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Perceived Effectiveness of Portfolio Assessment

For Pre-First and First Grade Teachers

In Pemberton Township School District

By

Ursula M. Csercsevits

A Master's Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

Master of Arts Degree in The Graduate School of

Rowan University

April 6, 2000

4/15/00

Abstract

Ursula Csercsevits

Perceived Effectiveness of Portfolio
Assessment For Pre-First and First
Grade Teachers In Pemberton Township
School District
2000
Dr. Gini Doolittle
School Administration

The purpose of this study is to discover the effects of portfolio assessment as perceived by pre-first and first grade teachers using community based action research. The outcome of this study is data that assists in evaluating the continued use of portfolio assessment as it exists, or determining the need for adjustment to the practice. The sample group consisted of forty-two pre-first and first grade teachers currently using portfolio assessment. Data collection of this action research study began with a questionnaire distributed to all members of the sample. The cycle of research continued with interviews, classroom observations and a review of student portfolios with a segment of the group. The data was classified to major characteristics of portfolio assessment systems as indicated by review of the literature. The data finds that the portfolio assessment system that is used in Pemberton Township is an effective assessment system that is based on standards, provides a checklist of proficiencies, documents individual learning by employing developmentally appropriate assessment activities, encourages student and teacher interaction and positively affects instructional planning.

Mini-Abstract

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The purpose of the study is to discover the effects of portfolio assessment as perceived by pre-first and first grade teachers. The data finds that the portfolio assessment system that is used in Pemberton Township is an effective assessment system that is based on standards, employs developmentally appropriate assessment activities, and positively affects instructional planning.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr.Gini Doolittle for providing me with guidance and direction as I explored the challenging world of collaborative action research.

In addition, I would like to thank Miss Peg Needham whose concern for meeting the needs of young learners fostered the growth and development of portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the pre-first and first grade teachers of Pemberton Township. They graciously shared their experiences and concerns and welcomed me into their classrooms.

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Chapter One Introduction

Focus of the Study

Koretz (1998) explains that during the last decade, dissatisfaction with standardized testing began to influence educators to look for alternative methods of assessment. It became apparent, that holding teachers accountable for standardized test scores led to instructional practices that limited the focus of instruction to information specific to the test and eliminated other significant materials.

Alternative assessment strategies, which would evaluate students as they are engaged in meaningful learning tasks and encourage positive significant learning experiences in the classroom, were examined. Portfolio assessment, one such alternative, offered an opportunity for a more authentic form of assessment. Based upon a collection of the student's performance, which is kept in a portfolio for periodic review, this assessment strategy provides teacher, student, parents and administrators with evidence, which can determine the extent to which learning has occurred.

Districts are recommending this change in evaluation and teachers are discovering that implementation of this evaluation strategy has an effect on instructional practice. Teachers are closely observing students and monitoring progress. Assessments are integrated into instruction, and provide evidence of achievement mastery and the need for instructional change.

Portfolio assessment involves teacher and student as observers of learning mastery. It also gives an opportunity for both to become engaged in instructional choices. As a student recognizes mastery of a skill or concept, he may also be able to

decide what should be learned next. Teachers and students can both be involved in building learning together.

Portfolio assessment is a practice recommended for children in kindergarten and first grade because, as explained by Lee (1992) , it measures growth and development. It is a process that looks for positive evidence of growth. An opportunity is provided for documenting the extent of this individual growth and encourages student and teacher interaction, which engages the early learner in constructing knowledge.

Sameroff (1994) describes children in this age group as in a period of development referred to as “the 5-7 year shift”. During this period of development, children demonstrate significant changes in cognitive development. Moreover, explains Sameroff, children are developing an ability to think logically and express their ideas verbally. Assessment strategies are needed which identify evidence of this development.

This study will focus on the use of portfolio assessment in pre-first (kindergarten) and first grade. In Pemberton Township the educational program for five-year-old children is a full day program which is referred to as pre-first. The students included in this study are from 5 to 7 years of age.

Purpose of the Study

Valencia (1990) emphasized portfolios as collections of work, which provide samples of student performances over time and measure growth toward the achievement of a particular goal or standard. The assessment tasks become part of instruction and provide teachers with information needed to make decisions concerning the individual

student and teaching practice. The intern will determine the consequences of this assessment measure on the students, the instruction and the curriculum in the pre – first and first grade classrooms in Pemberton Township.

In September 1997, pre–first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township began using portfolio assessment. This strategy was initiated as an alternative to standardized testing because both teachers and supervisors believed it to be a more accurate assessment of young children. Scores on standardized tests were not consistent with skill mastery as evidenced by teachers in classroom learning activities. Using district created portfolios, which included a list of skills based on Core Curriculum Standards, teachers began the process of assessing students by observing and collecting evidence of learning. The first grade report cards were revised to incorporate the skills mastery which focused the portfolio assessment. Standardized testing was no longer administered to these grade levels. Grade level skills mastery was based upon evidence gathered in portfolio assessment.

The purpose of this study is to discover the effects of portfolio assessment as perceived by pre-first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township using community based action research. All participants in the research will have the opportunity to reflect upon their use of portfolio assessment and perhaps be able to identify ways of making it a more effective instructional strategy. The study will reveal the extent to which the findings of Pemberton teachers are consistent with those of other teachers using this assessment strategy.

This research will give the intern the opportunity to develop leadership by producing clear concise written communication, in the form of a survey, which involves the district community in assessing a district- wide portfolio assessment program.

This research will result in a written report to inform teachers, and administrators about the effects of using portfolio assessment as an alternative to standardized testing, The outcome of this study will be data that assists in evaluating the continued use of the current practice of portfolio assessment as it exists, or determining the need for adjustment to the practice.

Definitions

Portfolio assessment - an assessment strategy based upon a collection of a student's performance

Authentic assessment – an assessment of work that is accomplished by students as part of ongoing learning activities in the classroom

Developmentally appropriate practice – early childhood educational practices, which are based upon knowledge about how children develop and learn

Constructivism – belief that knowledge is acquired by constructing it in interaction with the environment

Limitations of the Study

This action research project is limited to the forty-three pre-first (kindergarten) and first grade teachers in eight schools in Pemberton Township, New Jersey. Portfolio assessment in this district evaluates reading, math, and language, based on school district

curriculum which is consistent with Core Curriculum Content Standards. The data for this study begins in a single survey of the teachers who have been using portfolio assessment since September 1996. Following the survey, additional data will be gathered through informal interviews with some members of the sample group and observations, which will be limited to the pre-first and first grade teachers at Ft. Dix School.

The conclusions of this study cannot be generalized to other grade levels in this district, or to other pre-first and first grade classrooms in other districts.

Setting of the Study

The site of the research is Pemberton Township School District. This district which provides educational opportunities for residents of Pemberton Township, Pemberton Borough, and Ft. Dix Military Installation consists of nine elementary schools, one middle and one high school.

Pemberton Township, which lies in the pinelands of eastern Burlington County, is a middle class community of approximately 32,000 people. This ethnically diverse population is proud of its history, which can be traced back to pre-Revolutionary war era. Located along the Rancocas Creek it was an early mill town as well as an agricultural community. Pemberton Township is well known as a cranberry and blueberry growing area. With the opening of Camp Dix during World War I, Pemberton became home to military families. Even though the number of military has decreased, Pemberton still enjoys a special relationship with Ft. Dix.

Pemberton Township District provides educational opportunities for 5,280 students in its eleven schools. The goals of the district include: reducing class size to

twenty-two students; instituting a breakfast program in all elementary schools; implementing a before and after school child care program; supporting a professional development program for all staff; implementation of an elementary guidance program at each elementary level; and the implementation of a technology plan that placed computers and the world wide web in each classroom.

Of the 443 certified teachers in the district, 368 have bachelor degrees, 74 have master's degrees and 1 has a doctorate. The professional teaching staff is 87% White, 11% Black, 1% Hispanic, and 1% other. The average teaching salary is \$52,569.

The median household income as of 1990 census was \$38,000, and the median value of a single family home was listed at \$92,000. The median age is 30.0 years and the educational attainment of the majority of the population is high school graduation. The residents of the district are aided by the state in funding education, because despite a high rates of taxation, (2.54 per \$100) there is a lack of ratables and they are unable to raise the funds necessary. In addition, the funding from the Federal government to subsidize the education of dependant children has been decreased, due to a decrease in the number of military families in Pemberton District in the last few years.

Abbott School District

Pemberton Township School District, designated as a district in need of assistance by the state, is considered an Abbott School District. This term comes from the legal case Abbott v. Burke which argued the constitutionality of state funding to bring equity in education to all students in New Jersey. This classification designates Pemberton for special classifications of funding to provide equity for the students in this district.

Funding is designated as follows: Early Childhood Aid to provide full day kindergarten and half-day programs for all four and five year olds; Supplemental Core Curriculum Aid which is provided for any district that has 5-20% of its population classified as low income; Demonstrably Effective Programs which are services proven to be effective in improving academic performance, and Meritorious Programs for academic improvement as well as Distance Learning Aid to aid in technology development.

The funding provided will assist Pemberton in implementing regulations for Abbott districts. Abbott districts are required to implement an approved whole school reform program in each school, which is guided by a School Management Team . Full day kindergarten programs, and half-day pre-school programs are required. In addition, technology programs are to be in place. Pemberton School District is in the process of implementing all these regulations.

The School Management Team in each school of the district consists of teachers, parents, community members, and the building principal. Teachers can not represent more than 49% of the team. These team members are working toward the selection of a research based Whole School Reform Model, which will guide them in rebuilding each school. In addition the School Management Team will be planning budgets, developing programs for professional development, and be directly involved in all other concerns of the school community.

Standardized testing is administered annually in grades 2 and higher in this district. Since September 1997, the pre-first and first grade teachers of the district have been using portfolio assessment, instead of the California Achievement Test. The intern

proposes to survey these fifty teachers and determine their perceptions concerning the effectiveness of this method of assessment.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its determination of portfolio assessment as a developmentally appropriate assessment of the growth of kindergarten and first grade students in the areas of reading, language and math.

Portfolio assessment shows growth over a period of time, as opposed to the one-day performance that is evidenced on a standardized test. The age group sampled in pre-first and first grade are in a stage of significant developmental growth. Engel (1992) suggests that the evaluation of a developmental process, such as the learning of young children, be developmental itself.

This study allows teachers to respond to questions, which will show indications of the effectiveness of portfolio assessment in bringing about change in Pemberton Township. This study will ask teachers to describe the relationship between effects of portfolio assessment on lesson planning, instructional decision making, and evaluation (scoring) will indicate the extent to which portfolio assessment is a formative evaluation process in which assessment tasks are contextualized into instruction.

