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Implementing portfolio assessment in grade four

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Implementing portfolio assessment in grade four

Abstract

Writing is a process. To assess this process, it needs to be described through qualitative techniques. One of these techniques is portfolio collection: Writing . . exhibits, collected over time, can facilitate students' self-reflections on their writing activity, interests, progress, and instructional needs. Such a collection is also valuable evidence for teachers in planning and maintaining their language programs and in reporting to caregivers.

This project involved the implementation of portfolio assessment in grade four by a first-year teacher. Through portfolio collection, the teacher as well as the students received much information that promoted writing and led to much interest in the process.

Implementing Portfolio Assessment in Grade Four

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Submitted to the

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Marilyn L. Browder

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Abstract

Writing is a process. To assess this process, it needs to be described through qualitative techniques. One of these techniques is portfolio collection. Writing exhibits, collected over time, can facilitate students' self-reflections on their writing activity, interests, progress, and instructional needs. Such a collection is also valuable evidence for teachers in planning and maintaining their language programs and in reporting to caregivers.

This project involved the implementation of portfolio assessment in grade four by a first-year teacher. Through portfolio collection, the teacher as well as the students received much information that promoted writing and led to much interest in the process.

Writing is a process through which humans create meaning (Graves, 1994). The assessment of the writing needs to focus on the description of the writers' involvement in this process through qualitative techniques. Portfolio assessment is one of these qualitative techniques that can be implemented. This assessment technique is being used more frequently as educators search for ways to better document students' progress and instructional needs (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991).

Value of Portfolios in Assessing Children's Writing

Portfolio assessment of children's writing involves collecting their writing samples over time as evidence of their progress, interests, and instructional needs (Valencia, 1990; Tierney, et al, 1991). A portfolio is more than a repository of work waiting to be graded; it is a dynamic entity that reflects ongoing progress (Leu & Kinzier, 1999). The ownership of portfolios must belong to individual children. As a result of this ownership, children can honestly reflect on their emerging writing ability (Graves, 1994).

Implementation of Writing Portfolios

Two types of portfolios, working and showcase, can be part of the assessment process. The working portfolio contains the ongoing collection of writing exhibits representing the instructional program and the students' progress and instructional needs. During the school year, students with their teachers can collaborate during scheduled conferences to develop their portfolios. Various types of writing from across the curriculum can be included. At the end of the school year, exhibits representative of the year's writing activity can be selected by the children for their showcase portfolios that are sent on to the next year (Vavrus, 1990).

The student-teacher conference is important to the success of portfolio collection. The teacher can offer valuable support to students as they reflect on their progress and instructional needs. The teacher can assist each child in setting realistic goals, working to realize these goals, assessing the progress, and then setting further goals (Frank, 1994; Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland, 1997).

The writing portfolio is a valuable assessment technique in fostering positive home-school relationships. Portfolios offer concrete evidence of the school's instructional program and the children's writing activity, progress, and instructional needs. Then, parents have a better understanding of the school curriculum and classroom goals as well as their children's writing responses (Hart, 1994).

Portfolio Implementation in a Writing Program in Grade Four

My position in an elementary school is that of Curriculum Specialist. I am responsible for providing organizational and instructional leadership to the classroom teachers and paraprofessionals in collaboration with the principal.

Most of the students in the school are from low socio-economic backgrounds. These children do not perform well on standardized tests, so I explored other avenues of assessment. Also, I took into consideration that writing is a process so qualitative techniques need to be used to describe student growth.

In the writing program, the children are encouraged to write about their experiences. Such an approach free children to express themselves. Most of the children were eager to write. As the school year progressed, the children's writing folders began to contain many pieces.

In this paper, I will report the implementation of portfolio assessment into a writing program in grade 4 by a first-year teacher. I served as her mentor.

At the beginning of the year, each fourth grader was given a folder to store daily writing projects. As an introduction to portfolio collection, a high school student was invited to share his writing portfolio with the class. Also, writing portfolios of other elementary school children were shown. This sharing created student interest in portfolios. The teacher distributed a large folder to each child for a portfolio. It was to be housed in a file cabinet in the classroom and assessable at all times by the students.

