

Three Perspectives on Portfolio Assessment

by

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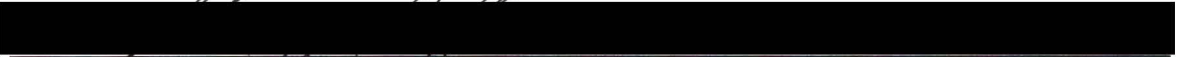
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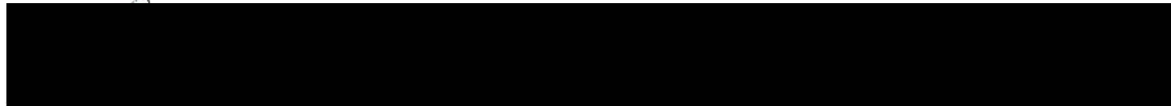
Abstract

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This study explores the use of Portfolio Assessment in one Grade Eight classroom during the 1994-95 school year. By interviewing and observing five students, their parents (eight parents participated in total), and the classroom teacher, the researcher explored the portfolio process in order to answer the following research question: What are the effects of using portfolio from the perspective of students, parents and teachers? The study involved six stages of data collection: teacher interviews, classroom observations, student interviews, videotaped student-led conferences, parent interviews and follow-up student interviews.

The findings indicate that Portfolio Assessment is a valuable process for students, parents and teachers. All three participating groups described the same three benefits of Portfolios. First, portfolios demonstrate growth and improvement over time. Second, students feel a strong sense of pride in their portfolios. And third, portfolios provide a visual reminder or record of what has been accomplished.

Examiners:


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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout North America, assessment practices in the field of education are undergoing tremendous change (Stiggins, 1994). Traditional methods of evaluating student achievement such as objective tests are no longer the only way that educators determine what students have learned. The focus is shifting from the teacher as the sole decision maker, to a more collaborative approach where students, parents and teachers have an active role in the assessment process.

In British Columbia, the Year 2000 Program (B.C Ministry of Education, 1989) and the subsequent Ministry documents promote alternate methods of assessment, including the increased use of self-assessments, peer assessments, portfolios and student-led conferences to supplement the reporting process (B.C Ministry of Education, 1993). Many elementary school teachers in British Columbia have added alternate assessment methods such as portfolios to their existing assessment techniques (Bachor & Anderson, 1994). Increasingly, portfolio assessment is being used as a complement or, in some cases, an alternative to traditional evaluation methods (Valencia & Calfee, 1991).

For the purpose of this study, the term “portfolio” refers to the purposeful collection of work samples by students, in conjunction with their teacher, to provide evidence of their learning over time. In most portfolios, students and teachers share the responsibility for selecting work samples to be included. It is important that guidelines for the selection of material to be included are established before the portfolio is assembled (Arter & Spandel, 1992). This means that the collection is purposeful, rather than haphazard.

Portfolios are assembled for many different purposes. For example, an art portfolio is usually a collection of an artist’s best work which will be shown to a prospective employer or school. Portfolio selections may be subject specific, or may be drawn from a wide range of subject areas. For example, a high school English teacher may have her students put together an English portfolio with samples of their writing over a period of time. An elementary school teacher

who teaches the same students all day may have her students keep a “Grade Two Portfolio” which contains materials from many different aspects of the students’ school life such as art work, printing, science, taped examples of a child reading, etc.

Another important aspect of a portfolio is that students reflect on the work samples that are included. This reflection can take different forms, but it is an essential aspect of the portfolio. For example, students may be given a prompt to complete such as, “I selected this piece because I am really proud of . . .” or they may simply be asked to write a reflection stating why they chose a particular piece of work and what it shows about their learning. It is also important that portfolios be shared with parents in some way. This may occur at a student-led conference, or students may simply take the portfolio home and share it informally with their parents.

Teachers in British Columbia are being encouraged to use portfolios because they provide opportunities for students, parents and teachers to enter into a meaningful dialogue about student learning. They allow teachers to integrate assessment and instruction, and they allow parents to become involved in their child’s learning. It is expected that by engaging in activities which require the learner to evaluate their progress and set future goals, “The learner can grow in personal responsibility and self-knowledge which are necessary for lifelong learning” (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 1).

Classroom-based research into the use of portfolios has become more prevalent in the last five years. Before that, most research in this area focussed on the use of alternate assessment for school, district and state-wide assessment purposes (Stiggins & Bridgeford, 1985). At present, researchers are just beginning to study the use of portfolio assessment from the perspective of the key players: teachers, parents and students. Studies which focus on the perspective of teachers and parents involved in the portfolio process are increasing (eg. Cheong, 1993; Gomez et al., 1991; Lamme & Hysmith, 1991); however, student perspectives still remain absent from most classroom studies.

Problem Statement

The intent of this study was to investigate the use of portfolio assessment in one Grade Eight classroom over the course of one school year. By interviewing students, parents and the classroom teacher, I explored the following question:

What are the effects of using portfolios from the perspective of
parents, teachers and students?

This study explored many aspects of portfolio assessment in order to understand the process from these three perspectives. Other related questions which were explored were: How were portfolios created? What was their purpose? What issues emerged for the teacher as he implemented portfolios with grade eight students? What criteria were used by teachers and students to select work for inclusion in the portfolio? What role did the portfolio play in the student-led conference? The research focussed on the experience of one teacher, five students and their parents in order to explore how portfolio assessment was actually implemented in one classroom over the course of a school year.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of portfolios in order to understand more about them from the perspective of students, teachers and parents. I was interested in exploring many aspects of portfolio assessment: portfolio creation, selection of work samples, teacher issues, student responses, parent responses, benefits and problems, and the role of the portfolio in a student-led conference. I was also interested in exploring whether this tool helps students reflect on their learning and brings students, teachers and parents together in meaningful dialogue.

New approaches to assessment such as portfolios are becoming more prevalent today as educators call into question existing practices in favour of new approaches (Herman, 1992).

Researchers are seeking to understand the role that portfolios and other alternate assessment methods play in classroom assessment practices. Progress is currently being made to understand the use of new assessment methods, but many challenges remain (Herman, 1992). This research project aims to shed some light on the use of portfolio assessment from the perspective of students, parents and teachers currently involved in the process.

Rationale

Within the realm of student assessment, portfolios are becoming powerful education tools that “can become a window into the student’s heads, a means for both staff and students to understand the educational process at the level of the individual learner” (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991, p. 61). Educators in North America are turning to alternate methods of assessment such as portfolios in order to encourage students to take charge of their own learning and to allow educators to see a broader picture of student learning. When parents are invited into the process, portfolios can also provide a way for parents to enter into a meaningful discussion with their child and the teacher. The narrow scope of traditional measurement is broadened as teachers are able to “observe students in a broader context: taking risks, developing creative solutions, and learning to make judgements about their own performances” (p. 63).

Assessment practices in British Columbia are changing rapidly (Bachor & Anderson, 1993). Teachers are being encouraged to use portfolios as evidence to support progress reports and to encourage students to become responsible for their own learning (B.C Ministry of Education, 1994). Students are asked to collect many different samples of their work: pieces of writing, pictures, tests, brainstorming webs, journals, videotapes, audiotapes, etc. After students have collected many different samples, they are asked to choose pieces which demonstrate different aspects of their learning. For example, they may choose pieces that they are proud of, that show improvement, that demonstrate creativity, etc. Students are then asked to reflect on their choices in a written piece which is included in their portfolio: Why were certain pieces of work chosen over

others? What were the criteria they used to make their decisions? What aspects of their learning does this evidence demonstrate?

There is a great deal of variation in the way that portfolios are being used by classroom teachers. Despite the variation, there are some standards of sound portfolio practice which seem to be consistently emerging (Arter & Spandel, 1992). Firstly, the guidelines for selection of material to be included in the portfolio need to be established before the portfolio is put together. Secondly, students must play a key role in the selection of material to be included so that the portfolio is indeed a reflection of them as they see themselves. The third common portfolio practice is that clear and appropriate criteria must be established for describing the quality of the work in the portfolio. Lastly, portfolios provide a way to help students see their improvement over time thus providing an increased sense of control over their own academic success.

Portfolio assessment is currently being hailed as “a powerful tool for the enhancement of instruction and assessment” (Valencia & Calfee, 1991, p. 333). Despite this, we know relatively little about the portfolio process from the perspective of parents, teachers and especially students. In the United States, many researchers are focussed on using portfolios for large scale, state-wide assessment (eg. The Vermont Portfolio Assessment Program, Koretz et al., 1993; Arts PROPEL, Camp, 1991). More information must be gathered about the use of portfolios to assess individual students in the classroom setting as this is the way that portfolios are currently being used in British Columbia schools. This kind of research is necessary if portfolios are going to continue to be used to supplement, and in some cases replace, traditional evaluation methods in the classroom.

Research Overview

This study utilized qualitative research methods and was exploratory in nature. The purpose was not to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but rather to understand how portfolios were

used and what they meant to the students, parents and teacher involved in the study. The field work was conducted in one Middle School in Victoria and involved five Grade Eight students, their parents (8 parents participated) and their English/Social Studies teacher. Each student had at least one parent participating in the study (three students had both parents involved). The study took place over the course of the 1994-95 school year and involved 6 stages:

a) Teacher interviews - September to June

The teacher was interviewed four times throughout the school year. He was asked to reflect on the portfolio process as he implemented it in his classroom. He also talked extensively about the student participants as they progressed throughout the year and how their portfolios reflected their learning and growth. At the end of the year, he reflected back on the process for him as a teacher, for his students and (in more detail) for the five students involved in the study.

b) Observations - September to April

The five students were observed as they worked on their portfolios in the classroom. The teacher was observed as he introduced different aspects of the portfolio process to the class. The class was also observed as they began preparing their portfolios for their student-led conferences which took place in April.

c) Student Interviews - February/March

Each student was interviewed separately once they had collected a substantial amount of work in their portfolio. These initial interviews were exploratory in nature. Students were asked to guide the researcher through their portfolio, talking about each piece of work, why it was selected and what the portfolio demonstrated about their learning.

d) Student-led Conference - April

This stage of the study involved videotaping the students and their parent(s) as they participated in a student-led conference. The conference centred around the portfolio as a focal point for discussion. The students led their parents through their portfolio, sharing the work samples and

discussing why each was included. The teacher joined the conference at the end to answer questions and discuss goals for the following term.

e) Parent Interviews - April

Each parent was interviewed after the student-led conference in order to explore their reactions to the conference and to their child's portfolio. Parents were asked to reflect on the value of the portfolio process in terms of their child's learning and growth over the year.

f) Follow-up Student Interviews - June

At this stage, the students were interviewed again. They were asked to share the pieces of work they had included in their portfolio since the first interview and to reflect back on the school year as a whole. The interview focussed on looking at the portfolio at the completion of their grade eight year and considering their growth as a learner over that time. They were asked to consider the value of the portfolio process based on their experience. Questions were asked in order to probe deeper and clarify opinions, thoughts and attitudes.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

Assessment/Evaluation - The process of gathering information about student learning from a variety of sources and making judgements based on the interpretation of evidence gathered. Traditional evaluation refers to the practice of basing judgement on the results of pencil and paper tests (eg. multiple choice tests).

Portfolio - A collection of work samples compiled by a student in order to provide evidence of their learning. The purpose is to show what the student knows and what they are able to do. The portfolio provides a way for students to reflect on their learning and to see their growth over time.

Work samples - Evidence of student learning. Work samples are gathered by the student and may be in any form: photograph, drawing, videotape, audiotape, written, etc.

Quick Write - The teacher who participated in this study asked his students to reflect on the work samples they had to chosen to include in their portfolio by completing a "Quick Write." Students were asked to write about the work sample they had chosen, why it was included and what it showed about their learning. The focus of the Quick Write was to write down ideas quickly without worrying about mechanics or form (see Appendix A, Sample Quick Write). Note: there are seven appendices located at the end of this document. They were selected in order to provide a representative sample of the contents of the student portfolios.

Student-led Conference - This process was used by the teacher during the second reporting period (April) to replace the traditional parent-teacher interview. Students prepared their portfolios in order to present them to their parents at a 30 minute conference. The students directed the conference, then the teacher joined them for the last five minutes to answer questions and set goals.

Limitations of the Study

The nature of portfolio assessment and the structure of this research jointly describe the limits of this study. Because a portfolio is a unique reflection of the individual learner, each portfolio will be different and will focus on different aspects of learning. This study is therefore limited by the complexity of the portfolio process itself. My goal was to try to understand the unique perspective of each person involved in the study while also trying to identify commonalities in order to describe a general picture of the three perspectives. The findings of this study do reveal many common themes which emerged from the interviews with parents, students and the teacher. These findings are not meant to be prescriptive, but may be considered in conjunction with other portfolio research as representative examples of the portfolio experience.

The study is also limited by the fact that only one teacher, five students and eight parents participated. It is my belief that seeking to understand the perspective of a small number of participants in detail was more beneficial than a cursory look at a large number of people. The data collected in this study are rich in description of people, conversations and experiences which is not easily handled by statistical procedures. Therefore, participant observation and interviews were the two data gathering techniques utilized in this study. These methods of research provided a detailed, rich description of the portfolio process as experienced by the fourteen participants which I deemed to be more valuable than collecting a small amount of information from hundreds of portfolio users.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is currently a great deal of attention being given by the educational research community to alternate assessment methods such as portfolios. Journal articles and papers can be divided into three categories. The first category includes articles that seek to provide background information about alternative assessment practices such as portfolio assessment, to explain how to use portfolios and what the benefits and limitation may be (eg. Stiggins, 1991; Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991; Valencia & Calfee, 1991). The second category includes studies by individual researchers seeking to tell the story of a particular teacher or teachers using portfolios in their classrooms (eg. Gomez, Graue & Bloch, 1991; Lamme & Hysmith, 1991; Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Goerss, 1993). Large-scale portfolio projects comprise the third category. These studies include research done by large organizations in cooperation with schools districts, ministries/state boards, individual schools and teachers (eg. Camp, 1991; Cheong, 1993; LeMahieu, Gitomer & Eresh, 1995; Koretz et al., 1994; Jorgensen, 1994). This study fits into the second category.

Background

Assessment practices in North America are currently in transition from traditional to alternate assessment methods. In his article, "Facing the Challenges of a New Era of Educational Assessment," Richard Stiggins (1991) argues that the current upheaval in assessment practices is not just a fad, but rather "it signals the end of a 60-year era of educational assessment and our passage into a whole new era" (p. 263). He goes on to describe the previous era of assessment in the United States as characterized by three patterns of behaviour. First, teachers and administrators abdicated responsibility for assessing students by making it the role of test and textbook publishers. It was believed that assessment would be more scientific and precise this way. Second, the assessment community began a rigorous program of research that made assessment so

complex that teachers and administrators could not begin to understand it. Third, the policy makers made testing more and more centralized resulting in the multi-layered approach we see today: school wide, district-wide, nation-wide, and world-wide testing program, one on top of the other (Stiggins, 1991).

In British Columbia, the major change has been “the modification of classroom assessment procedures” (Bachor & Anderson, 1994, p. 68). The shift has been for teachers to broaden their assessment techniques by focussing on gathering information about student learning from a variety of sources. Teachers have had to add new techniques to their repertoire of assessment practices. Alternate assessment practices such as portfolios and student observation are being used by many elementary school teachers to complement other forms of assessment such as tests and projects.

Stiggins contends that we are moving from an era of assessment for “sorting,” to an era of assessment for “competence” (1994, p. 21). Educators are beginning to realize that sorting and selecting students will not help *all students* become successful in school. In the past, educators, under pressure to be accountable, were forced to focus on producing improvement in their students’ test scores. Teachers had to teach to the test. According to Herman (1992), however, research has now proven that when teachers teach to the test, student scores may go up but such improvements do not generalize to other measures of achievement. This means that “superficial changes in instruction to improve test performance are not likely to result in meaningful learning” (p. 75).

There is a movement underway in North America today which aims to bring about change in the way assessment occurs in schools. This movement looks to alternate assessment methods in order to move away from traditional testing and toward authentic tests which require a collection of rich data about student learning from a variety of sources such as student observations, checklists, tests, and projects (Dana & Tippins, 1993).

The move toward alternate assessment has grown from a dissatisfaction with existing evaluation methods such as standardized tests. Standardized tests “do not reflect how we teach, the effects of our teaching on children, or how we adapt instruction to individual learners” (Hebert, 1992, p. 58). Much of the research on testing and its effects on schooling have concluded that such tests have a negative impact on school programs, teachers and students. While there is much disagreement about what effective assessment should look like, there is general agreement about what it is not: standardized, traditional multiple-choice tests (Herman, 1992).

Alternative assessment practices focus on demonstrating student learning in a variety of ways. Performance-based assessment such as portfolios fit this model because they allow students to demonstrate specific skills and growth in their learning. The portfolio concept came to the forefront in the 1970’s and 80’s when process writing became a curriculum focus in education. Students collected samples of their work in order to make revisions and to conference with others. This shift to process writing required that students keep a folder of their writing in order to revise and talk with others about their work. The move from keeping a folder of work to keeping a portfolio occurred as teachers realized the potential of the portfolio for student reflection on their learning (Valencia & Calfee, 1991).

The portfolio has come to be defined as a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits progress over time. Researchers seem to agree that portfolios have the potential to “become a window into the students’ heads,” allowing parents and teachers to understand more about the learning process (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991, p. 61). Portfolios can also be powerful tools for encouraging students to be responsible for their own learning (Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Collins & Dana, 1993). Valencia and Calfee (1991) have identified three distinctive models for portfolio use: the showcase portfolio, the documentation portfolio and the evaluation portfolio. The showcase portfolio “portrays a collection of student’s best or favourite work,” and usually the student selects most of the entries themselves (p. 337). The documentation portfolio centres on “systematic, ongoing records of student progress” (p. 337). Students and teachers share the task of selecting material for inclusion in a documentation portfolio and usually

the contents are not evaluated against predetermined standards or criteria. The third kind of portfolio is the evaluation portfolio. This portfolio is standardized and most of the direction comes from the teacher, administrator or school district. There are predetermined criteria for scoring and evaluation of this type of portfolio.

According to Valencia and Calfee (1991), the popularity of the portfolio comes from its potential to address several concerns: “The authenticity of the assessment tasks and their alignment with curriculum, the emphasis on individuals and individual growth, and a renewed interest in teacher professionalism” (p. 335). They go on to describe five critical issues associated with student portfolios. The first issue is that the use of student portfolios assumes a high degree of teacher knowledge and understanding with regards to the construction of authentic assessment tasks. There is concern that many teachers have little training in the use of alternate assessment methods which results in poorly constructed, haphazard collections of student work. The second issue is quality of instrumentation. The authors suggest that portfolio assessment must be linked to curriculum and instruction if it is to be viewed as a valid method of evaluating student progress.

Reliability is the third issue. Although many supporters of portfolio assessment make their claims based on the validity of the tasks associated with portfolios, few have addressed the reliability factor. Such issues as inter-rater reliability and generalizability over contexts have only just begun to be explored and, at this time, the findings are inconclusive. Valencia and Calfee (1991) believe that teachers must be knowledgeable and carefully trained in order for them to judge portfolios. The fourth concern is the need for adequate resources. Portfolios require time, money and commitment in the face of shrinking budgets.

The last issue is that of standards and criteria for judging the quality of student work. Valencia and Calfee (1991) believe that evaluating student strengths and weaknesses is a very difficult task. It requires teachers to have clear standards in mind, which is not always easy when considering the many different aspects of learning that can be demonstrated by portfolios.

