The Power of Portfolios in Inclusive Classrooms

Using portfolios can be particularly helpful for students with special needs who are enrolled in inclusive classrooms.

John* blushed with satisfaction at the praise from his family and teachers. He had just made a presentation during the spring parent-teacher conferences. After carefully selecting a report and a story to share from his portfolio, he explained that his report told about the Native American group he had studied, and briefly described his favorite story, which he had written about his first fishing trip with his grandfather. This was really special to him now that his grandfather had died. After sharing writing samples from the beginning of the year and his most recent work, John explained why the current work represented an improvement over the earlier samples. He finished his 15-minute presentation with a clip from a video tape that showed him working with other students during a cooperative group lesson and at Pathfinders during an orienteering group project.

A student with a learning disability, 10-year-old John is being mainstreamed in a regular fifth-grade classroom. When John arrived in this class, his learning problems and adults' reactions to his disruptive behavior had left him feeling incapable of achieving anything positive. For a long time, he had avoided doing any more work than necessary and, in most cases, had done nothing at all. He argued with his teachers and had difficulty getting along with his peers. His behavior limited his academic progress and isolated him socially. What role did the portfolio play in John's new success at school?

As used in this article, a *portfolio* is a "purposeful collection of student work that tells a story about student efforts, progress, or achievement" in several areas.[1] Using portfolios can be particularly helpful for students with special needs who are enrolled in inclusive classrooms. Portfolios allow for more equitable methods of assessment since they accommodate different learning styles, recognize multiple intelligences, and offer various ways to demonstrate competence. They can be used with any student, regardless of his or her special needs, as long as the child can communicate. John's teacher employed the portfolio strategy to achieve several goals: (1) engage students in learning, (2) help them learn the skills of reflection and self-eval-

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Both teacher and student need a clear understanding of the purpose of the story to be told through the portfolio. They must collaborate to create a rationale for collecting materials. Lack of a clear focus will result in an unmanageable portfolio that will weaken rather than strengthen the student's sense of efficacy and academic self-concept. Understanding the varied purposes of different types of portfolios provides the necessary perspective to get started. Spandel and Culham[3] suggest the use of three major types of portfolio: celebration, time sequenced, and status report. These are not mutually exclusive and may be combined.

The Celebration Portfolio

The *celebration portfolio* is guided by specific learning objectives. Driven by the question, "What do I think is really special about my work, and why?" it contains works in progress as well as finished samples. Students are encouraged to categorize and identify work based on their own definition of what is "special." It is critically important that this be their decision. (See Figure 1.)

Techniques such as cooperative learning groups and teacher conferences can greatly enhance learning opportunities for the child with special needs. Through extended interaction with the teacher and classmates, he or she can begin to connect elements of quality with a framework that represents "good work." The student discards the samples that do not represent his or her best work. In this way, the celebration portfolio can help students understand their own strengths and interests, and aid

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uation, (3) document learning in areas that do not lend themselves to traditional assessment, and (4) facilitate communication with parents.[2]

Engaging Students

Getting students to take responsibility for learning is a persistent challenge for educators. This is especially true of students with special learning needs, most of whom have experienced few successes in school. How can teachers engage such students and get them started using portfolios?

Figure 1
ITEM SELECTION

ARTIFACT:	Name of the item selected.
GOAL:	I chose this item as an example of my skill in (*the academic or behavioral objective*).
REFLECTION:	One thing in this area that I used to have trouble with but now can do is...
SELF-ASSESSMENT:	One thing I still need to work on is...

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them in making choices.[4] Three important components of portfolio assessment facilitate student choice: identification of growth and achievement, goal setting, and reflection/self-assessment.[5] Figure 1 shows a sample summary sheet that students can use to describe portfolio selections.

The Time Sequenced Portfolio

The *time sequenced portfolio* reflects changes in a student's academic performance over time. This can be reflected in a *growth portfolio* or a *project portfolio*. John presented writing samples from the beginning and end of the year, showing how much progress he had made. These writing samples came from his growth portfolio. In this case, the evaluation criteria remained constant over time. Being able to see his writing progress had tremendous motivational power for John. Figure 2 shows an analytic rubric for assessing items.

The project portfolio depicts the completion of steps in a project. The span of time can range from several days to a year or more. This type of portfolio typically needs highly structured guidelines that define what to collect as evidence of step-by-step task completion and quality. For example, John worked cooperatively with several of his classmates to report on a Native American group. The evaluative judgments for this project were based on two sets of performance criteria: (1) steps completed within a specified time; and (2) quality of work done at each step. As the report progressed, John's

artistic talents became evident. He selected and provided the illustrations for the written report, and drew many of the scenes in a mural that accompanied the group's oral report. Working with a group gave John experience in planning a task and sticking to a timeline.

