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Mary J. Rezac
University of Northern Iowa

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This paper examines the implementation of writing portfolios in a first grade classroom. The focus is on two reluctant writers. Throughout the school year, they collaborated with the teacher in selecting exhibits for their portfolio collections. While engaging in the portfolio collection process, the children assessed progress and reflected on instructional needs and goals for future learning.

Writing Portfolios In a First Grade Classroom

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by

Mary J. Rezac

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Jeanne McLain Harms
Director of Research Project

3/6/2000
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms
Graduate Faculty Adviser

3/7/00
Date Approved

Rick Traw
Graduate Faculty Reader

3/7/00
Date Approved

Rick Traw
Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

Abstract

The portfolio is one of several authentic, qualitative assessment techniques used to describe children's involvement in the writing process. Portfolios provide opportunities for children to become active participants in their own learning and assessment. They can become partners with the teacher as together they assess progress and set goals for future learning.

This paper examines the implementation of writing portfolios in a first grade classroom. The focus is on two reluctant writers. Throughout the school year, they collaborated with the teacher in selecting exhibits for their portfolio collections. While engaging in the portfolio collection process, the children assessed progress and reflected on instructional needs and goals for future learning.

Writing is a process to create meaning. To assess this process, the writer's involvement needs to be described. Therefore, qualitative assessment techniques, rather than quantitative, need to be used. Several qualitative assessment techniques that support each other can describe progress in developing writing abilities and also in developing further goals for the improvement of writing. One of these qualitative techniques is the portfolio. According to Frank (1994), the portfolio is a selected collection of student work, representative of a student's activity, interests, and progress in writing. It also shows examples of a student's self-reflection of his/her involvement in the process. When developing portfolios in the classroom, even as young as first grade, students can become active participants in evaluating their learning (Graves & Sunstein, 1992).

The writer describes the implementation of writing portfolios in a first grade classroom. The focus will be on two students who appeared to have potential for poor achievement. Their progress as developing writers through the year will be described.

Rationale of Portfolios in Qualitative Assessment

Portfolios can preserve the history of children's progress. They also give a sense of children's perception of themselves as writers. Using portfolios in this way will assist children in setting goals as learners (Graves, 1994).

Portfolios can closely relate instruction and assessment. Children,

with the support of their teachers, can reflect on their learning experiences as they compile exhibits representative of their progress for their portfolios throughout the school year (Bergeron, Wermuth & Hammar, 1997). As a result, students become active participants in the evaluation process as they justify the reason for selecting a piece of work, reflect on progress and needed instruction, and set further goals for learning (Lamme & HySmith, 1991). They have a chance to assume ownership of their learning (Valencia, 1990).

Implementation of Writing Portfolios

Artists, photographers, models, and other professionals have used showcase portfolios for years to document growth and achievement. In the same way, student portfolios can showcase learning and achievement (Valencia, 1990).

Implementing portfolio assessment in a classroom requires planning and organization by the teacher. Tierney, et al. (1991) state, “We do not expect any two classrooms, nor any two students, to have the same portfolios. Portfolios should grow from the students’ work, interests, and the projects and activities pursued by the class” (p. 45).

In planning for portfolios, teachers can offer an example of their own writing portfolio to their students. Students will benefit from the models and categories of the teacher’s writing. Teachers need to encourage students

to be actively involved in determining which writing pieces are selected for the portfolio. Such activity promotes ownership of the writing process (Graves, 1994).

Portfolio collections can be housed in many ways. Containers can be three-ring notebooks, file folders, expandable file folders, or cardboard boxes. Valencia (1990) suggests that portfolios can hold students' exhibits, checklists, and student-teacher conference notes. The writing exhibits can be selected from the students' writing folder and labeled by the student. A form can be developed for the labels and should include name of student, date of selection, the type of piece, reason for selection, progress in writing, and future goals for writing. Portfolios need to be kept where students have ready access to them (Frank, 1994).

