DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 082 PS 021 115

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TITLE Portfolio Assessment: Practical Training in Evaluating the Progress of Kindergarten and Primary Grade Children in Individualized Portfolio Formats.
PUB DATE 16 Oct 92
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children (28th, Houston, TX, October 16, 1992).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiotape Recordings; Check Lists; *Child Development; *Classroom Observation Techniques; Informal Assessment; Kindergarten; Kindergarten Children; Photographs; *Portfolios (Background Materials); Primary Education; Rating Scales; *Student Evaluation; Student Records; Videotape Recordings; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Portfolio Performance Appraisal Systems; *Student Centered Assessment

ABSTRACT

In contrast to standardized tests, which do not accurately reflect the achievement of young students, portfolio assessment is a valuable tool for documenting a student's development. Portfolio assessment can be conducted formally or informally through observation or by interview. Documentation of observations can take the form of checklists, rating scales, anecdotal records, audio or videotaping, and photographs. Portfolios should include samples of students' paintings, drawings, stories, letters, lists, signs, handwriting, and use of numbers. Teachers should adapt portfolio assessment to their specific situation, using portfolios to integrate curriculum and assessment and to reflect children's developmental progress. (MM)

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PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT: PRACTICAL TRAINING IN EVALUATING THE PROGRESS OF KINDERGARTEN AND PRIMARY GRADE CHILDREN IN INDIVIDUALIZED PORTFOLIO FORMATS

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by Deborah Diffily and Pamela O. Fleege, Ph.D.

PRESENTATION
TEXAS ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN
28TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE, HOUSTON, TEXAS
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16

About a year and a half ago, some of my colleagues and I were talking about experts in the field of early education saying, "You ought to be doing portfolios," to classroom teachers. As we we talked, the question arose "Has anyone looked to see if this can physically be done?" We couldn't think of anyone who had done research in this area, so we decided to do it. That's how Deborah and I got started.

Now that we have been doing portfolios for a while, we have found things that worked and those that didn't. Today we will discuss what is unique to our situation. That is one of the strengths of portfolio. It can be adapted to your particular situation.

First, let's discuss the need for portfolio assessment. The reason there is a move to portfolios is due in part to the focus on accountability and the back to basics movement. Others wanted us to be accountable for what we do in our classrooms. For us, as early childhood people, that was fine. But, for a number of years, we were asked to be accountable in the wrong manner. We know that children don't go through and mark x's and

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color in little circles very well. This is what we have been asking preschoolers through third graders to do. As you and I know, most third graders write fairly legibly, but for some reason when it comes to those little circles or transferring what they read in a booklet to a separate answer sheet that you color in, suddenly things don't match. Many teachers report an increase of behavior problems. You find kids that no longer want to come to school. You find children that have been your "model students" are suddenly problems. These are not the kids that you started with. These are not the students that you had last week. Then when testing is over, a week later, you've got your class back. It's like you don't know what happened in the interim.

In addition to changing the behavior of your students, research shos standardized tests don't match what we do in our class. They do not match our methods or the content. Studies have been conducted that show the best match found between a textbook and a test was 50%. So, these testing assessments are only assessing 50% of what we teach. That's not a real good match.

Research also shows that low socio-economic status and minority children score lower on standardized tests. It is not that they are not bright and it is not because they are not capable. One reason they don't do well is because they are young, but also they are not always privy to the content information on standardized tests. For these reasons as well as others, many educators have gone to portfolio assessment, alternative assessment, or authentic assessment. It is called many different names.

When implementing portfolio assessment, the two main ways you want to assess young children is through observation or by interview. As far as young children are concerned, this is the only way it can be done. Observations and interviews can be documented and included in portfolios. These can be documented formally or informally.

Documentation of observations can take the form of checklists. These are merely a list of behaviors. You check one of two things: yes, they exhibit this behavior or no, they don't. You do not look at the quality of the behavior.

Rating scales, on the other hand, give you that qualitative information of how well a child can perform a task. Many rating scales use the Likert scale of one to five or there will be boxes labelled: "I see this most of the time," " I see this some of the time", or "Not yet". I like the label "not yet" instead of "No, I don't see it." By checking a box that says "Not yet" you are telling the parents that the concept is going to come, and that you're just not seeing it yet.

Anecdotal records focus on a specific incident or event that you want to make note of. These need to be stated in very objective language, with a separate analysis. One area needs to state what happened and a separate area is what you think the incident tells you about that child.

Included in portfolios are student work samples. Work samples would be products created by the children. It can be art. It can be writing

samples or other things. Most anything that a student gives you can be filed.