In each step of the action research process, some questions are answered and others are created. I will reflect on this data gathered and determine the overall effects of the implementation of portfolio assessment in the pre – first and first grade classrooms in Pemberton Township.

Organization of the Study

This study will be organized as:

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

This chapter reviews pertinent studies in the area of educational practices in early childhood, portfolio assessment as an assessment strategy, and studies of portfolio assessment implementation in primary level.

Chapter 3 - Design of the Study

This chapter will describe the questionnaire, which will survey pre-first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township on their perceptions of the effectiveness of portfolio assessment.

Chapter 4 - Presentation of the Research Findings

The results of the survey, interviews, and observations will be discussed and the perceptions of the teachers concerning portfolio assessment will be determined.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions

A written descriptive report of the findings of the Likert Scale survey, interviews, and observations will be reviewed. Conclusions and recommendations for future assessment implementations will be discussed.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

This research investigates the effects of portfolio assessment on instructional practice in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. In order to examine this question, the literature review focuses on an examination of appropriate learning practices in kindergarten and first grade, an analysis of portfolio assessment as an alternative assessment strategy, and the effects of the use of portfolio assessment on instructional practice in kindergarten and first grade.

Appropriate Learning Practices

Appropriate learning practices in kindergarten and first grade are determined by an understanding of how children learn. Piaget as described by Wadsworth (1971), theorized that children learn by discovery and exploration of their world. They construct knowledge through these experiences as part of their natural development. This theory, called constructivism, sees learning in school aligned with development of the child, giving the child the opportunity to build knowledge.

Kamii (1991) in explaining Piaget's theory of constructivism describes how children acquire knowledge. Kamii states "educators have assumed that children acquire knowledge by internalizing it from the environment. Constructivism shows, however, that children acquire knowledge by constructing it from the inside in interaction with the environment"(p.18). Kamii further explains the concept by describing how children learn their native language.

At first, she explains, children speak in single words with incorrect pronunciations, even though no one around them is speaking that way. Children don't instantly internalize the knowledge; it comes in time as they continue to interact with their environment.

Williams (1991) further explained that Piaget believed that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the environment. This process is stimulated through children's direct activities, as they move through four stages of intellectual development (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal). Vygotsky, also a constructivist however, saw the external environment as essential in development, but did not believe in the existence of developmental stages. Rather, he believed that learning fosters development through language. Teachers and other adults, through social interaction move children to a higher level of understanding. This space in which children can have the opportunity to move developmentally is referred to as the "zone of proximal development"(Williams,1999, p.20).

As a result of research on how children learn, Williams (1999) explains, there has been growing interest in determining which practices are developmentally appropriate for young children. Some believe that young children learn individual skills and subjects like older children, while others hold fast to the belief that young children learn best when subjects and skills are integrated into learning activities that involve the child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional responses.

In response, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the NAEYC, published a policy paper which describes principles of child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practices for the education of young children. The most recent position statement published in 1996, enumerates the Developmentally Appropriate Practices, DAP.

It maintains that:

- Domains of children's development are closely related
- Development occurs in a relatively orderly sequence, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired
- Development proceeds at varying rates from child to child
- Early experiences have both cumulative and delayed effects on individual learning, development and optimal periods for certain types of development and learning
- Development proceeds in predictable directions toward greater complexity, organization, and internalization
- Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts
- Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experiences as well as culturally transmitting knowledge to construct their understandings
- Development and learning result from interaction of biological maturation and environment
- Play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development
- Development advances when children have opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond their level of their present mastery
- children demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know
- children develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel secure.(NAEYC, 1996)

Developmentally appropriate practice as outlined here requires realistic curriculum goals established which provide learning experiences for the individual needs of children. NAEYC states that realistic expectations for individual progress should also be determined and warned that group norm expectations, such as standardized testing are not consistent with what is known about individual learning in early childhood. (p.2)

Sameroff (1994) explained that children in pre-first and first grade classrooms should be involved in learning activities, which involve the whole child. They need to have opportunities to interact with their physical environment, engaging in process oriented activities using concrete materials so they might construct knowledge. They need language to reflect and interact with peers and adults so they may develop their understandings, as well as a positive self – concept. Assessment strategies employed to evaluate the learning in these environments should be consistent with the needs of the learners.

Analysis of Portfolio Assessment

Outlining characteristics of sound assessment, Valencia, (1990) explained that sound assessment should be authentic, showing progress. In addition, she argued that it be based upon a variety of media that has been reflected upon by both student and teacher. This collection should be linked to instructional goals and reviewed by both student and teacher to determine the extent to which the achievement of stated goal is apparent. This type of assessment used traditionally in art education is the portfolio. Emerging artists fill portfolios with many samples of their work. The samples show their diversity in many different mediums as well as displaying a particular strength. With such information teachers and the artists themselves can see their development over time and are able to plan future projects that would further promote their progress. Valencia argued that developing readers would benefit from the same opportunities to view their work as art students develops a sense of responsibility for that learning. It is “a process that honors products of learning, as well as the active process and participation of teachers and students in their own evaluation and growth” (Valencia, p.340). Although Valencia

was specifically setting forth guidelines for the use of portfolio assessment with developmental readers, she was setting forth a philosophy which underlies authentic performance based instruction. She contended that assessment is an integral part of instruction; it is not separate from it.

Moreover, Graves (1992) viewing portfolio assessment in the context of the instructional process recommended that the purpose of portfolios be expanded. He suggested that students use the portfolios as a place to keep a collection of artifacts that are important to them as learners. With the assistance of the teacher, students can begin to recognize evidence of learning. He further suggested that teachers keep class portfolios, which document class activities in photos, videos, tapes, etc. Teacher's understanding of the process is enhanced by his or her own personal involvement in this type of assessment process. Teachers who keep portfolios themselves can connect to their students' experience and assist them in developing skill in self-assessment.

Voss (1992) noted this connection in a case study of first grade teacher, Laurie, who was trying to initiate writing portfolios as an assessment strategy into her classroom. The young learners were having difficulty making selections about what to select for their portfolios. Laurie showed the children her own art portfolio. They were able to observe several sketches of the same object. Definite improvement was noted in the observation. The children understood the idea of evidence in growth and improvement in their teacher's experience with the art portfolios, and were able to carry it over to selecting writing pieces.

Portfolio Assessment and Instructional Practice

Many teachers are seeking ways to work with their students to construct knowledge and understandings and improve literacy. Au and Carroll (1996) and Roe and Vukelich (1997) conducted studies to determine the effects of portfolio assessment in programs designed to improve literacy in at risk children.

At Kameehameha Elementary Education Program in Hawaii teachers adopted a constructivist approach to help improve the literacy of Native Hawaiian children and used a Demonstration Class Project to study the effects of full involvement in the program. Au and Carroll (1996) stated that portfolio assessment was chosen to be the primary method of evaluation of this program rather than standardized tests.

Roe and Vukelich (1997) conducted a longitudinal study to research the effects of portfolio assessment over a three-year period with a group of teachers who taught in a summer literacy program for at-risk kindergarten and first grade students.

There were differences in the implementation of portfolio assessment. There was some evidence of standardization in this Kameehameha Program. There were certain “anchor pieces” which linked student performance to specific benchmarks or standards. The writing pieces were evaluated by using a prepared scoring manual, which provided examples of above grade level, below grade level, or developing. The study revealed that after full implementation of the literacy program and portfolio assessment, there were “substantial improvements and ownership of writing and writing process”(Au and Carroll, 1997). In the Roe and Vukelich study, data from the first year was compared to data from the third year. The portfolios were examined and four teachers who had been involved from the entire time were interviewed. Student involvement had changed.

Initially, teachers chose entries that documented their observations. Ultimately the teachers learned that students were able to select work for their own portfolios that demonstrated learning, and write comments reflecting this accomplishment. Students were given access to their portfolios, and made choices about learning activities. This was a definite indication that ownership of learning is taking place.

Instruction was also changed. Teachers were able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their students, establish goals, and work to attain them. There were significant changes over time. The teachers became skillful observers and learned to recognize that a student “reached a milestone, and had shown movement on a literacy continuum” (Roe and Vukelich, 1997, p.21). In both studies where portfolio assessment had been implemented to assist in literacy development, positive changes in instructional practice affected student achievement. This evidence encouraged the continued use of this method of assessment.

Implementing any new method of assessment requires innovation, dedication, time, and purpose. Each of these facets must be utilized concurrently to properly implement portfolio assessment.

Development of Portfolio Assessment Systems

Provincetown Elementary School in Provincetown, Mass. collaborated with Harvard University’s Project Zero to develop portfolio assessment which first grade teacher Cathy Skowron thought to be the only means of “validating kid’s voices”(Jervis, 1996, p.19).

Jervis, (1996) described the development of a school portfolio assessment system which evolved over a period of four years. In this elementary school there were no report

cards, standardized testing, or basal readers. The teachers wanted an assessment system, which would be appropriate for their school and consistent with their joint philosophies on learning. They developed a school portfolio handbook, which specifies the organization of the collection of student's work around dimensions. These four dimensions were described as acquisition and application of knowledge (report card), communication (written work), attitudes and approaches (learning style), and reflections. The dimensions set forth a standard and criteria for meeting the standard. As questions arose about accountability and parental concern about their child's progress, Skowron and the school staff responded by standardizing the portfolio and continue to work on improvements to this assessment system which is providing a showcase for their students work and an impetus for continued enriching activities. The staff development is on going and developmental like the portfolio assessment process itself. The teachers at Provincetown were dissatisfied with traditional methods and became innovators of a system that worked for their community of learners.

Sandra Murphy (1997) discussed educator's lack of satisfaction with traditional assessment and desiring assessments that are authentic, purposeful and engage students in formative experiences. "Portfolios treat learning as a process of construction to which students bring prior knowledge structures and experiences and their unique needs as learners." Teachers become expert guides rather than external evaluators" (Murphy, 1997, p.83). The Provincetown teachers participated in the construction process and built knowledge structures for themselves.

