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## Assessing children's literacy through writing portfolios

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## Assessing children's literacy through writing portfolios

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of portfolios as a means of assessing writing and their subsequent use in a fourth grade classroom in which the students are engaged in a process writing program. To establish a theoretical base upon which portfolios can be implemented as part 2 of the assessment of writing, the professional literature will be reviewed. Then, the writer will discuss how she implemented portfolios into an instructional program.

Assessing Children's Literacy  
Through Writing Portfolios

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
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by

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Meaningful writing assessment is student-centered. It is based on authentic purposeful tasks performed by the student while engaged in the writing process. The result of such assessment provides evidence of a student's learning strategies and achievement. In contrast, writing assessment that is product-oriented does not allow for the study of an individual's abilities and needs and does not encourage the writer's ownership of the composition process, both of which are crucial elements in learning.

One means of assessing a student's involvement in the writing process is the portfolio, which is a systematic collection of a student's written work illustrating certain aspects of his/her growth as a writer. Collaborating with the teacher, a student can select examples of his/her work for the study of writing progress and also for exhibits to indicate growth in the long term. Portfolios can be used to describe a student's growth, along with other assessment strategies, such as teacher anecdotal records, conference notes, and checklists.

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this paper is to describe the implementation of portfolios as a means of assessing writing and their subsequent use in a fourth grade classroom in which the students are engaged in a process writing program. To establish a theoretical base upon which portfolios can be implemented as part

of the assessment of writing, the professional literature will be reviewed. Then, the writer will discuss how she implemented portfolios into an instructional program.

### Review of Professional Literature

This review of professional literature will focus on the assessment of the writing process, portfolios as a means of assessment, and the status and effectiveness of portfolios.

#### Assessment of the Writing Process

The assessment of children's emerging literacy should be on-going and cumulative and should involve self-assessment by teachers and students. Goodman (1989) says that one of the main features of this view of evaluation is "kidwatching," the ways in which teachers observe, interact, and analyze their students. Wolf (1993) explains that in such assessment, a knowledgeable teacher systematically observes and selectively documents students over time using multiple methods as they participate in a variety of meaningful learning activities.

Authentic assessment of writing should be performance-based and instructionally appropriate. The process of writing--how students go about their writing tasks--must be emphasized in assessment if the results are to provide relevant information concerning their literacy development. In doing so, students need to reflect on their own learning and to take responsibility for their own progress (Vavrus, 1990). The teacher's role as

facilitator, rather than instiller of knowledge, enables students to assume this ownership. Both teacher and students need to have many opportunities to discuss, clarify, explain, redraft/revise, and reflect on effort (Farr & Lowe, 1991).

Cambourne and Turbill (1990) list five kinds of information needed from writing assessment: (1) the strategies learners use as they write, (2) the level of understanding they have of the process of writing, (3) the learners' attitudes toward writing, (4) interests and backgrounds of the learners, and (5) the amount of control they demonstrate over language in all its forms. From this information, teachers can plan appropriate instruction for students.

Much school-based assessment focuses on the results of standardized tests which are quantitative measures. Such assessment emphasizes product rather than process and fragments of language rather than wholes. As a result of these test experiences, students can come to believe that they have no control over their own learning and that what is important to be learned is determined by the teacher (Wolf, 1989).

#### Assessment of Writing Process Through Portfolios

This assessment tool was developed by PROPEL, a three-way consortium consisting of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Educational Testing Service, and Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in an effort to find ways of

capturing a record of growth over time and to provide for student reflection (Wolf, 1989). Its goal was to design ways of evaluating student learning that would provide information to teachers and school systems and would also model personal responsibility in questioning and reflecting. In this study, artists, musicians, and writers were asked how they sample and judge their own work. It was found that they often kept on-going collections of ideas, drafts, and questions. Writers included a variety of notes, diagrams, drafts, and final versions from many content areas to show what had changed with time or what still needed to be done. The PROPEL group extrapolated this method of assessment to develop systems of portfolio assessment in writing for youth. The student's compositions, along with student and teacher comments, became a portfolio that could be passed along from year to year (Wolf, 1989).

Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) identify five basic beliefs surrounding the use of portfolios: (1) Teachers are professionals who are capable of nurturing students' intellectual and emotional growth. (2) Students are learning how to think for themselves and can become self-directed learners. (3) Writing is essential for lifelong learning and self-fulfillment. (4) Diversity is inevitable and desirable, yet people must be able to work together. (5) Mutual respect between teacher and students is the key to a successful instructional program.



