional Assessment

Critics have charged that traditional testing gives false information about the status of learning, is unfair and biased to some students, tends to negate the educational processes of teaching and learning by promoting testing as the primary emphasis in the process, and reduces the focus of learning to simple skills rather than higher-order thinking and creativity (Haney & Madaus, 1989). Norm-referenced test scores from standardized measures and criterion-referenced test results (e.g. assessment supplied by a basal reader series) represent a narrow conception of reading and writing development (Wolf, 1989). These traditional types of assessment are based upon an outdated model of literacy and prohibit the use of learning strategies.
The whole language concept calls for a means of assessment that goes beyond a single test score. Valencia (1990b) relates that assessment must be continuous, multi-dimensional, and collaborative. It should reflect the ongoing nature of learning and its variability as students and teachers work together to assess the process of acquiring language abilities. It should reflect learning objectives and student behaviors and offer students a chance to apply the knowledge that has been gained.

Portfolio-based assessment has the potential for building a complete picture of a student's language abilities by exhibiting all of the processes and products that provide an ongoing description of a student's reading and writing experiences (Jongsma, 1989; Vavrus, 1990). A portfolio should purposefully house the evidence that demonstrates a student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. Students and teachers can collaborate in assembling the contents of the portfolio throughout the year (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

The recommendations for portfolios as a means of assessment are based on the fact that records gathered while students are engaged in functional and contextualized literacy tasks are more useful and relevant to teachers and students than any set of numbers derived from tests (Valencia, 1990a). This running record can promote a climate of reflection (Wolf, 1989). Portfolios allow students to assume a more active role in
assessing their learning and encourage them to reflect on the progress and establish further goals for learning.

Portfolio-based assessment permits instruction and assessment to be tied together in ways that traditional assessment does not. Together instruction and assessment can provide more than either can give separately. From portfolios, evidence can be gained of the progress made in implementing the instructional program (Paulson, et al., 1991). Such information helps teachers tailor instruction to the abilities of the students (Simmons, 1990).

Aspects of Portfolio Assessment

A portfolio should resemble a variety of materials that indicate the development of language abilities (Valencia, 1990a). It can include materials collected throughout the school year in the form of criterion and norm-referenced tests; journals and self-evaluations developed by the student; reading inventories, anecdotal records, and checklists compiled by the teacher; and reading logs and examples of student work selected in collaboration by the student and teacher.

Student Assessment

Johnston (1989) believes that the most effective way to assess learning is self-evaluation. The ability to self-correct encourages independent learning. Self-evaluation is a valid and effective way to promote student ownership in the assessment
of language abilities. It is evaluation of the highest level involving two steps: collecting the data and making judgments about the learning that has taken place (Routman, 1988, p. 203).

The role of students in the assessment process is very important: Students themselves must become adept at monitoring their own reading and writing achievements. As a self-monitoring tool, portfolios can provide students with opportunities to analyze their reading and writing processes, express feelings and opinions about what they have read and written, relate what they have read to their own experiences, develop questions about what they are reading and writing, and expand their thinking about the events that take place in the classroom.

Student journals, compiled daily by students, can provide evidence of the attitudes and thought processes used by the student while engaged in reading and writing tasks. The process of journal writing can encourage students to do reflective thinking on their emerging language abilities. It is an indication of the knowledge students have about texts, about themselves and others, and about their involvement in acquiring language abilities. The journals can become part of the portfolio.

Teachers can support students in their record-keeping by suggesting possibilities for entries. For example, some journal
entries might describe the student as a reader or a writer. Others might include having the student respond to the most important part of a story or what was surprising. An open dialogue with a character in the story might be established. A student reading "Flowers for Algernon" developed a dialogue with the main character, Charlie Gordon, and offered Charlie advice on the situations he faces in the story:

"Dear Charlie,

Sometimes the people we think are our friends are really not. It hurts to find that out. I know how it feels. They didn't mean to hurt your feelings by making fun of you. Some people just don't know any better.

Yours truly,

Melissa"

This reflective response demonstrates personal involvement in the story and the development of an inner dialogue with the situation.

The portfolio can include a reading log which records the frequency and types of materials being read by the student. The student, with support and guidance from the teacher, is mainly responsible for making choices and keeping this log. It can be as simple as a listing of books, authors, and dates of reading. It can also include a personal reaction to the story. This log indicates levels and preferences in genres, topics, and authors.
This log provides an ongoing record of what and when the student reads. (See Appendix A.)