Portfolios promise a new way for teachers, students and parents to communicate about learning. Many researchers have conducted studies in classrooms throughout North America in order to better understand the portfolio process. The following section describes the findings of many of these studies. They offer a unique look at how teachers implement portfolio assessment in their classrooms, as well as the benefits and problems of this type of assessment.

Portfolio Stories

In their article, “One School’s Adventure Into Portfolio Assessment,” Lamme and Hysmith (1991) studied the experiences of teachers at Blackburn Elementary School in Florida as they implemented school-wide portfolio assessment. They found that many teachers reported changes in the way they taught based upon their perceptions of the students in their class. Portfolio assessment helped the teachers become more reflective about their teaching practice and their role in educating students.

Lamme and Hysmith (1991) used their experience at Blackburn Elementary to develop a scale to assess teacher involvement with portfolio assessment. The scale traces teacher involvement through four stages beginning with no use at all and progressing to a complex understanding of the portfolio process. In the fourth stage, teachers understand why they are using portfolios, they use a variety of strategies for collecting data, they allow students to select work to include and they observe students systematically to see how they have progressed.

Hebert (1992) reflects on her staff’s experience with portfolios at Crow Island Elementary school in Illinois. The purpose of the project was to explore assessment practices. The product that emerged was a new reporting form called a “Learning Experience Form” which was augmented by student portfolios. Hebert found that, in the end, the process of developing thinking and teaching that centred on children’s learning became more valuable than the product,

though it too was valuable.

In another school-based study, Gomez, Graue and Bloch (1991) looked at the rhetoric about portfolio assessment compared to what actually happened with portfolios in one school. They observed 12 elementary teachers as these teachers attempted to implement portfolio assessment. The authors described their findings by telling the story of one teacher's experience with portfolios. The teacher, Ms. Benson, discovered that using portfolios had changed her work as a teacher. It allowed her to change the way she thought about teaching and learning. She also discovered that using portfolios was a very labour-intensive process. Thirdly, she discovered that portfolios alone did not make students reflective thinkers, individual teachers were needed to help students to do this. This placed teachers in a new role, requiring them to think and act differently toward their students.

Gomez, Graue and Bloch (1991) concluded that while the rhetoric about portfolio assessment paints a glowing picture of its benefits, there are still tensions and difficulties inherent in the process. Their research began with a set of questions which they sought to answer about the process. What they discovered were more questions to puzzle over. They were particularly concerned about the amount of time required by teachers and the fact that the responsibility for making portfolio assessment work falls directly on the shoulders of teachers who are already overburdened.

From the teacher's perspective, time seems to be a common deterrent in using portfolio assessment. Other problems centre on the purpose and precision of assessment. In their study of assessment practices used by elementary teachers in British Columbia, Bachor and Anderson (1994) found that "one key to rethinking alternative assessment practices is the need to be clear about what is to be assessed, how assessment is to be done, and why assessment is being completed" (p.91). The issue of precision is also important in using portfolios effectively in the classroom. Bachor and Anderson noted that teachers "lacked an interpretive framework to make sense of the assessment evidence collected" (p.91). They found that teachers were unsure of how

to use alternate assessment to report to parents and found it difficult to find precise evidence of learning to support their statements to parents.

Katherine Goerss (1993) also looked at the benefits and problems of portfolio assessment from the perspective of classroom teachers. She tells the story of 32 middle school teachers who volunteered to learn about alternative assessment strategies and to implement a portfolio system. She describes the story as a journey and a search to reconcile portfolios with traditional report cards. Her findings showed that teachers who used portfolios had several common attitudes. They saw the value of students being involved in assessment and taking responsibility for their learning. They also thought it was important for students to see how they had progressed over time. By seeing their progress, students learned to become evaluators and critics of their own work. Lastly, teachers found portfolios very helpful in parent conferences.

There were also several problems which the teachers experienced. They experienced difficulty keeping the process simple and finding time to monitor the process. They also found it difficult to give up control and to give up grading every paper. The issue of teachers grading every paper has not been discussed in great detail in the literature and yet it seems important that students be given the opportunity to assess their work without a teacher's mark on it.

Goerss (1993) also explored student and parent perspectives on the portfolio process. One hundred and seven students were asked the question: What is good about portfolios? The overwhelming response was that portfolios "helped keep them organized, get better grades, see personal improvement, see progress over a period of time, and offered a look at their best work and their past achievement" (p. 23). The biggest problems the students outlined were keeping track of their work, not losing assignments and generally keeping things organized. Goerss found parent reaction to the portfolio was very positive. Parents were impressed by the amount and variety of work the students chose to include. They were also impressed by the self-evaluation component of the portfolio and felt that it was very valuable.

In her article, “Literacy Portfolios: Helping Students Know Themselves”, Jane Hansen (1992) also discussed the benefits of portfolio assessment. She noted that “because of the students’ portfolio choices, the system we use to evaluate students can become not only more accurate, but more comprehensive” (p. 67). She feels that portfolios enable teachers to see students in a more holistic way, they become more than a number or a letter grade. One of the important benefits of portfolios is that teachers learn what students value and look for ways to honour their concerns. Hansen hopes that students will want to be a part of a school in which they find authentic work.

Many studies have involved teachers as co-researchers in portfolio projects. Frazier and Paulson’s study (1992), “How Portfolios Motivate Reluctant Writers” and Lambdin and Walker’s study (1994) entitled “Planning for Classroom Portfolio Assessment” are two examples. These studies describe the many benefits associated with portfolios. Arlene Frazier, a 4th grade teacher in Oregon, writes: “Portfolio assessment offers students a way to take charge of their learning; it also encourages ownership, pride and high self-esteem” (Frazier & Paulson, 1992, p. 64). And Lambdin and Walker, writing about the use of portfolios in Mathematics, state:

Portfolio assessment has helped me and my students make progress toward a number of goals . . . My students are more thoughtful about what mathematics they are studying and why. They seem to be developing a better understanding of what is meant by problem solving . . . In making portfolio selections, my students are learning to look for connections . . . and they are learning to take personal responsibility for self-assessment (1994, p. 323,324).

University of Victoria graduate student, Caren Cameron (1992), also involved teachers as co-researchers in her portfolio project. She explored the experiences of four teachers implementing portfolios at four different levels of the school system - Primary (Grades K-3), Intermediate (Grades 4 to 10), Graduation (Grades 11 and 12) and University. She found that the implementation of portfolios was a unique experience for each individual teacher. They talked occasionally about the portfolio products, but what was they focused on was the process of how they learned about using portfolios. The participants talked about seven key issues: time, support,

parents, student involvement, value, evaluation and learning.

A recent field-based research project in Saanich on Vancouver Island was conducted by teachers in their own classrooms. The study focussed on assessment and evaluation in high school Mathematics and Science classes. In one of the projects, Kirkpatrick and Knapp (1993) looked at how portfolios could be used to monitor the development of problem solving skills in senior secondary Mathematics classes. They found that the student reflections allowed them to get to know their students better. Kirkpatrick and Knapp also found that students' skill development increased because they were asked to reflect back on each solution and to think about problems in more depth. In addition, they found that students' attitude toward problem solving improved over the course of the project. The students reported that they found and used new and different methods for solving problems. Finally, Kirkpatrick and Knapp found that writing about the process helped them avoid recurring errors. Students said that keeping a portfolio showed them where improvement was needed.

At Cabot School, a small school in rural Vermont, teachers use technology to make portfolios a more efficient way of organizing work and a better way for students to learn. Kevin Bushwell (1995) describes how teachers scan student work into computers using image and optical character recognition scanners. Teachers can use the electronic portfolios to evaluate student writing and can use the computers' audio recording function to evaluate student reading. There are still many problems with this "high tech" innovation, but it seems likely that electronic portfolios may become more common in the future.

Despite the problems associated with portfolio assessment, many educators consider this form of assessment to be a more authentic way of assessing individual student performance, school performance, and district/state performance. The focus in Canada seems to be on the former, while the United States tends to focus on the latter two areas. The following section describes some of the large-scale portfolio projects which involve research done by large organizations in cooperation with school districts, ministries/state boards, schools and teachers.

Large-Scale Portfolio Projects

Large-scale portfolio projects are taking place in many places across the United States. Interest in more meaningful assessment tools have prompted universities, state boards and other large organizations to fund research in this area. For example, Arts PROPEL has been using portfolios to measure instruction and assess student learning in the arts. The Vermont Department of Education has mandated a state-wide system of portfolio assessment. In addition, colleges and universities are beginning to ask students to submit portfolios of their writing as part of their entrance requirements (Hamm & Adams, 1991).

Arts PROPEL is a project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and is a three-way consortium that brings together the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Educational Testing Service and Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Students create portfolios in music, art and writing that are chronologically-sequenced collections of work that demonstrate their learning over time (Camp, 1991). The project seeks to show “that it is possible to assess the thinking processes characteristic of the arts and humanities in rigorous, but undistorted ways” (Wolf, 1989, p. 36).

The range of work gathered in PROPEL portfolios is diverse and unique. Students include art work, photos, tape recordings, diagrams, journal entries and reflections about their work. At the end of a term or year, students sort through their collections and select several works that best demonstrate their learning and growth over time. These samples, along with student and teacher reflections, become a final portfolio that can be passed along as a continuing document from year to year (Wolf, 1989).

The Vermont Portfolio project is one of the most influential studies currently being undertaken in the United States today. It is the first state-wide implementation of a portfolio assessment program. It began in 1988 when teachers and administrators realized that they needed a new way to assess the result of Vermont’s new writing programs. The state embarked on an

innovative state-wide assessment program that was different from most other state-wide programs in that the performance component was the focus of the program, not an addition to an already existing traditional program. Secondly, the Vermont project based their reporting on unstandardized tasks (portfolios of student work). By 1991, portfolio assessment was in place across the state in grades 4 and 8.

In an attempt to evaluate the Vermont program and the quality of data it has yielded, researcher Daniel Koretz and others (1994) selected 48 schools to pilot fourth and eighth grade assessments in writing and mathematics. A sample of 1,903 grade four portfolios and 750 grade eight portfolios were randomly selected and scored, first by the student's own classroom teacher and again by one of the teachers who participated in a centralized portfolio grading workshop. The focus of the study was on reliability among raters. Researchers found that, "the reliability of scoring was so low that it precluded most of the intended uses of the portfolio scores" (Koretz et al., 1994, p. 92). The researchers concluded that modest expectations should be set for the quality of data gathered from this type of assessment.

In another large American study, "Portfolios in Large-Scale Assessment: Difficult but not Impossible," LeMahieu and his colleagues (1995) present results that offer a more optimistic view of the potential for using portfolios assessment to provide reliable data about student learning. Twenty-eight raters judged 99 Middle school portfolios and 78 high school portfolios. Researchers found a high degree of consistency among raters and suggest that further research should focus on developing new procedures that can explore and ensure quality in this area. The inconsistency between LeMahieu's results and the findings of Koretz and his colleagues (1994) suggest that further research into this area is necessary.

In a study funded by the National Science Foundation in the United States, Margaret Jorgensen (1994) looked at alternative assessment from the perspective of six different school systems. The purpose of the research was to determine whether portfolio assessment could be structured to permit meaningful aggregation for multiple hierarchical users. The focus was on

Science and Mathematics at the third, fourth, fifth and sixth grade in six Georgia school systems. She found that the different groups were able to work together to come up with a shared notion of a “structured portfolio.” While the content and instructional activity was different in different classrooms and systems, the notion of using a structured assessment activity was common to all six groups. The issues of reliability and information aggregation seem to be areas which require further attention by researchers. The studies done by Koretz (1994), LeMahieu (1995), Jorgenson (1994) and others, point to a need for further research into these areas, however these issues are not discussed in detail in this thesis as only one teacher and one classroom were studied.

In California, portfolios are being used to better meet the needs of a growing number of economically-disadvantaged and language-minority students. Student portfolios are an integral part of the California Learning Assessment System which has established assessment collaboratives in order to allow teachers to try out a variety of approaches to student portfolios. It is within this setting that Jacqueline Cheong (1993), project director and research psychologist at the University of California, conducted a recent study entitled: “Portfolios A Window on Student Achievement.” She interviewed 45 teachers who were using portfolios in two schools districts in California. She also observed classrooms where portfolios were being used and focus groups were conducted with parents and administrators. Among her findings, the following are of particular relevance:

- 40% of teachers said that student confidence and enthusiasm for learning grew with the use of portfolios
- 76% of teachers said that portfolios sharpened and broadened their understanding of their students as learners
- teachers emphasized the value of putting together “the big picture” of students’ learning
- teachers valued the role of the portfolio in stimulating student self-reflection so that students begin to notice for themselves how they’ve progressed
- teachers emphasized the value of seeing a pattern of growth and learning unfold over the course of the school year

- both parents and teachers felt that the most important benefit of the portfolio was the positive home-school link it created

Cheong concluded that portfolios offer a great deal of promise to educators. She acknowledged that portfolios represent a change for the educational community in terms of teaching, learning and communicating. Despite the problems in interpreting new ways to evaluate progress and document learning, she states that “the increased clarity of communication of accomplishments and the establishment of improved exchanges of information among teachers, parents and policy-makers warrants the continued investigation of portfolios as a trustworthy, defensible and effective evaluation method” (p. 29).

It is evident from the studies described in this literature review that continued investigation into portfolio assessment is warranted. Until recently, much of the research in the field of measurement has been done in the United States and has focussed on the use of portfolios for the purpose of large-scale assessment. While recent study have started to focus on the portfolio process from the perspective of teachers, parents and students, there are still many questions to be explored. Since portfolios are currently being used in British Columbia by teachers for the purpose of classroom assessment and not for large-scale assessment purposes, research into portfolio assessment for this purpose is important. The voices of students, parents and teachers participating in the portfolio process must continue to be heard.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research project is a case study which utilizes qualitative methods of inquiry and is exploratory in nature. The case study method was chosen because it allowed for a detailed examination of a small, select group of individuals and their use of portfolio assessment. The focus of the study was on one particular classroom in one school. Participant observation and interviews were the major data gathering techniques used.

The phenomena to be studied was portfolio assessment. It was examined from the perspective of five students, their parents and their English/Social Studies teacher. The study examined their experiences with portfolio assessment over the course of the 1994-95 school year. The study was concerned with how one teacher used portfolios in his classroom, how students viewed their own portfolio, and how parents felt about the use of portfolio assessment in their child's classroom.

Participants

This study was conducted in one classroom at Saanich Middle School in Victoria, British Columbia. The school is located in a middle-class, suburban neighbourhood where many students are bussed from outlying areas. Five students, three females and two males, were involved in the study from Mark Cafley's Grade Eight English and Social Studies class. The parent(s) of each of the students also participated in the study (eight parents participated in total).

Mark Cafley, the teacher involved in this study, has been teaching for 15 years. For the last five years he has taught Grade Seven and Eight English and Social Studies at Saanich Middle School. He is also part of the administration team at the school, serving as the Curriculum Coordinator for the last three years. Teachers, parents and students at Saanich Middle School refer to Mark as an "excellent teacher."

Five fourteen year old students from Mark's Grade Eight English/Social Studies class participated in this study; three females and two males. Betty is described by her teacher as a high achiever. Nancy, Mike and Garry are "in the middle" and Kathy is "low" in terms of her ability level. Eight parents were involved in this study. Each student had at least one parent involved in the study. Three students (Betty, Garry and Mike) had both parents involved. Nancy's mom and Kathy's mom participated alone.

Selection

At the end of the 1993-94 school year I approached my colleague, Mark Cafley, about participating in this research project. He was excited about the possibility right from the start and agreed. He felt that being involved in the study would help him take portfolio assessment further in his classroom than he had taken it in the past. He expressed a keen interest in having his students conduct student-led conferences which was something he had never done before with Grade Eights. We both felt that we would work well together on this project because we share similar beliefs about teaching and assessment, and because we have successfully worked together on other ventures.

At the beginning of the next year, Mark and I met to discuss the selection of student participants. We selected fifteen students that represented varying ability levels and were able to articulate their opinions fairly well. I approached the students and described the study to them. They were given a consent form to discuss with their parents and to sign if they all agreed to participate. Six students returned the consent form and were subsequently involved in the project, however one student's data was not included in the findings of this study because it was incomplete.

Data Collection

Participant observation and interviews were the two main means of data collection. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) describe these methods in their book, Qualitative Research for Education, which provided the foundation for the research methodology. The study involved six stages:

- a) Teacher interviews - September to June
- b) Classroom observations - September to April
- c) Student interviews - February/March
- d) Student-led conference - April
- e) Parent interviews - April
- f) Follow-up student interviews - June

Teacher Interviews

Mark Cafley was interviewed four times throughout the school year in order to talk about his experiences implementing portfolio assessment. The interviews were conversational in nature and were usually 30-45 minutes in length. I began each interview with a set of guiding questions which formed the basis of discussion. Often new topics would arise and we would discuss those freely, the planned questions acted only as a guide.

The guide questions can be divided into five categories. The first type were biographical in nature and focussed on Mark's teaching history (eg. How long have you been teaching? What subjects/grade levels have you taught?) The second type of question referred to Mark's values and attitudes toward portfolio assessment (eg. Why did you decide to use portfolios? What are the essential elements of a portfolio for you? How will you motivate students to see the value in portfolios?). The next kind of questions gathered information about the implementation of portfolios (eg. Where will the portfolios be located? What will the format of the portfolios be?

Who will choose what is to be included? When and with whom will the portfolios be shared?).

The fourth type of question focussed on reflection (eg. What worked well this year? What would you change next time? Did anything surprise you? What have you learned from this experience? If you could talk to a teacher who is using portfolios for the first time, what advice would you give them?) Lastly, questions were asked about the five student participants and their developing portfolios (eg. How has each of the students involved in this study grown as a learner over this past year? Does their portfolio reflect this growth in any way? Was the portfolio process particularly helpful to any of the students?) Discussion with the teacher occurred throughout the year, but formal discussion about each student's portfolio occurred at the end of the project when the portfolios were complete.

Classroom Observations

I visited Mark's class three times during the course of the study in order to formally observe the portfolio process at different stages and to observe the five participating students. These observations were spaced out throughout the year so that I could view the portfolio process at different stages. Each observation was forty-five minutes in length and detailed field notes were written in order to document what was taking place. Several informal visits took place from September to December. The purpose of these visits was to view the portfolios as they were beginning to be compiled. In the first formal visit in January, the students were observed in the classroom as they selected work to go into their portfolio and completed a Quick Write about their selection. At that time, I borrowed the five student portfolios and read through them so that I began to get a sense of what each one contained.

In the second visit at the end of January, I observed the class doing a cooperative group activity. The purpose of this visit was to observe the five participating students as they worked

with their peers. During the third observation I watched the class prepare for their student-led conferences. They were reading through their portfolio and deciding which pieces to attach the following labels: Favourite, Invisible Pride, Pride and Process. The students made their selections from the work they had done since September in English and Social Studies.

Detailed field notes were written during each observation describing the classroom set-up, teacher direction/instruction given to the class, student interactions with the teacher and other students, and observations of the students as they selected pieces of work to include in their portfolios.

Student Interviews

Each student was interviewed separately in February and March once a substantial number of pieces (at least ten) had been selected for inclusion in their portfolio. These interviews were exploratory in nature and took between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed in their entirety. I transcribed all of the interviews so that I would have a hard copy of the data which could be sorted and grouped into similar categories for analysis later on.

The focus of the initial interview was on having the students “walk” the researcher through their portfolio, talking about each piece of work, why it was selected and what it demonstrated about their learning. Each student was asked the twelve guide questions listed in Table 1. Other spontaneous questions/discussion evolved based on individual student responses.

