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Writing portfolios across the curriculum in a fifth grade classroom

Barbara L. Schultz
University of Northern Iowa

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Writing portfolios across the curriculum in a fifth grade classroom

Abstract

Writing portfolios in a fifth grade classroom were used to relate instruction and assessment more closely. A goal of the classroom instructional program was to extend writing experiences across the curriculum. Three students' portfolios were examined to show this instructional emphasis. Descriptions of the children's writing experiences and their portfolio entry responses are presented. This portfolio development experience indicates that the students used writing to learn in a more broad sense. They became more aware of the functions of the composition process. The students progressed from the idea that writing was stories and poems to the idea that writing is used in all areas of school, that writing is functional when used in the curricular areas.

Writing Portfolios Across the Curriculum
in a Fifth Grade Classroom

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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by

Barbara L. Schultz

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5/29/96
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms
~~Director of Research Paper~~
Director of Research Paper

5/29/96
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms
~~Graduate Faculty Adviser~~
Graduate Faculty Adviser

6/4/96
Date Approved

Dale D. Johnson
~~Graduate Faculty Reader~~
Graduate Faculty Reader

6/4/96
Date Approved

Peggy Ishler
~~Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction~~
Head, Department of Curriculum
and Instruction

Abstract

Writing portfolios in a fifth grade classroom were used to relate instruction and assessment more closely. A goal of the classroom instructional program was to extend writing experiences across the curriculum. Three students' portfolios were examined to show this instructional emphasis. Descriptions of the children's writing experiences and their portfolio entry responses are presented. This portfolio development experience indicates that the students used writing to learn in a more broad sense. They became more aware of the functions of the composition process. The students progressed from the idea that writing was stories and poems to the idea that writing is used in all areas of school, that writing is functional when used in the curricular areas.

Language arts programs traditionally have focused almost entirely on reading instruction. In the past few years, the writing process and its assessment have received considerable attention. Until recently, the writing program in the elementary school dealt with form and some creative projects. Current writing programs emphasize engaging in the writing process (Routman, 1991).

Writing is a recursive process through which children can create their own meaning. Children move back and forth among the components: selecting a topic, drafting, reading, redrafting, reading, revising, reading, and publishing. The process is more important than the product. How to learn is emphasized as much as what is learned. To assess children's involvement in the writing process, qualitative techniques are necessary to describe their progress and instructional needs. Because writing is most meaningful to children when they engage in the genuine functions of language provided by the various areas of the curriculum, assessment of their composition activity in these areas needs to be considered. Such writing pieces can be exhibited through portfolios (Graves, 1994).

What are Portfolios? How Can They Be Used in Assessment?

Portfolios are ongoing collections of exhibits representing children's progress, in this case, writing. They are developed by

each child with the support of the teacher. This form of assessment allows for a close connection between instruction and assessment. Such a collection can support children in self-evaluation: setting goals, assuming responsibility for their own learning, and assessing their learning through reflection (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Clemmons, Laase, Cooper, Areglado, & Dill, 1993). Portfolios are the most dynamic form of evaluation used in education today because they are a collaborative team effort between the student and teacher (Batzle, 1992).

No one method for organizing portfolio collections has emerged. However, there are certain essentials for their successful maintenance. Students need to participate in developing the criteria for selection. Students must be in charge of the exhibit selection. Children should have ownership of their portfolios as they choose what items will be selected. Each time a selection is made for the portfolio, the student should be able to justify its inclusion. While making selections, students should consider responses from the teacher and their peers. In portfolio development, the teacher becomes a collaborator in collecting evidence of learning for the students' portfolios (Graves, 1992; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Kieffer & Morrison, 1994).

A broad representation of students' writing is desirable in order to portray growth and instructional needs. Samples of students' best efforts and responses through the different genres of literature and forms of writing across the curricular areas can be included. Also, pieces composed at home can be exhibited (Tierney et al., 1991; Calkins, 1994).

The Project

The author was fascinated as she read about the potential of portfolios to showcase children's involvement in the writing process. She decided to incorporate portfolio development in her fifth grade classroom as a means of relating instruction and assessment more closely and extending composition across the curriculum.