Portfolios offer a means of collecting samples of children's involvement in many kinds of writing activity over an extended period of time, reflecting on the growth that has taken place and then establishing further goals for involvement in the process (Tierney et al., 1991). Arter (1992) suggests that "portfolios are instructional for students only when they take the responsibility for assembling them" (p. 2). The active participation of the students encourages them to take charge of their own learning. Collaboration of the student and the teacher can greatly extend the process of exhibit collection (Farr & Lowe, 1991; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

Portfolios should contain a whole array of works, for example, pieces of writing at various stages of completion (poems, short stories, plays, personal narratives, and science and social studies reports), checklists, unit projects, and journal entries. Other examples are persuasive paragraphs, expository paragraphs, descriptions, letters, how-to articles, responses to literature, and essays. The pieces in the writing portfolio can show evidence of a student's organization of ideas, use of details and appropriate voice, a range of different purposes, and control of form. As a result, a student has evidence of his/her power as a writer (Valencia, 1990; Bunce-Crim, 1992).

In conferencing with teachers and peers, a student can use his/her portfolio collection to gain insight into how he/she responds as a writer and to provide support for taking risks and responsibility for his/her own learning. From conferencing, teachers can match teaching to an individual child's instruction needs (Bintz & Harste, 1991; Farr & Lowe, 1991).

An important outcome of portfolio assessment is to provide students with opportunities to engage in self-regulating, self-disciplining, and self-assessing. From this experience, a student can become accustomed to taking risks with a minimum of stress and can further his/her ability to be an independent self-directed learner (Vavrus, 1990; Paulson et al., 1991).

#### Status and Effectiveness of Portfolio Assessment

Several studies have been conducted to ascertain the extent and effectiveness of portfolio assessment. In a survey of portfolio practice in selected elementary school programs throughout the United States, Calfee and Perfumo (1992) found that teachers who were involved in portfolio assessment were committed to this form of assessment and that the methods used to assess individual portfolios were weak and inconsistent.

In another study, Johns and VanLeirsburg (1991) compared the results of their questionnaire with those of a 1990 survey of educators to determine growth in knowledge and use of portfolio assessment. They found a growing familiarity among professionals

of the concept of portfolio assessment. Those who responded agreed with Valencia's (1990) four guiding principles of literacy assessment: It must be authentic, continuous, multidimensional, and collaborative. The items most frequently included in a portfolio were writing samples, reading logs or lists of books read, and teacher observations. Planning and organizing continued to be real issues as well as preparing notes and completing checklists.

Yumori and Tibbetts (1992) interviewed eight teachers, two at each grade level K-3 in a public elementary school on the Leeward Coast of Oahu, Hawaii, concerning the transition problems in moving to portfolio assessment. The responses indicated that teachers had difficulty adjusting to the absence of a scope and sequence of skills. Consultants observed an emphasis on assessing products rather than processes. The teachers were concerned about supplementary evidence, usefulness of data for reporting purposes, and ways to make assessment meaningful.

Several studies examined the effectiveness of writing assessment based on portfolios. Gearhart, Herman, Baker, and Whittaker (1992) and Baker and Linn (1992) examined the feasibility of large-scale portfolio assessment of elementary school students' writing competence. Data came from evaluating thirty-five portfolios of first, third, and fourth grade students. A well-validated analytic scoring guide was used which

contained four 6-point scales for assessing general competence, focus/organization, elaboration, and mechanics in narratives and summaries. This study found that holistic ratings can be achieved with high levels of rater agreement and that the ratings can discriminate among grade level and genre differences in students' competence. The multiple samples contained within the portfolio provided a more comprehensive basis for judging the quality of writing, but teachers sometimes rated collections higher than they did single pieces. These researchers pointed out a problem with the use of portfolio assessment on large-scale: Even though portfolios should be displays of work that teachers and students believe reveal students' competence, they must be prestructured for comparability and valid inference. Such a practice may interfere with teacher instructional practices.

Another large-scale assessment study, the Portfolio Study of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1990, was reported by Gentile (1992). This study explored portfolios as an alternative method of assessing students' writing achievement. Methods were developed for describing and classifying children's writing samples, and general scoring guides were created for assessing students' writing collected in portfolios in grades four and eight. The conclusions supported the use of

classroom-based assessment of writing, or a writing portfolio system, in a program that emphasized process, because it allows writing to be evaluated in a way that is relevant to instruction and supports the goals of the writing curriculum.

