

## **Part III**

# **Quality Assessment**

Part III includes the projects of teachers using assessment as a means to improve teacher practice and student learning.



# Improving Group Dynamics and Student Motivation in a Grade 9 Music Class

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Cheryl Black is an elementary vice principal. Previously she has taught vocal and instrumental music at the secondary level. Her first action research project is published at Ontario Action Researcher available at [www.unipissing.ca/oar](http://www.unipissing.ca/oar).

I have always believed that everyone has musical ability and that measuring that ability is unfair. Anyone can and should participate to the best of his or her ability for sheer enjoyment. After all, if only the best singers sang, there would never be enough people for a choir. As a teacher, I have always encouraged my students to strive for their best not be the best. In order to facilitate that, I have always tried to create in my class an atmosphere of trust, acceptance, tolerance, and respect for one another. As such, I have tried to use music as a vehicle through which to help my students gain confidence and self-assurance.

I am presently in my seventeenth year of teaching secondary school. Although music is my major and I have worked primarily with vocal and instrumental classes, I have also taught English, Visual Arts and Keyboarding. Our school serves a wide cross-section of population, but teaching music is a relatively sheltered existence—students are usually in my class because they have an aptitude or an interest in music. Rarely do students think that they will find music an easy credit. I do understand the classroom dynamics of teaching a mandatory subject. However, since I have taught only music for the last eight or nine years, I have rarely encountered unmanageable belligerence or animosity. If I do, peer pressure usually serves to help balance the problem.

This article describes my use of action research in my Professional Growth Strand. In the Grand Erie District School Board the Professional Growth Strand is an improvement-based approach to teacher evaluation in which experienced and competent teachers work periodically with a school administrator to set goals for improving their practice and to evaluate the progress made at the end of the year. Why Action Research?

I was introduced to the method of action research about the same time I learned I would be on professional growth strand. I was also looking for an answer for the problems I was having with one particular class. Action research appeared to be a means of combining with my professional growth strand the work I needed to do in this particular class.

Believing that I am respected for my ability and knowledge is a rare feeling. Action research gives credence to my knowledge and experience. The method of carefully gathering and analyzing data shows that constructive improvement has taken place. No longer do I have to rely on vague, nebulous feelings of improvement when the proof is in writing. This serves to spur me on with my project specifically, and my teaching in general, on those days when I feel discouraged, ineffective, and unappreciated. Believing that I am making a difference allows me to be more emotionally resilient to stress-related illnesses and helps me trust my own judgment when I am bombarded with derogatory messages from various sources.

### **My Project**

I believe that teachers can waste a great deal of energy trying to keep students motivated and interested in their respective subject

areas. Occasionally I have come across groups of students who, despite my best efforts, only reluctantly participate in the activities in my class. Until this year, reprimands and modeling desired behaviour have been effective in eventually improving the atmosphere in my class. However, students are changing. Peer approval appears to be more important than teacher approval. In my opinion this is due to lack of self-confidence; such misbehaviour appears to be more for the validation of peers and, therefore, less responsive to verbal reprimands. So, for my professional growth strand, I decided that I wanted to find more structured activities to improve group dynamics and increase student motivation. I expected that the students would take a little more responsibility for their own learning and self-discipline allowing me to spend my energy more constructively arranging music and creating appropriate lesson plans.

The group that I chose for my study was a grade nine vocal class of twelve girls and four boys. I chose a vocal class because the self-image of singers is much more closely related to their singing ability. Instrumentalists can always complain about the instrument when a performance does not go as well as they had hoped but singers are putting a larger piece of themselves forward for evaluation when they perform.

I am used to some resistance at the beginning of the year in a new vocal class but this class was an extreme case. I was planning lessons only to have the class sit with blank stares and participate only half-heartedly, if at all. There were discipline problems and an apparent lack of interest in the subject. Day after day, people greeted my instructions with reluctance if not downright defiance. There was a total lack of focus during theory lessons and an increasing lack of participation. Ignoring the

inappropriate behaviour had no impact on the students.

I decided to stop being reactive and start being active. I began watching the students as they entered at the beginning of class. There were a number of small groups within the class, depending on the public school attended. The groups were talking about each other, judging by glances and nudges. It appeared that insecurity and lack of group identity caused them to ridicule and put down each other. Students who would normally be interested in participating were intimidated into silence.

Initially, I dealt with snide comments and discipline problems as they occurred but as the situation did not appear to improve, I had to go deeper. I decided to assign a singing test. I planned a very short one but I hoped that taking a risk in front of each other would impress the point that they all shared the same amount of nervousness. One student, Al, refused to sing a test (Please note that in this article the names of students are pseudonyms.). He was rude and defiant. I asked him to go to the office because I was concerned that an attitude like that could spread. I understood that he was threatened by the thought of singing a solo and that was probably the root of his negative attitude. He said, "I'm not singing. I wanted Tech and they stuck me in here." I called his father that evening and suggested that a possible switch of classes would make the student happier but if he wanted to stay in my class, I was willing to keep trying with him. The student decided to stay in vocal music and even came in for a little private help.

I learned that two other students had been told that they had very good voices and the rest of the students were intimidated by their confident attitude. I began to believe that the

true problem was a lack of self-esteem and the negative attitude was a defense. I wanted to create a climate of cooperation rather than competition. Nathaniel Brandon (1996, page 37) wrote, "Self-respect is the conviction of our own value. It is not comparative or competitive at all. It is the conviction that our life and well-being are worth acting to support, protect, and nurture; that we are good and worthwhile and deserving of the respect of others; and that our happiness and personal fulfillment are important enough to work for."

I realized that the students needed to believe that singing was only one of the many things that they did. For some students singing was a priority at which they worked very hard; yet for other students singing was only an enjoyable leisure activity. As a consequence, comparing singing voices was unfair. I wanted an activity that would help the students believe that they were special thus decreasing their dependence on the opinions of others.

Thus I devised my action research question, "How can I help my students develop their self-esteem so they will take a more active role in their own learning?"

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collected was primarily journal writing by the students and myself. Approximately every two weeks, the students would answer questions that I created based on my perception of their needs on their journey to self discovery. I photocopied the pages out of their journals and filed the sheets from each writing session with a copy of the questions. I dated each file. The data collected spanned a period of four months. Also on two occasions, I taped and transcribed class discussion. I also kept a journal and wrote

particularly about specific situations in which the students exhibited improved caring and respect for themselves, each other, and myself.

I analyzed the entries during the project and as I prepared to write my article. Discussing the data and my analysis with a critical friend helped me to learn from the project.

### **The Story of the Project**

We started just after Christmas. I gave students each one hundred index cards and asked them to start writing one good thing about themselves on each card. They were not allowed to share or discuss the cards with anyone else. The comments on the cards had to be attributes and abilities. I reminded them that abilities did not need to be stated as absolutes; they could acknowledge movement along a continuum as progress. I hoped that if they understood that singing was only one of the abilities that they possessed, they would be less likely to measure their self-worth by the mark they received for their singing test. One student made the point that since I had not done this activity before, nor was doing it with any other class, that alone made them special.

For the next two weeks, I reminded them to continue reading over their cards every day and write more cards as they discovered more attributes. Eventually, I hoped that they would focus on things they could do in order to complete all of their cards. Focusing on their strengths would be the first step in increasing their self-esteem.

The next step was to help the students realize the difference the cards made to them. We had a class discussion during which I asked specific students to write down their own quotes. Out of sixteen students, only two had stopped reading them

and one of those two students had lost her cards.

After the first set of question sheets, I received a notice asking about the behaviour and attitude of Al. At this point I had already seen a marked improvement in his attitude and behaviour. His class participation had increased and so had his concentration level. I filled it out and later took it to his learning resource teacher. I was surprised to learn that he was very different in other classes. His improvement in attitude was not directed toward school in general, just toward my class. So, I realized that I needed an activity to help the students apply respect for self and others to other areas of their lives. At this point, I had lunch with my critical friend and shared my experiences to date. Many students have an unrealistic view of how they are perceived by other people, so an activity was suggested to allow the students to collect compliments about themselves.

I had the tables moved in the classroom so that the students were sitting in a circle. We passed around sheets of foolscap and students wrote their names on a sheet. We continued to pass the sheets so that other members of the class could write positive comments about each student. The sheets were passed along three people each time to protect the anonymity of the source for each comment. I collected these Compliment Sheets and checked them over to ensure that the comments were all positive before the students saw them. The following day, I handed out the sheets along with a notebook journal for each student. I asked a series of questions about their comments and asked students to write answers in their journals to ensure that the students read and considered the compliments that they received.

Once every two weeks, I would ask the students to write in their journal responses to a series of questions geared to help them become aware of the changes and maturing that was happening. The students called these classes, 'Think Days' and enjoyed them. If I forgot, they would remind me that they hadn't written in their books lately. The students were changing. I could see it and I could feel it in the atmosphere. The questions I asked were not very detailed but were only designed to make the students aware of their feelings.

## Findings

### *Case Study #1 - Sally*

Sally started out very negatively. She lost her cards and even when she read them, she said, "Those cards made me feel worse inside." In the margin of the same sheet of paper, she wrote, "I hate my fat life." However, the comments made about her by the other students included things like, "good friend; laughs a lot; always makes me laugh; very friendly; very kind." Her reaction to those comments seemed as if they were from a different person. She wrote, "All of the comments make me feel really good today; ...it makes me feel that in this class we are all good friends."

Two weeks later I asked them if they acted differently in my class. Sally replied, "I do my work and try to act nicer than normal." The next series of questions included the question, "What is the most important thing you learned about yourself this year?" Sally replied, "That I have a lot of problems and a caring teacher to help me solve them." On April 28, I asked whether or not students felt better about themselves, Sally replied, "Yes, I do feel a little more confident about myself." On May 11, Sally wrote, "I am nicer to teachers. I am not getting in that

much trouble lately and I have learned to like some people."

### *Case Study #2 - Al*

Al made more significant changes. In the beginning, he did not want to be in Vocal Music. He was insolent and frequently rude when asked to participate in class activities. After a short, private session after school to analyze his potential, he seemed somewhat resigned to stay in the class.

For the first three months of the school year, I tried my usual techniques. Verbal reprimands for derogatory comments usually work well but this year they did not. However, phoning Al's father to clarify the reason he had been sent to the office seemed to begin the change in Al's attitude. He was impressed that I wanted to ensure that he had not received more punishment at home.

When we did the one hundred index cards, I was uncertain as to what Al's reaction would be. He filled out six cards in class. That was a tremendous surprise. I had expected a battle. The next day, he had a total of ten filled out and one of the other students had a story to tell about him. In Math, a student had been making fun of himself for failing Math. Al asked the student if he had tried his best. When the student replied, "Yes." Al told him that he should be proud of that grade. The student scoffed and made fun of Al but the student telling the story came to Al's defense and agreed with him. As she was telling the story, Al looked rather sheepish but was smiling widely. The other students in the class applauded. This episode was followed by Al's improved willingness to participate in classroom activities.

Two weeks later, when we had our first real discussion about the cards, Al was late.

When he finally arrived, I asked him if he had forgotten last class and gone home. His jaw dropped and he said, "How did you know?" I told him it was just a lucky guess. Because he was honest with me, I didn't overreact. I just laughed with him, as did the class. Later he told me that earlier in the year, he would not have come to class and told me the truth. He would have tried to come up with an excuse or, gone to the office to sign back in.

Shortly after that class, I learned that another activity was necessary to help the students understand that they can choose how to act in every class, not just mine. The students appeared to have little difficulty coming up with compliments for Al as the sheets were passed around the class.

Compliments included, "He is funny; very honest; very interesting." One even complimented "his courage to stick with vocal music." He was not impressed by that comment but did like the fact that he was considered interesting and honest. He said, "People don't really know me...They just wrote anything down."

A couple of weeks later, another sheet was sent to Al's teachers to check on his progress. The reason for this sheet was his medication for Attention Deficit Disorder. He told me when he started the medication and that he was glad that he would be able to concentrate better in his classes. Initially, I was prepared to give Al's medication credit for his improved focus in school until I realized that there had been significant changes in my class before he was put on medication. I continued with my project because all the students seemed to be benefiting, and because William Glasser (1986, page 50) wrote, "Giving (students) a stimulant drug makes them feel as if they are satisfied, and for a while they tend to quiet

down. If, however, in this quiet period they do not learn more mature behaviors, the drug will cease to satisfy. Teachers should not be lulled into thinking that these students have been "cured" by a drug."

Comments on this set of sheets indicated that there was an improvement. Al "...has improved his behaviour and participation...(He) seems a little more settled in behaviour... better at times than in term 1...not as belligerent or aggressive."

The next journal writing session that Al attended was on April 14. In response to the question, "What do you like the best about this class?" Al wrote, "How people are open and can talk about everything or anything that is important to them." He also wrote that he would not change a thing about the class. When asked what he had learned about himself, Al wrote, "...that something that you think is bad can turn into something that you like."

Things continued to improve with Al. On April 28, Al wrote that he felt, "more confident, less worried about (his) appearance" and that he had "learned a lot of new things." When it came to taking risks in new activities, Al wrote that he was still "embarrassed" but that he learned to "laugh at (himself) and try anyway."

On May 11, I asked the students if they noticed significant changes in anyone. Nine of the students indicated that Al had the most improved attitude of anyone in the class. One said, "He sings a lot now." Another wrote, "He is more confident about (himself) and will now sing in class." Al felt "everyone (had) improved in everything." He also wrote, "Now I want to come to this class...It is one of my favourite classes now."



## **Observed Improvements in Group Dynamics**

One afternoon I took my class to watch a short drama presentation produced by another class. The audience did not produce the increased focus the drama teacher desired. The drama students did not take the presentation seriously and were rather ill-prepared. Upon returning to class, we talked about the presentation. One of my students said, "They weren't very mature, were they?" I thought that was significant considering in September, my class acted in a similar fashion when a performance was expected.

Another afternoon, the class was moving to the choir risers on one side of the room to perform their best piece. The piece had two parts, and each student knew which part they were expected to sing. Al stopped everyone and said, "People singing the first part stand on that end of the risers and everyone else on the other end." So, not only had he improved in his willingness to sing, his confidence in relating to the other students had also increased and he was beginning to develop some leadership ability.

On March 11, as I was doing attendance and the students were talking to each other and to me, I asked them to give me a minute to think because I had been involved in a rather heated discussion over a student just prior to the class. One student said, "Ms. B., it is so rare that you are not in a great mood that it brings me down." Another told me that I don't talk down to them; I speak to them "... as if we had a brain." Another said they listen to me because they like me not because they are made to listen. One girl remarked, "Every day we learn something; sometimes it's music, sometimes it's not but we always learn something." Al said, "Yeah, this is my favourite class." Another student

said, "We don't feel we have to pretend to be something we're not. We are accepted and special just the way we are." I was very moved to see them worrying about me. For a few days, I had been encouraging them to sing for the other music class scheduled at the same time as their class. After this conversation, they volunteered to sing for the other class. In retrospect, I wonder if they thought it would make me feel better.

My main method of data collection was journal writing. Students were very excited about the fact that I had bought them index cards and notebooks. One student asked whether I was doing journal writing with other classes. When I told him they were the only class, he said, "We really are special, aren't we?" I knew that if I wanted them to take more responsibility for their own learning, I had to help them believe that their opinions were valid. Asking them for their opinions, in their own words, was a means of increasing their feelings of self-worth.

## **Observed Improvements in Social Responsibility**

When I started this project, I only had the goal of improving the learning atmosphere in my grade nine vocal class. However, there were many added benefits. I saw my students develop an improved sense of social responsibility. Rarely did I have to deal with derogatory comments. Other students usually dealt with teasing and criticism. Regularly, the students tidied the piles of music and the room before leaving and without prompting from me. I saw increased tolerance and respect for each other. After all, if students are special, and treated with respect they learn to treat each other that way also. When setting dates for testing or other activities that they were not as happy about, they often decided to 'get

things over with' so they can go to do the things that they liked better. I believe that attitude shows an increased level of maturity. A couple of students decided that they would like to experiment with drama and drop music for a year. Both students subsequently changed their minds and switched their course selection back to music.

### **Conclusions**

The atmosphere in this vocal class improved more than that of any other class I have taught. In the past there have been many classes which started out on a really positive note and did not improve as much as this year's class. As a minimum activity, I intend to include journal writing on a weekly basis in my vocal classes. If the writing becomes a regular activity, I would hope that the need for directing questions would decrease as the comfort level of the students increased.

The index cards will also become a part of the course. I believe that everyone should have one hundred good things about themselves that they review everyday. The key is total honesty when writing the cards. Learning to be honest with myself is a very difficult lesson. I believe that helping students with that lesson will enrich their lives.

I realize that, having taught for seventeen years, there may be some things that I have begun to take for granted. The changes I witnessed this year have served to remind me that students always appreciate positive reinforcement. Even if I do not consciously work on self-esteem in my other music classes, positive comments about the progress of my students are always appreciated by them and by their parents. Lately, I may have fallen into the habit of pointing out areas for improvement without

remembering to first, compliment students on their progress.

I recognize that there is a danger of attributing too much to the activities done in my class this year. There is a strong possibility that the students would have developed naturally as a group as they gained confidence in the life of high school and, as they learned to trust each other and me. I am also aware that my attitude shifted. As I saw improvement in their treatment of each other and me, I am sure I saw the positive more readily and ignored the negative more often.

When I see a grade nine music class, I look at the students as a four or five year investment. If I can maintain a positive attitude toward music and, improve their readiness to learn, then the next three or four years will be affected. I took a chance that if there was slightly less curriculum covered in grade nine due to the activities I have described, the students would compensate for that either in grade nine or later due to their improved attitude in music class. However, during the year essential complicated concepts were mastered by the grade nines with which some grade ten vocal students are still struggling. A comparison of comprehension and retention will be a question for another action research project.

Later that year, my class asked me to perform for them. When I expressed my concern about nerves, one student piped up and said, "Why? Your singing voice is not who you are, you know?" They finally understood what I had been working for all year. I had hoped that they would achieve their potential as singers. However, the fact that some understood the motive behind our classroom activities, went beyond my expectations.

As a result of my year with this class, I have been reminded not to underestimate adolescents. Their abilities are almost limitless as long as they believe in themselves. Time spent helping them feel better about who they are has paid back immeasurably in their improved attitude toward learning and towards school, in general.

Action research has allowed me to validate my philosophy of education—remembering to teach the child as well as the subject. I hope that short-term setbacks will be compensated by the development of life-long learners with a more positive attitude about themselves.

### **Reflections on the Process of the Study**

I did not substantially change the focus of my study as the year progressed. My question remained the same. However, I

adjusted the questions for journal writing depending on the atmosphere within the class and, the interactions of the students between journal days. The questions were designed to help the students recognize the maturing and growing that they were doing. They were probably vaguely aware of the changes taking place within them, but asking them to articulate those changes in writing, meant they could not pretend that they were not growing.

The only change I made in my initial plan was the addition of the Compliment Sheets to help the students become more aware of the perceptions of other people. I realized that they were not automatically applying the things that they had learned about themselves. By making them aware of their own growth, I hoped to help them develop self-confidence and help them improve their dealings with other people.

### **Resources**

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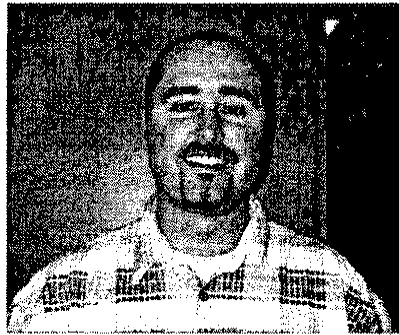
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**Cheryl Black, GEDSB, 2001**

*PC Concepts 10-01*

# Student Led Conferencing

Todd Bannister



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Todd is a Grade 6 teacher at Banbury Heights Elementary School in Brantford. While Todd was conducting parent-teacher interviews the previous year, he began to reflect on his communication with parents. Prompted by questions from parents, he decided to do something about it the following year.

He believes that effective home and school communication is the key to building success. Todd began the action research with the goal of fostering a positive and productive three-way partnership that allowed the teacher, parent and child to focus on the child's learning.

## SUMMARY

### 1. Focus:

Will using Friday Response Journals and three-way conferencing create a strong communication partnership between student, parent and teacher that will help improve student learning?

### 2. Process:

#### 2.1 Rationale:

- Information on student newsletter not getting to parents.
- Wanted to create newsletter interest by focusing on student achievement.

#### 2.2 Steps:

- Students identify strengths, weaknesses and goals.
- Students write in Friday response journals.
- Parents comment and sign journals.
- Three-way student led interviews conducted.
- Students surveyed.

### 3. Findings:

1. Friday Response Journals and three-way conferencing increased communication between parent and child regarding school events and student learning.
2. Students realized how important identifying weaknesses and creating action plans are in order to improve learning.
3. Most students were able to provide examples of when they used the Friday Response Journals to help them improve one of their academic weaknesses.
4. There were mixed results when students were asked if they liked the Friday Response Journals. Some students did not like the process because their parents were more interested and involved in the events happening at school and their academic progress.
5. Twenty of twenty-four students consistently returned their journals each week and an average of five parents make comments in the journal.

## PROJECT

I believe that effective home and school communication is the key to building a three-way partnership between parent, student and teacher. When this partnership is in place, all three members can focus on the student and their learning. My goal as an educator is to foster a positive and productive three-way partnership in order to facilitate student learning.

An event that occurred last year during parent teacher interviews made me reflect upon my communication methods with parents and my ability to create effective home and school communication. While conducting a parent teacher interview, I was requested by a parent to provide them with advance notice for tests. The parent wanted to ensure that their child was adequately preparing for the classroom tests. I asked the parent if they had received the weekly newsletter that had been sent home in their child's Friday file. After the parents agreed that they had received the weekly newsletters, I informed them that the newsletter had a section entitled 'Dates to Remember', which outlined upcoming tests and assignments. After their initial embarrassment the parents revealed that their child tended to produce the newsletter Monday mornings and requested them to sign it as they were leaving for school.

After the interview I began to reflect upon my home and school communication methods. I wondered how many other parents signed the bottom section of the newsletter without reading the contents. I was receiving only a few parent comments on the newsletter which did little to dispel my concerns. When analyzing my classroom newsletter format I began to realize that the newsletter was full of classroom information but did not contain information regarding

individual student achievement. I was providing parents with detailed information regarding classroom happenings but I was neglecting individual student progress and accomplishments.

I decided to undertake an action research project to determine if I could create a partnership between parent, teacher and student that would improve student learning.

My action research project will attempt to answer the following question. Will using Friday response journals and three-way conferencing create a strong communication partnership between student, parent and teacher that will help improve student learning? My project includes two components that will be used to create the three-way partnership to improve student learning.

### **1. Three-way conferencing:**

During the report card interviews, students were placed at the center of the process. Students were responsible for identifying their strengths and weaknesses. They were required to set personal goals and create a plan of action to achieve these goals. I was hoping to build a real partnership focused on students and their learning. By including the student in the interview process, the parent, teacher and student all hear the same message therefore all parties can work together to help the student attain their learning goals.

### **2. Friday Response Journals:**

The Friday response journal was created to keep the lines of communication open between the parent, student and teacher.

Each Friday, students would write in the journal using the following format:

- *Accomplishments*: Students would write about what they were studying in school during the past week.
- *Dates to Remember*: Students would list upcoming important dates such as project due dates, homework assignments, test dates, school events, etc.
- *Strengths and Weaknesses*: Students would list the areas of the curriculum that they had difficulties with and those areas that they found easy.
- *Action Plans*: Students would write a plan on how to improve their weak areas.

### 3. Putting the Plan into Action

My plan to create a partnership between parent, teacher and student that would improve student learning followed three steps.

#### Step 1 – Preparation for the Interview

Prior to the parent-teacher interview process the students were required to identify their academic strengths and weaknesses. Students were able to use the first term report card to assist in this process. I felt this exercise would be interesting because it would provide insight into the students' perceived abilities. Following the identification of their weaknesses the students created a plan of action (next step) to address their weak areas. The students were required to present this information at the interview, therefore each child participated in role-play activities to rehearse the information that they were going to present.

#### Step 2 – The Interview

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that each parent who attended the interview process was accompanied by their child. Each interview commenced with the student identifying their academic strengths. I believe that it is important to start the interview recognizing the students' strengths and accomplishments that were made during term one. Following the identification of their strengths the students outlined their academic areas of concern and explained their plan to address these weak areas. Parents were able to respond and state how they will assist their child in achieving their goals. The following are two examples of the interview process.

Student: *“One of my weaknesses is making eye contact during my oral presentations.”*

Action Plan: *“My plan is to write my notes on cue cards and practice my presentation at home.”*

Parents' response: *“To help you with your oral presentations we could practice your presentation aloud at home.”*

Student: *“My weakness is making facial expressions during dramatic plays.”*

Action Plan: *“I will practice my lines in front of a mirror.”*

Parents' response: *“We will practice your lines and I will give you feedback about your facial and body expressions.”*

#### Step 3– Friday Response Journals

I was initially concerned that the students would have a difficult time articulating their strengths, weaknesses and plans for improvement to their parents. To my surprise the majority of students were very comfortable discussing their strengths,

weaknesses and next steps. I walked away from the three-way conferences pleased and encouraged. The lines of communication between parent, student and teacher were opened. Continuing to keep the communication occurring was now my focus. Friday response journals were implemented in order to maintain the three-way partnership that was formed during the interview process. Students were required to write in the journal every Friday afternoon.

