Powerful Portfolios for Young Children

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Abstract The use of portfolio assessment is a valuable tool for teachers to use with young children to better understand how young children develop and learn. An intentional data collection and documentation system becomes a very powerful assessment tool, one that is authentic and based on children's capabilities and strengths. Children, educators, parents, and administrators are able to see the collection of items that celebrates the child. This article will describe several aspects of the portfolio system including: what a portfolio is; it's purposes; how to create the portfolio; and, how to use the portfolio with families.

When you hear the term portfolio, what do you think of? Do you envision a collection of artwork, a folder containing assessments, a comprehensive collection of student work, a scrapbook of memories? A portfolio may be all of these things listed, however, it can be created with intentional goals and purposeful artifacts that help the student, the teacher, and others to understand learning. The immediate focus of the portfolio is to support a child (learner)

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with their understandings of concepts, ideas, and emotional self. The final portfolio product could be used to provide evidence and to demonstrate accountability of meeting standards or benchmarks. With the emphasis of standards based education and testing in today's schools, it is even more important for teachers, administrators, schools, and parents to advocate for authentic assessments such as portfolios.

> "[My portfolio is] a binder of my best work and other things I like." Abbigale age 7

The Young Learner's Portfolio

A portfolio is a collection of items that celebrates the child. The portfolio includes a variety of artifacts, documentation, and reflections that are developmentally appropriate for young children and includes evidence of understanding and ability. Kruse (2001) discusses the notion of how the portfolio is a systematic collection of one's work. This tool supports and demonstrates children's understandings, abilities, and talents through electronic, oral, and hard copy formats. This collection may help guide curriculum and help students become responsible for their own learning through the reflective process. Greene-Wilkinson, the Region 7 director for National Board of NASSP and K-12 principal, recently stated in a public forum [It provides the opportunity to] "look at each child as an independent learner moving along at his or her own pace, assimilating and sharing information at various stages." In addition, the collection provides evidence of accountability of meeting standards, which may be of interest to administrators and even parents, especially in today's times of accountabilty. As we begin to document how children meet standards, the

audience widens into the administrative realm, including policy at district, state, and national levels. Not only are we showing that children are meeting and understanding standards, but that teachers are teaching that which has been set out for us to do by federal, state, and local governments. The portfolio can help students to understand and articulate their educational experiences and it helps children to see and make connections [between subjects]. In addition, it is a place to collect and keep work in one place and can help the teacher and child develop long-term goals and plans (Danielson and Abrutyn 1997; Gronlund and Engel 2001; Kleinert et al. 2002).

> [We have a portfolio] "to show our parents, teachers, and ourselves what we've learned through the year and how we've improved." Ryan, age 9

The Purposes

There are a variety of purposes and goals when one begins to think about the portfolio process. Initially, it is important for the teacher to conceptualize their own purpose for having and collecting items for a portfolio before the process begins. If the teacher's intent is to prove to others that he is teaching specific content, then he may collect certain things for accountability. However, if the intent is to only celebrate a child's accomplishments or to have the child reflect on their learning, the end product may look different. Most teachers will have several purposes in mind when they begin thinking about the portfolio process and why they are using this system. After teachers have a clear goal, they can then articulate this vision to their students and help facilitate the process.

A high quality portfolio collection, with clear goals, is an intentional process of gathering items to help us (teachers, parents, students, administrators, others) understand a child (and perhaps an entire class or grade level) more completely and more in context (Hebert 2001). Some teachers resist the portfolio process because of the time element. When teachers see the learning value and how the portfolio actually provides evidence of meeting/addressing standards, many teachers change their minds. The complete portfolio and each individual component can be used as a formative or summative assessment depending on when and how often items are collected and evaluated as well as the purpose. These collections can be built into the classroom routine to alleviate some of the time issues. The well-intentioned teacher can assess individuals as well as the whole group's understanding of content knowledge included in various state, school district, or early learning standards throughout the year. This method helps to address and to document how children meet standards at various points (e.g. end of quarters). Portfolios allow us the opportunity for interactive

assessment (Shores 1998): to think about our goals and where the teacher and students are in relation to those goals. They provide a means to gain insight into how to improve as well as what has been done well (Fox 2007).

The Power Shift

"We cannot know for sure what knowledge our students will need to best prepare them for the future. What we do know however is that they will need to become life-long learners, able to adapt to the future changes which will inevitably have an impact on their lives" (Fox 2007). If we, as educators, take the stance that children need to take responsibility for their learning and are partners with us in the classroom, our roles as teachers change and the power shift begins. The portfolio process can support the power shift and help students become more self directed and more responsible for their own learning. Children and teachers work together to identify strengths, artifacts, and other documentation and to better understand where students need to improve or continue to develop. Students become self-directed when they are supported and scaffolded to produce the portfolio. Fox (2007) states, "the portfolio provides structures which scaffold students towards increased responsibility for their own learning while also providing structures to assist teachers make the paradigm shift from that of director to facilitator of learning" (p. 2).

