University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

2-1-1997

When Portfolios Become Part of the Grading Process: A Case Study in a Junior High Setting

Loukia K. Sarroub
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, lsarroub2@unl.edu

P. David Pearson
Michigan State University

Carmen Dykema
Holt Junior High School

Randy Lloyd
Holt Junior High School

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub

Part of the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Sarroub , Loukia K.; Pearson, P. David; Dykema, Carmen; and Lloyd, Randy, "When Portfolios Become Part of the Grading Process: A Case Study in a Junior High Setting" (1997). *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education.* Paper 71.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/71

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

When Portfolios Become Part of the Grading Process: A Case Study in a Junior High Setting

Loukia K. Sarroub and P. David Pearson
Michigan State University

Carmen Dykema and Randy Lloyd
Holt Junior High School

Formal assessments have long served as our society's most privileged indices of student learning and school accountability. Hence, both learning and school effectiveness have often been equated with standardized test scores and/or grades. The privilege accorded to external assessment has tended to minimize the role of teachers and, even more dramatically, students in the assessment process. Assessments are external tools that are administered *to* teachers and students. For teachers, this often leads to a tension between their curricular goals and the assessment measures they must use in the classroom (Mitchell, 1992; Pearson, DeStefano, & Garcia, in press). Students are rarely involved in either the assessment process or the discourse surrounding assessment. They seldom participate in setting standards, determining what counts as evidence for those standards, or deciding what levels of performance indicate mastery or competence.

Such, at least, is the rhetoric of those who have worked hard over the last decade to reform our assessment practices by bringing them into greater alignment with curriculum, engaging teachers and students more directly in the process, and expanding assessment to include a wider range of performances, projects, and work samples. The reformers widely claim, and even occasionally document, cases in which good assessments inform instruction and provide meaningful ways for teachers and students to gain accurate information about academic growth and learning (Gillispie, Ford, Gillispie, & Leavell, 1996).

Although we know much about the wide-scale impact of new assessments on instruction and curriculum (Pearson, DeStefano, & García, in press; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991), we know less about how these practices play out at the school and classroom levels—what differences they make in the lives of individual teachers and students. It is at this level of analysis that we have undertaken the research in the current study.[1]

1. We need to assert, at the outset, that this grounding in the recent work about the use of assessment as an instrument (or artifact) of reform is about the extent of our theoretical framework. We undertook this investigation in the spirit of grounded inquiry. We had no particular expectations about what we would find, nor did we have much in the way of a set of preconceived notions about what data of one sort or another would mean. In hindsight, we think this open stance toward our work enabled the collaboration among the four of us to work as well as it did. The agenda belonged equally to all four of us.

At Holt Junior High School in Holt, Michigan, the site of our work, we took seriously the tensions that exist between the teachers' desires to use good assessments which emerge out of their curricula and their desire to engage students more deeply in their own assessment on the one hand and the school's public responsibilities to find indices and ways of reporting that are accountable to the community on the other. Over the past 2 years we have been engaged in studying the ways in which key constituents—teachers, students, and parents—respond when new assessment tools are used to make decisions of consequence for junior high school students enrolled in English classes.

We began our collaborative effort in the spring of 1995 at a meeting where we talked about possibilities for portfolio implementation. In the fall of 1995, the four authors (Loukia, David, Carmen, and Randy) started working together—exchanging ideas, looking at past assessment experiences at Holt, and reading about portfolio projects that had been implemented in other settings (e.g., Mosenthal, Lipson, Mekkelsen, Daniels, & Jiron, 1996; Underwood, 1996; Valencia, Hiebert & Afflerbach, 1994). Over time, an agenda, a set of research questions, and a research project evolved. At the broadest level, our agenda was to create and implement assessment practices that were more compatible with the curricular goals that Randy and Carmen had developed for their eighth-grade English curriculum over several years. Our motives for implementing this agenda were complementary but different. Randy and Carmen wanted to develop a better and more curricularly compatible assessment system and to document its influence on student performance. Loukia and David wanted to learn more about how the key constituents in the assessment system—teachers, students, and parents—responded to new assessments when they entered the school ecology. They (Loukia and David) wanted to answer the more general question of the impact of new assessments in a setting in which both the teachers and the students were actively engaged in the evaluation process and in the examination and implementation of the assessment system and the standards underlying it. Our collaboration at Holt provided just such an opportunity for all four of us to pursue our complementary agendas.[2]

