

# Portfolios in First Grade: Four Teachers Learn to Use Alternative Assessment

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Educational assessment is experiencing significant changes which affect classroom practices. This article describes an in-depth qualitative study of the implementation of portfolio assessment by four first grade teachers. Creative activities and valuable insights were given by these teachers which allow for successful implementation of portfolios in the classroom. These teachers found three major benefits of portfolios: (1) a means of communicating more effectively with families, (2) a tool to motivate, encourage, and instruct students in the skills of self-assessment, and (3) a mechanism to monitor and improve their own instruction in the classroom.

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**KEY WORDS:** Assessment; portfolio; early childhood education evaluation; developmentally appropriate assessment; parent communication.

## INTRODUCTION

Educational assessment is undergoing significant changes which affect classroom practices. At least three factors contribute to the current reforms in assessment, which include the changing nature of educational goals to more “process” education, the relationship between assessment and the processes of teaching and learning, and the limitations of the present ways of recording student performance and reporting credit (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993). The expansion of student-centered, integrative early childhood classrooms demands evaluation tools that appropriately assess students’ learning, encourage lifelong skills, and provide teachers with insights and diagnostic information as well as enhancing teaching effectiveness. The Southern Early Childhood Association has supported portfolio assessment in early childhood education because of its potential to improve teaching and learning instead of the cur-

rent use of standardized testing which has “disempowered and deprofessionalized” teachers (Grace & Shores, 1992, p. 1). As developmentally appropriate practices increase in early childhood education, educators must search for assessment procedures that coincide with what we know about children and learning. The purpose of this article is to share what the research says about current assessment practices and to describe teachers’ experiences as they attempted to implement portfolio assessment in a first grade classroom setting. Several points will be emphasized as a result of teacher perceptions, which include the power of the portfolio to communicate with families, the improvement of students’ abilities to self-assess and set goals, and the usefulness of portfolios in guiding teachers’ instructional decisions.

## A RESEARCH-BASED RATIONALE FOR PORTFOLIOS

Recent reports and studies have shown that the area of standardized testing is viewed with suspicion. As the “Goals 2000” proposal and similar efforts are implemented, educators are looking for programs which encourage lifelong learning where thinking processes are considered just as important as products. Glazer and Brown (1993) contend that educators must begin the renewal of assessment by harshly criticizing formal test-

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ing as a means to assess young children. Hills (1993) attributes this national obsession for the development of Curriculum and Assessment Guidelines, which object to the "overuse, misuse, and abuse of formal standardized testing, epitomized by standardized achievement tests that are unrelated to the ongoing activities of the classroom" (p. 44). This causes investigators to consider portfolio assessment as an alternative assessment practice, which involves assessing children's processes of learning as well as the products they create.

Decisions that impact young children such as enrollment, retention, and assignment to special needs classes should involve multiple scores of information, not just one test score (Anthony *et. al.*, 1991; NAEYC, 1988; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). While educators may understand a single test score is only one piece of the evaluation puzzle and may not adequately assess development, parents and students may perceive this score to mean much more than it actually does (Flood & Lapp, 1989; Simmons, 1990).

Rhodes and Shanklin (1993) claim the purpose of appropriate assessment in early childhood education is to inform others about student learning and teacher instruction and to address accountability concerns. They feel the most informative way to accomplish this task is to assess on a daily basis during everyday reading and writing activities. Shepard (1994) proposes that a guiding principle of assessment should be that it reflects progress toward important learning goals, including social/emotional development as well as cognitive gains. The NAEYC Position Statement on Standardized Testing claims that the purpose of assessment must be to improve services for children and monitor educational experiences for their benefit (NAEYC, 1988). To ensure appropriate assessment, it must be authentic, continuous, multidimensional and an active, collaborative reflection by the student and the teacher (Goodman, 1989; Valencia, 1990). Nonstandardized assessments such as anecdotal records, checklists, or teacher developed mastery tests should play a critical role in planning and implementing instruction and making decisions about children's learning needs (NAEYC, 1988). As early childhood educators look for a promising assessment tool, these characteristics guide that search.