Working portfolios developed during a school year can be assessed at the end of the year. Representative samples can be compiled for showcase portfolios to be passed on to the next year as part of an ongoing assessment. The remaining exhibits can be bound or boxed and sent home as treasured collections for the students and their families (Graves, 1994; Lamme & HySmith, 1991).

Parents should be part of the portfolio process. Concrete evidence of their children's ongoing growth in writing means more to parents than grades on a report card (Bunce-Crim, 1992; Tierney, et al., 1994). The

portfolio collections can be a part of parent-teacher-student conferences. A portfolio sharing night or an end of year portfolio celebration can be held in which students have opportunities to present their work to parent audiences (Johnson, 1996). It is an informative option for an open house.

Implementation of the Writing Portfolio In a First Grade Classroom

As a first grade teacher, I decided to introduce writing portfolios in conjunction with a writing period by the fourth week of the school year. As I planned the writing program, I was apprehensive because the class was quite young socially.

Planning for the Writing Program and Portfolio Assessment

My first task was to gather needed materials to support portfolio collection. I developed a three-ring notebook to keep my records: checklists of written form elements, anecdotal sheets for each student, forms for conference notes, and records of mini-lessons. I prepared folders for each student to house their daily writing. This folder contained pockets for possible topics, writing pieces in progress, and those completed. These folders were stored in a basket when the students were not writing, but the students had access to them at any time during the day. A word book was prepared for each child to assist in spelling. These books were composed of alphabetized word lists with a page for each letter and blank spaces to write other words needed in writing. Also, to assist in spelling, picture dictionaries,

words from our monthly theme board, and webbing sheets from the content areas were available. Students often referred to books that had been read aloud as a source for words and ideas.

In the classroom, I arranged a publishing center on a large table in the back of the room next to three computers and a printer. Students could choose to publish on the computer or use the materials on the publishing table. The materials included an assortment of writing tools: pencils, markers, crayons, and colored pencils. The center also included an assortment of papers and envelopes and a picture file for ideas and topics. Students frequently used this file for story ideas.

Writing Experience in the Classroom

In the beginning, the daily writing sessions were approximately twenty minutes in duration. As the year progressed, they lengthened to thirty minutes. The end of the session was reserved for the students to share their writing with the class. Most students readily found the writing a fulfilling experience. The children were disappointed if the writing time was disrupted and asked for time to work in their folder later in the day.

At the beginning of the writing program, the teacher discussed with the students topics for writing and a list was created on a sheet of chart paper. The students also were encouraged to keep a list of topics in their writing folders. As the year progressed, topics were added to the

lists. The chart sheets of webbing created by the teacher and the students presented concepts that could be possible topics for writing.

As the year progressed, mini-lessons on aspects of writing were introduced either to the whole class or to small groups of children. Lessons on developing characters and plots - - beginning, middle and ending - - were presented. Students' rereading of stories read aloud by the teacher offered models of story structure.

Mini-lessons on written form elements were presented to the whole class or small group sessions, based on student needs. The students used their writing pieces as examples during the lessons on specific elements.

During the author's chair experience, the children shared their completed works, which provided a form of publication. As students listened to one another read their stories, they learned ways to write a story. The student who was sharing a story gained authentic, meaningful experiences in speaking and reading aloud to others. A comment and question-answer session followed each shared story. In the beginning, the teacher modeled appropriate types of remarks and questions. Soon the students were able to offer constructive feedback and ask insight questions.

At the beginning of the school year, the first graders wanted frequent conferences. Several students who were not ready for the independent writing experiences needed much teacher support. When two university

Americorp students began working in my classroom, they were assigned to work with these dependent writers. Then, I was able to do much more conferencing.

Each day I was able to conference with one or two students as they shared their stories, discussed writing problems, or edited a story. From these individual conferences, I learned about children's interests, sense of story, and understanding of the writing components and elements of form. By using my notebook to keep records of the conferences, I had a wealth of knowledge about each student.