The journals were taken home over the weekend and returned Monday morning with parent comments and a signature. The Friday response journal was used for two purposes:

Inform the parents of events occurring in the classroom. Students would write about their accomplishments during the past week. Students would also include important dates to remember such as upcoming tests and assignment due dates.

Students would identify their academic strengths and weaknesses. They will also include action plans on how to improve those weak areas. Parents and the teacher can respond to the student in the journal about their weaknesses and action plans.

### **Students' Friday Response Entries**

The following are examples of students' entries in their journals. Each of the following students was able to identify a weakness and create a plan to address that weak area. Some students included how their parent or teacher could assist them in achieving their goal.

Kim: *"This week we did our oral presentations. I consider that to be my weakness. My plan to improve is by using cue cards and trying to memorize my report."*

Tyler: *"My weakness is not getting perfect on my spelling dictation. I am a good speller, but I can't get perfect. My plan is to take home my words and have my mom give the words so I can practice."*

Amanda: *"A weakness that I had this past week was division. My plan is to come to school early next week at 8:30 for some extra help."*

Carlee: *"My weakness is paragraph writing. My plan is to reread my stories to make sure that I have paragraphs and to remember to indent."*

### **Parents' Responses**

When the journals were returned to school on Monday mornings, I was encouraged that many parents responded in their child's journal. I was able to track parent responses and signatures in the journals and I discovered that twenty out of the twenty-four students in my class consistently returned their journal to school on Monday mornings with the minimum of a parent's signature. I was also able to track that each week, on average, five parents made comments in their child's journal regarding student learning. I received two responses from parents that made me realize that this process has been successful. One parent wrote that *"students being able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses is a strength in itself."*

Being able to reflect upon one's learning and identify strengths and weaknesses is a skill that most of the students in the class have mastered through the three-way conferencing and Friday response journal experience.

Another parent wrote that *"the journal helps the children to realize that it is normal to have strengths and weaknesses."*



This process provided the students with the opportunity to understand that each person has strengths and weaknesses. It allowed the students to realize that each person has weaknesses and that in order to improve weak areas it takes a plan of action and a perseverance attitude to evoke change.

Parents wrote in the journal for different purposes. They used the journal to comment on their child's ability to recognize their weaknesses and create plans to improve the weak areas. Others used the journal to ask me questions regarding their student's progress. The following are sample comments that the parents wrote in their child's Friday response journal:

*"It is good that Kim has taken the initiative to seek out extra help in math. The improvement that she has shown has given her pride. We are proud of her accomplishments."*

*"I enjoyed reading what my child perceived their strengths and weaknesses to be. I also like the idea of having students report on what they have accomplished for the week. It should help keep communication lines open. Normally when I ask what was done or learned I am told "nothing", "not much," or "I don't know." Even when asked specific questions about subjects the answer is very minimal and I am sure Mr. Bannister that you are teaching them something."*

*"Extra help this week has paid off in the fractions test. I admire you for knowing you needed to get extra help and then actually going to school early to get the help."*

The Friday response journal seemed to provide a forum to continue the three-way partnership that was created during the

parent-teacher interview. When I reflected upon the parent comments that I had received on last year's weekly newsletters to the Friday response journal comments, I was encouraged by the amount and quality of the responses that I was receiving regarding student learning. The next logical step for me was to determine how the students and parents felt about Friday response journals.

### Students' Survey

I administered a survey to the students in my class to determine their thoughts and feelings regarding Friday response journals. The following is a selection of questions and student responses.

*Have Friday response journals increased communication with your parents?*

*"The journal has improved communication because now my mom asks me questions about my strengths and weaknesses and how I am doing in school."*

*"My parents now like to ask me more questions about what we are learning in school."*

*Do you feel that it is beneficial for students to be able to identify their weaknesses?*

*"I think that it is a good idea because I write what my weakness is and I can make a plan to progress in that subject."*

*"I think that it's good to identify your weaknesses and create a plan so you can get better at the things that you aren't very good at."*

*"I think it does help because if your struggling it is good to make a plan to improve."*

*“Give examples of when you have been able to identify one of your weaknesses and create a plan to improve that weak area”.*

*“I did not know my multiplication facts very well and I improved by making a plan to get flash cards and practicing at home with my mom.”*

*“When we did division, I was not very good at it. I made a plan to come in for extra help and practiced a lot so I’m better at it now.”*

*“I have a problem with cooperating with others. I tried to improve that area by cheering other people during gym and helping them with their work.”*

*Do you like Friday Response Journals?*

*“Yes I do because if I am having trouble with a subject I write it in my journal and my parents help me improve that area.”*

*“I don’t like them because my parents always talk to me about school after they read it.”*

*“Yes, it gives my parents a better understanding of what is happening at school.”*

By reviewing the surveys I was able to draw the following conclusions:

- Friday response journals increased communication between parent and child regarding school events and student learning.
- Students realized how important identifying weaknesses and creating action plans are in order to improve their learning.
- Most students were able to provide examples of when they used the Friday response journal to help them improve one of their academic weaknesses.

- There were mixed results when the students were asked if they liked Friday response journals. Some students did not like the process because their parents were more interested and involved in the events happening at school and their academic progress.

The conclusions that I have drawn from the student surveys will have a great impact on my future teaching practices. By implementing Friday response journals I have achieved my goal of increasing communication between home and school regarding student learning.

The Friday response journals have provided a forum for students to list their accomplishments, state their weaknesses, and create plans to improve their weak areas. After this process students understand how important reflective thinking is when identifying their weaknesses. Friday response journals have also provided students with the confidence to be able to improve their learning.

### **Parents’ Survey**

I was very encouraged by the number of parents who responded to the child’s plans for academic improvement. I conducted a parent survey to determine their thoughts and feelings regarding Friday response journals.

*Have Friday response journals helped to keep you informed of events happening in the classroom?*

*“I think that it is a good way for the parents to know what their child is working on in class and their strengths and weak areas.”*

*“Thanks to that information I now know where my daughter’s weak areas are and what is going on in class.”*

*“The Friday response journal helps with discussions about school and to know how my child feels about school.”*

*“The children can identify their strengths and weaknesses as well as giving the parent a chance to respond to this in the journal.”  
Have you used Friday response journals to assist your child in improving their weak areas?*

*“When weaknesses are mentioned in the journal, I take the opportunity to discuss with her possible causes and solutions.”*

*“We use the response journal to assist our child in improving his grades and understanding his weaknesses and how they can be improved.”*

*“We worked on the math grids to improve multiplication scores once the weak area was identified.”*

### **Conclusions:**

My research project has proved that effective home and school communication is the key to building a three-way partnership between student, parent and teacher in order to improve student learning. Three-way conferencing and Friday response journals have been instrumental in helping me create a productive three way partnership that is focused on the student and their learning.

I truly believe that the students now realize that being able to recognize their weaknesses and create a plan to improve these weaknesses is a valuable skill to have. Through the use of Friday response journals and three-way conferencing I was able to demonstrate improved communication between home and school.

Parental involvement in this process is essential in order to improve student learning. A parent’s signature in a student’s journal does not equal parental involvement in student learning. For a parent to take the time to read their child’s journal and comment on their plans for improvement shows a commitment towards their child’s learning.

This action research project has provided me with valuable insight into the importance of home and school communication and its impact on student learning.

**Todd Bannister, GEDSB, May 2001**

*PC Concepts 10/01*

# Creating a Positive Classroom Environment and Promoting Academic Achievement While Managing Several Extreme Behavioural Challenges

Donna Howey



*Donna Howey  
Grade1-2 Teacher  
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## **ABSTRACT:**

As a classroom teacher entering her fourth year at F.C. Bodley, I was fully aware of what I would be faced with. I was no longer naive enough to think that I might have an easier class this year. I knew that the support personnel was diminishing due to cutbacks, while the number of children in my class who would need support was staying the same or rising. I was already aware of one child I would be teaching who was severely oppositional to authority and whose parents were not pleased with the way the principal or his previous teacher had dealt with his behaviours (although I knew both the principal and the teacher to be extremely caring, competent professionals). To be an effective teacher in this situation, I knew I would have to have an even better plan than last year and make use of the supports in the system that were available.

### 1. a) The Situation:

In September of 2000, I was starting my fourth year at F.C. Bodley School, my ninth year of teaching school. I was again teaching the grade 1/2 split class, as I had been the previous three years. The province's public education system had recently undergone many cutbacks and changes that were basically forced upon the school boards by the majority Harris Conservative Government. I, like many teachers, was feeling the strain of coping with rapid change that had been forced upon me without sufficient training or support.

I had worked hard over the past three years. Learning the new Ontario Provincial Curriculum meant reading it through, reflecting on my current Grade 1/2 program, deciding what changes and additions were necessary, then developing and acquiring the necessary teaching units and materials. At the same time, I wanted to ensure that I was still maintaining developmentally appropriate practice. Together with the other Grade One teacher, who is a wonderful person to plan and teach collaboratively with, I developed units for the new Science curriculum. I worked at learning Guided Reading and developing a balance literacy program within my class. I developed math centers to support math lessons. After repeating the process of "Plan-Do-Review" several times, I felt I was on top of the curriculum. I was now at the stage of refining and polishing programs and yet, I was discontent. I still remembered the extreme frustrations of the past three years. I knew I would be facing a fourth year of struggle. I knew that the students who would make up my class would present challenges that even an expert in classroom management would find difficult.

### 1. b) School profile:

F.C. Bodley School has a student population of about 220, a principal, 8 classroom teachers, a French teacher, a Learning Resource Teacher, 1 full-time Educational Assistant and 1 full-time secretary. The average household income for the school's community is third from the bottom of all schools in the Grand Erie District School Board. Many families are on social assistance. Many other families are working for low wages and struggling to support themselves. The Children's Aid Society, Access Brant, the police and the legal system are often involved with families in the F.C. Bodley School area.

Each school year, a part of the student population changes. Families have their children switch schools at any point in the school year. This is due to their need to find inexpensive rental housing after being evicted from their current accommodations, likely for failing to pay the rent or due to changes in their family situation. These families often do not have personal transportation and so are unable to transport their children to the school they started at in September. Some children attend two or more schools within a school year. This lack of stability seriously affects some children's academic and social progress.

At F.C. Bodley there are also many stable families who nurture their children to the best of their abilities. Unfortunately, the high percentage of children who come from difficult social or difficult economic situations means that many children did not receive sufficient or appropriate pre-school training. Their development is behind both socially and academically. The life experiences of some of these children would be considered tragic by most people's standards. This often translates into behaviour that is inappropriate and disruptive in the classroom.

## Why I Had to Take Further Affirmative Action

Over the past three years at F.C. Bodley, I had become increasingly frustrated over the unfair amount of time I spent with behaviourally challenged children. There was a good school plan to reward desirable behaviours. Undesirable behaviours were dealt with by helping children through a problem solving process and consequences were in place and enforced. However, the undesirable behaviours still took up an unfair proportion of my time.

I believe every person is important. I want to help each child develop. I believe the classroom should be an inviting place with challenges for all ability levels. I believe it should be a place that children feel secure to participate and risk making mistakes without fear of ridicule. I believe that children need high self-esteem to achieve and do well for themselves. I believe that as children develop skills and those skills are recognized and celebrated, self-esteem naturally develops. I believe that "fair" is not treating everyone the same, but giving each child what they need to help them develop.

I also felt very strongly that it was unfair to the majority of students, who are willing, cooperative learners, that their classroom be dominated by inappropriate behaviours

which were counterproductive to learning. It was unfair to me, as a caring, energetic teacher who is seeking personal excellence both for herself and for her students. It was unfair that so much of my time be spent on behaviourally challenged children while others who are willing but struggling, are left without enough teacher support. Some teachers may have been able to accept that this is "the way it is". I was not willing to. I was determined not to let a few students ruin the opportunity for success for the majority of my class. I was determined not to let a few students ruin my enthusiasm for teaching and learning. I was determined to learn how to be compassionate and continually re-inviting to behaviourally challenged children without becoming overly emotionally involved (which only hurts me as a person and makes me less effective as a teacher).

I knew I would need to build on my current strengths, to develop new strategies, to assess the effectiveness of strategies attempted and to make revisions as I went along. I knew I would also need the support of colleagues. To this end, I joined the Brantford Area Action Research Group, began journalling and developed this project.

## 2. Focus: My Action Research Question

*How can I best accommodate behaviourally challenged children while still maintaining a classroom environment that is positive and helps the willing majority to achieve the curriculum expectations to the best of their ability?*

### 3. Process: The Way Forward - The Plan:

My plan had several components. I did not put timelines on all of the components of the plan. They are listed below in random order. Most components of the plan went through an ongoing process of “plan-do-review” throughout the year. The exception is the idea of “acceptable classroom behaviour“. It was necessary for me to stand firmly with my concept of acceptable classroom behaviour, in order for the students to maintain a clear sense of what is expected from them.

*Note:* I decided I would continue to teach the grade 1/2 curriculum in the ways that I had developed over the past 3 years. I had developed a program that addressed the curriculum and the nature of the child at this stage of personal development.

#### 3.1. My Attitude

I recognize that as the teacher of the class, it will be my attitude that takes the lead. I shape the classroom climate through my attitude. I want to be resilient enough to not let the challenging behaviours of some students alter my disposition. I want to smile, be positive, model desirable behaviour, praise desirable behaviour, try my best everyday, be patient, not expect myself to be perfect (an oxymoron to this list), not expect the students to be perfect, and be willing to try hard again the next day, even after failures.

I want to follow through with the strategies that are known to help most children learn appropriate school behaviour. When the strategies fall through, I want to apply the forewarned consequences calmly and consistently. It is impossible to exhibit this attitude all of the time. However, this is what I currently envision as the ideal attitude for myself and I am going to work towards achieving it, in the best way I can.

#### 3.2 Acceptable Classroom Behaviour

a) There is already a school wide Code of Conduct which outlines expected behaviours, a description of unacceptable behaviours and a list of consequences that will be applied

according to the severity of the misbehaviour. The principles of this Behaviour Code of Conduct are applied throughout the school (see appendixes).

b) Each year in my class, I make up a list of “Things We Do to Help us Learn and Get Along”. My class and I create this collaboratively together each year; although I have the most influence over how the list is created.

It will have the following components:

- Do what you are expected to do (participate in the teaching/learning process).
- Be where you are expected to be.
- Use materials when and how you are asked to use them.
- Listen to the teacher’s instruction.
- Try your best.

c) From that list we create a few rules that will encompass all of the desirable behaviours. Most students are able to comply with classroom expectations, once they have learned the classroom routines for entering, exiting, moving through the school using facilities and materials, how to talk during whole group times, small group time and individual work time.

d) Any behaviours that are unsafe, unfair or disruptive to learning are not tolerated. Anything outright dangerous or injurious results in immediate consequences (see # 8).

#### 3.3 Learn About the “Behaviourally Challenged” Children

The students whom I would term “behaviourally challenged” are those whose inability to respond appropriately is frequent and disruptive in nature. They may have trouble controlling their movement or their talking. They may be dangerous or abusive to themselves or to others.

For students such as these, I will speak to their former teachers, the Learning Resource Teacher, the principal and the secretary to try to get some background information. I will also go through their Ontario Student Record to find out the student's personal academic history. I will be looking for clues. What experiences are in this child's history that are possible contributors to behaviour problems? This information will help me to make decisions about which strategies and supports may be appropriate to achieve more desirable behaviour.

### **3.4 Make Contacts with the Parents of the "Behaviourally Challenged" Children**

It is good practice to make contact with all the parents of one's students. The closer to the beginning of the school year, the better. In the case of "behaviourally challenged" children, an early contact is essential. First, I intend to contact these parents promptly. Prior to making the contact, I will plan the message I would like to get across during the first meeting. My first message will be that it is important for home and school to work together for the benefit of the child who needs to learn to behave appropriately at school.

Secondly, I will also express my concern about specific behaviours, my willingness to accommodate, encourage and support the child through this learning experience.

Thirdly, I also intend to listen carefully to the parents' opinions, attitudes and any background information they are willing to give me. This information could be invaluable in making decisions about which accommodations and strategies may be effective.

Lastly, I will set a timeline with the parents. This will ensure that we check with each other and maintain communication about their child's progress. It may become necessary to have a joint meeting with the L.R.T., the principal, the parents and myself. This will be

decided upon according to the severity of the problems we encounter with the student.

### **3.5 Make Contacts with All of the Appropriate Resource People Within the School and System**

In order to manage several extreme behavioural challenges within a class and still have a positive classroom that promotes academic success, I will need the support of my colleagues, administrators and several consultants. The first step is to make the L.R.T. and the principal aware of students with extreme problems. They will likely be aware of them already, as their behaviour often draws attention beyond the classroom. These students will likely need to be put on the agenda for the monthly "School Resource Team Meeting". A Special Education Consultant, a Psychological Services representative and a Board Social Worker will be at the meeting along with the principal, the L.R.T. and myself, the classroom teacher. This meeting is an opportunity to for everyone to share information about the student of concern. Methods currently being used to manage the situation are shared.

Next steps, such as strategies, tests and contacts will be discussed and decided upon. A timeline will be set to carry out these next steps. The same child may need to reviewed at "team meetings" several times throughout the year.

### **3.6 Journal Writing**

As suggested by the Action Research Group leader, Cheryl Black, I am going to keep a personal journal about my teaching experiences. This is a way to tell the daily classroom stories, express my feelings about events at school, to reflect on the successes and failures of strategies tried and to develop new plans in hope of future successes. At the end of the year, my journal will become evidence of what has transpired over the course of the year



### 3.7 Read Related Literature and Documents

As an attitude refresher, I will re-read parts of "Inviting School Success" by Purkey and Novak and "Kids Are Worth It" by Barbara Coloroso. I will review my file with articles on behaviour and conditions affecting behaviour. I will look for new information and articles that will be relevant to the children that I will be dealing with this year.

### 3.8 Decide on Appropriate Behaviour Accommodations and Ways to Track Their Success

- a) I will use the following classroom management strategies:
- strong routines for all transitions
  - consistent expectations
  - interesting programming
  - tasks designed to meet the varied ability levels of students
  - smiles, praise, complimenting desirable behaviours so that others can copy it
  - encouragement
  - speed challenges
  - group points and prizes
  - treats and privileges
- b) When students are behaving inappropriately but not dangerously, I will use the strategies as outlined in the "Allowable Program Accommodations Resource Guide" (see appendixes). This guide is

included in our school staff handbook and contains a comprehensive list of strategies that may be used and are proven to be effective. I will try the "accommodations that are available to all" before moving to the "intensive individual accommodations" which often require additional human and/or physical resources.

- c) When students are physically dangerous I will make use of the systems in place at F.C. Bodley. The F.C. Bodley School Withdrawal Record clearly outlines the progression of consequences (see appendixes). It will be important to follow through with the record keeping and consistently apply the consequences.
- d) When students are defiant, continuously disruptive, or disrespectful I will make use of the "1, 2, 3 Magic" system. I will attempt in-class timeout if the student will comply. Should these methods fail, I will again resort to the F.C. Bodley School Withdrawal Record.
- e) For students who are "behaviorally challenged" I will track their behaviour daily, possibly even on the ¼ day. I will devise a checklist for each "behaviorally challenged" student after a pattern of typical behaviours has emerged. This should ease record keeping and will act as proof of changes, developments and patterns of behaviour.

## 4. Implementing the Plan

Throughout the year, I stuck to the plan. I will comment on how the year progressed for each component of the plan.

### 4.1 My Attitude

I was able to maintain a positive attitude most of the time. I occasionally slipped into despair by the end of the day, but was able to come back again the next day and start with a fresh attitude.

### 4.2 Acceptable Classroom Behaviour

As expected, the majority of students were able to comply with the standard of behaviour that is expected in the classroom. Seven students had daily trouble staying within the expectations. Five of those seven had difficulties that interfered in dangerous and continuously disruptive ways.

### 4.3 Learn About the "Behaviourally Challenged" Children

I was able to quickly acquire background information about each of the children who presented serious challenges. Every one of the students who was unable to behave appropriately had difficult life experiences. These difficulties included learning troubles, abuse, parents in jail, neglect, financial troubles, Satanic cult experiences and ill-handled divorces.

With this knowledge, I considered the needs of each student and I was then able to decide which strategies would likely work best for each student (i.e., a child new to the community and suffering from lack of parental attention was invited in early each day to help with class jobs).

### 4.4 Make Contacts with the Parents of "Behaviourally Challenged" Children

I initiated contacts with each of the parents.

In one case, the parents worked with me throughout the year and their child has gone on to

be my most academically improved student. His behaviours have greatly progressed, as well.

In three cases, the parents agreed to work with me and maintained contact at appropriate times throughout the year (after extreme behaviours, changes in behaviour, reports, before class trips, etc.). One of these students has improved his behaviour tremendously, with only occasional slip ups. The other two continue to have difficulty complying, but have not gotten worse and have shown acceptance of the expectations.

In one other case, the parent did not have a phone and although she met with me and agreed to our plan to help her child, she put delays in the plan throughout the year and avoided communicating unless she had a need. Unfortunately, it took until the school expressed their intent to suspend and to notify the attendance counselor, until the parent followed through on the plans. Improvements came about for her child after this, but he is still far from being able to comply consistently.

In the worst case, the parents agreed to meet with us occasionally, but they blamed the school, teachers and administration for the difficulties their child was having. They spoke slanderously about the teacher and principal in front of their child. They confused the child, myself, the LRT, the principal and other supports with their frequent changes of intent. Mom was spying on the classroom from the hallway and interrupting the class when she felt appropriate. After many necessary suspensions, the parents sought medical intervention, which has been very effective for the child. The parents are fighting the identification that was assigned their child at IPRC and they will not sign his IEP.

#### **4.5 Make Contacts with All of the Appropriate Resource People Within the School and System**

I quickly made the principal and LRT aware of the students who were struggling with proper behaviour. Three students were put on the agenda of "School Resource Team Meetings". This led to further testing and services that I would not be able to access on my own. The Psychological Services person, the Social Worker and the Special Education Consultant came in to my class to observe. I continued to track behaviours and I continued to make them aware of the ongoing and new problems I was encountering in the classroom.

As a result, I was allotted support in the form of an Educational Assistant every other afternoon and an extra teacher working with me every Tuesday and Thursday morning.

#### **4.6 Journal Writing**

I found that writing in my journal was a good outlet for the negative emotional energy that sometimes built up over the course of a day. Although I did vent to colleagues and my partner at home, I believe that journalling is a more fair way to express frustrations. The negative expression usually led to ideas for improving my handling of the situation next time, or avoiding a repeat of it. I enjoyed brainstorming new ideas in my journal. Some of the successes I experienced were also recorded through my journal writing.

#### **4.7 Read Related Literature and Documents**

Reading materials related to the challenges I as facing helped me in several ways. Even when I had read the piece before, I still found it beneficial because it strengthened my resolve to proceed in the appropriate professional manner.

#### **4.8 Decide on Appropriate Behaviour Accommodations and Ways to Track Their Success**

My planned classroom management strategies remained consistent throughout the year.

The accommodations were decided upon, tried, discussed with the LRT and Principal, then modified where necessary. This was an ongoing process.

The plan of using "1,2,3 Magic" for defiant, disruptive or disrespectful students who are not dangerous, worked very well. The students learned that I was insisting on their compliance and they knew they would receive the consequence if I had to get to "3".

The plan of using the "F.C. Bodley School Withdrawal Record" for dangerous behaviours also worked well. Unfortunately, repeated formal suspensions were necessary for two students and one time suspensions were necessary for three other students.

The plan to track behaviour daily for those with severe problems was effective in the beginning. I did develop checklists for three students. After the first couple of months, I eased up on the daily tracking, took a break and tracked again a few months later. I did keep records of extreme behaviours in the interim.

## 5. Evidence of the Positive Classroom Environment

A questionnaire was devised and distributed to colleagues who are familiar with my daily teaching practice (see appendixes).

A different questionnaire was devised for parents to complete (see appendixes).

A third questionnaire was devised for the students (see appendixes). In a different classroom, the questions were read to the students by a teacher known to them, but not Ms. Howey. Their answers were tape recorded.

The responses were read and listened to. They were then categorized as positive or negative and compiled below.

### a) From Colleagues

#### POSITIVE PRACTICES:

- class rewards, group points system, check marks, stickers
- attitude remains positive despite what is going on
- gives students another chance the next day, doesn't hold grudges
- recognizes positive behaviours
- patience
- maintains fairness
- instructions are clear and to the point
- high energy
- children respect her
- organized
- children feel good about themselves

#### WAYS TO IMPROVE PRACTICE:

- help students to have materials ready before settling into student work times
- during student work times, take time for individuals to share what they have accomplished so far (this may help to motivate and keep others on track)
- make use of a social skills program such as Lion's Quest

### b) From Parents

#### POSITIVE PRACTICES:

- uses music, songs and games to keep learning interesting
- good with the kids
- plays with the class
- talks to the students personally

- my child likes her as a teacher (several responses)
- my child thinks she is a good teacher
- class trips
- prizes
- showing things
- nice
- helpful
- funny

#### NEGATIVE PRACTICES:

- gets angry
- gives detention
- yells

### c) From Students

#### POSITIVE PRACTICES;

- the teacher helps us (many similar responses)
- "I like learning"
- the teacher encourages us with words (many responses)
- fun
- the teacher cares that we don't get hurt
- the teacher "goes around and gets us into it"
- winks at me "I think that means that we're friends"
- "school is a good place to learn"
- "we do fun things"
- "she's a wonderful teacher"

#### NEGATIVE PRACTICES:

- yells
- sends people out of the class

## 6. Evidence of Management of Behavioural Challenges

A questionnaire was devised and distributed to **colleagues** who are familiar with my daily teaching practice (see appendixes).