To assist more teachers in developing and implementing portfolio assessment in their classrooms, Samuel Meisels (1997) developed The Work Sampling System, which

is an assessment for Preschool-5th grade that is based upon teacher observation of children at work in the classroom. It is linked to standards and teaching objectives and enables the teacher to improve instructional practice through authentic assessment. It includes two processes: evaluation and documentation. Evaluation determines the extent to which the student has mastered a standard, and documentation provides the evidence of the accomplishment. Documentation such as standardized tests that is gathered outside of regular classroom activities could produce results inconsistent with daily performances of the student. Actual classroom experiences provide authentic real assessment. Observations are documented using checklists, which list developmentally appropriate expectations; portfolios which show samples of student's work across the curriculum areas; and summary reports that replaces report cards with a narrative report. (p.62) The Work Sampling System places evaluation into the context of learning. This system organizes portfolios by focusing on the standard but does not take away individuality.

Portfolios Assessment and Parents

Assessment is of significance to students, to teachers and to the family. Portfolio assessment provides a means of keeping an on going record of a child's progress. Emphasizing positive accomplishments, portfolios are a means for parents and teachers to discuss progress using concrete documentation.

Maintaining a bridge of communication between home and school is essential in the monitoring the progress of young children. Gelfer and Perkins (1996) developed and implemented The Early Childhood Portfolio Assessment Preparation Model in a university preschool and a public school kindergarten. The implementation began with an

orientation for teachers in whom the goals for the program were discussed and plan were made for beginning the program. Teachers were advised to educate families, demonstrate portfolios to students, determine an evaluation policy, provide a portfolio center and determine the pace of implementation. Workshops for teachers, and parents provided answers to basic questions concerning the use of this assessment. Gelfer and Perkins explained that portfolios provide information that assists students in reflecting upon their work and provide for positive communication between home and school, allow for an understanding of the individual learning style and progress of the child while maintaining attributes of evaluation standards: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy (Joint Committee on Standards for Evaluation of Education Program, Projects, and Materials, 1981)

The ECPAP model suggested that the portfolio include sections for problem solving (math, science), literacy and language, self-expression, social sciences, and teacher and family support involvement. The selections could be made by teacher, child and parent. These selections could be drawing; writing, anecdotal notes, and video and tape recordings as well as any other learning artifacts.

Gelfer and Perkins (1996) suggested teacher/ student conferences every three to four weeks, and parent conferences twice a year. During the conferences, the evidence is reviewed and indications of growth and areas in need of improvement are noted. Decisions may be made for future learning experiences.

At the end of the school year several teachers and parents were interviewed to evaluate the ECPAP model. Parents comments revealed overall positive responses to portfolios. Parents felt that their children seemed more engaged in school and were very

enthusiastic about their portfolio. Parents saw themselves as involved in the assessment of their child's work. Teachers, although commenting on the amount of work that portfolio assessment initiated, felt that it was a positive step in assessment, which ought to be continued. The students commented "I like talking to the teacher by myself" and "I have really grown" (Gelfer and Perkins, 1996,p.10). This evidence shows that this form of assessment is appropriate for the developing child and meaningful both to student and parents.

When portfolio assessment is implemented, Flood and Lapp (1989) explain, parent conferences can be an opportunity for reflection on a child's learning. The conference will focus on evidence of growth and illustrations of success. Parent/teacher conferences can contribute to continued learning. These portfolios are designed for parents to compare their child's progress over time. Lapp suggested that teachers initially create these portfolios, but eventually allow students to participate as they become more involved in the assessment process.

This literature review has examined portfolio assessment and its effect on instructional practice. A developmentally appropriate assessment strategy, it emphasizes positive achievements and encourages student self-assessment. This provides an opportunity for parents to view their child's growth through the school year using an assessment other than standardized testing

Graves (1992) brings up the question of standardization of portfolios. Should there be specific pieces of evidence required to document mastery, or should the student be permitted to select the piece? Teachers are looking to authentic assessment as a means

of integrating assessment into instruction. If this assessment is linked to curriculum or specific standards, which must be documented, how will this be accomplished. Teachers are looking for ways to meet this challenge.

The portfolio assessment system in Pemberton School District is linked to standards and district curriculum. A survey of teachers implementing this system, as well as interviews and classroom observations will provide significant information concerning the effects of portfolio assessment in pre–first and first grade classrooms.

Chapter Three

Design of the Study

Overview

Portfolio assessment is an assessment strategy based upon a collection of the student's performances. A periodic review of the contents of the portfolio provides teacher, student, parents and administrators with evidence that can determine the extent to which learning has taken place.

Districts are examining portfolio assessment and recommending its implementation as an alternative to standardized testing. Koretz (1998) explains that it became apparent that standardized testing limited the focus of instruction to information that was specific to the test and eliminated other instructional practice.

As districts are mandating this change in evaluation, teachers are discovering that implementation of this evaluation strategy has an effect on instructional practice. Teachers are closely observing students and monitoring progress. Assessments are integrated into instruction, and provide evidence of achievement mastery and the need for instructional change.

Portfolio assessment involves teacher and student as observers of learning mastery. It also gives an opportunity for both to become engaged in instructional choices. As a student recognizes mastery of a skill or concept, he may also know what should be learned next. Teachers and students can be involved in building learning together.

This study focuses on the use of portfolio assessment with pre – first (kindergarten) and first grade students in Pemberton Township. Portfolio assessment was initiated in 1997 as an alternative to standardized testing because both teachers and supervisors believed it to be a more accurate assessment of young children. Scores on standardized tests were not consistent with skill mastery as evidenced by teachers in classroom learning activities. Using portfolios created by the district, which included a list of skills based on Core Curriculum Standards, teachers began the process of assessing students by observing and collecting evidence of learning. The first grade report cards were revised to incorporate the skills mastery which focused the portfolio assessment. Standardized testing was no longer administered to these grade levels. Grade level skills mastery was based upon evidence gathered in portfolio assessment.

Purpose

Valencia (1990) emphasized portfolios as collections of work, which provide samples of student performances over time and measure growth toward the achievement of a particular goal or standard. The assessment tasks become part of instruction and provide teachers with information needed to make decisions concerning the individual student and teaching practice. As the researcher, I will determine the consequences of this assessment measure on the students, the instruction and the curriculum in the pre - first and first grade classrooms in Pemberton Township. Grade level skills mastery was based upon evidence gathered in portfolio assessment.

The purpose of this study is to discover the effects of portfolio assessment for kindergarten and pre-first students in Pemberton Township using community based

action research. All participants will have the opportunity to reflect upon their use of portfolio assessment and perhaps be able to identify ways of making it a more effective instructional strategy. The study will reveal the extent to which the findings of Pemberton teachers are consistent with those of other teachers using this assessment strategy.

This research will result in a written report to inform teachers, and administrators about the effects of using portfolio assessment as an alternative to standardized testing. The outcome of this study will be data that assists in evaluating the continued use of the current practice of portfolio assessment as it exists, or determining the need for adjustment to the practice.

Context of the Study

The site of the research is Pemberton Township School District. This district which provides educational opportunities for residents of Pemberton Township, Pemberton Borough, and Ft. Dix Military Installation consists of nine elementary schools, one middle and one high school

The median household income as of 1990 census was \$38,000, and the median value of a single family home was listed at \$92,000. The median age is 30.0 years and the educational attainment of the majority of the population is high school graduation. The residents of the district are aided by the state in funding education, because despite a high rates of taxation, (2.54 per \$100) there is a lack of ratables and they are unable to raise the funds necessary. In addition, the funding from the Federal government to subsidize the education of dependant children has been decreased, due to a decrease in the number of military families in Pemberton District in the last few years. Pemberton

Township School District, designated as a district in need of assistance by the state, is considered an Abbott School District. This term comes from the legal case *Abbott v. Burke* which argued the constitutionality of state funding to bring equity in education to all students in New Jersey. The additional funding will assist the district in meeting the needs of all students and fostering educational achievement.

Standardized testing was used in all grades for annual testing until two years ago. In September 1997, pre – first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township began using portfolio assessment to evaluate reading, math and language. This strategy was initiated as an alternative to standardized testing because both teachers and supervisors believed it to be a more accurate assessment of young children. Scores on standardized tests were not consistent with skill mastery as evidenced by teachers in classroom learning activities. Using portfolios created by the district, which included a list of skills based on Core Curriculum Standards, teachers began the process of assessing students by observing and collecting evidence of learning. The first grade report cards were revised to incorporate the skills mastery which focused the portfolio assessment. Standardized testing was no longer administered to these grade levels

As a first grade teacher in this district I hailed the implementation of portfolio assessment as a significant step toward authentic true evaluation. After years of looking in disbelief at standardized testing scores which often showed students with weak skills showing mastery and students with strong skills showing weaknesses, it was apparent that this type of evaluation was not accurate. It did not show a true measure of student achievement. It was not a question of how the children ranked nationally. It was the

obvious ranking within the class itself that showed problems with this testing format. It did not measure the observable achievement.

It has been two years since the portfolio assessment process has been initiated. There are limited opportunities for communication about this process from school to school, so there was a need to determine the effects of this process district wide and its effects on instructional practice. As the schools in this district move toward restructuring, existing programs must be examined to determine their efficacy. This study will examine the effectiveness of portfolio assessment and its impact on instructional practice.

Portfolio assessment requires samples of student learning. In order to gather these samples, teachers need to employ instructional strategies that direct students toward applying processes learned to create a product. The study will further examine the extent to which teachers are designing lessons and assessing students on authentic learning activities that utilize higher level thinking skills. The study will explore scoring methods and determine the extent to which evaluations are based on specific criterion.

Portfolio assessment requires teachers to be observers of their students, looking for milestones reached and ready to advance to new levels of instruction. This research looks at the role of the student in the portfolio assessment process. The extent that the pre – first and first grade students are involved in their assessment will determine their understanding of the process.

Observations

Working Design

Wiersma (1995) explains that the methodology of research is determined by the problems and the conditions of the research study. The research began with a working design. The study involved all elementary schools using portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township. A research problem was determined, research questions created and alternatives for data gathering were considered. Purposeful sampling was used in this study including only pre – first and first grades teachers because they were the only ones using the assessment strategy qualitative in design.

Research Problem

The research problem of this study is the perceived effectiveness of portfolio assessment and its effect on instructional practice. This is a qualitative action research study that takes place in a school environment. As an action research study, it is collaborative and the perceptions of pre – first and first grade teachers are being researched.

Data Collection

Data collection for this action research study will be interactive as I, as a researcher and first grade teacher in Pemberton Township will be collaborating with subjects in the research study. The data collection will involve a survey in the form of a questionnaire, a series of informal interviews, observations and a review of portfolios.

A survey of all the teachers in Pemberton Township using portfolio assessment to determine information gathered by their observations and opinions about its use seem most appropriate and effective means to gather data and a sound beginning for this research study. This survey was cross – sectional in design collecting data at one point in time. At this two-year point all participants in the study have had the same amount of experience involving this assessment strategy.