Portfolio Collection

At the end of the first quarter, the process of portfolio collection was introduced to the students. The folders for the exhibits were distributed. Students decorated their folders. I used my collection of writing exhibits as a model during the explanation of the purpose and procedures for portfolio collection.

At the end of each quarter, each student and I conferenced to select two to four pieces from the writing folder as exhibits for the portfolios. Included with each writing piece was a dated notation dictated by the student explaining why the piece was chosen. I also added my observations. During these conferences, we discussed progress and established learning goals for the upcoming weeks. When we conferenced at the end of the

second quarter, the students and I compared the selected pieces to the first quarter samples. The children were pleased to see their progress in writing. It was a great boost to their self-esteem.

The third quarter portfolio conferences continued to show growth. Most students were trying different types of stories, even poems and letters. They were successfully using references for their writing including the dictionary and some information books. The students began to work more independently, needing less teacher assistance. More conferences with students could be held because there were fewer students asking for assistance. Students also began to help each other as they engaged in the writing process. It was interesting to hear discussions as they shared their writing and made suggestions to each other. It was obvious they enjoyed writing.

By fourth quarter conference, the students could clearly see that they had become writers. Writing had become meaningful to them and was no longer tedious. They used ideas and models from literature. Most of them had several works in progress and settled into the writing period immediately each day. Many of them were even writing letters and notes to family members and friends. Students published an assortment of books on the computer and also by hand.

The class wrote a book titled, All About Us. We sent it to a professional

publisher and sold copies to the students' families. A copy was placed in the school library. Five students wrote and illustrated stories for a state writing contest; one story was chosen as a finalist.

While most of the students experienced much success, two students had limited engagement in the writing process. It was a struggle for them to put ideas on paper. They were able to write a sentence but had difficulty developing a story. They needed much support from the teacher to turn an idea into a story. For these two students, an adult helper often wrote while the student dictated. Predictable and repetitive books were shared. Then, as a follow-up, the students wrote a similar story with the same pattern. Occasionally, the students dictated a story to me to be typed and then supplied the illustrations. These support procedures provided some success and resulted in stories to share in the author's chair.

Involvement of Parents

I introduced the writing folders, portfolios, and writing goals for the program to parents at the parent-teacher conferences in October. The parents were encouraged to do writing activities at home by providing materials, time, and space. The importance of the parent as a role model for writing was discussed.

A portfolio sharing night was held in May for parents to view their children's writing portfolios. The students were anxious to share their

portfolios and read their writing exhibits. The students demonstrated for parents the writing period by modeling the use of the writing folder, the picture file and other resources, and the publishing center. Several parents commented on the children's obvious enjoyment of writing and said they would continue to support writing at home.

Portfolio Assessment of Two Reluctant Writers in First Grade

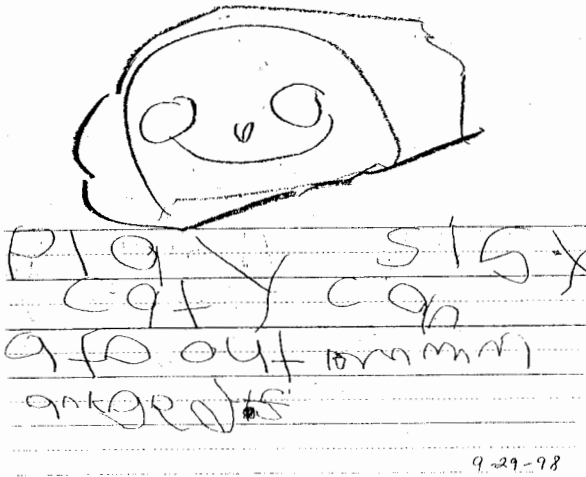
During the school year, I particularly studied the effect portfolio collection had on the writing progress of two reluctant first grade writers in the school program discussed in the previous section. Their progress in writing as portrayed in their portfolios is presented in the following pages.