A different questionnaire was devised for **parents** to complete (see appendixes).

A third questionnaire was devised for the students (see appendixes). In a different classroom, the questions were read to the students by a teacher known to them, but not Ms. Howey. Their answers were tape recorded.

The responses were read and listened to. They were then categorized as positive or negative and compiled.

**a) From Colleagues (principal, teaching partners, Educational Assistant):**

**POSITIVE PRACTICES**

- consistent follow through on what she says she will do
- expresses her needs to the class
- appropriate use of supports
- insistence on having behaviourally challenging children recognized and dealt with
- consistent, clear expectations
- adapting and accommodating for students with behaviour problems

**b) From Supply Teachers:**

- some have refused to come to my Grade One/Two Class
- every supply teacher has left a note about the poor behaviours of many students (the usual seven were always on that list)

**c) From Parents:**

- controlled the class well despite the unfair situation of having so many behaviour problems

**d) From Students:**

- students expressed the following range of feelings when classmates are misbehaving: nervous, sad, upset, impatient, angry and good
- students repeatedly expressed their concerns to me (ie., "Ms. Howey doesn't deserve that treatment)
- several students expressed the desire for all students to behave properly

## 7. Evidence of Academic Achievement in the Class

Samples of the student's work from September and June could be included in this section. Since learning to read independently is of utmost importance in Grades One and Two, I selected a measure of their sight word vocabulary. From both my own and other teacher's experience, I have found reading ability to be strongly related to academic success in the primary grades. I have also found sight vocabulary to be strongly related to overall reading ability.

Below is the data compiled on the student's Dolch Sight Word Vocabulary.

STUDENT	# of words in November	# of words in June	Change
S.L.	25	162	+137
T.F.	5	164	+159
N.L.	4	44	+40
J.F.	22	154	+132
D.M.	27	213	+186
D.H.	33	216	+183
A.F.	3	65	+62
E.T.	15	126	+111
B.L.	3	94	+91
C.P.	38	202	+164
A.R.	98	216	+118
C.G.	38	116	+78
D.R.	73	151	+78
J.P.	35	187	+152
T.G.	62	146	+84
T.J.	121	209	+88
R.J.	100	210	+110
D.S.	112	198	+86
R.P.	17	134	+117
K.M.	25	159	+134
C.P.	1	7	+6

For the "Dolch Word Sight Vocabulary Test", students who arrived later in the year were not included as there would be no measure of their growth.

Between November and June:

- All 21 students included showed growth.
- 19 of the 21 learned more than 50 new sight words.
- 12 of the 21 learned more than 100 new sight words.
- 4 of the 21 learned more than 150 new sight words.

The following evidence of teaching practice that promotes academic achievement was gathered through the questionnaires which were distributed to colleagues and parents. Evidence from the oral questionnaire which the students answered on tape is also included below.

**a) From Colleagues:**

- variety of reading strategies used
- hands-on, active learning
- excellent questioning
- challenges students with the curriculum
- variety of types of lessons and assignments

**b) From Parents:**

- my child has learned a lot
- my child has improved in reading, spelling and math
- keeps parents informed on what their child needs help with
- my child likes being taught math in the way that she teaches it
- doing lots of math
- helps students with their seatwork

**c) From Students:**

- several students expressed that the teacher “helps us learn”
- fun games help us learn
- she gives us challenging work, but if we don’t get it right its okay
- like the word wall lists
- doing the work
- math facts
- several students mentioned, that the teacher comes around and helps us
- learning songs
- gives us role models of what we should be doing
- explains
- gives us hints

## 8. Conclusions

I know that my objectives were high and the resulting classroom environment was less than I consider desirable. It is difficult to relax in a room when there are children whose behaviour is totally inappropriate and even dangerous. At times, these children end up controlling how much teaching and learning will happen. Despite these facts, I believe that the overall atmosphere in my classroom was positive! The responses of the students, the parents and my colleagues indicate that it is a positive learning environment.

With so much time, energy and consideration put into behaviour management, I was pleased that I was able to maintain the focus on academic learning. Helping these children develop skills and knowledge has been a strong source of satisfaction for me. I know from test results, comparative work samples and personal observations that every student has improved. I am particularly thrilled with the progress of many students in reading and writing!

As a teacher and a person, I have learned a lot about my character. I have learned to be compassionate without being overly emotionally involved. This lesson has taken me several years. I am resilient to the stresses that students place on me. So many other teachers and supply teachers have said to me, "I don't know how you do it!" or "You deserve a medal for teaching this group." Strangely, that reassures me and makes me recognize my strengths. Most of the time, I am able to handle inappropriate behaviour situations

calmly, consistently and effectively. I have gained further confidence that I will be able to handle the situations that teaching presents me with. However, I will not seek out difficult situations, as they are a strain on the emotions.

The plan of action was necessary and effective. I would do it the same way again. I would change my expectations for results. I now know that I followed through with the plan because it is the professional way to teach a class. That does not mean that the desired results will be yielded with every student.

I better recognize and appreciate the limits of my influence. Trying harder or being a "better teacher" would not change some of the inappropriate incidences that occurred.

I know that several students have personal histories that have had lasting damaging effects on them. I recognize their disadvantages and my inability to correct that for them. I despair at times, and yet, I know I am a positive influence on their lives. The largest influence at this point in their young lives is still their home environment. What they are born into is their lot in life, as it is for us all (consider George Bush). It will be up to them as they grow, to decide how they will react to their life situation. When they are older, their decisions and actions can change their lives for the better (or worse). In the meantime, I try to provide them with encouragement, positive guidance and skills that will help them along the way.



## 9. Comments about this Action Research Project

My project started out very informally. I was looking for support and input as I was striving to do well with a difficult teaching situation. I was hoping by looking at my situation from a "study" point of view, that I would keep things in perspective. I really didn't consider that I was going to write it all up formally.

A definite weakness in the project is the methodology of data collection and analysis. The questionnaire needed to have the questions revised. More specific questions may have yielded more telling data. Statements with a rating scale response may have better addressed the questions.

Despite the weaknesses in the questionnaire format, I really liked the tape recorded student answers. It was revealing and enjoyable to hear the student's responses in their own voices.

Some students have amazingly clear insight into the causes of behaviour problems (i.e., "some kids have hard problems with their parents and stuff", "I've been bad yes, but I have improved. I haven't been suspended again....I close my eyes and lay down on my desk - it calms me down.")

**Donna Howey, GEDSB, May 2001**

*PC Concepts 10/01*

The students idealism is nice to see (i.e., "I would change yelling, all the teachers would be nice to the students and all of the students would be nice to the teachers.", "I would change the student's behaviour" , "This would be a better place by everyone being good. Send all the bad people out and keep the good people.")

The students showed empathy for the teacher's position in situations with improper behaviour (i.e., "I feel sorry for Ms. Howey because she doesn't deserve that treatment").

At times, the students perspective provided amusement (i.e., "If she didn't tell us what to do, we would just be sitting there doing nothing.")

The students responses also provided me with personal reward (i.e., "She encourages us a lot when we're a bit sad while we're doing our school work.", "I also like listening to the teacher because sometimes it makes me real happy.", "she's a wonderful teacher!").

June 11, 2001

Dear Parents:

I am continuing to work towards improving student learning by improving the way I organize our class and by improving my teaching methods. Your honest answers to the following questions will help me to understand the school experience from the perspective of my students and their parents.

**Please finish the following sentences in your own words**

1.) "Ms. Howey should keep on ... (list things she does that help learning and make school pleasant)

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2.) "I don't like it when Ms. Howey .... (list things that Ms. Howey does that you don't like)

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Does she do this often?            Yes    No

Why do you think she does this?

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What should she do instead?

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3.) "I would like it if Ms. Howey started to .....

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4.) "Ms. Howey is the kind of teacher that ...

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**Please use the space below to add any additional comments you may have regarding your child's school experience this year.**

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\*Your name and signature is optional.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(student's name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(parent's name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(parent's signature)

### Student Interview

Students in Ms. Howey's Grade 1/2 class 2000-2001, were interviewed in another classroom by another teacher. Their answers were tape recorded. Prior to being asked the questions, the students were told the following:

"Ms. Howey is working on making school a good place for students to learn and teachers to teach. She would like your honest opinions when you answer these questions. She will use your answers to help herself learn about the student's experiences at school."

- 1.) What does your teacher say that helps you learn?
- 2.) What does your teacher do that helps you learn?
- 3.) What does your teacher do to show you she cares?
- 4.) How do you feel when other students misbehave?
- 5.) Is it hard for you to behave appropriately at school? When? Why do you think it is hard for you?
- 6.) What would you change about school if you had the power?
- 7.) What do you like about school?
- 8.) What do you wish was different about school?
- 9.) What does your teacher do that encourages you to try hard at your schoolwork?
- 10.) Who in your class has improved their behaviour at school this year?

# Student Led Conferencing

Deb Kekewich



*Deb Kekewich  
Grade 7 Teacher  
Cedarland School*

Deborah Kekewich has worked as a teacher of all grades from one to eight in four different Boards (including a year in Australia) over her career. She has also worked as a Project Consultant with the Toronto Board of Education, a workshop leader, and has written student textbooks and teacher resource books for Nelson Publishing.

## SUMMARY

**FOCUS:** “How can I improve my practice to help my students think and talk about themselves as learners? (13 boys/ 14 girls)”

### Process:

**1. Rationale:**

- Saw the process in Australia and wanted to duplicate it
- Wanted to improve learning in EQAO areas of weakness on the Grade 6 test, specifically
- explaining work and problem solving.

**2. Steps:**

- Worked on reasoning skills using a ‘Friday Journal’ as a learning log
- Used the portfolio to evaluate growth
- Used the three-way conferencing strategy with parent/student/teacher

### 3. Findings:

1. Reflective practice, portfolios, and three-way conferencing are all excellent techniques.
2. The journal/portfolio/student-led conference process helped to involve parents.
3. The parents must support what is happening in the classroom and be wholeheartedly involved in their child's learning.
4. Communication about school between parent and student increased. Seven of twelve respondents said the change was *dramatic*.
5. *Twenty* students improved in their March report card marks and *twenty-three* students thought they were better students than a year ago.



### The Dream:

#### Alice in Wonderland

Three years ago, I was fortunate enough to spend a year teaching Year 6 in Australia. Whilst I was there, I was introduced to new teaching, evaluating, and reporting practices. Also, I experienced a changed emphasis on the role of the portfolio and the format of the parent teacher interview.

In Australia, the students kept very detailed portfolios, complete with work samples, tests good and bad, self evaluations, peer evaluations, rubrics and other sorts of diagnostic and formative teacher assessments and evaluations. The Deputy V.P. sent us time line reminders for what needed to be in the portfolio. In the second term of four, close to midway through the year, the students began practising for the three-way conference that we were about to hold with their parent. On 'interview day' I was relieved from class and waited in the interview room as each student came, in turn, with their parent in tow. The parents and students then had a conference about the student's work. As the student used the portfolio to discuss his/her strengths, weaknesses, and next steps, the limelight was on the student. The parent, in all but one case, lavished extensive praise and

encouragement on their child and asked insightful questions that prompted even more thinking on the child's part. I was amazed at how smoothly it all went. Then I remembered that these parents and students had been doing this for six years, and for them, it was a totally natural method of communicating about school. I also remembered that I had done a good job facilitating the organization of the portfolio and the rehearsals for the conference! At any rate, I came away from the experience a true believer.

*"So, what did I do?"*

When I returned to Canada, I tried to put into practice some of the elements of the portfolio and the three-way conferencing technique. I felt, however, that I couldn't really do justice to either. In Australia, the students were very confident with thinking and talking about their learning, the report cards looked somewhat like rubrics and contained no grades, the portfolio carried more weight, and the parents expected a student conference, not a teacher interview.

This September, when the opportunity to be part of an action research team that asked the question, “How can I improve my practice by including student-led conferencing?” came along, I jumped at it. I was hoping I would be able to figure out ways to make the process work as well as it did in Australia. I was given a mentor, time out of my class to talk with other teachers, and the opportunity to attend workshops given by noted educators. I was very excited.

### **The Reality:**

#### One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

**Cast of Characters:** 13 boys, 14 girls in a straight Grade 7 class

**Location:** Cedarland Public School, Brantford, a K-8 suburban neighborhood school, with a mixture of single and double parent families, stay at home and working moms, and high, middle, and low income families

*“So, what did I do?”*

I went back to my classroom fired up and ready to work. We had already started our portfolios, but now I energetically refocused my students on their importance and how to use them. I conferenced with them about what they were choosing to include so far and discovered that they only wanted to put in pieces of work and tests that had very good marks. As a whole, the students couldn’t talk about the steps involved in completing the assignments, what they had learned, what they liked, what they might do better or anything other than that they got a good mark or a bad one. At this point I thought I should have joined the Portfolio Action Research Group. Then we got the EQAO results for my Grade 7 class and I thought I should probably be in the EQAO Action Research Group because my class scored quite low on explaining work and problem solving!

However, since I couldn’t change groups, I thought I’d better change my question to

*“How can I improve my practice to help my students think and talk about themselves as learners?”*

I was not going to give up on student/parent conferencing; I still intended to do that, but I needed to change my focus in order to help my students arrive at a stage where they actually would have something to say about their learning. Students cannot be expected to be able to reflect on their learning unless they are given many opportunities to do so orally, in writing, at school, and at home.

*“So, what did I do?”*, I:

- ✓ made a point of asking questions in every lesson that were metacognitive in nature
- ✓ specifically asked students to give me more oral and written explanations
- ✓ asked my students, “How do you know?” almost as much as “How are you?”
- ✓ repeatedly asked students to look at two similar pieces of work to notice and account for the differences between them
- ✓ resurrected a ‘Friday journal’ idea I had tried a few years before. This is a response/ learning log that is written to parents each week.
- ✓ kept a list of student generated questions (what did I do, how did I do it, what did I find easy and why, what did I find hard, and why, what did I learn from this, where can I use these skills/ideas again, what was I surprised by, where do I need to improve, and what will I do to make this happen, what is a goal I need to set, etc) on the board as a constant reference for student to use as they thought about their learning and wrote in their Friday Journals

- ✓ kept the portfolios growing and had students use them to self-evaluate and share with parents
- ✓ asked the students and parents to participate in a three-way conference in December, and parent-student portfolio conferences in March and June

### **The Challenge:**

#### They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Many of the things on my list I was already doing as a teacher, but because of the action research project, I made a conscientious effort to be extremely consistent and really document them well. However, the Friday Journal was a new concept for my students. It was going to be the centerpiece of my plan to give them the opportunity to enthusiastically reflect, write, and talk about their learning.

I introduced the Friday Journals to the twenty-three children in my Grade 7 class with an explanation that we would be writing in our journals once a week, taking them home on the weekend, sharing them with our parents, and returning them to school on Monday. It was not to be an accounting of events that happened during the week, but more of a letter to themselves and their parents explaining what they were learning, how they were learning, what they were doing well, and what they still needed to learn. I asked the parents to write back to their child, or at the very least, sign the journal to indicate that the journal had been read. Every Friday, I would give my students twenty to thirty minutes at the end of the day to write in their journal. I did not want it to be seen as just another piece of homework. Of course, they could write in it daily, and a few students did this. We talked about some of the things that could go into it, always emphasizing that it was not an agenda.

*"I remember awaiting the results on that first Monday with great excitement. I collected the journals and found that eighteen were written as agendas and three students had written it the way I had hoped. Twelve parents wrote back to their students, seven signed only, three did not sign, and two students didn't do or return their journals at all."*

I was discouraged and that day I wrote in my journal, "I am dis- ap- point- ed! Two years ago I introduced the Friday journal and I didn't do half as good a job and the kids did twice as good a job. Back to the drawing board"

We once again generated a list of questions that could be used to help write about our learning and this time posted them in our class. We tried again over the following weeks. Happily, during the course of the seven months that the students have been engaged in this activity, all but three of the participating students, with varying degrees of expertise, can now write about what they have learned, identify goals, strengths, weaknesses, and next steps, though not specifically in those terms.

I surveyed my parents in April and asked them questions around general communication with their child, and the Friday Journal in particular. Out of twenty-three students twelve parents completed the survey. All parents who comment in or sign the Friday Journal regularly returned the survey. From the responses, I learned that four parents found the first two pages of the Report Card and eight parents found the Friday Journal most helpful in facilitating talk with their child or learning about their child's strengths, weaknesses, and goals. Six parents found the conferencing and sharing of the portfolio the second most helpful practice, and two more selected the Friday journal as their second choice.



Why did parents like the Friday Journal? Eight out of the twelve responding parents found that communications with their child had improved

*"Karen tends to be more informative and personal when writing."*

*"I was surprised and pleased to see how knowledgeable Carly is with regards to her goals."*

*"I do feel the Friday Journal gives me more insight into his feelings and goals. I also see how much more he exerts himself. It is a very useful tool."*

*"We actually discuss the topics covered in that particular week. Instead of the usual question, "What did you do in school this week," and the usual answer, "Nothing much," we get a more thorough outline of what Chris is learning, and there have been quite a few topics that opened up more of a discussion. It also keeps Chris thinking about what he has done and what he has learned."*

I felt much happier now: *"Even though only 1/2 of my parents have responded to the survey, it shows me that those families have bought into the idea of the Friday journals and are enjoying improved communication about school."*

Also in April, I gave my students a quick written survey and had a co-op student interview them on video talking about their March report, the Friday journal, and themselves as learners.

All students who regularly complete the Friday Journal (20 out of 23) felt that it has helped them communicate with their parents. One student said,

*"the Friday Journal helps to keep me on track and to communicate with my*

*parents better. I think that's a very big deal because if they're not involved they can't give you support and that can cause some problems."*

Fourteen of the twenty students could all give some reason they think writing in the Friday Journals had helped them:

*"...helps me remember and look back on what I've learned."*

*"It has helped me with my writing."*

*"Helps me and my Dad understand what I did and how I did it."*

*"...reflect on my work and remember goals."*

*"The Friday Journal helps us recognize ourselves as learners, before the Friday Journal I never really looked at how I was learning, I just went ahead and did it. It was an every day thing but I feel after we started the Friday Journal I understand better how I'm learning and the kind of learner I am."*

Of the twenty students who completed the journals, six students did not enjoy writing in the Friday Journal, seven liked it most of the time, and eight students liked the



experience and, in fact, would like to keep writing in a Journal next year. Of the students who liked writing in the Friday Journal, but don't want to do it in Grade 8, the

responses were similar. "No, I don't want to write in the journal next year because even though I think it has helped me, next year I think I will be able to think about what I did learn and where I need to improve etc without writing it down."

How does the Friday Journal relate to three-way conferencing?

*In December, I held three-way student conferences at the school. To rehearse for the big day, the students conferenced with me and practiced with peers.*

It was a totally new experience for them all, and they were very nervous. Students, whose parents did not come to the school for the interview, held a portfolio-based conference in their homes. The students, who were successful in learning how to think and talk about themselves as learners, and were regularly writing in their Friday journals and sharing them at home by December, had great conferences. They weren't as wonderful as my year 6 students in Australia, but then again, they hadn't had six years of practice. My 'dream' wasn't totally realized, but, "I felt very proud of my kids and I knew we had made progress."



After it was all over, I surveyed the parents and students. I asked them to tell me what they liked or didn't like about a three-way conference that focused on a portfolio of their child's work. Fourteen out of twenty-three parents responded. Of that number, eleven really liked the process, two did not like it as much as a traditional parent/teacher interview and one liked it, "just fine."

Positive comments from the parents included,

*"Having the student at the conference lets the student know exactly what is required of them by both the teacher and the parent."*

*"I really took pleasure in seeing Katie lead the conference with such confidence."*

*"I think having Nicki at the conference puts everyone on the same page." Nicki was able to tell both of us her concerns."*



*"...Specifically, I feel that getting the child involved is instrumental in their development of leadership, presentation, and leadership skills. I was extremely impressed with Lisa's presentation style and the vocabulary she used presenting her portfolio."*

*"There has been a 100% improvement in James' ability to discuss his learning and goal setting. His portfolio helps him to celebrate his successes, see growth over time, and set goals. This is the first year James' has been able to 'articulate' goal setting confidently."*

Positive comments from seventeen out of twenty-three students included,

*"Before my interview I was so nervous, but then after it was done my mom said I did great. From this interview I learned how to talk about things I did well and things I did bad. That made me very proud of myself."*

*"I like this so much better. I always wondered what the parents and teachers were talking about in those interviews."*

*"I prefer the student/parent conference because then I can tell my parent where I am improving and what I need to work harder on instead of my teacher telling them."*

Students who did not enjoy the experience said that it made them feel uncomfortable, but thought that, if they had started the process in a younger grade they would be used to it and would have liked it better.

## **The Realization:**

### The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

*"So, what did I find out?"*

All parents who responded to the April survey found that there were major positive changes in their child this year. Six found that their child had improved in self-confidence, seven in attitude in terms of wanting to do better work, and ten found their child could now better articulate their strengths, weaknesses and goals.

"Aaron has improved in his:

- ability to self-evaluate ( i.e.. strengths, weaknesses)
- ability to identify more realistic and measurable learning goals
- confidence in learning; strength as a student."

*"The changes I have noticed in James both academically and socially/emotionally are dramatic. James is concerned with the quality of his work and completing assignments/ projects with attention to detail. His self-confidence has improved greatly....James has internalized the process of writing in his journal. He writes about his week at school and then comments on difficulties/weaknesses and the next steps he will take."*

Communication about school between student and parent seems to have increased. Seven out of twelve parents say the change is dramatic.

All students but seven improved their March report card marks in at least half of the twenty-seven reported areas. Only one student showed no improvement at all. Twenty-one out of the twenty-three students think they are better students this year than last. When asked specifically why they see themselves as performing better, responses

ranged from caring more about their work, wanting to do better, doing more homework, understanding better, trying harder, putting more effort into projects, liking the encouragement they have been getting at home, to studying more for tests. Students made no specific mentions of portfolios or conferencing, and only three mentions of using the Friday Journal. Lisa concludes, "on the second term report card I have had an immense improvement. 15 out of 27 marks have gone up. I feel I have made these improvements because I have been putting forth a more enthusiastic and responsible attitude. I also feel I have recognized myself better as a learner and I feel this is important because I need to know and understand the progress I am making. I am also understanding the work better."

All students loved keeping the portfolio and sharing it, and all parents liked discussing it with their child.

One of the biggest rewards is observing my students with their reading buddies. I hear them asking the little ones questions like,

*"How will you figure that out?"* and, *"How did you know that?"* and, *"What can you add to your picture to make it better?"*

*"So, what have I learned?"*

#### **Four things:**

- 1) Reflective practice, portfolios and three-way conferencing are all excellent techniques and should be a natural and accepted part of every student's learning.
- 2) The journal/portfolio/conference process helped to involve parents more than has traditionally been the case when students reach the later elementary years.
- 3) It is hard to be the only teacher in a school using student-led conferences.



- 4) The parents must support what is happening in the classroom and be wholeheartedly involved in their child's learning. If the parents won't participate, neither will the students.

Interesting data has emerged from my project in terms of the degree of parental involvement. The number of parents writing comments back each week is still between ten and twelve, while the number of parents just signing is hovering at two or three and the number of students with no parental signature has increased to seven. The number of students failing to consistently complete their journals has risen to five. These five students are students whose parents never did or stopped writing in the journal early into the project. Without question, the number of students actively involved in the journal writing and are successfully thinking about their own learning have parents who are supporting the program. Students will not willingly put forth the effort to write in their Friday Journal if the parents don't respond. Parents need to see this type of program as part of the norm and the way the school functions

**Deb Kekewich, GEDSB, May 2001**

*PC Concepts 1999*

rather than an experiment. Only consistency, year after year, will accomplish that.

My research has confirmed for me that a teacher cannot successfully run a program that includes journals/reflective practice, portfolio-keeping, and three-way conferencing in isolation within the school. Yes, my students have made huge gains this year. Yes, my practice has improved. No, my time and effort haven't been wasted. But, I know my students would be much more independent and confident learners if they had grown up with the process. A lasting change in student learning and attitude will only be achieved if the whole school commits to the idea of portfolios and student led conferencing.

#### **The Continuation:**

#### The Godfather, Parts One, Two, and Three

Participating in this action research has taught me many things about myself, my students, and my commitment to the profession. Despite many frustrations along the way, I do believe in everything I have tried and I have witnessed the benefits.

*"So, what will I do next? "*

Make them an offer they can't refuse?

I will encourage other teachers at my school to get on board. Although Grade 7 students might come to me without much experience and with quite a bit of resistance, I will continue with portfolio keeping, some form of the journal/learning log process, and three-way conferencing because it is worth it. I know everyone in the class will somehow benefit, and small gains are better than none.

# Portfolio Assessment

Carolyn MacNeil



*Carolyn MacNeil,  
Grade 10 Teacher  
Delhi District High School*

This year I had the opportunity to improve my assessment practice by participating in an action research project on portfolios at the board level. The project had a rippling effect in my classroom. Not only did I benefit from the in-service training, the workshops, and the intensive reflection into my own practice, the students benefited by new ways of assessment. For example, after participating in a Corrective Feedback seminar with Ruth Sutton, I began to seriously understand the importance of oral feedback for my students.