The Status Report Portfolio

The *status report portfolio* documents student achievement of specific curricular objectives. Spandel and Culham[6] refer to this as a "passport folio." It can be used for a variety of purposes, such as documenting mastery of high school competencies. For a student with developmental disabilities, it can be used to document vocational experiences as he or she prepares for employment. This might include a video tape showing (1) the student working in several settings, such as the school library or a fast-food restaurant; (2) a checklist of academic and work-related skills; (3) the transcript of an interview with the teacher in which the student talks about his or her career plans; and (4) a list of the student's circle of friends and the role each one plays in his or her social development. In John's case, it included videotaped evidence of social/behavioral growth demonstrated by cooperative work in classroom and community groups. It could also include checklist documentation of achievement in reading and writing.

It is important for the student to show through the portfolio that he or she has attained pre-established standards of performance.

Reflection, Documentation, Communication

The self-reflection process is the most important dimension of portfolios. The teacher can help students reflect on their progress by sharing with them a vision of what it means to succeed and providing each child with an age-appropriate vocabulary to use in communicating about it. Research indicates that "students who learn to evaluate their own achievement become better achievers through that process. They maintain contact with their own strengths and weaknesses."[7]

With the support of his teacher, John set criteria for behaviors that would help him work with others. He prepared a video to document his progress. The portfolio structure provided a framework in which he could effectively demonstrate competence and communicate "his story" to his family and others.

General Organizational Tips

Portfolio items are chosen according to the type and purpose of the portfolio. Each item should be dated and labeled. Comments from parents or school personnel are important for a child with

special needs. A sample format for parent response is shown in Figure 3.

A table of contents serves as an important organizational function. Danielson and Abrutyn suggest the following sequence:[8] (1) cover or title page; (2) table of contents; (3) introduction with the student's opinion on what the portfolio says about his or her work; (4) actual items or artifacts, each one accompanied by an explanation of the assignment such as that shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Challenges

Using portfolios does pose certain challenges. They change the role of the teacher from director to facilitator of learning. This may be a difficult role for teachers of students with special needs. The portfolio approach can be time-consuming for teachers because it requires clarity in goals, outcomes, and criteria to help students and parents understand the process. Also, students need to be prepared for the process of self-reflection. This requires frequent

The time sequenced portfolio reflects changes in a student's academic performance over time.

teacher-student conferences to ensure that the process is meaningful and ongoing. (See Figure 4.)

However, many teachers have found that the positive learning outcomes are well worth the effort required to use portfolios. Well-designed portfolios demonstrate a rich array of the things that learners with special needs know and can do. Because portfolios display both the products and the process of learning, this makes learners aware of the necessary steps to achieve their goals and encourages ownership.

Portfolios are adaptable, flexible, ongoing, and cumulative. They help students understand the nature of high-quality performance and provide feedback for them and others.[9] Wesson and King[10] suggest that portfolios reduce barriers to communication between exceptional and general educators by largely eliminating assessment jargon. This method of assessment focuses on the process of instruction and learning rather than depending solely on test scores to evaluate student progress since these children often perform poorly on standardized tests.

Giving students the opportunity to participate and make choices is a proven way to boost achievement and motivation and to increase their self-esteem. Increasingly, general and special educators are recognizing the power of portfolios in the instructional process. ✐

Figure 2
ANALYTIC RUBRIC: PORTFOLIO ITEM ASSESSMENT*
(Quality of Work)

ARTIFACT: _____

GOAL: _____

REFLECTION: _____

_____

SELF-ASSESSMENT: _____

Level of Achievement	Description
Exemplary (4)	Coherent, complete, clear, unambiguous, identifies all important elements of the objective or competency
Competent (3)	Fairly complete response to the objective, identifies the most important elements of the objective or competency
Satisfactory (2)	Minor flaws, a few important areas are missing; muddled, incomplete response related to the objective or competency
Needs Improvement (1)	Serious flaws, several important areas are missing; muddled, incomplete response related to the objective or competency
Unacceptable (0)	No important areas are identified; muddled, incomplete response related to the objective or competency

*Note: Adapt this rubric for statement of specific skills or behaviors in the subject areas. It can also be adapted for use as a summative evaluation of the entire portfolio. Teacher and student are to work together to complete this form; student assumes greater responsibility over time.

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The project portfolio depicts the completion of steps in a project.

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5. Danielson and Abrutyn.

6. Spandel and Culham.

7. Stiggins, p. 459.

8. Danielson and Abrutyn, p. 70.

9. Sandra Kerka, *Techniques for Authentic Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995). ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 381 688.

10. C. L. Wesson and R. P. King, "Portfolio Assessment and Special Education Students," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 28 (1996), pp. 44-48.

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Figure 3
REACTION FORM FOR PORTFOLIOS
(Comments of Parents or Others)

A feature of this portfolio I particularly like is:

_____

_____

In this portfolio, I see evidence of improvement in:

_____

_____

This year, (*student*) has improved in:

_____

_____

I would like (*student*) to be able to:

_____

_____

Adapted from Charlotte Danielson and Leslye Abrutyn, *An Introduction to Using Portfolios in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997).

Figure 4
CRITERIA FOR PORTFOLIOS

1. Communicates clear purpose and standards.

2. Gives proof of growth/achievement, goal setting, and reflection/self-assessment.

3. Involves student in selection of items.

4. Emphasizes product and process.

5. Uses varied formats for item presentation (e.g., audio, video, essay, art).

6. Demonstrates application to real life.