Student A

This boy was not as mature as most of his first grade classmates. He had difficulty staying on task for any length of time. His fine motor skills were poorly developed; his handwriting and drawings were typical of a preschool child. This student needed one-on-one support to get ideas on paper. He did not use time wisely during the writing period and required constant monitoring.

First quarter. The piece Student A chose for his portfolio was a list of words copied from a chart. He seemed pleased with his choice, having no clear idea about a story. In this piece, he had difficulty forming letters. He combined scribbling and words. He could not relate to me what all of it said. His reason for choosing this piece was, "I like this story" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

First-Quarter Selection

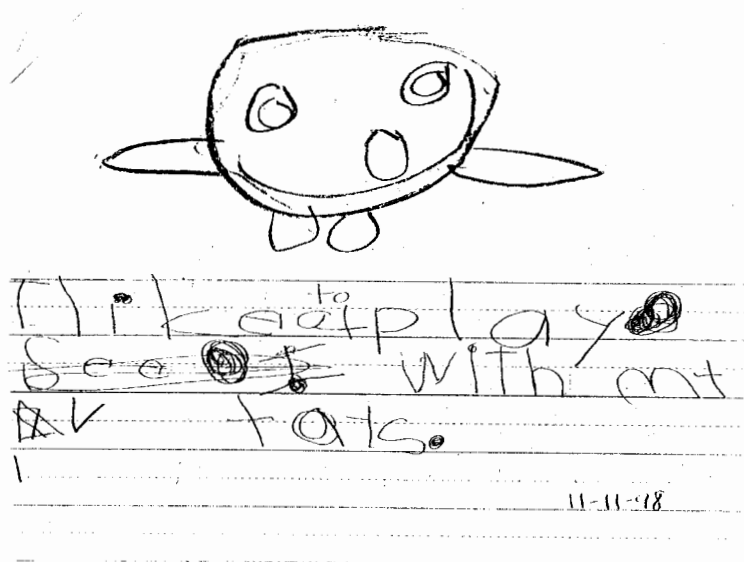
Play sister cat can out

(The rest he could not read.)

Second quarter. Even though Student A's progress was slow, he chose a piece for the second quarter that was a complete sentence (see Figure 2). Student A had gained some confidence in engaging in the writing process and appeared more focused during writing. His interest in writing might be attributed to students sharing their stories in the author's chair. He was always intent on the stories that were shared.

In reflecting on this piece, Student A noted better handwriting and the use of a period. We discussed different ways to start stories. All of his stories started with "I like". Student A set two goals for future writing: He wanted to write longer stories, and ones with a beginning, middle and end.

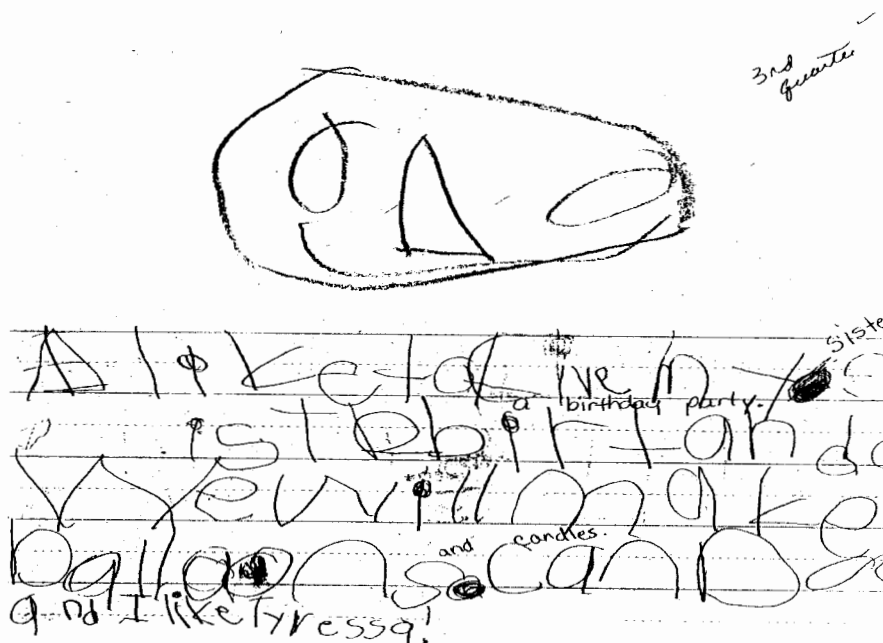
Figure 2

Second-Quarter Selection

I like to play with my toys.