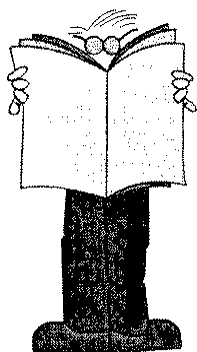
I began conferencing with my applied level classes individually on a daily basis in order to help them better understand their strengths, weaknesses and next steps. I found that after this contact students were encouraged to initiate these dialogues with me on their own time before and after school. Amazing for the applied level students! The students seemed to demonstrate that these feedback sessions gave them the confidence to revise and improve their skills level. Using the portfolios as a method of evaluation also gave the students a chance to learn from their mistakes and work toward a polished copy with confidence. Action research was definitely a bonus to me as a teacher, but also helped the students that I teach.

*"We have been discussing this and looking at what we did. We could have done things so much better . . . but we didn't know how!" (Brendon a grade 10 student)*

**FOCUS:** "How can I use the portfolio to improve assessment literacy for myself and my students?"

## **RATIONALE:**

This question was very important to me because I found that I was struggling with the student emphasis on marks rather than self growth. I wanted to encourage my students to look at their work in terms of how improvement could be made for them as an individual learner. I needed to develop my practice to allow reflection process to occur. I also felt that I needed to develop a “safe” atmosphere where students felt encouraged to analyze and revise their work. I wanted the students to ask themselves “How can I improve this work in order to develop the skills I need before assessment” The portfolio then, becomes the assessment tool for corrective feedback.



As a teacher I was finding that the students were not using written comments from the teacher effectively. They were not able to realistically reflect upon their work because they were afraid that it would be part of their mark. They also did not know how to incorporate comments and move onto the next steps.

During a formative lesson I gave my students a group assignment. This assignment was a practice effort that would later on be assessed in the portfolio. I gave the students a rubric and it was modified by the class. I discussed my expectations, went over questions. I assisted students while they worked on their group presentation.

The groups presented to the class. Only one group fulfilled my expectations for the assignment. After each of the groups presented, I asked them to fill out an assessment sheet. I asked the students to be self critical and honest. The class average for the self assessment was 4-. I was perplexed. This was not an accurate assessment. I knew that I had to look at what I was doing as a teacher and change my methodology to help students be more accurate in their assessment literacy.

I decided to work on a best work portfolio because it would allow my students to refine the skills taught during the semester and to concentrate on the “ownership” difficulty so many of the students expressed.

## **STEPS (Action Taken):**

I decided that several things needed to change.

- I needed to provide an exemplar for the students
- I needed to allow the students to have an opportunity to re-do their presentations.
- I needed to encourage the students to act, reflect and revise.

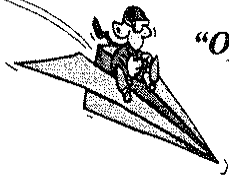
After I discussed with the students the problems that were apparent in their presentations I asked them to go back into their groups and discuss with the members where they could have improved. How could they have brought their work into a high level 3 or 4 standard? They had already had looked at the initial assessment by me and were working with the rubric. I walked around and observed:

I stopped at Brendon's group and asked: What did you give yourself on the self assessment? He responded with, "a level 4". I asked him after reflecting on the rubric, looking at exemplars did he still feel that the assessment was accurate? He responded:

*"We have been discussing this and looking at what we did. We could have done things so much better . . . but we did not know how? We missed a whole section of the assignment. When we took the time as a group to look at it, we realized we were not so good"*

My journal of October 16, 2000 reinforces his response:

*I stopped the class and asked them generally if they saw the areas where they could have improved? They felt they did. I announced that people do not learn from their mistakes unless they have the opportunity to REFLECT on those mistakes and revise them. I was allowing the students to redo the work. They could not believe it. I told them if they could improve their mark and learn from what they did, then learning was happening and this is what IT is all about. The student level of enthusiasm was high in the class.*



***"Opportunity to Re-do work improves achievement"***

After a class discussion Ashley T. responded:

*"I gave myself a level 3 + because I wanted to have that as a mark. I cannot see how I could give myself that when I look at the rubric. I haven't done what I was supposed to do but I was afraid that it would be in my mark!"*

From the students' reaction I could see that obtaining high marks affected what the student would share with me as a teacher. This in turn affected the revision process.

What is my vision of success for my students? What will be the purpose of the student portfolio? What did I see as a definition of the portfolio? Portfolios are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

Collecting students work over a period of time enables me to:

- a) get a broader, more in depth look at what the student knows and can do,
- b) base assessment on authentic work
- c) have a supplement or alternative to mere report cards, and
- d) have a better way to communicate students progress to parents.

I told the students that they could improve their mark and learn from what they did, then learning was happening. The student level of enthusiasm was high. I was now allowing these students to do what I was doing in my own action research project. I was empowering these students to look at their work and assess honestly. I was also offering the students an opportunity to show signs of growth. This was the premise on which I wanted to base my portfolio research.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

My goal was to provide the students with as many formative activities as possible before the summative in order to practice their skill development. Throughout my "Diversity Unit"(see appendix) in the grade 10 English program, the students were encouraged to keep journals, read work from peers, to conference with me on a regular basis. I offered corrective feedback.

Ruth Sutton makes excellent suggestions regarding conferencing with students and in February I made notes regarding her philosophy and employed several useful skills with my students. I wanted to alleviate the stress of formal marks and found that verbal corrective feedback and outlining strengths, weaknesses and next steps encouraged growth.

Using the overhead, I offered examples of level 3 and 4 work. I gave the students an opportunity to dialogue about exemplars. **The whole unit was designed for practice and reflection with the ultimate goal to produce "best work" in the portfolio.** While the students were working on the formative activities, they had a clear picture of the final expectation. In their portfolio they needed to produce the piece of writing, reflect on the writing and have a peer react to the writing. They were encouraged in their reflection to indicate strengths, weaknesses and next steps.

## **FINDINGS:**

The process of Reflection acts as a method for students to improve future work. (see work by Lynn Abbey and Cheryl Black 1999) By taking the time to look over their strengths weaknesses and next steps the students have a clearer picture about what they need to do to improve their learning. The students who were honest and able to look critically at their work in the portfolio were the ones who showed the most improvement throughout the course.

Dialoging with students proves to be a method for me as a practitioner to enhance teacher direction and focus on corrective feedback. As part of the portfolio teacher "coaching" is of major importance and students clearly value one on one contact.

I collected varying responses from the students for exemplars for this research. The student reflection afforded me the opportunity to assess what the students learned about themselves:

## **KEY RESPONSES:**

*"I learned that everyone has hopes dreams and wishes and writing them down just makes it easier to accomplish them."(Amy)*

*"My entry is about how mean people can be before they think about how the other person thinks . . . I learned that even I make jokes about people which hurts their feelings. I will change by thinking about what I say before I say it."(Sarah D)*

*"My entry is about a terrifying stereotyping which I faced in the past. I chose to write this entry because it was a defining moment in my life that I will never forget. From this experience I learned that all people are equal regardless of religion, race, sex. I have changed my views in life thanks to this experience and writing it down. We all have stories to tell." (Ashley T)*



## SHARING THE WEALTH:

From this experience with the students I was asked to write an article on Portfolios for an Assessment Periodical.

# Portfolios...in the Classroom

Why use portfolios in the classroom? Don't we as educators have enough to do without integrating new initiatives? It isn't until you explore and study the concept of using portfolios in your classroom that you realize it can be seen as a single strategy that does it all! Simply put, the portfolio allows us to achieve many of our most important, though sometimes elusive goals.

Portfolios are a one step system that helps students learn the skill of reflection and self evaluation. Isn't that what the new curriculum encourages? In September 2000, I began to seriously think about using portfolios as an action research project. I wanted to incorporate the portfolio as the culminating activity for each unit in my English classes. What looked like a daunting task to a novice portfolio "consumer", proved to be a time saver once the initial preparation was organized. Once I began to experiment with the portfolio as a summative activity I quickly realized that this could be a powerful tool for evaluation.

To date, I have started off with simple straightforward criteria for portfolio selection, but as I am getting my feet wet, I realize that this system could be an excellent opportunity to get parents, students and teachers working together as a team. My ultimate goal is to link the portfolio to the multiple intelligence in the classroom.

There are several ways to commence with your portfolio project. I followed the methods outlined by Barb Bower in her informative manual entitled, *The Portfolio Organizer*. To begin, you need to decide upon your educational goals and purpose. Without this step you are somewhat directionless and your portfolio could

become a collection of work with no clear focus. Secondly, an understanding of the purpose of the portfolio is paramount. One of the most difficult tasks is deciding on the type of portfolio in which you are interested. The most common are "growth" and "best work" portfolios. For culminating activities the best work portfolio seems to work well, but whatever you decide it must be determined before you begin.

The next step is determining an audience. Will parents be involved? Will students lead a portfolio conference or will you mark it in consultation with the student.

Lastly, you need to decide the duration of time, specifically whether your portfolio will be a year, a semester or just a grading period. All of these important decisions are vital steps in planning for portfolio success. Being organized is the key to making a positive experience for you and your students.

The most beneficial aspect of the portfolio is the collection and reflection by the student -the actual act of preparing the product. The students ultimately take responsibility for documenting aspects of their learning that do not show up well in traditional assessments. When students become highly engaged in their learning then we as teachers know that we have done our job well.

There are several resources on the market geared to help teachers with classroom portfolios. I would rate Barb Bower's *The Portfolio Organizer, 1999* as one of the best. Also, *An Introduction To Using Portfolios In The Classroom*, by Charlotte Danielson and Leslie Abrutyn is an excellent resource for the novice.

## **SUMMARY - The changes I wanted to make and the things that I have learned:**

- As a teacher I need to use better prompts.
- I need to stress reflection more and work with students providing corrective feedback so that they can learn from what they have produced.
- I need to incorporate a section addressing short term goals so that the students can really see that the reflection is there for them rather than something to write for me.
- I need to realize that after all of the work the students and I did -we need an avenue in which to celebrate the work and learning.

## **NEXT STEPS:**

Student led conferencing! Danielson and Abrutyn's four steps of portfolio development include COLLECTION, SELECTION, REFLECTION, PROJECTION . . . and I missed the projection on this initiative. I need to clarify goal setting and work out prompts for reflection. Is this another need to above?

Evidence to indicate that students are growing through this process include: more students meeting with me to conference on a one to one basis on their own time before and after school. Students' marks went up on average 10%. Students' exam mark was within 5% of their portfolio mark. Reflections have been honest and address next steps because the prompts that I am including are more specific. Students in my classes are better able to articulate strengths, weaknesses and next step orally and as a class. This is occurring during all formative exercises.

### **My March journal says it best:**

*March 14, 2001 I have been so pleased with the classroom. I really felt that several things went repeating these mistakes I took the some chances. With the portfolio work I opportunity to celebrate the things they to take it one step further so I avoided the recycling bin. What to do? What to student led conferencing. The students work all semester and then at the end*



*lead a conference with important people in their lives . . . me included of course. SO far this semester I am using 15 minutes each day to conference with students and discuss next steps and I allow them to walk through their work and decide where they need to improve. In my academic class the students are really eager and of course want to know where they can improve. Several of the students are amazed that I will give them the opportunity to redo and revise and that I will count the highest mark. They still think that teachers are the ENEMY and find that when the onus is on them to improve that they are able to produce and enjoy the process so much more. I love it. I keep telling the students that I am there to help them do the best that they can do. IF that means that they need to revise several times . . . who cares?. The main goal is improvement and that I can help them to grow. I am trying to show them that when they take the ownership of their learning that great things can happen. For example, Amber was writing a comparison essay of To Kill a Mockingbird and Beauty and The Beast (the video). She came to me 4 times and was*

*things that are occurring in my asked last semester. Instead of opportunity to revise and take knew that the kids needed an did in their portfolio. I needed the celebration taking place in do? Well I am engaging in will be practicing discussing their when they do their portfolio they can*

*growing each time. She was so excited about the process. ON Thursday she said OH Mrs. Mac Neil I want to do so much more to this .....too bad I have to hand it in tomorrow. I said ....Don't hand it in.....She was shocked. I will get late marks....I said Amber.....why would I penalize you for working and growing.. If you need more time to demonstrate your learning GO FOR IT.....She handed in a level four essay on MONDAY.....When she started she was at level 2....Things like this are all so exciting. In my applied level class this semester I have never had such a group of students who are revising and coming in for extra help. I told them all that it was my goal that they all end up with level 3 this semester. They laughed. I then said that if they did not get it they could take responsibility for it because I wanted to help them GROW and revise and learn .....The kids are buying into this and I have had kids in after school and before school and email.....FROM APPLIED kids.....Usually they forget to come to school.....now they are coming in for help.*

**Carolyn MacNeil, GEDSB, May 2001**

*PC Concepts 10/01*

# Portfolios Project

Cindy Mels



*Cindy Mels*  
*Kindergarten – Grade 3 Teacher*  
*Delhi Public School*

I have been teaching with this Board since 1995 and have taught in a variety of settings including a Blended Family containing Grades 1-3, a Grade 3 Classroom, and a Junior Intermediate Behaviour Class. While doing my Action Research, I taught a Self Contained Primary Behaviour Classroom containing Grades K-3. The portfolio process was adapted and modified to best suit the needs of the variety of students in my room.

Since I have begun teaching, I have been experimenting with portfolios as an assessment tool. However, I haven't felt that they have been as effective as I believed they could be. I found them cumbersome, time consuming and the process seemed to lack closure. The process seemed to have potential, but I wasn't achieving the results that I felt were possible. When approached with the opportunity to do Action Research in the area of portfolios I jumped at the opportunity.

The Action Research Process was a phenomenal growth process for my students and myself. I learned a great deal about my own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and built on them. In the 2001-2002 school year I will be teaching in a regular Grade 3 Classroom and look forward to continuing with the portfolio process and extending it to Student Led Conferencing. It is my hope that Student Led Conferencing will provide the closure that the portfolio process seemed to lack. I look forward to the challenge.

**FOCUS:** "How do I use portfolios to improve and motivate student learning?"

## **PROCESS:**

**Rationale:** Had tried portfolios before, saw potential for self-assessment and empowerment.

### **Steps:**

1. Used portfolios to improve on choice, once a week select and reflect on choice.
2. "Portfolio Window" for display and explanation of choice followed.
3. Flexibility is necessary and it was logical to use conferencing with parents as 'closure'.

### **Findings:**

1. Increased motivation and improvement occurred.
2. Gradually more efficient in time and process.
3. Multi-Intelligence opportunities increase empowerment and ownership.

### **My Previous Journey**

Since I have begun teaching I have been experimenting with portfolios as an assessment tool. However, I haven't felt that they have been as effective as they could be. Predominantly I have used student directed, best work portfolios, but found them cumbersome because of storage due to the type of container holding the portfolio. They were time consuming due to the assessment and selection process (teacher versus student directed) and they didn't appear to motivate students in the way I had hoped. I saw Action Research this year as an opportunity to focus on what I believed could be an awesome experience in the classroom, and to improve my use of portfolios as an assessment tool thereby motivating and improving student learning. I was concerned with this entire process, because I had worked with it in the past and found it ineffective. The process seemed to have potential, but I wasn't achieving the results that I felt were possible.

*"How do I use portfolios to improve and motivate student learning?"*

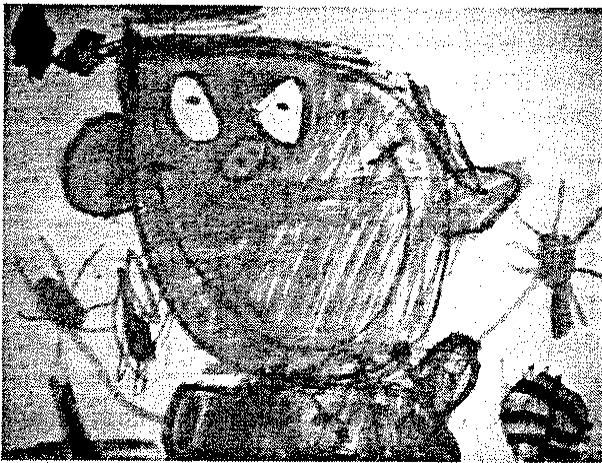
### **Rationale for Focus Question**

As an educator I feel it is imperative for students to have some feeling of control over their learning. Students need to feel empowered by what they are doing, and that there is value in what they are learning. Some students don't appear to have an inner drive to strive for improvement, so educators need to find a way to create an opportunity for that drive to occur. I think portfolios might help students to feel empowered through their learning, thereby improving and motivating them. Secondly, the EQAO grade 3 and 6 assessments are being discussed constantly. On the tests students need to be able to express themselves and their opinions/answers using pictures, numbers and words. It makes sense to have students assess/evaluate their work on a continual basis using reflection and goal setting in order to prepare for these assessments, thereby improving scores on assessments and everyday work.

*"It is important to note that I currently teach in a Self Contained Behaviour Class containing grades K-3. The portfolio process was adapted and modified to best suit the needs of the variety of students in my room."*

## The Process

First step was to find a portfolio style. I approached several teachers on staff to see what they had used and what they found effective. Some teachers used file folder portfolios and students were able to file their work in their very own grade drawer in the filing cabinet. Other teachers used the scrap book style, pizza boxes and others made large pockets (for lack of a better word) out of Bristol board (this one frightened me because there was no organization opportunity which was important to me). Storage was an issue because I felt that portfolio needed to be stored so that they were not in the way, that the work in the folio didn't get damaged. However they still needed to be accessible enough for both students and teacher. I didn't want my room to appear 'messy' because of the portfolios, but they needed to be in my face enough so that everyone would remember to use them. Finally, I realized I had to actually sit down



Digital picture of a painting too large to fit in scrapbook

and define what a portfolio meant for me and my students. This took a lot of soul searching and decision making.

I decided that the portfolio would be comprised of work samples from any subject area and that the selection process would be mainly student directed with minimal coaching. The portfolio itself would be a

combination of a display, assessment, and working portfolio (Danielson and Abrutyn, Portfolios in the Classroom, p.1-6). I would model the selection, reflection and goal setting processes. Portfolios had to be open to choice from any subject area so that students could have the opportunity to meet with success in a subject area that was a strength or potentially to shine in an area of weakness. I felt that if I had chosen one subject area to focus on, such as a writing portfolio, that it would limit the students and myself. The working portfolio offered more opportunity for multiple intelligence. Hopefully students would see that they could meet with success, see growth and set new goals in all areas. My intent was that growth would be evident from the beginning of the process to the end, but it would not have to be based on a best work idea although I knew much of the work would likely result in a best work style. I also decided that students would be exposed to a variety of reflection styles so that they wouldn't rely as heavily on best work samples.

Basically the process for the class was to collect, select, reflect and direct (adapted from Bower presentation, October, 2000). Collecting was the gathering of work samples stored as 'fat files' in bins for each student. Each week, students had to 'select' a piece of work and then 'reflect' on it using one of several reflection sheets already prepared for them to choose from. Finally, the 'directing' came from the goal setting and conferencing that takes place after the reflecting.

I decided that because I was working on a one year timeline (as a result of the Action Research Project) I would create a portfolio window as a display in my classroom which consisted of a bulletin board with designated

sections for each child in the room. Having work on display should inspire and motivate students. And it did! Work samples would be on display for a week and then the samples would be placed in a scrapbook portfolio which would serve as a working/growth portfolio. The scrapbook had a cover attached to the front of it, which students were expected to creatively decorate with their name and anything else they wanted on it. Once a week, students would be expected to choose a piece of work that they wanted to display in their portfolio window. After selection they would conference with either myself or a buddy and complete a reflection sheet of their choice. Periodically, new reflection sheets were introduced with reflection prompts such as, *"This piece was a challenge because.... Or This piece shows problem solving because..."* in order to encourage a variety of other portfolio entry styles. When a new piece of work was being placed in the portfolio window, the piece on the bulletin board along with the reflection was taken down and put into a scrapbook. If the piece was too large to be placed in the scrapbook, the digital camera was used to take a picture of the item, and the picture and the reflection were placed in the scrapbook. Several times students were asked to share the piece they had chosen in front of the class or in pairs.

Finally, students were given the opportunity to share their portfolio with an adult (teacher, E.A., principal, or family member of choice).

### **Monitoring the Process**

While the portfolio process was taking place, two major problems arose that required "monitoring". The first problem was that while students were working on the portfolios the process lacked closure. Where does this portfolio process lead? This wrinkle is similar to McNiff's description of the 'cycle of cycles or a 'spiral of spirals,'

which means "The project changed in focus over time, and each change involved the expansion of the enquiry" (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, You and Your Action Research Project, p.23). The solution to the problem became evident one day while completing an interview with a set of parents. I pulled some student work samples contained in a scrapbook and decided to let the student share the pieces with his parents. What followed was incredible! The kindergarten child explained in full detail each piece of work and the parents commented and offered praise throughout the discussion. The delight for the child and parents was phenomenal....immediately I realized...the perfect 'ending' to portfolios was student-led conferencing (suddenly it seemed so obvious). The child who led the conference, had a twin who was at home that day, so I offered to the parents both scrapbooks for the set of twins so that the same experience could be shared with the child at home. The parents were elated to say the least. They called the next day to express gratitude and explain how well their other child presented his portfolio work

The second major problem occurred with the students who have poor expressive/receptive difficulties. The reflection sheets that I began with contained an area where students could fill in the expression on a face; happy/sad in order to indicate how they felt about the piece they chose. This worked well with the older students in my class. However for the younger students (with some language difficulties) this became an obsession on emotions. They repeated the same phrase, sometimes indefinitely; for example, "I feel mad because I ran away during recess, I feel sad because I am sick. I was a bad boy, this one makes me sad, I will cry et cetera." There wasn't any goal setting happening just an obsession on emotions.

I realized that I wasn't getting anywhere so I decided that rather than have students focus on faces (which obviously linked them to emotions), I tried to use symbols relating to the colour and the detail in the work samples. This didn't work either because the students became distracted by the symbols representing colour and design.

I decided to try a stoplight method. I started off by putting mini stop lights on every activity that these students worked on as well as a makeshift stoplight at the front of the classroom. Upon completion of the activity, students were asked to colour in the stoplight according to the following:

RED = too hard  
YELLOW = just right  
GREEN = too easy

This was very straightforward and the students seemed to enjoy colouring the stoplight to indicate the end to an activity. Later when students chose a piece of work to add to their portfolio, the reflection sheet had a stoplight and students were asked again to reflect on the work sample, rate it, and then set a goal. This worked much better. Suddenly we were able to move beyond 'feelings' and move toward goal setting and student improvement.

On one occasion a student recorded that a piece was too hard. That child did a wonderful job on the assignment, it was perfect, but for him the job had been very difficult. For me this was important corrective feedback (Ruth Sutton, The Learning School, p. 42-64). I knew what challenged the child and I knew that if I continued with this level of challenge, the student may become frustrated and behaviours may follow. This experience also opened the door for a conversation between myself and the student to discuss the task

and our own observations, essential elements of corrective feedback. After some time, I no longer had to put stoplights on the students work, they coloured an 'appropriate' coloured circle in the upper right corner of their paper to indicate the level of difficulty.

As a teacher, this stoplight rating method became an integral part of the portfolio process; namely self-assessment. Students could rate the level of difficulty of each assignment and rate their effort, and I could, as the teacher, visually see how students were feeling about tasks and could therefore adjust program where necessary. The stoplights became a means for me to assess level of difficulty so that I could optimize the challenge, teach to and break down subskills in order for task mastery and application to occur, but not to challenge students to the point of frustration. This process became a way for me to set goals within my own programming.

### **My Findings**

While working through the portfolio process it quickly became evident that students were demonstrating increased motivation in their learning. Effort and neatness improved, as well as increased task commitment. Gradually it took less time for students to choose an item for their portfolio because they have been thinking about it throughout the previous week while they were completing assignments. Also students required less time to fill out their reflection sheets. The reflections themselves contained more character (exclamation marks, all upper case letters for emphasis et cetera) and included more detailed content and insight. For instance "I like it because it's good" became, "I like the blended colours and detail in my art piece and I am proud because I did it on my own!").



Some students' discussions I overheard also provided evidence that the portfolio process was motivating students. For example, upon completing an activity, one student was overheard saying, "Can I put this in my portfolio?". This student hates to do any printing/writing yet was willing to take extra time to complete an extra reflection sheet (above and beyond his regular work). Another student who hated writing stories chose a story writing sample and his reflection said, "I didn't want to do it but I did it." This was a major celebration for the student and myself. Yet another student chose incomplete homework to place in his portfolio saying, "It will remind me to do my homework and to do it better." A grade one student reviewed his portfolio with another student and saw a painted self portrait from the beginning of the year and asked if he could paint a new one to show how his improvement in his drawing ability. A grade 2 student returned from art class which is taken with another teacher and said, "I did the art today, this is going in my portfolio!" This child rarely met with success or completed art activities. It became obvious to me at that moment that he had taken the ownership of the portfolio, he no longer felt the need to have his choices approved by me. Attitude improved for art class from that point on. Motivation and improvement was achieved

Pedagogically growth was evident also. The following are two quotes taken from my own personal reflection. "I am working harder to make a variety of experiences available to students rather than the usual paper pencil tasks." Later on I observed, "Using portfolios is pushing me to improve the development of creativity as well as providing an increased variety and wealth of experiences for my students ." I made a more conscious effort to provide my students with a wealth of experiences in a

variety of contexts in order for them to choose a variety of samples to reflect on. The result was teaching multiple intelligences which of course assisted in the motivation and growth of learning.