Simmons (1990) in studying the effectiveness of portfolios and time-tests in the assessment of writing in grade five concluded that timed-tests and portfolio assessments produce essentially the same ordering of students. Portfolios provided a more complete and accurate assessment of a student's writing growth.

#### Implementation of Portfolios to Assess Growth in the Writing Process

As the writing program emphasizing process emerged in the writer's fourth grade classroom, techniques to describe children's language growth were needed. Pieces in all stages of development had been kept in each student's literacy folder but were not organized for assessment. Portfolios were implemented to help students engage in self-reflection which could be further extended in conferencing with the teacher. Evidence of growth could also be shared with parents.

To support student writing, student-teacher conferences were held regularly to talk about pieces in progress. The teacher listened, asked questions, gave suggestions, and provided encouragement to the student writers. (Anecdotal notes were made

about the conferences and the students' progress.) As pieces became ready for completion, the student writers edited the pieces and wrote final drafts which demonstrated their best efforts without teacher assistance. Photocopies were made of the final drafts on which the teacher wrote comments and suggestions during editing conferences. During these conferences, the teacher and students worked collaboratively to improve drafts for publication. The photocopies enabled the teacher to avoid marking on the students' original copies and thus preserved clean copies that demonstrated what the children could do without the help of the teacher. Students could choose completed pieces to be bound into a published collection. Additional ways of sharing included reading pieces aloud to other students; giving the piece to parents, other family members, and friends; and displaying the piece in the room.

At the end of the first nine-week period, the teacher introduced the idea of portfolio assessment to the fourth graders. They were told that their portfolios would demonstrate their understanding of the writing process. Each student was instructed to spread out his/her work, reread each piece, confer with other students if desired, and then choose one or two pieces to be included in the portfolio. The students were given a one-pocket expandable file to hold their collections. To promote self-reflection, the students were given large note cards to use

in explaining why each piece was chosen and what it demonstrated in regard to the students' writing abilities. The cards were attached to the selections and were placed in the portfolio. Portfolios were shared with parents at the fall conferences.

During the second nine-week period, students extended their writing activity. Personal narratives, letters, science reports, make-believe stories, poems, and responses to books were written. At the end of this period, the children again examined pieces to add to their portfolios. They chose from pieces in various stages of the writing process and from a variety of types of writing. One to four pieces were chosen depending on the number of pieces in their literacy folders. Students once again explained on note cards why each piece was selected.

Small groups of students met with the teacher to extend the self-assessment process. They were instructed to complete a written self-evaluation form after examining the pieces in their portfolio. These items were included: (1) What I did well. (2) What I learned. (3) Ways I could improve. (4) Goals for the next period.

Before conferencing individually with students concerning their emerging writing abilities and their instructional needs, the teacher examined each portfolio. Then, each student was invited to discuss the content and the form of the pieces in their portfolio. At the conclusion of the conference, the

teacher and student worked collaboratively to set goals for the next nine-week period.

The portfolio exhibits from five students collected during the first semester were chosen to be examined in this paper. Writers, referred to as Students A, B, C, D, and E, represent the range of writing abilities in this fourth grade class from most able to least able.

#### Student A

This boy has a good command of mechanics and expresses himself quite effectively. He likes jotting down ideas before engaging in the writing process. From his writing folder, he chose five pieces for his portfolio: two personal narratives, one letter, a book report, and a science report. His reasons for choosing the pieces included amount of effort he put forth, good detail, and use of correct punctuation. He shared that he had written three drafts for most pieces. His redrafts indicated a focus on content, however the revisions were minimal, usually an addition of a sentence or two or a few word changes. His writing indicated that he understood the elements of form presented in grade four.

His written self-evaluation of each piece chosen for the portfolio showed that he thinks he does well completing sentences, using capitalization and punctuation, and spelling. He responded that during this semester he learned to spell some



words and to use colons and semicolons and gained the understanding that sometimes compound words are written with hyphens. He thought that he could improve by making his stories longer, putting in more detail, and using more interesting words. His written goals were: (1) Use better handwriting. (2) Write more stories. (3) Write longer stories.