To facilitate writing across the curriculum, the teacher examined the functions of language in the curricular areas. This list resulted from the survey:

journals and diaries

story writing

books

reports

poems

summaries

letters

thank you notes
signs/posters
charts and graphs
essays
outlines
brochures
surveys
newspapers
scripts/plays
cartoons
lists

The students participating in this project were twenty-six fifth graders representing all economic groups, most of whom were from middle economic levels. Most parents had a college education and/or a strong work ethic. They valued education and considered doing one's best in school an important aspect of learning. Generally, that feeling was transmitted to their children. The students possessed a considerable range of academic abilities. Several students received additional support through the R.S.D.S. Program (Renewed Services Delivery System), and several other children received instruction through the E.L.P. Program (Extended Learning Program--gifted).

During the first week of school, a survey was given to the fifth graders to ascertain the students' attitudes towards

writing. The students were asked how they felt about writing, the reasons they wrote, and how they received ideas for their writing. Most students said they enjoyed writing. They had many reasons for why they wrote including: "I like writing stories," "It gives you ideas sometimes," "When I think of an idea I don't want to loose [lose], I write it down." Students acquired ideas from TV shows, books they had read, lists and notes they had jotted down, and real life experiences. One person said that when she started writing, things just came. Most connected writing to stories and poems written in writers' workshop.

Each student had a working portfolio, one that shows work in progress (Batzle, 1992). This portfolio was conveniently located in an open filing crate that was accessible to the students as well as the teacher at all times. The students were responsible for the selection of the exhibits for the portfolio. With the support of the teacher, the students were encouraged during conferences to choose examples representative of their writing progress and activity across the curriculum. The teacher also contributed pieces of students' work she thought important in portraying their writing responses. These conferences for portfolio development were conducted approximately once a month. During conferences, students attached an entry form to each piece of writing, explaining what it was, why it was chosen, and what goals for future writing were being established.

During parent-student-teacher conferences, the parents were impressed with the writing and the learning they saw exhibited in the portfolios. One parent remarked that portfolios were an effective communication tool to show children's progress.

Showcase portfolios will be constructed in May to exhibit the students' most representative writings during their fifth grade year. The students will provide organization for their portfolios by creating a table of contents. These portfolios will be passed on to the next grade level as a part of the ongoing assessment of students' progress and instructional needs. The remaining contents of the working portfolio will be spiral bound and given to the children and their families. A portfolio celebration will be held with parents, teachers, and administrators to culminate the fifth grade year. At that time, the showcase portfolio will be displayed, and children can share selected works to small assigned groups.

These examples are highlights of three students' writing across the curriculum as portrayed through their portfolios.

Student A

This boy has high academic ability. He is goal-oriented and enthusiastic about learning which supports his success in the E.L.P. Program (gifted). He particularly enjoys the social studies area of the curriculum. His parents are supportive in their son's educational endeavors.

During the goal-setting conference at the beginning of the year, Student A stated that he believed that he could write, but he did not feel confident in his ability to write well. As a goal, he planned to do more writing at home as well as at school. Because Student A is highly motivated, receiving help and support from home, the teacher needed only to provide opportunities for him to write and to act as a facilitator during the writing process and in the maintenance of his portfolio.

Student A kept his goal in mind and wrote many pieces of writing with enthusiasm. The first sample he selected for his portfolio was a poem, "The Perfect Cat." He chose this piece because, in his words, he "had figured out he could write poetry." His rough drafts showed evidence of his exploration of the genre. He offered an interesting pattern of questions and a clever ending, justifying the ownership of an artificial, silver cat. In revising, he refined his choice of words and also worked on correct punctuation at the end of each line. During the conference, he shared that after finishing his cat poem, he went back to a short paragraph he had written about his iguana and changed it into poetry form.

Another piece of writing Student A selected for his portfolio was a short story called "Stitches!" which was about an incident that happened at school the previous year. He stated on his entry form, "I feel that it is a good piece of writing

because it was chosen for Writers Share Shop." Writers Share Shop is a celebration of writing led by a volunteer in the IMC every two weeks. Student A worked on this piece at home and at school. He shared it in his small group during writers' workshop. His group reacted favorably and had a great deal of fun remembering when the gym door hit Student A on the forehead near his eyebrow. They asked a few questions, Student A made revisions, and he was ready to share this piece at Author's Chair. It was evident that Student A enjoyed writing about personal experiences and had a well developed sense of humor.

