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Portfolios for assessment and reporting in New South Wales primary schools

Laurie Brady
University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Two trends influencing school assessment practice in New South Wales (NSW) in the 90s are the authentic assessment movement, involving performance and situated assessment, and outcomes-based education, which was introduced with the national curriculum. Portfolios emerged relatively recently as an assessment and reporting strategy that exemplifies both trends.

This article reports a study involving a survey of 64 randomly selected primary schools in NSW, and a case study of a single school. The purpose of the study was to ascertain teacher interpretations of the purpose of portfolios; to identify what teachers include as contents; to determine how portfolios are used to assess and report; and to examine the impact of portfolio use on one school's assessment and reporting practices.

The results indicate that teachers regard portfolios as strategic collections of student work demonstrating the achievement of outcomes, particularly in English and maths, and that student self-assessment and teacher-student collaboration in content selection are not yet well developed. These results are explained both in terms of the context and the recency of the innovation.

In Australia from the early to mid-90s, there was a strong concern that the mandate of outcomes-based education, a legacy of 'the national curriculum', might inevitably result in a formal testing regime. Some interpretations of outcomes-based education, particularly a generally dreaded mastery learning interpretation, were perceived as consistent with the more formal assessment of specific outcomes.

However, this trend towards outcomes-based education in Australia ran parallel with a trend towards authentic assessment, previously dubbed 'alternative assessment'. Cumming and Maxwell (1999) identify four major interpretations of authentic assessment:

- performance assessment or tasks assessed by actual demonstration;
- situated assessment or tasks assessed in context;
- problem-based assessment or assessment of tasks that involve more than mere technical facility; and
- competence-based assessment or tasks assessed for competence in the workplace.

Despite these variations in interpretation, there appears to be consensus on several elements (Darling-Hammond 1995; Hiebert et al 1994; Valencia et al 1994; Wiener & Cohen 1997). First, it involves a variety of assessment strategies that capture the quality of a student's work.

Second, these assessments explore a student's normal daily performance rather than focus on tests; and third, such assessments reflect the actual learning and teaching in the classroom and beyond.

The portfolio as a strategy for assessment and reporting reflects each of these emphases. It is also identified by Brady (1998) as the most common assessment and reporting strategy emerging in NSW primary schools in the late 90s, as it implements an outcomes approach to assessment and reporting.

The literature

The international literature on portfolios focuses on their purpose and characteristics, including that which extols the merits of the strategy (Karoly 1996; National Schools Network 1979; Richter 1997; Snider et al 1994; Wiener & Cohen 1997), their contents (inevitably linked to purpose) and their implementation.

(i) **Purposes and characteristics.** Arguably, the current interpretation of portfolios is not inconsistent with an early definition provided by Wolf (1991, p 36): 'a depository of artefacts' or assortment of documents that may include pencil and paper tests, classroom observations, tapes, artwork, poems or stories, that 'require a written reflection by the developer on the significance or contribution of those artefacts'. While more recent definitions and statements of purpose link these artefacts to the demonstration of student outcomes, the importance of student self-assessment using portfolios has certainly remained a premium (D'Urso 1996; Freeman & Lewis 1998; Sloan 1996; Valencia & Place 1994).

Later definitions and expressions of purpose have been influenced by a variety of notions of purpose and type. For example, Benoit and Yang's (1996) study revealed two different types of portfolio based on different purposes. When accountability was the model, the portfolio required standardisation and therefore included information yielding valid comparisons, but when instructional improvement was the model, there was

less standardisation and more teacher involvement. Richter (1997) also refers to two different types of portfolio: the working portfolio containing daily work, and the showcase portfolio containing work identified as the student's best. Valencia and Place (1994) identify four different types of portfolio, two of which are analogous to those of Richter (1997):

- the showcase portfolio, which includes the student s best work;
- the evaluation portfolio, which includes specified and marked work;
- the documentation portfolio, which contains student work systematically kept by the teacher but not marked; and
- the process portfolio, which contains ongoing work and student self-reflection.