METHOD

Project Site Description

Holt Junior High opened in 1976 with two grades, eight and nine. The building was designed as an "open" school, with the media center as the hub for classrooms. Like many projects from this period, open classrooms were quickly enclosed as the building adopted a more traditional secondary philosophy. In 1995–96, Holt served a total of 827

2. It must also be acknowledged that although we chose a collaborative research model as the vehicle for studying novel assessments, we simply chose not to make the collaboration itself an object of our attention. While it was not the object of our attention in our 1995–96 work, it has become more important to us in 1996–97, and we are in the process of completing an analysis of the nature of collective and individual professional development within this collaborative process (Sarroub, Pearson, Dykema, & Lloyd, in preparation).

students with a staff of 46 teachers, 2 counselors, and 2 administrators. Historically, Holt students have come from a predominant mixture of white blue-collar and small farming families, but in the last few years there has been a slight increase of minority students, and most of the students now come from white-collar families who have moved into the Holt subdivision areas (former farmland).

The educational program at Holt is a typical secondary program. Students attend six classes, four of which are core (English, mathematics, science, and social studies), whereas two classes are reserved for electives. In the eighth grade, elective choices included foreign language, reading, life skills, art, and technology education. All eighth graders are placed on a team. These teams help establish connections between elective subjects and the core curriculum and within the core subjects. The team approach is used to foster personalized learning for the students while providing a sense of belonging for team members.

By extending class time on the other four days, the junior high has been able to reserve Wednesday mornings for professional development; it is a time in which teachers can consider important changes in the direction and structure of the school and programs. This practice affords teachers the opportunity to share skills and new ideas with one another, thus further building a collaborative and supportive professional environment. This practice was important for us since many of our meetings took place during some portion of the Wednesday morning professional development sessions.

The Evolution of the Pioneer Portfolio Project

In our initial meetings during the fall of 1995, we read articles, examined a number of existing portfolio systems, and talked about the history of portfolios and other assessments at Holt Junior High. In November 1995, we turned our attention to the issue of a framework in which we might embed our portfolio. We even analyzed the national standards and how they might serve as a framework for helping us construct either an entry or standards-driven portfolio. At the same time we wondered how the eighth grade students perceived the roles played by their teachers and themselves vis-à-vis assessments of their work, so we began to construct a survey to administer to all students in classes taught by Randy and Carmen. By the end of January, we had decided to implement a standards-driven portfolio and we discussed the possibility that it might be used as a part of the students' grade during the last term of the year. In February 1996, Carmen and Randy voiced their apprehensions about how to better link their curriculum during the last term of the year to a menu of entries and criteria. Thus also began a process in which we systematically compared the standards in the Michigan English Language Arts Frameworks (MELAF), the Holt District Framework for English Language Arts Standards, the National Standards for the English Language Arts, and the standards underlying the portfolio system of New Standards.

The elaborate process culminated in March when we chose four standards from the MELAF to implement during the spring term. At the beginning of April we administered our survey and discussed the final details of the portfolio implementation. By the end of April, both Randy and Carmen had introduced the Literature standard into their classrooms, and the students were engaged explicitly in making sense of it, rewriting it in

everyday language and developing a menu of entries that might serve as evidence of its mastery. As the project was implemented in May and June, it became increasingly obvious to us that we could not implement four standards, so we scaled back to the Literature standard only.