In scheduled conferences throughout the year, the children could select two to three writing pieces that represented their interests, efforts, growth, or the school program for their portfolios. The children were to add labels to the selected pieces giving this information: the name of child, the date of selection, the type of piece, the reason for selection, and the goal(s) for future writing. The major function of the teacher in the portfolio conference was that of a listener as the children reflected on their choices for writing exhibits and set goals for further involvement in the writing process.

I encouraged the teacher to introduce portfolios to the parents at the beginning of the school year. The parent letter was sent home with each child (see Appendix A).

To assist children in feeling comfortable in selecting portfolio exhibits, the teacher and I demonstrated the selection of exhibits in a conference. These suggestions for selecting exhibits were posted for the class to use as guides:

1. I enjoyed writing this story.
2. I had a lot to say about this topic.
3. The story sounds good.
4. The piece is about something we learned in class.
5. This piece was easy to write.

Three children's writing was closely followed during this implementation phase. Their pieces from the conferences held in September, January, March, and May are analyzed by the Batzle rubric (1992). This rubric is presented in Appendix B.

Student A

Student A was a bright energetic girl who enjoyed school and learning experiences. Her parents were supportive of the school program.

During the first few weeks of school as the writing process was being taught, and the writers workshop was introduced, she was excited about writing. She needed

some support in selecting topics at first. The pieces that Student A selected for her portfolio conferences are presented in Appendix C.

September Conference

For the first conference, at the end of September, Student A chose a story entitled "Best Friend." She said that she chose this piece because it was about her best friend. She had put a great deal of time into this selection and was proud of it. As she and the teacher looked through the story, they noticed that she had many run-on sentences, and she could have developed her ideas more extensively. Her pieces had few misspellings. The girl chose goals for the future: To avoid run-on sentences, to add more details in her writing so the audience could understand more clearly her ideas, and to use neater cursive writing. The teacher engaged her in a mini-lesson on sentence construction.

Both parents attended the scheduled fall parent-teacher conference that was held the following week after the first portfolio collection conference. They were excited about the writing program in the classroom and wanted to know how they could support her writing at home. The teacher suggested that their child could keep a personal journal that recorded family events and that they could encourage her to share her pieces from her school writing folder at home.

January Conference

In January, Student A chose a story entitled "The King Witches," which told of the adventures of her and her mother as witches. The story showed more elaboration of details and better sentence structure, which she had set as her goals in the September conference. The next goals set by the student was to continue to provide more details and to attend sentence structure.

March Conference

For the March conference, Student A chose a piece called "Holiday Fun," which was about Christmas at her grandmother's home. This story was well developed and attention was given to form elements.

Parent-teacher conferences were held at the end of March. The teacher shared the child's exhibits in her portfolio as evidence of her progress in writing. Student A's parents were impressed with their daughter's portfolio. They related that she had started a personal journal at home.

May Conference

Student A through her portfolio collection could realize her progress in developing as a writer. Her last selection was entitled "Queen," which focused on her dog who had been hit by a car and died as a result. This incident hurt Student A deeply. She wrote with emotion and developed her story quite thoroughly. The girl shared this piece at the Mother's Day Tea. Her parents attended the tea. They were impressed with their child's showcase portfolio and said that their child spends much time at home writing and sharing her writing with relatives. Her mother believed that the sharing at conference times gave her parents insight into their child's progress.

Student A was a strong writer for a fourth grader. Student A was able to grasp new ideas and took suggestions to make progress in writing. Her final products were well written and neat. Student A developed a love for writing that carried over to home.

Student B

Student B was a girl that was working below grade level at the beginning of the year. She frequently appeared angry. She lived with her mother who had not been an active participant in her child's educational life.

September Conference

Student B, for the first conference, selected a story titled "Daddy Come Home," which was about her father and how he left her family when she was very young. Student B said she chose this piece because she misses her father. The piece showed much about her feelings for her family. The story contained many misspelled words and fragmented sentences. She used capitalization accurately but no punctuation. The pieces that Student B selected for her portfolio are in Appendix D.

During the first conference Student B said she hated to write. Someone was always telling her what to write. It was boring to her, and she was not good at writing. The teacher assured that she could select subjects of interest to her this year. It was apparent to the teacher that this student needed much support in developing her writing ability and self concept.

The girl said that she wanted to write personal stories. She was assisted in setting the goals of writing complete sentences and using correct punctuation.

Student B's mother did not attend the first conference. The school made several unsuccessful attempts to reach the mother by phone.