There are several reasons to use portfolio assessment in early childhood education. Portfolios offer children unique opportunities such as:

- Shared decision-making and control in learning
- Examination of individual work and growth
- Active participation in the literacy and learning process
- Reflection on student strengths as well as weaknesses

- Engagement in student's own personal story of how learning takes place (Wolf, 1989)
- Self-assessment of ongoing growth
- Greater responsibility for learning
- Improved skills in an authentic setting

As students become more responsible for their own learning, teachers can be given valued opportunities to observe and measure student growth in a way that complements holistic teaching strategies. Levi (1990) notes that skills can be observed through portfolios in real-world situations as students apply these skills by working on meaningful additions to the portfolio. Rhodes and Shanklin (1993) add that as students apply these skills in work added to a portfolio, strengths rather than weaknesses are capitalized. Graves (1992) claims that by using portfolios with students, they are more apt to develop a sense of trust with teachers. Clemmons, Laase, and Cooper (1993) found this form of assessment to be the anchor for applying reading and writing to all other disciplines.

Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) spent 3 years studying and implementing portfolio assessment in the Upper Arlington, Ohio, school district. They found that portfolios represented the range of reading and writing students are engaged in where standardized testing does not. Tierney, Carter, and Desai (1991) found other advantages to be more opportunities for students to assess progress and establish goals, accommodations for individual differences, and collaboration on progress between students and teachers.

As early childhood classrooms become more developmentally appropriate and child-centered relying on an integrated curriculum, portfolios need to be investigated as an assessment alternative. Anthony, Johnson, Michelson, and Preece (1991) found that portfolios can individualize learning, give students control and input, and appropriately assess growth and development of young children. Sumner (1993) suggests that portfolio assessment is an answer worth investigating to honor a constructivist philosophy that values process and products of learning.

## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PORTFOLIOS

Upon entering this study, the four first grade teachers who will be profiled here all had very different ideas about portfolio assessment. One teacher had been trained to use portfolios as the primary means of assessment in another state and routinely used portfolios as a collection of student work. She felt that portfolios were the way to assess children but wasn't sure about how to involve chil-

dren or to organize procedures in her classroom. Her primary concern was limited time to adequately assess children. Another teacher had read several books on portfolio assessment and had begun to use portfolios in her classroom on a limited basis. She was seeking ways to utilize the portfolio as a tool of assessment and communication rather than just as a "collection of work." The other two teachers were very interested in portfolio assessment as an alternative form of assessment but had very little experience with the actual practice. Both of these teachers had previously used informal assessment such as checklists, observation, and samples of student work so portfolio assessment seemed to offer them a way to integrate these processes. They each expressed desire to learn more about the organization of portfolios and the involvement of students and parents.

The researcher conducted three initial workshops to clarify procedural concerns about the implementation of portfolio assessment. Monthly brainstorming sessions followed which resulted in a collaborative view of how portfolios would be introduced to students and procedures for beginning the implementation process. Accordion folders were selected as the container for the portfolios. These colored folders were decorated by the students to promote student ownership as suggested by Voss (1992). One teacher numbered the portfolios to make it easier for the students to use them and return them to the correct order. These folders were kept in boxes that were labeled "Portfolios." Teachers worked at keeping these accessible to the students while also assuring the safety of the work placed in the portfolio. Lessons were taught which emphasized the importance of care and respect for individual as well as others' portfolios.

Teachers decided to collect writing samples, inventories on reading and writing, lists of books read at home, reading logs, research activities, art work, math papers, and other work samples relevant to student growth. Students were encouraged to set aside "their very best work" for filing in the portfolio. Other contents included audiotapes of reading and storytelling and videotapes of students sharing portfolios. Portfolios began as one indicator of student growth. Teachers wanted to begin with portfolios as a "reflection of student achievement" in addition to traditional grading techniques.

These teachers began looking to portfolio assessment "as a way to back up our grading system" and "to let parents see the gaps in development that a grading system just can't show." All teachers expressed interest in an assessment that would meet the needs of individual children and serve as an indicator of growth to parents. Teachers desired student self-assessment but weren't sure it was possible at this age. One teacher had already

experimented with student goal-setting and had found that their goals resembled ideas such as "getting more recess," "coloring," and "being good." All teachers agreed that students should become more responsible and "empowered" in their own assessment; however, whether portfolios could be the mechanism to achieve this was still very uncertain.