A questionnaire was designed using questions that determined the content of the portfolio, the assessment strategies employed, the effects of portfolio assessment on instruction and the evaluation of portfolio assessment as an assessment strategy. Moreover, the extent to which students are engaged in the assessment process was also determined by questions, which survey the student's accessibility to portfolios as well as choices made about direction of learning. The questions were clear, simply stated and related directly to the research problem. The questions are structured with standardized response stubs. Likert scale, yes/no and multiple choice responses are included. No neutral responses are solicited. Using these standardized response stubs, the data can be related on scale, and reported statistically. One open-ended question is included at the end to gather an opinion concerning the evaluation of portfolio assessment as an assessment strategy.

On November 15th, 1999, forty-two pre – first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township who have been actively involved in portfolio assessment received a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of sixteen questions. The cover letter acknowledged their expertise and appealed to them to share their experiences. They were

assured that their truthful responses would provide needed information for the District Curriculum Supervisor about this innovative program.

The teachers were informed that this survey could be completed in about fifteen minutes and a self-addressed envelope was included to ensure a prompt return of the questionnaire in two weeks. The participants were assured of anonymity and offered a copy of the results. A letter was also sent to each building principal explaining the research and offering an opportunity to receive the results. A follow up letter was prepared and distributed which was business like in nature and asked the non-respondents to return the survey immediately.

The survey will be followed by informal interviews with pre – first and first grade teachers at The Ft. Dix School as well as informal observations in their classrooms. The questioning in the interviews will relate to questions which were created by questionnaire results as well as discussions about the extent to which portfolio assessment is being used to encourage authentic meaningful instruction and achievement

Newmann and Wehlage (1993) developed a framework for determining if innovations such as portfolio assessment are being utilized in a manner, which will encourage authentic meaningful instruction and achievement. The Five Standards of Authentic Instruction provides a scale for measuring the extent to which students are engaged in learning. “The five standards are: higher –order thinking, depth of knowledge, connectedness to the world beyond the classroom, substantive conversation, and social support for student achievement” (Newmann and Wehlage, 1993, p.10).

I will employ the “Five Standards of Authentic Instruction” in the development of the interview questions. These questions will determine the extent to which the students

were assessed on authentic instructional activities. Moreover, the extent to which students are engaged in the assessment process will be determined by questions, which survey the student's accessibility to portfolios as well as choices made about the direction of learning.

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) explained that open – ended questions of this nature which are termed by Spradley (1980) as “grand tour” questions may branch to “mini-tour” questions and may provide additional data to expand questions drawn from the survey results. (p.119)

The interviews then may lead to questions or areas of research that may be addressed in observations of portfolios with classroom teachers If the interviewers seems hesitant to respond or uncomfortable about responses, questions can be restated stressing that there are no correct or expected answers to these questions. The hesitant respondent may need some probing to clarify or amplify these responses.

Permission for audio recording of the interviews will be requested. Notes will also be taken to record observations. However, it is important that the note – taking be quickly completed and not distracting.

Observations and review of portfolios with teachers will be conducted in three classrooms at Ft. Dix School. The portfolios from these three classrooms, will also be reviewed with the classroom teacher. Field notes will keep record of research as it proceeds.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis of data received from questionnaires began as it was received. Wiersma (1995) suggests that collecting data early may show another aspect of a problem and then more data may be needed to examine this information . This is particularly true in the recursive process of action research where analysis of data collected in each action plots the next course of the research process.

As the surveys are returned, the data is coded and categorized. The responses will offer a description of the perceived effectiveness of portfolio assessment. New questions of research may arise as a result of data collected. Data collection and reflection will direct the path to further data collection. There may be a need for further explanations of responses.

This information will be categorized and coded. Wiersma (1995) suggests criterion for characteristics of a coding system are: (1) the system accurately captures the information in the data relative to what is being coded, and (2) this information is useful in describing and understanding the phenomenon being studied” (p.217). Some possible codes for this study may be identification of lessons assessed which demonstrate higher level thinking skills, effects of portfolio assessment on instruction, student/teacher involvement, portfolio contents, and teacher opinion of portfolio assessment.

After analyzing and organizing the data from all data sources, and limiting the focus, the original research questions will be revisited and after reflection, results can be determined. Wiersma (1995) describes this perspective of research that moves from a general research question toward a specific focus as the funnel approach. The research is

initiated with a broad view of this question of the effectiveness of portfolio assessment but eventually it will focus on specific aspects of this practice in Pemberton Township.

Nature of Action Research

Kemmis(1982) defines action research as “developing a plan of action to improve what is already happening, acting to implement the plan, observe the effects of action in context in which it occurs and to reflect on these effects as a basis for further plan and subsequent action through a succession of cycles” (p.7).

Action Plan

As a first grade teacher using portfolio assessment I had many questions about its effectiveness as an assessment strategy and was curious about its effect on instructional practice. I developed a plan of action to study portfolio assessment. With great concern over the potential impact of my practices on student achievement, I began to take action to examine my questions and potentially improve learning conditions for my students. The purpose of this research is to look closely at portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township , reflect on my findings and make plans for subsequent plans if indicated by the research. I questioned whether or not I was using portfolio assessment effectively and wondered how other educators in my district and elsewhere were using the strategy. After an extensive review of literature, I discovered that the findings of the research determined that portfolio assessment was a developmentally appropriate means of assessing young children. Lee (1992) recommends portfolio assessment for young learners because it shows growth and development and encourages children by looking for positive evidences of growth. It provides opportunity for documenting the extent of

this individual growth and encourages student and teacher interaction, which engage the early learner in constructing knowledge.

Moreover, the research indicated that portfolio assessment had a positive effect on instructional practice. Roe and Vukelich (1997) explain that instruction was changed as a result of portfolio assessment. Teachers were able to identify strengths and weaknesses of their students, establish goals, and work to attain them. Instructional decisions were made based on the achievement of the children. Students were learning what they were ready to learn. There were differences noted in how teachers used portfolios and varied in their criterion for evaluation.

Implementation of the Action Plan

After a review of the literature, I was ready to research my school community. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, (1994) describe the three core techniques in action research as interviews, observations, archives and documents. Anderson et al.(1994) further explains that there are several kinds of interviews and a questionnaire is considered similar to a structured interview because the questions are structured, often with predetermined responses. I designed a questionnaire, which focused on drawing comparison between my community, Pemberton Township, and the findings of the research studies. I wanted to determine how the pre – first and first grade teachers were using portfolios in their classrooms and examine teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of this assessment strategy.

The information from the literature review assisted me in creating a questionnaire to provide a tool to gather data from all teachers of the district using portfolio assessment. The results will show how the practice in our district compares to the research.

The results of the questionnaire indicate contents of the portfolio, assessment strategies employed, effects of portfolio assessment on lesson planning, student involvement in assessment as well as teacher opinion of portfolio assessment as an overall assessment strategy. Uniformity as well as discrepancies in responses to questions will raise new questions. Teacher response to the open-ended question concerning the comparison of portfolio assessment to standardized testing may explore new aspects of this inquiry. An analysis of this data and reflection on its significance leads to the next phase of the action research

Informal interviews with six teachers using portfolio assessment at Ft. Dix School will address the questions raised by the analysis and reflection of the questionnaire. These interviews will be informal, however open-ended questions will encourage the teachers to talk about their own experiences and may branch to other subsequent questions. Permission to audiotape these interviews will be requested. If the interviewee is uncomfortable with the taping, I will rely solely on my field notes. However, taping would provide an opportunity for freedom from the distraction of note – taking. The data gathered from the interviews will be analyzed and categorized. New categories may be created from data received in these interviews.

Observe

Reflection on the data gathered from the literature review assisted me in creating a questionnaire, which was a tool for gathering data from all teachers of the district using portfolio assessment. The results will show how the practice in our district compares to the research.

The results of the questionnaire indicate contents of the portfolio, assessment strategies employed, effects of portfolio assessment on lesson planning, student involvement in assessment as well as teacher opinion of portfolio assessment as an overall assessment strategy. Uniformity as well as discrepancies in responses to questions will raise new questions. Teacher response to the open-ended question concerning the comparison of portfolio assessment to standardized testing may explore new aspects of this inquiry. An analysis of this data and reflection on its significance leads to the next phase of the action research the data, informal observations in the classroom and review of student portfolios will follow. Action research is a constant process of examination of data, never knowing what may be discovered in the process.

The informal observations in the pre–first and first grade classrooms at Ft. Dix School will be participant observation. This will demonstrate students involved in authentic learning activities and provide an opportunity for viewing the portfolios. Field notes will be taken during the observations and in viewing student’s portfolios. The data gathered from classroom observations as well as portfolio documents will be analyzed categorized and reflected upon.

Reflect

At this point in the research, I will identify information gathered and consider it in terms of my original concern. This action research study will result in a clear vision of portfolio assessment as it is practiced by pre – first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township. The information gathered can lead to revisions and continued improvement of this assessment practice.

Outcomes

The data gathered from the questionnaire is specific to the practice of portfolio assessment in Pemberton. The results of that data collection will show the extent to which the practices and perceptions of Pemberton teachers are consistent with other teachers using this assessment practice.

The areas of inconsistency with the research data will create questions and may revise the research question. If the Pemberton teachers' responses are not consistent with the research on portfolio assessment then this study will seek to find out the reasons for this discrepancy.

The informal interviews with five pre – first and first grade teachers will address the new areas of concern created as a result of the questionnaire. There will be questions provided but they will be open ended and encourage responses from the teachers which may delve even further into the reasons for compliance or inconsistency with data determined by the literature review. Results of the interviews along with data from the questionnaires will be analyzed.

The final data gathering for this study is the classroom observations and review of the portfolio documents. These methods provide another opportunity to view information from a different perspective.

This research study examines the question of portfolio assessment and gathers data through questionnaire, or structured interview, informal interview, classroom observations and review of the documents. The information about this concern was not limited nor the view of the question constrained by data collected, nor method of data collection. This triangulation of the data provides cross validation of the results.

As an action research study portfolio assessment is being studied not just by one sole researcher, but rather by a collaborative effort of all teachers involved in the process. Teacher reflection is involved in the data collection. The participants in this study produced the research results. As the researcher, I have the opportunity to view the entire research question and at the same time, as a first grade teacher using portfolio assessment, be a part of it.