The obvious question, "*How do you know that the growth isn't just a result of the students own personal growth, maturity and experience?*" was posed by an E.A. Improvement will naturally occur during the course of a year. However, through the portfolio process in my professional experience with these students, improvement went above and beyond expectations because students were encouraged to self-assess, justify, and communicate their beliefs through the processes of reflection and goal setting. Multi-intelligence needs were met by varying the types of tasks as a conscious effort to further the portfolio process. The portfolios served as a vehicle to motivate and improve learning.

### **Conclusions and Next Steps**

This year I saw huge growth by using the portfolio process. Now I see what I would do differently. Next time I would:

- create a classroom rubric to go with the portfolios created with the students
- I would evaluate work orally/daily
- model goal setting regularly
- spend more time discussing what a portfolio is before having them thrown into the process
- work on peer responses to portfolio
- spend more time creating the portfolio container thereby increasing ownership
- once a cycle pick a piece of work, once a month share portfolio with someone else, once a term share with an adult or on video tape and *at least* once a year share portfolio in a student led conference with parents.

Through my own reflection I realize that I was missing two key elements. My portfolios in the past had verbal but not written reflection for the students and verbal goal setting rather than written. It was necessary to have the oral discussion for reflecting and goal setting and then to follow it with written thoughts. Without putting reflection and goal setting in written form, the process was incomplete. Less motivation and less student learning occurred when only oral discussion happened. Secondly there was no closure to the process. Now I see that a student led conference is an excellent ending/experience to complete this process. What a powerful experience it was. Finally I have come full circle, I will use portfolios as a teaching tool to give students ownership, motivation, a sense of accomplishment and participation, to aid in parent conferences, to involve students in the process of self evaluation, goal setting, and reflection. Through Action Research I

can now define portfolios confidently. I know why and how I am using them. The purpose of portfolios has become like a good paragraph. I see the beginning, middle, and end of the process and all of the excellent content contained within it.

### **Final Food For Thought**

Through this portfolio process, I have improved my delivery of an assessment strategy, plus improved student learning and motivation. As I continue my research, I am relieved that the books state that the refinement process with portfolios develops over many years. I can't expect my portfolios to be perfect the first time. They will develop and change over time according to the way I change professionally, according to the different needs of my class which will change yearly, and finally any change in the criteria of the portfolio. Enjoy the ride!!

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**Cindy Mels, GEDSB 2001**

*PC Concepts 10/01*

# A School-Wide Action Research Approach to Improve Literacy

Ruth Mills



*Ruth Mills  
Principal  
Lansdowne-Costain School*

Ruth Mills is the principal of Lansdowne-Costain School in Brantford. She has been at the school for three years and continues to love the school and the community. When faced with low EQAO scores she was approached about conducting some teacher based classroom research to improve literacy.

## **Background**

Last winter our staff embarked on an Action Research adventure. I call it an adventure because it was just that. We had \$5000.00 to spend on teacher research related to literacy. I began the journey with some fear and a little apprehension. How would my staff accept the idea? Would they see it as just another "make work" project coming from above? Carefully I planned the next staff meeting.

## **Process**

We began by examining past EQAO results, tests and anchor booklets. We made a list of what students would need to know and be able to do to reach a level three or four in their reading and writing. We then discussed how we could help students acquire these skills and what materials we might need to make this happen. Our individual action research projects were a direct result of this discussion.

We thought that we needed to know how to better use the Reading and Writing Exemplars to help students understand how to increase their levels of writing and reading. We also felt that we needed to increase student attitude towards reading and writing and utilize a wider range of reading and writing teaching strategies in the classroom. Time to explore new documents was also sighted as a key element to success in using these documents to help students increase achievement levels.

I was ecstatic when everyone on staff embraced the idea of developing a question and then exploring it through classroom based research. The experience developed friendships and a new outlook on how teachers are valued as professionals, capable of improving student learning. Some of us are still working on our projects, others have moved on to new questions. All in all the experience was most favorable.

### **Focus**

As a principal I have learned much from the project and from exploring my own practice through Action Research. When an administrator asks herself:

*"How can I assist staff members in improving student learning?"*

a new paradigm forms. Staff is seen as the experts they truly are and the students reap the benefits.

This is the story of a journey taken by five public elementary schools in Ontario's Grand Erie District School Board – Central, Graham Bell, King George, Victoria, and Woodman. We decided to focus our efforts on the area of early literacy. When we speak of this topic many questions come to mind: What impacts on early literacy? How can we improve literacy skills in our schools? What teaching practices have a positive impact on early literacy? Do quality materials contribute to literacy learning? Do environmental factors contribute to literacy success in the early years? Asking and then discussing these questions as a group of administrators led us to our action research.

We decided as a group to focus on classroom practice because that is where we were in direct control. We looked at our values around literacy learning in the early years and found that we all agreed that a balanced approach was best. Teaching should include the following activities as bases for the teaching of skills - shared reading, reading aloud, independent reading, guided reading, systematic teaching of reading and writing strategies, responding to text, and using quality literature in a variety of genre.

We met with our teachers to discuss our concerns. All were eager to embark on a project which would improve students' reading skills. They were also eager to have the opportunity to obtain classroom resources that would benefit students and assist teachers in the teaching process. Our action research then became our teachers' action research as well.

A gap analysis in our schools led us to realize that guided reading was not practiced in our classrooms. The main reason for this was that our schools lacked quality materials to conduct shared reading sessions. Because they lacked practice in this area, teachers lacked expertise. This discovery led us to narrow our question: how will using the guided reading strategy increase reading comprehension skills in primary classrooms? As an ancillary inquiry, we wanted to discover if the materials themselves had a positive impact on the children's love for, and interest in, reading. Our ancillary question became: will the use of quality materials increase positive student attitude toward reading?

Throughout our study we collected data using video- and audio-taping, journal keeping, questionnaires and standardized

tests. The data provides substantial evidence that, indeed, guided reading has had a significant positive impact on reading comprehension skills in our schools. The data also supports our assumption that the materials themselves had a significant impact on increased student learning. In addition to this, our data indicates that our teachers improved their ability to teach reading and that our students developed an increased love of books.

### **Conducting the Study**

Our first step was to identify our needs. These included the following:

1. in-service education for teachers on the guided reading process,
2. in-service education for teachers on data collection,
3. purchase of quality early literacy materials which would address the wide range of teaching
4. collection/development of teaching strategies we believed should be used
5. time to discuss ideas and observe each other.

We obtained funds through compensatory education to release teachers for two in-service sessions and to purchase materials. One in-service focused on the delivery model of guided reading and a review of the new materials purchased. The second session looked at data collection. In addition, we released the grade one teachers for half a day to observe the guided reading process in a colleague's classroom.

We purchased the Bookshop (1997) guided reading program from Scholastic Canada. The program was chosen because it included big books and charts for shared reading, a variety of reading levels in each stage, and a wide range of genre. The books were suitable for independent reading as well as reading aloud.

Teachers were instructed on the process of keeping a journal and of observing students and recording comments - all important data collection skills. Video was used on several occasions to record students reading and teachers talking together. Teachers kept anecdotal comments regarding the process of guided reading, the students' interest in reading, and the students' increased skill levels. Teachers also recorded their feelings about the process, questions and problems that arose, and ways they solved these problems.

We decided to collect additional data using standardized tests. The Scholastic Reading Inventory was used at four of the schools. The Mann-Suiter test of reading comprehension was used at the fifth. Most schools used a combination of tests and teacher observation because younger students could not read the Scholastic Reading Inventory at the beginning of the year.

We encountered some challenges during the implementation of the project. Three of our teachers had extended periods of absenteeism due to illness. Three teachers changed teaching assignments in December and one teacher retired. We have left out the data from four of classrooms for these reasons. In two of the six classrooms, however, teachers, were able to leave sufficient instructions for the person taking over so that the project was not in jeopardy.

Guided Reading is a complex process but it involves the following steps. The teacher groups the students according to their skill level. Each small group meets with the teacher once a week to first preview a book, learn new vocabulary, discuss reading strategies, read the book and then engage in book talk. The process of previewing builds students' confidence and helps them to implement appropriate reading strategies

when they need to decode unfamiliar text. When students read the book they do so alone and aloud allowing the teacher to intervene when meaning making is in jeopardy.

Classroom management was an issue for some teachers when managing guided reading. As one teacher put it, "Those who have the responsibility of completing assigned tasks with the minimum of adult intervention can often stray off topic, disrupt, and misuse the time they have been allotted."

Through the discussions with their colleagues, teachers were able to work through some of the difficulties. Staff at King George School wrote, "After much trial and error, switching groups and books, and venting frustrations to the rest of the primary team, we combined all our ideas and found a delivery method that appears to suit our needs and the students' needs."

### **Findings**

Students made tremendous gains in their levels of reading comprehension in the allotted time period - December to the end of March. Two hundred and five students increased their reading level and fifty-six showed no gains. Three hundred and six students said that their reading had improved while only seventeen said that their reading had not improved. Two hundred and sixty-eight students thought that the guided reading process helped them to understand the book while only 12 thought it did not help them.

Throughout the project, teachers made observations which indicated that the model was making a difference for children. Teachers' journals included comments like:

*"Parents have indicated that for the first time their children are showing an interest in reading and are independently asking to read together at home."*

*"Students are liking the small groups. They are wanting to do more."*

*"Groups of children are gathering daily to read the story together on their own."*

*"Today Tom is excited about being able to read a higher level book all by himself. He read the story to Mr. Denton."*

*"Bob used many of the word attack strategies we had talked about."*

*"Students have been asking me when their group will have a guided reading session."*

*"I noticed today that the beginning readers are focusing on the print and pointing to the words. Twenty-one out of twenty-four students said they enjoyed reading on the attitude inventory today."*

Our data indicates that the quality of the books contributed significantly to the success of the project. The books in the Bookshop (1997) program were enticing and beautifully presented. The materials seemed to draw the pupils into the process. This led to increased exposure to print which, in turn, led to an increase in reading skills. Comments from teachers included the following:

*"I have seen a particular influence in attitude and enthusiasm towards the cookshop (1997) books. The*

*students want to read the books because they are usually interesting and they can be successful at reading them."*

*"Students return to the materials again and again during independent reading activities and will reread the same books with enthusiasm and confidence."*

*"There is a race to the bookshelf at guided reading time to see who can get a book and be the first group back to participate in small group reading together."*

*"The books are on topics children find fascinating, such as 'Frogs,' 'Spiders,' and 'Thinking About Ants.' Also, these books fit in well with my units of study and are great motivation to develop language."*

*"'Tubes in My Ears' generated a great deal of interest in medical things. Students said it made them less fearful of getting tubes in their ears."*

*"Children were especially intrigued with detail in the torn paper illustrations. They were even more appreciative after they tried to make a torn paper picture."*

When asked if they liked the Bookshop (1997) books, 286 students who answered the question said, "Yes," and 26 students said, "No." Reasons students gave for liking the books included such comments as, "interesting," "entertaining," "funny," "very colourful," and, "very good pictures." Some liked the information or instructions the stories provided. One student wrote, "Some of the stories make me feel happy." Reasons students gave for not liking the books

included, "The printing of the 'g's' confused me," "They are too hard to read," and, "Reading is boring."

Teachers expressed their own very positive feelings about the guided reading program. Teachers at one school wrote, "As we worked through the difficulties we all agree that the reading program is quite good. When you see the enthusiasm and willingness to read in the young children, you too get inspired and forget about the difficulties and pressure surrounding the project." A teacher at another school said, "I found the enthusiasm of the students contagious throughout this project. I have enjoyed experiencing the increase in self-confidence and self-esteem of the students as they have developed their skills in reading."

Other teachers found the project fit into their beliefs and values around literacy and worked through the process of learning about guided reading with zeal and enthusiasm from the beginning. Journals include comments such as the following:

*"I found this project easy to do. It fit into my activity based program very well and lots of other teachers showed interest by requesting visits to my classroom to see the project in action."*

*"This literature-based program is a direct reflection of my values around early literacy. Through previewing the book, reading, discussing, reflecting, and responding, students are meeting the reading, writing and oral communication expectations of The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language. (1997) "*

*"The project supported our values around early literacy by supplying us*

*with appropriate materials to try an alternative delivery model."*

*"Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are the four corners of language. Children must develop these four blocks in a continuing spiral. Guided reading allows for and encourages the continuing spiral of learning."*

*"This project instills the, "I can read," mentality."*

*"It supports and encourages my push and concern that we "hook" pupils onto reading. Their love of books and stories is most evident."*

The journal comments shared by teachers indicated that they had grown professionally through the experience. A number wrote comments like the following ones:

*"The project helped to give me a better sense of teacher as facilitator and allowed me to value the importance of learning through guided questioning."*

*"I didn't do a lot of guided reading before this; now I am getting more comfortable with it and am really enjoying it."*

### **Reference List**

Mondo Publishing. (1997). *Bookshop: A reading program*. Greenvale, New York: Author.

The Ontario Ministry of Education. (1997). *The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language*. Toronto: author.

- ONTARIO ACTION RESEARCHER - V.2.13 - Papers - 1999

**Ruth Mills, GEDSB, 2001**

*PC Concepts 1991*

*"This project has provided me with the knowledge and experience to implement a successful literature-based program in the classroom."*

### **Summary**

We view our action research to be a success in many ways. Students improved their reading comprehension and were aware that they had done so. The resources we purchased had a significant impact on students' excitement and enthusiasm toward learning to read. Teachers gained expertise in learning a new strategy for teaching the reading process and discovered new ways to observe and record data.

Guided reading made a difference in encouraging reluctant readers, developing enthusiasm, and increasing comprehension. We can look back, however, and see that many more questions arise from our study. Should teachers be given more ownership at the onset of the process? Is Grade One too late to begin early literacy? Are other resources needed to meet an even wider range of pupil levels and needs?

I am sure that upon examining our data even more closely, we will conclude that we too must continue our journey up the learning spiral which action research spins for us, seeking answers to new questions and always looking to improve student learning.



# Self-Assessment Through the Use of Portfolios

Lyn-Anne Nash Dertinger



*Lyn-Anne Nash-Dertinger  
Grade 2 Teacher  
Delhi Public School*

I began teaching in Moose River, Ontario, a small Native Canadian community about 40 km. south of Moosonee, Ontario.

My husband, Ed, and I were the only teachers there. While I taught grades K-3, Ed taught grades 4-8. Once our two year contract was complete, we backpacked in South East Asia for seven months. We moved home to Southwestern Ontario on our return to Canada.

A few years later, I began teaching grades 1 and 2 at Delhi Public School where I have been teaching for eleven years. Last year both Ed and I were on a teacher- funded leave. We home schooled our children, ages 10 and 12 while the four of us backpacked for seven months in Australia, New Zealand and Bali. We enjoyed plenty of experiences and came home with our thoughts recorded in seventeen journals. A famous Aussie saying is, "No worries, mate." We became very relaxed over the seven month period. Even so, worries began to creep into my mind on the flight home, as I prepared myself for the inevitable return to educational information overload and the busy lifestyle we have here in Canada. With increased information, there is usually change and with change, the need to adapt and understand the change.

In September of this year, I found myself catching up on information. I began to reflect on how my educational values fit with the guidelines we are now working with. I saw myself working hard to meet time lines, filling student minds with as much curriculum as possible, providing opportunities to practice skills, problem solve, communicate and apply knowledge and giving ongoing assessment of learning. I needed to make a meaningful, and workable goal for myself

and my students to benefit our growth and the learning process, and at the same time work within the Ontario Curriculum guidelines . I found this to be a positive way of dealing with the changes in education we are all experiencing. To accomplish this, I decided to do action research and focus on the use of portfolios to improve student learning skills.

During the course of the year I have learned a lot through the action research process. The process has led me to more questions which will help me improve my use of portfolios in the classroom. My goal next year is to continue action research to explore the assessment strategy of student-led conferencing.

## SUMMARY

### 1. Focus:

How can I help students develop the learning skills necessary to become life-long learners, and in the process, meet the goals in the knowledge and skills areas of the Ontario Curriculum?

### 2. Process:

#### 2.1 Rationale:

- Student involvement with respect to goal setting and student ownership of the portfolio was lacking
- Assessment for learning is process oriented, needs dialogue, focussed on improving

#### 2.2 Steps:

- Used a fat file and comment booklet for a writing portfolio, student selected a sample each term for a final four-piece growth portfolio.
- Students developed a rubric for self-assessment and goal-setting.

### 3. Findings:

1. Students improved in writing if it followed a multiple intelligence experience; such as, a drama class, a reading, or a field trip.
2. The guidelines of a rubric help to make reflections and goals more specific.
3. Portfolios incorporate curriculum expectations and promote life long learning

# **Self-Assessment Through The Use of Portfolios**

**By Lyn-Anne Nash-Dertinger**

**Teacher, Grand Erie District School Board**

As a primary teacher, I have found the use of teacher-led portfolios very useful. After in-service training in First Steps, I became used to tracking student work using the growth strands or developmental continuum. When tracking student progress using growth strands I found teacher-led portfolios a good means to organize evidence of student development, keep anecdotal records and gather samples of work to support my tracking.

Documenting and assessing student learning has changed over the years. We have worked with Board Curriculum, Common Curriculum and The Ontario Curriculum. When reflecting on my practice as a teacher towards the end of last year, I saw myself working hard to meet time lines, filling student minds with as much curriculum as possible, providing opportunities to practice skills, problem solve, communicate and apply knowledge and giving ongoing assessment of learning. (Ruth Sutton Presentation, February 2001) Assessment of learning focuses on mastery of concepts taught and the ability to apply and communicate knowledge. It is product oriented. Even breaking curriculum down into chunks and assessing through student participation, conferencing, daily work, and theme portfolios was like filling up the big think tank, only to get a cursory measurement of surface achievement at the end. The student learning seemed fragmented when I wanted to create a seamless cycle of learning.

As I began to explore ways to create this kind of learning cycle, I realized that often students were driven to get a "B" or "A" and seemed to make this goal a focus without knowing what the marks meant in terms of how to reflect—not a positive educational process. Similarly, while some students thoroughly enjoyed the challenge in all kinds of assessment,

some needed encouragement and guidance, and some really didn't care at all. I wondered whether, in total, the students were giving me only a perception that they were learning (Jack Whitehead Presentation, December, 2000) rather than actually gaining deep understanding of the concepts and skills I worked so hard to teach and assess. My suspicion was that some students simply copied my models without assimilating the knowledge behind the demonstration. I started to look for ways to modify my practice to improve student learning and motivate more students to take on challenges. The problem solving, application, and communication of knowledge are difficult skills for many young students and require practice and focused student involvement for learning to take place. Oral games and behavior modification strategies work to spark student interest and motivate more students to be involved with learning. However, I was concerned about how continued assessment of learning was benefitting student growth. This concern prompted me to reflect on my practice as a teacher.

When questioning my priorities as an educator, I felt torn: my need to cover and assess The Ontario Curriculum expectations seemed to conflict with my values for student-centered learning. I believe in measuring individual success with a previous best, and building student growth. I think learning takes place when students are involved, feel a part of the process, recognize their own growth, and build on their own strengths. I wanted to make these seemingly opposite approaches to education come together in my practice for the benefit of the students. Given this, assessment for learning or formative assessment follows (Ruth Sutton Presentation, February 2001). Assessment **for** learning is process oriented. Through conferencing with the teacher and student reflection, students are given feedback, in words, focused on improving the student's best work; e.g., "How can you make this even better than your best?" It is credible to me that learning skills such as **goal setting**, **initiative**, and **organized work habits** can be successfully developed through assessment **for** learning. I began to hypothesize that once student involvement is gained in this way, perhaps irrefutable and sustained student learning would take place. This leads to the question at the center of this action research project:

**How can I help students develop the learning skills necessary to become life-long learners, and in the process, meet the goals in the knowledge and skill areas of the Ontario Curriculum?**

Every year I have given students writing portfolios. In them, student rough drafts and published works are filed. Early this year I asked students, "Why do we use portfolios?" Students' responses reflect their general perceptions about the writing portfolios:

- ➡ "So we don't lose our work."
- ➡ "So the teacher can go over the work to make sure the right mark is given."
- ➡ "So we can add more to our writing because it is in the portfolio to work on."
- ➡ "So the teacher can show other teachers our work at meetings."
- ➡ "To keep all good copies of work so we can look at it when we are older."
- ➡ "So we can check and recheck our work to see if the writing is alright."

While the responses were very good, it was clear that portfolios were not serving the purpose I intended: student involvement with respect to goal setting and student ownership of the portfolio was lacking; rather, portfolios were show cases of writing. Since my goal was to make the writing portfolio a tool to practice formative assessment and thereby enhance goal setting, initiative, and organized work habits, several changes needed to take place.

What changes could I make in an effort to reach my goal? I imagined several possibilities and tried them all:

1. I thought I might have success encouraging student involvement with the writing portfolio if I provided opportunities for students to develop writing skills from an area of strength. I became aware of the importance of tapping into Multiple Intelligence and looked for opportunities to make Multiple Intelligences inherent in the pre-writing experience. This included incorporating activities like drama, art, school trips, mathematical problem solving, group research, and stories read to the class.
2. I gave students a comment booklet, hoping to extend their sense of audience and purpose for writing. About three times a term, I gave a set of student written stories and the comment booklets to another teacher. In them, the teacher wrote positive comments about the written work; these were returned to the students.
3. Students began to complete student reflections of written work. Here they recorded what they liked best about their work, what they didn't like about their work, and how they could make their written work better next time. To help with this, I displayed a rubric on the bulletin board describing what written work at Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 looks like (see Figure: 6).
4. Sometimes, the entire written assignment was based on a reflection of another school activity. Here Multiple Intelligence was included in the writing experience.
5. All rough drafts and published writing was kept in the writing folder or "fat file" throughout the year. Each term, students chose one favorite writing sample from the fat file to include in a growth portfolio; additionally, one final piece was selected to create a final four-piece growth portfolio. Through this portfolio, growth over the course of the year is very visible. Each time the students add something to these portfolios they look back at their first piece of writing in September and see how their writing ability has grown. Student involvement with their own work is evident in the photographs (see Figures 1-5).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

I too became very much involved in the portfolio experience. I enjoyed the challenge and as one idea led to another I perceived portfolios less as extra work and more like a huge puzzle. The challenge was to fit the pieces together to make a workable whole, whereby students build on previous success, and given clues (rubric guidelines), are able to move onto the next step in developing writing skills.

When reflecting on the impact of the strategies used, I discovered students became more involved with expressing their thoughts through writing, following a kinesthetic experiences (e.g., drama class, trip to Backus Mill) and following books I read to them as a class. Attached are student samples of writing following a drama class and following a story read to them (see Appendix 1-2).

Early in the school year, I recognized that student reflections of written work were lacking substance and direction with respect to goal setting. They seemed more interested in the mark they may "get" than in the process. I had posted a rubric on the bulletin board (see Figure: 6), but wondered whether the rubric was too difficult for them to connect with. Changes had to be made in this area since helping students set goals for themselves through self assessment was a fundamental part of the goal I had in mind.

**A - The Whopper**  
Student demonstrates,

**B - The Combo**  
Student demonstrates,

**C - The Burg**  
Student demonstrates

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Independent work habits</li> <li>✦ Consistent accuracy</li> <li>✦ Clear, precise, confident communication</li> <li>✦ Application of concepts taught, in a variety of contexts</li> <li>✦ Problem solving skills by creating new strategies or changing known strategies</li> <li>✦ complete understanding of concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Independent work habits</li> <li>✦ Accurate work usually</li> <li>✦ Clear precise communication</li> <li>✦ Application of most concepts taught for specific purposes</li> <li>✦ Problem solving skills by choosing the most appropriate strategies</li> <li>✦ Consistent general understanding of concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Ability with assistance</li> <li>✦ Frequent accuracy</li> <li>✦ Communication with some clarity and some precision</li> <li>✦ Application of some concepts taught for a variety of simple purposes</li> <li>✦ Problem solving skills by using appropriate strategies</li> <li>✦ Limited understanding of concepts</li> </ul>
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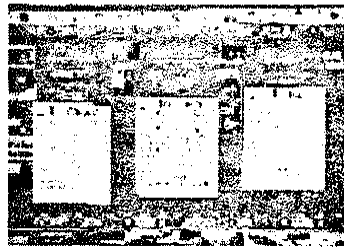


Figure 6

Together we developed a rubric (see Figure 7) in the language of the students. Rather than using Levels or Grades on the rubric we used red, yellow and green color coding to differentiate the descriptions of written work. I explained to the students that when reflecting they need to:



1. Read their rough draft and published copy carefully.
2. Determine what they are doing well or very well based on the rubric. Highlight descriptions of their writing on the rubric.
3. Set two goals based on what they need to do to achieve one step next to their present achievement level as recorded on the rubric.