By this time Randy and Carmen had developed their own overall rubrics for evaluating the portfolios. Carmen used four criteria: purpose, organization, presentation, and details. Each criterion was elaborated by some guiding questions and was scored according to a 1–4 scale which indexed how consistently the students met each criterion. Randy adapted the rubric that he had been using for everyday class assignments. His criteria included form, content, voice/creativity, and mechanics. Each criterion was worth up to however many points he and his students agreed upon.

Because we carried out our pilot study at the end of the year, communication with parents was not as extensive as it would have been had we used the portfolio all year. Thus, the students and the teachers were the primary audience for the portfolio. At the end of the academic year we interviewed the teachers and students, and during the summer we started to analyze our data. We continued to meet during the fall of 1996 to analyze data, revise our categories and themes, write this paper, and plan for the second year of implementation.

Data Sources

Research artifacts included transcriptions of meeting notes, interviews with key players, and classroom observations, along with samples of student work and teacher handouts.

Meeting notes. All meetings were audiotaped and transcribed. The transcriptions were shared among all of us as well as with the principal at Holt. The meeting notes served as both mnemonic devices and enabled us, especially the teachers, to be more critical and analytical of our perceptions of the standards and portfolio implementation process.

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with the key participants in our study, the teachers and the focus students. For our Portfolio Pioneer Project, we chose six focus students and we chose them intentionally to represent a range of abilities and a range of dispositions with respect to how seriously they took school and academic work. The focus students included Melinda and Amy, both honors students; John, a resistant low-achiever; Jane, a typical student; Mark, a special education student; and Roy, a resistant high-achiever. Carmen and Randy both agreed to be interviewed at the end of the spring term, 1996.

Classroom observations. We conducted classroom observations on a weekly basis, sometimes once every 2 weeks, depending on the teachers' curricular plans. We made every attempt to be present for sessions in which the standards were introduced and/or discussed. In most cases, these sessions were tape-recorded, but we also took elaborate fieldnotes in anticipation of a great deal of "noise" in the whole class audiotapes. We were also able to examine all of the assignments completed during these standards sessions.

Artifacts. For our analyses, the assignments completed during the standards sessions, the portfolios of our focus students, and the end-of-course evaluations completed by Randy's classes were available for examination.

Research Design and Analysis

An ethnographic case study approach was used to explore the questions posed in this project. Using traditional ethnographic analysis techniques, the data were examined, categories were developed and refined, and narrative accounts explaining the history of our site and each individual's understanding were developed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Analysis tools included constant comparative analysis, member checks, staff meetings, and triangulation among artifacts and analyses.

Several special features of our data analysis deserve special mention. First, our meeting notes were analyzed by all four of us on an ongoing basis. Part of each meeting was spent examining our expanded fieldnotes (paraphrases based upon tape recordings). This enabled us to make connections between our pragmatic goals from week to week and evolution of our grounded inquiry. Second, after each classroom observation, Loukia or David debriefed Randy or Carmen and made notes about their responses. These debriefings served the practical function of keeping everyone informed and at the same time allowed us to document more closely informal conversations about our study. Third, we analyzed the interview transcripts as a group. This particular process helped us elaborate our individual sense of the emerging themes and patterns from the data collectively.

FINDINGS

Our findings provide a mixed reading of the impact of portfolios on the lives of students. For some students, portfolios presented a new and different opportunity for self-expression, but for others they were just another assignment, another way of "doing school." For Randy and Carmen, they provided a new way of thinking about both achievement and curriculum. These general points are unpacked in a set of four interrelated themes that serve to summarize our findings:

1. Students are interested in deconstructing the institutional or official language of the standards by recrafting official standards and generating their own standards in language that is accessible to them;
2. Students are interested in participating in their own evaluation even as they acknowledge and are concerned with the fact that their learning is measured through grades;
3. Portfolios are a *possible* avenue for self-evaluation and reflection; and
4. Portfolios can be readily adapted to differing purposes, teaching philosophies, and teaching styles.