By November, Student A had entered a two-page fictional story, "The First Men on the Moon," into his portfolio. He wrote a longer explanation on the entry form which stated, "I have been working on it [the story] for a long time, and I feel this is a good piece of work. This piece's special strengths are white spaces, dialogue, and humor. One thing I learned from completing this piece is that I have a good sense of writing. If I wanted to improve this piece, I would revise again and finish it." Student A was beginning to use white space, as illustrated in a novel the teacher had read aloud to the class, and to use dialogue, although he still needed to learn how to paragraph dialogue correctly. More importantly, he was gaining much confidence in his writing by recognizing that he had a good sense

of story and could use humor. Also, it was evident that his writer's voice was emerging.

Student A identified other content areas in which writing was used in a functional manner, including the area of social studies which he especially enjoyed. In February, he entered in his portfolio the essay, "Native American Test on the Nootka Tribe from the Northwest Region." On his entry form, he said, "I selected this piece because I feel that I did very well on this test. I studied hard and was ready and determined. This piece's special strengths are [that] it is long, descriptive, and has much information. I learned a lot about Native Americans, especially the Nootka. If I wanted to improve this piece, I would add on to it and make it neater."

This writing piece emerged from a Native American Unit. During the unit, the students had worked in small groups. They used research and note-taking tasks to collect information from resource books, reference books, and trade-books on the folklore of the region. Student A's group, consisting of five students, created a diorama of the region showing its geographical features as well as the plant and animal life. In the diorama, the group also included a model of a Nootka village depicting the homes, the food and its preparation, the clothing, the crafts, and the work done by the men and women. With this background information, Student A wrote freely for almost an hour on his culminating

essay-test. Because Student A had organized his thoughts into the categories that were researched and displayed in his group's diorama, he was able to write in paragraphs with the categories as major ideas. Because of his experience with personal writing and with literature, he included an introduction and a conclusion in his essay. When he finished, his composition was over two pages. From this writing experience, he had found a meaningful purpose for doing this type of writing. He felt a great sense of pride. It was also evident that the student's conceptual development had been expanded by his involvement in the diorama project.

Student A also selected for his portfolio another essay that culminated a fractions unit in math. This time his entry slip simply stated, "I have learned a lot about fractions. It was fun and I improved throughout the lesson [unit]." Before starting the unit, the students wrote what they knew about fractions to establish a knowledge baseline. Student A wrote a scant half page. At the end of the unit, he had written almost two pages. It was obvious that he understood the difference between the terms, "congruent" and "noncongruent." He also knew the relationships among halves, fourths, eighths, etc. and thirds, sixths, ninths. By writing, Student A was able to realize that he had a good understanding of fraction concepts. The teacher was able to see the depth of his understanding.

Student A enjoyed the detective work of researching fifty questions written on paper pickles and placed in a pickle jar. These were questions that asked facts relating to the topics of geography, history, and science studied in the fifth grade curriculum. He soon earned the title of "Pickle Guru." Since he had fun with researching and wanted more problems, it became an opportunity for him to write the next set of "Pickle Problems." This activity required becoming more familiar with reference books as he researched questions on the subject of American History and then wrote his own list of challenging questions. A copy of his "Pickle Problems" and their answers were also included in his portfolio. He included them because "they were fun to do and took a long time to complete." The other students enjoyed finding answers to the questions which enhanced their knowledge of American History. Student A learned new information in a fun way and gained a feeling of success for completing a long-term project entirely on his own. This exhibited another functional use of language.

Student B

This girl has high-average ability. She is a quiet, reserved individual who works slowly and carefully to do her best. Her mother is a primary teacher who values good literature and has exposed Student B to many quality books. Student B loves

to write and especially loves to write poetry. She is creative and enjoys using the elements of imagery in story writing.