During his portfolio conference, he established the goal of improving the content of his pieces. When asked how he would do this, he said that he would "put things in like Laura Ingalls Wilder did to make you feel like you're doing or being right there . . . or put more detail . . . and use more interesting words."

#### Student B

This girl writes with a good command of form. She is very capable and puts forth much effort in writing pieces. She likes writing both personal narratives and pieces of fiction. Her portfolio included four pieces: three personal narratives and a science report. Her reasons for choosing these pieces included the amount of effort she put forth to develop long pieces which included much information and careful handwriting.

She shared that she usually wrote three drafts before editing and writing a final draft, but the changes were minor on most of the pieces. There were some words crossed out, and she used arrows to move sentences around in the draft. In a piece

dated later in the semester, she had made significant revisions. For two of her personal narratives, she had selected a topic that was too broad. She needed to focus on one aspect of a topic.

On her self-evaluation sheet, she wrote that she did well in spelling and thinking up ideas for stories. She had learned when to start new paragraphs, where to put commas, and when to capitalize important words. Her written goals were: (1) Finish more stories. (2) Try not to make so many mistakes. (3) Try to remember more personal experiences.

During her portfolio conference, she set the following goals: (1) Start new paragraphs when necessary. (2) Be sure the information is in the proper order. (3) Make more content changes in drafts. (4) Narrow down the subject so ideas can be developed.

### Student C

This girl expresses herself well through writing. She has had many life experiences to draw from in writing personal narratives. She does not have a good understanding of many elements of form; specifically she has difficulty with spelling. She says that "sometimes writing can be fun, and sometimes it's not that exciting." She likes to write personal narratives and poems. Her portfolio contained three pieces: a poem, a personal narrative, and a science report. She shared that she chose the personal narrative because she put much effort into it, and she

liked the way it sounded. She included the poem because she had not written many poems, and she thought it was a good piece. The science report was chosen because it was a true story, she put a lot of hard work into it, and she had not written many reports.

The second draft on her personal narrative showed that she added much more detail: Her first draft was four pages long, and her second draft was ten pages long. She said that in the second draft she described and explained more and added additional detail. She explained that . . . "detail helps people know what it's like . . . it makes it kind of exciting." When asked what she thinks makes a good story, she answered, "detail, effort, and how you told the story . . . how you explained it." She continued . . . "in my first draft I didn't put all the ideas I had in my mind and everything, like in my second draft." She explained that in a first draft you tell about your story, and then in the second draft you put in more words. "I like to do about two or three drafts so you can switch things around, and you can put punctuation and capital letters. Writing more drafts lets you try to think of more detail to put in your story . . . so it sounds better." In explaining what is important when writing a report, she responded, "You have to put a lot of thought and put in as much detail as you can so that people who read it know . . . can actually picture it." She gave a copy of her personal narrative, "Cruise to the Bahamas," to her mother's

secretary because "she went on the same cruise, and I thought she might like it."

She wrote on her self-evaluation form that what she did well was put in periods and capital letters, and she knows how to make it sound exciting. She said that she always makes the sentences sound correct. She had learned to have fun writing, to make stories exciting, and to write good sentences. She believes that she could improve on spelling and handwriting. She listed as her goals: (1) Get a couple of stories done. (2) Put hard work into it.

During her portfolio conference the following goals were set: (1) Be sure to include enough detail. (2) Make significant revisions in drafts.

#### Student D

This boy likes to write about his personal experiences but does not like "putting in commas and looking up all the words." Outside of school, he sometimes writes letters to famous people whose addresses he finds in Sports Illustrated. His portfolio included five pieces: a response to a book, two pieces of fiction, a science report, and a personal narrative. He related that he chose these pieces because he had spent much time working on them. Other comments included, "I liked my ending (the science report 'Jupiter'); I didn't stop looking up words until I got them all (response to a book); I did it all by myself

('Turtle,' an extension of Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing); I could remember when I did it, I can remember doing all the stuff (the personal narrative 'Minnesota State Fair'); I think this is one of my best ones (the piece about his solar invention '4 X 4 ZR')."

In examining Student D's drafts, it was observed that although he wrote approximately three drafts on a piece, he did not substantially change the piece. He occasionally added detail and used arrows to move content from one place to another. His focus was too broad in his personal narration "Minnesota State Fair." He told what happened from the time he left home until arriving at the fair, highlights of the fair, and then going to his aunt's house. His fiction piece "Turtle," on the other hand, had good story development and a surprise ending.