Table 1**Guide Questions for Initial Student Interviews**

Describe yourself as a learner.

How was this portfolio put together?

Why do you think your teacher decided to have the class do portfolios?

Talk me through your portfolio please. Why did you include this piece?

How do you feel about your portfolio?

What is your favourite piece of work in your portfolio? Why?

What is your least favourite piece of work? Why?

Which piece do you think would be your parent's favourite? Why?

Which piece do you think would be your teacher's favourite? Why?

If you could change anything about your portfolio, what would you change? Why?

What does this portfolio reveal about you as a learner?

Is keeping a portfolio an important activity to you? Why/Why not?

Student-led Conference

Each student in Mark Cafley's's class conducted a student-led conference with their parents at the end of the second term (April). The class prepared for the conference for several weeks: preparing their portfolios, practicing what they would say, writing an invitation to their parents and completing goal statements. The conference lasted approximately 30 minutes; 25 minutes for the student to lead their parent(s) through their portfolio and talk about their progress, 5 minutes for Mark to join the conference in order to answer any questions and discuss goals for the third term. The student-led conferences were video-taped and reviewed later in order to gather data. I was not present during the conference as I felt my presence might hinder the conversation between parent and child.

Parent Interviews

In the weeks following the student-led conferences, the parent(s) of each student participant were interviewed separately in order to follow up on the conference. Three of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, one was conducted in a classroom at the school and one was conducted in a hotel room during a school field trip. Parents were asked to reflect on their child's portfolio and to describe what the portfolio revealed about their child's learning. Each interview was approximately 20 minutes in length and was audio-taped and transcribed in its entirety. Each parent was asked the twelve guide questions listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Guide Questions for Parent Interviews

What is your child like as a learner?

What are your goals for your child this year?

How did you feel about the student-led conference?

Were you surprised by anything that happened at the conference?

What did you think of your child's portfolio?

Did you learn anything new about your child from their portfolio? If so, what?

What does your child's portfolio reveal about him/her as a learner?

Do you think creating a portfolio was a valuable experience for your child? Why/Why not?

What do you think are the benefits of portfolios? What are the problems?

Do you see a relationship between your child's marks on their report card and the work in their portfolio? Explain.

What was your favourite piece of work in your child's portfolio? Why?

Did you see anything in the portfolio that you didn't like? If so, what?

Follow-up Student Interviews

The students were interviewed again individually at the very end of the year (June). The interviews took place in an empty office at the school. Students were asked to reflect on their student-led conference, to discuss their completed portfolio, to reflect on their growth over the year and to discuss the portfolio process as they had experienced it. Each interview was approximately 20 minutes in length and was audio-taped and transcribed in its entirety. Each student was asked the twelve guide questions listed in Table 3. Other questions were asked based on individual student responses.

Table 3

Guide Questions for Follow-up Student Interviews

How did you feel about your student-led conference?

How do you think your parent(s) reacted to your portfolio?

What were your goals for this year? Did you reach them?

What are the benefits of using portfolios? What are the problems?

What will you do with your portfolio now?

Do you think that your portfolio is an accurate reflection of the work you have done in English and Social Studies this year?

What does your portfolio reveal about you as a learner?

If you could talk to a student who is making a portfolio for the first time, what advice would you give him/her?

What advice would you give your teacher for the next time he does portfolios?

Has your portfolio helped you in any way this year? Explain.

If you could choose one piece from your portfolio that reflects your growth over the year, which piece would you choose? Why?

What is the role of the Quick Write in the portfolio process?

Data Organization/Analysis

After the fieldwork was completed, the resulting field notes, transcripts and portfolio samples were organized. First the field notes and interview transcripts were coded. The codes reflected “the words, phrases, patterns of behaviour, subjects’ ways of thinking and events that repeat and stand out [in the data]” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 166). Next, the data were analyzed in order to determine broad categories (themes) which provided an organizational framework under which the pieces of coded data fit. Individual pieces of datum were divided into groups which supported one theme. The individual codes became the properties and sub-properties of each category. Where there was insufficient data to support a property, the data were disregarded or included in another property if they fit. Some data fit into multiple categories which was noted and accounted for. In order for a student theme to be included, it needed to be supported by at least three of the five students. In the case of the parent themes, they needed to be supported by at least four parents. Some exceptions have been made to these guidelines and these have been explained in Chapter Four.

The data were analyzed as they related to the three perspectives explored in this study: the perspective of the students, parents and teacher. The researcher discovered that some categories were common to all three perspectives, while others were specific to one or two of the participant groups. In the following chapter, the perspective of each of the participant groups is described in detail. Specific quotes and examples from the observations and interviews are used in order to describe each group’s experience with portfolios.

Other Data Sources

As well as the participant observations, interviews and video-taped conferences described above, several other sources of data were used. Each student’s portfolio was photocopied and reviewed several times during the course of the year. This allowed for careful study of each

portfolio since I found that during my interviews with the students they moved from one page to the next quite quickly and I was not always able to read what they had written in its entirety. Another source of data was the Quick Writes that the class completed each month. Mark Cafley gave me copies of all of the Quick Writes written each month so that I could photocopy them and review them. Throughout the year I received hundreds of Quick Writes which provided a great deal of insight into why students selected work to include in their portfolios.

Confirmation

The data gathered in this study came from a variety of sources: classroom observations, student interviews, parent interviews, teacher interviews, video-tape of student/parent/teacher interaction, photocopies of portfolios and photocopies of Quick Writes. By collecting data from different sources and by getting different perspectives on the same phenomenon, I believe that the data collected are a valid representation of the portfolio process in one classroom. For example, I found a high degree of consistency between what the students said about their portfolios to me at the initial interviews and what they said to their parents at the student-led conference. I also found that the teacher's description of the portfolio process and the students' descriptions of the process were very similar.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore portfolio assessment from the perspective of students, parents and teachers. The findings are divided into five main sections: the portfolio process, the teacher's perspective, the students' perspectives, the parents' perspectives and the student-led conference. At the end of the chapter the findings are summarized in point form.

The findings are organized by participant group in order to facilitate comparison of the similarities and differences between the three participating groups (see Chapter Five for comparisons). It made sense to organize this section in this manner rather than by topics or themes because the focus of the study was on the three perspectives and because many of the themes were particular to only one or two of the participating groups.

Where it seemed appropriate, the participants' own words are used to tell their story. In other cases, the participants' perspectives are summarized by the researcher and supported with direct quotes from them. The first two sections summarizing the portfolio process and the teacher's perspective have been participant approved. Mark Cafley was asked to read each section and to make any changes necessary to ensure their accuracy.

The first section, the portfolio process, is described from the perspective of the teacher, Mark Cafley, and from the five participating students who experienced it. This section details how portfolios were introduced, their contents and their purpose.

The Portfolio Process

At the beginning of September, Mark Cafley sent home a letter to parents describing the main activities for the year. One of those activities was a portfolio. He asked his students to bring a one inch binder to school to be used solely for the purpose of the portfolio. The binders were

stored in the classroom on a shelf that was “theirs to go back to.” Mark thought it was important that the portfolios were housed in an easily accessible place so that students would feel comfortable to take out their portfolios at any time.

The portfolio began with a title page that included the student’s name and the title “Humanities Eight Personal Portfolio.” A table of contents followed with the title of each entry and the date it was included. Next, the students completed a three page summary statement introducing themselves to their teacher (see Appendix B). Mark described these pages as “a September survey of what their skills were like and what problems they had, how many outside activities they had, all of those kinds of things.” Placed at the beginning of their portfolio, it was a starting point that students could refer back to later.

At the end of the summary statement, Mark also included a set of basic guidelines for student portfolios. He discussed these guidelines with the class as a way of introducing his expectations of the portfolio process:

1. “You or your teacher may suggest assignments to be included in the portfolio.” For the most part, the students selected the pieces that were included in their portfolio. Several times, Mark asked everyone in the class to include a piece of work because it was a major piece of work that they had been working on for a long time.
2. “Sometimes we will complete a learning log which will be included.” Mark did give his students a “Learning Log” to include in their portfolios, but he never explained to the class how they were to use it and it was left blank in all the students’ portfolios.
3. “Any assignment chosen for the portfolio will not have to be perfect - however it must contain the date, a title and your name.”
4. “Frequently we will complete ‘Quick Writes’ that will be included in your portfolio.” (See

Appendix A, Sample Quick Write).

5. “Portfolios may be sent home or shown to your parents so that they can share in your successes.” By the end of September, Mark had decided that all students would show their portfolio to their parents at a student-led conference in April.

6. “With your permission, portfolios may be shown to other teachers or the principal.” As portfolio assessment was a new concept for most grade eight teachers at the school, Mark thought that he would show other teachers what he was doing and he wanted to make sure that his students knew that.

7. “All portfolios are stored in the classroom on the shelf.” Mark thought it was important that his students kept their portfolios at school so that they were easily accessible and available at any time to review and to add new pieces.

One of the participating students, Kathy, recalled how the portfolio was introduced: “Mr. Cafley told us that we were going to do a portfolio over the year so we could remember what we’ve done and we could show our parents at parent-teacher interviews. If we want to, we can look back and see how we did at the beginning of the year and what we’re doing at the end of the year.”

Next, the class discussed what a portfolio was and what it might include. Mark encouraged the students to include drafts, outlines and completed pieces of work. He wanted to make sure that students included work at different stages of completion, not just finished, polished products. He wanted the portfolio to be a “process collection” rather than a “best work collection.” He felt it was important for parents to see the process that students went through in their learning, not just the finished products. He felt that a process collection would facilitate more meaningful discussion between student and parent at the student-led conference.

Mark thought that initially his students' portfolios would probably be "best work collections" rather than "process collections." Once students had accumulated a lot of different kinds of work however, he felt they would have a much broader selection of work to choose from and "they'd probably get to the point where they'd be redoing things and they'd start to see that there's improvement." He encouraged students to include several drafts of the same story or essay to show how they had improved on each one. Later in the year, Mark allowed students to rewrite pieces from earlier in the year and encouraged them to include earlier and later samples in their portfolios to show their growth over time.

The next issue which the class discussed was selection criteria. Mark began by explaining how selections would be made:

One of the things that will be important about collecting work for the portfolio will be the choices we make. Sometimes I will ask you to insert a sample that is my choice; other times I will ask you to look for a piece that reflects a certain quality such as 'improved organization,' 'attention to detail,' 'follows directions carefully,' 'best effort at a difficult task,' 'most improved piece,' etc. Other times I will ask you to select on the basis of the pride that you take in having completed the work, such as in having met the criteria which we decided were to be used for evaluation. You will have many choices throughout the year, but we are going to share the task of selection.

Next the students were asked to think about the selection criteria they might use to select pieces of work. Mark did this activity as a brainstorming activity with the whole class, he did not direct it in any way except to write down their ideas. The class came up with a list of ten reasons for selecting a piece of work to include in their portfolio (See Appendix C). These criteria were written up and included in each student's portfolio. They decided as a class that "the most important criteria of all is that I tried my best!"

Initially, Mark decided that the students would only select work from the subjects he taught them, English and Social Studies. Later on in the year, however, he changed his mind and encouraged students to include work from any subject. This was an issue that he wrestled with

throughout the year and is discussed in detail in the section entitled “Teacher Themes.”

Several times a month, usually on Fridays, Mark designated a class period for students to select work samples for inclusion in their portfolio. He did not allow students to put a work sample into the portfolio without a comment sheet saying why the piece was important. Usually these comment sheets took the form of a “Quick Write.” Mark described the Quick Write to his students in this way: “Quick Writes will be your way of communicating what’s working for you, and my way of understand the process which you are working through in the classroom.” Once a piece was selected, the students were expected to complete a Quick Write detailing why they had chosen to include that particular work sample and what it revealed about their learning. The Quick Write was intended to be done quickly with no regard for mechanical errors. The focus was on getting thoughts and ideas down on paper. Mark described the Quick Write as a way to create “a comfort level” that allowed students the freedom to write without being constrained by format or presentation. “I set it up at the beginning of the year as something that’s very non-threatening; it’s not marked. I find that they give me some of their best, most honest writing that way.” He felt that students in grade eight did not need fancy posters, prompts or packaged materials to fill out; the Quick Write allowed his students the flexibility to write creatively and honestly.

The students’ descriptions of the portfolio process confirmed that what Mark described actually did occur. Nancy explained: “About once or twice a month we put in a piece of our work. It could be something we want to improve or something to show we have accomplished our goals . . . and then we always [had] to do a Quick Write on them.” As each student talked about their portfolio, they made reference to the process as it occurred in the class. They referred to the importance of the Quick Write and they talked about the fact that their portfolio was going to be shown to their parents at the Student-led Conference. They described the criteria for selecting work and showed me the criteria that the class had developed together.

It was very important to Mark that his students did not select pieces solely on the basis of the mark they got. He felt strongly that students should not write “I chose this piece because I got

an A,” or, “I chose this piece because I got 9 out of 10.” He believed that they would become better able to assess themselves if they were directed to come up with some “really good, solid reasons why work was chosen.” This was confirmed by the students when I asked them to select a piece of work that they thought would be Mr. Cafley’s favourite. The students did not select the piece with the highest mark, but rather all five students selected work that showed their growth. When asked if Mr. Cafley’s favourite would be the pieces of work with the highest marks, Garry responded by saying, “No, because he always tells us that it doesn’t matter what kind of mark we get.”

The portfolios were not used as part of the reporting procedure at the end of the first term (December), but they were used as a basis for the student-led conferences that took place in April at the end of the second term. At the beginning of each term, the students set goals for themselves which they included in their portfolio (see Appendix D). At the end of each term, Mark Cafley had each student complete a self-assessment to determine whether or not they had met their goals (which was included in their report card). Occasionally, he used the student portfolios to help him write report card comments, especially for students whose growth was more subtle and deserved more detailed observation. Mark explained:

If I felt that the work I was assessing was not giving me adequate information because the student was struggling, or if a parent was asking for more specific information about expectations, I would use a portfolio to refresh my memory . . . Other times I found the portfolio useful in a parent-teacher conference since it was the child’s way of communicating what he was doing in the classroom on a day to day basis. Parent's can’t refute or ignore what their children say about their learning if it’s recorded in this way.

As a whole, Mark felt that the class responded positively to the implementation of portfolios. For many, it was the first time that they had used a portfolio. Mark found that the students were “willing to give it a try and they seemed to be keen to keep it up to date. They’d remind me, ‘shouldn’t we be filling this in?’” In fact, the students seemed to have a good sense of why they were doing what they were doing. When asked why she thought Mr. Cafley wanted

to do portfolios with the class, Betty replied, “so we can reflect on what we’ve done.” Nancy responded by saying, “Maybe it’s so that we can show everyone how we’re doing our work and we can look back to September and see [our growth].”

When I interviewed Mark in September and January he described three important reasons for doing portfolios. The first was because it allowed students a chance to “reflect back on what they’d done” and to see their improvement over time. A second reason was to target areas where students could feel successful. The portfolio provided a way to “target areas where students could feel some success, not broad areas that work for all kids, but more specific ones that work for them.” For example, a student might include a spelling test (something that was not often done in Mark Cafley’s class) because he/she felt that they were a good speller. The portfolio provided that student with the opportunity to focus on something that they felt successful at, something that otherwise might have gone unrecognized.

A third reason for doing portfolios was to help students set goals and evaluate their progress. He illustrated this point by telling the story of a student in his class who had come to him and asked, “Mr. Cafley, can you tell me how I’m doing on my goals?” She had set three goals at the beginning of the year related to her behaviour in class and her desire to make new friends because she was new to the school. Mark realized that “those things were very important to her at that time.” He was expecting students to set goals like “I’m going to use more descriptive language in my writing,” but that did not reflect her immediate needs. It was important to her to set those behavioural and social goals in September, but by November she had realized that she had achieved them. By allowing her the opportunity to set her own goals, she was able to see that she had reached them and was then able to go on to more specific learning goals.

The Teacher's Perspective

The next section is divided into two parts. The first describes Mark Cafley's background and philosophy of education. It is told mainly in the first person because the data was so rich and descriptive, and it made sense that he should tell his own story. The second part explores the themes that emerged from the four interviews I had with Mark. It describes the journey that he embarked upon during the 1994-95 school year as he wrestled with many issues about portfolio assessment.

Background

Mark Cafley began teaching English and Art at the senior secondary level 15 years ago. He then taught grades 3 to 7 for 10 years. For the past five years he has been teaching grade 7 and 8 English and Social Studies at Saanich Middle school where he is also the Curriculum Coordinator. He describes his career this way:

I'm very content right where I am. I have enough of a blend working with adults and students in my role as Curriculum Coordinator and homeroom teacher. I'm really happy. I have no interest in administration whatsoever; it's taken me a while to determine that. I could handle going back to being a full time teacher and not regret it at all, but I'd rather do the coordinating job as well.

Being a coordinator has allowed me to do more planning of my own. It has allowed me to branch out into areas that I probably wouldn't explore as a classroom teacher. I have the benefit of talking to a lot of people and they make suggestions that help me explore new areas. It has improved my teaching immensely; it's just amazing what it's done! I've thrown out complete files of things that I know are not good teaching practice, are not good strategies, or are not effective units. I've rid myself of content in some areas because I've been able to look at it much more judiciously. It has helped me sort out what is really valuable that I should be doing with kids.

I think I was really fortunate when I was growing up that what I learned in school was *how to learn*. All of the content that was thrust upon me was really irrelevant,

I had more fun just exploring how I wanted to learn. So when it came time for me to explore my passions, I really had a lot of skills to do that. If I had to articulate my philosophy of education it would be to make sure that kids are able to explore their passions in their lives. My role is to give them the tools to do that, and that's where portfolios come in.

For the last two years I've used portfolios, but on a more superficial level in the sense that students just collected work in a binder, I didn't have the structure that I'd like. That's what I want to do this year; I want to provide a bit more structure in terms of the purpose of the portfolio, what students choose to include, and how it gets used in the classroom. I want them to do more reflecting about what goes into their portfolio and to do more self-assessment than I did previously. In the past it was a collection of work that really wasn't tied to a lot of good solid reasons for being there. A couple of years ago, I sent the portfolios home with my students and a couple of parents remarked how revealing it was to see how much work their children had done, which spurred me on to continue using portfolios.

Teacher Themes

Throughout the year, I spoke to Mark about the progress he was making with portfolio assessment in his classroom. From September to April he spent a lot of time questioning what he was doing, wrestling with issues that arose and trying to find a way to make portfolios work for him and his grade eight students. When I spoke to him at the end of the year, he had resolved many of these issues. The following issues emerged from our dialogue about his implementation experience.

Repetition/Engagement

Initially, Mark was concerned that his students would feel that the reflections they did in their portfolios would just be a repetition of the goal setting and Quick Write activities that he had built into their everyday classroom procedures. He was worried that his students might feel that

the portfolio process was contrived, that they were fulfilling a duty by completing the portfolio and it didn't provide a personal context. Mark wondered, "How do I make the process more engaging for them?" He struggled with the notion of how often to have students select work samples for their portfolios. If he asked them to select work each week, they might only have one or two pieces of work to choose from. If, on the other hand, he had his students work on their portfolios once a month, then the process might seem distant and removed.