During the goal-setting conference at the beginning of the year, Student B said that she was excited about her fifth grade year because she knew she would have many opportunities to write. Because she felt confident in her ability to write, she was ready to start the year by composing several stories about her family that she already had in mind.

Her first entry selected for her portfolio was an expository piece about her grandmother's travels to France and Italy from which she had brought dolls for her sister and her. Student B has a large collection of dolls from many parts of the world. On her self-evaluation form, she wrote, "I selected this piece because it was about my grandma traveling and bringing back dolls for my sister and me. This piece's special strength is [that] I told a true story about my grandma. One thing I learned from completing this piece is that I should be more grateful for having a grandma as nice as her. If I wanted to improve this piece, I would finish, add more polish, and give a copy to my grandma." Because this piece was written early in the year, it provided much information about Student B's writing strengths as well as areas in which the teacher could provide direction. Although she was unsure about paragraphing, she had a good command of written language and wrote in an interesting,

descriptive manner. Already, she had established voice in her writing.

During the second portfolio collection conference, Student B entered her poem, "Litterbox," in her portfolio. (This writing was partly influenced by the poetry rich environment created by the teacher.) Her comments were, "I am entering this poem because it took me a long time to do this, and I put a lot of work and thought into it. This piece's strengths are smells, description of smell, picture, making it seem like you just cleaned a litterbox. I had to think about how I would feel because I don't have a cat. One thing I learned from completing this piece is not to get a cat because I will be cleaning its litterbox out." Her peers enjoyed her poem immensely when she shared it with them. It was published in the Erskine Eagle, a journal of students' writings prepared by parent volunteers twice a year. She was exhibiting her knowledge of the elements of poetry by using rhythm, repetition, figurative language, and imagery. She also included an unusual twist to the ending about the effort of caring for a pet.

Another early entry to her portfolio was a summary of the story, "Rustytoes." This time her entry form stated, "I am entering this summarizing story because I tried to get to the point and tried to put some detail into it but still keep it to the point and I liked the story." The teacher noted that

Student B wrote the major ideas of the story in a logical sequence. She usually ended sentences with punctuation, but sometimes wrote run-on sentences.

In November, Student B selected a diary written from a literature experience for her portfolio. The class had read The Sign of the Beaver (1983), by Elizabeth George Speare, and wrote a response after each chapter as diary entries. They were encouraged to write reactions to the events from Matt's point of view. On the entry form she wrote, "I wrote a lot and enjoyed the book, and it was easy to understand. One thing I learned from completing this piece is I know how to write from someone's point of view in the book and write down feelings. If I wanted to improve this piece, I would get to the point faster." Student B was beginning to understand the importance of being concise when summarizing. She was able to infer how Matt might have felt and had empathy towards the character.

Student B used poems in other circumstances and submitted them to her portfolio. At the culmination of a science unit on weather and after a February cold snap, she wrote a poem focusing on a snow image as part of a thank-you note to a guest speaker, a local meteorologist. Her entry on this poem said, "I liked not having to worry about rhyming and just being able to express my feelings." Student B's poem was unrhymed and made use of imagery

to describe an unusually heavy snowfall. She had colored a bright border of snowflakes around the poem.

At a later conference, Student B selected her essay-test on fractions to enter into her portfolio. She stated, "I selected this piece because it [fractions] were pretty easy to understand, and I thought I wrote a lot. I tried to explain it as well as I could. One thing I learned from completing this piece is how fun it is to know I got a plus on something that was so easy. If I wanted to improve this piece, I would keep adding to this." Student B found that the previous work with fractions with the use of geoboards and geoboard-patterned paper for diagrams gave her a topic for writing. Writing about her knowledge of fractions helped her to realize how much she actually knew. The teacher noted that Student B wrote this essay using concise language and paragraphs, often adding diagrams and color-coding them to make her writing meaningful.

At the beginning of March, Student B selected a short report on the occupation of the tailor during the study of American colonial times in history for the portfolio. She had researched this piece because it is in my favorite subject. This piece's special strengths are I tried to get the buyer to buy my clothing at bargain prices. From completing this piece, I learned lots about the tailor or seamstress. If I wanted to improve this

piece, I would try and find more about it so I could extend this piece of writing."