The significance of this study lies in its determination of portfolio assessment as a developmentally appropriate assessment of the growth of pre -first and first grade students in the areas of reading, language and math. While providing an understanding of the reality of portfolio assessment in the context of the pre – first and first grade classrooms of Pemberton Township, it established the groundwork for future revisions and applications of assessment practice.

This study will result in a written report to inform teachers, and administrators about the effects of using portfolio assessment as an alternative to standardized testing. The outcome of this study will be data that assists in evaluating the continued use of the current practice of portfolio assessment as it now exists, or determining the need for adjustment to the practice.

Chapter Four Presentation of the Research Findings

Introduction

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) describe action research as a process that involves the development of an action plan to improve a current condition, the implementation of the plan, an observation , and a reflection on the results of this implementation. In school , explain Anderson et al. (1994) “action research involves educators and other stakeholders in a cycle of actions to address a particular situation and work collaboratively toward continued improvement” (p.11).

As an educator, I have been involved in action research for many years. Identifying situations in the classroom, which were in need of improvement, I consulted with colleagues, reviewed available literature, adopted a plan of action and monitored the results of the implementation. Success or failure of these interventions suggested further actions, and so the cycle continued. As I reflect on this, I realize that my present classroom management system, home and school communication plan, and strategies for reading instruction are the result of fourteen years of informal collaborative research. It is the foundation for continued improvement in the classroom.

One particular area of concern that was frequently identified by other teachers and myself was the assessment of our pre – first and first grade students. Discussions about assessment usually took place in the spring during the week of standardized testing, as we watched our children experiencing a very uncomfortable situation.

The testing experience was very confusing for these young learners. The nurturing atmosphere of their classrooms was altered. Some children felt isolated as their usually supportive teacher read directions from a testing manual, and wasn't able to assist them in completing the task at hand. As a result, some students became frustrated and just complied with the testing situation by filling in circles. The results of this testing were often not reflective of the child's observable daily learning in the classroom.

The Curriculum Supervisor in response to our concerns about standardized testing examined alternatives. In September, 1997, a system of portfolio assessment was initiated in Pemberton Township. Using district created portfolios, which included a checklist of skills based on Core Curriculum Standards, pre – first and first grade teachers began the process of assessing students by observing and collecting evidences of learning. At the end of each semester we evaluated students and indicated their achievement of skill mastery on the checklist as seen in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1
about here

In response to concerns raised by first grade teachers, the first grade report cards were subsequently revised in 1998 to incorporate the list of skill proficiencies which were the basis of the portfolio assessment. Standardized testing was no longer administered to these grade levels. Grade level skills mastery was based upon evidence gathered in portfolio assessment.

This plan of action initiated by our Curriculum Supervisor to address a particular situation led to subsequent action taken by administration and all pre – first and first grade teachers in the district. As a first grade teacher using portfolio assessment I had many questions about its effectiveness as an assessment strategy and was curious about its effect on instructional practice. My intervention in this implementation and its impact on learning, as perceived by the pre – first and first grade teachers is the subject of this action research study. A description of my action plan, my observations and reflections will trace the steps of my intervention through the recursive cycles of action research.

Action Plan

With great concern over the potential impact of my practices on student achievement, I began to take action to examine my questions and potential instructional practice. The purpose of this research is to look closely at portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township , reflect on these findings and make plans for subsequent plans if indicated by the research. I questioned whether or not I was using portfolio assessment effectively and wondered how other educators in my district and elsewhere were using this strategy.

After an extensive review of literature, I discovered that the findings of the research determined that portfolio assessment was a developmentally appropriate means of assessing young children. Lee (1992) recommends portfolio assessment for young learners because it shows growth and development and encourages children by looking for positive evidences of growth. It provides opportunity for documenting the extent of

this individual growth and encourages student and teacher interaction, which engage the early learner in constructing knowledge.

Moreover, the research indicated that portfolio assessment had a positive effect on instructional practice. Roe and Vukelich (1997) explain that instruction was changed as a result of portfolio assessment. Teachers were able to identify strengths and weaknesses of their students, establish goals, and work to attain them. Instructional decisions were made based on the achievement of the children. Students were learning what they were ready to learn. There were differences noted in how teachers used portfolios and varied in their criterion for evaluation.

After a review of the literature, I was ready to research my school community. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen, (1994) describe the three core techniques in action research as interviews, observations, archives and documents. Anderson et al. (1994) further explain that “combining the techniques in different ways, called triangulation of the data, allows the researcher to maximize time and to see the same scene from different angles”(p. 115). Employing surveys, interviews, observations and a review of student portfolios in the recursive process of action research, I began the process of bringing the picture of portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township into focus.

Observe

As I reflected on the purpose of my research, I formulated some questions. What evidence of learning was being saved in the portfolios? What types of assessment strategies were being used? Is portfolio assessment having a positive effect on

instruction? To what extent is portfolio assessment involving students and parent? After deciding on questions, I began to look for answers.

On November 15th, 1999, forty – two pre – first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township who have been actively involved in portfolio assessment received a questionnaire, which consisted of sixteen questions that I had constructed. In ten days, a follow up letter was given to non-respondents urging their prompt response.

Twenty-five of the forty-two teachers responded to the survey. The responses reflect the opinions of 60% of the teachers who are using portfolio assessment. The teachers were surveyed on portfolio contents, assessment strategies employed, means of evaluation, effects of portfolio assessment on instruction, portfolio assessment and students, portfolio assessment and parents, and teachers opinions on portfolio assessment and standardized testing. Their responses to these questions would help determine what was in the portfolios, why it was included, and how this documentation was part of the entire assessment process.

Portfolio Contents

Valencia, (1990) encouraging the use of portfolio assessment with young learners, states that portfolio assessment should be based upon a collection of samples of work that are linked to specific instructional goals.

As a teacher familiar with the structure of the portfolio assessment system in Pemberton, I knew that Pemberton's portfolio assessment system was very specifically linked to instructional goals. The achievement goals are printed on the portfolio, as well as an explanation that the contents of the portfolio should be samples of work related to the stated instructional goals. I structured the survey questions to determine what types of

documents were selected by the teachers for inclusion in the collection that best reflected the stated goals.

The survey responses showed that all teachers included writing samples in the portfolios as well as objective (chapter and unit) tests. 52% included notes on observations of children and 20% reported documentation of conversations with children concerning their work as seen in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2
about here

I needed to determine what types of writing samples were collected as well as determine what other evidence of learning was being included in student portfolios. I realized then that the survey questions had limited the responses. Interviews with the teachers would provide me with a more complete list of portfolio selections.

In interviews with three pre–first teachers, they explained that their concern is selecting items for the portfolio that show the development of their students in eye-to- hand coordination, small muscle development, as well as skills in number concepts, letter sounds, and reading readiness. Teacher A explained that activities which involve cutting with scissors, and penmanship are sampled periodically throughout the year. Those samples as well as family and self-portraits completed in September and May, “show parents the growth and development of their child throughout the year.” Teacher B explained “the addition of details in a child’s drawing indicates developmental level. In addition, Teacher B explained that she always included the

samples of sentences , which were written by her students. She explained that it gives parents clear evidence of their child’s present level of mastery.

The two first grade teachers interviewed explained that their selection for the portfolio was guided by samples that reflect accomplishment of specific reading, language or math proficiencies as listed on the portfolio and the report card. Reading and math chapter tests are always included, they explained, because they are closely aligned to the curriculum. In addition, writing samples that indicate mastery of a specific skill such as possessives or contractions as well as those that determine growth in sentence and paragraph development are kept in the portfolios.

Teacher C stated she always samples her students’ descriptive writing skills in September and again in February and June. She explained that in September she asks the children to write about a picture of animals that is at the beginning of their math book. She saves it in their portfolio as a sample of their writing skills at the beginning of the first grade year. In February the children brought in stuffed animals and were asked to write about them. This selection is kept in the portfolio also, as seen in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3

About here

The growth seen in these two samples indicates this first grader’s development in communication skills over a five-month period. Teacher C will select a third and final descriptive writing activity at the end of the year to complete the assessment.

Teacher D explained that she also likes to include items in the portfolio that show individuality, initiative, and creativity. This may be original stories or drawings or even lists created outside of the classroom that show the child mastered a skill and wanted to practice it at home. Some examples may be lists of words, math facts or a few sentences and an illustration about a story that was read in class.

In response to my questions about the inclusion of notes on conversations with children and notes on observations of children in the portfolio, the interviewed teachers all explained that observation of student performance in learning activities as well as discussions with students concerning their work is a very essential part of assessment, but demands of on-going classroom responsibilities did not always allow an opportunity for them to write notes and place them in the portfolio.

In my observation of a language arts lesson, Teacher C was very involved in communicating with her students about their sentence writing and illustrations. She asked Tommy, a new student who was struggling with letter formation, to tell her about his picture. "I really like your dog, Tommy, and I can see you know how to write the word dog, too." Tommy beamed with pride and continued to work diligently to complete an activity that would be included in his portfolio. Teacher C explained to me that his accomplishment today showed significant improvement over his first attempts at expressive tasks. It was dated and placed in his portfolio.

As I reviewed the student portfolios I saw a variety of writing samples, objective tests, drawings and other expressive activities which reflected student involvement in activities aligned with the specific standards of our portfolio assessment system.

Assessment Strategies

After completing my literature review of portfolio assessment, I understood that a portfolio assessment system must be based on standards and focus on the achievement of standards through sound authentic instructional practice. Newman and Wehlage (1993) created a framework for determining the types of instructional practice that determine the extent that instruction is authentic. “The five standards of authentic instruction are: higher –order thinking, depth of knowledge, connectedness to the world beyond the classroom, substantive conversation, and social support for student achievement” (Newmann and Wehlage, 1993, p.10).

In my research of the portfolio assessment system in Pemberton Township, the extent to which students are assessed on authentic instruction is significant. The majority of teachers surveyed indicated that students are assessed on activities, which required an application of skills learned. 48% responded definitely yes, while 28% responded probably yes, as seen in Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4

About here

This survey response suggested to me that teachers were aware of the importance of assessing students on activities which involved higher - order thinking skills. In interviews with both pre – first and first grade teachers, they explained that many of the writing activities selected for the portfolio were the products of lessons where

brainstorming and cooperative interaction evidenced the presence of substantive conversation in learning activities which characterizes authentic instruction.

As a first grade teacher, I believe that authentic instructional practice of young children also includes an understanding of how children learn and provides social support of their learning. Young children learn developmentally and through a variety of experiences. They need to be provided with a variety of opportunities for instruction and assessment of that instruction. As Kamii (1991) explains, children learn by constructing knowledge over time as they continue to interact with their environment.