Third quarter. Student A began to write longer stories, but his progress was inconsistent. He usually wrote about his family members and their activities. This piece chosen for one of his exhibits showed some progress in story content and organization (see Figure 3). It contained three sentences. He believed this story had a beginning, middle and end.

Figure 3

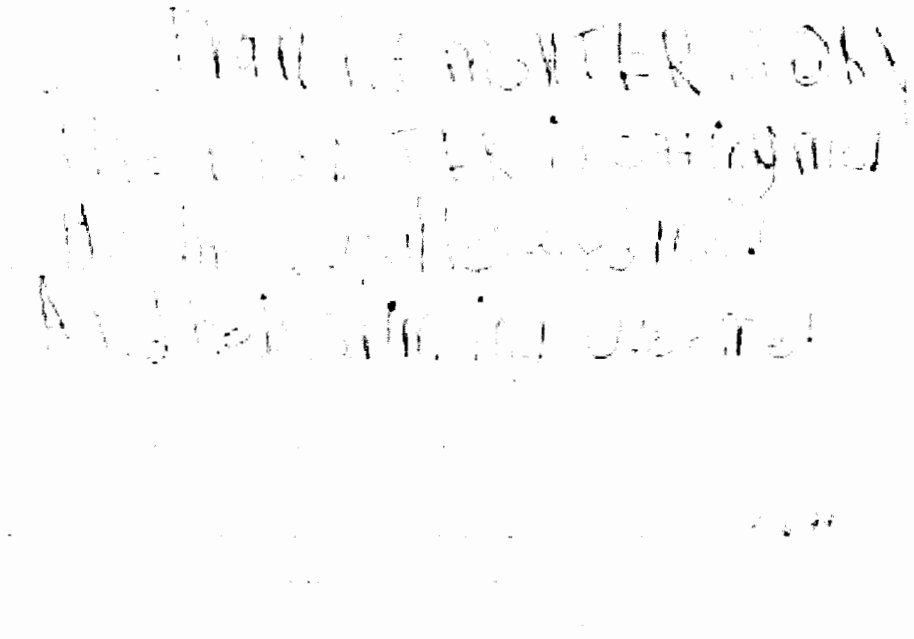
Third-Quarter Selection

I like to give my sister a birthday party. We will make balloons
and candles. And I like Tyressa!

Student A had begun to use more classroom references to aid in writing, such as a birthday chart for the word “birthday” and used his word book for “balloon” and “candles.” He showed lack of progress in handwriting. His learning goals for the fourth quarter were to improve his handwriting and write a story with a title.

Fourth quarter. During the fourth quarter, Student A became interested in monsters after reading a book titled The Meanies Came to School (1995), by Joy Crowley, published by The Wright Group. He wrote several stories about monsters. One of these was chosen as an exhibit (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Fourth-Quarter Selection

During our last conference, Student A appeared proud of his exhibit and his progress from the beginning of the year. He noted much better handwriting and the use of capitals and punctuation at the end of sentences. He said he used exclamation marks because he was excited in his story. He was proud of his title.

While Student A did not achieve his goal of a longer story, he had made progress as a writer. His ideas were logical and sequential. His sentences were simple but well-constructed. He was beginning to have original ideas and was enjoying writing and sharing his stories. Handwriting was still a

struggle but was more legible. He was no longer scribbling and copying words out of context from around the classroom.

In this final conference he reflected that he was good at using his word book. He also thought his handwriting had improved.