Connections

Mark often wondered about the remoteness of the portfolio process for many of his students. He struggled with the fact that the portfolio seemed to be disconnected from the learning process: "I don't know how many of the kids understand the whole purpose of the portfolio because I'm not sure how many of them really do a lot of reflection about their learning." Mark felt that the way to make the process richer and more connected to his students' lives was to help them see their growth over time. In the beginning, it was "still a remote activity, but it's going to become richer as they start to see their growth." Once students began to evaluate their work as a collection, Mark felt that they would be able to incorporate their own experience and make the process more meaningful and connected to their own lives. The portfolio became a vehicle to help students become reflective adults: "Each time they do something in their lives, we want them to think, 'how did I do, how could I do better?' So making a portfolio is just an intermediary way of solidifying that process with an actual object."

Structure

By January, Mark noticed that his students had accumulated a lot of work in their portfolios and he realized that they needed to do something with it. They needed to look at their collection of

work and “make some really clear statements about what it is that they have changed, what they have modified, and what it is that’s better.” He felt that if he did not provide the structure for them to look at their collection and reflect on it, then it would be “a lost activity.” Mark struggled to find a way to provide his students with enough structure to help them identify their growth. In March, just before the student-led conferences, he provided an opportunity for students to sit down with their portfolio, spread their work out in front of them and begin to make notes about the growth that they had made from September to the present. Mark felt that this “spreading out of the collection” would provide the structure needed to help his students reflect on their improvement since the beginning of the year.

Time

Like many teachers who have used portfolio assessment, Mark was concerned about the amount of time required to make it work. One day I asked him about this concern and he replied, “To be really honest, that’s the only thing that’s holding me back, and that’s probably a reflection of why I’ve done it on an arm’s length basis with the kids.” Mark found that portfolios took up a lot of time; time away from teaching content and teacher-time planning and thinking about portfolios. He talked about how immersed he often got in his teaching and how difficult it was to break away from what he was doing in order to allow students time to work on their portfolios. For example, during one interview Mark shared how difficult it was to pull himself away from his teaching in order to find time for portfolios. He had just spent a class working on portfolios and he said, “Having my druthers, I would rather have done portfolios another day when it was more convenient, but in terms of how those kids have been performing over the last two days, it was really appropriate.” He had not wanted to stop what he was doing in order to allow students time to select a piece to put in their portfolio and complete a Quick Write, but when he did he was pleased because they seemed to need that time to stop what they were doing and reflect on their learning.

Mark was also concerned about needing to plan a portfolio lesson to coincide with a day when there were no students absent because he felt it would be difficult to reteach the mini-lesson that motivated the writing activity (usually a Quick Write) for that class. He also felt that his time was constrained because he only saw his class for seven or eight 45-minute classes per week, as opposed to an elementary school teacher who would probably see their class for most of the day. He felt torn between needing to make the most of his precious time in order to cover the content of the course, and wanting to allow students time each month to add new pieces to their portfolios and reflect on their selections.

Mark also felt that portfolios were time consuming because of the amount of time he spent thinking about and planning for portfolios. He found that portfolios took up a lot of “space in [his] head” because of the ongoing nature of the portfolio process. “I find it hard to have an activity running that has no immediate closure,” he said. With all the things he was currently thinking about, portfolios were just one more thing that took up time. “It creates a fragmented environment which is as hard for the kids as it is for me,” he shared. “I try to keep things ‘clean’ in terms of the amount of time I’m willing to ‘give up’ from other curricula, and that is why I struggled.” Like many teachers, Mark had difficulty juggling the many aspects of a teacher’s daily life. The time required to think about portfolio assessment and the time it took away from other aspects of the curriculum were both issues which Mark struggled with as he implemented portfolios in his classroom.

Marks

Another issue that emerged was that students were always referring to marks as a criteria for inclusion in their portfolios. Mark was frustrated by this because he had made it a priority to stress to students that marks alone were not a good reason to value a piece of work. He concentrated on this issue with his class and was disappointed when students referred to marks so often in their portfolios. One day when I was observing his class, Mark was leading a discussion

about striving for excellence and he told them about a piece of wood he had ruined by cutting it the wrong way. He said, “I gave myself an “F” for cutting that wood incorrectly.” Later, when I asked Mark about it, he was very angry at himself: “I almost kicked myself when I was talking about cutting that piece of wood up . . . I don’t usually emphasize marks. Now they’re all going to write about marks today!”

A Writing Portfolio

Throughout the year, Mark considered narrowing the focus of his portfolios so that they included only writing samples. He struggled with this issue because he thought that by narrowing the focus of the portfolio to just writing it would isolate the writing process. He thought that his students might view writing as something separate from other aspects of English and Social Studies, rather than as an integral part. In January, he considered the idea of creating a writing portfolio to replace the Humanities Portfolio (containing material from English and Social Studies) his students were presently working on because his students were doing so much writing and it seemed like “it should be distinct from everything else.” But by April, he realized that the idea of a writing portfolio was too narrow and too specific for grade eights. Reflecting back on his dilemma at the end of the year he said, “I think they needed to see the bigger picture. I don’t think kids are sophisticated enough to see the subtle growth in their writing. I can see it, but I don’t think it’s fair to expect them to assess it.” In the end, he decided to allow students to select work from all subject areas (not just English and Social Studies), thus expanding the number of sources of information they had to draw upon.

“Finding My Own Way”

As Mark began to read about other teachers’ experiences with portfolios, he found that most of the prepackaged materials were more suitable for elementary students. He knew that his

grade eights would not be impressed by "smiley" faces and cute borders. He realized that he was not going to be able to follow someone else's model. "I've got to make things work for me," he said. Mark modified some of the elementary materials he had and developed a lot of his own materials in order to create more sophisticated, age-appropriate materials (see Appendix E).

He also focussed his attention on helping his students see how much they were improving in ways that were not recordable on paper and therefore not demonstrated in the portfolio: "I'm wondering if teachers who are struggling with introducing portfolios to older students are actually struggling with the notion that there isn't always a recordable event. A lot of group work, a lot of team work, a lot of growth that occurs with older students isn't necessarily seen on paper." This was a key issue for Mark, one that he referred to again when I asked him to read over this section in order to gain participant approval. He felt that the unrecordable nature of growth in learning was an important obstacle in the use of portfolios with older students. He felt it was important to encourage students to reflect on their growth in these areas and to include this kind reflection in their portfolio. He struggled with the fact that students didn't often reflect on this kind of growth in their portfolio because there was no tangible evidence to include. This was an important aspect of "finding his own way" for Mark. Although he did not resolve this issue during the year that I worked with him, he felt that it was very important to find other ways to help students reflect on their "invisible growth."

Loss of Control

Another issue that emerged was that doing portfolios meant giving up a great deal of control to the students. Mark described it this way: "A portfolio is so personal, it's hard for a teacher to enter into it. You have to kind of leave it alone and let it have its own life, let it grow and become something. Maybe that's the struggle I've always had with it. I've always wanted control over this thing." Mark felt that it was hard for teachers to accept that something like a portfolio could stand on its own without the teacher's direct involvement.

Surprises

Mark was surprised by a number of aspects of his portfolio experience. First of all, he was surprised and disappointed by the lack of parent enthusiasm at the student-led conferences (see page 72 for more details). Secondly, he was surprised and impressed by the amount of work that his students put into their portfolios. “I think it’s always neat to look at the best student’s binder,” he said. “I was impressed with how much interest she had shown in her portfolio and how much detail she had put in. Things were filled out sensitively and I thought it was pretty good, I mean you have to measure your successes somewhere.” Even the kids who were struggling took the portfolio process seriously. “It surprised me,” Mark recalled, “that the kids who were genuinely struggling didn’t just say, ‘forget it.’”

Next Time

The next time Mark uses portfolios, he hopes to make some changes based on his experience this year. First of all, he plans to polish the self-assessment materials that he developed this year so that they are more specific and more tailored to grade eight students. He wants to make them more varied so that students don’t feel that they are using the same prompt over and over again. Despite the struggles Mark experienced this year, he does plan to use portfolios again next year. He has the following advice for teachers who are planning to implement portfolios for the first time:

1. “Use a three-ring binder; work can go in there really quickly and it’s a good filing system.”
2. “Don’t underestimate how much time it takes to train the students.” Mark discovered that students needed to be taught to “be reflective, to self-evaluate effectively and to make decisions about their learning.” He felt that teaching these concepts was necessary if the portfolio was to become more than just a storage document. He wanted his students’ portfolios to become a

statement of learning processes and values, a “process collection.” “Students need to be informed about their learning, how they learn and why it is valued, or they will continue to see it as something they do for adults or to please their parents,” he said.

3. “Don’t underestimate how disengaged parents might be, despite your best efforts.” Mark found that many of the parents did not appear to become very involved with their child’s portfolio at the student-led conference. He was disappointed by what he perceived to be a lack of support for the process, but he still felt that it had been a worthwhile activity for many students.

4. “Think of the portfolio as a standards document, even if it contains something that is of a low standard, it’s still a standards document.” Mark defined a standard as “a statement or reflection of what could be considered a benchmark for a student.” He went on to explain that it could be self-imposed such as goal or task set by a student, or it could come from parents and reflect the values that are critical to them. He noted that teachers develop standard documents in their mind which are reflected in the criteria that they use to assess students’ work. Mark described it as an “intuitive statement that is developed over many years. . . . Students and parents lack this reference point as they have not shared in the numerous activities and processes from which an assessment originates.” He concludes that a portfolio can be a standards document for students and parents so that they can begin to reflect on the assessment processes themselves and identify what makes good work even better. Mark often had students include the criteria sheets that he used to mark their work so that they and their parents could use it as a point of reference and could see how the work was evaluated (see Appendix F).

5. “Make the connections for students with artists and others who keep portfolios as part of their professional work.” Mark thought that it was important for his students to see that portfolios are used in the “real world.” He hoped that students would begin to see the intrinsic value in keeping a portfolio rather than doing it just to please the teacher.

6. “Don’t underestimate how much kids value it because they do; we forget that kids really like to

show us their best.”

Benefits

Initially, Mark was not convinced of the benefits of using portfolios. “I thought it was a little airy fairy,” he admitted. “I thought it was a dabbling activity that wasn’t anchored in thought or research. But it really is clear when you do it with kids and you follow up on the self-evaluation part, it really benefits kids.” The most important benefit that Mark referred to was that students were able to see and articulate their growth as learners. He asked each student to write a reflection about their progress at the very end of the year and he was impressed with how clearly they were able to articulate their growth (see Appendix G).

Mark sensed that his students also felt a strong sense of pride in their portfolios. He felt that they took the process seriously because they knew that he had invested so much in it. By the end of the year, Mark felt that the portfolio had become something that they recognized as a part of their learning, “not just another storage document or another teacher activity.” When I asked him what he thought was the most important thing that his students gained from their portfolio experience, he stated with deep conviction:

They leave with a sense of accomplishment, a really valid, visible sense of what they’ve done in a year. The biggest advantage for them is to see and hold right in front of them what it is that is different from September to June. And maybe its just moving from being a better editor, or organizing a math page better, or finally learning how to write out a Science lab . . . if that’s all it is, that’s big for kids. We forget that those are big changes.

Mark thought it was important to recognize the growth that each student had made. He recognized that what might seem like small, insignificant changes to adults were actually big changes for children. “I was also curious about what the student valued; often it was different than what I thought,” he said. “Often they remarked on what I thought was a minor

accomplishment, but when I looked back at the portfolio I saw it within the context of that child's learning and it made sense that they would be proud of having reached that goal." The portfolio provided an insight into what was valuable to students. It allowed Mark to see what they valued and it brought recognition to the growth that they had made over the year.

The Students' Perspectives

This section is divided into two parts. The first part describes each of the five participating students using their own words as well as those of their parents and teacher. It describes what each child is like and what their portfolio reveals about them as a learner. It also describes their goals for the year and their reflections at the end of the year. The second part, Student Themes, describes the main themes that emerged from the student interviews.

The Students

Five grade eight students (age 14), three girls and two boys, participated in this study during the 1994-95 school year. Betty is described by her teacher as a high achiever. Nancy, Mike and Garry are "in the middle" and Kathy is "low" in terms of her ability level. Reflecting on the five students as a group, Mark noted that "they all have a really strong sense of family." They were all comfortable being involved in the study even though it meant having their parents involved. Mark Cafley described "a sense of confidence" that each child had that "their parents could be involved and it was no big deal."

Betty

Betty is a blonde, athletic young woman who excels at most things that she does. “She has an encyclopaedic mind that takes in all the information that you give her,” says Mark Cafley. “She produces what you want, and what she knows should be there, and then she goes one step further and does it even better.” Even though she works very hard, Betty is not a perfectionist. “She’s not eating herself up over her work, but she still produces really good quality work.” Mark Cafley describes her as “100% neat, she’s really considerate of other people and she makes good judgements.”

Learning comes fairly easy to Betty. Her Mom describes her as a quick learner who is thorough in everything she does: “She wants to know all about something, she doesn’t want just surface details.” As a learner, she really pays attention and concentrates. Her Mom notes that “you can walk around the kitchen [while she is working] and ask her if she wants something, but she doesn’t even hear you because she’s concentrating and focussing.”

Betty’s portfolio confirms that she is a “strong” student. She notes that her portfolio demonstrates how hard she works in school: “I put a lot of effort into my work, I study a lot for tests . . . my portfolio shows that I work hard and I like to be neat. It’s a reflection of me, how I learn.” This year Betty focussed on her editing skills as the main area for improvement. “As you can tell by my essays, I need to proofread. But I’ve really done a lot better at it. When I look back on my writing from the beginning of the year there are lots of mistakes, I got rid of most of those.” Reflecting back on the year at the end of June, Betty summarized her growth in this way:

In Grade Seven we set goals but we never reflected back on them. This year I have completed each and every one of my goals. My portfolio shows how I’ve improved at proofreading my essays. I see how even my handwriting has improved. It makes me want to keep on trying when I see I am improving. My portfolio helps me to think and I’m very proud of it, even though I might not show it.

Nancy

Nancy is a gentle, kind young woman. She does well at school, but when asked about her achievement she dwells on the areas in which she has difficulty. “It’s a confidence issue with Nancy,” says Mark Cafley, “I think she feels that what she has to say and what she’s doing isn’t enough.” Learning is a slow, methodical process for her. Her Mom notes that she likes to learn things, “but she likes to learn at her own speed.” She likes working in groups a lot because “you get everyone’s opinion and if you’re wrong, you know that you’re wrong because other people tell you,” she says.

Nancy loves to write and often writes from a very personal perspective. “I’m glad I write stories,” she says, “because I have a lot of ideas, but sometimes it’s hard to write them out.” The personal nature of her writing seems to come from a strong connection to her family. “There’s a real bonding in her family,” notes Mark Cafley, “a really strong sense of attachment to each other.”

This year Nancy wanted to focus on improving her proofreading, spelling and listening skills. She also wanted to focus on improving in geography. At the end of the year she noted improvement in many of these areas. “I guess I’m listening better because I’m trying to make eye contact with Mr. Cafley and I’m not fiddling as much,” she says. “I’m getting a lot better on my punctuation and spelling; I can look at my writing and I know what I did wrong.” Nancy’s portfolio reveals that she has improved a lot this year. “Nancy was just bursting with pride at the end of the year,” said Mark Cafley. “She had made so many changes, that was really clear.” In her self-evaluation at the end of June, Nancy reflected on her year in this way:

Unfortunately, last year I never had a chance to reflect over the year and my growth. Since I am able to this year because of my portfolio, I know how much or how little I’ve grown with my school work. Ten months ago I could write poetry, I could write a story and I could do my homework, but now I am able to live my stories, my poems come from the heart and I answer questions in more detail so my teachers will know what I have learned.

Mike

Mike is a gregarious, theatrical young man who enjoys school, but is not always willing to put in the effort that is necessary to do well. Mr Cafley describes him as “textbook smart.” He is able to digest what he reads and “regurgitate” it, but his written skills are rushed. He has good verbal skills and a great sense of humour which he draws on a lot in his writing and acting.

Mike’s favourite activity at school is writing. He loves creative writing especially when the topic is wide open. His major goals for the year were to improve his handwriting, to write more stories and not to take short cuts in his school work. Reflecting back on his goals at the end of year, Mike noted that he had improved in many areas. “I’ve improved my handwriting now, but it’s still something I’m working on.” He used to skip Math questions that were too hard, “but now I try to work through the problem.”

Mike’s portfolio demonstrates the varied quality of work he has done this year: “I put in some good stuff and then I thought, well this isn’t just to impress myself, so I put in some bad stuff too. So it’s a complete collection of what I have done and not just the good stuff.” His Dad really enjoyed reading his portfolio. “It shows that Mike has the ability to focus in on his gifts,” he says, “and it also shows his desires and some of his weaknesses. Some kids never get it, but he’s really got that gift and I think that shows in Mike’s work.” Mark Cafley noted that Mike had grown this year, but he was seldom willing to put in the effort necessary to produce really good work. “He’s making it clear that what he is doing is his standard and his standard is just fine, his plans are to entertain the world and to be who he is. But you have to accept that there are “Mikes” in your class and you have to let them do that because that’s their passion.” Mike reflected on his year this way:

This year has come to an end now and I feel as though I’m prepared [for high school]. This year we kept a portfolio which I think helped me . I got to look back at how I was doing in September and that helped me to recognize the improvement.

Garry

Garry is a quiet, thoughtful young man. Mark Cafley described him at the beginning of the year as a “very hesitant, shy, self-conscious child.” By the end of the year, it was evident that he had grown and matured a lot.

Garry is the kind of student who works really hard to be successful. “He really does try,” his Dad says. “He can go on into anything, but he’s gotta work.” Garry learns by listening. “He’s a wonderful kid,” says Mark Cafley. “If you’re wondering if anybody’s listening to you, you just look at Garry and he is.”

Garry really struggled with English this year, but found Social Studies quite easy. His goals for the year were to try to improve in English by working on his spelling and handwriting. “Those are all hard things for me to do, I don’t know why but they are,” he said.

His portfolio shows very clearly his struggle with English this year. “I don’t think before he had a clue that he was not a good writer,” says Mark Cafley. “The portfolio really emphasized that.” His Dad noted that the portfolio revealed how much effort Garry had put into his work. “He may not be successful all the time, but generally he’s given his all to it, he’s really tried.”

At the end of the year, Garry felt pretty good about the growth he had made in English. In his self-evaluation in June he wrote:

At the beginning of this year I was very weak in English, but I am getting better and better each day. I think my portfolio was a good thing to have because it reflected on the growth that I have made since the beginning of the year. The effort that I made to help me reach my goals was listening to the teacher when he is speaking and doing every homework assignment I was told to do.

Kathy

Kathy is the last participant in this study. She is a very kind, gregarious young woman. She struggles at school because of a learning disability, but works very hard to overcome it. “It takes me a long time to learn things,” she says, “I have to go over things fifty times before I can remember them. I have a learning disability so it’s harder sometimes.” Kathy is fully integrated into the classroom this year, although she went to the Resource Room for support in previous years. She has difficulty with spelling and with retaining new vocabulary that she has just read.

In order to help her cope in the classroom, she is provided with less stringent guidelines for writing and longer opportunities to write. She takes a lot of work home to work on with her mom who provides a great deal of support. Her Mom reflects on her difficulty in this way: “If there was anything in this whole wide world we could do to change it we would, but we can’t. It’s always going to be a problem for her, she’ll have to work at it. She is so talented in so many ways, the potential is there.”

This year Kathy focussed on trying to complete her work on her own as much as possible. She expressed the most pride in her work when it was done without help from her mom. She pushed herself to get things done and to try her best at all times. Kathy’s portfolio demonstrates her struggle and her pride in achieving success. “It shows that I struggle in learning, but I do well even though I struggle,” she says. Mark Cafley noted that her portfolio gave her a chance to show how her personal writing improved over time. “I think she’d be most proud of that, the fact that she made that growth,” he says. Her mom felt that the portfolio revealed “her struggle from being a child to a young woman. It probably shows her struggle separating from me, too.”