Student C

This intelligent boy, talented in art, receives additional support for his learning disabilities through the R.S.D.S. Program (Renewed Services Delivery System). He has difficulties in the areas of writing, mathematics, and organizational skills.

His parents give him extra support with his school work at home. This year his stepfather has played a key role in his academic successes by working with him on his writing projects. Using the computer has been motivational and a useful tool for Student C.

Student C has a focused approach towards school. When preparing for the goal-setting conference at the beginning of the year, he wrote these expectations for fifth grade, saying, "I would like to learn everything that I can so I can be prepared for sixth grade. I am going to try to do my personal best all the time. I like to write and put ideas down on paper. My teachers in past years have told me I come up with good ideas. I'm not so good at math, but I expect to improve this year! I hope for a good year!"

Student C's first entry into his portfolio was a story called "Jammer," which was not completed. On the entry form for the portfolio, he stated, "I selected this piece because it's my

best work of all. This piece's special strengths are [that] it's realistic and it has a good, funny story. One thing I learned from completing this piece is hard work pays off. I want to write more and make it into a book."

Later Student C spent a considerable amount of time working on his fantasy piece, "Jammer," a story about a basketball which comes to life and has realistic adventures, much the same as those an eleven-year-old boy might have. He spent much time revising his story on the computer and illustrating the cover. In a small group, composed of five students of various abilities, Student C shared his story aloud. From this supportive experience, he continued to work on the composition. The teacher noted that he needed instruction in paragraphing.

Student C's second entry into his portfolio was a picture story map of his story, "Jammer." He stated in his portfolio entry, "I entered this story map because I did a very good job on it." The map depicted the different events in his story with illustrations colored with felt tip pens. Student C was very proud of this piece of work and shared it in a small group conference. The teacher suggested that these visuals could be helpful in organizing his story into paragraphs.

By November, Student C had entered a second draft of "Jammer" in his portfolio. He stated on his entry form, "I've

added more on to this story and made it better." The teacher observed that he had used some paragraphing.

After completing the science unit on weather in February, Student C placed in his portfolio the evaluation of the understandings of weather map reading. On his entry form he stated, "I selected this piece because I used my own vocabulary. This piece's strengths are nice writing, vocabulary. One thing I learned from completing this piece is that heat makes air expand. If I wanted to improve this piece, I would use a better example." Student C had understood the basic concepts of heat makes air expand and hot air rises, but his understanding of high pressure and low pressure was not accurate. The student used punctuation accurately and wrote with much clarity. His spelling had improved. When he was not sure of the spelling, he spelled phonetically.

Student C entered the poem, "Snowman," written in conjunction with the weather unit. He wrote the following statement on his entry form: "I liked the rhymes and having them have meaning. I tried to put pictures in peoples' minds." Student C used rhyming couplets and correct form to create meaning in his poem. He illustrated his poem with a snowman holding his smiling head.

In March, he entered an informational piece about a Colonial sheriff's job in his portfolio. His entry slip stated,

"I did a good job and had fun." The teacher had observed Student C taking notes on his topic from a book about Colonial life. He then wrote a full page about the sheriff's job. He had included many interesting facts and used proper paragraphing and punctuation.

The most recent entry to his portfolio was a brochure made during the Drug Awareness Unit. Student C stated on his entry form, "It took me some time to do it [the brochure] because I had to use a mirror. The face I used was mine. I thought it was fun to make a rhyme. I also had to write about different types of drugs." The brochures made by the class were to be displayed in doctors' offices and the children's sections of local hospitals; therefore, the class took this project seriously. Student C worked on his brochure at school diligently, as well as at home.

Conclusions

Although the school year is not over, the author believes that her students have gained many benefits from portfolio assessment across the curriculum. Through portfolio conferences, selections from across the curriculum provided a way to assess students' writing, identifying their strengths as well as their instructional needs. Students then set goals to address those needs. The students moved from the idea that writing was stories and poems to the idea that writing is used in all areas in

school: Writing is functional and used in all areas of the school program.

The portfolio writing samples were an important communication link for parents as well as students and the teacher. Parents found portfolios to be a valid instrument in providing evidence of their children's progress in school over a period of time.

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