The survey revealed that the majority of teachers did include evidences of assessment in portfolios that allowed for the developmental level of children. As seen in Figure 5, 48% responded definitely yes and an additional 44% indicated probably yes. This indicates that students were given the opportunity to respond to questions in a manner appropriate for their developmental level. Their free response may be drawing, writing, or a combination of each.

Insert Figure 5

about here

Teacher D explained that students are given an opportunity to connect science and social studies activities with language arts. Both pre–first and first grade teachers discussed student projects where students respond in writing and or drawing to learning experiences involving the study of animals, weather, occupations, holidays etc. They respond to them based on their interests, experiences and developmental level of written

expression. These writing samples when included in portfolios provide evidence of experience, interests and skill development as the child progresses through the year. I see the assessments included in the portfolios as appropriate for developmental differences and connected to the experiences of the children indicating assessment strategies related to authentic instructional practices

Means of Evaluation

There are differences in the means of evaluation in portfolio assessment programs. Au and Carroll (1996) in describing the Kameehameha Program in Hawaii, state that there were certain “anchor pieces” which linked student performance to specific standards. These writing pieces were scored using a prepared scoring manual. Other programs collect random pieces that evidence growth in a particular standard and review periodically to see evidence of that growth.

The portfolio assessment system in Pemberton Township does not require specific “anchor pieces” nor is a particular scoring system used for portfolio pieces. However, 68% of teachers surveyed reported using a scoring system to measure pieces put in student’s portfolios. 76% stated that the report cards are related to the portfolio assessment system, as seen in Figure 6.

Insert Figure 6

about here

Portfolios reviewed indicated that some teachers used percentages for chapter and unit test. The scoring code from Pemberton first grade report cards (O (Outstanding),

VG (Very Good), S (Satisfactory), I (Improvement Needed), and U (Unsatisfactory), as seen in Figure 7 was used for some other pieces. Other choices for scoring were “stars” and “smiley faces,” as well as stickers, and comments of praise.

Insert Figure 7

About here

Teacher A indicated that if certain samples, such as penmanship, drawing, cutting, etc. were kept primarily to show parents the skills development of their child over the year, then a specific grade need not be assigned. Other teachers interviewed felt that if the sample demonstrated a skill that was assessed on the report card, the report card scoring code should be used. In reviewing the portfolios, I noticed that the objective tests were scored using percentages or the report card scoring code. The writing exercises on some of the first grade reading tests involve the use of a rubric on the scale of 1 – 4. As expressed by the interviewed teachers, some of the writing samples were graded using the report card code, while those included in the portfolio for the purposes of comparison over time were not scored.

My research study at this point has shown portfolio assessment in the pre – first and first grades in Pemberton Township to be based on specific standards. There is evidence that the assessment strategies employed are developmentally appropriate and encourage higher–level thinking skills. There are no specific “anchor” pieces required, nor is there a specific scoring system for portfolio entries. However teachers seem to be

using the report card scoring code and percentages to assess objective tests, while using a variety of means to assess writing samples and other entries.

Effects of Portfolio Assessment on Instruction

I now had some indications of what was in the portfolio and why those samples were selected. Now I wanted to determine the effects of portfolio assessment on instructional planning. In 1996, NAEYC stated that “ in enumerating developmentally appropriate practices maintained that development advances when children have the opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond their level of their present mastery”. (NAEYC, 1996)

This statement clarifies the role of assessment in lesson planning. Development of young children requires an opportunity to apply skills learned and an opportunity to attempt new challenges. I feel that the portfolio provides an opportunity to closely monitor individual development and make plans for continued improvement.

The curriculum for pre –first and first grade in Pemberton Township is developmentally sequenced. Teachers, through observations and assessments, decide the appropriate pace for groups and individuals. All of the teachers surveyed agreed that decisions on instructional planning are based on curriculum sequence and 68% agreed that instructional decisions are based on portfolio assessment.

In regard to the number of times a month a teacher reviews student’s portfolios, 16% reported they conducted a review three times a month, 24% twice a month, 40% once a month, and 20% not on a monthly basis.

Teacher A explained that she made instructional decisions based on curriculum and portfolio assessment as well as specific observations of the children. All teachers interviewed expressed similar opinions.

Teacher B described how closely pre – first and first grade teachers work with their students, and how that interaction affects instructional planning. “We work with our students in small groups and one to one situations and make assessments and adjustments all the time.” The teachers further explained that the portfolios are reviewed by them at report card time and as often as is necessary for the individual teacher.

Portfolio Assessment and Students

In the survey of pre – first and first grade teachers responding to a question concerning the frequency of student/teacher portfolio conferencing, 20% reported conferencing three times a month, 8% twice a month, 8% once a month and 64% reported conferencing not on a monthly basis. In interviews with teachers, they explained they conference with students concerning individual entries in the portfolio on an informal basis. In my observation in Teacher D’s class, she asked individual children if they would like to place a particular piece of writing in their portfolio. It was apparent that they viewed their portfolios as a place to keep samples of their best work. They were proud of their accomplishments.

Teacher A did report reviewing the report card and portfolio with each student at report card time. She said it does take time, but felt that the children enjoyed the one –to–one time and attention to their accomplishments.

Teacher C explained that she has tried to involve her students in selecting samples for their portfolios, but found that they are not yet demonstrating the ability to select

pieces, which necessarily showed improvement. “They want to include everything”, she exclaimed. This interaction between teachers and students provides opportunity for students’ involvement in the assessment process. Although instructional guidance and other demands of time did not always allow for formal portfolio conferencing with students within specific timed intervals, I did see evidence of student involvement. Continued practice of portfolio assessment may encourage greater involvement.

Portfolio Assessment and Parents

Dianne Lapp (1989) suggests the use of portfolios at parent-teacher conferences to show parents a comparison of their child’s progress at the beginning and at the end of the school year. Samples of work created in authentic learning situations give parents concrete evidence of progress. Parents become engaged in the learning process with their child and their child’s teacher.

Ninety-two per cent of teachers surveyed reported that parents are given the opportunity to review their child’s portfolio quarterly. Report cards are issued quarterly in Pemberton Township and parent/teacher conferences are scheduled twice a year for all students, with opportunity for additional conferences given throughout the school year. Portfolios are given to the parents at the end of the school year. This can serve as a record of their child’s progress and provide a point of reference for expected learning activities in the next grade level.

Interviews with teachers revealed the importance of portfolios in parent teacher conferences. Writing samples, reading comprehension assessments, handwriting, cutting, and drawing samples show significant growth. These concrete examples can be analyzed by teacher and parent and obvious indications of the child’s development become

apparent. The parent is able to see what the child has learned and is able to have a sense of which learning activities would be appropriate for the child's continued progress. Teacher A reflected on the significance of portfolio assessment at parent – teacher conferences. Viewing the portfolio with the teacher gives the parents an opportunity to assess their child's progress and, with that knowledge, enables them to help their child achieve success in the future.

Portfolio Assessment vs. Standardized Testing

The survey of the pre – first and first grade teachers using portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township revealed that the vast majority (96%) believed that portfolio assessment was a more accurate measure of achievement. One teacher states, “ I have found that portfolio assessment provides a more personal measure of a student's progress. Parents and teachers can see a student's progress through tests, projects, writing and art activities over the entire school year. This is not possible from an annual standardized test.”

The daily work of the student as observed by the classroom teacher, they felt, was the most accurate means of assessment. As one teacher stated, “The teacher is the best judge of a young child's abilities and achievement in a school setting.”

There were a few teachers who supported portfolio assessment, but felt that standardized testing and reading assessments also had their place in the total assessment process. “Portfolio assessment alone limits the assessment of the child to the perceptions of the classroom teacher alone,” reflected one of the teachers.

The teachers interviewed supported the use of portfolio assessment, and felt it gave a more accurate profile of progress. They all agreed that standardized testing over all did not provide results that were consistent with daily performance.

Reflect

Samuel Meisels (1997) developed an assessment system designed “ to put assessment back where it belongs in the hands of teachers and students in the classrooms in which they work” (p. 62).

The Work Sampling System links standards to teaching objectives and uses portfolios to show samples of student work across curriculum areas. Checklists of appropriate expectations are used to record skills observed. They are evaluated on these skills with a developmental rating scale. Portfolios show examples of student work across the curriculum. This system has been used since 1991 with more than 300, 000 students from Pre – school through fifth grade in almost every state.

As I reflect on my review of this literature and my observations of portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township, I realize that there are similarities between Meisel’s model and our system of assessment. Although the assessment in Pemberton Township has only been used since 1997 with pre – first and first grade students, it evolved from needs identified by staff and administration as appropriate for young learners

The Pemberton portfolio assessment system is based on Comprehensive Core Curriculum Standards and includes lists of performance indicators in each curriculum area to guide teachers in assessing skill mastery and instructional planning. The first grade report card, which is aligned to portfolio assessment proficiencies, evaluates skills

using a developmental mastery scale. Portfolios are utilized by classroom teachers and focus on the assessment of daily instructional activities by the classroom teacher. The portfolio assessment system is supported by the classroom teachers and found to be an accurate measure of achievement and an effective means of communication between parents, teachers and students.

As this brief comparison reveals, there is evidence of similarities between the portfolio assessment system used in Pemberton Township and The Work Sampling System which has been designed to serve as a model for portfolio assessment implementation. As a member of the sample group of teachers using portfolio assessment in Pemberton , it is encouraging to see strong evidences of strength in our system.

Chapter Five

Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Conclusions

The purpose of this action research was to develop a plan of action to look closely at portfolio assessment in Pemberton Township, reflect on my findings and make plans for subsequent plans if indicated by the research. After a review of the literature, I gained an understanding of the characteristics of sound portfolio assessment systems. I then focused on determining which characteristics of portfolio assessment were present in the system used in our school district and the extent that teachers were complying with these practices. This study provided me with an opportunity to collaborate with my fellow teachers, sharing our perceptions of this assessment innovation.

The questionnaire provided data from 60% of the teachers involved in this system. Their responses indicated a strong teacher support for portfolio assessment, viewing it as a more accurate measure of assessment than standardized testing. As one teacher remarked, “ Although portfolio assessment requires more time to complete than Standardized testing, I feel the accuracy of the results received are worth the time and effort involved.”

The surveying of teacher perceptions through questionnaire and subsequent interviews revealed that teachers value the daily assessment of student progress that is achieved through the daily instructional interaction with their students. The work samples collected provided evidence of growth that teachers can share with parents during

conferences. This concrete evidence , as one teacher surveyed stated “empowers parents with the knowledge of what skills and concepts their child needs to accomplish .”

