

Shared Ownership of Assessment: Student Portfolios in a Second Grade Classroom

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Abstract

Portfolios help students to be active participants in their own learning and evaluation. Alternative assessment techniques document a child's strengths and needs, levels of understanding, learning styles, and growth and development over a period of time. Portfolios are individual, positive, strength-based, family-friendly, and developmentally-appropriate photographs of each student's progress.

My students have been stuffing their completed work into folders, their desks, and their backpacks for as long as I can remember. This was the year to capitalize on this natural tendency through the introduction and implementation of student portfolios. Portfolios empowered my second graders through self-selection and self-reflection. They no longer see assessment as something that is done to them by someone else.

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Rationale

As a veteran teacher with over 20 years of experience, I find myself disturbed by the increased use of standardized tests in the primary grades. I firmly believe in developmentally appropriate practices for young children. Early childhood educators question the isolated use of traditional assessment practices in today's schools; more and more educators are seeking alternative, authentic assessments which provide a more realistic picture of each student's individual achievement and progress (Grace, 1992). Assessment data obtained through the use of standardized, quantitative approaches have typically been used to determine what is wrong with a child. Authentic, performance-based assessment techniques, on the other hand, are valuable tools because they document a child's strengths, levels of understanding, learning styles, and growth and development over a period of time.

My personal struggle with the traditional, standardized testing practices led me to the decision to implement student portfolios in my 2nd grade classroom. Portfolio assessment is an individualized, positive, strength-based, and family-friendly picture of each student's progress. Learning should be an outcome of a young child's natural curiosity and exploration, not the result of rote memorization. The use of student portfolios empowers the students as they are transformed into active participants in their own learning and evaluation. After many years of experience as an early childhood educator, I believe that formative assessment should be an integral part of the curriculum, and data gathered from authentic assessment should be utilized to make appropriate instructional decisions which contribute positively to each child's self-esteem and developmental progress.

Context

I teach 2nd grade at a Math and Science Magnet School in the Westerville City School District. Our school is a small school; we have only one classroom for each grade. In order to attend a Math and Science Magnet School, students must enter a lottery drawing; there are long waiting lists for any vacancies that occur during the school year. We serve a multicultural population. Our school's mission is to provide children with a technology-rich environment in which they experience mathematics and science as an integral part of life.

I have 26 students (13 boys and 13 girls) in my second grade classroom. My classroom ethnicity includes African-American students and students from Russian, Jordanian, and Moroccan cultural backgrounds. My students fall across the learning spectrum; I have students who are serviced by the ESL teacher, the speech therapist, the reading teacher, and the occupational therapist. My classroom is an active learning environment where hands-on learning activities are integral, everyday occurrences.

Literature Review

The pendulum continues to swing between authentic assessment that is embedded in teaching and learning versus traditional, standardized forms of assessment. According to McNair, Bhargava, Adams, Edgerton, and Kypros (2003), the U.S. Department of Education's emphasis on quantitative, standardized assessments pressures teachers to teach to a narrow set of objectives in contrast to the broader, more integrated set of skills and knowledge that are also part of the standards movement. As a result, today's educators are constantly struggling to find a balanced approach to utilize in the documentation of their students' progress. National curriculum reform groups (Katz & Chard, 1996) support the implementation of formative assessment that is an ongoing, daily approach in which students are active participants; the teacher checks with them to see what they know and what they are interested in. Students self-reflect on their own performance and learning through the documentation and collection of their learning through the use of student portfolios. The focus of such authentic assessment is on integrating skills and knowledge and working toward more complex objectives rather than focusing on isolated skills (McNair, Bhargava, Adams, Edgerton, and Kypros, 2003).

I began to wonder if others mirrored my belief in the integration of classroom-based assessment and student-choice in today's classrooms. Corcoran, Dershimer, and Tichenor (2004) define classroom-based assessment as the collection and evaluation of evidence of our students' learning which focuses on indicators of valuable and meaningful student progress and is an integral component of the teaching process. These classroom-based data inform our teaching while enabling our students to become more self-monitoring and self-regulating. Both students and their teachers must be willing to take risks and evaluate themselves; teachers must be willing to take on new instructional assessment roles.

My decision to implement student portfolios in my 2nd grade classroom was validated by the writings of Hanson and Gilkerson (1999). Hanson and Gilkerson (1999) state that the use of portfolio assessment in early childhood classrooms documents much more than just the learning of one's ABC's and 123's. Early childhood teachers must do more than articulate what the children are learning. Believing that standardized testing practices are inappropriate for young children, the authors argue that teachers must provide measurable, concrete documentation of children's knowledge, skills, and achievement through appropriate, alternative assessment practices; portfolio assessment is one such promising, effective measurement tool. Portfolio assessments have proven to be a measure of accountability, an excellent public relations tool, and an affirmation of the tenets of early childhood education.