The Process

When planning portfolios, one must take into consideration the audience. The child should be the focal point, yet the teachers also play a key role as they help to guide the child through their learning. Because the portfolio process is an opportunity to celebrate the child, the parent is another key component to consider as an audience member. Throughout the process (the collection and sharing), student, teacher, and parent relationships are strengthened.

To understand the portfolio process, one must understand the key components and the varying responsibilities of the key members. The key components and how they are understood through work samples, reflections, observations, and assessments is essential in seeing the relationship of learning to assessing. The teacher also needs to identify who supports the collection, selection, and reflection of each piece. More than likely, the teacher, colleagues, parents, and children will be a part of this team.

The Roles

There are three main partners that support student success and the development of the portfolio process. The

Table 1 Relationship of the process

	Teacher	Student/Child	Parent
Roles	• To facilitate • To review • To collaborate • To assess • To learn • To be a resource	• To review • To collect • To reflect • To collaborate • To assess • To learn	• To review • To support • To encourage • To collaborate • To listen • To be a resource
Big picture	• To have a clear vision/purpose • To prepare teacher and student goals • To communicate about process • To show accountability to content, curriculum, standards	• To construct knowledge • To self-assess • To take responsibility of learning • To develop goals • To be accountable	• To learn about child's knowledge and abilities • To understand portfolio process • To support child
Collection	• To document experiences • To facilitate learning opportunities • To collect work samples • To support student reflections • To reflect about student abilities and strengths • To collect other products (artwork, individual projects, etc.) • To observe • To assess	• To participate and engage in learning opportunities • To collect work samples and other products • To reflect on learning • To integrate products (work samples, reflections, artwork, etc.) • To organize the products	• To collect supporting documentation to the curriculum • To observe child (at home or at school)
Presentation (student led conference)	• To help prepare final product • To facilitate and provide practice of presentation skills • To organize setting and experience • To guide and support during presentation	• To prepare final product • To practice presentation • To present portfolio • To reflect on learning	• To attend presentation • To guide and support during presentation • To listen • To ask questions • To explore products

relationships of these key members are critical for understanding and evaluating the product. Each member has key responsibilities ranging from the preparation, expectation, time, commitment, organization, etc. These roles overlap and support one another. Each are distinct yet necessary. See Table 1.

The Big Picture

The teacher must be able to communicate a clear vision for student learning and how to assess this learning (Wolk 1997). Teachers should understand the expected curriculum and standards appropriate for their students as well as how to meet developmental needs. When this happens, portfolios provide the opportunity to show evidence of progress as measured against standards and whole child learning. "[There is] a direct correlation between the abilities to assess a child which gives the school accountability but also acknowledges accountability both with the teacher and with the student within themselves because the child can see how they're meeting their own personal goals and objectives" (Greene-Wilkinson 2007, Personal Communication). Having accountability supports credibility. Students come to us with a variety of learning styles, many of which are nontraditional ways that do not clearly demonstrate achievement through paper and pencil methods. Portfolios allow for children to share their growth and learning in ways that express their individuality (Helm et al. 1998). They allow for teachers, students, parents, and others to focus on the process and not just achievement (product). The portfolio process empowers students to take responsibility for their learning and provides an authentic record of assessment (Stefanakis 2002; Shores 1998).

The Collection

When thinking about portfolios, one often hears the advice: "collect, select, reflect." Various state departments of education websites, school districts, and teachers have used these three elements alike. They are important parts of the process each with a distinct function.

Collection The above chart mentions many items for collection. These pieces are single products, documentation, photographs, and project that are collected over a period of time. Not all items are included in the final portfolio; however, the pieces that identify growth, learning, and understanding of a standard are important components. Knowing which pieces to select is the next phase to consider.

Selection When one begins the selection process, they must go back to the initial purpose of creating the portfolio— *why am I having a portfolio and what do I want it to address?* The teacher, the student, and even the parent may have specific things that they want in the portfolio and specific things they want the portfolio to demonstrate. The teacher has background knowledge about the standards and artifacts that provide evidence of meeting them in addition to the deeper understanding of developmental knowledge. Teachers also have a larger understanding about student growth and may plan specific assessments or experiences to chart growth for individual children. For example, at the beginning of the year a teacher may ask her kindergarten students to draw a self-portrait. She may do this several more times throughout the year. Some students may have additional pieces of documentation that highlight a specific ability or talent—for example, a student who is artistic may have several art pieces. Students should also be encouraged and expected to select items they feel are important for their portfolio. This will help to give ownership to the student and also helps students to see and understand what they are learning. This revisiting process helps guide students to think about areas of strength—content-wise or interest-wise—and what they might do next. Students should be encouraged to think about why they have chosen particular pieces. Questions such as *"What makes this something that you want to keep and share with your family?"* Some students need more guidance than others in this selection process. As the portfolio unfolds, the pieces are added as needed. This selection process is ongoing throughout the year.