At the end of the year, Kathy stated that she was most proud of the way she became more independent this year. This was a really important goal for her. In her self-evaluation in June she wrote:

In previous years I have not been able to work by myself on anything. Now I still need help, but not as much. I think I have improved this year in my spelling and editing. I have achieved these goals by working hard and not giving up.

Student Themes

This section details the themes that emerged from two interviews with each of the five student participants. It is divided into two parts. The first part describes the criteria used by the students to select work samples for inclusion in their portfolio. While the students had many reasons for selecting work, five criteria were most common: pride, improvement, surface features, personal, and demonstration of skill. The second part describes the other themes that emerged from the interviews.

Selection Criteria

During both interviews, the students were asked to share the contents of their portfolios with the interviewer. They explained what each piece of work was and why it was included in their collection. This topic provided the largest number of piece of data (chunks of transcribed text coded with the same category or sub-category) in the study. When I first coded the student interviews, I had 28 different selection criteria. After reading the data several times, omitting criteria that were only mentioned once or twice and grouping like criteria together, I found that there were five main criteria. Many assignments were chosen for a number of reasons. In those cases, single pieces of datum were included in several categories. At the end of this section I included some of the “special selections” that I asked students to make during our interviews.

Pride.

Pride was the most common reason the students gave for selecting a piece of work. There were 26 pieces of data that related to pride as a selection criteria. Students felt proud of their work for many different reasons: they had put in a great deal of effort, the assignment was difficult, the work was deemed to be of good quality, or they received a good mark.

Effort was one reason the students gave for being proud of a piece of work. For example, Garry said, "I just put in whatever one I did well on and I tried the hardest on." The difficulty of the assignment was also a reason to be proud of a piece of work. Betty included a Definitions Test because "the words were a little different, hard to explain kind of. So you had to give examples." Kathy included her Classic Book essay in her portfolio because she "found it harder than all the other essays . . . You had to use your memory to write the notes so I found that harder, but I was pleased with it in the end." Students also felt proud of their work if they felt that it was of good quality. "I think this piece reflects a lot of good views," Mike explained. Kathy said that her Theme and Conflict essay was her favourite because she felt good about it even before she handed it in. She knew it was good quality.

Marks were the most common reason for being proud of a piece of work. The students referred to the mark they received frequently and cited it as one of the main reasons for selecting a piece of work to go into their portfolio. At first I thought that "marks" would become its own category, but after reading the data again I noticed that the students seldom selected a piece of work solely because of the mark. Rather, the mark seemed to be connected to feelings of pride and accomplishment. For example, Mike said, "I got 7 out of 7 on it, so I was kind of happy. I think I did a pretty good job on it for the beginning of the year, so that's why I put it in." Nancy included her short story in her portfolio because she got 18 out of 20 and she thought that was really good. Betty included her Classic Book essay because she got 87% on it. "I was pretty happy with it," she said, "it was a major piece of work that we'd done!"

Interestingly, only one student included a piece of work specifically because it had not been marked. Mike included a poem he had written because it was important to him to have something in his portfolio that was just his own: “I thought it would be different because everything I’d put in so far was marked, everything had somebody else’s comments on it. I wrote it this way and so I can remember it as something I just did, by myself, nobody corrected it or anything.”

Improvement.

Students also selected work samples because they demonstrated improvement. For example, Nancy chose to include four drafts of her short story “because each draft shows a little bit more progress.” Kathy also included several drafts of the same piece of work “so you can really see how one draft to the next improves.” Betty included her Theme and Conflict essay even though she didn’t do that well on it “because it shows how I’ve improved when I do a good one.”

Students also selected work because it was the “first” one of a particular kind of assignment. There were 10 piece of data which fit into this sub-category. Students referred to the fact that they would be able to “look back” on this piece and see how they had improved. For instance, Betty chose to include her very first piece of writing of the year in her portfolio because she thought it “would be neat to see it at the end of the year.” The students often referred back to previous work samples in their portfolio in order to see how much they had improved. Nancy included a Geography test because that was an area that she had been having difficulty with. “I put it in because I thought it showed how I was doing better at Geography,” she explained.

Surface features.

Another reason for selecting work was because of surface features such as neatness, appearance, length and mechanics. Students liked to include work that was visually appealing.

For example, Kathy included her Ramon story because “I typed it up so I liked how it looked.” Longer works were also included because the students felt they were more revealing. Mike said, “I thought that this piece took a while so I thought it was a pretty important piece.” The most frequent surface feature to which the students referred was mechanics.

Mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization etc.) was an area that Mark Cafley focussed on throughout the year and so the students spent a lot of time editing their work and the work of their peers. When asked why she had chosen a particular story, Kathy answered, “because it’s not got very many spelling errors in it and the errors that it has I was able to correct [in the next draft].” Betty talked about the mechanical errors in her writing the most often out of all the students. “I think the mistakes sort of help me, they tell that I still have to really keep working on some of it,” she says, “I just keep finding these stupid little errors in here.”

Personal.

Students also had personal reasons for selecting work samples. Some pieces of work were included because they revealed something about the student or because they had some connection to the student’s own life. Mike said that his Quick Writes were his favourite pieces of work in his portfolio because they were reflections about his work. “The Quick Writes tell about my work, what I was thinking, what I liked and disliked about my stories,” he explained. He also put work in just to show what kind of work he was doing throughout the year: “I wanted to show what kind of work I had done and what I had handed in. I think that I probably could have tried harder on this, so I wanted to show that.” Nancy also included work which revealed what she was like: “I included this piece of work because it tells about me and this portfolio is supposed to tell about me. It just explains what I think and why.”

The students also included work that reminded them of a personal experience. For example, Garry included a vocabulary assignment that involved words from Medieval times

because he had visited England last year. “I thought it was real neat because I learned some of the words they used back in the Middle Ages,” he noted. Nancy also included a piece that had personal significance to her. She included her story about the character “Nona” because “she reminded me of my Mom. The story just kind of touched me.”

Demonstration of Skill.

The final selection criteria was demonstration of skill. Students selected work which showed that they were capable of demonstrating a particular skill. For instance, Kathy included a story because she was pleased with her opening paragraph. “We were practicing drawing people in, getting their attention so I started my story with: ‘The blackness surrounds her, it went on and on. Not a glimmer of light, just solid blackness wrapping its arms around her.’” Kathy was pleased with the beginning of her story because it showed that she was capable of grabbing the reader’s attention. Nancy included several drafts of the same story in order to show how she was able to make use of the senses in her descriptive writing. “In my first draft I wrote: ‘She was crying,’ but in my last draft I wrote: ‘As I entered the room I could smell the bitter sweet scent of crying,’” she explained.

Special selections.

At the end of the second interview, I asked each student to look through their portfolio and make some special selections. Students were asked to select the piece that they thought would be their parent’s favourite, their teacher’s favourite and their own personal favourite. They were also asked to chose one piece that they felt reflected their growth over the year. After analyzing the data from these special selections I found common responses in two of the selections: teacher’s favourite and “growth piece.”

Four of the five students said that the teacher's favourite would be a piece of work that demonstrated what they were able to do. It would not necessarily be a piece with a good mark, but rather a piece that showed what they were able to accomplish. Betty picked her conflict piece because "it shows a range, it's not my best work, but it shows a range of what I can do and he likes to see that." Kathy chose a rough draft "because he can see how I've done it," and Nancy chose her short story "because he's seen me work thorough each draft and I guess that would show him how I've gone from one place to another." Garry said that Mr. Cafley would choose the pieces on which he had worked the hardest. I asked him if that would be the pieces with the highest marks and he replied, "No, because he always tells us that it doesn't matter what kind of mark you get."

At the very end of the June interview, I asked each student to select a piece of work from their portfolio which demonstrated the growth they had made over the year. All five of them selected a piece of work that was related to their final essay of the year: the Classic Book essay. Mike selected the Quick Write in which he wrote about his Classic Book essay and discussed his growth over the year. Garry chose his essay "because I didn't think I'd do that good in English this year." Kathy chose her essay because it was something that she had done on her own with little help from her mom. "It shows from the beginning of the year what kind of work I was able to do," she explained. Betty also selected her Classic Book essay: "It shows everything we've done in English this year: theme, suspense, conflict, internal conflict, point of view, paragraphs . . . its just got everything!" Similarly, Nancy chose her essay because it shows "almost everything I've accomplished over the year like punctuation, spelling, structure, paragraph form and all that."

Other Themes

There were three other themes that emerged from the student interviews: benefits of portfolios, importance of the Quick Write, and advice.

Benefits of portfolios.

The students described two main benefits of using portfolios: they allow you to see improvement and growth over time, and they provide a record of what you have done over the course of the year. Four of the five students talked about seeing improvement as a benefit of portfolios. There were 8 pieces of data which supported this sub-category. Students said that they benefited from being able to look back over their portfolio and see how their work had improved since the beginning of the year. For example, Nancy noticed how her writing had changed over the year. "It really does change," she noted. "It's funny that you don't notice it unless you look at one of your old pieces and put it beside one of the new pieces, and then you think 'Wow!'" Betty also felt that her portfolio showed her growth over the year: "I can see how I have improved. I don't like to see bad work, but its good for me to see it so I can improve." Mike noted that "a lot of people don't notice changes in their writing, or their opinions. With a portfolio you can look back and say, 'I used to think this and now I think this.'" Garry also felt that the biggest benefit of using a portfolio was that it allowed you to look back on what you did at the beginning and see how you have improved.

A second benefit is that portfolios provide a lasting record of student work and they enable students to see their accomplishments. All five participating students referred to this benefit in their interviews (8 pieces of data supported this sub-category.) They talked about how it was good to be able to see what they had done over the year and to be able look back later on in life and remember. "I think I'd probably keep a portfolio on my own when I'm older because its good to see what you have done," Mike said, "its important to me." Betty noted that it would be good to look back on her portfolio in a few years "and just laugh." Both Garry and Kathy talked about how easy it is to forget about what you've accomplished, "this way you can go back through it and remember the things that you've done." Nancy felt that it not only showed the kind of work she had done in Grade Eight, but it revealed something about her personally. "I think it talks about me," she said, "like if someone looked at it they'd say 'Oh yeah, that's Nancy.' I think it just shows what I'm like at everything."

It was very clear that the students valued their portfolios. At the end of June, I asked each of the students what they would do with their portfolio now that the year was over and all of them except Garry said that they would keep their portfolio (Garry did not give a reason for not wanting to keep his portfolio). Nancy wanted to take it home to show her Mom, while Kathy and Betty were going to put it with their other keepsakes from previous years. Mike wanted it to be on the bookshelf where he could “go back to it in a couple of years.” The students felt a lot of pride in their portfolios and thought it was important to have a record of what they had done in Grade Eight.

I also asked each student if there were any problems or disadvantages associated with using portfolios. The students found it difficult to come up with any problems. The problems that they did suggest were few and were not related to one another so I did not include problems as a separate theme. The problems the students described were: not being able to include as much work as you would like because of the size of the binder, not having your notes to study from when you need them because they are in your portfolio, forgetting to put work into your portfolio and getting behind, and “sometimes it becomes a drag to do.” Kathy was the only one who said that her portfolio had not helped her in any way this year. “I haven’t used it for anything except for these interviews,” she stated.

Importance of the quick write.

This was a relatively small category, but I included it because three of the five students referred to it. Nancy, Betty and Mike all talked about how important the Quick Writes were. They viewed the Quick Write as the personal part of the portfolio, the place where your thoughts and opinions could be expressed. “They reflect you a lot,” Betty said, “they reflect your opinion of how you’ve done.” Mike noted that portfolios contain mostly work samples, “you don’t see what the opinion is.” It is the role of the Quick Write to reveal students’ thought and opinions.

Advice.

This section contains data from the students' responses to three interview questions: What advice would you give to a student who is making a portfolio for the first time? What advice would you give to Mr. Cafley? Is there anything about your portfolio that you would like to change? Interestingly, all five of the students had the same advice for their peers: include a variety of work samples, from your best to your worst, so that you can see how you've grown over the year. Garry noted that you should put in your best and your worst work "so you'll know the difference." The students felt that it was important for a portfolio to be an honest reflection of one's work. If you put in only your best work, then "it makes you look like you're [something you're not]." Nancy felt that it was important that students were not afraid to put work in. "It doesn't matter how badly you've done," she explained, "you can put that in and then show how well you've done on something else."

The main advice the students had for Mr. Cafley was to keep doing portfolios. They also suggested that he have students work on their portfolios once every few weeks or once a month. Kathy felt that it might "get to be a drag" if it was done too often, but Betty felt it was important to keep the process going regularly. Mike appreciated that Mr. Cafley let the students choose most of the pieces that were included in their portfolio: "I think Mr. Cafley handled it pretty well because it's our portfolio so he just let us put in what we thought would be a good reflection." Nancy thought that Mr. Cafley should not have required them to put in a certain number of pieces each week. "Sometimes I didn't want to put three pieces in, I just wanted to put one piece in," she said.

When I asked the students what they would change about their portfolio, they generally said that they wouldn't change anything. "Once a piece is in there," Mike stated, "it should stay there because it tells about me at that time." Betty, Nancy and Kathy all wanted to add more pieces to show variety in the kind of work they did. Garry was the only one who wanted to take something out of his portfolio: "I'd take out the things that I had to put in because I didn't do very good on those."

The Parents' Perspectives

This section details the themes that emerged from my interviews with each student's parent(s) following the student-led conference. The interviews took place within 3 weeks of the conference and lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. There were 8 parents involved in the study: Nancy's Mom, Garry's Mom and Dad, Mike's Mom and Dad, Karen's Mom and Betty's Mom and Dad (Betty's Dad attended the Student-led Conference, but was unable to attend the parent interview). Four themes emerged from the parent interviews: benefits of portfolios, problems of portfolios, relationship to grades and favourite selections.

Benefits of Portfolios

The parents described three main benefits of portfolios. The first benefit was that students were able to see their growth and improvement over time. Pride was the second benefit of portfolios. The parents felt that the portfolio was a source of pride for their children, providing a sense of accomplishment and achievement. The third benefit was that the portfolio was a visual reminder of the work that had been done during the year. It provided a record of the work that was done. Even though the parents had seen most of the work in their child's portfolio before, they were pleased to be able to see the finished products all in one place.

Shows growth/improvement over time.

There were 10 pieces of data which supported this property. All of the parents whom I interviewed referred to this benefit. Mike's dad thought it was very important for Mike to see his strengths and weaknesses. The portfolio provided a way to do this. "It shows him that he has some areas that he needs to pick up his socks in and it shows him his strengths, too," he said. Betty's Mom noticed a big difference in the way Betty organized her thoughts and ideas from the

beginning of the year to the end of the year. She felt that the portfolio provided a way for students to see how they had grown and improved: “They know how much they’ve improved from the beginning to the end of the year. They can watch themselves improve.” Kathy’s Mom agreed. “You can see what you started with and where you are now,” she said. Mike’s Mom described the portfolio as a way of “marking the progress.” She felt that the portfolio was like a journal that allowed students to look back at what they had done and see “how they’d gone ahead.” Nancy’s Mom liked how Nancy had included four drafts of the same story in her portfolio. She thought it was very important for Nancy to see her growth and to see that she could “arrive at a really good finished product.” The parents remarked at how the growth and improvement were so evident when they looked at the portfolio. They also noted that their children were aware of this growth and were able to talk about it.

Pride.

Another benefit of portfolios was that the students felt a sense of pride and accomplishment. Four parents referred to pride as a benefit of portfolios. Garry’s Dad described it as “a little bit of a pat on the back for them.” He noted that students don’t always get the positive, reassuring comments they need. To him, the portfolio was a way of helping students feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. Betty’s Mom said that she was able to feel how proud Betty was of her portfolio when they sat down for the student-led conference together. “She really wanted us to see it and felt that she had done a good job,” she added. Nancy’s Mom also felt that the portfolio provided “a sense of pride and a sense of achievement.” Having been an English teacher herself, Nancy’s Mom noted that she used portfolio with her students. She felt that students gained a sense that “Yes, if I work at it, I can do something academic.”

Visual Record.

The parents noted that they had already seen most of the work in the portfolio. Despite this, they were glad to see the final products, many of which they had not seen as completed works. “I’d mostly seen the rough drafts, but quite often I wouldn’t see the final product so that was really nice to see it all cleaned up and polished up,” noted Nancy’s Mom. Kathy’s Mom felt that the portfolio would be a keepsake, “a memory” for the student of what she had accomplished. Mike’s Dad felt that the portfolio provided a record for the parents and teacher, as well as for the student. “I think that one of the benefits is that we as parents can see how he’s doing and the teacher can see the same things,” he said.

The parents felt that the portfolio was a way of keeping all the work together in one place as a visual reminder of what was accomplished during the year. “It’s good to have it all in one place,” noted Nancy’s Mom. Betty’s Mom also felt that it was important to keep a record of their work. “They can go back at any time and read their first goals and their teacher’s comments. I think it’s good because it’s all together,” she said.

Problems of Portfolios

There was really no agreement about the problems of portfolios among participating parents. Kathy’s Mom and Betty’s Mom did not find any problems or disadvantages with the use of portfolios. Garry’s parents and Mike’s Dad could not think of any problems with portfolios for their child, but felt that there were potential problems for other children. Garry’s parents noted that their younger child had “breezed through his student-led conference” and didn’t really seem to have gained anything from his portfolio experience. “No child is identical, every child is different,” noted Garry’s Dad. “You can’t really say that this is the best for all children.” Mike’s Dad felt that some children would be dishonest about their achievements in their portfolios in order to “pull the wool over their parents’ eyes.”

Nancy's Mom spoke about a number of problems associated with the use of portfolios. She felt that too much time was spent doing portfolios, time that should have been spent on the academic subjects. She felt that the time spent having students reflect on their work should have been done outside of class time, preferable at home in the summer holidays. "I think the introspection should be done outside of class time. I think that class time should be really strongly instructional," she explained. Later in the interview, Nancy's Mom went on to explain that she thought that the work in the portfolio should speak for itself, it should not be accompanied by a lot of student reflection. "This is only my opinion, but I think that sometimes when kids articulate their thoughts they say what sounds good or what they're able to say," she noted. She felt that the work that students chose to include in their portfolio would reveal a lot about them and their learning without needing any further explanation.

Relationship to Grades

All of the parents, except one, stated that there was a strong relationship between their child's portfolio and their grades on their report card. For example, Betty's Mom immediately saw a strong relationship between the pieces in Betty's portfolio and in her report card: "They're all A's!" Mike's Dad really appreciated Mike's honesty in selecting work for his portfolio that showed both his strengths and weaknesses. "I think that Mike has realistically pulled out his weaknesses and strengths and it shows in his portfolio exactly the way it is on his report card. He's not trying to cover it," he said.

Nancy's Mom was the only parent who did not find a correlation between the work in her daughter's portfolio and the marks on her report card. She said that the work in Nancy's portfolio was work that she had chosen herself and "she doesn't want to show me her worst work." She noted that Nancy had included a Math test which she got 15 out of 20 on, but she only got a C+ in Math on her report card. "Her marks were not a surprise and the portfolio was not a surprise, but I think that marks is a whole different subject," she explained.