Red	Orange	Green
Few descriptive words	Some descriptive words	Many descriptive words
A little punctuation	Mostly correct punctuation	Correct punctuation
Several spelling errors	Mostly correct spelling	Correct spelling
You need a lot of help to complete work	You might need a little help	You complete work all by yourself
A few ideas written unclearly with no detail	Beginning, middle and ending with little detail	Strong beginning, middle and ending and detail

Figure 7

Students found reflection on their work much easier using the ideas in the rubric to comment on. The guidelines in the rubric helped the students choose grade appropriate goals and provided some direction. Reflections were much more specific, and precise and therefore, more purposeful with respect to the overall goal. Evidence of this can be seen when comparing the following reflections of the same published writing sample. Students did two reflections each; a reflection of their writing before creating the rubric together and a reflection of their writing using the rubric created together as a guideline (see Figures 8a,8b, 9a, 9b, 10a, 10b).

During the course of the year I have learned a lot through the action research process. Once again, when reflecting, I see several aspects to the portfolio approach I plan to change next year. I will include more activities tapping into Multiple Intelligence in the portfolios. Also, I will work with the students to create a more appropriate writing rubric for them to use early in September. As writing skills develop I will help students to create new rubrics guiding them to set more advanced goals as the year progresses. In this way I will incorporate growth through formative assessment into my program and at the same time meet curriculum expectations; thus, preparing students for Provincial Assessment in Grade 3. I hope to further build on portfolios by extending it to the assessment strategy of student-led conferencing.

Figure 8a

**I am proud of this Portfolio Item because . . .**

*I am proud of this story because*

*I had a part that they learned a*

*lesson. I'm also proud of this story*

*because I have a strong beginning, middle,*

*and ending. I am proud that I did some stuff I*

*really like.*

**Date:** *Aug 19, 2001*      **Signed,** *B. Buttrick*

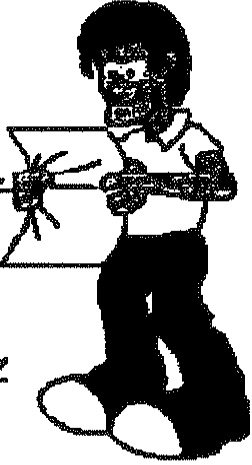


Figure 8b

## Rubric for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting in Writing

Few descriptive words	Some descriptive words	Many descriptive words
A little punctuation	Mostly correct punctuation	Correct punctuation
Several spelling errors	Mostly correct spelling	Correct spelling
You need a lot of help to complete work	You might need a little help	You complete work all by yourself
A few ideas written unclearly with no detail	Beginning, middle and ending with little detail	Strong beginning, middle and ending and detail

**I am proud of this Portfolio Item because . . .**

*I had a strong beginning middle and ending and details*

*My goals are to have more correct punctuation and correct spelling and do it all by myself*



**Date:** 05/12/2001      **Signed,** Remittan 2.

Figure 9a

**I am proud of this Portfolio Item  
because . . .**

It is the Best story I have done  
this year. I like this work because  
I worked real hard on it.  
I like this work because it is  
my favorite piece of work.

**Date:** Apr 19, 2001      **Signed,** Kristy

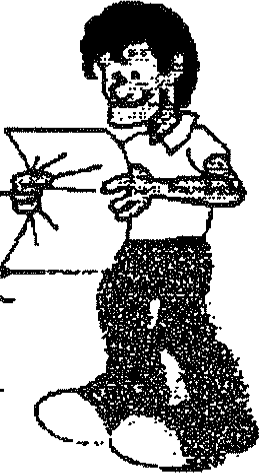


Figure 9b

**Rubric for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting in Writing**

Few descriptive words	Some descriptive words	Many descriptive words
A little punctuation	mostly correct punctuation	Correct punctuation
Several spelling errors	mostly correct spelling	Correct spelling
You need a lot of help to complete work	You might need a little help	You complete work all by yourself
A few ideas written unclearly with no detail	Beginning, middle and ending with little detail	Strong beginning, middle and ending and detail

**I am proud of this Portfolio Item because . . .**

I have mostly correct spelling.

I can complete work all by my self.

Next time I will correct Punctuations.

**Date:** May 9 2001 **Signed,** Kristy

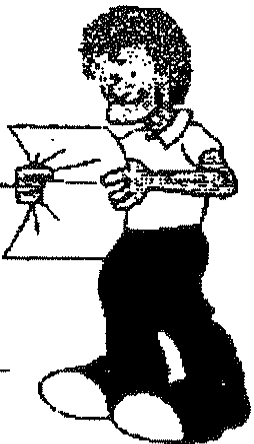


Figure 10b

## Rubric for Self-Assessment and Goal Setting in Writing

Few descriptive words	Some descriptive words	Many descriptive words
A little punctuation	Correct punctuation	Correct punctuation
Several spelling errors	mostly correct spelling	Correct spelling
You need a lot of help to complete work	You might need a little help	You complete work all by yourself
A few ideas written unclearly with no detail	Beginning, middle and ending with little detail	Strong beginning, middle and ending and detail

**I am proud of this Portfolio Item because . . .**

I have mostly correct spelling and I have a beginning, middle and ending with little details. Next time I'll try to write a strong beginning, middle and ending and more details.

Date: Tues. May 2, 2001      Signed, Mathew Wood


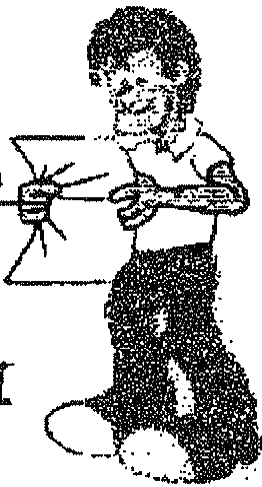


Figure 10a

**I am proud of this Portfolio Item because . . .**

I stayed in recess. I wrote  
more than usual. I did  
capades and periods and I  
used my corrections.

**Date:** Apr 19 2001      **Signed,** Matthew Wood



# Drawing Portfolios

## Authentic Formative Assessment

Anita Ricker



*Anita Ricker*  
*Northview Public School*  
*Grade 1 Teacher*

Much of my teaching experience has been working with early childhood students. I have taught preschool, kindergarten for seven years, and grades one and two for the past three years. Currently, I am a primary teacher for the Grand Erie District School Board. I teach grade one and two at Northview Public School in Hagersville, Ontario.

My post secondary education includes earning a diploma in Social Service Work, and a combined Bachelor of Arts Degree in Child Studies and Psychology. I later attended teacher's college and earned a Bachelor of Education Degree.

I first became involved in Action Research in 2000. For many years, I had been very interested in what is known as the Reggio Approach; an Italian city's approach to early childhood education. Reggio Emilia is renowned for its image of the child, how the child learns, and how s/he expresses that learning using many "languages".

Through action research, I want to continue to implement aspects of this approach into my program within the framework of the Ontario Curriculum. My work has led to an in-depth investigation of children's drawings, portfolios, and the documentation process.



**1. Focus:**

To demonstrate the authenticity of the drawing portfolio as a formative assessment tool.

**2. Process:**

2.1 Rationale:

- Wanted to use portfolio to show the importance of 'listening' to students learning and documenting as a *Reggio Emilia* Approach to Early Childhood Education.
- Use the portfolio to show drawing as a vehicle for learning.

2.2 Steps:

- Used 'drawing what you see' (initial phase, construction phase, refinement phase) and dialogue as assessment in Autumn Harvest, Inukshuks, Snowflakes, and Postage Stamps.
- Used visual display of progressive work.

**3. Findings:**

1. The drawing 'growth' portfolio showed solid evidence of learning over time.
2. The reflective process transforms a collection of learning samples into a meaningful picture of individual learning.
3. Children do draw to learn and can demonstrate learning through drawing.

# THE DRAWING PORTFOLIO

## Authentic Formative Assessment

By Anita Ricker

### DRAWING AS A VISUAL LANGUAGE

As an early childhood educator, I have come to appreciate children's drawings as a visual language used to represent their learning and growth over time. I believe that drawing is a method of communication; that students are able to represent their knowledge and understanding in a purposeful way through drawing experiences. Children often have knowledge which words alone cannot measure. Further, active learning is taking place when children draw and then reflect on their drawings. I believe that a drawing task engages children, allowing them to focus on details that they may not have noticed otherwise. Dawn and Fred Sedgwick advocate in their book, *Drawing To Learn* (1993), that "drawing is one of the most powerful means of learning, communicating and expressing that there is". Through action research, I wanted to strengthen and promote my convictions about how children *draw to learn and demonstrate their learning through drawing*.

I have been interested in the portfolio process and have attempted to implement their use in previous years. My prior experiences with portfolios have been undeveloped. I simply used them to collect samples of student work to share at parent-teacher conferences. The essential element of student reflection was missing.

In my experience of teaching children ages 3 to 8 years, I have come to understand the importance of listening to the students I teach; listening to their questions, thoughts, ideas, and reflections about their experiences. What children say is important. Important enough to document and remember. I wanted to use what I firmly hold to be true as a starting point for research. I now wanted to utilize portfolios in a more complete way to demonstrate students' growth and learning over time.

The purpose of my action research became to demonstrate the authenticity of a drawing portfolio as a formative assessment tool. Further, I intended to investigate the verity and functionality of the portfolio experience.

### DOCUMENTATION AND PORTFOLIOS

Of particular influence to my aforesaid beliefs is the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. This approach has been a source of inspiration for my teaching throughout the past four years. The following are aspects of the approach which are relevant to my research.

The preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, are internationally acclaimed. Reggio is not a method but a way of thinking about children, education and schools. Long-term projects provide children with opportunities for integrated and meaningful learning. The curriculum in Reggio Emilia is emergent. It is not established in advance; however, teachers do have general educational objectives for children. The curriculum emerges during the process of the activity or project. Children are given time to engage in long-term, in-depth investigations. They are not tied to rigid schedules although general routines of daily

activities are usually followed. Children are encouraged to express their learning in ways which compliment their individual learning styles. The arts are valued as “languages” which students utilize to demonstrate their knowledge and learning. It is believed that young children want and need to express ideas and messages through different expressive ways such as working with clay, paint, drawing, sculpture, construction, music, movement, dance and shadow play. The children draw to learn. They revisit and revise their work moving them to new levels of awareness.

An important feature of the Reggio Approach is the use of documentation. Documentation is a well-designed visual representation of a project or a learning experience. It is prepared in the form of panels, slides and videotapes. Documentation typically includes: samples of a child’s, or group of children’s work at several different stages of completion; photographs showing work in progress; comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the children; transcriptions of children’s discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and comments made by parents. Examples of children’s work and written reflections on the experiences of the children are displayed in an aesthetically pleasing manner.

### **Making Connections ...**

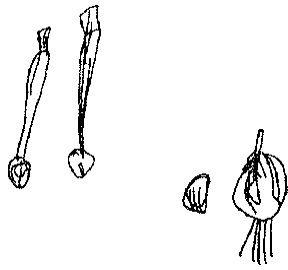
By means of reading support materials, [See Appendix A for a complete listing] it became evident to me that there are many similarities between the documentation process in Reggio Emilia and the use of growth portfolios in Ontario schools. Both are used to:

- track student progress and learning over time.
- offer students the opportunity for revisiting, reflecting and interpreting.
- support the children’s memory, offering them the opportunity to retrace their own progresses, to find confirmation or negation, and to self-correct.
- influence further learning and programming.
- engage the student and teacher in reciprocal learning.

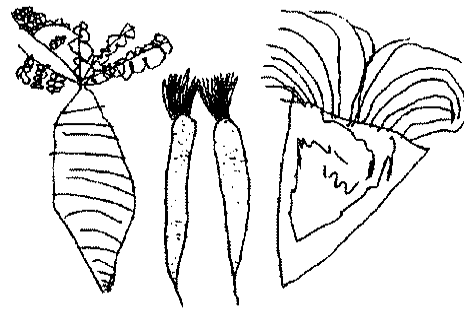
### **TAKING ACTION**

#### **In the beginning ...**

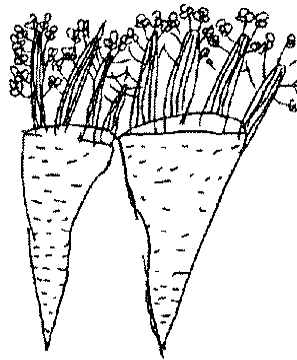
At the start of my research project, my focus question and method of investigation were still unclear. I knew that I wanted to study children’s drawings within a portfolio context; however, was unsure as to how I would go about it. Initially, I just planned for drawing experiences to explore how they could be used to demonstrate learning in a grade one classroom. I first included drawing in an Autumn Harvest unit that I was developing. We had been talking about fruits and vegetables which are harvested in the fall so I brought in some real samples for my students to see, feel, smell and taste - my experience as a teacher of young children has taught me the importance of planning for activities which call upon the five senses. Following this sensory experience, I encouraged the children to “draw what you see”. I was surprised at the realism and the detail that students included in their drawings. We then created a class book featuring their drawings entitled A Harvest Of Fruits And Vegetables. I recall that the students were very pleased to see that their drawings were valued by one another and by me, their teacher. They were delighted to see their work combined for the purpose of making a book for the classroom library. At this point, although I was listening to “student talk”, regretfully, I did not transcribe the dialogue I was hearing. I made photocopies of the students’ drawings so that a copy could be placed in their portfolios.



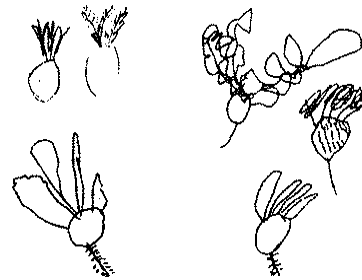
Onions and Garlic



Carrots



More Carrots



Radishes

***Drawings with annotation provide context and illuminate.***

I discovered early on, that the transcription of students' oral descriptions and/or explanations along with my own anecdotal observations are an essential part of the authentic assessment process. The drawing itself represents part of the learning; however, when the dialogue is added, the picture becomes richer and more complete.

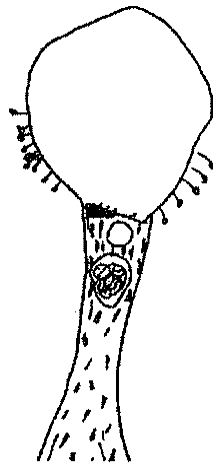
I want to exemplify the importance of listening to "student talk" as they are drawing. Children will often think aloud or converse with other students as they are working. By listening to and recording this dialogue I have gained meaningful insight into the students' cognitive understanding as well as the effectiveness of particular learning experiences that I have provided for my students.

The following examples illustrate and are presented here as evidence for my position.

**Investigating Trees and Leaves**

My class went out to the school playground to look at trees. To increase students' awareness of size, shape and texture, I asked the children to feel the texture of the bark, to put their arms around the tree and to notice the shapes of the branches and the variations of the leaves. We looked at and compared the seeds of the maple tree and oak tree. While outdoors, I asked the students to use paper and crayons to make rubbings of the tree bark. The next day, I asked the students to draw a tree including the many of the parts that they experienced the day before.

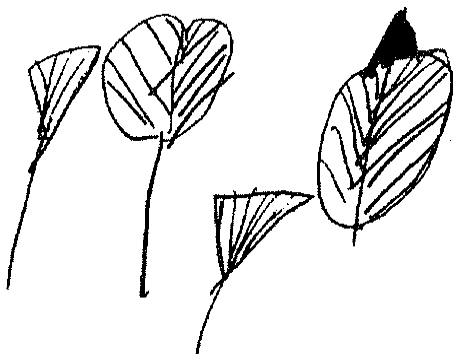
As Devon draws broken vertical lines on the trunk of his tree to show the texture of the bark, he comments to a classmate, "Remember? We did the rubbings".



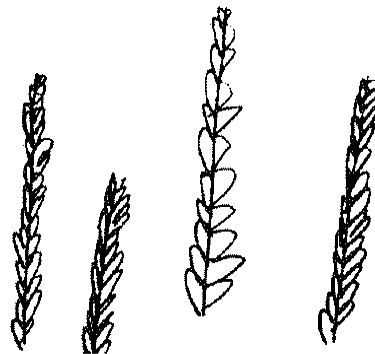
By listening to and recording this dialogue, I gained important information about Devon's understanding of the texture of the tree trunk and his attempt to draw that texture, as well as the value of the previous day's experiences.

That same day, the students looked at and felt maple leaves, oak leaves, and various compound leaves. They noticed and felt the veins and the smooth, lobed and toothed patterns of the leaf edge.

The experiences allowed them to draw realistic representations of what they saw and learned.



Simple Leaves by Sam



Compound Leaves by Sam

At the completion of our investigation of trees and leaves, I asked the students to draw pictures of trees and leaves to be used as one part of the assessment of learning for this unit of study. I clearly outlined for the students what I would be looking for in the drawings:

- Parts of a tree (i.e. The drawings were to show the tree roots, trunk, branches, leaves, seeds.)
- Leaves (i.e. Their drawings were to show leaf shapes; edges: smooth, toothed, lobed; and type: simple or compound.)

What I found was that the student drawings supported the oral assessment that I had conducted through student-teacher conferencing. In almost every case the drawings were an accurate reflection of the student's understanding. In those cases where there was a discrepancy, the students showed limitations in fine motor coordination and therefore the drawings did not show all that they knew about trees and leaves. In a few other cases, the drawings actually showed more of what the student knew than what s/he was able to express verbally. These results stress the importance of using both the drawings and student anecdotes in combination for assessment purposes.

### Inukshuks

My grade one students were learning to read a story from the Nelson reader, Swing In entitled, Inukshuks by William Belsey. The children expressed a great deal of interest in learning about inukshuks, so I used their curiosity to transfer the topic into a science unit on structures. I showed photographs, paintings, and read stories, etc. to build their understanding about what an inukshuk is. I then asked the students to make their own inukshuks using building blocks, a computer drawing program, and various art media (oil pastel, paint, modelling clay).

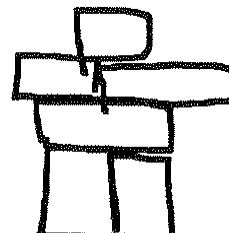
It had now become a common practice for me to transcribe student dialogues about their drawings. The children in my class had become accustomed to using their drawings as a basis for reflective conferencing. I prompted the student by asking questions about the drawing and then recorded the student's answers. Their oral responses provided me with additional information about their level of understanding. At other times the dialogue was not prompted; however, notably informative.

As Katie handed me her drawing of an Inukshuk, she pulled it back saying,  
*"Oh, I have to do it again because the arms will fall off".*

(Katie had verbalized an understanding of structural support as well as recognizing the value in revising her work. )



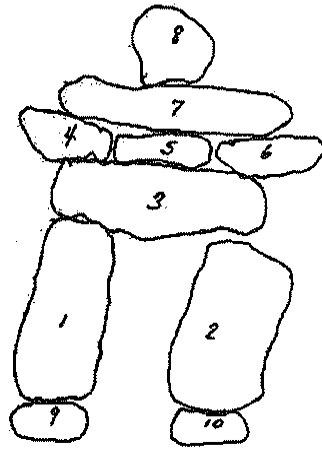
Katie's first drawing of an inukshuk using the computer program KidPix



Katie's revised drawing.

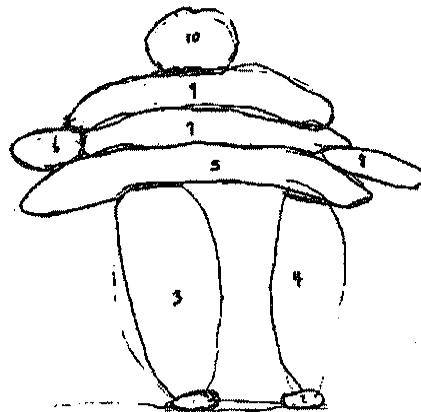
I asked the students to talk about their drawings and art work using the prompt, "Tell me about your drawing" or "Tell me about your picture".

The following two examples of student reflection demonstrate their understanding of Inukshuk structure.



Evan's drawing of an inukshuk December 9, 2000

*"I put these rocks (9, 10) underneath because these (1,2) weren't touching the ground. I put this rock (5) here so it would be more supported. I put this one (7) on so these (4,6) wouldn't fall."*

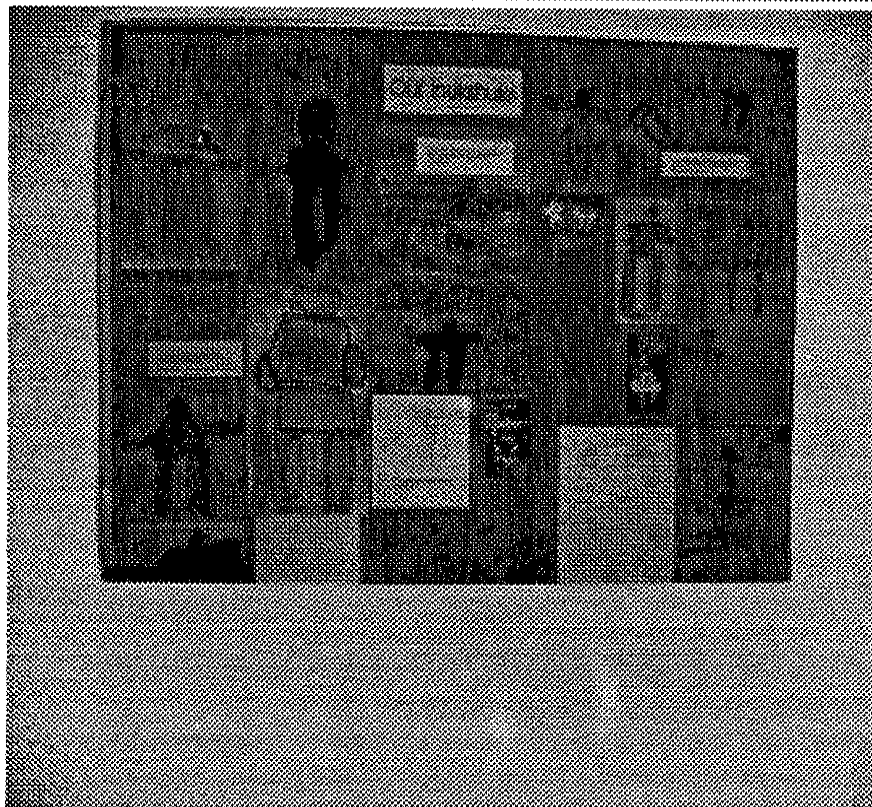
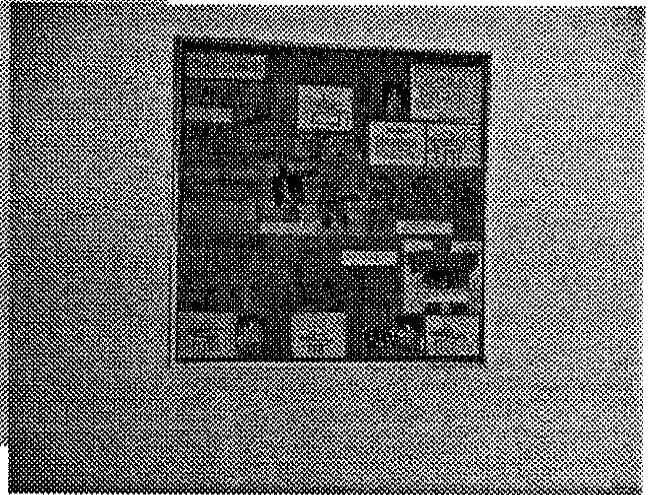
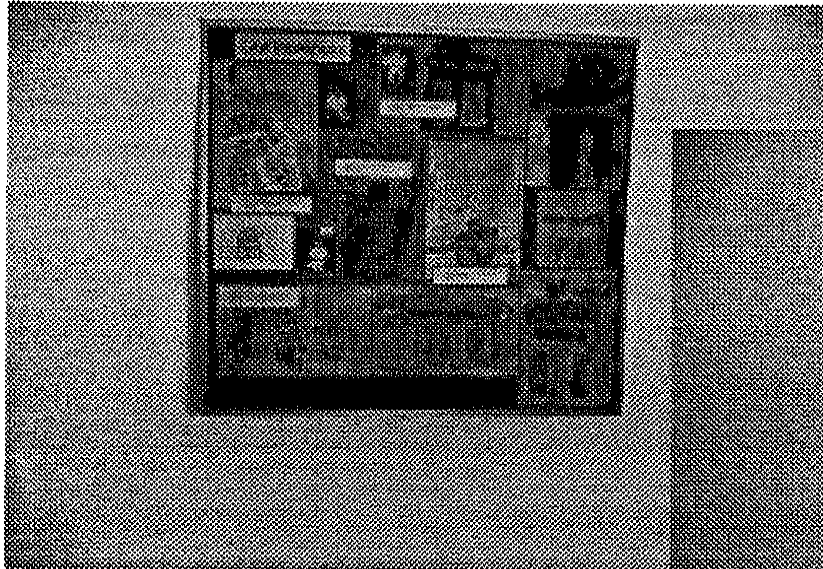


Stacie's drawing of an inukshuk December 8, 2000

*"I made this rock(8) longer because it shows the way home. I made the Inukshuk's head(10) round because people's heads are round. I drew the rocks so they would stand up and not fall down."*

### Applying the Reggio Emilia Panel Format.

I created panels which communicated student learning throughout the study of inukshuks. The display showed various samples of student work at various stages along with their reflections, photographs of block structures, and anecdotal comments by me which outlined the student's experiences and learning. What a worthwhile effort it was! The students and I were empowered by the visual display of their learning. It served to tell the story of their progress.





The following are students' reflections on their art work showing understanding of what an inukshuk is and its purpose.