Teacher frustration was also evident at the beginning of this study primarily based on lack of time to assess, lack of inservice training about portfolios, and assessment inconsistencies between individual teachers and schools. When asked about beginning to utilize portfolio assessment, one teacher remarked,

I really didn't have a perception about portfolios until now. I had heard about it, but didn't know anything about how to implement it with my children. It sounds like a great idea; I just wish we would receive more practical information about how to use them, rather than just be expected to change the way we assess overnight.

This statement brought consensus from the other teachers as well. Their frustration seemed to be when administrators expected new ideas and practices to be implemented with little or no *relevant* training sessions. They seemed, nonetheless, excited about using portfolios with their children and eager to learn the organization and practice of portfolios because they believed that "this idea does have the best interests of our children in mind." This initial frustration seemed to be more with their lack of knowledge about how to make portfolios work with their students and the fact that it was a discovery process that couldn't happen overnight. Working through the problems and concerns that arose throughout the implementation of portfolio assessment resulted in a stronger bond between the four teachers and the researcher. Direct communication between all participants remained consistent throughout the implementation process.

As teachers worked through implementation concerns, perceptions about portfolios began to become more positive. Teachers began to find individual ways to use the portfolio to help them in their own classrooms. Three major purposes of the portfolio kept reoccurring throughout the study. These included communicating progress more effectively to parents, increasing student awareness of literacy development and self-assessment, and even changing teachers' own instruction and curriculum. These three major uses of the portfolio resulted in powerful and positive benefits for the teachers, students, and parents.

## **BENEFIT 1: PORTFOLIOS COMMUNICATE TO FAMILIES**

A letter was sent home to families during September which introduced the idea of portfolio assessment in first grade. Teachers also briefly addressed the concept of portfolios at the Fall Open House. Families had very little knowledge of this alternative form of assessment at this time. After these informative communications, teachers expressed concern about the families' preference of concrete grades. One teacher explained that many of her parents expressed discomfort at even the hint of doing away with letter grades. One teacher said,

Letter grades are a comfort to parents. They let them know concretely how their children are doing in comparison to other children. Even though we discourage competition, it still exists and if you don't believe that, talk to parents.

Even though families tended to prefer grades, these teachers focused on ways to incorporate the portfolio in their interactions with families.

When families attended conferences, excitement about their children's writing and progress were evident. Teachers used the portfolios during conferences to show families specific skills that had been mastered and those that were lacking. The best part of this process, according to one teacher, was that she could show mastery of skills in the context of meaningful writing, rather than some isolated drill sheet. Families became very excited to see their children using skills in everyday writing. All four teachers stated that "writing pieces" provided the most information when sharing with families. Even families of reluctant writers could see progress through the portfolio that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. No parent complaints about the portfolios were documented from the parent/teacher conference experience. Most families expressed gratitude at seeing their child's work in a portfolio. The portfolios were also used by the teachers to show families examples of work that met the criteria for specific grades. For instance, one teacher showed an anonymous portfolio with work that would be considered an "E" for "excellent" in reading and writing and another that would be recorded as a "N" for "Needs Improvement." Parents were interested in seeing a variety of examples of portfolios. The teachers felt it helped them to put their own child's work in perspective. It also documented weak areas that they could work on with their child. The purpose of sharing these portfolios was not to compare children but give parents a more consistent view of the criteria expected for certain grades. When asked why the teachers did this, they responded,

The parents are still looking for grades. They need or want to know how their child is doing compared to peers. Even with at-risk students, it helps their parents to see just what you expect and what areas they need to be working on with their children.

Teachers became efficient at communicating specific literacy concerns with parents. Even though the portfolio contained other work samples besides writing, all teachers utilized the writing samples the most. Specific areas they documented on writing samples and shared with parents included the following: labeling stages of writing, using capitalization and punctuation correctly, story structure, sequencing skills, imagination, illustrations, sounding out words, inventive spelling, motion in illustrations, even spacing of words and letters, handwriting, drawings with detail, creativity, vocabulary, taking time on work, and stories with good structural elements. When teachers selected student work to include in the portfolio, they focused most on works that showed stages of writing and creativity.

