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# Literacy Portfolios: Helping Students Know Themselves

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*Self-created Literacy Portfolios help teachers know the whole child — including what the child is like beyond the classroom door.*

JANE HANSEN

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Scott is a 4th grade student at an inner-city school in Manchester, New Hampshire. He is telling Karen Harris, his resource room teacher, why he chose the items he included in his Literacy Portfolio:

- A drawing. "This shows that I can draw pictures, because before I couldn't draw. I'll always remember this. At home my mother used to give me paper and pencil, and I broke the pencils and crossed my arms. Now I write."

- A draft of a piece of writing he had published as a book in the resource room the previous year. "This is the first book I wrote. I can write books."

- A piece of writing from the current year. "Before I couldn't write that good, and now I can. Now I can write better and read better."

- A list of books he can read. "This says that I'm a reader, that I can read these books."

- A book, *The Little Engine That Could*. "This is one of my favorite books. My mom used to read it to me."

- His report card from 3rd grade. "This was the best report card I ever had." The school gives grades of S (satisfactory), W (working on), and N (needs improvement). Previously,

Scott had gotten mostly Ns, but last year he got mostly Ws.

- A photo of his father. "I miss my father. He's part of my life. He has to stay in jail for about 12 years."

- A photo of his grandparents. "I love my grandparents. They bring me up to see my father."

Scott is a member of a group of students and adults involved in a Literacy Portfolios Project in Manchester (Hansen 1991). The adults are students and teachers from the University of New Hampshire, teachers from five elementary and secondary public schools in the inner city, and two administrators. The students are from a 1st grade classroom, an elementary school resource room, a self-contained 6th grade, and junior and senior high English classes. As many as 79 percent of the elementary school children receive free lunch, and the dropout rate in the high school is one-third.

Every adult and student in the project has created a Literacy Portfolio. Whether or not we know ourselves better than anyone else does, our portfolios give us the opportunity to get to know ourselves better. Our literacy is who we are (Neilsen 1989). Many of the students in these inner-city schools think, "I'm nobody." Later, with a self-created Literacy

Portfolio in hand, they say, "This is me. I exist."

## A Nonschool Identity

We get to know Scott when we see the items in his Literacy Portfolio and hear his reasons for selecting them. We may be surprised to see family photos in Scott's portfolio, but we've learned the significance of "real" life to our academic selves.

At one of our first research team meetings, Andrea Luna, a university student and research assistant, wrote about Kevin, a high school student who spent most of a period staring at his desk, hunched over his paper, not writing. When she asked to see his work, he dragged his book bag overflowing with books onto the desk. When Andrea commented that he had a lot of stuff in there, Kevin told her that he had only two books in it; the other books didn't count because they were Dungeons and Dragons books. He used those D&D materials outside of school. Andrea wrote about this young man for our meeting and ended her paper this way: "Kevin seemed to recognize borders that separate what is important to him from what happens in school."

From this, we learned that a student's portfolio must contain items from beyond school if it's to be called a Literacy Portfolio. Students' most significant involvement with literacy may be outside of school (Heath 1983, Hill 1989).

Similarly, resource teacher Karen Harris interviewed a 6th grade girl referred to her resource room (Harris 1991). A statement in the girl's



Literacy portfolios reflect students' outside interests, often pique classmates' curiosity, and provide a way for students to learn from one another.

records labeled her "illiterate." In her interview with the girl, Karen learned that the girl "reads a great deal at home and has a high interest in reading rock magazines. In fact, she and her friend write their own fantasy interviews with each other." Again, her Literacy Portfolio would be inaccurate if it did not include items from beyond school.

### What Students Value

When students select items for their portfolios, they weigh each item's significance. They determine the relevance of an item in terms of these questions: "Who am I?" "Who am I as a reader-writer?" "How does this item show my growth?" The focus of the Literacy Portfolios is on self-evaluation (Rief 1990, Asher 1991).

First grade teacher Brenda Ross thought long and hard about how her students could start to gain a sense of their literacy. Her principal and the university researcher in her classroom shared their portfolios with the children. Then Brenda asked her students to find something to use as a portfolio. Some of them folded large sheets of

paper in half and stapled them along the edges to create large pockets. Others brought folders, binders, and shoe boxes from home. Shawn used a Raisin Bran cereal box. In it he included a book, *The Hungry Thing Returns*. "I'm putting in this book because I have trouble talking, like him," Shawn explained. The boy in the book has a speech problem and so does Shawn. Karla, another 1st grader, used a book cover as her portfolio. One of her items was a comic of the bird Shoe saying, "Who? What? Where? When?" Karla explained, "All the time when I read a book I wish there was a part two. Like when you read a book and you want more information you ask, 'Who? What? Where? When?'"

