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Literacy assessment with portfolios

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Literacy assessment with portfolios

Abstract

Whole language is a concept that is concerned with the nature of language and the emerging literacy of children. Instructional programs that reflect this concept emphasize children's involvement in the language processes to create meaning. Whole units of language facilitate children's natural evolution in these processes.

Literacy Assessment with Portfolios

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by

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Whole language is a concept that is concerned with the nature of language and the emerging literacy of children. Instructional programs that reflect this concept emphasize children's involvement in the language processes to create meaning. Whole units of language facilitate children's natural involvement in these processes.

The assessment of language abilities has not kept pace with what is known about language and language learning (Cambourne & Turbill, 1990). The methods used to assess children's involvement in the language processes are still, for the most part, the traditional quantitative measures that focus on fragments of language, or skills, and that view language as linear. Quantitative assessment does not accurately reflect children's language development, especially as information for instructional decision (Gaesser, 1990).

To be consistent with the whole language concept, qualitative techniques are needed to describe children's involvement in the thinking-language processes and to view language as recursive. One effective qualitative technique for assessing students' emerging literacy is the portfolio. Portfolio assessment is a multi-dimensional framework for describing students' behavior while they are engaged in the language processes.

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of the paper is to present portfolio assessment as more effective than traditional quantitative assessment in determining children's reading and writing abilities. An account of the writer's experiences in implementing portfolios in her classroom will be offered. Also reflections on this experience, both advantages and limitations, will be included.

Review of Professional Literature

Limitations of Traditional Assessment

For decades classroom evaluation has been used to label and group children for instruction. Often students' school careers were influenced largely by grades and a single performance on a standardized or criterion-referenced test. A single score or a letter grade cannot represent a student's total learning, yet this representation often occurs. Test scores have extraordinary power when no other records of a student's growth are available (Wolf, 1988; Valencia, 1990).

Calkins (1991) relates that standardized tests do not focus on the most important indicators of learning. Such tests do not reveal students' confidence as readers and writers or their abilities to learn or to find pleasure in language. This type of evaluation focuses on product rather than process. Also, time demands placed on teachers in using standardized tests include activities such as teaching students how to "take tests",

teaching to the tests, and stress and relaxation activities that teachers must add to their daily routines.

Tierney (1991) has enumerated several major problems with standardized, or formal testing. First, he asserts, these tests reflect an outdated view of classrooms and have restricted goals for learning. Second, they reflect a limited view of reading and writing. Third, they disenfranchise teachers and limit instructional possibilities. Finally, standardized tests do not allow students to be engaged in self-assessment.

Rationale for Portfolio Assessment

Evaluation can only be useful if it is taking place in whole and contextualized learning experiences. The main goal of evaluation is to learn about and seek to improve teaching and learning. Evaluation needs to empower learners to take the responsibility for their own learning (Johnston, 1987).

Assessment should be ongoing and grounded in classroom activities. It should happen in the context of learning and teaching. A wide range of assessment devices and strategies should be used in many contexts (Wolf, Athanases, and Chin, 1988).

Evaluation in a program that focuses on process has the individual's growth as the primary concern. Assessment should connect literacy with the lives of students. No one indicator of reading or writing can give a full picture of a student's

problems or potentials. Portfolios can serve as a collective representation of student accomplishment in the different curriculum areas. They are an evolving and changing accumulation of exhibits that document a student's progress in achieving his/her instructional goals. A portfolio can show a child's performance at the beginning of the year and then his/her progress throughout the school year with a broad range of materials. Portfolio evaluation capitalizes on the best every student has to offer, can encourage the use of many different ways to evaluate learning, and can have the integrity and validity that no other type of assessment offers (Valencia, 1990).

Cambourne and Turbill (1990) stress that it is crucial for the systems of instruction and evaluation to be collaborative. A school district should establish broad goals for the use of literacy portfolios that should be consistent with the goals of specific grade levels, districts and even state goals.