(ii) **Contents**. Portfolio contents obviously depend on their purpose. Evaluation or accountability portfolios will typically include formal tests and best work samples; showcase portfolios will include best work that demonstrates outcomes, perhaps with cosmetic appeal; and while most portfolio types involve student self-assessment, this will be abundant in process portfolios.

The contents of portfolios may further be determined by the factors of subject area and ownership. For instance, the National Schools Network (1997) redefined learning into seven domains or key competencies (for example, valuing ethical decision making; communicating, crafting and reflecting; and connecting the past, present and future). Students were assessed at a roundtable involving peers, teachers and community members, at which they presented a portfolio for *each* of the seven domains. In relation to ownership, Vizyak (1995) assesses two portfolios - a student-managed and a teacher-student portfolio - and allows students to select a meaningful piece from the teacher-student portfolio twice a month, attaching a statement specifying student reasons for the choice. The choice may involve a test, work sample, project or even parent input from a survey.

Freeman and Lewis (1998), who only discuss a generic portfolio, include completed assignments, copies of learning contracts, notes, drawings, diaries, project reports, charts, posters, software, certificates and student self-assessment in their list of assembled materials. The portfolio belonging to the ten year-old subject of Karoly's (1996) case study not only contained drafts of essays, stories and research projects, written and illustrated book reports, photograph displays, quizzes and exams, but a variety of constructed items (a pyramid, stool, Indian village and weathervane accompanied by written narratives on their construction).

(iii) **Implementation**. The literature contains numerous recommendations for portfolio implementation (Hill et al 1994; Snider et al 1994; Valencia & Place 1994; Vizyak 1995; Wiener & Cohen 1997) and includes criteria to be

observed for effective implementation, and procedures to be followed. For example, Wiener and Cohen (1997) advocate a process involving a sequence of self-reflection from and dialogue between student, teacher and parent. However, Hill et al (1994) suggest a number of steps, comprising: defining the portfolio's purpose; teaching students to self reflect; structuring portfolio reviews; making time for peer evaluation; and sharing portfolios with parents.

In describing the implementation process, Paulson and Paulson's (1994) classification of the chronological stages of portfolio growth seems to be the only one of its type. It includes:

- the off-track portfolio, which is simply a selection of student work or assessment with no coherent principle for organising the material;
- the emerging portfolio, in which there is a sense of greater organisation or purpose. While some relationship between certain entries is apparent, the organisation is not sufficiently developed to comprise a satisfying learning narrative;
- the on-track portfolio, in which there is a relationship between the parts, and an emerging story of the student as learner. There is evidence of student self-assessment and the learner is engaged in the process of selecting and explaining entries; and
- the outstanding portfolio, which is a coherent story of the student as a reflective learner and in which there is a clear purpose and relationship between the parts.

The context

In Australia, NSW abandoned the formal dictates of the national curriculum framework in 1995, replacing the national curriculum stages with its own stage hierarchy and reducing the number of outcomes. It did however retain commitment to the key learning areas of English, maths, science and technology, human society and its environment, personal development/health/physical education and the creative arts (primary), and to the notion of outcomes as observable, measurable benchmarks of student achievement.

From the mid-90s in NSW, there has been a strong Department of Education and Training (DET) (previously the Department of School Education (DSE)) emphasis on the assessment implications of outcomes-based education. The authentic assessment movement of the 90s gave further momentum to the push to identify appropriate assessment strategies.