When teachers adopt a portfolio system, they expect students to select, collect, and reflect on their classroom work (Sweet & Zimmerman, 1993). Student portfolios support new instructional approaches which emphasize both the teacher's role in promoting understanding and the student's role in constructing understanding. According to Sweet

and Zimmerman (1993), portfolios are highly flexible instructional and assessment tools which are adaptable to student age and grade levels, different curricula, and diverse contexts.

A crucial element of portfolio assessment is the creation of a safe and supportive environment which promotes shared discourse between teachers and their students; such shared discourse enhances metacognition (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005). Educators must strive to make critical self-reflection a positive process for young children (Potter, 1999). We must respect young children's thinking. Lamme and Hysmith (1991) propose that we need to try to see things from the child's perspective, which in the long run is the only one that really counts. A portfolio is something done by the student, not to the student; it is a concrete way for students to learn to value their own work and become independent, self-directed learners (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991). Effective, reflective portfolio assessment can be the key to constructive growth and change (Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005).



Kankaanranta (1996) believes that using portfolios as a means of self-assessment provides teachers with self-portraits of their students. Portfolios provide a comprehensive picture of the children to the people surrounding them- other children, teachers, and parents. The most essential tasks of early childhood student portfolios are to promote the children's self-knowledge of their development and learning, give teachers insight into future planning, and increase parents' active participation in the assessment process of their children.

Change in Practice

It is now time to value my students' views of their successes and failures.

(My Research Log - September 14, 2007)

My teaching philosophy has always centered on a belief in developmentally-appropriate practice that includes hands-on activities and interactive approaches. My classroom assessment, on the other hand, has been one-sided; my input has been the only consideration of the academic growth of the children in my classroom. Why have I not allowed my classroom assessment to be an interactive process which incorporates both teacher and student input? Why have I continued to just think and talk about using alternative, authentic forms of assessment in my class? Why have I not taken the initiative and time to allow my students the opportunity for self-reflection and self-assessment? It was finally time to "walk the walk," not just "talk the talk." Shared ownership of student assessment needed to become reality in my second grade classroom.

CREATING GOALS

We began our use of student portfolios by working together to create our classroom goals for the school year. I first explained and modeled what a classroom goal could look like; next, I divided the class into small groups to develop possible classroom goals. Each group reported back to the class, and we decided as a whole class what our yearly classroom goals were going to be. Our classroom goals poster, which was signed by all the children and myself, was the first visible sign of shared ownership of assessment.



The next portfolio task, formulating personal learning goals for the school year, was difficult for my students to verbalize, let alone to write. I realized that they were going to require individualized guidance from me even to begin this process of goal setting. I changed my plan of action by having the students first draw themselves doing three things they wanted to learn during this school year. I demonstrated by modeling the goals I wanted to accomplish this year as their teacher. The children were able to

experience success when illustrating their goals and as a result were able to verbalize their goals. I had the students use their drawings as a springboard for writing their goals, and the amount of adult assistance needed diminished significantly. I asked the students two additional questions:

- How will you accomplish your goals?
- Who will help you achieve your learning goals?

I began to see things from each child's perspective (Lamme and Hysmith, 1991). Together we were now able to discuss and celebrate the completion of their personal learning goals.



MATH AND READING SURVEYS

The next step in bringing student portfolios into our classroom was the creation of math and reading surveys which addressed the needs of my specific class. The students completed these surveys with the help of parent volunteers, the ESL teacher, and myself. The knowledge gained from their answers on these surveys was used to guide both my reading and math lessons.



MY BEST WORK: STUDENT SELECTION



After an explanation and class discussion on student choice, it was time for the children to select work samples for their portfolios. The students began by choosing what they considered to be their best handwriting and creative writing story samples. After I modeled how to write down their thoughts about their chosen work samples, each of my students wrote why they included their specific items in their portfolios. Students were able to see portfolios as something done by them, not to them. (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

GRAPHING PROGRESS

The final components of their student portfolios were graphs that enabled students to track progress on their spelling tests, mathematics tests, and reading comprehension quizzes. I met with small groups of students to update their graphs and discuss their understanding of these graphs. My students learned how to record data and maintain these graphs by themselves as the year progressed.



Findings

I began with overly optimistic expectations for my students' first attempts at self-assessment and reflection. The children were overwhelmed by the concept of portfolios and their transformation into active participants in their own learning and evaluation. First attempts at work sample collecting and reflection were frustrating and not as productive as I had hoped. I had to change my plan of action to incorporate additional

modeling of each component of student portfolios. I definitely learned the portfolio process along with my students (i.e., what did and did not work with my class).