Since regular feedback is important for both students and teachers, tracing a student's progress through portfolios provides the teacher a better opportunity to reflect on the past and to plan for the future. Donald Graves and Virginia Stuart (1985) indicate that the most important record of a child's progress is the portfolio. They say that by using the whole folder, teachers can evaluate writing on many fronts.

They can evaluate children's ability to choose topics and sustain efforts over a period of time and to judge how well children take responsibility for elements of form, such as spelling, handwriting, grammar, or punctuation. A child's whole history of literacy can be seen in the portfolio.

Portfolios in the Classroom

Criteria for a well-developed portfolio system are provided by Valencia (1990). She relates that the portfolio shows the best efforts of students rather than their errors or mistakes. The portfolio style of assessment is an ongoing process rather than scheduled events several times during the school year as standardized tests would be. The assessment is multi-dimensional and collaborative with students and teacher assessing together to reach instructional goals. It occurs while students are actually involved in literacy learning.

Regular feedback concerning children's response within the language processes is important for both students and teachers. Tracing students' progress provides an opportunity to reflect on the goals set, the child's progress in meeting them, and the revision of goals or formulation of new ones (Valencia, 1990).

The portfolio provides a cumulative record of work that demonstrates the depth and breadth of a student's expertise. Portfolios are a dynamic, not a static means, of monitoring progress in literacy. Some possibilities for the contents of a

literacy portfolio are student daily work samples, test information, response log samples, independent reading lists, reading and writing in the content areas, letter writing, genres used in writing, anecdotal notes, videos, photos, tapes from student reading, and collaborative notes and checklists.

Samples need to be compiled that show the degree of control learners are displaying over language in all forms. According to Cambourne and Turbill (1990), some of these indicators of control are a student's sense of audience, use of conventions, use of genre in the different areas of the curriculum, vocabulary growth, and confidence in creating meaning.

Students should also be encouraged to use the portfolio to reflect upon their own progress. They also need to update their portfolios periodically and in so doing engage in self-reflection.

A literacy portfolio can offer physical proof of a child's progress in the course of a year, and if kept from year to year, a history of the child's school life (Cambourne & Turbill, 1990). The portfolio, then, is a cumulative collection of the work students have done. Some forms that could be used are: a traditional folder in which students keep their work, a bound notebook with separate sections kept for work in progress, and final pieces, or a loose leaf notebook in which students keep important pieces and examples of work.

Implementation of Portfolios as an Assessment Technique

Over a two-year period, the writer implemented portfolios as one means of assessing her students' language growth in grade three. During the first school year of using portfolios, they were limited to writing assessment. Then the second year both reading and writing were assessed by this means.

The artifacts that were gathered were student or teacher selected and were kept in folders for each student. Students kept lists of books read, samples of responses to their reading, "best" pieces of writing, samples of writing drafts in progress, end-of-book responses, tapes of dramatic readings, lists of published books, and regular monthly letters to parents written by the child.

Students kept their portfolios current. Students examined their writing folders after six weeks of the school year had passed and selected one piece they considered to be their best work according to a predetermined criteria, e.g., good descriptions, interesting use of verbs, or showing not telling. This selection was continued every six weeks. Children were guided to select writing of different genres. Students compiled lists of published works they had completed to be kept in their portfolios. A list compiled by one student included these

pieces published: "My Family", "My Trip to Colorado", "The Farm", "Baby Eric", and "Maggie and the Road".

Three times during the school year students were asked to write on a given topic that was holistically scored and kept in the writing portfolio. One such topic was "The Best Book I Ever Read." These were part of a cumulative portfolio that followed the student from grade to grade. Scoring was a 1, 2, 3, or 4, based on mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and on an overall impression of the writing.

The teacher conferred frequently with individual students on progress being made in the area of writing and reading. The teacher asked such questions as "What makes your story good?", or "How would you make your piece better?" Students responded by showing their understanding of the craft of writing and their involvement in the reading process. One child said, "My story has to be interesting, and I do that by using description." Another said, "My stories have to be longer and have more detail." Still another thought that her story would be good if the character in it was "likeable." Students were then asked what they did to improve their stories once they had finished.

