2

Putting Portfolios Into Action

Portfolios are the heart of assessment with young children as they have the potential to recognize the uniqueness of each child while documenting the learning standards inherent in school programs. Children do not enter school with the same background experiences or profiles as learners, yet all are expected to achieve specified levels of learning. Portfolios are valued as a tool that focuses on both the affective and cognitive domains of children's learning while integrating learning standards throughout the curriculum.

"Portfolios promote success for children from all populations."

Portfolios offer a concrete record of children's modes of learning and the development of their talents and achievements during a year or more. In classrooms where all children develop portfolios, the process enables each student to be acknowledged for the level of work he or she produces. In this manner, portfolios promote students' success by providing multiple opportunities for children from every population to demonstrate talents and potential (Payne, 2003; Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth, 2007). Portfolios assist teachers in their quest to honor the diversity of students and discover the strengths of each learner.

Portfolios are successfully used nationwide with children as young as four to celebrate children's work and validate their learning. Not everything a child produces is kept in the portfolio; rather, the portfolio is a selection of representative or especially significant items. Most of a child's work goes home on a regular basis so parents consistently see the fruits of their child's learning. This

chapter provides information about using portfolios with young children by first defining what their portfolios are, then addressing how objectives for prekindergarten and kindergarten children differ from the objectives for first-through third-grade learners, and finally, outlining a sequence for implementing portfolios.

WHAT IS A PORTFOLIO?

"A portfolio is a systematic collection representative of a child's work that the teacher and student select to provide information regarding each child's developmental readiness, learning profile, interests, achievement levels, and learning growth over time."

A significant concept in this definition is *systematic collection*. A systematic collection ensures that portfolios develop purposefully and continually by establishing when, how, and why products get into a portfolio, how it is managed, and what are its assessment applications. The products in a portfolio must be representative of the work that is typical of that child and not just the child's best work. Representative products reflect patterns and trends over a period in the child's learning and avoid isolated examples.

A second important concept in this definition is that both teacher-selected and child-selected products are incorporated. To document readiness levels, learning standards, and achievement, teachers determine which products are required portfolio pieces for all students. Then when appropriate, as children mature in their portfolio implementation, some products are child selected to individualize the portfolio, confirm interests, recognize students' ownership in the process, and motivate students' continued learning.

A vital concept in this definition is the use of the portfolio to document a child's learning profile and learning growth over time. Children and other invested individuals should review the portfolio to determine how each child is developing as a learner. Many children are more motivated to excel when they see for themselves that they are making progress and that their work is resulting in success. The goal is for portfolios to be educationally effective and personally satisfying for educators, children, and their families.
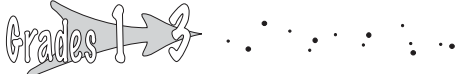
PORTFOLIO OBJECTIVES

Portfolio objectives develop and expand as children mature. The intent of portfolios with prekindergarten and kindergarten children is to initiate the portfolio process by involving children in collecting and managing a representative sample of work to document achievements and celebrate their learning. The intent with first- through third-grade children is to expand the portfolio process and increase students' involvement and responsibilities. Figure 2.1 elaborates on these objectives (Kingore, 2007).

Figure 2.1

Portfolio Objectives

Pre-K ➔ K

1. **Develop students' feelings of self-worth.**
   When young children review their portfolios, they see products to compare over time and realize that their skills are increasing. They feel important and successful.

2. **Use repeated tasks to document each child's level of learning standards, growth, and achievements.**
   Repeated tasks document the children's achievement level of learning standards by substantiating children's increased integration of concepts and skills over time. Children, parents, other educators, and administrators benefit from viewing products that exemplify the pace and level of each child's learning.

3. **Document learning and determine effective instructional accommodations.**
   The work children produce confirms their learning and encourages appropriate instruction to be initiated in a timely fashion. Products from authentic learning experiences in a classroom are valuable components to align with other data when diagnosing young students with learning differences or special needs as well as students who would benefit from extended learning opportunities.