The emergence of the portfolio as such a strategy may be traced from the two paragraphs in DSE's (1996) *Principles of assessment and reporting in NSW*

government schools, to the prominence given to portfolios as a discrete strategy in DSE's (1997) *Strategies for assessment and reporting. Primary schools*, and the DET (1999) *Assessment and reporting issues 7-12. Bulletin 5,* dealing exclusively with portfolios. Defining portfolios as 'a deliberate, strategic and specific collection of student work or evidence of student work … that demonstrates that learning has occurred', DET (1999) identifies the purpose of portfolios for teachers, students and parents, before addressing the issues of what should be included and how evidence should be collected. The bulletin is not prescriptive. For instance, beyond suggesting that work should be gathered from a wide variety of tasks, and that a balance should be achieved between teacher and student control of the portfolio, it identifies issues (eg all evidence or selected best pieces) rather than provides solutions. It does, however, advocate student self-assessment as an essential part of the process.

Given the recency of portfolio implementation in NSW schools, the empirical research is scant. One recent multi-case study is that of Cullen (1999) who investigated the impact of portfolio assessment on student learning; changes in classroom practices as a result of portfolios; and changes in teacher and parent beliefs. As this was a case study employing qualitative methodology, and due to the fact that there is negligible data from a large sample of practising primary teachers, the study reported here was undertaken.

1. The study

The study was conducted in two phases: a quantitative study involving the survey of a stratified proportional systematic selection of primary school teachers in NSW; and a qualitative study involving a case study of one school. The aims of the study were:

- to ascertain teacher interpretations of the purpose of portfolios;
- to identify what teachers include as the contents of portfolios;
- to determine how portfolios are used to assess and report; and
- to examine the impact of portfolio use on one school s assessment and teaching practices.

1. The survey

A survey was considered the most appropriate instrument to obtain a broad understanding of the use of portfolios in assessing and reporting in NSW primary schools. The survey enables a large representative sample of teachers in a large number of schools to be canvassed, and quantitative data to be collected.

A 'stratified proportional systematic selection' (Fox 1969) of 64 primary schools in eight non-contiguous school districts was selected with the intention of selecting eight schools from each district. To ensure representation with regard to the distribution of different school types, stratified proportional sampling was used.

In NSW, primary schools are classified from P1 to P6 depending upon the total enrolment of students (a P1 is the largest in terms of student numbers, and a P6 is the smallest). The Directory of the NSW Department of Education and Training (1999) was consulted to determine the proportion of school types in each school district. As there were six different school types and only eight schools were required from each district, it was decided to combine the six types into three broader types (P1 and P2; P3 and P4; P5 and P6) to ensure a more meaningful distribution. Table 1 displays the proportion of school types for each district. The first column displays the percentage of the type in the district sample; the second column displays the numerical equivalent for a sample of eight; and the third column displays the actual number of schools selected.

Table 1: Sample by district and school type

	Type 1 & 2	**Type 3 & 4**	**Type 5 & 6**
District 1	5 (1.2) 1	28 (6.8) 7	-
District 2	5 (1.2) 1	23 (5.2) 5	7 (1.6) 2
District 3	22 (3.6) 4	13 (2.2) 2	13 (2.2) 2
District 4	13 (2.7) 3	26 (5.3) 5	-
District 5	25 (5.6) 6	11 (2.4) 2	-
District 6	14 (2.5) 3	23 (4.1) 4	8 (1.4) 1
District 7	9 (2.6) 3	19 (5.4) 5	-
District 8	12 (2.2) 2	26 (4.9) 5	5 (0.9) 1

The schools in each district were alphabetically ordered and numbered for school type. Every fifth school was then systematically selected for each school type and when the end of the list had been reached, the procedure resumed until the sample size was obtained. Schools were then contacted to secure a commitment.

The survey contained 29 questions with a Likert scale providing five response options. It focused on teacher perceptions of the purpose of portfolios; the desired contents of portfolios; the contexts in which portfolios are used; and the relative responsibilities of teachers and students in the development of portfolios. Item validity was checked and a small pilot conducted.

The survey was administered in term two (2000) to 950 teachers and the response rate was 74%. Data were analysed to obtain frequency distributions and measures of significance, and multiple analysis of variance was used to determine

differences according to school type, status, teaching experience, age and gender. The major findings follow.