Student B

Student B was a girl who came from a home in which Spanish was the first language. Her mother spoke only Spanish, and the father was bilingual. This student was fluent in speaking both languages. However, she lacked confidence, beginning the year hesitant to participate orally and working slowly on classroom tasks. She was reluctant to write and would labor over each word. Because she wanted her writing to be perfect and was afraid to take risks, she accomplished little. The picture file was a great help to her. She enjoyed selecting a picture and writing about it, especially pictures of animals. Also, she gained confidence when seated with another student who enjoyed writing.

First quarter. Student B's first selection for the portfolio was a piece with one sentence (see Figure 5). She chose it because it was about her father.

Figure 5

First-Quarter Selection

I love my Dad!

9-29-98

Her writing showed that she knew how to write a sentence and how to use her word book. She began the sentence with capitalization and ended with a period. We set a goal for the future to write a longer story.

Second quarter. Student B continued to make slow progress in writing. Although she was writing more, she accomplished so little each day. Sometimes she wrote only one sentence during the entire writing period. Her selection for second quarter took several days to complete (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Second-Quarter Selection

She said she chose this piece because she likes P.E. and because it was a longer story. In setting goals, we discussed writing different kinds of stories and developing a story with a beginning, middle and end. She reflected that she also wanted to try more details and descriptive words.

Third quarter. When we conferenced for third quarter, Student B appeared proud of her snowstorm story (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Third-Quarter Selection

The Snow Storm,
 The Snow Storm was
^{coming} ~~coming~~ ^{outside} out side and
^{somebody} ~~somebody~~ ^{running} was running
 in side. The Snow
 Storm was inside

Student B had achieved her goals to write a different kind of story, creating a title, and writing a longer piece. She made an attempt at writing a beginning, middle and end. She showed some understanding of capitalization and periods. When we reflected on goals, Student B wanted to continue to write longer stories, use some descriptive words, and try some poetry.

Fourth quarter. Student B seemed to make more progress in writing during the fourth quarter. She gained more confidence in her writing ability and began to sign up to share her writing with the class. Her stories began to

have focus on details (see Figure 8). She even included conversation in her story for her portfolio selection.

Figure 8

Fourth-Quarter Selection

5-10-99
 The Cat and Dog
 The dog is not like
 the cat. But they are
 friends. The cat likes
 the dog. They said
 let's go to the park.

This was a letter
 from my dog to the
 cat. He said I
 am a dog. But I like
 the cat.
 Let's go to the park.

During our final conference, we compared her Cat and Dog story to her first-quarter selection. She remarked, "I write such longer stories now."

Her stories became logical and sequential. She had progressed in story structure and was titling her stories. She had good use of mechanics and sentence structure.

Student B published (typed and illustrated) her story to share with the class. She was so proud when they noticed she had used conversation in her story.

We discussed her goals before summer. She said she wanted to use a dictionary for descriptive words and finish one more story.

Conclusions

The use of writing portfolios in my classroom as a qualitative assessment technique was a positive experience for both the students and me. This authentic assessment of writing provided me information I needed to understand each child's individual instructional needs.

The students appreciated the opportunity to assess their work through the portfolio collection conferences. The individual conferences provided them time to collaborate with their teacher in reflecting on progress and setting goals. The conferences provided meaningful learning experiences.

The parents were interested in the authentic examples of their child's writing that showed evidence of growth. Many commented that they saw a new value in writing as a means of creating meaning.

The two reluctant writers experienced growth as writers as the year progressed. Student A needed some time to adjust to the classroom setting. Student B learned to take more risks. Student B also gained

much growth in creating stories, confidence in speaking, and sharing orally with the class. They both showed growth in the mechanics of writing and learned to use references around the classroom.

Next year I look forward to implementing portfolios again. I have learned so much about conducting individual conferences and planning mini-lessons. I have enjoyed watching the growth of the students as they became confident writers. If the goal of writing portfolios is to produce students who enjoy writing, then it was truly a teaching and learning success.

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