Overall, the teachers felt the portfolio represented documentation of student growth and development and an effective communication tool to use with parents. One teacher remarked that she felt more professional using the portfolio as data to support her assessment of the child. As a result of sharing the portfolio, teachers in the study felt the parents' awareness level of their child's literacy, specifically writing development, was increased; relevant skill strengths and weaknesses were conveyed; and overall communication and rapport with parents were enhanced.

## **BENEFIT 2: STUDENTS LEARN THE SKILLS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT**

"Mark chooses every work; he just can't choose a 'best.'"

"Stephen chose this piece because it's his favorite color."

"Sara just picks any work—takes no time or thought in her selection."

"Taylor forgets to select anything."

"Josh wants me to help him—won't try himself to make a selection."

These above comments represent several made by students about selecting work for their portfolios. One of the first teacher concerns expressed was that students were not actively involved in the portfolio. One teacher said,

I am making the selections for the portfolio at this point. When I do ask students to select their best work or what they're most proud of, they choose something based on the coloring or handwriting or because it's the longest.

It has very little to do with their story writing or literacy growth. It would take me two full days to conference with every child about how to do this. There just doesn't seem to be the time to get the procedure going. At this point, I'm very disappointed in the selections my students make for the portfolio and its relationship with self-assessment.

No doubt, getting 6- and 7-year-old children involved with self-assessment was a challenge. When asked to share in the responsibility of assessment, many students reportedly looked "dumbfounded." Their teachers realized that students were accustomed to being told by the teacher what was "a good job" or what "needed work." At first, these students seemed to think they were being tricked. "Hey, you never asked me before about this, what's the deal?" seemed to be the sentiment of many children. Changes were in the air during this time and it took students a while to engage in this newly found freedom. After students became familiar with the idea of self-assessment, strides were imminent. Teachers thought three major strategies helped their students to become more efficient at self-assessment. These strategies included:

- Teacher modeling of appropriate assessment techniques
- Student practice in selecting work samples for the portfolio at the "Portfolio Center"
- Students sharing their portfolios with peers and teachers through the videotaping process

Based on the positive benefits on students' ability to "self-assess" that resulted from these innovative ideas, each will be elaborated upon for further understanding.

After the initial frustration of student selections for their portfolios, teachers realized they needed to model ideas and suggestions that could be reasons for selecting a paper for the portfolio that would reflect literacy growth. During the morning message, teachers would model examples of skills that would be great for showing in your writing. For example, one teacher was writing a story about penguins. Throughout her story, she talked about sequencing and story elements. This was an excellent story for teaching a beginning, middle, and end. She then explained that students could look through their stories and find one that had a great beginning, middle, and end. She advised them to put creative stories like this in their portfolio to show they could write a sequenced story well. Students seemed to respond to this type of modeling.

The Portfolio Center was a result of a brainstorming session where teachers and the researcher searched for an avenue to work individually with students through conferencing which would demonstrate to students how to

select pieces for the portfolio that better reflected their growth. At first, teachers suggested bringing in parents to monitor children for a couple of days while teachers worked one on one with students. They concluded, however, that this seemed too separate and distinct from instruction and assessment so they decided to develop a Portfolio Center. For 2 weeks, the teachers each set up a center area in their classrooms to conference with students about selections for their portfolios. Teachers required all students to visit the portfolio center at least once a week. Children in the center were limited to five. Portfolio folders were on the table and children were instructed to look through their portfolios. Various work samples that the teacher had collected were also on the table for students to peruse. During this time, the teachers began by making remarks such as:

"Pick out the work that you're most proud of."

"It will take you a while because it's a big decision and you have so many nice things."

"Look at your stories, which one do you like best? Think about why you like it best."

"Make sure this piece is your favorite and think about why it's your favorite."

Student responses dictated to teachers that they needed to ask questions a little differently next time. Student answers included comments such as:

"I like this one—it has a star."

"I wrote good."

"I like the star."

"It has a sticker on it."

"We did good on it."

"The handwriting was good."

"I like it. It got a star."