January Conference

The girl selected for an exhibit a story entitled "The Shot." She said she chose the story because her cousin was shot in a drive by shooting. Her cousin was trying to make it to their house when he got shot. This incident was extremely traumatic for her. During the conference, Student B commented that she did not think she had achieved the goal she had set for her writing in September because so many things were going on in her head. She just wanted to get them down on paper. The teacher assured the student that her goal could be worked on in the next months. The teacher emphasized to her that content is the most important aspect of writing; form elements were

secondary. The child responded by smiling. The teacher encouraged Student B to experiment with other types of writing.

March Conference

In March, Student B selected a story entitled "Running Wild." This story was about dogs that got loose and started running the city. This piece was not as well developed as the two previous selections. The characters were not developed; it did not have a smooth sequence of events. Student B believed that this story was her best, but she said that she was not comfortable writing fiction. Then, she contradicted herself: She said, "I still don't like writing and this story is stupid." Then, she threw her paper on the floor and left the room crying. Later that day after talking with the counselor, the teacher discovered that the child's mother was in jail and that the child was in the care of her aunt. The conference was continued the next day, at which time, she apologized for her behavior. She said writing makes her feel good sometimes: She prefers to write about personal topics. The teacher assured her that she could choose the topics for her writing.

No family attended the spring conference for Student B. She was still living with her aunt and contact could not be made with her.

May Conference

For the exhibit during this conference, the child chose a story, "My Mom." The story was about her mother going to jail and leaving the family. She said she chose the piece because she tried her very best in writing it. She stated, "I watched my sentences, and punctuation. I really tried hard, and I wrote a lot."

During the conference, the student showed pride in her story. She included much detail, her sentence structure was much better, and she paid close attention to punctuation. For Student B, writing about her feelings was important. It made her feel better and released some of her anger. In the end, she believed that writing allowed her to write about the things important to her. Student B made a great deal of progress with her

writing this year. She grew as a writer and a person. Being able to put her emotions on paper was an avenue she used to help her cope with her problems.

No family member attended the May Tea. Student B asked the teacher if she would be her mother for the tea. At the tea, the child proudly shared the selections in her showcase portfolio. She said that the next time she sees her mother the sharing of her portfolio is at the top of her list. Student B thought her mother would especially enjoy the piece entitled "My Mom."

Student C

Student C was a boy working at grade level at the beginning of the year. He was an avid reader and an excellent mathematician. Writing was not one of his strengths. He struggled with developing content but had an extensive vocabulary. Student C's selections are located in Appendix E.

September Conference

Student C chose a piece written about Michael Jordan for his first portfolio selection. His reason for choosing this piece was that Michael Jordan is his hero and model for his life. Student C remarked that writing this story was easy because he knew much about Michael Jordan. Student C developed an excellent piece.

During the portfolio conference, Student C was pleased with his form element accuracy and the length of his paper. He believed that one of his strengths is writing about topics that he cares about. In his story, he evidenced knowledge of sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. Student C set the goal of adding more details to his stories.

Student C's mother attended the fall parent-teacher conference. She related that her son was excited about writing. He always is reading and wrote a great deal at home.

January Conference

For this conference, Student C chose a story entitled "The Day I Met Michael Jordan." He chose this piece for the same reason he chose the first piece in September: His admiration for the athlete. He stated, "When I write about Jordan, I always do my best." The story was a fictional account about how he met Michael Jordan.

Student C's story was well developed with supporting details. The teacher suggested that Student C might explore other topics and types of writing. He might try writing about an event other than sports. Student C set this as his goal for the next period.

March Conference

Student C selected a story entitled "Good Times," which was about his family and their loving relationship. Student C was proud of this piece of work and said he chose it because his family is important to him. He said, "Mom will cry when I show her this one."

During the spring parent-teacher conference, Student C's mother was beaming with pride as she reviewed her son's writing portfolio. She said her son has always done well in school, but he appears to enjoy it more this year because of his writing activity.

May Conference

During the May conference, Student C selected an account of some special moments at school. The selection was entitled "A Good Year." He said he chose this story because it would make the teacher happy. Student C believed he had learned many things this year to make him a better student and writer. Writing had become one of his best subject areas. Student C recognized that he had developed more complete stories with supporting details.

Student C's mother attended the Mother's Day Tea. Again, she thanked the teacher for encouraging her son to write. She also cried after reading "Good Times."