Teachers of young children understand the relationship between learning and development. They know that development and the learning that accompanies it varies from child to child. These early years of education are times of growth. The teachers in this study as evidenced by interviews and classroom observations use student portfolios to collect evidence of this development for assessing students according to list of proficiencies provided.

It was very apparent in both my interviews with the teachers and classroom observations that teachers and students have conversations about their work that is being placed in the portfolio. However, providing instructional guidance and other demands of time did not always allow for formal conferencing with students. Future study looks toward greater student involvement in the assessment process.

On the basis of the data that I gathered in this study, the portfolio assessment system that is being used by pre – first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township is an effective assessment program that is based on standards, provides a checklist of proficiencies, documents individual learning by employing developmentally appropriate assessment activities, encourages student and teacher interaction and positively effects instructional planning.

Limitations

This action research project is limited to the respondents of the questionnaire, which was sent to forty – two, pre –first, and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township. Twenty-five of the forty-two teachers (60%) responded to the

survey. Following the survey, additional data was gathered through informal interviews with five teachers. Additional data was collected through observations and review of student portfolios in four classrooms at Ft. Dix Elementary. The conclusions of this study cannot be generalized to other grade levels in this district, or to other pre-first and first grade classrooms in other districts.

Implications and Future Study

I see the implementation of portfolio assessment in the pre – first and first grade classes of Pemberton Township as action research. The program was a plan to improve assessment in the early years of education. The focus has been to provide assessment of authentic learning that occurs on a daily basis in the classroom. Assessing skill mastery of individual students, portfolio assessment provides documentation to share with parents and all members of the child’s educational team.

After the first year of implementation, our Curriculum Supervisor responded to input from first grade teachers and facilitated the development of a new first grade report card. The teacher created report card was closely aligned to the skills proficiencies listed on the portfolio and provided a rating scale that was developmentally based. The cycle of research must continue to strengthen the use of this assessment strategy.

As I spoke to my colleagues during the data-gathering period, I strongly encourage them to answer honestly. I stressed the fact that there were no wrong answers. Through this action research, I feel I have had an opportunity to meet with the majority of my portfolio assessment colleagues and together conduct a self-study of our practices.

As I share the results of this study with members of this sample group of teachers, we will be opening the doors to our classrooms. With a clear picture of portfolio

assessment as it is being used by a majority of pre – first and first grade teachers in Pemberton Township, we can decide what adjustments and improvements should be made. This information will empower teachers to collaborate and decide what constitutes best assessment practice.

I believe that the greatest strength of this program lies in the support of our teachers for its continued use as an accurate measure of the achievement of their students. Their responses show enthusiasm for the use of a developmentally appropriate means of assessment.

Future study and action plans need to look closely at the structural organization and management of this system in the classroom. Seeking solutions to problems of time allotment for student/teacher conferencing will allow for increased student involvement in assessment.

In addition, we need to examine the strengths of this assessment system and continue to work toward increasing its effectiveness through the committed involvement of students, teachers, administrators, and parents. All members in the learning community have a role in the assessment process.

The establishment of a district portfolio assessment committee, consisting of one teacher from each school using portfolio assessment would provide an opportunity for teachers to meet periodically, discuss the process, and identify needs of development. Members of the district committee would share information from their meetings to the portfolio assessment team at their school. This school team, which would consist of teachers who are involved in portfolio assessment, the school administrator, and a parent

representative would provide opportunities for teachers to meet periodically, discuss the process, and identify needs of development.

I think that an explanation of portfolio assessment could begin at Back to School Night in September where samples are displayed. Periodic messages in the monthly newsletter could provide additional information about the process. Parent interest in this process could be increased further through periodic “portfolio days” in the classroom. On these occasions, parents would be invited to come and view the portfolios. This would not limit parent interaction with the portfolios to report card conference time.

This interest may encourage parent volunteers in the classroom, which may provide teachers with some extra time for student conferencing. Communication, shared responsibility and consensus building are essential to successful continued growth.

Portfolio assessment encourages teacher and student interaction and suggested future study will seek ways to stimulate continued interaction and increased student involvement in assessment. The recursive process of action research continues as we use portfolio assessment in our classrooms and seek ways to improve the process.

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Appendix A
Research Instruments

Questionnaire

Thank you for your cooperation. Please read each question and circle your response.

1. Portfolios include writing samples. (Circle only one.)

Yes No

2. Portfolios include objective (chapter and unit) tests. (Circle only one.)

Yes No

3. Portfolios contain notes on observations of children. (Circle only one.)

Yes No

4. Students are assessed on activities, which require application of skills learned.
(Circle only one.)

Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
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5. Portfolios include notes on conversations with students concerning their work.
(Circle only one.)

Yes No

6. Portfolios contain evidence of assessment that allows for differences in developmental level of children. (i.e. students may respond to a question with drawing and/or writing)
(Circle only one.)

Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
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7. Is a scoring system used to measure pieces that are put in the student's portfolio?
(Circle only one.)

Yes No

8. Report cards are linked to the portfolio assessment system. (Circle only one.)

Yes No

9. How often are parents given the opportunity to review portfolios?
(Circle only one.)

Monthly Quarterly Yearly

10. At the end of the year portfolios are....
(Circle only one.)

A.) Given to parents B.) Placed in student's permanent file

11. How many times in a month do you review each child's portfolio?
(Circle only one.)

3 or more 2 1 Not on a monthly basis

12. How many times in a month do you conference with each student?
(Circle only one.)

3 or more 2 1 Not on a monthly basis

13. Students have access to portfolios. (Circle only one.)

Yes No

14. Decisions on instructional planning are based on review of student's portfolios.
(Circle only one.)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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15. Decisions on instructional planning are based on curriculum sequence.
(Circle only one.)

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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16. Which is a more accurate measure of achievement, portfolio assessment or annual Standardized testing? (Please comment below)

Please send me a copy of the study summary.

_____ (Name)
_____ (Address)
_____ (City, State)
_____ (Zip Code)

Please return this questionnaire in this self addressed stamped envelope. Thank you for your cooperation.

Ursula Csercsevits

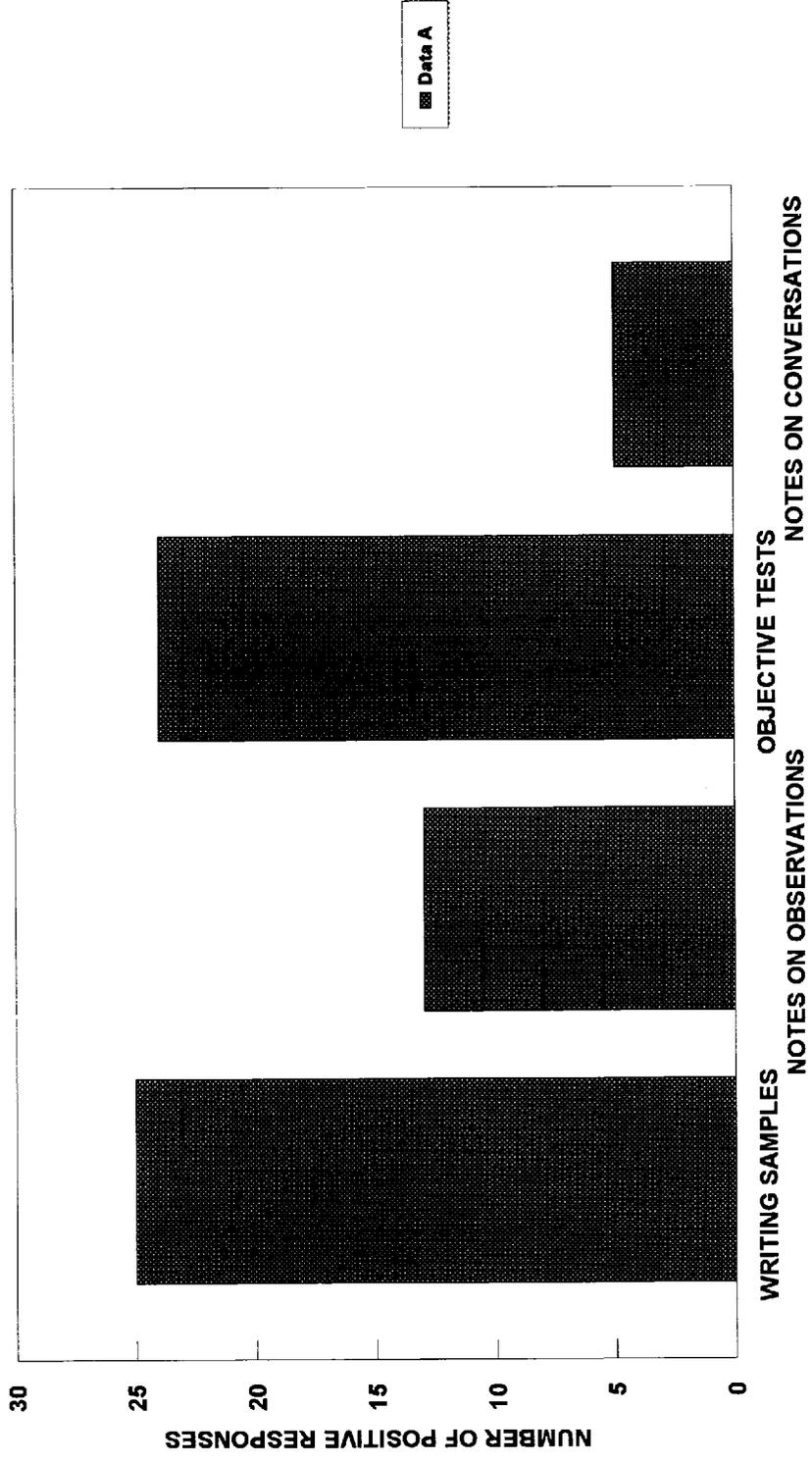
Interview Guide

1. Can you describe the criterion you use for selecting a piece to be placed in a portfolio?
2. Describe a situation when a portfolio entry indicated to you that a child was ready for a shift in instruction?
3. Do you think portfolio assessment involves a child more in learning?
4. How have parents responded to portfolio assessment? To what extent has it affected parent/teacher conferencing ?
5. To what extent did the learning activities assessed involve brainstorming, cooperative learning, or other opportunities for communication?