These students' portfolio selections and their reasons for their choices show their awareness of their literacy and their unique viewpoint (Hindley 1990, Graves and Sunstein in press). At the end of the first year of the Literacy Portfolios project, Brenda said, "The children taught me what was important to them. I assumed I'd be able to predict what they'd choose

to put in, but I would have chosen incorrectly. They showed me they truly could self-evaluate."

### Toward More Comprehensive Evaluations

Because of the students' portfolio choices, the system we use to evaluate students can become not only more accurate, but more comprehensive. The student becomes more than a number or a letter grade.

Eric, a 6th grader, has many items in his portfolio, including a ribbon from an athletic event, several drawings, a book of poems by Edgar Allan Poe that his father gave him, several poems he has written, and two treasured comic books. Eric is a poet, an artist, an athlete, and an avid reader of comic books. He also has good grades and high standardized test scores; but do those numbers and letters give an adequate picture of who Eric is? Maybe the students are right when they say that we don't care who they are, but we can change that. A list of the items in a student's portfolio — information that comes from the students themselves — may belong in the school records as well as test scores and grades.

### Sharing Portfolios

At the end of the marking periods, Karen Boettcher's 6th graders shared their portfolios with her and with other students. Then they took them home. The class talked about how they must arrange a time with someone at home to sit down and explain each item. In the back of each student's portfolio was a sheet labeled Portfolio Comments. Whenever a student shared a portfolio with someone in school, that person wrote a comment. At home, someone was asked to do the same.

Each of the portfolios came back

with a comment. Something about these Literacy Portfolios was important, and the students had conveyed the significance to their families. Someone in each household had found time to listen.

Because the students consider the portfolio items valuable, sharing them can make a difference. David was relatively new to his school and Jody Coughlin's junior high English class, and he had only two items in his portfolio. The first was a piece of writing about a rock concert that he'd put in his portfolio because, "My older brother took me and that made my mom feel good." The other students interested in the concert asked David about it, and he told them about the event. Their interest impressed him, as we shall see.

His second item was a response to a book. "In this book the boy steals a jeep and has to go to one of those places like a camp. While he's there he decides to straighten out. I decided if the kid in the book can, then I can. I've changed." David's comment piqued the students' curiosity. He had come to this school because he'd been kicked out of his previous school, and, with successive questions, he told his story.

Then someone asked what he might put in next. He didn't know, but he might put in something about his uncle, who's paralyzed from the neck down because of a diving accident. The students had questions again.

During the following week, the university researcher in his classroom, Dan-Ling Fu, interviewed David. He'd added a picture of his uncle and intended to write about him. He'd also added a Valentine from his mother, with whom he wishes he could live. Dan-Ling asked, "What have you learned about yourself through putting your portfolio together?" David responded, "I thought nobody liked

me, and nobody wanted to be with me. But after I put my portfolio together, I found people do like me and want me to be around them. They want me to do good. . . ."

### Creating Goals

David has set a specific goal for his Literacy Portfolio. He plans to write about his uncle. The goals the students set for their portfolios show they can shed their passive school posture. They no longer sit and wait for the teacher to give the next assignment and then grudgingly do it — or not. They make their own plans. The teacher's task is to help the students become better writers at their self-assigned tasks (Hansen 1987).

This fall, as the second year of the project began, Karen Harris, the resource room teacher, shared her portfolio with her students on the first day of school. The last item in it was her list of goals for herself. She then asked her students to write their own goals. Each listed what he or she wanted to learn in reading and writing. Some wanted to read specific books, some wanted to learn to use quotation marks in their writing, and some set broader goals, such as, "I want to read harder books." These goal statements became the first item in their portfolios, and as they accomplish their goals, they put in artifacts to show their growth. Sometimes the items they add are from home. As the year unfolds, they make new goals or revise old ones.

Literacy Portfolios enable students to plan a relevant curriculum for themselves. As we learn what each student values, we look for ways to honor the student's concerns and interests within the school (Krogness 1991). Maybe students will stay in a school in which they find authentic work.

According to the high school

students, their portfolios have started to influence their writing and reading. One student wrote, "By making a portfolio, I found, even though my teachers often tell me this, that I am too much of a one-dimensional reader and that I should broaden my horizons to more than sports. I may have trouble doing so, but I am willing to try."

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