Favourite Selections

During the parent interviews, each parent was asked to select a favourite piece of work from their child's portfolio and to explain why they chose that particular piece. Garry's parents were unable to make a favourite selection (they couldn't remember a particular piece which was their favourite), but the rest of the parents all chose pieces of work which revealed something very personal about their child. Mike's dad said he would chose anything which revealed Mike's theatrical nature. "I love anything Mike does on the theatrical aspect because he just shines through. He's got such a flair for it, it's a joy to read his work." Betty's mom had a lot of pieces which she liked, but she selected Betty's assignment called "Castles and Cathedrals" as her favourite. "I really like the way she wrote this," she said, "I thought it was a pretty mature statement. This was, in her own words, what she thought."

Nancy's mom selected her daughter's poetry because "she has just incredible poetry. I'm not even a big fan of poetry, but Nancy's poetry is really stunning." Kathy's Mom selected Kathy's suspense story because it touched her personally. "Those stories just touch my heart because it really is her." She acknowledged that, over the year, she had helped Kathy a lot with her writing, but it was the writing that Kathy did on her own which touched her deeply. "You know I certainly help her, but there's a part of her that's there. That's very special to me and I'm glad that she likes to write."

The Student-led Conference

This section describes the student-led conferences which occurred in April after parents had received the second term report card. The data in this section comes from several sources. The first is the student, teacher and parent interviews which I conducted throughout the study. I asked

each participant to reflect on the student-led conference and to describe their feelings about the conference. The second source of data was from the video-tapes of the student-led conferences. After the conferences were video-taped, I watched them and took detailed notes about what I observed, what was said and the interactions that occurred. For the purpose of this study, the focus of my observations and questions was on the role of the portfolio in the student-led conference.

The findings related to the student-led conferences are broken down into six sections. The first describes how Mark Cafley and the class prepared for the conference. The second section describes the conference itself. My observations based on the video-taped conferences make up the third section. The remaining three sections detail the perspectives of each participating group: teacher, students and parents.

Preparing for the Conference

In my first interview with Mark Cafley in September, 1994, he talked about using the portfolio as a means to communicate with parents. He decided that he would have his students participate in a student-led conference at the end of the second term in order to share their portfolio with their parents. He had never done this before with grade eight students and embarked on it with trepidation and curiosity.

Initially he wasn't sure if he was going to do student-led conferencing with his whole class or just with the five students who were participating in the study. He decided to do it with everyone because "it needs to be an outcome for the portfolio process." When he introduced the concept of portfolios with his students in September he told them that they would be preparing the portfolio in order to show their parents in April.

In March the class began actively preparing for the conference. They spent several classes

looking through their portfolios and adding new pieces. Next they began to prepare a personalized script to practice. Finally, they wrote a letter inviting their parents to the conference. The letter explained what the purpose of the conference was, what would occur at the conference and it provided the details about time and location. At this point I spoke to each participating student to remind them that the conference would be video-taped and to ensure that they did not mind.

The Conference

The student-led conferences took place in Mark Cafley's classroom at Saanich Middle School. The desks were pushed together in groups of four to make a larger area for students and parents to meet. Often there was only one conference going on at a time, but sometimes there was up to three conferences going on simultaneously. When the student and their parent(s) arrived they sat down at a free table and the student went over to the shelf to get their portfolio. They began by describing the purpose of the portfolio. For example, Betty began her conference by saying, "This is my portfolio and the purpose of it is to show my growth throughout the year, from the first term to the last term."

Next the students showed their parents their portfolio, going through it page by page and answering any questions their parents had about the work samples. Often parents did not read each selection entirely, but relied on the child to tell them about the work. Most of the parents read the Quick Writes in order to understand why the work sample was included. The parents asked a lot of clarifying questions such as: "Did you do this yourself?" "What is this piece about?" "What is a Quick Write?" They also made some positive comments about the work such as: "That's great!" "I remember you working on this at home." "Looks good!" And, "That was a good test." They seldom asked probing questions or engaged their child in a dialogue about their learning. Mark also noticed this. He had been in the classroom observing many of the conferences before it was his turn to join the dialogue and he observed that their conversations focused largely on "the mechanics of learning, rather than the excitement or enthusiasm that went into the process of

learning a new skill, changing an attitude or acquiring new knowledge.”

Once the students had finished going through the portfolio (15-25 minutes), Mark Cafley joined the group. He focussed on two main topics when he joined the conference. First he asked if the parent(s) had any questions. Then he went on to talk about the student’s growth and to talk about goals for the future. He did not refer directly to the portfolio in any of the student-led conferences, but focussed more on areas which require further attention and particularly on areas to focus on next year in high school. The conference ended with Mark Cafley thanking the parent(s) for coming and asking them to fill out an evaluation of the conference for his records.

The Researcher’s Observations

From my observations of the student-led conferences, I found several commonalities. First I observed that the portfolio acted as a vehicle for discussion. The portfolio was a springboard which led into many different areas. Participants talked about long term goals such as careers, they talked about going on to high school next year and they talked about the process of learning in general. The portfolio also provided a focus for the student. It gave them something to talk about and to illustrate the points they were trying to make. For example, Betty began her conference by saying, “One of the things that you can notice from the beginning to the end of the year is my handwriting. Look how messy it was [turning to the beginning of her portfolio]. Now look!” Occasionally, the students illustrated how they had achieved their goals by showing examples from their portfolio.

The Teacher’s Perspective

Mark felt that the student-led conference was beneficial in that it opened up a dialogue between students, parents and teachers. He saw the conference as a means of “opening a door to

communication with parents.” He really appreciated the parents who took the conference seriously and were genuinely interested in the portfolio. “Some of the parents were wonderful,” he noted. “This one Dad looked at everything in detail and asked great questions. He held his son there for a half an hour and his son was quite happy to be there with his Dad. It was really exciting.”

Unfortunately, about half of the parents did not respond as positively as Mark had hoped. He was disappointed with the parent response in many cases: “I think my biggest disappointment is that maybe by grade eight parents aren’t wanting teachers to do this kind of thing; they think there’s more important things to be done.” Some parents were distracted (particularly those that brought small children to the conference) and some parents “just didn’t seem to care at all.” Mark was disappointed that some parents did not take it very seriously, “I’m disappointed that they didn’t put more into it for the kids’ sake.” Mark felt that many parents were unsure of their role in the conference. Many were unsure of whether they were supposed to ask questions and many did not seem to know what kinds of questions to ask or comments to make. Mark felt that that the parents might have benefited from having a script or at least a list of possible questions to ask. He realized that this kind of discussion was probably foreign to most parents and he had expected them to be more skilled in this area than they were. He concluded by saying that parents may have had their own insecurities about coming to a student-led conference and that perhaps it is not fair to judge the process on one attempt.

Mark noticed that, for many of the students, the conference was a vehicle for “showing” their parents their portfolio rather than “discussing” in it any detailed or systematic way. He felt that he had not spent enough time teaching the students how to talk about their portfolios and to engage their parents in a meaningful discussion about their learning. He felt that the students viewed the portfolio as tool for collecting and organizing their work, rather than as an assessment document. He felt that this was because he had viewed it this way for much of the year. It wasn’t until the conferences were nearing that he began to realize the potential for discussion about the portfolios, “but I didn’t have time to do it justice, and we simply moved to the conference with a

plan for 'showing' the work without really 'discussing it' adequately." When asked if he would do student-led conferences again, Mark was undecided.

The Students' Perspectives

The students seemed to feel very comfortable leading the conference. When I asked them about it they responded positively. They appeared to be well prepared and not the least bit nervous. Kathy admitted that she was a bit nervous at the beginning, "but then I just totally forgot that people were around and I just sort of talked." All of the students except Nancy felt that their parents responded very positively to the conference. There was a sense of pride as the students reflected back on the conference. For example, when I asked Betty how the conference went she replied, "It went really good. My parents were really happy to see all the stuff we were doing. I think they really liked it!" My observations of the video-taped conferences also revealed that the students seemed to feel very proud of their portfolios. The portfolios prompted a lot of positive reactions from parents which made the students feel good. Comments like "well done", "good job", and "what a good mark" abounded.

Nancy was unsure of whether her Mom enjoyed the conference or not. "She wanted to know how I [related to] other kids but the portfolio didn't tell her," Nancy explained. "She asked Mr Cafley: 'How does Nancy get along with the other kids and why don't you do that?' And she gave him a couple of ideas." I observed that Nancy seemed to be a little uncomfortable during the student-led conference, especially when her Mom focussed on her difficulty with spelling. She corrected the spelling on one of her Quick Writes which seemed to make Nancy very frustrated.

The Parents' Perspectives

All of the parents said that they enjoyed the student-led conference. Betty, Garry and Mike's parents liked the fact that the conference was child-directed. They appreciated that their child was responsible for describing their learning and leading the discussion. Mike's Dad said, "I thought it was fantastic! Getting the children to actually conduct it is a really good idea because that way they have to assess themselves and explain it to us." Garry's Dad also noted that he appreciated hearing Garry's point of view: "It was a different perspective because you got his feelings and his efforts. He talked about where he worked hard and where he felt he didn't work so hard." Betty's Mom was very impressed with how capable her daughter was of leading the discussion:

She was just so familiar and so comfortable with what she was doing. For a long time you think of them as your children and you're proud of everything they do. But they come to that point when you start to look at them as another person. And it was kind of neat to look at her and think, 'You're way better at this than I ever will be.'

Nancy's Mom liked the fact that the student-led conference provided a formal setting for the discussion of Nancy's work. "I think it was a source of pride for Nancy to be able to sit down and show me a lot of things that she'd accomplished," her Mom noted. Kathy's Mom also enjoyed the conference. She was very aware of the video-tape at first, but eventually she forget about it and concentrated on the conference.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore portfolio assessment from the perspective of 5 students, their parents, and their teacher. The findings are based on four interviews with the teacher, two interviews with each of the students, one interview with the participating parents, observation of student-led conferences and three classroom observations. Also, each student's portfolio was photocopied and reviewed. The key findings are summarized below in point form in order to provide a concise synopsis of the results. They are organized according to the major themes which emerged from one, two or all three perspectives.

Benefits/Problems

- parents, students and teacher felt that portfolios are a valuable tool
- parents, students and teacher described three main benefits of portfolios: they demonstrate growth and improvement over time, students feel a strong sense of pride in their portfolios, and portfolios provide a visual reminder of student accomplishments
- the students did not agree on any common problems associated with portfolios, but some problems suggested by individual students were: not being able to include as much work as one would like, not having ones' notes to study from because they are in the portfolio and forgetting to put work in the portfolio
- the parents did not agree on any common problems associated with portfolios, but they suggested several possible problems which might occur: some students might be dishonest about their achievements, some students might not gain anything from the portfolio experience, teachers might spend too much time on portfolios and not enough time on the academics
- teacher problems are included in the section entitled "Teacher Issues"

Portfolio Creation

- the process was very teacher-directed at the beginning
- students took more ownership once the process had been established
- once or twice a month students were given class time to select work to put in their portfolio and complete a Quick Write
- three of the five students talked about how important the Quick Write was because it is the place

where students express their thoughts and feelings about the work they do

- students and the teacher shared the responsibility for selecting work samples, but the students were allowed to make most of the selections
- the students had some advice for their peers who might be keeping a portfolio: include a variety of work samples (not just your best), your portfolio should be an honest reflection of your achievements, don't be afraid to put work into your portfolio
- the students also had advice for their teacher: keep doing portfolios, have students work on their portfolio at least once every two or three weeks, let the students choose most of their pieces of work to be included in their portfolio, don't require students to include a certain number of pieces each week

Purpose

- the teacher described three reasons for doing portfolios: portfolios offer students an opportunity to reflect back in order to see improvement over time, portfolios help target areas where students can feel successful and portfolios help students set goals and evaluate their progress
- the students said that the purpose of the portfolio was to show how they had improved over the year and to help them evaluate their progress

Teacher Issues

- Mark was concerned that his students would feel that the reflection done in their portfolios was merely a repetition of similar reflective activities already done in class
- he was concerned that portfolios would be a remote, disconnected activity for some of his students
- he felt the need to provide structure within the portfolio process in order to help his students identify their growth
- he was concerned about the amount of time that portfolio assessment took up
- he was frustrated by the fact that his students referred to marks so often in their portfolios
- he considered narrowing the focus of his portfolios to focus solely on writing; he decided not to do this because he felt that his students would not be able to assess the subtle growth in their writing
- he discovered that he could not rely on other teachers' portfolio materials; he had to find his own way to make portfolios work for him and his students
- he found that doing portfolios meant giving up a great deal of control to his students
- he was surprised by the lack of parent enthusiasm for the student-led conferences and he was

surprised by the amount of work that his students put into their portfolios

- next time Mark uses portfolio he wants to polish his self-assessment materials and make them more varied

Selection Criteria

- pride (which included effort, difficulty of assignment, quality and mark) was the most common reason given for selecting a piece of work
- students also selected work that showed improvement (students included several drafts of the same assignment to show how they had improved, or they included one of their “first” assignments in a particular area so that they could see how they had improved later on)
- surface feature was another reason for selecting work, eg. neatness, appearance, length, few mechanical errors
- students also had personal reasons for selecting work samples (for example, their work revealed something personal about them, or reminded them of a personal experience)
- students included work samples that demonstrated a particular skill
- students were asked to select a piece of work from their portfolio that they felt would be their teacher’s favourite (four of the five students selected a piece of work that they felt demonstrated what they were capable of achieving)
- students were also asked to select a piece of work which demonstrated the growth they had made over the year (all five students selected their Classic Book Essay which they had completed in June)

Student-led Conference

- the portfolio provided a basis (and a springboard) for the discussion at the student-led conference
- the teacher was disappointed with the dialogue he observed at the student-led conference
- the teacher felt that many parents did not know what was expected of them at the conference
- the teacher felt that the students may have perceived the portfolio as a collection tool rather than an assessment tool
- the parents all felt that the student-led conference was valuable
- the students felt proud to show their portfolios to their parents at the student-led conference
- all of the parents except one felt that there was a strong relationship between the work they saw in their child’s portfolio and the grades they received on the report card

It is evident that each of the participants in this study had a very personal experience with portfolio assessment. Mark Cafley viewed the experience through the eyes of an experienced teacher, constantly looking for ways to improve student learning and to help students become more reflective thinkers. The students experienced the portfolio process as unique learners, each one learning more about their own strengths and weaknesses through the process. The parents experienced portfolios through their children who shared the process with them at the student-led conference. They were able to see how their children had benefited from the experience and how the portfolio reflected their growth during their Grade Eight year.

Despite the very personal nature of the portfolio experience for each of the participants, the findings do reveal many common themes and issues. The following chapter describes the strong themes which emerged and suggests implications for classroom assessment practices and implications for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The intent of this study was to investigate the use of portfolio assessment in one Grade Eight classroom over a ten month period. By interviewing and observing five students, their parents and the classroom teacher, the researcher explored the portfolio process in order to answer the following research question: What are the effects of using portfolios from the perspective of parents, teachers and students? This study explored many aspects of portfolio assessment in order to understand the process from the three perspectives. Other key issues were: How were portfolios created? What was their purpose? What issues emerged for the teacher as he implemented portfolios with grade eight students? What criteria were used by teachers and students to select work for inclusion in the portfolio? What role did the portfolio play in the student-led conference? The purpose of this chapter is to try to answer these questions and discuss implications for classroom assessment and for further research.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The Discussion section describes the themes that emerged from the findings outlined in Chapter Four. This section answers the questions asked in the first chapter of this study. The second section looks at the implications for classroom assessment practices and for future research.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that portfolio assessment provides a very personal and unique experience to those who participate in the process. Despite the unique experience of each participant, there were many common themes which emerged. These themes are discussed in relation to the research questions posed in Chapter One. Each research question is stated and then the related findings are discussed.

What are the Benefits and Problems of Using Portfolios?

“Benefits” was the strongest theme which emerged from this study. All three participating groups described the same three benefits of portfolios. Firstly, portfolios demonstrate growth and improvement over time. Secondly, students feel a strong sense of pride in their portfolios. And thirdly, portfolios provide a visual reminder or record of what has been accomplished.

The teacher, students and parents all talked about how valuable the portfolio was because it enabled them to see growth over the year and to identify areas where marked improvement had occurred. This was especially evident at the student-led conference where many of the students pointed out their growth by showing their parents several pieces of work from their portfolio. By showing a piece of work from the beginning of the year and one from the end of the year, they were able to illustrate their growth in such tangible areas as spelling, handwriting, etc.

It was very evident that the students felt proud of their portfolios. In the interviews I had with each student at the end of the year, all of them told me that they felt proud of their portfolio and four of the five participating students said that they wanted to keep their portfolios for future reference. The parents noted that their child’s pride and sense of accomplishment was evident at the student-led conference. The teacher also sensed that all of his students were proud of their portfolios, even those students who had really struggled academically. Although many students threw away their notebooks at the end of June, they did not throw away their portfolios. Even though Mark said that he wanted his students to include a variety of work, not just their best, he still felt that an important aspect of the portfolio was that they felt proud of it. I think that is why he let the students select most of the pieces that were included in their portfolio. He wanted them to have ownership over the contents so that they would feel pride in what they had accomplished.

The portfolio was also deemed beneficial because it provided a record of what had been accomplished over the year. The students liked the idea of being able to look back on it when they were older and remember their Grade Eight year. The parents appreciated the fact that they could

see their child's work all organized and in one place. The teacher felt that the portfolio provided a visual reminder of what his students had accomplished over the year. He saw it as a place where students could see their successes, the evidence was there in black and white.

In my interviews with each of the students and their parents, I also asked them to describe the problems or difficulties with portfolio assessment. The answer to this question was unique to each participant. There were really no common responses. This in itself was interesting in contrast to the strong degree of agreement about the benefits of portfolios. Some of the problems that individual students described were: not being able to include as much work as you would like because of the size of the binder, not having your notes to study from when you need them because they are in your portfolio, forgetting to put work in your portfolio and getting behind, and Kathy said that sometimes portfolios become a "drag". The parents also did not agree on any common problems. Some of the problems described by individual parents were: some students might be dishonest about their achievements, some students might not gain anything from their portfolio experience, and teachers might spend too much time on them and not enough time on the academics.

I also asked the teacher to describe the problems associated with portfolio assessment. He described many issues which he struggled with throughout the year as he implemented portfolios. These issues are described in the fourth section of this Discussion which describes the issues that emerged for the teacher as he implemented portfolios with his Grade Eight students.

How Were Portfolios Created?

When I spoke to Mark about the implementation of portfolio assessment, I sensed that it was a very teacher-directed process at the beginning. He prescribed the size of the portfolio, he gave each student a generic cover page to begin their portfolio, and he directed the activities and resulting products which were included as the first few pages of the portfolio. He decided that his

students could not include a piece of work without also including a Quick Write stating why the piece had been included. Often he gave the students the prompt with which they were to begin their Quick Write. He decided how often the students would add pieces to their portfolio and how many pieces they were required to add. Mark often spoke about the importance of providing structure in order for the portfolio process to be successful. He felt the students needed guidance in order to be able to see and articulate their growth. For example, they needed a structured goal-setting activity at the beginning of the year so that later they could look back on those goals and see how far they had progressed in achieving them.