Another way to document a child's progress is through audio taping. We have used audio tapes to assess story retellings and language development.

In addition to observation, progress can be assessed through interviews. Interviews can be formal or informal. They can be very formal where you take the child away from the group and ask them to perform a task or ask them a series of questions. One example of an interview focusing on concept words such as "in" would be to ask the child to put the car inside the box. Or the teacher moves the objects and says, "Where did I put the car?" That would be a formal interview. However, interviews can be very informal. Fox example, walk over to the block center, bend down and say, "Tell me about what you are doing," or "How many blocks did you use to build this structure? Well, let's count them." Interviews can be that informal. How you use interviews depends on how you feel about them because this is your expertise. Portfolios can be adapted for what is comfortable for the teacher and what is comfortable for the children.

Video taping can be very useful. We are having more and more elementary schools which have camcorders. It is not very hard to do. Many times you can get parents who are really into this and will come into the classroom and tape for you. If that is not an option, you can put it on a tripod, focus it, and just let it run. As a teacher, you decide how you

want to use it. One way teachers are handling the expense is by putting tapes on their supply lists. Some teachers are asking for one video tape and two audio tapes as part of the fall supply list. That way they have access to these supplies throughout the year.

Photographs are another way of documenting your observations. It is very vivid to parents, if for example, you have pictures of children's block structures at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. Basically, you document those little three-block structures to cities that go across the entire room. These photographs are a vivid way of showing parents the development of their children in that particular area.

These are a few ways that you can document your observations and interviews. Now, Deborah is going to tell you how she adapts these assessment practices in her own classroom.

To be honest, I was not overly enthusiastic about starting portfolios a year ago in August. I did it for two reasons: one, because my major professor asked me to and secondly, because I felt a sense of obligation to my students to be the best teacher that I could be. I kept hearing that portfolios were an appropriate way of looking at young children and documenting their progress.

Before I started trying to create portfolios, I wanted to learn as much as I could. I went to the library and ran ERIC searches and read indices of professional journals. I was looking for help in how to get

started, what to do first. I didn't find much information available. I feel like I spent a lot of my first year searching.

I tried to go from what I knew into the unknown area of trying to create portfolios. I knew that I wanted to look at all areas of development in my kindergarten students. I knew that I wanted their portfolios to reflect all those areas, but I wasn't sure exactly how that should look. For my first year, I started with what I was given as a teacher. In my school district, each teacher is given a set of learner objectives for which they are responsible. In kindergarten, these objectives are divided into five developmental domains: cognition, communication, aesthetics, physical, and social/emotional. I started there. I looked at each domain and chose two or three specific objectives that I wanted to document, areas that interested me. Then I tried to match methods of documenting to each objective. For example, under communication, I chose an objective related to story retellings. Audio taping and transcription of those tapes seemed to me to be the best way of demonstrating a child's progress in story retelling, showing development in the quantity and quality of language they used to retell particular stories. That's the way I started, by deciding what I wanted to more formally assess and how I thought these certain objectives could be included in my student's portfolios.

I knew I wanted to use as many different methods of documenting progress as I could, so I looked through all the child development books I had and several from local college libraries. I looked for checklists and rating scales that might work to assess the objectives already selected. I

relied heavily on one book, Observing Development of the Young Child, by Janice Beaty. I took her lists regarding what you should be looking for in young children's fine and large motor skill development and I turned those into checklists. Originally I had not felt very comfortable with checklists, indicating a simple yes or no about a child's behavior, but Beaty suggested checking items that children perform regularly, marking an "N" for items where there is no opportunity to observe a particular behavior, marking a + for items where the child had progressed to advance levels, and writing simply comments beside as many checklist items as possible. Using Beaty's approach to checklists made me feel more comfortable.

Over the summer, in evaluating what I had learned about creating portfolios which demonstrate the progress of my students, I realized that I did not have to rely so heavily on Beaty - or any other expert. As an early childhood teacher, I know what I am looking for in different areas of development. I know what to expect from kindergarten children from my experiences with them.

This year I am using checklists that I create myself. Using a draw package on my computer, I drew a chart with five columns and twelve rows. If I am looking for particular behaviors, I create a list of those actions. For example, after reading Strega Nona by Tomie dePaola, my students took different kinds of pasta and colored stringing buttons from the Math Center into the Home Center. They transformed the living room and kitchen of the home into a restaurant. Within a few minutes, they were giving away pasta in platters and bowls, like Big Anthony had, and

sorting and selling the colored buttons as pizzas. During lunch that day, I took one of the blank forms I had created and entered these behaviors at the top of the page: sorting by color, sorting by attribute, one-to-one correspondence, oral counting, and writing numerals. I expected to see those behaviors and did during their afternoon center time. My observations were easily documented as I checked each item observed and made a brief note about the child's choice of actions.