Conclusions

As a first-year teacher, writing portfolio collection as a qualitative assessment technique has made me a better teacher and my students better writers. Using the writers workshop and maintaining writing portfolios has made a difference in my class. Much improvement has been seen in the students' interest and abilities in writing. Portfolios encouraged self-reflection in surveying their writing progress and instructional needs. Many parents expressed appreciation of the writing program with portfolio assessment.

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Appendix A

August 1999

Dear Parents,

As a part of the writing experience and instruction in our classroom, students will soon be creating individual Writing Portfolios. They have just begun to learn about what portfolios are. We have looked at several examples of professional portfolios used to show the work or abilities of a writer, an architect, a designer and a photographer. We've discussed the concept of creating and using portfolios in our own classroom. Together, the students and I have decided to use Writing Portfolios to help students improve their writing and to involve students in the processes of evaluating their own writing achievement and growth.

At this time, we are just beginning the first steps towards our Writing Portfolio to collect all kinds of work related to writing. This means that not all of the writing samples your child generates will be coming home. Many will be saved in the Working Portfolio by the student or by me. You too may recommend a piece of writing be kept in the Working Portfolio.

For the next several weeks, we will be doing lots of writing and saving. The students will also be learning how to reflect on and evaluate their own writing. Later on, students will be ready to select samples to move into their writing Portfolios. When these showcase portfolios are ready, students will be sharing them with you and asking you to respond to them.

For now, you can help by encouraging your child to bring to school for including in the Working Portfolios any special pieces of writing done at home, favorite pieces of literature, or any ideas or treasures that might motivate writing. We'll keep you posted on our Writing Portfolio progress!

**Sincerely,
Mrs. Browder**

Appendix B

Evaluating Writing Pieces

	Ideas	Organization	Word Choice	*Sentence Structure	*Mechanics
4	Fresh, original Focuses on topic Supporting details	Ideas connected Strong beginning, middle, end Sequenced and logical	Wide variety used Consistent and appropriate usage Words "enhance" ideas	Clearly written Complete sentences Variety of sentence length	*Appropriate or acceptable: - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
3	Some original ideas General focus on topic Most supporting details included	Most ideas connected Good beginning, middle, end Most ideas sequenced & logical	Some variety Mostly consistent and appropriate Words generally support ideas	Most sentences clearly written Simple sentences Some variety of length	Some errors in - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
2	Few original ideas Moves away from focus Few supporting details	Some ideas connected Attempts beginning, middle, end Not always sequenced & logical	Common word choice Some appropriate word choices Little use of descriptive words	Some unclear sentences Run-on, fragmented, sentences Little variety	Several errors in - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
1	Incomplete ideas Unfocused Lacks details	Few ideas connected Lacks beginning, middle, end Little sequence & logic	Limited word choice Inappropriate word choices No attempt at descriptive words	Sentences not clear Frequent fragmented sentences No variety	Many errors in - spelling - capitalization - punctuation
0	No attempt	No attempt	No attempt	No attempt	No attempt

*May vary depending upon which draft it is of the child's writing

(Rubric adapted from Batzel, J. (1992). *Portfolio assessment and evaluation*. Cypress, CA: Creative Teaching Press, 53.)

Appendix C

Student A's Portfolio Exhibits

September 1999Best Friend

My best friend is Keisha she is pretty and smart. We do alot of things together. We go to the movies with her and we have alot of fun. Keisha will get to spend the weekend new week. we will watch movies.

Appendix C

Student A's Portfolio Exhibits

January 2000The King Witches

One day when I woke up I felt a tingle in finger. I thought it was strange, so I started shaking my finger. While I shaking my finger things started to moved in my room. I was very nervous. I ran into my mother's room. She was still asleep, I woke her up and asked her what was wrong with me. She said she was wondering when I would get my powers. She told me that our family come from a long line of witches and our family was the best of the witches.

Appendix C

Student A's Portfolio Exhibits

March 2000

Holiday Fun

Every year we have Christmas dinner at my grandmother's. My entire family gets together and everyone brings something for dinner.

There are many different foods to eat and every family member has a great story to tell.

My uncle tells about the time he was in navy, and how he was a cook on a big ship. My grandma tells stories about my mom and her sisters and brother when

When we were little, my mom would always make grandma a ornament for Christmas. My grandmother has a big tree with lots of decorations in her house and on her house. At the end of dinner we sing Christmas songs. When it's time to go home we all hug and kiss and say good-bye. I can't wait till next Christmas.

