

Yaoying Xu

*Yaoying Xu is Assistant Professor,
Department of Special Education,
College of Education, University of
Nevada Las Vegas.*

Teacher Portfolios

An Effective Way To Assess Teacher Performance and Enhance Learning

The overall goal of assessment is to collect information regarding a targeted program or performance. Specifically, assessment involves the identification, clarification, and application of defensible criteria to ascertain a target object's value, quality, utility, effectiveness, or significance in relation to those criteria (Fetterman, 1994; Shadish, 1994). Through such evaluation, one can examine the appropriateness of the program and teachers' performance in childhood education, providing meaningful information that can improve the quality and application of education programs (Decker & Decker, 2001).

The trend in assessment is shifting from a categorical approach ("sorting") to a more functional approach ("real life") (Wortham, Barbour, & Desjean-Perrotta, 1998). Instead of using traditional assessment, such as standardized tests, questionnaires, or surveys, many teachers choose to use performance-based, authentic assessments to measure the quality of an education program by comprehensively examining individuals' performance (Wortham et al., 1998). Portfolios are performance-based, authentic assessments because they involve collecting information from real-life situations (Bergen, 1993/1994). In the area of education, portfolio assessment focuses on what an individual does (the content), how he/she does it (the strategy), and in what process he/she does it (the sequence). Portfolios also help teachers to plan for further instruction and develop individually appropriate learning experiences for a specific child (Stone, 1995).

Researchers have found that while teachers spend significant amounts of time being engaged in assessment-related activities for their students, they do not apply this standard of assessment to their own performance (Stiggins, 1991). This article will discuss the procedure and methods of developing portfolio assessment for teachers, with the purpose of helping teachers evaluate their own performance as well as the effectiveness of the program.

Most approaches to teaching portfolios define them as a collection of materials, assembled by a faculty member, that document or reflect teaching performance. Each is a collection of an individual's personal data, whether contained in a notebook, folder, or binder. Portfolios can include a record of achievements, samples of work, observations of others (e.g., colleagues and supervisors), interviews, personal evaluations, descriptions of curriculum development, and other relevant data. The current literature on teaching portfolios demonstrates that portfolios can document both the characteristics of the instructional environment and the outcomes of teaching (Gelfer & Perkins, 1996; Scriven, 1996). As it encourages reflection, it also can result in

Researchers have found that while teachers spend significant amounts of time being engaged in assessment-related activities for their students, they do not apply this standard of assessment to their own performance.

improvement of teaching methods.

A teaching portfolio is an organized collection of evidence about a teacher's best work that is selective, reflective, and collaborative. The items in the portfolio are selected to demonstrate a teacher's accomplishments over time and to document the variety of contexts in which these accomplishments occur (Scriven, 1996). Principals and supervisors responsible for evaluating teachers' performance can benefit from the clear and comprehensive picture of a teacher's work that is possible through portfolios. Yet, as Gelfer and Perkins (1996) point out, when portfolios are used to make personnel decisions the contents should be scrutinized much more carefully than if the purpose is simply to examine a teacher's professional growth.

The Goal of Teacher Portfolios

The primary goal of teacher portfolios is to describe, through documentation over an extended period of time, the full range of a teacher's abilities and effectiveness. Each included artifact (or document) should illustrate some significant and specific aspect of the teacher's development and preserve a paper trail or record of achievement. Suggested items for inclusion are samples of work and observations made by a supervisor, colleague, or the teacher him/herself (including personal evaluations). Other elements of the portfolio can include schedules and information on class size and student demographics. Information relevant to activities that do not directly involve teaching also may be included. For example, special education teachers, as well as other teachers and staff who provide services to students with disabilities, may spend a considerable amount of time serving as collaborative team members. They participate in IEP teams, eligibility teams, and student support teams, and they also may serve on task forces and planning committees. Each of these activities constitutes important aspects of what is currently expected of educators.

The Organization of Teacher Portfolios

The development of a teacher portfolio requires planning, time, organization, and cooperation from students, colleagues, parents, and supervisors. The physical portfolio is often no more sophisticated than an expandable file that includes samples of an individual's work and documentation of performance and professional growth over a period of time (often, one year).

Notebooks, three-ring binders, and even hanging files may serve as the medium for organization. In fact, the very form that the portfolio takes may provide the teacher with an opportunity to be creative. The format of the portfolio may vary from individual to individual and be based upon personal preference. Some may

choose to embellish with artwork, photographs of the classroom, and original statements or quotations that exemplify their personal philosophy.