4. **Celebrate learning.**
   Children review their portfolios to celebrate their learning accomplishments; they delight in sharing with others what they have learned and what they are currently able to do. Parents review their child's portfolio to concretely understand and celebrate the learning growth of their child.

Grades 1 ➔ 3

1. **Develop students' feelings of self-worth.**
   As they review their portfolios over time, primary children develop feelings of self-worth and observe concrete indications of their growth and changes as learners. They substantiate to themselves that their efforts result in achievement.

2. **Teach young children to manage, organize, and file their portfolio products.**
   Typically, young children are not organized. Organization and management are valued

life skills children must develop over time. A simple but clearly structured portfolio system helps children learn how to organize, manage, and maintain their work.

3. **Increase children's responsibility for learning.**
   The portfolio process requires children to analyze their learning rather than rely only on the evaluations of others. They are responsible for reviewing several pieces of their work to select portfolio products supported by their reflection upon their learning and achievement.

4. **Use repeated tasks to document each child's level of learning standards, growth, and achievements.**
   Repeated tasks document the achievement of learning standards by substantiating children's increased integration of concepts and skills over time. Children, parents, other educators, and administrators benefit from viewing products that exemplify the pace and level of each child's learning.

5. **Document readiness levels and determine learning goals.**
   The work students produce confirms readiness, augments understanding of information from standardized evaluations, and forms a foundation for collaborative goal setting. Products document the level at which concepts and skills are attained by primary students with fewer skills, students on grade level, students with learning differences or special needs, and students who would benefit from extended learning opportunities. The portfolio is a concrete means to demonstrate achievements related to placement in special classes or to encourage that appropriate intervention is initiated in a timely fashion.

6. **Implement effective self-assessment and collaborative evaluation.**
   Many students talk about grades as something given to them by teachers. Self-assessment is clearly needed to promote students' reflection about what they have earned by their effort. Well-developed criteria, often shared in the form of holistic or analytical rubrics, stimulate students' self assessments and lead to collaborative evaluations between teachers and students as they consider the merits and demerits of a product or process.

7. **Celebrate learning and share information with others.**
   Children review their portfolios to acknowledge their learning accomplishment. When viewed over time, portfolios promote students' celebrations of learning and enable them to share evidence of learning with family, the teacher, and peers. Children can also present their learning achievements through student-involved conferences.

8. **Document district and state learning standards.**
   Portfolio products document learning standards by substantiating students' application of concepts and skills. Teachers' and students' reflections can specifically address the standards inherent in the product.

PLANNING A SEQUENCE FOR IMPLEMENTING PORTFOLIOS

Effective portfolios are not a lucky accident, and effective teachers do not rely on spontaneous moments when wonderful products develop and children rush to their portfolios to include the new treasure. Taking time to plan increases the likelihood of success and prevents frustration later. Design a sequence for implementing portfolios by prioritizing, organizing, communicating, and integrating (Kingore, 2007).

Prioritize

- To develop a plan for schoolwide implementation of portfolios, work as a group to address the prompts posed as staff discussion questions in Figure 2.2.
- To develop a portfolio plan for your classroom only, use the discussion questions in Figure 2.2 to promote your decision making.
- Decide the number and kind of products you want in the portfolios.
- Avoid attempting too much at one time. Prioritize so you can begin small and let the process develop with time and experience.
- Allow the portfolios to reflect the personal goals, styles, strengths, and needs of you and your class.

Figure 2.2

Staff Discussion Questions

Reference these questions to guide decisions, focus on the assessment potential, and determine the implementation of your portfolio system.

1. What does the term portfolio mean to you?

   _____

2. How might the portfolio process relate to the social and emotional factors crucial to young children's learning success?

   _____

3. What are our purposes in using portfolios?

   _____

4. Who are our audiences for the portfolios?

   _____

5. On which curriculum areas should portfolios focus?

   _____

6. What potential value might portfolios offer in identifying and responding to our special populations and validating the variety of modalities, styles, and intelligences represented by the children in our classes?