Once Mark had introduced the concept of a portfolio and the first few pages had been completed, then the process became more student directed. Once or twice a month, Mark provided class time (usually 45 minutes) for the students to select work samples to include in their portfolios and to complete a Quick Write. Occasionally he selected work to include in the students' portfolios, or he described specific criteria for inclusion, but most of the time the students were responsible for making their own selections. Before the students completed their Quick Writes, Mark taught a mini-lesson which focussed on some aspect of self-assessment. For example, one week he spoke about striving for excellence, another week he focussed on re-evaluating goals. At the end of the first term they evaluated whether they had achieved their goals and then they set new ones for the second term. At the end of the second term they spent several class periods preparing for the student-led conferences. They added pieces to their portfolios, prepared a script for the conference, practiced the script and wrote a letter inviting their parents to the conference. At the end of the year they completed a very detailed self-evaluation in which they reflected on the entire year (see Appendix G). At the beginning of the year, Mark had been in control of the process. After a few months, however, much of the control had shifted to the students.

In our interviews, Mark expressed concern about the loss of control he was feeling with the portfolio process. Initially he had been in control of the process, but once the year was underway he found that he was no longer in control. The students were selecting most of the pieces which they included in their portfolios and were reflecting on their selections in a very personal way.

Mark was no longer in control the way he had been at the beginning of the year when he directed what went into the portfolio. Mark recognized that this was positive, but still expressed difficulty in accepting it and letting it happen. He realized that the portfolio process was a very personal and unique experience for each of his students. They were in control of the contents of their portfolio and of the reflection which accompanied each work sample. As a teacher, Mark found it hard to let go of the process and to let his students determine what direction the process would take them. I think this was frustrating for Mark because he had thought a lot about the implementation of portfolios and had very strong ideas about how the process could help his students see and articulate their growth. He wanted to make sure this happened, and yet he realized that he couldn't control it. This determination to let students be responsible for their portfolio led Mark to distance himself from the process at the end of the year. He did not collect their portfolios in order to mark them or evaluate them in any way. He felt that the evaluation he had done on their work and the self-evaluation they had done in their portfolios was enough.

When I asked the students to describe the portfolio process their responses were very short and lacking in detail. For example, they made statements like: "He told us we were going to do portfolios and then he gave us some pages and we put them in." I was surprised by this because I knew that Mark had spent a lot of time introducing the concept of keeping a portfolio and helping them through the process. Reflecting on this now, I think that the students probably had not "bought into" the process at the beginning of the year when I first spoke to them. As I mentioned earlier, the process had been very teacher directed at the start and consequently I think that the students did not take ownership of the process. It was not until they started selecting pieces of work and reflecting on them in a very personal way that they began to feel a sense of pride and a sense of ownership.

What Was the Purpose of Creating a Portfolio?

Mark Cafley described three reasons for doing portfolios with his students. First of all, he

felt that portfolios would offer his students an opportunity to reflect back on what they had done in order to see improvement over time. A second purpose was to target areas where students could feel successful. And thirdly, he felt that portfolios would help students set goals and evaluate their progress. Overriding these purposes was a larger goal which I referred to in Chapter Four as “Connections.” Mark hoped that by teaching students to evaluate themselves and reflect on their progress at school, they would make the connection to their own lives and continue to be reflective thinkers as adults. This reason was of paramount importance to Mark. He realized that he might never know if this goal was achieved by any of his students, but he felt that it was the most important reason for doing portfolios.

When I asked the students about the purpose of the portfolio they stated many of the same things that Mark had said. For example, they said that the purpose of the portfolios was to show how they had improved over the year and to help them evaluate themselves. They did not, however, mention Mark’s key purpose, that of helping them make connections to their real life experiences and learning as adults. Possibly this was because Mark did not directly talk about this goal, although he did refer to indirectly on many occasions. For example, he often used examples from his own life to illustrate a point he was making about the importance of reflection. He also gave the students examples of how portfolio are used by adults in their jobs and as part of their hobbies. I think that that the students were essentially repeating Mark’s stated purposes when I asked them what the purpose of the portfolio was. They were probably not old enough to have developed their own personal sense of why portfolios were important in their lives.

What Issues Emerged for the Teacher as he Implemented Portfolios with his Grade Eight Students?

In Chapter Four, I described eleven issues which emerged from my interviews with Mark Cafley. Most of them have been discussed in this chapter already, but three issues stand out as important for further discussion. The first issue is “time.” Mark, like many teachers who use portfolio assessment, found that portfolios took up a lot of time, time away from teaching content

and teacher-time planning and thinking about portfolios. When I asked him to describe why the portfolio process was so time-consuming, Mark cited two reasons. The first reason was that it was difficult to give up time from the unit he was currently teaching in order to make time for a portfolio lesson. He resented having to stop what he was doing, to interrupt the flow or sequence of his lessons in order to allow students time to work on their portfolios. The second reason was that he found it hard to have an activity like portfolios running throughout the year with no immediate closure. Even though he only did portfolios once or twice a month, he found that thinking about the process “took up a lot of space” in his head so it seemed like he spent more time on it than he actually did. Mark found himself thinking about portfolios a lot because of the ongoing nature of portfolio assessment. It wasn’t an activity that he could bring closure to and go on to focus on other things, it was an ongoing project which needed to be juggled along with the five or ten other things which were “on the go” at any given time.

Mark was also concerned about needing to plan a portfolio lesson to fit into one 45-minute class and to ensure that it occurred on a day when all the students were present. He felt it would be hard to help a student “catch-up” if they missed a portfolio lesson as they would have missed his mini-lesson that motivated the writing activity (usually a Quick Write) for that class. He felt that his time was constrained more than most elementary school teachers because he only saw his students for seven or eight 45-minute classes per week. Despite these time constraints, Mark felt that the portfolio process was worth the time that he had invested in it. Even though sometimes he resented giving up the time necessary to do portfolios, he felt it was worthwhile in the end and expressed a strong desire to use portfolios again next year.

The second issue that emerged for Mark as he implemented portfolios was referred to in Chapter Four as “Finding my own Way.” Mark found that he could not use most of the prepackaged portfolio materials which had been circulating in his school district because they were more suitable for elementary students. He discovered that he needed to find his own way of making portfolio work for his students. This meant developing age-appropriate materials (See appendix E) that would appeal to fourteen year olds. He found that the students responded well to

the Quick Write as a tool for reflecting on their work. He sensed that they would not accept the “cute” worksheets that many elementary teachers found successful with their younger students. Even the format of the portfolio itself had to be considered. Many elementary portfolios took the form of a scrap book where work was glued in and students enjoyed drawing pictures and illustrating the pages. Mark found that a 1.5 inch binder worked well for his students. They were not interested in gluing things in or illustrating work.

Another aspect of “finding his own way” was finding a way to reflect on the growth that his students had made in ways that were not recordable on paper and therefore not included in the portfolio. Mark felt frustrated that he had not provided ways for his students to assess their growth in areas that could not be evidenced on paper. Mark had seen tremendous growth in areas such cooperative group skills and team work, and yet he felt that students had not addressed these kinds of skills by entering evidence into their portfolios. He hoped that if students could reflect on their growth in these areas in their portfolios it would make them more aware that they had actually grown in these areas. For example, it is fairly easy for a child to see that their handwriting has improved, but not so easy for them to see that their cooperative group skills have improved. At the end of the year Mark reflected on this problem and wondered if, in fact, many high school teachers have chosen not to use portfolios for precisely this reason.

The third issue which Mark referred to in his interviews was his perception that the students focussed too heavily on marks as a criteria for selecting work to include in their portfolio. He really wanted his students to value their work for intrinsic reasons, not because of his judgements about the work. He spent a lot of time talking to the class about selection criteria. He emphasized that he did not want them to select work solely because of the grade they had received. Despite his efforts, he expressed frustration that many of his students were still selecting work because of the mark they received.

This was interesting in light of two other findings of this study. First of all, when I collected each of the student’s portfolios I discovered that when the class had developed their

official “Criteria For Selecting Portfolio Pieces,” an activity which was led by Mark and done with the participation of the whole class, they had decided that the first criteria was “High Mark” (see Appendix C). Some of the other reasons were sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, capitalization and handwriting. This was interesting because it conflicted with Mark’s statements about how marks were not important and it conflicted with the selection criteria that the students described to me in our interviews. The students actually did select work for “good” reasons such as pride, improvement, demonstrations of skill, etc. They did refer to marks quite a lot, but they usually had additional reasons which described what, specifically, was valuable about a particular piece of work.

I think it would have been very difficult for the students not to have referred to marks at all since almost all of their work was marked at various stages throughout the year. There were few pieces of work in the student’s portfolios that did not have a grade on them. Interestingly, one of the participating students actually chose to include a poem that he had written because it had not been marked. He made the comment that almost everything in his portfolio was marked and he thought it was important to include something that did not have anyone else’s judgement on it. He liked the idea that there was something in his portfolio that was totally his, that did not have anyone’s comments or judgements on it but his own.

Even though students did refer to marks quite often, when I spoke to them about their reasons for including a piece of work they were very clear that marks were not the most important reason for inclusion. For example, they might say that they had included a piece of work because they got 10 out of 10 and it showed that their editing skills had improved since the last test. When I asked them to select a piece of work that they thought would be their teacher’s favourite, they all selected work that showed their growth or improvement. They recognized that he would value work which revealed something about their learning, not work which necessarily had a high mark. I think that the students did understand Mark’s message about marks, even though he did not perceive that they did. I also think that it might have been unrealistic to expect students not to refer to marks considering the value that is placed on grades by teachers, parents,

students and society in general.

What Criteria Were Used by the Teacher and Students to Select Work for Inclusion in the Portfolio?

When Mark introduced portfolios at the beginning of the year he spoke to the class about the kinds of work he hoped they would include and then he facilitated a lesson where the students came up with a list of selection criteria which they put at the front of their portfolio (see Appendix C). Initially he encouraged them to include drafts, outlines, and completed pieces of work. He wanted them to include work that was representative of the process they were working through at the time. Most of the time the students were allowed to select work for their portfolios. Mark would circulate to check that they were keeping up with their portfolio selections, but he did not collect the portfolios to evaluate them in any way. Occasionally Mark asked students to make their selections based on specific criteria. For example, he might have asked them to include a particular stage of their work rather than just a finished product, or a piece that showed organization or “best effort at a difficult task.” They would still be allowed to choose the exact piece of work, but it needed to meet his criteria. Mark wanted to do this so that parents would see the process that the students had gone through and it would provide something upon which to base a discussion between student and parent at the conference. He felt that if students included only finished products or their best work then parents would not get an accurate picture of their progress. He hoped that the portfolio would be a “process collection” showing works at different stages of completion and success, as opposed to a “brag collection” that only showed their best work.

The students were also allowed to include work for their own reasons. Most of the pieces selected in their portfolios were chosen by the students for their own reasons. In Chapter Four I summarized the five main criteria upon which students based their selections: pride, improvement, surface features, personal reasons, and demonstration of skill. I found it interesting that the students did not often use the “Criteria For Selecting Portfolio Pieces” that they had developed at the beginning of year. Most of the criteria which they had developed at the beginning of the year focussed on mechanical and surface features. They did not mention pride or improvement even

though those were the two criteria which were most often cited.

Interestingly, I asked Mark about this discrepancy in September of the next school year and he showed me the criteria that his new class of grade eight students had just developed the previous week. Their criteria included: “Pieces that showed improvement, something you are proud of, something that demonstrates change or learning, and something that shows that you have reached a goal or are working on as a goal.” I was surprised at how different the criteria were from one year to the next, especially when Mark told me that he had structured both lessons in much the same way. When I asked him why the responses were so different he felt the his new students had had more experience with portfolios and were therefore better able to come up with thoughtful criteria.

All three participating groups (teacher, students and parents) said it was important to include a variety of work in a portfolio, not just one’s favourite or best work. Mark felt it was important for a portfolio to be a “process collection.” The students all said it was essential to include a variety of work that portrays an accurate picture of one’s learning and progress. I was surprised that the students felt so strongly about this issue. I did not ask them directly about it, but rather I asked them what advice they had for other students who were making a portfolio for the first time. The fact that all five of the participating students gave the same advice suggests that it was an important aspect of portfolio assessment in their eyes. They all felt it was important to include a variety of work, from their best to their worst, in order to provide a representative sample of their learning and to allow them to see their growth and improvement over time.

The parents also felt that it was important for students to select work that provides a representative sample of the work they do at school. They felt that it might be easy for students to mislead their parents by including only their best or favourite pieces of work. They also felt that it was important that the contents of the portfolio supported the letter grades which the students received on their report cards. All of the parent except one felt that there was a strong relationship between their child’s grades and the samples of work that had been included in their child’s portfolio.

What Role did the Portfolio Play in the Student-led Conference?

The portfolio provided a basis for discussion at the student-led conference in April. It became a springboard, a starting place, which led into many areas of discussion. The portfolio provided many topics of discussion for the students and their parents. They talked about goals, future career aspirations, plans for high school, and occasionally they talked specifically about skills that had been taught during the year. The portfolio provided a focus for the student. It gave them something to talk about and some tangible examples to illustrate what they were saying.

Mark hoped the conference would be a way of opening up a meaningful dialogue between students and parents about learning. Unfortunately, he was disappointed with the dialogue which he observed at the conferences. Some parents took the conference seriously and invested some time in it, but Mark perceived that approximately half of the parents did not seem to get involved in a meaningful way in the conference. For example, Mark noted that, despite his preparations with the students before the conference, “the child would often talk at the parent and the parent would listen intently without asking questions.” Mark wondered if he should have sent home a list of things that the parents could do to support the conversation. “I naively thought that all parents know what to ask their child in such circumstances,” Mark said. “I can only conclude that they needed to be told to be more proactive, to ask questions and to probe a little bit more.” From my observation of the student-led conferences, I also noted that the interaction between the students and parents seemed fairly superficial and much of the time was spent reading the work rather than talking about it in any detail. The questions that the parents did ask were clarification questions such as, “When did you do this?” or, “What is a Quick Write?” They seldom asked probing questions about the child’s thoughts or attitudes toward learning. Their comments about the work samples generally focussed on surface features such as neatness and spelling.

By the time Mark joined the student and their parents during the last five or ten minutes of the conference, he felt that he had to “try to ‘salvage’ it by asking more probing questions, offering recommendations, or helping to set goals with the parent.” He felt that at this point the parents

were unsure of their role in the process. I also noticed this when I observed the conferences. The parents seemed unsure of how to respond and it seemed that the teacher did most of the talking. It seemed that parents had difficulty talking about their child's learning in the conference because they didn't know what kinds of questions to ask (the students had developed a script, but the parents had not been given any guidelines.) I think they also had difficulty because the experience was something quite new and unfamiliar to them. Perhaps they felt somewhat threatened or unsure, especially in the presence of their child who had practiced for the conference for weeks and the teacher who was very skilled at talking about learning.

The findings related to the student-led conferences were quite different from each of the three perspectives. The students and parents unaminously liked the conferences and felt positive about the process of reviewing the portfolio at the conference. The teacher, however, was not so sure that the student-led conferences had been successful. In my interview with him after the conferences, he expressed disappointment with the parent input into the conferences and with the way he had prepared the students for the conference. Mark felt that perhaps part of the problem had been that he had presented the portfolio as a collection and organization tool rather than an assessment tool. At the end of the year he noted, "It wasn't until I went through the conferences that I realized that the students may have also seen [the portfolios] more as a tool and not a core of the assessment I was doing in the classroom." He wondered if the discussion between student and parent had been so superficial because they had also viewed the portfolio as an organized collection of work rather than a place where meaningful assessment could take place. Mark felt that as the day for the conferences approached he began to find many things in the student's portfolio that revealed their learning and the processes they went through, "but I didn't have time to do it justice, and we simply moved to the conferences with a plan for 'showing' the work without really 'discussing it' adequately." In the end, Mark felt that the student-led conferences had been "unsuccessful" because he had not taught the students about the value of the process. They were not really ready to talk about their portfolio beyond merely "showing" the samples of work.

On the whole, I felt that the student-led conferences had been more successful than the

teacher felt they were. The student and parent support for the process was unanimous. After watching the video-taped conferences, I felt that the students had been really proud to show their parents their portfolio and the parents had enjoyed hearing their child talk about their portfolio and lead the discussion. Like the teacher, however, I too was surprised by how superficial most of the discussion was at the student-led conferences I watched. I had thought that grade eight students would have been able to talk about their learning experiences and reflect on their growth in some detail. It was a very valuable experience for me because it caused me to question the role of the portfolio in the conference. I realized that if student-led conferences are going to be valuable for students and their parents, then teachers do have to invest the time needed to help the students be capable leaders in the discussion about their learning. They also need to ensure that the portfolio is presented to the students in a way that they realize it is an assessment tool rather than just a place to hold work. Perhaps the teacher could collect the student portfolios each month and assess them (using a checklist or anecdotal comments). Also the teacher could sit down with each student for a few minutes and discuss the portfolio, focussing on the areas which could be focussed on in the student-led conference.

I was impressed with the process that Mark had gone through with his students to prepare for the student-led conference, and yet it did not seem to be enough. This observation forced me to re-evaluate the use of student-led conferences in my own classroom. I think that if I do student-led conferences with my students, I will not ask them to show their parents every piece of work in their portfolio. I think that I might ask students to select five or six pieces of work which demonstrate their growth in learning in different areas. Perhaps they might show a piece that they feel they are proud of, one that demonstrates their perseverance at a difficult task, etc. I think that by narrowing the focus of the conference to a few pieces of work, parents and students might be able to spend more time on each piece and really focus on the student's growth and learning.

Implications

It is evident that assessment practices in North American schools are undergoing tremendous change (Stiggins, 1994). In British Columbia, changes resulting from the Sullivan Royal Commission (1988) have altered the way teachers assess their students. The focus is shifting from the teacher as the sole decision maker, to a more collaborative approach where students, parents and teachers have an active role in the assessment process. Recently, research in the area of assessment has begun to focus on exploring alternate assessment methods such as portfolios in order to understand how they are being used to assess students in the classroom (eg. Lamme & Hysmith, 1991; Cheong, 1993).

The purpose of this study was to explore portfolio assessment from the perspective of students, parents and teachers in order to learn more about the process through their experience. The findings suggest that portfolio assessment is a valuable way to help students see their growth and improvement over time. This study revealed that students felt proud of their portfolios and appreciated having a visual record of their accomplishments. The implications of this study can be divided into two categories: implications for classroom assessment practices and implications for further research.

Implications for Classroom Teachers

Portfolios alone do not make students reflective thinkers.

This study revealed that students were apt to focus on surface features in their portfolio reflections such as marks and neatness. It required a great deal of effort on the part of the teacher to help students focus on what they value about their work and to reflect thoughtfully about their work samples. This finding is supported by Goerss' study (1993) in which 32 middle school teachers were interviewed. The study found that teachers needed to help students make reflective

comments in their portfolios, students did not do it on their own. Teachers need to model reflective thinking with their students, discuss selection criteria with them, and teach students how to make meaningful statements about their learning and assess their progress.

The teacher in my study was frustrated that his students focussed on marks so often in their portfolio reflections. He wanted them to write about what they valued about their work, as opposed to external judgements such as grades. As a researcher, I observed that students did do this sometimes, but I think it was difficult because most of the work they did was marked by the teacher. I suspect that teachers who mark every piece of work that students produce will find that students focus on marks in their portfolios. Teachers need to model the kind of reflective behaviour they hope their students will exhibit. In Goerss' study (1993), teachers reported finding it difficult to give up grading every paper, but I think it is important to allow students to make judgements about their work and to see that teachers think their judgements are valuable, too.

Portfolios are not just for elementary students.

Many of the prepackaged portfolio materials available to teachers are geared to elementary students. My experience teaching at middle school leads me to believe that middle school and high school teachers may shy away from portfolios because they think that they are only appropriate for younger children, or they cannot find materials that are suitable for older students. They may also feel that they do not have the time to implement portfolios since they may only see their students for one block each day.