He related that after finishing a draft, he reads it to see if it makes sense and then adds words if he needs them. He also corrects spelling and punctuation. According to Student D, a piece of writing is good if you put a lot of effort into it, and use correct punctuation, spelling, and capital letters. He stated that the most important thing about a piece of writing is that you put a lot of detail in it, because it makes it sound more interesting. He related that the purpose of drafts is "thinking of different ways I could do it."

On his self-assessment sheet, he thought that he did well using capital letters and punctuation marks. He wrote that he learned when to start paragraphs and where to put commas in compound sentences. He thought he could improve his writing by learning to indent in forming paragraphs, using more punctuation, and composing more stories. He listed as his goals: (1) Make more stories. (2) Learn how to use exclamation points. (3) Work harder.

The goals that were decided upon during his portfolio conference were: (1) Conference with peers to find out what they would want to know more about before making another draft. (2) Work on beginnings and endings of pieces. (3) Make sure the piece makes sense. (4) Include specific details.

#### Student E

This girl has difficulty getting her thoughts down on paper. Her sentences are short and lack content. She is a very poor reader and speller. She does, however, have a good imagination when it comes to writing fictional pieces. She likes to write, and she thinks it is important to include many words in a piece. She especially likes to write about her pets. Her portfolio included four pieces: two personal narratives, a poem, and a pen pal letter. Her reasons for choosing them were that she worked hard on them and had put in much detail.

In examining her drafts, she had written several, but there was not much change from one draft to another. She said that when she writes a new draft, she tries to fix mistakes, such as spelling, periods, and commas, and then recopies the draft. She has great difficulty with spelling and relies on two or three peers to help her.

On her self-assessment sheet, she wrote that she does well using punctuation--periods, commas, and question marks. She thinks that she has learned where to put punctuation marks. She wrote that she could improve by making her stories longer and composing more stories. She listed as her goals: (1) Write longer stories. (2) Try to make punctuation better. (3) Make more stories.

The goals set during her portfolio conference were:  
(1) Complete "I Like Kristi," a personal narrative, and "In the Magical Land of Oz," a piece of fiction. (2) Make content changes in drafts. (3) Don't worry about spelling until the very end of the piece. (4) Include enough information and use interesting words.

Portfolio assessment will resume at the end of the third and fourth nine-week periods. Each time the student writers will have an opportunity to contribute additional pieces to their portfolio, demonstrating their progress, instructional needs, and

goals in the writing program. Portfolios will be shared with parents at the spring parent-teacher conference.

As a culmination of the year's work, each student and the teacher collaboratively will choose representative pieces from the portfolio to include in a school portfolio to be passed along to next year's teacher. This portfolio will include the following components as suggested by Bunce-Crim (1992): (1) a table of contents listing the pieces the student has chosen; (2) a best piece which he/she thinks is an example of his/her best writing; (3) a letter about the best piece addressed to the teacher and others who might review the portfolio explaining why this piece was chosen and the process used to write it; (4) a poem, short story, play, or personal narrative; (5) a personal response to a book, event, or topic of his/her choice; and (6) a piece written in any subject area other than the language arts.

#### Conclusion

In this fourth grade classroom, portfolios provided a means of collecting samples of many kinds of writing activities over an extended period of time. In selecting pieces, students reflected on their writing activity as they sifted through the contents of their literacy folders, rereading pieces, and deciding which ones to add to their portfolios. In doing so, students were made aware of the many kinds of writing activities they had been engaged in, and the teacher was made aware of the need to provide



further opportunities for students to expand their writing topics.

The portfolio conference provided the teacher and the students with another opportunity to reexamine collaboratively pieces of writing. In studying the drafts of a piece, for example, the teacher and student could see what kind of revisions were made. By examining aspects of the writing process in a piece, the student became more aware of the importance of rethinking and redrafting. In setting further goals, the students were encouraged to look critically at their work and to appraise their efforts. In this way students became more involved in decisions affecting their learning.

Portfolios allowed writing to be evaluated in a way that was relevant to instruction. The teacher was able to help each student grow in areas of need. Students were involved in their own learning and evaluation, and the teacher was able to facilitate this learning by providing individualized instruction to better meet the needs of each student. Portfolio assessment allowed students and teacher to work together in a supportive learning partnership. The teacher's experience with portfolio assessment supports the use of portfolios as a meaningful form of writing assessment which can be implemented in classrooms.

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