   _____

7. What are the classroom management implications?

   _____

8. Upon which human and material resources can we draw?

   _____

9. What additional resources are needed to enable implementation?

   _____

10. How might we appropriately inform and involve parents in this learning partnership?

   _____

Organize

- Determine the portfolio containers, storage location, and management procedures. (Chapter 3 discusses suggestions to guide organization and management.)
- Organize a process and schedule for selecting portfolio products.
- Organize an ongoing schedule for when children's work goes home and communicate that schedule to parents.
- Prepare needed forms and assemble needed materials.
- Plan the first item for students to file in their portfolio so the process begins smoothly and quickly. For example, determine a specific repeated task for students to complete and file as soon as portfolios are implemented. (Chapter 5 includes a discussion of repeated tasks and suggests several applications.)

Communicate

Communicate With Other Teachers and Administrators
- Network with other interested educators to nurture ideas and successes as you share concerns or problems.
- Brainstorm whether there is an easier way to do this.
- Begin an ongoing need-to-know list with questions that occur to you so that you can network with and learn from other professionals using portfolios.
- Share articles, books, and information about portfolios.

Communicate With Families
- Send letters to families every month to share information about children's progress and their use of portfolios. (Chapter 6 includes several sample letters to families.)
- Conduct meetings with parents during which you model portfolios, discuss the process, have children share their portfolios, and note the growth and pride the children demonstrate. Emphasize to families that portfolios provide concrete examples to revisit over time in order to understand the capabilities, achievements, and potential of children. (Chapter 6 elaborates multiple ideas for productive meetings and communications with families.)
- Develop a file folder of brief articles and information regarding the use of portfolios and authentic assessments to offer family members who have questions about the process. Consider including the list of assessment terms and explanations shared in Chapter 1.

Communicate With Children
- Show children what a portfolio is and explain how they will use one in class.
- Discuss how older students use portfolios for job interviews and college entrances. Explain how some adults use portfolios for job advancement

or to obtain a new job. When possible, invite older students or adults to share their portfolios with the children and explain why portfolios are important and useful in their lives.

• Discuss the children's ownership and pride. Explain how they will be responsible for filing and organizing their work, just as adults do in their jobs.

Connecting Learning Experience

A Think Aloud About Portfolios

A *think aloud* is a metacognitive strategy to model a thinking process verbally with children. Think out loud about the potential personal value of portfolios for children and verbalize your thinking with the class. The objective is to use your perspective to ignite children's enthusiasm to begin their portfolios. The following is one example of a think aloud.

"As I look at you now, I am thinking about how your portfolios will look many days from now. Your portfolio will become the finest book you have ever developed. It will show others some of the most important things you learn and the things that are most important to you. You will get to keep your portfolio forever. When you get older, you can look through your portfolio and celebrate your learning."

Integrate

Portfolios should reflect instructional decisions and authentic learning experiences in a class. Looking through a child's portfolio reveals a clear view of instructional priorities and the kinds of learning experiences most often provided. Strive to make portfolios a part of the regular routine in your class rather than something extra to do.

• Establish a specific time for portfolio product selection and maintain your schedule. Do not leave it to chance.
• Integrate portfolios into children's learning experiences by involving them in the filing and management of their portfolio products. Chapter 3 offers several management suggestions for young children.
• Set aside time for giving children feedback and for developing the portfolio and its components.

Share criteria for quality work and, as appropriate, ask children to review their portfolio and choose something they did well to share with a classmate or family member.

- Integrate portfolios with assessment goals and topic objectives. Review the children's portfolios to document learning accomplishments and guide instructional pacing.
- Integrate portfolios with instructional decisions. How do portfolios showcase the kind of instructional experiences that best benefit students? How do portfolios support the effectiveness of a wide array of learning tasks beyond simple fill-in-the-blank responses?
- Connect portfolio products to children's capabilities and potential. Integrate multiple modalities and/or intelligences in the product opportunities available to students.