This was a situation where I followed the lead of the children. I simply observed them at play and determined which cognitive skills I could see them demonstrating during their play episodes. The open checklist forms I had in my files allowed me to respond quickly to what they were already doing.

As a teacher, I felt good about what I was able to document about my students through their home center play. After considering how much I was able to document about my students through this manner, I decided to rearrange the home center, hoping to elicit certain emergent literacy behaviors in my students. Two weeks after the restaurant play theme, I began adding certain items to the home center just to see how the children would incorporate them into their play. I started putting logos on the wall from foods I knew the children ate: popular cereals, soups, breads, lunch meats, vegetables. I placed grocery circulars and pads of paper labelled "Grocery List." I placed canned foods in the pantry. I put stationery and envelopes on shelves. I placed some of the class' favorite books near the cradle. I placed a telephone book near the telephone. The children really did start using those in their play. Once again, the open

checklists helped me document the behaviors I observed: reading familiar books to the "babies," reading logos as referenced the posted logos in deciding "what to make for dinner", knowing that print is written from left to right as they copied grocery lists from the circulars, and using resources to find what they want to know, when they "looked up" the phone number for a restaurant which would deliver pizza to them.

Honestly, I was able to put more information about my students into their portfolios by following their play and documenting what I observed, than I had the year before when I was so tied to using forms created by someone else. You do not have to use checklists that others have developed. Sometimes when you do, you find yourself setting up contrived situations so that you can try to observe those behaviors on the list. The most authentic assessment occurs when the teacher observes children in natural settings in which the children have chosen their activities.

I do use checklists for other reasons too. One thing I learned about creating portfolios from last year's experience is that I needed to collect more information which could be compared. One checklist I am using this year is a Center Choice Chart, where I simply type another form, listing all the centers in our classroom across the top of the page and the days of the week down the left side of the page. For one week in September, I asked my students to tell me every time they made a center change. I simply checked off their decisions. I will do this again in January and in May to compare which centers they are choosing and how many changes they make in a week.

One of the things that portfolios do best is show growth over time. By consciously collecting more base line data, this year I will be able to show this growth more easily. By looking at how many times children change centers at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year, you can demonstrate increased attention span and changing interests. But to be able to do this kind of comparison, you need to make some decisions about what kinds of data you are going to collect at the beginning of the year.

Base line data should be compared to similar data. For example, last year I recorded several story retellings from each student, but they were not similar tasks. Last year, the first taping I did on each student was predicting an ending to a particular book, then I recorded a retelling of a fiction book, then a recording of an expository text. In assessing a child's progress in story retellings, you cannot look at these three tapes and honestly show true growth over time. This year I am doing these same recordings, making sure that I have one example of each from the beginning of the year and at the end of the year.

Rating scales can be as flexible as checklists. Again, teachers can create their own. Last year I developed a list of literacy behaviors I wanted to look for in my students. The process of developing the list helped focus my observations of students' actions. The rating scale started with simple behaviors like: chooses books for personal enjoyment and knows print/illustration difference and ended with: uses text in functional ways and can read sight words from books. I simply marked one

number between one and five to indicate how frequently I observed those behaviors in each student, from seldom to often.

This year I used the same literacy rating scale, but I asked the families of my students to complete the form. I'll ask parents to complete this same form at the end of the school year. Comparing those two rating scales will allow parents to see how their perceptions of their children's literacy development has changed over time.

Rating scales can be created with behaviors from any developmental domain. As I was reviewing my students' portfolios recently, I decided that I had not done enough documentation in the area of social/emotional development. I simply took some of the learner objectives mandated by my school district and turned those statements into a rating scale. Sometimes it is easier to observe behaviors when you have some structure to shape your observations. I simply marked where I thought each child was on each objective on a 1-5 continuum and filed those rating scales in each child's portfolio.

Anecdotal records are another way of documenting behaviors. These are an important part of portfolios. These can be very time consuming. Last year I included very formal anecdotal records in each portfolio. I found myself spending too much time trying to document too much in this manner. In formal anecdotal records, you use very objective language to describe a particular incident involving a group of children or an event in the classroom life of one child. Any questions raised or insights learned by the incident must be written separately from the description of the

event. I was trying to do too many of these. Handwriting objective descriptions takes a lot of time.

Because anecdotal records are time-consuming, I use these to document behaviors that I find particularly significant. It might be the first time that a child has chosen to read books in the reading center or a moment in which two children who normally do not work together choose a joint project or a time when a child risks moving into a new stage of writing.