Another aspect of assessment to be included in the portfolio is writing samples which are dated pieces of writing chosen by the student or the teacher at fixed intervals to demonstrate growth. These can be written responses to literature, personal experience stories, letters, lists, essays, and creative writing. These samples can provide evidence of various stages of the writing process—prewriting (brainstorming and clustering), rough drafts, editing and revising, and final drafts. In collecting exhibits of their writing, students can be asked why they chose the piece to be placed in the portfolio, how and why it was written, any problems encountered and how they were solved, goals that were set and achieved, and goals for the next few weeks. Students can explore the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing in assessing its effectiveness; for example, these are two eighth graders' responses:

"I have learned that you just can't sit down and write a story and use that as a final draft. You have to go through many steps before you are actually finished. My literary strengths are the plot and the setting. I think the setting was pretty well expressed and that everybody had an idea of how it took place."
I thought for a long time about something to write about. I thought of things that would seem believable. I found out that you really have to think to make it exciting so people won't get bored reading it.

These self-evaluations demonstrate the development of students' writing abilities and offer students an opportunity to reflect on their involvement in this process and the effectiveness of their writing.

Captions on work samples, written either by the student or the teacher, can explain and interpret what the works show about a student in terms of instructional goals (Vavrus, 1990). Setting and meeting goals allow the student and teacher to plan and assess progress. Over a period of time, growth in the writing process can be observed through the samples collected in the portfolio. For example, an eighth grade student's story of a brother and sister finding and caring for an injured bunny, Waldo, prompted this response from the teacher:

"I really enjoyed your story. Setting and characterization at the beginning of the story captured your reader's attention. You could expand this story by developing the relationship of this brother and sister in the context of caring for Waldo. Keep writing—you may be the next James Herriot!"
The student has been provided with feedback on writing achievement and encouraged to continue to develop the story line.

**Teacher Assessment**

Teacher assessment of students is useful and effective only to the extent that it improves instruction for individual students (Johnston, 1987). The evidence collected in portfolios should assist teachers in making instructional decisions. The ability to encourage and record patterns of activity and changes in these patterns is the core of a teacher's evaluative ability (Johnston, 1989). Several informal techniques that are discussed in the following pages are useful and can be part of the portfolio.

A reading inventory can be used to summarize attitudes and interests in reading as well as other areas of student interest. Questions that might be included on a reading inventory are: what kinds of books do you read, how do you decide what book to read, who are your favorite authors, do you read at home for pleasure, and do you like to have your teacher read to you. An inventory can provide helpful information in planning the instructional program for the student. For example, a student interested in hunting might be guided toward specific types of reading and encouraged to write personal experience stories. A student who reads avidly in one genre might be encouraged to
explore other genres or target a particular author. A student who has shown fascination for an author's work might be guided to read his/her other works and learn about the author and his/her life experiences. These inventories can be used at specific intervals throughout the year to indicate changes that may be occurring in the attitudes and interests of the student.

Anecdotal records provide a description of a student's reading and writing behaviors. They can be compiled from teacher observations and can be noted during sustained silent reading, conferencing, oral reading, classroom discussions of literature, speaking and listening activities, and writer's workshops. Anecdotal records can supply much information about students' involvement in the language processes. For example, they are helpful in identifying a student's ability to concentrate while reading independently. A chart can be developed to show the percentage of time-on-task during sustained silent reading periods. (See Appendix B.) Also, these records can note observations of interests in books, knowledge of books, and reading strategies as well as observations of how the student views him/herself as a reader and writer and how the student generates ideas through the writing process.

Conferencing with a student provides a view of a student's interaction with the teacher concerning his/her thought
processes while reading and writing. Notes recorded during discussions of students' book choices are given below:

"I chose this book because I like the others in the series."

"I chose this book because it was a new one. I never had heard about the author, and I wanted to learn more about her."

"I read the back of the book cover, and two of my friends recommended it."

Notes from writing conferences indicate students' involvement in the writing process. Selected examples are:

Michael is "very proud of his four-page story on drag-racing. He plans to revise and edit and write a sequel with a friend. Also had three other stories to put in his folder."

"Holly and I discussed writer's block. She stated, 'I pound on the table. Then I try to think!'"

"Cari wrote four poems, because they're easier than long stories'. She plans to write a longer story for her next endeavor."

Notes recorded during classroom discussions of literature can indicate a student's involvement in the reading process and his/her willingness to become involved in sharing reading insights; for example:
"John often leads class discussions and volunteers to share his ideas frequently. A risk-taker."

"Molly is often unwilling to express her ideas even though she grasps the story idea very well. Works well in a smaller group."

These notes are helpful in planning activities and lessons in the classroom as well as organizing groups for discussions of literature.

Observations during writer's workshop can describe a student's involvement in the writing process, willingness to share writing, and his/her responses to the writing of others. These are selected examples:

"Curtis must be continually reminded to stay on task. He finds it difficult to concentrate on his writing in the classroom setting."