The teacher in my study found it difficult to implement portfolios with his students because he had such a limited amount of time with them (6-8 45 minutes classes per week). He also found that he had to adapt a lot of the portfolio materials he had collected over the years because they were not suitable for older students. Despite these difficulties, he found that grade eight students responded very well to portfolios. All five of the students involved in this study thought that

keeping a portfolio was a valuable experience.

Portfolios should include a variety of student work samples, not just their best.

The findings of this study indicate that it is very important for students to include a variety of work samples in their portfolio which are an honest reflection of their progress over time. In their advice to first time portfolio users, the five participating students all stated that portfolios must include students' best and worst work. The teacher and the parents also agreed with this statement. Portfolio collections should include a variety of work samples in order to provide an accurate picture of student learning, and to help students, parents and teachers see growth and improvement over time.

Students need to have some control over the contents of their portfolios.

The teacher in this study felt that his students seemed to invest more in the portfolio process when he stepped back and gave them some control. He did this by giving them most of the control over the contents of their portfolios. Occasionally he selected a piece for inclusion or provided the criteria for selection, but most selections were left up to the students. As a researcher, I was able to watch the process evolve from a distance and I observed that there was a fine line between providing students with enough structure and direction, and allowing them some ownership over the process. Students need structure in order to help them make meaningful selections and to help them see and articulate their growth over time. They also need to be allowed to make personal decisions about the contents of their portfolio and the kind of reflection it includes.

Portfolios enable teachers to reflect on their teaching and their students.

The teacher's discussions with me throughout the study revealed that he was being highly reflective about his own teaching practice and about his student's needs. Although we did speak about the portfolio as a product, most often we talked about the process. The teacher constantly reflected about the process and questioned his own values and goals for his students. This finding is supported by Lamme and Hysmith (1991) who also found that teachers implementing portfolios were highly reflective about their own teaching practice.

The portfolio process also encourages teachers to focus more on their student's needs. Teachers who implement portfolios need to listen to what their students are telling them in their portfolios. Student portfolios reveal what is important to students about their work as well as their own personal learning goals. Portfolios shift the emphasis from teachers as sole decision makers about learning, to teachers helping students set and achieve their own learning goals. This finding supports Hansen's research which found that when teachers involve students with portfolios they learn what students value and look for ways to honour their concerns .

Implementing portfolio assessment is a personal experience.

Teachers who use portfolio assessment must realize that there is no formula or prescription which works for every teacher. It is difficult to follow someone else's lesson plan, or use someone else's materials. This does not mean that the experience of others should be discarded, but rather teachers can use the research and materials presently available to help them find their own way, a way which works for them and their students. This may mean adapting or modifying the materials of another teacher, or speaking with other teachers who are implementing portfolios in order to share experiences and learn new ideas.

Portfolios require time.

The findings of this study support other portfolio studies (eg. Gomez et al. , 1991) which found that portfolios require a great deal of time. Both “process” and “product” require time on the part of teachers and students. The “process” involves talking to students about the purpose of the portfolio, discussing selection criteria, and teaching students how to be reflective. The “product” involves actually putting together the portfolio collection: selecting working samples, writing down reflections, completing the table of contents, etc.

First of all, teachers need to spend time thinking about the process and struggling with the issues. The teacher in my study referred to the fact that thinking about the portfolio process took up “space in [his] head.” Portfolios take up class time because teachers have to help students understand the process and why it is important. Creating the portfolio product is also time consuming. Teachers have to spend time putting together materials that are appropriate for their students. For example, the teacher in my study created a number of different forms for his students to enable them to reflect on their work samples. The product also takes up class time because students need to be given time to add pieces of work to their portfolios and to reflect on their work. As mentioned previously, middle school and secondary teachers who only see their classes for one or two blocks a day may find the time commitment a hindrance to portfolio use.

Student-led conferences can be a useful tool for students to share their portfolio with their parents.

The participating parents in this study all agreed that the student-led conference was a valuable event which allowed students and parents an opportunity to talk about learning. Despite this apparent support for the process, the teacher felt that many of the parents who were involved in the conferences were unsure of their role and had difficulty asking meaningful questions. He also felt that a great deal of teaching was necessary to provide students with the skills necessary to

adequately lead a discussion about their learning. Teachers of older students should consider using student-led conferences as a way to allow students to share their portfolios with their parents, but they must keep in mind that parents may have difficulty actively participating in the discussion. Providing parents with sample questions and giving them specific areas to comment on may be helpful .

Implications for Future Research

Research should continue to focus on the use of portfolios to evaluate student achievement and to assess student learning.

Large-scale portfolio studies such as Koretz et al.. (1994) and LeMahieu (1993) have found that the use of portfolios to evaluate student achievement is inconsistent. Further research in this area is needed in order to clarify the criteria upon which portfolio can be graded and to explore the area of consistency. Researchers should continue to explore the use of portfolios to evaluate student achievement: What is different when portfolios are graded and when they are not? Can a portfolio be a self-assessment document and a piece of work that is graded by the teacher? Are grades given on portfolios consistent with grades students receive on other tasks?

In my study, I observed that the teacher did not evaluate the portfolio in any systematic way. He felt that the evaluation he did on the student's work and the reflection they did on their portfolios was enough, and yet at the end of the study he felt that by doing this he had inadvertently taught his students that their portfolios were collections of work rather than tools for assessing learning. I sensed that the teacher was unsure of how to use the portfolios to assess student learning and to report to parents. This finding is supported by Bachor and Anderson (1994) who found that teachers "lacked the interpretive framework to make sense of the assessment evidence collected" (p. 91).

It is clear that assessment and evaluation are complex issues which classroom teachers

struggle with on a daily basis. Therefore, researcher should continue to explore the possibilities for portfolios as assessment and evaluation tools. Researchers should continue to consider if and how portfolios can be reconciled with other assessment practices such as traditional report cards, tests, projects and presentations. Is it possible for these varied assessment practices to complement each other? Can portfolios be used to assess group processes and cooperative learning activities?

Research should examine student selection criteria and the relationship to grading.

The students in this study often referred to marks as a selection criteria. This was particularly frustrating for the teacher who had spent a great deal of time talking to the students about selecting work because they deemed it to be valuable in revealing something important about their learning. He tried to get students to think beyond “I selected this piece because I got an A,” to “I selected this piece because I tried to write about a very personal experience and I think I was successful at describing the situation in vivid detail using a lot of descriptive language.”

Interestingly, when I viewed the students’ portfolios I discovered that almost every piece of work in their portfolio had been marked by the teacher. This seems to be an area which requires further research. For example, Goerss (1993) found that 32 middle school teachers experienced difficulty in giving up control and giving up grading every paper. What kinds of “controls” do teachers have to give up when they use portfolios with students? Why is it difficult for teachers to give up grading every paper? Does it matter if teachers mark every piece of work that students do? Do students concentrate less on marks when teachers don’t mark every piece of work they do? What do students value about their work?

Research should continue to explore the use of portfolios with older students and adults.

The teacher in this study was one of the first teachers in his school to use portfolio assessment with grade eight students. He discovered that his students focussed on areas of growth which were tangible and easy to demonstrate in their portfolios such as improved handwriting or spelling. He realized that other “invisible” kinds of growth such as cooperative group skills were not reflected on in his student’s portfolios. The teacher wondered if other middle school and high school teachers are not using portfolios because they do not adequately address this kind of growth. Can portfolios demonstrate learning in such areas as cooperative group work? How can teachers help students see their growth in these kinds of “invisible” areas and reflect on it in their portfolios?

There is a definitely a need for further research into the use of portfolios with older students and adults. Are portfolios as successful with older students as they seem to be with young students? What are the issues that face high school teachers who use portfolio assessment? How are these issues different from those facing elementary teachers?

Further research is needed into strategies for teaching students to become reflective thinkers.

In their study of twelve elementary school teacher’s experience with portfolio assessment, Gomez (1991) and her colleagues found that portfolios alone did not make students reflective thinkers, teachers were needed to help students do this. The teacher in my study also found this to be true. The whole issue of how teachers teach students to use portfolios seems to be an areas which requires further investigation. More specifically, how do teachers teach students to reflect on their work in their portfolio? Have teachers had any success in teaching students to become reflective thinkers? Do students transfer any of the reflection skills they have learned through their portfolio experience to other areas of their lives?

Research should explore the student-led conference as a vehicle for sharing a portfolio.

The parents involved in this study all agreed that the student-led conference was a useful way for students to share their portfolios with their parents. The teacher, on the other hand, was disappointed with the student-led conferences. He felt that the students were not able to discuss their work in any depth and that the parents were disengaged from the process. The findings of this study point to a need for further research into the role of the student-led conference in portfolio assessment. What do teachers do to prepare students for student-led conferences? How can parents be adequately prepared for student-led conferences? Are student-led conferences useful for older students as well as younger ones?

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore portfolio assessment from the perspective of one teacher, five students and eight parents over the course of one school year. The findings indicate that portfolio assessment is a valuable process for students, parents and teachers. All three participating groups described the same three benefits of portfolios. First, portfolios demonstrate growth and improvement over time. Second, students feel a strong sense of pride in their portfolios. And third, portfolios provide a visual reminder or record of what has been accomplished.

Throughout the year, the teacher wrestled with many issues about portfolio assessment. He struggled to find a process that worked for him and his grade eight students. At the end of the second term he invited parents to participate in student-led conferences where the students presented their portfolio to their parents. The parents involved in this study all agreed that the student-led conference was a valuable experience. They were impressed with the fact that their child was able to lead the discussion and to talk about their learning with them. The teacher, on the

other hand, was somewhat disappointed with the student-led conferences. He felt that he had not taught his students how to talk about their learning and engage their parents in a meaningful discussion. He also felt that the parents were unsure of their role in the conference and were unsure of what kind of questions to ask.

At the end of the year, the teacher and the students were asked to reflect back on the year and their experiences with portfolio assessment. The students all agreed that their experience with portfolios had been valuable. The teacher also reflected back on the year in a positive way. He had not answered every question with which he began, nor had he solved all the problems which had surfaced. Despite this he was eager to use portfolios again next year.

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Appendix A: Sample Quick Write

Jan. 26/95

[REDACTED] Write!

Since September I have been working on the quality of my work. This piece shows a lot of effort because I haven't done one of these in a long time. One thing that will be important to remember for next time is to check all of the points to make sure they're accurate. Something I value about this piece is how neat it was. Next time to improve a similar assignment I would have a partner or peer read it over to see what they think. /

Good ideas!
You are a very
confident writer!

Appendix B: Summary Statement (placed at start of portfolio)

1. Last year I worked with the following teachers:

2. Complete each statement:

I learn best when ...
 It's hard for me to just sit there for hours on end listening to ~~the~~ teachers talk sometimes I drift off so I like to read.

What I find most difficult is when ...
 I can't figure something out and someone else asks me to ~~at~~ explain and I try to but get frustrated.

I like to learn by ...
 Reading things I don't like to copy things off the board. I also like watching and doing things.

It would be helpful if my teacher knew that it is difficult for me to complete homework. YES NO
 Why? I have a two year old sister and my mom is pregnant so I have to take care of both of them. On Tuesdays I have diving.

I have a medical problem that might affect my school work. YES NO
 How? Not really I'm a slow learner & I can't hold information in my head for very long.

How I get along with my friends or family may affect my schoolwork. YES NO
 Why? When I'm feeling down so does my homework.

Read each of the following lists. As you read each list, think about the way you work in a classroom, while you are on a field trip, or when you are trying to complete homework. Check off the ideas which describe you best in each list.

Next, choose the **group** that has the most ideas about you. Sometimes there will be ideas in all three lists that apply to you. However, pick just one list and circle the letter that matches the list.

- K. Sometimes I find it hard to sit still.
I drop things.
I like to make things with my hands.
I might punch a friend for fun or to get his attention.
I like to set up equipment or do classroom tasks.
I like to write on the blackboard.
I might use my finger to point when I read.
- V. I like to examine, study or read about things.
I tend to be quiet, organized and enjoy tasks.
I can pick out mistakes on the blackboard.
I would rather read than be read to.
I can create strong images or mental pictures from books.
I like to draw or doodle.
I help out with displays or art projects.
I have trouble remembering what people say sometimes.
- A. I like to read aloud.
I make noises in the classroom.
I can be distracted easily.
Sometimes I talk to myself or count out loud.
I like to discuss what needs to be done.
I learn better when the teacher gives instructions.
I must work hard to understand maps/diagrams.
I repeat reading material to myself to learn it.

The list that best describes me is: K V A

Setting Goals

1. What are your strengths?

In the coming year I will continue to do something that I have always done well.

I love to read and be read to. I have a wonderful imagination sometimes it runs away with me.

2. What are you worrying about?

In the coming year I will try to take a risk and do something that I haven't done before.

I worry about tests because it doesn't matter how much I study once I get that paper I'm blank.

3. What are your weaknesses (we all have them!) ?

In the coming year I will try to make improvements in the way that I do some things.

I will try to study more.

4. Who will help me?

I know that these people will assist me if I ask for help or let them know if there is a problem.

My mom & Dad. Mr. Cafley. My friends.
The teacher teaching the subject.

4(b) Who can I help?

Sometimes you can be a better teacher than the person at the front of the room.

my friends.

Setting Goals

5. What are the most positive things that I can contribute to my classes this year?

Creating a positive climate in the classroom is a shared responsibility.

I will try to be an optimist not a
pessimist.

6. What are my parents' expectations for me this year?

Your teacher and your parents work together to help you "learn how to learn". Phone calls, notes, interim reports and term report cards are the ways we keep in touch.

All my parents want me to do is
get good grades.

Keeping A Portfolio

During the year we will share your successes with your parents by collecting your work in a portfolio. (By the way, this word comes from the Italian word *portafogli* - "porta" meaning carry and "foglio" meaning leaf.)

Basic Guidelines:

1. You or your teacher may suggest assignments to be included in the portfolio.
2. Sometimes we will complete a "learning log" which will be included.
3. Any assignment chosen for the portfolio will not have to be perfect - however it must contain the date, a title and your name.
4. Frequently you will complete "quick writes" that will be included in your portfolio.
5. Portfolios may be sent home or shown to your parents so that they can share in your successes.
6. With your permission, portfolios may be shown to other teachers or the Principal.
7. All portfolios are stored in the classroom on the shelf.

Appendix C: Selection Criteria

Sept. 16/94

Criteria for Selecting


- ① (high marks)
- ② personal opinion
- ③ sentence structure
- ④ -punctit
- ⑤ punctuation
- ⑥ spelling
- ⑦ capitalization
- ⑧ answer the question
- ⑨ handwriting
- ⑩ self-discipline to self-edit.

"The most important criteria of all is that I tried my best!"

Appendix D: Sample Student Goals

Goal Statement 1994 - 1995

September 30, 1994

During the first week of school I noticed that it was hard to start back into writing stories. I think that this year I will improve on my writing skills and short stories. Compared to last year my writing has improved already. I used to have lots of deadwood, but now I cut it out.

I have many important goals for the upcoming year. My first goal is to listen carefully to instructions. I think that this is important because I won't miss anything. I know that it will help me.

My second goal is to be organized. It will help me a lot. By reaching this goal I will be able to have all my homework done on time and I won't forget any assignments.

My third goal is to be on time for everything. I think it is important so I can be prepared for class. I know that it will help me because I won't be rushed any more. Someone who can confirm that this goal has been met is Mr. Cafley.

If I work really are on all these three of these goals I will be able to improve my grades. I will also be able to get down to work much faster.

Teacher Comments:

You are such a positive person, I know that you will succeed at your goals. You have selected important tasks to work on this year, especially in the area of staying organized. You are participating well in class and making a super effort. Congratulations on a great start to the year!

Appendix E: Sample Portfolio Entry

PORTFOLIO ENTRY

STUDENT NAME

DATE: Nov 14/94

Title of piece chosen:

Theme and Conflict

Student Comments: (please write in complete sentences)

Two reasons I chose this item are:

I am proud of it and I
did a lot on my own.

I want you to notice:

That my spelling is getting
better every time. I write
some thing.

Next time I might:

Things that have improved since my last entry:

Are my spelling and under-
standing what to do on it.

Other comments, ideas or reflections:

That when I had it in
I felt confused about
what I had done and
that I was going to get
a good mark on it.

Appendix F: Sample Marking Criteria Sheet



December 1994

Short Story Assignment: The Holocaust

Mr. Cafley

Student: _____

During the school year students use writing reference sets to guide their writing processes. The following evaluation is based on scales six and seven in each of the areas shown. The goals for the following assignment were to produce a "letter perfect" assignment using spell-check on the computer as well as revision and proofreading skills. Students produced several written drafts of the assignment before beginning work on the computer.

	Quality	Not Yet	
Writing Conventions			
Spelling is accurate, even on harder words	✓	_____	
The grammar and punctuation are correct, making sentences easy to read.	_____	✓	
Paragraphs begin in the right places	✓	_____	
Capitals are used correctly.	✓	_____	
Overall, the paper appears to have been well proofread.	_____	✓	
Sentence Structure			
The writing sounds natural.	✓	_____	
Sentences begin in different ways and use connecting words (however, besides, for instance).	✓	_____	<i>Watch for too many "there's"!</i>
You have removed "deadwood", or all unnecessary words and clichés.	✓	_____	
You have used a variety of sentences; some are long and detailed while others are short and snappy.	✓	_____	
	_____	_____	
Word Choice			
Every word seems just right. Every word carries its own weight.	✓	_____	
The writing isn't overdone or flowery. The language is colourful and snappy, vital, fresh and brisk.	✓	_____	
The writer thinks, "Gee, this was a great way to say it!"	✓	_____	
The writer has taken some risks with new words and used them effectively.	✓	_____	
Ideas and Content			
the writer seems to know a lot about this topic, and lets the reader in on some new or little-known information.	✓	_____	<i>You included ideas from your other reading experience</i>
The writer doesn't just "tell" about events. The writer "shows" events happening so the reader understands clearly.	_____	✓	
The writer fills the paper with interesting details.	_____	✓	
Voice			
The writer seems very much caught up in the topic, and has the courage to say what he feels.	✓	_____	<i>16/20</i>
The reader feels that the writer is talking directly to him.	✓	_____	
The writer seems confident.	✓	_____	
The writing is lively. It might make a reader laugh or cry.	_____	_____	
It seems full of the writer's own feelings, and it makes the reader feel things too.	✓	_____	

Appendix G: Sample Year-end Reflection**STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION**
JUNE, 1995

NAME:

DIVISION: 8-5 TEACHER: Mr. Cafley

At the beginning of the year I expected to mature but not as much as I did. I also met all my goals by improving my assignments, tests and spelling. Some of my homeworks was poetry and I am proud of my collection which shows that I have improved a lot by my standards. My work is much neater compared to the beginning of the year. ^{unfortunately} last year I never ^{had} ~~got~~ a chance to reflect over the year and my growth. Since I am able to this year because of my portfolio, I know how much or how little I have grown with my school work. When I open my portfolio I am taking a look into my past. Ten months ago I could

write poetry, I could write a story and I could do my homework but now I am able to live my stories, my poems come from my heart and I answer questions in more detail so my teachers will know what I have learned. Looking back I also realise that when I go on to I'm not only leaving behind but I'm leaving a part of me. The part that would rather watch G.V. than do homework, the part that would rather stay home than go to dance class. Yes I have matured and I will keep maturing for years to come. To be able to mature you need good friends, a loving family and good guidance from teachers and peers. I'm lucky to be blessed with all of them.

Thank you

VITA

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