Theme 1: Decoding the Secret World of Assessment

The eighth graders in Carmen's and Randy's classes felt as if they had been let in on

a "big secret" as they were exposed to the state standard on literature: "read and analyze a wide variety of classic and contemporary literature and other texts to seek information, ideas, enjoyment, and understanding of their individuality, or common heritage and common humanity, and the rich diversity in our society." The comments of our focal students reveal this interest in decoding the institutional or official language of this standard even as some thought the standard would not affect their academic achievement. Amy, one of the honor students, along with Mark (the special education student), who thought that "at least it wasn't boring" and John (the resistant low achiever), who thought it neither helped nor hurt his progress in English, captured the resigned but compliant response to the standard:

> Amy: I think that it's reasonable. It's just saying you know, read things and be able to connect it to different things. I suppose now that I know about it, it may have affected me because before I didn't know what the state really wanted. . .and you can say, I am doing what the state wants me to do, so I'm not behind or anything. I'm doing my job. (Interview, 5/29/96)

Jane, our typical student, was bothered by the standard's vagueness and grateful for the classroom discussion in which Randy and her peers unpacked it:

> Jane: I think it's O.K. but I don't like the way it's written. It's hard to explain. It's O.K. the way it is, but he (Mr. Lloyd) had to go through each and every step of it before we could understand it. (Interview, 6/7/96)

As the students became engaged explicitly in reaching the standard, they found the official state language difficult to grasp in their everyday English classroom lives. Consequently, they and their teachers reproduced and generated their own standard in language that was accessible to them. They rewrote the standard on literature after small-group discussions and most of the groups listed the benchmarks with which they could meet the standard. Interestingly enough, the students chose benchmarks directly from their curriculum rather than from the listed set in the MELAF. Here is one example of a group constructed list of benchmarks from Randy's first hour:

> Read any type of literature to get information and understand the individuality of one piece to another through reading between the lines. Students will apply information collected to daily lives, understanding society and communicate this in many forms of speaking. Benchmarks: compare/contrast paper, reading log, Zlata's Diary, Holocaust paper. (Classroom observations, May 1996)

Contrast their list of benchmarks with those provided by the Michigan State Board of Education (1995) for middle school students:

> Read and respond thoughtfully to both classic and contemporary literature recognized for quality and literary merit.
>
> Describe and discuss shared issues in the human experience that appear in literature and other texts from around the world.
>
> Identify and discuss how the tensions among characters, communities, themes and issues in literature and other texts are related to one's own experience.

Although the teachers often directed and guided these classroom activities, they also struggled to release responsibility to the students for exploring how self-assess-

ment works. Randy, thinking back on the process he had engaged in for almost a year, noted in one of our meetings:

> One thing that goes on in my mind and the one thing that I am thinking about that goes on top of that, is that I'm trying to make myself as invisible as possible within the process. If the students can sit down with their portfolio and discuss how they met the standards with the parents, without me, that's the best thing. If they can sit down with another teacher and do it without me, that's the best thing. (Meeting notes, 11/11/96)

The most vivid example of unpacking standards in Carmen's classroom occurred in the fall 1996 during her introduction to the MELAF Voice standard (Learn to communicate information accurately and effectively and demonstrate expressive abilities by creating oral, written, and visual text that enlighten and engage and audience) discussion centered on what students already knew about voices they could recognize without being told the authors' names. For instance, the students recognized, while never having heard it before, Shell Silverstein's poem, "Reachin' Richard," as Carmen read it aloud. She also asked them to read texts and describe their perceptions of the voice they heard (i.e., anger, frustration, sadness, etc.). From this discussion, grounded in the students' own experiences, they were able to construct their own elaboration of the of Voice standard:

> Voice is how the author lets the reader understand what and why things are happening and why characters are how they are.
>
> Voice is sharing knowledge truthfully and efficiently.
>
> Put yourself in a real life situation and tell how you would feel at that moment, how you would respond to that certain person or where you are. That is voice.
>
> The writer can have different voices. It depends on what he is writing about. It has to do with who the audience is. (Classroom observations, 10/24/96)

For both Randy and Carmen, this deep engagement in unpacking the standards and connecting their documentation to everyday classroom artifacts proved one of the most satisfying (and serendipitous) aspects of the portfolio trial. None of us anticipated the degree to which students were willing to engage themselves in making the standards accessible to themselves as a means of evaluating growth and accomplishment.

Theme 2: Grades Equal Learning?

The tension between self-representation and external controls was an important issue to us as we documented the students and the teachers' perceptions of the new assessment measures. Although through the portfolios Randy and Carmen provided different avenues for the students to express their academic improvement over time, the students often felt an irreconcilable tension between the grades they "earned" on their report cards (which were justifications of learning for their parents) and Randy and Carmen's encouragement to be self-expressive and self-evaluative in their portfolios. Melinda told us in her interview:

> Students should have a say in the grading process because they're learning it too. We're the ones having to earn and all. I think they (grades) don't help very much because if your teacher just bases it on what the letter grade is, they don't really see if you had

> struggles, if you brought your grade way up or if you brought it down. (Interview, 5/29/96)

To Amy, good grades were important and served as a plausible index of achievement and growth. She said, "Well, if we get good grades, you're meeting the requirements and he's (Mr. Lloyd) pleased with your work. If you're getting a bad grade, then maybe, I don't know by looking at your report card, he can't tell you what areas you can improve in but he can tell you need to improve somehow" (Interview, 5/29/96). For Jane, as well, grades were important, especially to her parents: "Grades don't really mean that much to Mr. Lloyd. My parents—report cards are everything. They're like, if you're learning everything you would get good grades, if not you would get bad grades. [Not] getting good grades doesn't mean I don't know the stuff" (Interview, 6/7/96).

In reflecting back to the pilot study and the progress they made in the second year of our study, Carmen and Randy also felt a strong tension between showing the students' achievement through the traditional grading system and the portfolio. Randy often used the analogy that the grades the students get on the report cards represent but a single snapshot of them at a particular point in time. The portfolio was more like the entire photo album: "We're trying to balance between the gradebook picture and that other portrait of them." He did not think he could ever implement the portfolio as the sole assessment tool, simply because "there needs to be an objective test (an external lens) for measuring what one knows" (Meeting notes, 11/13/96). Explaining his teaching of a new curriculum in the ninth grade (second year of our study) for the first time, Randy stated:

> I've been having a bit of a revelation about the grading process and the ideas of expectations with the portfolio. I am one of those people who likes to develop rubrics for the things that I ask students to do, yet I have not developed a rubric for the standards of Voice and Literature. I guess the goal would be that all students meet the standard as it is stated. I want to use the benchmarks and the standard as a way of setting different levels of meeting the standard. What I would like to do is have the clarity of the rubric I have been using for their writing—I thought about bringing the students in on this process, yet I'm not really sure about this at the present time—one of those good old comfort issues. (Meeting notes, 11/11/96)

For Randy, grading expedited the process of certifying the students' readiness to travel to the next level of achievement, and according to him, assessing his students only through the medium of the portfolio would not create a useful balance between subjective and objective notions of measuring academic progress. Carmen, on the other hand, felt that she could implement the portfolio as the only means of assessment if she "put herself in her classroom with her students and did not pay attention to outside pressures" (Meeting notes, 11/13/96). In other words, if she did not have to defend her assessment procedures to the rest of the Holt community (teachers, administrators, and parents), she could implement a learner-centered, grade-free portfolio assessment system. She said:

> Think about when we sit down to conference with kids about their writing, that's when writing becomes meaningful for the kids. It doesn't have anything to do with getting feedback written on their paper that says, you got eight out of ten—you got a 90%.