The teacher might adapt the setting to better meet the student's needs. Perhaps a quieter, more secluded place is more desirable.

"Sarah responds in a very positive way to the literary strengths of a piece of writing. 'I especially liked the characterization in your story. The characters really came alive. I feel like I know them.' Sarah is demonstrating an awareness of the importance of building an inner audience with readers."
These noted observations serve as a valuable reminder for teachers in planning the instructional activities in the classroom.

Checklists can identify children's attainment of language abilities in a systematic and retrievable form. These can be marked by both the teacher and the student throughout the year to note achievement in reading and writing skills. Possibilities include checklists for (a) sense of story structure--introduction, characterization, setting, theme, plot structure, and resolution; (b) response to the writing process--self-selected topics, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph development, and revision strategies; and (c) writing mechanics--handwriting, capitalization, punctuation, and correct grammar. (See Appendices C, D, and E.)

Student-Teacher Collaboration for Parent-Teacher Conferences

The portfolio provides a useful array of tangible evidence of student achievement to examine and discuss during parent-teacher conferences. The contents of the portfolio, assembled by the student and teacher collaboratively, demonstrate to parents and administrators students' development of language abilities and progress in doing so from the beginning of the school year to the end. The teacher and student can share examples of student work with parents and administrators. By examining and discussing journal entries, self-evaluations,
reading inventories, anecdotal records, checklists, reading logs, and tests, parents and administrators are presented with a meaningful representation of student progress and achievement. Strengths and weaknesses can be identified, and plans for enhancing the strengths and correcting the weaknesses can be formulated.

Summary

Portfolios can provide a profile of a student as a reader and writer and can document a student's progress in acquiring literacy. This long-term account can reveal what and how a student learns therefore, promoting continuity in a student's education.

From using portfolio assessment in her classroom, the writer observed the students becoming more involved in setting goals for their learning experiences and more adept in monitoring their own progress. As they became more accustomed to owning their learning experiences, they took more risks. The more they discovered about their abilities, the higher their expectations became. The students and the teacher formed a collaborative bond as they became partners in learning.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Books I Have Read

<table>
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<th>DATE</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>REACTION</th>
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BOOKS I HAVE READ
Appendix B

Reading/Writing Scan Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>2 on-task</th>
<th>1 brief interruptions</th>
<th>0 off-task; unprepared</th>
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Appendix C

Language Evaluation Sheet: Reading

____ Shows obvious enjoyment and displays a willing attitude towards reading

____ Borrows books regularly from the library

____ Reads for a sustained period of time

____ Knows how to choose a book suited to his/her interests and needs

____ Selects literature appropriate to his/her reading ability

____ Selects a range of literature to read

____ Can talk about reading and reading processes

____ Predicts meaning in texts by appropriate use of cues

____ Understands the value of rereading parts for information

____ Can skim to obtain information

____ Can summarize, including all major points

____ Can describe storyline development (setting, plot, conflict, climax)

____ Can identify characters and character traits

____ Can classify books (fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, folktale)

---

NAME

DATE

SIGNED

---

+ Observed in use
- Some evidence
° Area of need
Appendix D

Language Evaluation Sheet: Writing

___ Displays a willing attitude towards writing
___ Willingly seeks and accepts advice
___ Attempts a variety of genre
___ Is able to gather/brainstorm for information
___ Can select a topic
___ Consults a variety of sources in search of information
___ Shows organization toward a story form (beginning, middle, end)
___ Writes leads that arouse interest
___ Writes descriptively and gives details
___ Reveals a growing vocabulary
___ Sequences ideas logically
___ Writes satisfactory endings
___ Makes a positive attempt to edit and revise
___ Shows improved control of spelling
___ Structures sentences correctly:
   ___ correct punctuation
   ___ varies sentence structure (simple, compound, complex)
___ Structures a paragraph using a topic sentence

NAME ____________________________

DATE ______________________________

SIGNED ____________________________

+ Observed in use
- Some evidence
° Area of need
Appendix E

Checklist: Mechanics and Usage

___ HANDWRITING

___ CAPITALIZATION
  ___ Beginning sentences
  ___ Titles
  ___ Proper nouns

___ PUNCTUATION
  ___ Uses periods
  ___ Uses commas
  ___ Uses quotation marks
  ___ Possessives
  ___ Contractions
  ___ Abbreviations

___ USAGE
  ___ Strong accurate verbs
  ___ Subject/verb agreement
  ___ Uses adjectives and adverbs correctly
  ___ Pronouns
  ___ Plurals

___ SPELLING

Comments and recommendations:

NAME

DATE

SIGNED