Writing was a challenge for my second graders; I figured out that drawing pictures helped them to focus on their personal learning goals. The students shared their pictures with their friends; peer interaction and the desire for peer acceptance increased. These first signs of excitement and interest made me feel that we were now on the right path to using alternative assessment in our classroom.

I get it now!

(K's Portfolio Conference –September 27, 2007)

Can I draw more than three things that I want to learn this year?

(X's Portfolio Conference – September 27, 2007)

I underestimated the amount of one-on-one time necessary for the writing of personal learning goals. Although the majority of my students were eventually able to write their personal goals, some remained unsure of what they would achieve and who would help them achieve these goals. Having no previous knowledge or experience with self-assessment truly hampered the process of authentic assessment; students were not used to having both a voice and a choice in the evaluation process.

The easiest part of the portfolio process for my students was creating spelling, mathematics, and reading comprehension progress graphs. Graphs offered students visual representations of their successes. The students were able to compare and contrast their daily and weekly assessment results.

WHAT DID MY STUDENTS LEARN?

The majority of my second graders gained self-confidence as the portfolio process unfolded across the school year. Enthusiasm and excitement were evident as self-assessment instilled pride in the students. They were eager to select their best work and tell others why they thought it was their best. Those struggling with the process verbalized much more; their insecurities were evident in their words and actions.

I felt a little nervous about my portfolio.

(K's Portfolio Journal – October, 2007)

Now I feel kinda good about putting my work in my portfolio.

(K's Portfolio Journal – May, 2008)

I just hope that I can have at least two goals completed: read better and write longer books. (J's Portfolio Journal – November, 2007)

The average students collected more work samples than either my struggling or my high-achieving students; self-selection was a rewarding and fun-filled learning activity for them.

When I started picking my work I felt responsible. (Z's Portfolio Journal – May, 2008)

I feel good! I'm basically grading myself on my accomplishments.

(M's Portfolio Journal – May, 2008)

I like things in my portfolio because it makes me feel good that I've done my best to work hard and show that I've done my best work! (L's Portfolio Journal – May, 2008)

The portfolio process was a showcase for my high achievers; these are the students who are continually searching for ways to display their high level of academic prowess. They had become independent, self-directed learners who valued their personal work effort and academic achievements (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991).

I've achieved all of my goals, and I'm even making new goals.

(C's Portfolio Journal – May, 2008)

I was very excited that we got to pick what goes inside our portfolio. So I did not waste time. I put in all the important stuff inside. I am happy that we get to pick what goes inside our portfolio. (X's Portfolio Journal – May, 2008)

WHAT DID I LEARN

The portfolio process is finally being embraced by the majority of my 2nd graders; hopefully this enthusiasm will continue to grow and be sustained throughout the school year! (My Research Log - November 1, 2007)

The majority of the children responded very positively to student portfolios; letting go of control worked. With only two exceptions, most of my second grade students took great pride in their portfolios. One, an ESL student, remained passive, possibly because of a language barrier. She never felt comfortable selecting work or commenting on her progress. The second exception, a young man who got restless quite easily, didn't buy into reflection and self-selection; he just wanted to get his work done as quickly as possible.

I was surprised to learn that my average students made the greatest strides. They, even more than my high achievers, invested in the process and exceeded my expectations. Their sustained effort over time showed that they considered themselves to be valued members of our classroom assessment team.

Reflections

As an educator, I must constantly seek to balance quantitative, standardized assessments with alternative, authentic assessments. Student portfolios return assessment to its rightful owners – the children and teachers in our schools' classrooms. I have to be willing to give up some control so that my students can be equal partners in the assessment process.



Educators are immersed in an age of accountability with administrative watchdogs around every corner, looking to see that students pass standardized tests. The pressure to produce robotic students who know all the answers makes teachers fearful to trust students as active participants in their own learning and evaluation. The number of students who pass tests becomes more important than the validity of the test results.

The introduction and use of student portfolios in my second grade classroom allowed an active learning community to emerge in which students developed a sense of responsibility for their own learning. Portfolios are the flexible, adaptable assessment and instructional tools that Sweet and Zimmerman (1993) referred to in their writings. Student portfolios are a natural by-product of my hands-on, developmentally-appropriate classroom. I plan to continue to use student portfolios again in my second grade classroom with some important modifications: First, I will begin with smaller steps and additional modeling of data collection, reflection, and self-assessment. Second, I will spend more time interviewing children to get a better handle on their needs and interests. Third, I will look for ways to get parents involved in the portfolio process.

I believe that my students gained self-confidence as they selected and reflected on their choices of work samples. They were eager to have me share their portfolios with their families during conferences. These “albums of growth” (Kankaanranta, 1996) became positive composites of each child’s achievements. The enjoyment and excitement expressed by my present students in their final journal entries reinforces my commitment to alternative, authentic assessment.

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