> The growth comes from all that interaction because you can talk about the process of growth instead of the product. (Meeting notes, 11/13/96)

By making the portfolios part of the grading process, we probably created a situation in which the mismatch between normal grading practices and the portfolio was less serious and dramatic than is often the case when portfolios are brought into the classroom (and used only for building rich portraits of learning). Even so, it is clear that both teachers and many of the students recognize and appreciate the contrasts.

Theme 3: Portfolios, Self-evaluation, and Self-expression

Portfolios are not always the preferred means for all students to show who they are and what they have learned. For instance, in her interview (which was conducted prior to the implementation of the portfolio trial) Melinda told us that she was more likely to be engaged with the portfolio if she had the opportunity to verbalize what she had learned in a conversation about her work. Even so, by the time the portfolio was completed, she appeared to have accepted the portfolio, and her written reflections on the work in it, as an accurate reflection of herself as a learner. In her "Dear Reader" letter below, Melinda illustrated her creative and reflective self through the portfolio.

> Dear Reader,
>
> Let me introduce myself. My name is Melinda, and I am currently in Ms. Dykema's eighth English class. I write a lot of personal narratives as well as factual, expository pieces. I also read a lot of novels on a variety of topics. In this portfolio you will read six exhibits that display my abilities and strengths.
>
> The pieces that I chose to put in my portfolio were chosen for many reasons. First of all, they show my aptitude, as well as showing my grades. Some of the pieces you will read are creative and artistic. Some of the pieces are factual and show a lot of information.
>
> They show my maturity and how I've grown as a reader and a writer because they increase in grade as the year goes on. They also show resourcing skills and skills that show following directions.
>
> There are pieces that show my weakness in some areas. They also show similar pieces and how I changed them to fit the standards and improve my weakness in grammar and my correct word usage. They also show how this class has taught me many things as a student, a reader, and a writer. (June 1996)

We encountered strong resistance from one focus group eighth grader in particular about portfolios during our pilot study, even though in the ninth grade, he decided to create his own and became more engaged with the process.[3] Here is what Roy told us about portfolios in June 1996:

> They don't really help, I don't think. Just because a person that's not that smart, they can have a really good portfolio if they have somebody to help them. But if you can have a smart person not care about it and. . . . I know some people aren't as smart as me. They have really good portfolios because they pay attention to it. I pay attention

3. In a focus group conducted in April 1997, Roy had come full circle in his views about portfolios. He championed portfolios each time they were criticized by one of the other students in the focus group interview.

> more to school work than my portfolio. Mine's like barely nothing in it. We shouldn't have portfolios. The school is just doing them for money, I think. The government gives them money if they have them. A teacher told me that the government gives them so much extra money if they do portfolios. (Interview, 5/30/96)

Roy ended the eighth grade by not completing his portfolio in Carmen's class. Amy, on the other hand, thought that her portfolio could be useful in other parts of her life. She said, "I'd like to see my portfolio help me a lot. I'd like to see my portfolio be quality work and good work and to help me possibly get into college or get jobs or something, to help me in my future and maybe help me evaluate myself, you know." (Interview, 5/29/96)

Although he was not one of our focal students, we all learned a valuable lesson from Brian, one of Carmen's students. Brian was a resistant low-achiever and his work in English class was highly variable. But for Brian, the portfolio provided an exceptional stock-taking opportunity. It brought out the best in him because it appealed to his sense of independence and self-control:

> I think I have improved my reading and writing skills a lot this year. I have learned how to write several types of papers correctly. Including letters, compare and contrast, essays and dialogue journal entries. I still need to work on proof reading and correct grammar. I plan to just keep reading and rewriting to help me get better over time. (Portfolio Dear Reader letter, 6/9/96)

Clearly, we did not succeed in convincing all students that portfolios were a superior alternative to the normal course of assignments and grading practices. Some students were clearly critical of and sometimes cynical about our attempts to offer meaningful ways to make self-assessment more explicit and organic. Other students, such as Melinda, Brian, and Amy, however, seized upon portfolios as a new and more empowering medium for self-representation. The grounds of these differences, be they cultural, social, economic, gendered, ethnic, or linguistic, await further and more detailed examination than was in this study.