This year I discovered how much easier it is to make quick notes during the day and write up the incidents later on the computer. Word processing allows anecdotal records to be created in one-quarter the time, sometimes less. Early in the year, our snack for the day was Ritz crackers. Before I passed them out to children, I asked them watch carefully and to tell me how many crackers I had given them. This was a quick way to check for one-to-one correspondence through five. That night I could change a few words on each anecdotal records and complete 23 records in less than half an hour. Last year, one anecdotal records could have easily taken half an hour! This is a important point to remember. The more you work with portfolios, the more you will learn about constructing them.

I've also learned that not every anecdotal record must be formal. I'm also including more informal anecdotal records in portfolios. Quick notes jotted down on Post-It notes can be just as valuable as formal anecdotal records. I especially use these informal notes to describe the

process a child goes through to create artwork or writing a story. I jot down comments they make as they work, or discussions they have with other children who are working near them.

These notes can be very important to explaining the children's work samples. I remember one particular easel painting created last year by one of my students. If you looked at the painting alone, it would look like one giant brown blob, quite ordinary looking. But when you read the explanation of her process of creating the painting, it became a very important piece in her portfolio. Tiffany was a very motherly type child, taking care of everyone in the classroom. When we studied reptiles, she was horrified to learn that reptiles don't take care of their babies. She handled her feelings through painting. First she painted small, yellow oval shapes, saying, "Here goes an egg. Here goes an egg," and so on. Then she picked up all the paintbrushes at one time. As she painted over the yellow shapes, she said, "Now cover them up to make them safe." Without the note describing her self-talk, the work sample would not have been as meaningful.

I also use interviews in my classroom both formal and informal interviews. In my school, we are exploring the issue of student self-assessment this year. For kindergarten students, this is not a particularly easy task. So early in the year, I established Friday learning cards. This is a very simple form of formal interview where each child answers the same question. Each Friday each student dictates an ending to the sentence, "This week I learned..." What the students dictate is not always true. On September 15, one boy in my class dictated, "This week I learned

to be quiet." He had not learned to be quiet that week! But he did learn that that was a behavior which was expected of him. These learning cards collected over a period of time can show real growth in children. Writing one sentence per child does not take that much time and already this year, I have noticed some dramatic changes in some students. At the first of the year, one student made very global statements, like "This week I learned to read and write." Now they are making much more specific statements, like "This week I learned that Mercer Mayer puts a spider and a grasshopper in all his illustrations."

Obviously these learning cards are filed in their portfolios and, as a collection, will demonstrate how children develop in the area of self-assessment and can also show oral language development. I use other formal interviews where I ask the same questions to all children. For example, I use a questionnaire about the students perceptions of themselves as readers and writers. I ask the same set of questions in the fall and again in the spring. Again, this brings up the point of base line data. Comparing the one type of data collection to the exact same data collection months later demonstrates real growth in children.

I record these formal interviews and then transcribe them to put into portfolios. The transcriptions are not necessary to be included in portfolios. Audio tapes are a valid form of documentation, but I just like to have the interviews in hard copy. For me, it is easier to compare the two interviews with the transcribed notes.

Informal interviews are also important. This can be as simple as asking a child about her block structure or listening to children read their stories and jotting down their answers to your questions.

Work samples must be a part of portfolios. The child's own work shows developmental growth in ways that your notes cannot. You need to collect all kinds of work: the way they write their names; their paintings and drawings; the stories, letters, lists, and signs the children create, and ways that children use numbers.

Not every child's portfolio will have the same collection of work samples. From time to time, you may want to ask children to do a particular activity. At the beginning the year, I read books about families and then ask all my students to draw a picture of their families. I'll repeat this activity two or three more times during the year so that I will have a collection in their portfolios of family drawings. In this case, every child has the same type of work sample, but I do not do this on a regular basis. Normally, the work sample section of the portfolios look very different, dependent on the strengths and interests of each child.

On a certain week, I might decide to include a mathematical work sample for each child, but it will not be the same type of work. For one child who uses numbers to score a game, that scoring sheet will be filed in his portfolio. For another child who chooses to copy the calendar, their self-created calendar will be the mathematical work sample. For still another child who is interested in creating patterns, a photograph of their pattern block creation might be the portfolio entry. It is important that

teachers watch closely for how children use numbers as they work in centers and include these in their portfolios.

Some teachers have had problems with children wanting to keep their work instead of having it filed in portfolios. This problem can be alleviated by how you present the concept of portfolios to students and how honored they become in the classroom. If you believe the portfolio collections are very special, children will begin to feel the same way. If you make children part of the process of deciding what does into their portfolios, they will begin to feel ownership of the portfolios. Soon, children will be bringing you more work samples than you have time to file!