Appendix C

Student A's Portfolio Exhibits

May 2000

Queen

Queen was a black pit bull dog. My family got her when she was six weeks old. We loved her right from the start. Queen had a way of making you feel good inside. When I would come home from school she would greet me at the door, she would jump into my arms and lick my face. Queen would follow me around the house, and listen to all my stories. She would even bark at my

pen. One day I was in the front yard
after getting the mail; Queen was right
by my side. A girl that lives across the
street from us called Queen. She ran
across the street and got hit by a car. A
car in the middle of the street and picked
up Queen's poor body. We took her to
a vet. Queen had died! My whole family
was sad because of Queen's death. We
all cried days after she had died.
We miss Queen very much. Everytime I
see a black pit bull dog, I think of Queen.

Appendix D

Student B's Portfolio Exhibits

September 1999

Daddy Come Home

Daddy come home. I miss you all
the time. I don't get to see
you just all us when you
I don't know why. When are you
going to come back. We miss you

Appendix D

Student B's Portfolio Exhibits

January 2000

The Shot

My coping name is Small. He was
to go and take his mouth to the shot
of a white and man old to the was
in a sense they were other sum.
to try to make it to the house they shot
him close to the door up are the
and

Appendix D

Student B's Portfolio Exhibits

March 2000

Running Wild

The dog got out the sheep
running all over I try to catch
all of them they never get

Appendix D

Student B's Portfolio Exhibits

May 2000

My Mom

My mom had to leave our family. I love my mom I don't know if she loves me. My mom had to go to jail because she did something bad. She is always doing things that we can't do. When she went to jail we had to stay with my dad. I don't want to go but it's not like being with my mom. I can not wait for mom to come back home. I miss her.

Appendix E

Student C's Portfolio Exhibits

September 1999

Michael Jordan

Michael Jordan is my favorite basketball player. I like him because he plays great ball. He makes a lot of points every game. Mike is a good team member and a role model for kids. He is married and has two kids. If I could be like anyone it would be Michael Jordan.

Appendix E

Student C's Portfolio Exhibits

January 2000The Day I Met Michael Jordan

While I was reading the newspaper one rainy Sunday, there was an advertisement that Michael Jordan would be in town next week. He would be signing autographs at a local bookstore. I ask my mom if I could go, she was all for it. I could barely get through school that week waiting for Sat. to come.

Sat. finally came, I was up early that morning. I could not wait for the book store to open at noon. At 11:00 I started walking to the bookstore. I wanted to make sure I was there when they opened. As I waited outside I kept looking at my watch. Noon took forever to get here.

Finally the door opened. I ran inside. Michael was sitting at a table. I handed him my piece of paper and told him I was his number one fan. He smiled at me and said, "Thanks number 1 fan". I will never forget that Sat. When Mom said, I take out my autograph of Michael Jordan, it makes me feel better.

Appendix E

Student C's Portfolio Exhibits

March 2000Good Times

When I am with my family, it is always good times. I have an older sister and younger brother.

We live with our mom in a nice clean house.

My family loves each other and we have a good time together. My mom works hard, but always finds time to be with her family. We always have dinner together. At dinner we laugh and talk about our day.

My mom tells funny stories about work, and the kids tell funny stories about school. Every Wednesday night we have game night. We play a board game, cards, or dominos. My mom takes us to the movies twice a month. We try to go on vacations every summer. Our family gets along ^{with each other} and we

love each other. When we are together we always have a good time. My mom keeps our family happy and safe. We all love her. She is a Super Mom.

Appendix E

Student C's Portfolio Exhibits

May 2000

A Good Year

I had a good school year this year. Two great teachers taught me, Mrs. Cotton my regular teacher and Mrs. Browder, she helped with writing. I learned alot of neat things this year. In math I made the math honor roll all four quarters. I became really good at division. In science I learned many things about electricity and magnets. You would not believe how many things you can do with a bubble. In social studies we learned about other countries, and famous African Americans. Did you know Harriet Tubman carried hundreds of people on her underground railroad? I became a better reader and writer this year. In writing I learned to slow down and think about what I want to write. I also try to put more detail in my writing. I had a good year this year. When you go to a great school and have great teachers, you can't help but to have a great year.