- *Teachers are significantly more likely to report with portfolios than to assess by them (0.00).*

While the means for items relating to assessment and reporting were relatively high, teachers made a clear distinction between them, even though the DSE publications of 1996 and 1997 (distributed to all schools) do not make such a distinction.

A typical reporting process in NSW primary schools involves half yearly reports followed by teacher-parent interviews (increasingly involving the portfolio as the predominant reporting tool). An end-of-year report is typically associated with an optional interview. While there are ongoing and informal opportunities to report to parents, reporting is generally viewed as formal and summative.

The finding that teachers regard the portfolio more as a reporting than assessment tool may be explained by the teachers' perception of it as an instrument of accountability. It provides a tangible means of demonstrating to parents, other teachers and the students themselves the achievement of outcomes.

However, a typically strong relationship between assessment and reporting is evidenced by the high mean (4.33) for the use of the portfolio in assessing student work. After all, teachers who assess by a formal testing regime would report in terms of test results. So, teachers who assess with portfolios also use them as the basis for reporting.

- *Portfolios are perceived as a strategic collection of student work that demonstrates outcomes.*

Teachers did not perceive the portfolio as a showcase of students' best work. They also made a clear distinction between the portfolio as a mere collection of student work, and a 'strategic' collection of student work. It was further regarded as a means of demonstrating the achievement of outcomes. Teachers were significantly more likely to view the portfolio as a strategic collection of student work than just a collection of their work (0.00); and significantly more likely to view the portfolio as a means of demonstrating outcomes than just a collection of student work (0.00).

Table 2 displays means for the perceived purposes of the portfolio.

Table 2: Means for the perceived purposes of portfolios

Purpose of portfolios	Mean
showcases students' best work	1.64
assembles a collection of all student work that demonstrates learning over time	1.64
assembles a strategic collection of all student work that demonstrates learning over time	4.17
indicates that syllabus outcomes have been achieved	4.14
assembles marked/graded work as a basis for evaluation/accountability	3.56
enables students to engage in ongoing assessment of their own	3.31

These perceptions of the purpose of portfolios may be explained by the context factors already mentioned. From the mid-90s in NSW, the authentic assessment movement, with its emphasis on performance and situated assessment, has been accompanied by a strong DET emphasis on the assessment implications of outcomes-based education. The definition of portfolios, provided by DET in 1999 as 'a deliberate, strategic and specific collection of student work or evidence of student work … that demonstrates that learning has occurred', is strongly reflected in these findings.

The primacy of outcomes in determining the purpose of portfolios is further evidenced in the high mean for the contents item work samples with statements of outcomes attached (4.17), and in the purpose item assembling marked/graded work as a basis for evaluation/accountability (3.56). It is unlikely though that this notion of accountability equates with that of Benoit and Yang s (1996) accountability portfolio with its emphasis on standardisation and valid comparisons.

- *Portfolio contents include work samples, particularly in English and maths, that demonstrate the achievement of outcomes.*

While data indicated that work from all key learning areas was included in portfolios, evidence suggested both a focus on English and maths, and the practice of attaching outcome statements to completed work. The perceived importance of English and maths has been previously reported by Brady (1997, 1998). In both these studies, English and maths were significantly more likely to involve planning and assessing by outcomes than the other four primary key learning areas. Their perceived importance may also be explained by Basic Skills Testing in NSW (externally mandated testing

focusing on literacy and numeracy), and by a public and professional perception of the generic value of literacy and numeracy.

Table 3 displays means for items relating to portfolio contents.