*Inukshuks are made to show a place for fishing. They can point the way home. They are made of rocks. They look like two boulders and two rocks on top. It looks like a person. I used pastels and a paint wash to make my picture.*

Bryer

*An inukshuk is made of rock. An inukshuk shows the way home or points to where hunters can find meat or fish. They stand for a long time because they are important. I used tempera paint and crayon.*

Matt

*Inukshuks are made of stone or rock. They show hunters the way home. They have to be built strong so they will stand for a long time. I used a paint wash over oil pastel colours for my picture. It shows three inukshuks on a hill with flowers.*

Stacie

*Inukshuks are made out of stone. They're used to point the way home if you're lost. My inukshuk has one longer arm than the other, two legs a body and a head just like a human. My inukshuk is standing beside a hill and a flower. The sun is shining.*

Sydney

### **The drawing portfolio as an authentic assessment tool**

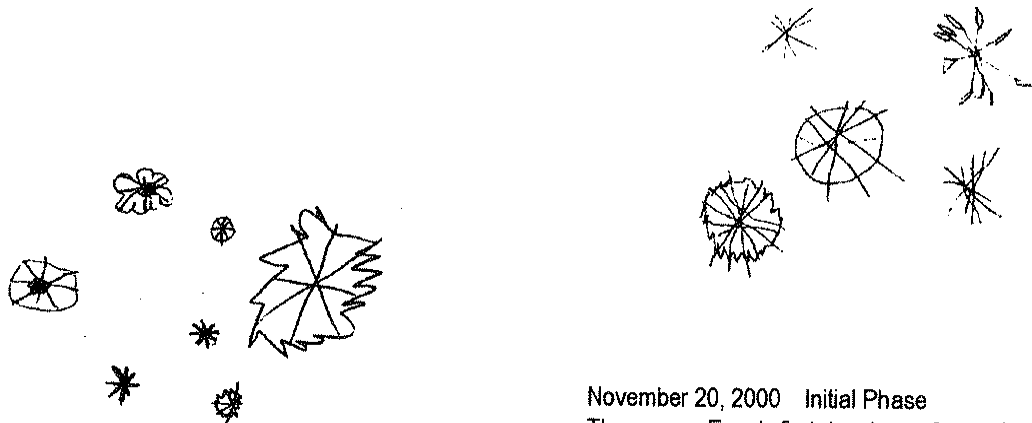
To demonstrate the authenticity of the drawing portfolio as an assessment tool, I facilitated students through three phases of understanding for each of the curriculum investigations. The aim of the *Initial Phase* was to assess children's knowledge about a subject - to activate prior knowledge, and to establish a point of reference. The first drawings were completed during this phase. During the *Construction of Knowledge Phase*, I provided tactile, visual and auditory experiences with the subject and gave my students corrective feedback and opportunities to rework and revise their drawings demonstrating new learning. The *Refinement Phase* includes the students' final drawings. Together the students and I then looked at the drawings and reflected on the learning experience. I transcribed the dialogue for assessment purposes.

### **Snowflakes**

Our study of snowflakes in my room was a true example of emergent curriculum. As it happens each year, the children all raced to the windows of my classroom on the day of the first snowfall. This year was different though. The difference was in how I responded to the children's excitement and interest. After spending some time looking out the windows, I asked the children to come to their tables to draw. I asked them to draw what they know about snowflakes (initial phase). Then we all put on our coats and went outdoors to enjoy the snow. We looked at snowflakes falling on our coats and mittens and tried to describe them. I knew that this was a "teachable moment" and I didn't want to throw it away. So I started researching. I first went to the Ontario curriculum documents to determine how I could use snowflakes as a

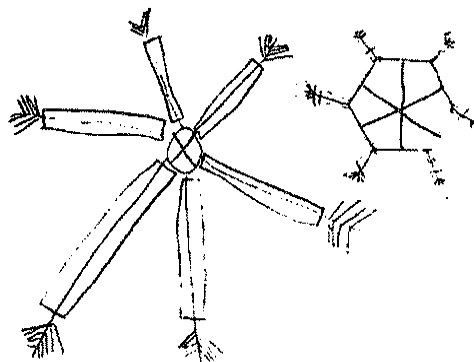
theme for learning. I decided to develop an integrated unit which included a study of symmetry and patterns in nature. During the construction of knowledge phase, I facilitated various learning experiences. I discovered a terrific website on the Internet about "Snowflake Bentley", the man who discovered through photography that no two snowflakes are identical. I down-loaded, then photocopied, many photos of snowflakes for the students to see. The children learned that snowflakes have a distinct pattern, six sides or six points and that there is at least one line of symmetry. They cut paper snowflakes and drew snowflakes many times. The refinement phase was also the stage at which I used the student's drawings for assessment purposes. I outlined for the students what my expectations were; that their drawing must have all of the characteristics of a snowflake as they had learned. The drawings were used as one part of my assessment of their understanding of patterns and symmetry.

Evan's drawings and anecdotes represent his progress and growth over time.



November 20, 2000 Initial Phase  
These were Evan's first drawings of snowflakes.

December 20, 2000  
Construction Of Knowledge Phase  
Evan described what he drew. *"They have about six points. This one has more (he points to one of his snowflakes). Snowflakes are all different."*

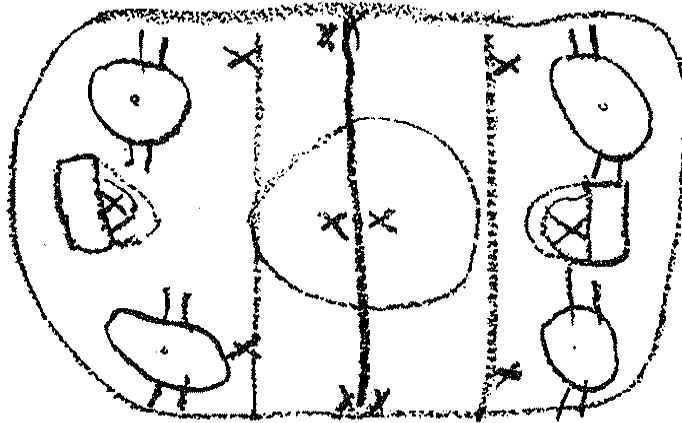


January 12, 2001 Refinement Phase  
This is Evan's final drawing. His reflection confirms what he has learned. *"This drawing of a snowflake is right. It has six points and it has lines of symmetry. It also has a pattern."*

### Drawing as a motivator

Evan's confidence in his drawing ability grew with each drawing experience. He was beginning to use drawing independently to apply new learning.

During the unit on patterns and symmetry, I had set up various centres with math manipulatives for the students to create symmetrical designs. Evan and Sam came to me and asked if they could draw with oil pastels to create a symmetrical design instead of working at the planned centres. I responded with a resounding "Absolutely!" This is what Evan drew.



Arena Floor Drawing

Drawn by Evan as an example of symmetrical design.

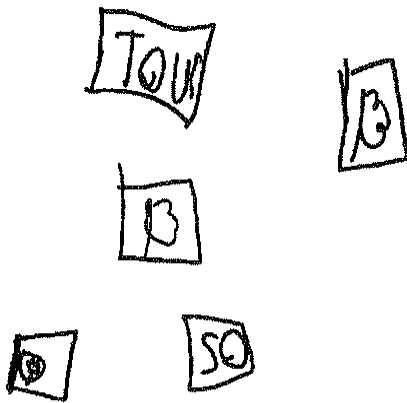
### Postage Stamps

While learning about our community, my class visited the local post office. The children had learned to write a friendly letter, and had written short letters to their Eco-Pals in British Columbia. We had also received correspondence from them. We had a discussion about how letters get from one place to another. One of the children commented that there were a lot of stamps on the big envelope that came from our Eco-Pals.

I used postage stamps to teach about Canadian symbols and money. In the Initial Phase, I had the children draw what they knew about postage stamps. During the Construction of Knowledge Phase, the students learned that a postage stamp has a value, a picture or symbol, the country name and one of many shapes. They were given many opportunities to draw postage stamps illustrating their growing knowledge.

The Refinement Phase included the students' final drawings which were considered in the assessment of learning skills. I was particularly interested in the students' use of information; namely, connecting new information to prior learning and integrating learning from various subjects.

The following are samples of student work which were included as part of their drawing portfolio.



#### Initial Phase

Devon's first drawings of postage stamps show that he knows that stamps can be rectangular or square and of different sizes. He knows that there are pictures, letters and numbers; however, does not understand what they represent or how they work together.



#### Construction of Knowledge Phase

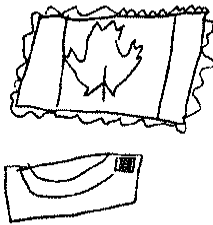
Devon has learned that a postage stamp includes the country name, a picture and a stated value.



#### Refinement Phase

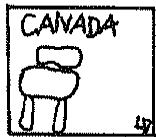
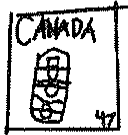
Devon points to the largest stamp picturing a loon and comments, "This stamp is twenty five cents". I asked him what coins he could use to pay for his stamp and he answered, "A quarter ... or just pennies". His drawings show his understanding of the inukshuk and loon as Canadian symbols (social studies) and his oral comments demonstrate his knowledge about the value of money (math).

## EVAN'S POSTAGE STAMP DRAWINGS



### Initial Phase

Evan demonstrates an understanding of the maple leaf being present on many Canadian stamps and also where a stamp goes on an envelope.



### Construction of Knowledge Phase

Evan has learned that the country name is on a stamp and he has assigned the value of 47 cents to the stamps.



### Refinement Phase

Evan's final drawings show Canadian symbols, the country name and various values assigned to the stamps.

## MATT'S POSTAGE STAMP DRAWINGS

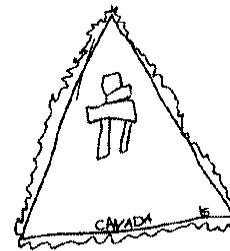


### Initial Phase

Matt's first drawings of postage stamps.

*"I already knew they had a picture. I drew a Canada leaf; a maple leaf."*

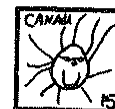
Matt also clearly understands the most common shape of Canadian postage stamp.



### Construction of Knowledge Phase

*"I learned that there's always how much it is and the name CANADA."*

*"I also learned that stamps can come in different shapes."*



### Refinement Phase

Matt's comments on his final drawings:

*"I made stamps that have pictures of things I like. They are worth*

*different amounts, but I did them all with 5's.*

*I learned that a stamp doesn't have to have squiggly lines."*

## CONCLUSIONS

Danielson and Abrutyn (1997) state that “the primary purpose of the assessment portfolio is to document student learning on specific curriculum outcomes.” I accomplished this through the use of drawing portfolios.

The drawing portfolio provided solid evidence to the students of their learning over time. Progress was clear to the students as their work was laid out in sequence before them. It was through incremental reflection on their drawings that the students were able to provide evidence of learning for assessment purposes. The drawings independent of anecdotes often provided additional evidence of learning that the student was unable to verbally communicate. In those instances, I described my observations to the student so she would also realize her knowledge. For example, when conferencing with a student about her drawing of an inukshuk, I pointed out, “*You’ve drawn rocks here to support the ones you’ve drawn here*”. At other times, I would prompt the student to realize why he drew what he did by asking thought-provoking questions such as, “*I notice that you’ve drawn this rock longer. Can you tell me why you did that?*”.

Rolheiser et al (2000), state that a growth portfolio “will include comparative samples that reflect the process of learning over time”. The drawing portfolio as I used it in my classroom is an authentic example of a growth portfolio which can be used for assessment purposes. They also assert that “a portfolio entry is a learning sample plus a reflection on that sample. The reflective process transforms a collection of learning samples into a rich source of data because student reflection provides a more comprehensive and meaningful picture of individual learning. The collection of entries constitutes a portfolio”. I have to admit that I did not have each student in my class reflect on every portfolio entry. I simply couldn’t manage it; especially in the beginning. I discovered how difficult it was for grade one students to put their learning “into words”. I learned the importance of setting into place mechanisms to encourage student reflection before conferencing. I modelled reflective statements while I was drawing for the students or as I was sharing a drawing by another artist. When I use drawing portfolios again, I will teach reflective skills more directly and early in the school year. I’ll model the use of prompts for the students such as:

- This drawing shows what I know about ...
- This is a special drawing because it makes me feel ...
- I enjoyed doing this drawing because ...
- I chose this drawing for my portfolio because ...

I discovered the importance of setting routines for conferencing. After I had tried various methods, I set in place a routine for conferencing at a table with a computer. It was possible for me to transcribe student reflections immediately, quickly and neatly. I believe too, that because they saw me “writing” what they said, my students felt that what they were saying was important and valued. This recording method worked well for me; however, other teachers may wish to use a prepared form for anecdotes.

For me, the experience of using a drawing portfolio validated my belief that children do *draw to learn* and do *demonstrate their learning through drawing*. I learned the value of student reflection. It is crucially important to listen to students as they work and have them engage in the reflective process. Given the evidence cited, children's words and pictures together are to be valued as authentic languages used to express their learning . I conclude that they are a fundamental source of information for formative assessment purposes.

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## Appendix B

### LOOKING TO THE ONTARIO CURRICULUM

Using the Ontario Unit Planner as a tool, I conducted a search for the word “draw” within overall and specific expectations in grade one math, science, and the arts. These are the integrated subject areas I used as the focus for my research. I found that the word draw and/or drawing(s) was present in grade one expectations for each strand of math, for each strand of science and in the visual arts strand. This finding was a clear message to me that *drawing to learn* is indeed valued by the writers of our Ontario Curriculum. The following is a listing of those expectations:

#### MATHEMATICS

##### Number Sense and Numeration

- compare and order whole numbers using concrete materials and drawings to develop number meanings (e.g., to show place value, arrange 32 counters in groups of 3 tens and 2 ones);
- compare, order, and represent whole numbers to 50 using concrete materials and drawings;
- represent and explain halves as part of a whole using concrete materials and drawings (e.g., colour one-half of a circle);
- add and subtract money amounts to 10¢ using concrete materials, drawings, and symbols;

##### Measurement

- represent the results of measurement activities using concrete materials and drawings;
- represent a given value of coins up to 10¢ using concrete materials or drawings;

##### Geometry and Spatial Sense

- describe and classify three-dimensional figures and two-dimensional shapes using concrete materials and drawings;
- understand basic concepts in transformational geometry using concrete materials and drawings.
- explore and identify three-dimensional figures using concrete materials and drawings (e.g., cube, cone, cylinder, sphere);
- explore and identify two-dimensional shapes using concrete materials and drawings (e.g., circle, rectangle, triangle);
- create symmetrical figures using concrete materials and drawings;

### **Patterning and Algebra**

- describe, draw, and make models of patterns using actions, objects, diagrams, and words;

### **Data Management and Probability**

- collect, organize, and describe data using concrete materials and drawings;
- record data on charts or grids given by the teacher using various recording methods (e.g., drawing pictures, placing stickers);
- read and discuss data from graphs made with concrete materials and express understanding in a variety of informal ways (e.g., tell a story, draw a picture);
- draw and interpret scale diagrams related to applications (e.g., technical drawings)

## **SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

### **Life Systems**

- record relevant observations, findings, and measurements, using written language, drawings, charts, and concrete materials (e.g., make a drawing of an insect, observing with the unaided eye, and a drawing of the same insect while using a magnifying glass);
- communicate the procedures and results of investigations for specific purposes, using demonstrations, drawings, and oral and written descriptions (e.g., demonstrate how a bird builds a nest).

### **Matter and Materials**

- record relevant observations, findings, and measurements, using written language, drawings, charts, and concrete materials (e.g., make a display board and record the results of their testing of chalk on different materials);
- communicate the procedures and results of investigations for specific purposes, using demonstrations, drawings, and oral and written descriptions (e.g., display examples of materials tested and indicate which ones were best for writing on).

### **Energy and Control**

- record relevant observations, findings, and measurements using written language, drawings, concrete materials, and charts (e.g., create an energy poster illustrating the various forms of energy used in daily life and how they are controlled);
- communicate the procedures and results of investigations and explorations for specific purposes, using demonstrations, drawings, and oral and written descriptions (e.g., prepare a chart of energy conservation practices at home; prepare a chart illustrating how their senses help them use and control everyday devices).

### **Structures and Mechanisms**

- record relevant observations, findings, and measurements, using written language, drawings, charts, and concrete materials (e.g., record the number of different shapes in a playground and draw them);
- communicate the procedures and results of investigations and explorations for specific purposes, using demonstrations, drawings, and oral and written descriptions (e.g., set up a display of different cooking utensils and identify the function of each utensil);

### **Earth and Space Systems**

- record relevant observations, findings, and measurements, using written language, drawings, concrete materials, and charts (e.g., draw pictures of how animals live and what they do at different times of the year; measure and record changes in temperature);
- communicate the procedures and results of explorations and investigations for specific purposes, using demonstrations, drawings, and oral and written descriptions (e.g., write and illustrate a booklet about their observations of seasonal changes; keep a journal recording and describing the weather for a given period of time).

## **VISUAL ARTS**

- identify a variety of art tools, materials, and techniques, and demonstrate understanding of their proper and safe use (e.g., brushes, sponges, fingers, sticks for painting; modelling clay for making sculptures; oil pastels, crayons, markers, pencil crayons for drawing).
- produce two- and three-dimensional works of art (i.e., works involving media and techniques used in drawing, painting, sculpting, printmaking) that communicate thoughts and feelings (e.g., paint a picture about a class trip);

## Appendix C

### WHAT IS DRAWING? THE CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

I asked the children in my class to answer the question, "What is drawing?". Here are some of their responses:

Gabe

Drawing is making lines and colours.

Katelyn

It means to make a picture. We use pencils, crayons or markers.

Sydney

Drawing is when you get a pencil and you make a story with pictures.

Josh

Using a pencil.

Paul

Drawing is writing. You draw with a pencil and markers. You can draw with crayons.

Robbie

It is when you get a pencil and you put the grey end of it onto the paper. Move the pencil to make a picture.

Jessica

Drawing is a picture for a friend.

Stacie

It means to have fun and to do your best work. Drawing is my favourite thing to do. I use a pencil. You hold on to it. You can't draw if you aren't holding it. You move it so you can make a picture. You can make shapes and lines.

Matt

Drawing is you and a pencil.

Ethan

Fun and learning and helping me by learning.

Chantelle

A drawing is something that happens when you take a pencil and it just pops out of your head.

Kevin

A great activity. It's the best. It's fun.

# Portfolios

Neal Stamer



*Neal Stamer  
Grade 10 Teacher  
Pauline Johnson Collegiate-Vocational*

After teaching English in Japan for two terms, Neal taught at Brantford Collegiate Institute in the history and English departments. Currently, he is teaching at Pauline Johnson Collegiate Institute in Brantford.

**1. Focus:**

Will the Learning Portfolio as assessment strategy help to improve student motivation to improve learning?

**2. Process:**

**2.1 Rationale:**

- > given all the changes in secondary reform, would the portfolio help with student motivation in the subject of History?
- > students will feel empowered and more committed with the best-work portfolio
- > are 'performing better' and 'motivation' variations on the same theme?

**2.2 Steps:**

- > documented several indicators (attendance, surveys, witnesses, and professional judgment) in Grade 10 Applied and Academic focus on World War II
- > used "holding tank" portfolio and "selective" for eight best samples using a reflection sheet of five questions
- > corrective feedback and sub tasks to refine the process

### 3.0 Findings:

1. With chosen “wow” questions ( students’ questions used for discussion) from the reflection sheet, the author/student (anonymously) was pleased and more engaged and the quality of “wow” questions improved
2. A reflection/selection period every week or so works best because it takes time to familiarize with portfolios
3. Ownership and choice of assessment promotes motivation, diversity of opportunity is key

### OVERVIEW

Assessment. Evaluation. Authentic Assessment. Authentic Evaluation. Skills for Life Long Learning. These are the buzzwords of 2001. These are the phrases and terms which new teachers are learning for job interviews and that experienced teachers are adding to their lexicon to keep up to date with new mandates from the Ministry and Boards. Tests Assignments. Exams. Quizzes. Journals. Portfolios. Homework. Essays. Class Discussion. Independent Study. These forms of assessment and evaluation are the “real world” manifestations of the aforementioned buzzwords. At the end of the day, one question remains for an eager fourth year teachers who loves showing up for school (not work) on Monday morning, has already lived through two Ministry curricula, and is being battered from pillar to post by: Ministry expectations, public opinion, federation concerns, newspaper editorials, and ad Provincial pressures. What can I do to motivate my kids to want to learn history?

Motivation of students is a daily concern with which every teacher, regardless of age or experience, deals. Each teacher must continually adapt his/her “bag of tricks” to come up with new and innovative ways to deliver the gift of leaning to our students. In our Nintendo playing, Coffee-in-class drinking, Eminem listening, flared jean wearing world, this task continues to be an arduous and time consuming experience and, when combined with Ministry changes, it is

becoming increasingly difficult to “come up with the goods.”

My endeavour was to investigate the use of the Learning Portfolio, and to determine if its use would increase student motivation in the History classroom. This task involved a number of steps: to learn what a portfolio is, how to best implement it in my classroom, to determine a workable time frame for the portfolio, to teach students how to compile the components of the portfolio, to actually teach the unit and complete the portfolio, and finally to determine if there was an increase in student motivation as a result of the use of the portfolio.

### RHW LITEWRATURE

Much of the literature about portfolios deals with the nitty-gritty details of creating and assembling a portfolio. For the purposes of this paper, I will not give an exhaustive discussion of the key concepts and steps involved in using portfolios in the classroom. However, portfolios and their use in the classroom are outlined in many sources. The Portfolio Organizer by Carol Rolheiser, Barbarea Bower and Laurie Stevahn is a tremendous guide, and, if your board is lucky enough to bring Barbara Bower or Sherry Schwarz for Professional Development, **Get In That Workshop!** Other beneficial sources were: An Introduction to Portfolios in the Classroom by Charlotte Danielson and Leslye Abrutyn, Portfolio Assessment by James Barton and Angelo Colins, editors and “The

Portfolio Connection: Real World Examples” in Best Practices for the Learner-Centred Classroom: A Collection of Articles. Also, “*Portfolio Assessment: Taking Charge of Learning*” by Marti Player in Teach Magazine was a beneficial article.

Student motivation is, without a doubt, one of the main selling points in any of the literature advocating the use of portfolios in the classroom:

- “Students feel empowered and efficacious when they are given the opportunity to work in real-world tasks, to share them with others, and to assess their own learning.” (Player, Teach magazine, 25)
- “Students, as well as teachers, become more committed to the process when they experience the joy of exhibiting their best work and interpreting its meaning.” (Danielson & Abrutyn, 3)
- “Students will learn how to make decisions about quality and usefulness of their own work, and these decisions can led to a strong sense of accomplishment.” (Barton & Collins, 31)

After reading much of the literature (okay, reading the relevant parts, getting an idea of what I was doing, and then backtracking to my sources when I got stuck) I was overwhelmed. I wholeheartedly agreed with Danielson and Abrutyn when they wrote, “One can easily come away with the impression that portfolios can do everything, possibly even paint the house.” (Danielson & Abrutyn, viii) However, while each of my gathered sources (my holding tank of portfolio knowledge, if you will) advocated the use of portfolios and their ability to change the lives of students, I was struck by the fact that no one had defined how student motivation was to be measured. While students showed tremendous progress in “reflecting metacognitively” on their own

learning, produced grand portfolios, and performed, in general, “better” on assessments and evaluations (and, don’t get me wrong, bravo to portfolios for succeeding in these areas) no educator explicitly discussed whether students were more motivated in class time or if this was just another assignment to be completed.

### ASSESSING MOTIVATION

The ultimate problem lay in my assessment of motivation. I feel it is impossible to “measure motivation.” I toyed with many ideas including attendance statistics, asking students if they were more motivated, asking if they like class, having outside parties witness the class at various times and assessing their observations, videotaping the class at various times or asking peer tutors to assess whether the students were more motivated. As a distinct proponent of Occam’s Razor, the easiest solution is often the most correct one, I decided to rely upon the most reliable measure of motivation – ME. “After all, I am with the students every day, “ I thought, “and, as a professional, I am trusted in my judgment of students and their learning. Therefore, I can tell if my students are more motivated or not.” (I guess that is one reason I don’t teach the scientific method.) Humour aside, I do feel that the classroom teacher is the best assessor of whether student motivation is on the increase. We are all professionals and are called upon thousands of times daily to determine whether students are working or not, understanding concepts of hopelessly confused, having a good day or bad day, motivated to be there. In addition, students through their reflections, give indications as to their beliefs about their “enjoyment” of the portfolio process. In this regard, any teacher who has done portfolios, can give the best answer to the question “Did portfolios help increase the level of student motivation in my classroom?”

## THE PORTFOLIO PROCESS

My portfolio process began in Grade 10 Applied and Academic classes and centred on an academic portfolio composed of students' best work and collected for a unit based on World War II. Students would be required to collect samples from a variety of topic areas as well as a visual activity (video, artwork, picture, etc.) and teacher assigned selections. Students were asked to bring in folders that would be stored in the classroom to use as holding tanks for their selections and would complete a reflection sheet for each entry. At the end of the WWII unit, students would use their collected material to assemble a portfolio of their eight best pieces of work for evaluation. Additionally, the portfolio would be the sole resource for the WWII cumulative assignment.