Every piece in the portfolio is accompanied by either a checklist of skills or an evaluation of the work by the teacher or the student. Checklists included mechanical skills such as capitalization, sentence structure, punctuation, and the genre

being presented or read. The checklist used to assess reading abilities included the title and author of the book shared, the student's ability to summarize or retell the story, and the child's sharing of favorite portions of the story. The items on the checklists were established as goals for this grade level by the district. Everything placed in the child's portfolio had to include some sort of self-evaluation statement about the child's work. For example, one student stated, "I want my tape in my portfolio because I read with expression and because it sounds real."

The teacher kept anecdotal records and noted changes in behaviors or attitudes toward writing, e.g., "Student tried an informational piece after writing three fiction pieces." "Student enjoyed writing this story and included a great deal of action." One student in particular made a departure from his usual writings about stories based on TV characters by writing about his family. The teacher noted, "This is a first for Brian. He wrote a personal experience story with lots of description."

Students were continuously encouraged to set specific, realistic goals for themselves. One student's goal was to complete two stories she had been working on. She felt that a 'good' story would include "lots of action, they might be funny, and they would use big words." Another student decided

that writing thirteen stories in a nine week period would be too much, so she concluded that writing three or four stories and publishing one would be more realistic. Students were asked to reflect on how well they did in achieving their goals. This reflection resulted in more descriptive pieces and more time spent revising their writing.

All material in each student's portfolio was shared with parents at regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences. Everything in the portfolio was included as part of assessment for report cards. Because pieces had been saved from previous years, there was opportunity to compare and note growth in the student's writing. Parents' responses to portfolios were favorable. Some commented that they appreciated seeing the changes that their child had made from the early grades. They stated that it was interesting to see why their child chose certain work as "the best." By using students' own work parents are able to see at a glance the range of work their child is accomplishing.

Responses to portfolio assessment within the classroom have been favorable. Students are eager to place pieces of their best work in their own portfolio. One student wrote that she placed a reading response activity in her portfolio because of "all the color I put into it, and how it explains two things that happened in the book Ramona Quimby, Age 8."

The idea of self-reflection is still growing within this classroom. Students are experimenting with how much they know and with the idea of examining their own growth.

Reflections on the Advantages and Limitations of Portfolios for Assessment

From the writer's experience with portfolios as a means of assessment, she concludes that portfolios hold great promise. They provide power for both students and teachers within a common framework, allowing learners to collaborate with their teachers in discussing their achievements and needs. They provide teachers with opportunities to connect what is actually taught in the classroom and what is being assessed. Portfolios provide opportunities to ascertain children's abilities and to collect and preserve children's responses that would not be available otherwise. They give teachers the chance to change the way they think about teaching and learning.

Portfolio assessment requires teachers to look more carefully at curriculum and instruction. As a result, they can analyze and understand the meaning of each child's learning process.

There is not a universal acceptance from school officials and the public of portfolio assessment. The question of accountability in monitoring student progress still exists.

After using portfolio assessment, the teacher believes that it is a far better method of evaluating students' progress in acquiring literacy than standardized tests. This assessment technique captures and capitalizes on the best that every student has to offer. Portfolios encourage authentic evaluation.

However, there are limitations for their use. First, portfolios can be time-consuming if they are to be kept organized for ease in interpreting student response. They demand subjective discussion with students, and teachers have to take time to read and to interpret the children's works and their patterns of growth. Another disadvantage of the use of portfolios is the time involved. In this writer's classroom, the organization of portfolios required 15-20 minutes per week of student time and 30 minutes or more per week of teacher time. Portfolios should not evolve into extensive unused records that leave the teacher exhausted at the end of the week. Records need to be kept simple. They must prepare the teacher for a "teachable moment." In preparing for portfolio assessment, teachers need to learn that every response of the child cannot be recorded.

Because of the time involved in beginning portfolios, administrators need to consider providing release time for teachers, both alone and in groups, for planning and implementing.

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