There are three other ways to document children's progress within portfolios: photographs, audio tape, and video tape. However, these methods are more expensive ways to document. You may want to consider putting these items on beginning of the year supply lists.

Photographs are a wonderful way to document certain behaviors. For example, the complexity of a child's block structures during the year is not easily documented through written description. Yet the development of a child's four-block house in September to cities that cover the entire room by April is important progress that should be included in her portfolio. Photographs can do this. In our classroom, we have The Block Book. After children complete their block structures, I take a photograph of them and the blocks and they dictate a story about their creation. When the film is developed we match story to photograph. I always get double

prints of all photographs, so one copy goes into The Block Book and one copy is filed in a portfolio. A camera should always be loaded and ready for photographs of those magic moments that happen in classrooms.

Audio taping has already been discussed in terms of story retellings and interviewing. Most children are not accustomed to being taped. At the beginning of the year, I do lots of group taping as we have class discussions or as they are doing choral readings. We put these tapes in the listening center. As children learn to love listening to themselves, they are more willing to tape. Then I move into taping individual children during our class meetings. We pass the tape recorder around and each students says something about their families or answers a question about an issue we are trying to make a class decision about. I transcribe these comments and put them on their lockers. This is another motivating factor for the children to want to tape. After these taping activities, I move into taping individual interviews. I have one tape for each child and tape each child on their own tape.

Video taping often depends on the availability of a camcorder and/or someone to run the tape. You can set up the recorder on a tripod and let it run in a particular center, but then you have no control over the contents of tape.

Let's return to checklists for a moment. It is important to track what kinds of things you are putting into each child's portfolio. One of the strengths of portfolio is their flexibility and the fact that each portfolio reflects that particular child. However, if teachers are not careful, a few

children may not have complete portfolios. You may inadvertently neglect to make any social/emotional entries in the portfolios of those very quiet students or may not collect any mathematical samples from children who do not choose these activities very often. If you keep a list of portfolio entries, you can avoid this situation.

Now, for how to get started with portfolio assessment. Last year, when I was beginning, I had the hardest time just deciding how to organize and store the portfolios. There are lots of different methods to consider. Some teachers I know use large pizza boxes and they put everything in those boxes. Some have large artist portfolios and keep everything that children create. Some simply use grocery bags to keep every child's things separate. Those methods did not work for me. My background is business and I need file folders to feel organized. I tried keeping the files in a file cabinet in my classroom, but that did not work either. I finally bought plastic crates and used a hanging file for each child, with six folders in each file: one for each developmental domain and one for personal information. This made the portfolios more portable. I could take the crates home at night and file things or review portfolios. This method also forced me not to overcollect portfolio items.

Now comes the question, what do you do with the portfolios at the end of the year. This depends totally on the situation in which you teach. If teachers in the next grade will review the portfolios, you may want to send an abbreviated collection onto the next grade level. I would choose selected documentation which represents the developmental growth of each particular student and pass along that documentation. I keep some

samples for my own files and give the remaining collection of documentation to the child's family.

Anytime you start something new or try to change ways of doing something, expect to feel uncomfortable at times. Think about your personal life. When you decide to go on a diet, when you try to make those changes in the foods you eat, it is not easy. You need to realize this about portfolio assessment. You will be looking at children differently and documenting their behaviors differently. Expect this to be a learning process for you. After you decide to start portfolios, start small. Select a developmental area that interests you and look for and document those behaviors in your students. After you feel comfortable with that one area, add another. Do not try to make too many changes at one time.

Another important caution for educators is the very definition of portfolio assessment. At the moment, portfolios are defined differently by different people. As early childhood professionals, we must make sure that portfolios are constructed in ways that support our curriculum. If we are not careful, portfolio assessment can become as standardized as any standardized test. We must not allow portfolios to drive our classrooms. Recently, I heard Dan Resnick of the New Standards Project speak. He said that portfolios were new enough that if teachers did not take responsibility for defining portfolios, that publishers would. Instead of having end-of-the-chapter questions, we will soon find end-of-the-chapter portfolio entries.

Portfolios, especially for young children, must be representational of your program and your specific students. Key factors to remember about portfolio assessment are: portfolios should be evidence of children's progress over time through a variety of assessment methods; that portfoiios should assist in integrating curriculum and assessment; and that this ongoing, evaluation process will provide a rich depiction of each student across developmental domains.

For more information about authentic assessment and creating portfolios for young children, please see these sources:

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