This teacher was concerned when she realized that students were using whether or not she put a star on their paper to base their assessment decision. Thus, after the first two days of establishing the center, this teacher began to change the questions she asked her students. New, revised questions included:

What piece of work shows you to be a great writer?  
Why?

What paper do you feel you did the very best on and why?

Which is your best story? What makes a good story?

What paper are you most proud of?

What paper was the very hardest for you to do?

How did you feel after you finished this paper?

What is your best handwriting? Math work?

What part of this paper really makes you feel good?

As can be seen, questions became more specific and targeted specific skills of the students. Teachers felt that students were reflecting a continuum during this process

ranging from directive to self-reflective (see Fig. 1).

When student responses during the Portfolio Center activity in December and April were compared, it was apparent that students had become more competent in selecting work that better reflected their growth and progress. Teachers felt they were more “directive” in December, but pleased to do less directing and more monitoring and offering feedback in the April center time.

Because teachers were constantly dealing with time constraints and instructional demands, the Portfolio Center was a successful compromise for these teachers. They felt the objectives accomplished by the center would not have been possible without the organization of the center activity time. Teachers also looked to other times throughout the day to advise, conference, and observe students on their attempts at self-reflection. However, the center activity seemed to be more useful for formalizing this procedure and increasing the awareness level of literacy growth of the students and the teachers.

During the month of February, all first grade students were videotaped while sharing their portfolios. During this time, questions from the student interview sheet were also asked. Students were brought to the taping room five at a time. They then individually shared work in the portfolio and told what the portfolio meant to them. Teachers felt this opportunity enabled students to become more articulate about themselves as lifelong learners. All students expressed excitement about the opportunity to share their portfolio “on TV.” One teacher expressed,

It’s not very often that students get to be on center stage. Everyone, including the camera, was watching—each child got their turn to really feel special and the great thing about it is they were doing this while sharing their accomplishments in first grade. That just doesn’t happen to these kids everyday.

Teachers felt that the videotaping had positive results for children. The students later got to view the videotapes in May as an “End of the Year” special treat. During this time, teachers were again given the opportu-

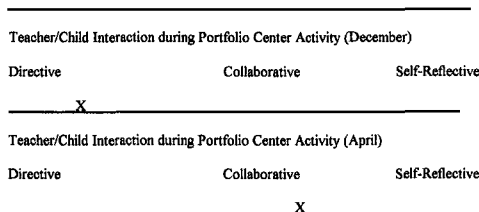


Fig. 1. Continuum of teacher/child interaction.

nity to model self-assessment by pointing out positive traits about each child’s presentation.

Teacher modeling, the portfolio center, and videotaping students as they shared their portfolios all seemed to have a positive impact on the students’ ability to make decisions about their individual growth and development. All students expressed pride in their portfolio while sharing during the videotape, which may indicate they did feel ownership and a part of the assessment process.

### BENEFIT 3: PORTFOLIOS GUIDE TEACHERS’ INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING

According to Rhodes and Shanklin (1993), a primary purpose of assessment is to monitor and adjust instruction to better meet the individual needs of the students. Thus, teachers were asked if and how using the portfolios changed their everyday classrooms. Three of four teachers responded that their instruction changed based on information gathered through the portfolios. However, instructional changes were observed and documented in all classrooms that seemed to be related to portfolios. The teacher who answered “no instructional changes were made” on the questionnaire actually described changes that she did make in instruction based on portfolio data through interviewing and informal visits with the researcher. Three primary changes were documented in teacher instruction and curriculum which included more emphasis on writing and the writing process, more collaboration with students one-on-one, and a greater awareness of gaps in skills in all areas.

The teachers and researcher documented “writing” to be the one area that produced the greatest change in daily instruction and activities. All teachers claimed that as a result of the portfolio data, they incorporated more creative writing in their classroom and spent more time teaching the writing process. When asked what she had learned about portfolios, one teacher said,

I’ve learned that next time I want to have more math and writing work samples and less structured word study activities. From seeing the portfolios, I have put a lot more writing activities in my daily lessons.

Another teacher answered,

I’ve noticed from the portfolios that we have done so much pattern writing and very little creative writing. I think I need to emphasize “fun” writing for a while.