Having studied the portfolio process, and having done a great deal of preparation for this assignment, my excitement for its introduction to my class was at a distinct high. My explanation of the nature of a portfolio as well as my description of the components contained a great deal of energy, and I was shocked that my students were...well...themselves. They weren't exhilarated by the idea of doing a portfolio. Submitting only their best work and reflecting on their learning process didn't excite them at all. Candidly, the central concern of the class was raised by one of my best students, Joanne, who asked, "Do we get to decorate our file folders?" For me, reality set in quickly. Tell a class that they will be watching a movie and they exude energy, tell them about an upcoming tests and get a collective sigh, tell them about a due date and be ready to negotiate and yet, say portfolio and encounter stoicism. Why the difference or better stated – indifference? The obvious conclusion hit me slowly. They had no frame of reference. My students had no idea what a portfolio was.

However, unlike most tasks which are un-experienced but known (e.g., fear of bungee jumping even though you have never done it), the world portfolio was neither experienced nor known and, hence, produced no reaction. Right off the bat there was no increase in student motivation. After all, how could there be, I might as well have been speaking Esperanto.

Originally, I had intended to begin my portfolio during my WWII unit, but in long-term planning I discovered that there were simply not enough days to give the portfolio a fair chance. At this point, I discovered one of the central tenets of the portfolio process: be flexible. Thus, the portfolio began at the start of my Roaring 20's unit and the first entry was in the "20's" category. At first, my students had difficulty with the concept of selecting their best work. A common question was, "Which one do I pick?" or "Which one do you want in the portfolio?" It was an odd realization for students when they realized they had the power to select what they felt they had done best. In fact, after their first entries were selected, I did an informal poll of what each student had selected and I noticed a distinct range of examples. Of eight possible choices for the portfolio, each possibility had been selected by someone, with none of the eight receiving 50% of the students' choices. As the process wore on, this trend continued with students consistently selecting a range of entries and demonstrating a distinct rationale for the choice. (Relationship to motivation discussed later)

A key part of the portfolio process is the use of a student reflection sheet with each entry. This reflection compels a student to think about what he/she is selecting, the reasons for its selection, and then to comment upon their reasons for its choice in written form. In my



class, students were instructed to complete five questions related to their selection.

1. What is your entry about?
2. Why did you choose this as an entry?
3. What did you learn? (Though students noted a difficulty in understanding the wording and I subsequently amended it to "What did you discover about how you like to learn?")
4. How did your understanding of history grow as a result of this assignment?
5. Write a question, inspired by this assignment, that you want answered.

First and foremost, this reflective process was not new to students. One of my early considerations was the fact that my students needed experience in the reflective process, else my project would change from student motivation through portfolios to students learning to do reflections. The first attempt at completing the reflection sheets was predictable. The responses were not highly developed and were treated as "busy work." This was expected. I read the reflection sheets for each portfolio and, if the analysis was not detailed I responded in writing, with follow up questions related to their comments. I then explained to the students that if I had included additional questions that they should do their best to respond before their next portfolio entry was due (like a response log or philosophy journal). This brought great results because students took time to answer more thoughtfully in the future. (Though one student in my applied class, Nathan, consistently delivered "simple" responses. When asked why, he responded simply, he found it easier to answer my leading questions than to come up with thoughts on his own. This prompted my thought to include sentence starters, as Barbara Bower has suggested, as another option for future reflection sheets)

The key in the reflection sheets, however, had nothing to do with gauging learning. In fact, the metacognitive question was secondary to, "Write a question, inspired by this assignment, that you want answered." In their portfolio, students received a written comment from me on their question. The received questions could be broken down into two categories: *Simple and WOW!* Students who included a question like, "When did prohibition end?" received the response, "You can find this in the textbook." Students who included a question like, "Why did women argue for banning alcohol instead of just throwing their drunk husbands out?" received a written response regarding women's perceived role, the value of political action, different family "beliefs:" of the time, and a follow-up question encouraging them to consider the issue further. These WOW questions then became the topic of discussion for a future class when I would bring them up for class DISCUSSION. The question would be raised as, "One of you asked, Was the government so naïve that they thought people would not drink alcohol just because there was a law? Why did the government think this?" However, in terms of student motivation, this had a significant effect as the student, whose question we were discussing, would beam at their unnamed recognition (it is, after all, uncool to be centred out in many classrooms for such a thing as doing well on an assignment, lest you be deemed a suck-up). In addition, I noted that during the process the quality of questions received in future portfolio entries increased. This prompted some students to ask (and ask and ask) me after class to tell them when and if their questions were going to be discussed by the class.

In terms of time constraints, my original plan to use a portfolio on a unit basis was a poor one. That is not to say that a unit portfolio won't work in that time frame; on the contrary,

for a well-prepared class that has previous knowledge of portfolios a unit portfolio could prove to be a valuable assessment tool. However, for a first attempt, the pleasure of extra time is a resource beyond value. Like easing into a cold swimming pool, students need to be led through the process slowly and carefully, ensuring that there are no missteps, lest they become overwhelmed or apprehensive of the portfolio. Similarly, the development of a consistent time frame related to the portfolio is crucial in terms of resources available for selection. In my practice one portfolio session of 20 minutes every 7-8 semester periods worked best. In that time frame, most students will have an example that they can deem their "best work" and enter in to their collection with pride. However, students who should also be encouraged to add material at their discretion if they feel it warrants entry, with the caveat that it should not replace their notebook as a storehouse for all things great and small.

### CONCLUSIONS

Through personal observation, I believe that during the period of time that portfolios were used in my classroom that student motivation did, indeed, increase. My classes, in general, were in class on a more regular basis (less truancy), participated more readily in activities, took greater care with work, worked more diligently during class time, and demonstrated a greater interest in topics being studied. However, I am not totally convinced that this motivation is solely the result of portfolio use.

Though it is stated in most literature, the power of student empowerment created by the portfolio process cannot be overstated. Like teachers being dictated to by the government, students, similarly, do not like being told what to do by teachers. Giving students some autonomy in choice and control of their own

destiny gives students a chance to be greater stakeholders, in their efforts. Students are motivated to do better because they become the sole person responsible for credit or criticism. My students had a great deal of trouble adjusting to "not being told what to do." When students are given the choice of what is included in a key evaluative tool, they tend to undertake the responsibility with greater passion and energy. In this process, there are no excuses: if the student succeeds it is because of their choices and their work; likewise if the student fails to fulfill his/her own expectations.

Students are also motivated by the fact that they have the opportunity to interact with a teacher in a non-judgmental forum. By posing a question generated from the topic, students' ideas and questions are seen as relevant and meaningful; incorporating these questions into the classroom context validates these beliefs. Similarly, having this dialogue with students in written form can facilitate a bonding between student and teacher that is often lost or non-existent. When the student-teacher relationship becomes more symbiotic, the relationship moves from worker and assessor to a mutual contract where one cannot reach full potential without the participation and support of the other. In this way, the students are motivated to reach their potential while aiding the class and teacher as a whole (no matter how self-centred we see teenagers to be).

However, portfolios will not solve motivation problems for every teacher. Indeed for many teachers this will serve as an assessment technique that will be ill-suited to their teaching style. I believe that a great deal of the success of the portfolio derives from the preparation involved in allowing for a well-rounded process. Many teachers, self-included at times, fall victim to the comfortable tactic

of teaching in a limited number of ways. Some of us prefer to be lecturers, others choose inquiry, some prefer textbook and questions. The portfolio process, by necessity, requires a teacher to provide a variety of activities and assignments in the classroom. For a portfolio to be truly successful, a student must have a range of activities to choose from so that the holding tank of possible entries is not a group of the same style of assignment. I feel it is this diversity that appeals to students. Teachers, as a result to fatigue, government pressure and complacency often fall into the rut of teaching topics and items the same way. A common thought is that "I've done it for years and it works so why change it." Though success in past years may be true, students today often do not react in the same way as students twenty, ten or even five years ago did. The diversity of assignments, cognizant of the pre-chosen categories, multiple intelligences, and group

planning among colleagues, promote an increase in student motivation. As a result, students arrive for class ready to see what's next or what new way of approaching the topic will be used today. For example, during my portfolio unit, students were exposed to video clips. Student created posters, poster analysis, painting analysis, mural creation, multiple choice test, short answer test, class discussion, textbook questions, lecture notes, music analysis, formal debate, a history party and scrapbook questions and other methods.

Students like to be surprised and challenged. They like to be asked to do things in a different way to present their knowledge in unique ways. This diversity in task, which ensures students have choice for their portfolio, is the primary reason that student interest rises and student motivation increases.

## SUMMARY

1. Students may not reflect increased student motivation at the onset of the portfolio process.
2. Student motivation may increase as they recognize the power of selecting entries
3. Student motivation may increase as they discover the value of the reflective process.
4. Student motivation may increase when their questions are regarded as valuable and are used in class.
5. Student motivation may increase if time constraints maximize the likelihood of having a "Best Work" example for the portfolio.
6. Student motivation may increase as they realize that they are responsible for the portfolio's success or failure.
7. Student motivation may increase as student and teacher develop a meaningful dialogue through reflection sheets.
8. Student motivation may increase as students are exposed to a variety of learning strategies and assessment and evaluation techniques.
9. Student motivation may increase as students aim to impress the teacher, peers or significant adult with their finished product.

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**Neal Stamer, GEDSB, May 2001**

*PC Concepts 10/01*

# Student Led Conferencing

Lesley Boudreault



*Lesley Boudreault  
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Lesley is a part-time Grade 6 classroom teacher and part-time learning resource teacher at Banbury Heights Elementary School. Over the years, Lesley has tried a number of different methods to ensure that parents are informed about classroom activities. Yet, parents still seemed to lack some of the required information. EQAO Test results seemed to confirm that there was not enough parental involvement in learning.

Because she was aware of the fact that parental involvement was crucial to student learning, Lesley used her action research to investigate ways of improving student achievement by increasing parental involvement for her students.

## **1. Focus**

How can I improve my practice to increase parental involvement and facilitate student/parent communication about learning?

## **2. Process:**

### **2.1 Rationale:**

- EQAO assessment showed there was not enough parental involvement in learning.
- Needed to supplement classroom practice with strategies to improve parental involvement.
- Wanted to use student led conferencing as the tool to increase the involvement.

### **2.2 Steps:**

- Students practiced developing strengths, weaknesses.
- Friday Quiz
- Student generated "This Week in Grade 6" newsletter.
- Newsletters returned with parent response.
- Students directed conversation in parent interviews in December.
- Students take more initiative and newsletters become more flexible.
- Students and parents surveyed.

## **3. Findings:**

1. Poorest efforts of students came from students where there was no parental feedback.
2. Regular parental encouragement translated into superior student responses.
3. 80% of students were able to direct discussion at parent interviews.
4. Newsletters resulted in fewer incomplete homework assignments, more student and parent interest in comments on newsletters and interviews, and fewer calls from parents about assignments.
5. Written responses are clearer, more specific and have resulted in increased achievement.
6. Parents need activity sheets or suggestions for working at home with their children.

## PROJECT

### In The Beginning....

Teachers are constantly striving to improve communication between home and school, yet my most frequent conversations with parents involve comments like, *"I wish I knew that Johnny had a Science test ahead of time so that I could help him study,"* or *"I didn't even know that Susie was working on a research project"*.

Communication, in one form or another, has been part of our School Plan for Growth since I began teaching. I have tried a number of different methods to ensure that parents are informed about our classroom activities: regular phone calls to report positives as well as negative incidents, parent signatures on assignment outlines and test results, monthly newsletters highlighting curriculum and announcing upcoming tests and projects. Yet parents still seem to lack required information. My students apparently do not talk to their families about school activities and parents are either not reading or not understanding my communication tools.

Similarly, last year's board-wide results for the EQAO Assessment indicates that there is not enough parental involvement in learning. On the parent questionnaires, forty-five percent of Grade six parents reported that they do not talk with their children about what they have read more than once a week. Fifty-five percent indicated that they do not encourage mathematics problem solving beyond class work, more than once a week. It isn't surprising that our students' assessment results fell well below the provincial average.

It is common knowledge that parental interest and involvement in their child's

education significantly impacts student performance. I knew, therefore, that I needed to supplement my classroom teaching practices with strategies to increase parental involvement. Teacher-generated communication tools had so far been inadequate, so I wanted to give my students a tool to facilitate communication about learning with their parents. Student-led conferencing, in a variety of forms, became that tool.

### Objectives

My goals for student-led conferencing were:

- **To help students become active and effective communicators**
- **To encourage students to act as liaisons between home and school**
- **To give students a tool to evaluate their own progress and the responsibility for reporting it to their parents**
- **To make parents more informed, more interested, and more involved in their children's learning**

My ultimate goal for student led conferencing, was to facilitate a three-way interview after Term One report cards, with students directing the conversation and showing accountability for their work.

After observing my students' oral communication skills in the classroom, however, I knew that they lacked some of the necessary skills for three-way conferencing. They had difficulty making eye contact, maintaining focus when they presented information orally, and articulating their strengths and weaknesses.

I knew that they were not ready for a formal three-way conference, and while they were certainly invited to attend and participate in report card interviews, I chose a more introductory approach to student-led conferencing as my focus, to ease them into the communication process.

My students needed practice identifying strengths and weaknesses individually before having to present them to others orally.

I modified my original action research question, which referred to a formal three-way conference, to a more general statement:

**“How can I improve my practice to increase parental involvement and facilitate student/parent communication about learning?”**

Instead of communicating on a one-time basis at a report card interview, we would undertake weekly student newsletters to build communication skills. Responsibility for informing parents about curriculum, achievement, upcoming events, etc... would move from me to my students.

### **Description**

I replaced my monthly teacher newsletter about classroom activities, with a weekly student-generated newsletter, which became our conferencing tool. Each Friday, we had a quiz with review questions from all subject areas based on that week’s lessons. The **“Friday Quiz”**:

- Reminded students about topics covered in the past week
- Showed them how well they had learned the information
- Gave parents a sample of our activities
- I recorded my original intention for the Friday Quiz in my journal as, *“...a springboard for discussion between parents and students.”*

On the flip side of the quiz, was our student newsletter entitled, **“This Week in Grade 6”**

- Students commented in writing on their strengths and weaknesses.
- Students developed a personal action plan to improve in the following week.
- Students completed a section called, **“Looking Ahead,”** about upcoming tests, projects, and events.

The final section of the newsletter was a box for parents to write their comments and to sign their names showing that they had received and read the newsletter. Since students were expected to return the newsletter to school on Monday, my hope was that this would become a tool for parents to express concerns and questions to both myself and their children and that I could then respond appropriately. I also hoped that they would use the questions from the **“Friday Quiz”** to highlight problem areas and develop practice activities to assist their children.

### **November 2000**

I introduced the concept to my students and parents by attaching my own information letter to the first student newsletter. After an initial formal lesson where students noted their general strengths (e.g. soccer, music) and weaknesses (e.g. math, studying), we had our first **“Friday Quiz”**. Students marked each other’s responses (this was a real motivator for my class). They then examined their own results, and made conclusions about their strengths and weaknesses from the curriculum that week.

They were given introductory statements like, *“I understood...,” “I feel good about...,” “I had difficulty with...,” and “I wish that...”* Some sample student comments were:

*“I did well at math because I got a B+.”*

*“I understood my social studies test.”*



*"I feel good about my spelling test (I did good!)"*

*"I did well at volleyball during gym."*

*"I didn't understand angles in math."*

*"I had difficulty with French sheets."*

*"I wish that we could play King's Court in gym."*

While we had some work to do to include enough descriptive detail, it was a good start. The students, however, had more difficulty developing their action plan. It took several attempts for students to understand that these steps to improve needed to relate to their weaknesses. Students developed goals like:

*"I need to try harder."*

*"I should calm down on tests."*

*"Next week I will try to be good and not talk out."*

Tootsie pops are a standard motivator in my classroom, so students were told that they would be rewarded with a tootsie pop if they returned their newsletters on Monday with a parent signature. Out of twenty-three students, twenty-two returned their newsletters on Monday. Ten parents just signed the page while the others wrote comments:

*"Great idea! I'm always interested in my child's learning capabilities and new strategies I could use to help out at home more."*

*"I was very proud of Joe's math test!"*

*"I agree with Bob's goals!"*

*"When is the French test? Steve has suggested that he clean out his desk as a way of getting organized."*

*"This form is great! Hope you keep it up!"*

*"I think this is a great idea. It will give me a chance to help Bill more – in areas he feels he needs help."*

Over the next four weeks, an average of nineteen out of twenty-three newsletters were returned. I was disappointed that most just contained signatures, but a core group of seven to ten parents added regular comments or questions:

*"Jill was somewhat forgetful with her homework, but we are very pleased with the work she has done in the last week. She is proud of her accomplishments and so are we."*

*"David has been doing his homework and his Friday Quiz looks good!"*

*"We are trying to help Monica at home with her organization skills."*

*"Glad to see Melissa helping with the Book Fair. Hopefully activities like these will boost her confidence."*

*"Please let me know if Jennifer stays in for extra help. I hope she does because it will help her out a lot."*

*"Do you have any practice math sheets that Trevor could bring home?"*

As the weeks progressed, I reviewed each set of returned newsletters that I'd been collecting in separate file folders, and found a distinct dividing line being drawn down my classroom. The poorest effort at written conferencing came from students where there was no regular parental feedback.

They rushed through the process, developing very vague strength/weakness statements with no specific or measurable goals.

Conversely, regular parental encouragement and commentary translated into superior written responses from the children.

Students who knew that their parents would carefully examine the newsletter, made thoughtful insights, set achievable goals, and followed them through. Parental interest in the project was critical to student motivation and progress.

### **December**

Although we did not use a formal process for three-way conferencing during report card interviews, eighty percent of my students did attend the interviews with their parents and directed the conversations. Even Jason, who told me that, *“My mom doesn’t want to talk to me at the interview...she talks to me all the time. She wants to talk to you,”* attended the interview and participated actively.

The students often just repeated many of the strengths, weaknesses, and next steps that were stated on their report cards, but they did talk with their parents to develop some personal goals. I was particularly impressed with their ability to explain to their parents why they received the marks that they did. I heard fewer questions about ways that their children could improve, because students were offering those suggestions proactively.

I felt that the interview process flowed more smoothly with students taking responsibility for their achievement. When colleagues asked me how interviews went, I was surprised to reply so positively. I was more comfortable with interviews this year because I was not the focus of attention; the student played the starring role.

### **January – February**

We experienced a lull in participation, as the process became routine. Fewer newsletters were being returned on Mondays, usually just with signatures. I noted in my journal that I felt hurt and took it personally that the

parents were not valuing my efforts. When venting my frustrations about this to my more objective action research colleagues, they suggested that I do some role-playing in class about how students were sharing their newsletter with parents.

I found out that most kids were handing them to mom or dad to get signatures before they ran out the door on Monday mornings. We discussed the need to share their newsletters earlier in the weekend and role-played conversations that they might have when presenting their work.

I also removed the sentence prompts from the newsletter so that students could develop more original and personal strengths, weaknesses, and next steps. I compared the student newsletters that I had saved from the beginning of the process to these new responses and found more personal insights:

*“Our advertising group had trouble developing a slogan.”*

*“I did well on my Henry Hudson journal by making it look old and adding some important historical information.”*

*“My big weakness is problem solving because I don’t know what steps to use like multiplying, dividing, or adding. It’s too confusing.”*

*“I should get a friend to edit my work before I do it in good copy.”*

*“I need to improve by writing detailed sentences.”*

*“I will make sure that I have enough facts to support my opinions on tests.”*

*“I need to be more positive than negative sometimes. I should encourage others and myself.”*

While frustrated that parent responses were not as extensive as I’d imagined, I was comforted knowing that my students were

obviously improving at pinpointing their strengths and weaknesses and setting specific, achievable goals. In an audio-taped conversation with my action research team, I commented that, "...my kids are getting really good at writing plans, but not so good at following them through".

### March

I had originally imagined that parents would write me flowing, insightful comments every week, but by now I had realized that this was an unrealistic expectation. Through a parent survey, I came to understand that the project was a success in spite of the lack of weekly responses. Parents preferred the weekly student newsletter to my monthly teacher newsletter because they felt more informed and involved with their children. Of the twenty-three surveys distributed, seventeen were returned. The results were as follows:

1. a) How often do you read monthly school/teacher newsletters?

Never - 0      Sometimes - 1  
Usually - 5      Always - 11

- b) I discuss them with my child.

Yes - 12      No - 5

2. a) How often do you read student-generated weekly newsletters?

Never - 0      Sometimes - 1  
Usually - 2      Always - 14

- b) I discuss them with my child.

Yes - 15      No - 2

3. Which type of classroom newsletter do you prefer?

Monthly teacher newsletter - 4  
Weekly student newsletter - 11  
Both - 2

4. I think weekly student newsletters have helped me better understand my child's school activities.

Yes - 14      No - 3

5. I have used weekly student newsletters to develop learning activities to help my child at home.

Yes - 8      No - 7

My goal for weekly written conferencing to increase home learning opportunities seemed to achieve split results, but it was evident that almost all parents preferred this method of communication and were feeling more informed. Parents added comments like:

*"From what I have seen, this is an excellent idea. I have used some of the math questions to talk with Bill about where he went wrong. Keep the weekly newsletters. They do help."*

*"I like the student weekly newsletters. I feel this is a better means of communication for the teachers, students, and parents."*

*"I like weekly updates and to have an opportunity to write to you about whatever."*

I also sought student feedback and gave them a survey to complete:

1. I like doing a "Friday Quiz."

Yes - 19      No - 2

2. I like completing "This Week in Grade 6" (strengths/weaknesses/action plan)

Yes - 4      No - 17

3. I talk to my parents about the weekly newsletters.

Yes - 12      No - 9

4. I think I've improved at identifying my strengths and weaknesses.

Yes - 12      No - 9

5. I think "Friday Quiz" and "This Week in Grade 6" are helping me improve my work.

Yes - 17      No - 4

The results of the student survey confirmed the results of the parent survey: my students were getting better at communicating and the weekly written conferencing was helping to improve student achievement. The students also added some comments:

*"The weekly newsletters help me figure out what I need help with."*

*"It tells us what we are good at and what we need to do to improve."*

*"When I do my Friday Quiz, I see what my weaknesses are so then I set a goal for myself and sometimes I do my goal!"*

I also found it very helpful to see that my class liked doing the Friday Quiz, but did not like writing "This Week in Grade 6" about their strengths and weaknesses. I thought that it might have become too repetitive, so I have begun to vary their writing topic each week. Students are now answering questions like: *"Why am I better at the things I like doing?"* *"What careers might involve the things that I like to do?"*

*"Do I learn better when I see information or hear information?"* *"Do I have good study habits?"* *"When do I feel relaxed and comfortable at school?"* I will continue to save these new responses to compare their depth and focus to earlier efforts. I will also monitor the students'

continuing level of interest in these activities.

### **A New Beginning!**

My surveys illustrate that both parents and students are happy with the results of weekly written conferencing. In addition to their personal reflections about improved achievement, I have also noted fewer incomplete assignments on my homework tracking sheets and that students are actually reading the comments that I write on their work about their strengths and weaknesses.

Their written responses are clearer, with more specific detail. I have received very few parent phone calls or letters this year with questions about assignments or grades. This may be because parents aren't interested, but I prefer to believe that it is because they feel more informed, after hearing the following comments:

*"I find it (student newsletter) helpful in knowing how to assist my daughter."*

*"...the student weekly newsletter is a better means of communication for the teachers, students, and parents."*

When I undertake weekly written conferencing next year, I will make a few variations to improve the process. I will vary the students' writing topics each week to maintain interest. While my students often lost their response sheets over the weekend, my Critical Partner who used a bound notebook as a student journal for written conferencing, had an easier time keeping track of their work. Next year, I will keep my students' writing sheets in a duotang or notebook to make it easier to track growth. This year I did not establish a formal method to track how well students are carrying through with their goals and action plans, and I need to add this next year, as is evident in the following parent/student comments:

*“Student newsletter is great because it makes them think. The only problem is doing what they say in their action plan.”*

*“I don’t think it helps because the weekend comes and I completely forget what I need to do for the next week to help me with my weaknesses.”*

*“It doesn’t help me improve my schoolwork because I never follow through.”*

I even commented myself in an audio-taped conversation that my students are “...full of ‘I can do this’ and ‘I can do that’ but they never do it.”

If I want parents to initiate educational experiences at home, I need to attach activity sheets that they can do together with their children. Most parents are not teachers and have shown that they do not know how to develop learning opportunities independently.

If I start the weekly written conferencing in September of next year, we should be able to apply the writing skills to effective oral conferencing, and be ready for a formal three-way conference by the December interview day.

**Leslèy Boudreault, GEDSB, May 31, 2001**

*\*p.1c/PC Concepts 10/01*

## **Personal Reflection**

Through the many changes and modifications that I was required to make through the action research process, I have become more responsive and flexible in my teaching approach. The regular reflections in my journal emphasized problem areas and forced me to make adjustments. Through the sharing process, I was able to vent my frustrations, and hear suggestions from colleagues that I would not have been objective enough to develop on my own.

Action research has also shown me that my students are capable of increased responsibility and accountability for their own learning. With EQAO assessments quickly approaching, I am confident that my class has developed the necessary independence to work through the testing successfully, by examining their own responses and discovering areas to improve. I hope that my students will carry this learning with them through the rest of their education. A parent provided the best description of the impact of student-led conferencing:

*“It gives the students a chance to reflect on where they have been, where they should be, and how they should get there.”*