> "I put stuff in it that I am not always finished with so I can work on it more." Sabrina, age 6

Reflection The reflection process is a time to revisit and review past work, to think about strengths and weaknesses, and to set goals for future opportunities. Teachers might use the reflection process to guide curriculum and to assess individual as well as group understanding of concepts. Student reflection will be more personal and individual depending on the child. They may consider questions such as *"What did I learn from this?"* and *"If I could do this again, what would I change?"* or even, *"Why did I like this experience?"* These types of questions offer students the opportunity for self-reflection as well as self-assessment as a learner. Students are able to reflect on their learning and to feel confident in themselves in this process. The self-reflection process encourages students to think about their own thinking and helps to develop their ability to know how to think. Students also benefit from multiple ways to look at their learning. Portfolios provide a means for the student to see their success, which, in turn, provides the confidence and encouragement necessary to take risks in the future. Teachers can use the portfolio to understand the risks students have taken, and it offers the opportunity to think about where students want to go.

> "What I like about sharing my portfolio is that your parents get to see your work and be proud of what you did and see what they can do to help you." Sarah, age 10

The Presentation, The Celebration

The presentation is the sharing of the portfolio by the student, with guidance from the teacher and possibly a parent, to interested parties (parents, teachers, friends, etc.). Once the collection process is complete and the product is determined, the presentation becomes the celebration of the student.

The product may vary depending on the teacher, the child, the school expectation, and available time to produce the product. The product should take on the form that addresses the initial purpose and vision of the teacher and family. (Meisels et al. 2001). The products may range from a notebook with collected artifacts and other materials to electronic portfolios or even web pages. At times a display board (bulletin board or documentation of an event) may also be appropriate. See Table 2. Each of the various forms has benefits as well as challenges. Teachers or school staff should weigh these concerns prior to beginning the process.

Summary

When beginning this process, a key to success is patience. The use of portfolios takes time: time to plan, organize, and

Table 2 The product

	Organizational components	Materials	Benefits	Challenges
Notebooks	• Table of contents • Personal statement or self-assessment • Content area (literacy, math, etc.) tabs • Reflections • Goals	• Binder • Tabs • Plastic sleeves • Paper (colored, photo, etc.) • Photographs • Assessments	• A keepsake • Easy to add content • Content is adjustable • Easy to share with one or two others	• Hard copy may get lost • Hard to share with large group • Hard to compare data with other products • Takes time to create
e-folios	• Table of contents • Personal statement or self-assessment • Content area (literacy, math, etc.) tabs • Reflections • Goals	• Computer with current software • Electronic template software (PowerPoint, presentation software, etc.) • Digital photographs or video clips • Printer • Web space • CD or DVD burner and players	• A keepsake • Easy to add content • Content is adjustable • Easy to share with others electronically • Easy to add more components • Easy to archive	• Must have technology equipment • Must have technology knowledge and ability • Takes time to create
Displays (bulletin boards, documentation panels, etc.)	• Overview of the project, behavior, skill, experience • Photographs • Descriptions of the photographs • Work samples • Conclusion—what was learned through this or which standards were addressed	• Bulletin board space, or • Panel (poster board or tri-fold) to place materials • Stapler, tape, or adhesive • Paper (color, photo, etc.) • Ink to print photos and descriptions	• Visible to others • Large group or individual experiences are displayed • Reflects how student/s have met standards	• Not as personal • Short term—information may be lost when the bulletin board is removed • Takes time to create

implement. The positive results far exceed (any difficult aspects). Standardized assessments take relatively little time to administer and do not require a considerable amount of effort on the part of the teachers, administrators, and policy makers. The results are easy to understand, can be compared across systems, and are often considered to be objective by the general population. That being said, portfolios (and the process) offer something more. Portfolios promote student self-evaluation, reflection, and critical thinking which are difficult to measure and assess in a standardized test. Portfolios also empower students to take responsibility for their learning in an authentic way, one, that encourages and requires higher order thinking. They encourage interaction with other students, teachers, parents, and the larger community. What and how we assess affects what is taught and how it is taught. It is important to make sure that the assessment truly measures actual learning performance and ability within a relevant curriculum in order to provide a better understanding of students' achievement and to make meaningful use of the results. Overall, the portfolio process can be a very beneficial tool, one that has lasting and meaningful results for the student, the parent the teacher, and the school.

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