The portfolio can be organized to include, at the very least, the following distinct sections:

- *Planning.* In planning, teachers think about content, purpose, strategies, and how these all fit characteristics of the learner. It is from the planning process that organization and, eventually, evaluation will emerge. Schedules and outlines of learning strategies are inherent outcomes of the planning process (e.g., a lesson plan, a unit plan, support plans for students with disabilities, weekly lesson plans, etc.).
- *Organization of Instruction.* Organization determines when and how the teacher will support learning. It is an expression of the teacher's understanding of the relationships among content, materials, physical settings, and students' learning characteristics. Such strategies as task analysis can help determine the elements (including prerequisites) and sequence of the instruction that will best enable the learner to be successful.
- *Presentation of Knowledge.* Strategies that are most appropriate for the range of individual needs of each learner are described, including centers, individual direct instruction, peer models and tutors, the use of adaptive and assistive equipment (including computers, language boards, and/or mobility devices), and collaborative learning groups.
- *Teacher-Student Interaction.* Methods used for communicating with students are discussed in some detail. For example, the teacher may provide records of questions initiated about a lesson, elicited performances, feedback, or an analysis of the child's progress over time.
- *Teacher-Parent Interaction.* The methods that teachers and parents use to communicate with each other relative to student progress, program characteristics, and other matters are described. Examples may range from class newsletters, student notebooks, teacher/parent notes of meetings and phone contacts, and home visit reports.
- *Assessment and Evaluation.* The variety of assessment procedures that are used to document student progress, along with suggested revisions to those approaches, are addressed. Descriptions of the traditional techniques (e.g., standardized tests, teacher-made tests, criterion referenced tests) and less traditional but, perhaps, more functional tests (e.g., environmental inventories, discrepancy analyses, interest inventories, and self-critiques) may be included.
- *Classroom Guidance.* The approach that the teacher uses to establish discipline, deal effectively with the

challenging behaviors of individual students, and provide students with opportunities to practice making decisions—and the attendant consequences—is described. A list of class conduct rules, behavior support plans for students with challenging behaviors (antecedents, alternative behaviors, consequences, etc.), strategies for rewarding outstanding behavior, and descriptions of methods the teacher uses to foster a sense of individual as well as group responsibility for behavior may be included.

- *Curriculum Development.* This section includes any supplements or modifications that have been made to individualize the curriculum provided by the district or program. Examples of modified curriculum, with accompanying rationale, may be appropriate. For example, revisions/additions to promote developmentally appropriate curriculum could be documented.
- *Noninstructional Professional Assignments/Responsibilities and Professional Development.* Documentation is presented that indicates successful completion of professional workshops, district-sponsored seminars, university courses, and other professional development activities. Materials could be included that indicate that the teacher has prepared and presented workshops, seminars, etc., for other professionals and parents.

Teacher portfolios exemplify the teacher's management, creativity, organization, and effectiveness. Each teacher should select samples of daily work experiences to put into the portfolio. The contents may include observations made by the principal and other faculty, written lesson plans, progress reports, pictures of bulletin boards, and descriptions of innovative projects. Also present might be samples of written communications, graphs of individual student progress, generic notes from representative parent conferences, and notes of appreciation from parents.

Methods of Organizing Teacher Portfolios

- *Illustrating Philosophy and Role Perception*

- 1) Include a statement of personal perception addressing the question "How do my students learn?" as a preamble to the Planning section. The same statement should be posted in a prominent place in the classroom for all visitors to see and reflect upon.
- 2) Include a statement of one's personal view of the "appropriate" role of the teacher (e.g., as facilitator, manager, team member, partner, etc.) in the overall instruction of children. Be sure that sections like Classroom Management and

Teacher portfolios
exemplify the teacher's
management, creativity,
organization, and
effectiveness.

Teacher-Parent Relations also reflect one's personal views about the role of the teacher.

- 3) Describe, in the Curriculum Development section, how the curriculum relates to the school philosophy or goal statement. If the school philosophy reflects acceptance of diversity in the student population, describe how the classroom curriculum promotes acceptance of cultural and racial diversity. The assessment and evaluation section can include measures of those skills that are perceived as important for students to learn.
- *Illustrating What Has Been Taught*
 - 1) Include sample lesson plans and assignments that illustrate the goals and objectives of the program. These artifacts should be included in several different sections (e.g., Presentation of Knowledge, Curriculum Development, Assessment, and Evaluation).
 - 2) Describe the range of goals and objectives that have been addressed from the IEPs of students with disabilities who receive special education and related services in your classroom. Include examples of how these students have been involved in activities, as well as the range of activities that occur in the class.
 - 3) Describe the informal aspects of the curriculum for students, including guest speakers in class, special assemblies, and field trips. Include artifacts about these aspects in the Presentation of Knowledge and the Curriculum

Development sections.