Theme 4: Chameleon-like Portfolios

As has been documented elsewhere (Underwood, 1996) portfolios exhibit chameleon-like qualities when they are implemented in classrooms. In our work, the ways in which Randy and Carmen implemented portfolios reflected their particular philosophical stances and expectations (Underwood, 1996). In attempting to implement the Literature, and later, the Voice standards uniformly in all of their classrooms, Carmen and Randy found that in order for the portfolio implementation to be successful, it had to be consistent with each of their curricula and teaching styles. Consequently, the portfolio trial, even though it was guided by a common set of principles and guidelines, played out differently in their classrooms. Carmen emphasized gathering a credible and convincing set of work samples and Dear Reader letters that described how the evidence mapped onto the standards. Randy adopted more of a process-orientation. For him, what was most important was their engagement in rewriting the standards and writing about the difference between portfolios and regular tests.

This difference in implementation is consistent with Underwood's (1996) observations that the portfolio is chameleon-like in that it adapts to teachers' varying philosophies and teaching styles. This characteristic is at once promising and troubling. We knew, for example, the traditional grading system, although universally disliked, did possess the one virtue of extending across a whole range of teachers and teaching philosophies. Could portfolios do likewise? Could portfolios travel across the same range of philosophies? Within a limited sphere, the answer is clearly, yes, and this flexibility gives us hope for their future. Were they to demand a narrower band of compliance and a more rigid set of implementation steps, their prospects would not be so bright. Had they demanded, for example, both process and outcome compliance, Randy and Carmen might not have felt the sense of accomplishment that they did at the end of Year 1, and they might have discontinued the experiment. As events unfolded in Year 2, implementation of the standards-driven portfolio revealed a remarkable convergence between Randy and Carmen. Randy began to worry more about products, and Carmen engaged her students more deeply in the process of defining and unpacking the standards and benchmarks.

The troubling part is a nagging concern that if portfolios can be used in any and all classes, how can they serve either as agents or reflections of change? In other words, if the tool is so adaptable, does it permit any and all curriculum practices, even those that are inconsistent with the emphasis on reflection and self-evaluation that seem to be such an integral part of the portfolio culture? Our data do not permit a definitive answer to this question, but we did gain some insights about what portfolios demand, particularly of teachers, irrespective of their setting. Early in our second year, as we planned new variations on the portfolio system, Carmen raised what for us has become the central feature of our portfolio experience at Holt. In talking about planning for Year-2 implementation, she said:

> The void in putting my curriculum together has always been am I teaching the right thing. What is the right thing to teach? Am I forgetting essential components in my curriculum? Texts have offered a guideline in the past, but this was lacking in some respects. The text and district curricula did not allow the freedom I need. There were too many recipes rather than a conceptual framework. When I look at the standards, I see components that need to make up my curriculum. I can hang my scope and sequence onto something. [The standard] provides a common language. I can talk to my peers about the standards. It is important that as colleagues we are in agreement regarding the meaning of the standards if we are to use them as a common language. (Meeting notes, 11/11/96)

And without question, the curriculum/assessment link, operationalized as an answer to the question, "What artifacts from this unit can the students use in their portfolios to show that they have met our guiding standards?", has dominated our Year-2 discourse.

What is still problematic for us is the question of how teachers can account for their students' learning and achievement to a wider audience, including parents and the public. As we move into our next phase, we are tackling this question head on by engaging the students in presenting their portfolios to their parents as a part of parent-teacher-student conferences.