Viewing the portfolios caused teachers to examine how they were utilizing their daily instruction. All teachers felt writing deserved more time because of the

amount of information they could glean from a writing sample in the portfolio. The teachers expressed surprise in how helpful the writing samples were for documenting skill growth and communicating to parents. When asked what items in the portfolio were most helpful, one teacher remarked,

Writing samples are most helpful to me because I can see how their spelling is coming along and to see how many skills they are picking up and applying in their work. It really helps me to know what we need to cover more.

Another teacher answered the question this way:

Writing pieces are the most helpful to me. I feel like I can see many ways a child is using skills we've learned. I can really see progress in their writing!

Another teacher was asked how the portfolio reflected student growth and she responded,

I use work in the portfolio to see which skills the students have mastered in their writing samples or have retained from previous lessons. Looking at the writing samples and inventive spelling has really helped me hone in on weak areas of individual children.

Because teachers had begun to place a higher value on writing after using the portfolios, the researcher observed classroom instruction and analyzed the portfolios with the sole purpose of looking for evidence of writing instruction and creative writing samples. Teachers were observed spending time teaching the writing process. Over time, the classrooms began to reflect more writing by charts of the writing process and more children's writings hanging in the classroom and hallways. Analysis of the portfolios in December and May revealed that in May there were *three times more* stories written and self-selected writing pieces in the portfolios than in December. When students were asked in February on videotape what their favorite piece was in the portfolio, stories written ranked first, again showing the emphasis placed on writing.

The second area of instructional change involved the value placed on individual instruction. The teachers felt that through the portfolio center and individual conferencing, a positive rapport was established in their classrooms with the students. The teachers claimed that using the portfolios had positively affected their relationships with students. One teacher remarked,

It has shown me what kinds of things are important to my students and what kind of things they like to do. I have really learned more about them through our conversations about their work.

Another remarked,

I think the students know more about my expectations for them, especially in their writing. Before, I made too many assumptions about these expectations.

Another suggested,

Because of the portfolio, children have taken more pride in their work. I have realized even more the incredible power that one-on-one has with students. Even though there is little time for this, I will make sure conferencing with my students and one-on-one instruction is a priority in my classroom. The portfolio center helped a lot with this.

As noted in the above comments, one-on-one interaction between student and teacher seemed to be enhanced through the use of portfolios. Teachers seemed to gain greater appreciation for the art of collaboration.

The third instructional change documented was the use of the portfolio to guide future skill lessons. Teachers found the portfolios to be, in a sense, their own personal report card. They were perceptive in utilizing data from the portfolio to help them know what areas of skill concentration students needed. Seeing the work samples selected by the students for the portfolio provided them with student input. Though this was the least noted change, it did seem that teachers looked to the portfolio as a mechanism that identified "holes" in children's skill development. These "holes" were later emphasized through formal lessons, guided activities, and even center activities.

This study documented that instructional change can occur as a result of implementation of portfolio assessment. Though the portfolios can be credited for the majority of these changes, much can also be said for the art of "collaboration." These teachers met regularly with the researcher and brainstormed ideas for improving instruction as well as assessment. These sessions helped participants look to improve instruction by means of incorporating more writing into the first grade curriculum, providing opportunities for more teacher/student collaboration about assessment, and pinpointing skill deficiencies through a perusal of portfolio contents.

## SUMMARY

A primary question that undergirded this study was an investigation of the ways in which teachers can utilize portfolios in their classrooms. Research has shown that teachers find portfolio assessment to be rewarding but very time consuming (Anthony, Johnson, Michelson, & Preece, 1991; Graves, 1992; Merina, 1993; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993; Voss, 1992). The four teachers in this study verified these previous findings in that time and management concerns were present throughout the

study. However, they did engage in various activities which lessened the time constraints and management problems. Some of the teachers' creative problem solving strategies designed to address time and management issues included the use of fifth grade buddies, a portfolio center, and brainstorming sessions among teachers.

These teachers found that portfolios were useful to them as a device to document students' progress and communicate with families, a tool to motivate, encourage, and instruct students in the skill of self-assessment, and a means of monitoring and improving their own instruction in the classroom.

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