Appendix B

Figures 1-7

PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT
PORTFOLIO CONTENTS



BASED UPON 25 TOTAL RESPONSES

WRITING SAMPLES	25	(100%)
NOTES ON OBSERVATIONS	13	(52%)
OBJECTIVE TESTS	24	(96%)
NOTES ON CONVERSATIONS	5	(20%)

Figure 2

Collin

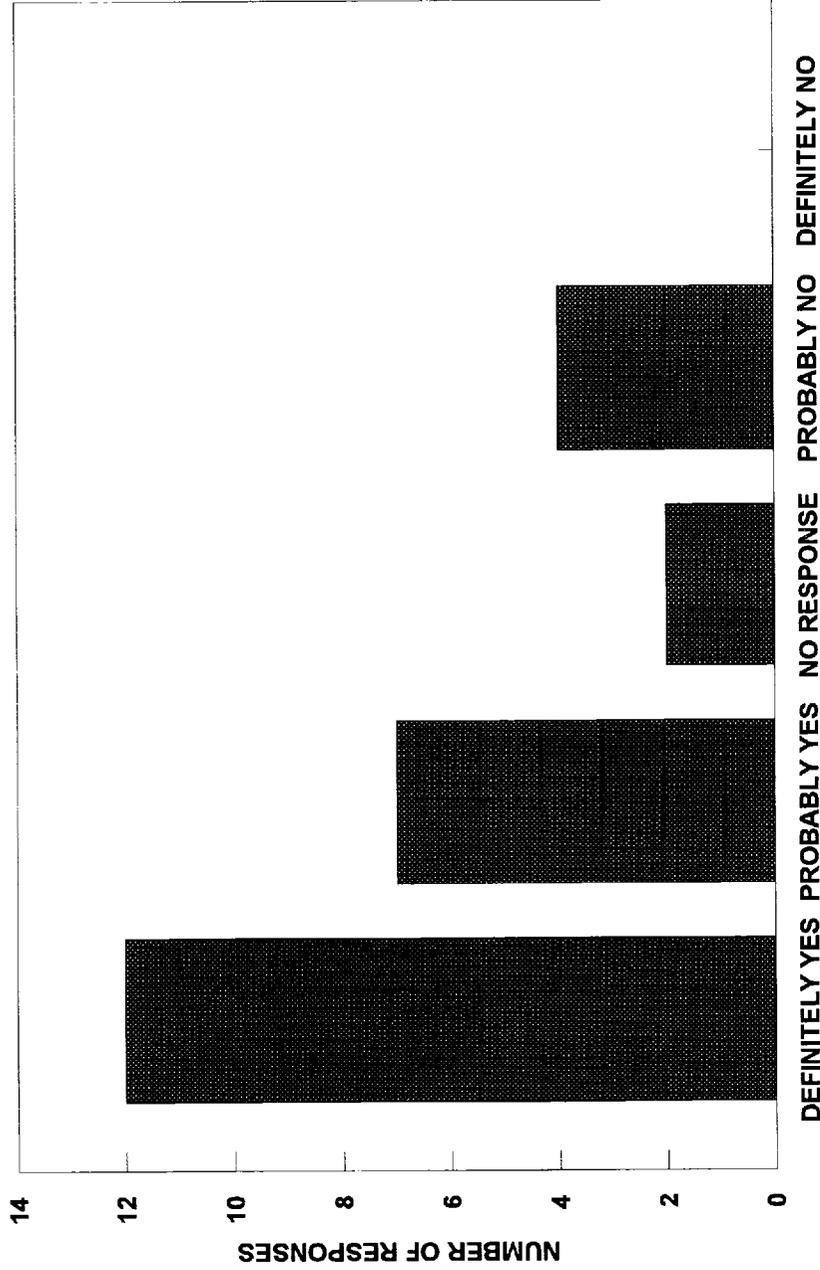
Animals in the Jungle
wuns a ned elnd len
Ined hed elnd rnd
lend denr enltn lenre
elner erne the king.
eln the king Innen et

Collin



His name is Curious George.
I hug my Curious George.
Curious George is so soft.
Curious George likes to play.
My Curious George is nice.

**PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT
ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES**

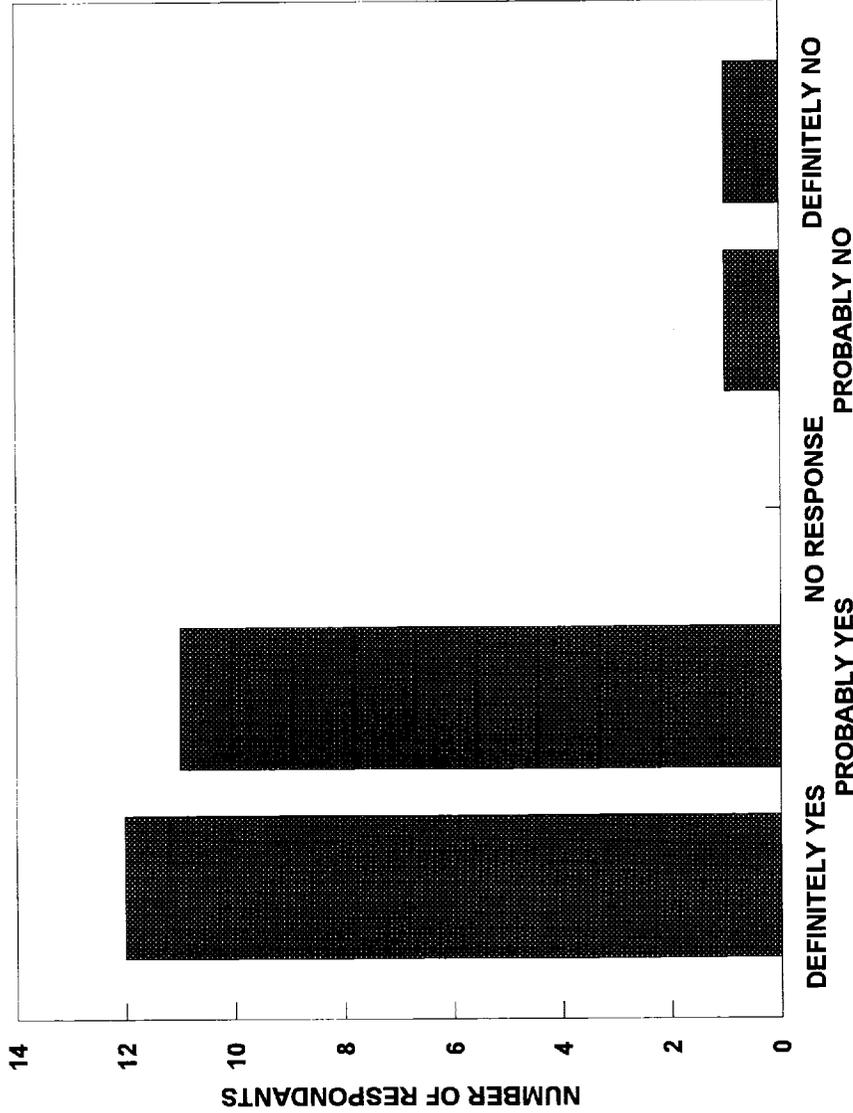


"ASSESSMENT BASED ON SKILLS APPLICATION"
BASED ON 25 TOTAL RESPONSES

DEFINITELY YES	12	(48%)
PROBABLY YES	7	(28%)
NO RESPONSE	2	(8%)
PROBABLY NO	4	(16%)
DEFINITELY NO	0	(0%)

Figure 4

**PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT
ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES**

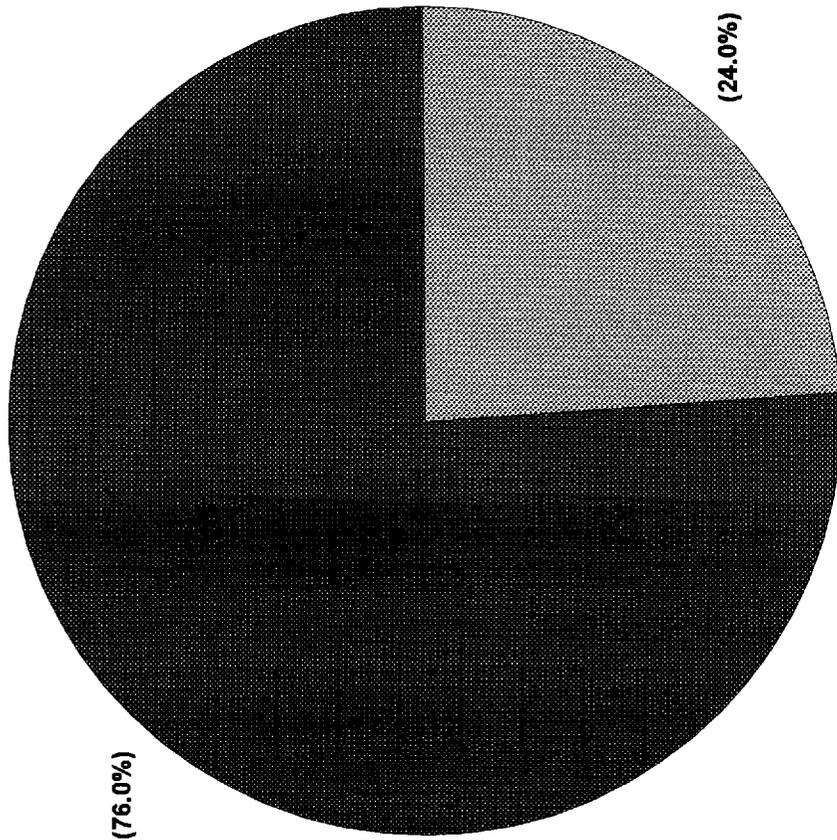


**"ASSESSMENT ALLOWS FOR DIFFERENCES IN DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS"
BASED ON 25 TOTAL RESPONSES**

DEFINITELY YES	12	(48%)
PROBABLY YES	11	(44%)
NO RESPONSE	0	(0%)
PROBABLY NO	1	(4%)
DEFINITELY NO	1	(4%)

Figure 5

**PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT
MEANS OF EVALUATION**



**"PORTFOLIOS LINKED TO REPORT CARDS"
BASED ON 25 TOTAL RESPONSES**

YES	19	(76%)
NO	6	(24%)

Figure 6

Biographical Data

Name	Ursula Csercsevits
High School	Magnificat High School Rocky River, Ohio
Undergraduate	Bachelor of Science Elementary Education University of Dayton Dayton, Ohio
Graduate	Master of Arts School Administration Rowan University Glassboro, NJ
Present Occupation	First Grade Teacher Ft. Dix School Ft. Dix, NJ