IMPLICATIONS

We are all too aware of the preliminary nature of our findings. Issues of sampling, scope, and longevity prescribe just such a skepticism. Nonetheless, we are also fairly excited about some of the insights we have gained. Our study brings to light the importance of dialogue about assessments among teachers and students. By making evaluation and assessment a part of the classroom discourse, both teachers and students internalized the curriculum, learning, and the standards. Implementing a standards-driven portfolio became a meaningful way to learn and expand our knowledge about writing, reading, oral talk, diverse learners, teaching practices, and explicit engagement in new assessments. We also noted that assessing students through the portfolio is problematic, as the resulting portfolio is often times an idiosyncratic endeavor which reflects strong individual tendencies and motivations, even as the students' work meet agreed upon standards of good work. Balancing "subjective" and "objective" lenses is of special importance as teachers attempt to justify their assessment practices to each other, their students, and their communities.

We, like many who have engaged for longer periods of time in the world of portfolios (e.g., Graves & Sunstein, 1992), see the greatest potential for portfolios as tools of reflection and self-examination. For students, this means greater engagement in deciding for themselves what their work says about themselves as learners. Yet we know that portfolios have yet to prove useful for all students. In fact, we think it is important for us to understand why students such as Roy, who are so resistant to the normal trappings of school life, appear to be equally as resistant to innovations such as portfolios. We may have painted portfolios into a "conventional" corner by making them part of the grading system before we had engaged in the steps necessary to establish a portfolio culture (Graves & Sunstein, 1992). But we faced a dilemma and we made the decision we felt we had to make: Had we failed to make them part of the grading system, we would not have engaged students in the process of reflection and self-evaluation.

For teachers, they serve a different reflective function; they force one to constantly examine curriculum with a critical eye. If we believe the standards that guide our assessment systems are valid, and if we can find ways of unpacking their meaning for students (as we seem to have found), then it is impossible to look at activities and assignments with a cavalier attitude. Instead, we are forced to ask ourselves, for any assignment or activity, not only what students will learn, but also what they will learn about themselves.

REFERENCES

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Gillispie, C., Ford, K., Gillispie, R., & Leavell, A. (1996). Portfolio assessment: Some questions, some answers, some recommendations. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 39,* 6.

Graves, B., & Sunstein, S.(1992). *Portfolio portraits.* Toronto: Irwin.

Michigan State Board of Education. (1995). *English language Arts model content standards for curriculum and benchmarks for the model content standards for curriculum.* Lansing: Author.

Mitchell, R. (1992). *Testing for learning: how new approaches to evaluation can improve American schools.* New York: Free Press.

Mosenthal, J., Lipson, M. Mekkelsen, J, Daniels, P., & Jiron, H. (1996). The meaning and use of portfolios in different literacy contexts: Making sense of the vermont assessment program. In Leu, D., Kinzer, C., Hinchman, K. (Eds.). *Literacies for the 21st Century: research and practice.* Forty-fifth yearbook of the National Reading Conference (pp. 113–123). Chicago: National Reading Conference.

Pearson, P. D., Destafano, Y., & Garcia, G. E. (in press). Dilemmas in reading assessment. In C. Harrison & T. Salinger (Eds.), *Assessing reading 1: Theory and practice.* London: Routledge.

Sarroub, L. K., Pearson, P.D., Dykema, C., & Lloyd, R. (in preparation). *How new assessments impact student learning, curriculum, and professional development: A case study in a junior high setting.* Michigan State University.

Tierney, R., Carter, M., & Desai, L. (1991). *Portfolio assessment in the reading-writing classroom.* Boston: Christopher Gordon.

Underwood, T. (1996). *Consequential validity inquiry and portfolio assessment: A Case Study.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Davis.

Valencia, S., Hiebert, E., & Afflerbach, P. (1994). *Authentic reading assessment: practices and possibilities.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.