- 4) List workshops that have been presented, planned, and/or attended that have focused upon teaching parents effective parenting skills.
- **Illustrating Teaching Strategies**
 - 1) Include sample lesson plans, such as support plans for students with disabilities that describe adaptations and accommodations made to address their needs. Lesson descriptions should be complete (describe materials and strategies).
 - 2) Include photographs of the classroom and materials, such as shots of students at work and play, sample transparencies, and a list of videotapes and computer software.
 - 3) Include descriptive letters from colleague observers, administrators, and parents.
 - **Illustrating Various Types of Feedback**
 - 1) Provide copies of reports and letters resulting from peers' periodic visitations and observations.
 - 2) Include principals' and supervisors' evaluation reports and include their comments regarding reports received from you. Describe your plan to address any of their recommendations.
 - 3) List and, if possible, provide a copy of any teaching or professional awards that you have received. Describe what you did to win the award and the criteria by which you were selected to receive it.
 - 4) Provide copies of summaries of performance-based checklists, filled out by your supervisor.
 - **Illustrating Teacher/Parent Partnerships**
 - 1) Provide sample copies of newsletters and written communications that have been sent to parents.
 - 2) Provide records of conferences, phone contacts, and descriptions of how parents have been involved in planning and carrying out activities.
 - 3) Describe, and include samples of, materials used to inform parents regarding the curriculum and its relevance to their children's developmental progress.
 - 4) Include descriptions of organized gatherings of groups of parents and family members where you have presented information.
 - **Illustrating What You Have Learned**
 - 1) Provide a list of the new teaching strategies, materials, etc. that you have employed, and tell how effective each has been.
 - 2) List the workshops, seminars, professional conferences, and university classes that you have completed and describe how you have incorporated the knowledge gained in your teaching.
 - 3) Present graphs of students' performance, indicating where changes in program occurred, so that their progress can be compared to their initial performances.

Conclusion

Teacher portfolios serve as a potentially effective method to encourage teachers' self-evaluation and skill enhancement. They also are a means by which to enhance positive work attitudes and improve the quality of programs. A portfolio contains written documentation of a teacher's planning, content or curriculum, organization and method of presentation, type and extent of interactions with both students and their parents, methods and uses of evaluation and assessment, approaches to classroom management, and professional development activities. An important advantage of the portfolio to teachers is the opportunity to describe the teaching process from their own perspectives. Furthermore, in the process of building the portfolio, teachers gain insight into their own strengths and can identify areas that need improvement.

Unlike standardized assessment, which typically provides a numerical score for the teacher's performance, teacher portfolios provide more meaningful, valid indicators of what teachers know and can do (Klecker, 2000). They also emphasize strengths, rather than weaknesses, through a variety of documentation. Furthermore, teacher portfolios enhance the communication and collaboration between teachers and parents or other people outside the classroom by providing useful assessment information. Therefore, a teacher portfolio is an effective way to enhance teaching and learning for both teachers and students.

References

- Bergen, D. (1993/1994). Authentic performance assessments. *Childhood Education, 70*, 99-102.
- Decker, C. A., & Decker, J. R. (2001). *Planning and administering early childhood programs*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Fetterman, D. M. (1994). Empowerment evaluation. *Evaluation Practice, 13*, 1-15.
- Gelfer, J. I., & Perkins, P. G. (1996). A model for the preparation of portfolio assessment in early childhood education programs. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 21*, 5-10.
- Klecker, B. M. (2000). Content validity of preservice teacher portfolios in a standards-based program. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 27*(1), 35-38.
- Scriven, M. (1996). Types of evaluation and types of evaluator. *Evaluation Practice, 17*(2), 367-382.
- Shadish, W. R. (1994). Need-based evaluation theory: What do you need to know to do good evaluation? *Evaluation Practice, 15*(3), 347-358.
- Stiggins, R. (1991). Assessment literacy. *Phi Delta Kappan, 72*, 534-539.
- Stone, S. J. (1995). Portfolios: Interactive and dynamic instructional tool. *Childhood Education, 71*, 232-234.
- Wortham, S. C., Barbour, A., & Desjean-Perrotta, B. (1998). *Portfolio assessment: A handbook for preschool and elementary educators*. Olney, MD: Association for Childhood Education International.