Table 3: Means for items relating to portfolio contents

Item	Mean
work samples in English and maths	4.86
work samples in all key learning areas	3.94
work samples with teacher comments	3.93
work samples with statements of outcomes attached	4.17
completed assignments	2.97
copies of learning contracts	2.04
test papers	2.80
merit certificates/awards	1.75
journal entries relating responses to learning activities	2.17
accounts of out-of-school experiences	2.26
student assessment of their own work	2.98
provision for parent comments on their children's progress	3.60

While items relating to learning contracts, merit certificates and accounts of out-of-school experiences all obtained relatively low means, so did the item relating to student use of journal entries to respond to learning activities (2.17). Such data may seem to provide a prima facie case for lack of student self-assessment, particularly as student journal entries are regarded as the most common form of student self-assessment. Another item relating explicitly to student self assessment did not obtain a high rating (2.98).

While the value of portfolios as a student self-assessment tool is reported elsewhere (Sloan 1996; Snider et al 1994; Vizyak 1995), its use as a tool for self-assessment may not have been fully realised in this state. The relative recency of portfolio use in NSW, and the likelihood that initial implementation may involve greater structure and teacher direction, is a

probable explanation. In fact, in obtaining a survey sample, six schools declined to participate as they were not using portfolios at all.

- *Portfolio development is the responsibility of year level teachers.*

Arguably, another factor explained by the recency of portfolio development is that of teacher determination of portfolio contents. Data indicated that student determination of portfolio contents was low (2.03), as was discussion/collaboration between teacher and student in selecting work (2.21).

Vizyak (1995), who assesses two portfolios - a student-managed and a teacher-student portfolio - allows students to select a meaningful piece from the teacher-student portfolio bi-monthly, and affixes a statement providing student reasons for the choice. Snider et al (1994) propose a scheme in which teachers and students collaborate to collect evidence (and in which a community team is involved in portfolio assessment). These are instances of portfolio implementation that are not yet common practice in NSW.

- *Teachers observe a school-wide policy on portfolio implementation.*

Given that the use of portfolios is part of a school's overall assessment policy, the fact that individual teachers operate within such constraints is not surprising. Portfolio use is both a recent and widespread practice and the need for school management to impose uniformity is understandable. On the one hand, such regulation could limit assessment creativity; but on the other, it might provide much needed direction.

It is, though, a finding worth reporting for researchers who need to consider whether the school or individual teacher should be the focus of analysis.

- *Younger and less experienced teachers include portfolio work samples in English and maths significantly more than other teachers.*

Such a finding might seem to belie the evidence of a school-wide policy, but might be explained in terms of variable perceptions or limited freedom to determine contents beyond English and maths. The findings that younger teachers (0.01) and less experienced teachers (0.00) were significantly more likely to include portfolio work samples in English and maths were unidirectional; ie with increasing age and teaching experience, the teachers in the sample were less likely to include English and maths.

One explanation may be that younger and less experienced teachers have been educated as teachers in the early 90s under the banner of the 'national curriculum' with its strong emphasis on outcomes, and have therefore been imbued with a need for accountability. Proficiency in English and maths may be seen as the greatest expression of such accountability. Such a claim may be given further credibility by previous studies by Brady

(1997, 1998) that found that younger and less experienced teachers were significantly more likely both to plan and assess by outcomes.

- *Smaller schools were significantly more likely to engage students in portfolio use.*

When the P1 and P2 schools were related as large schools, and the P3-P5 schools were related as small schools, teachers in the smaller schools were significantly more likely to include accounts of out-of-school experiences (0.04) and journal entries relating responses to learning activities (0.00) in portfolios, and to engage in discussion/collaboration between teacher and student in selecting work (0.00). As the common element in these items is a higher degree of student involvement, a possible explanation might involve a greater informality or diminished uniformity that arguably characterises smaller schools.

- *The personal/professional attributes of teachers accounted for few variations in the data.*

Apart from the reported significant differences according to age/experience and school type, the personal/professional attributes of teachers (age, teaching experience, gender, status and school type) explained few variations in the data.

2. The case study

As no single method of data gathering could produce a comprehensive picture of portfolio implementation, it was decided to supplement the survey data with a case study on one school. Yin (1993, p 31) claims that the case study method is especially appropriate to this type of research question, as 'the contextual variables are so numerous and rich that no experimental design can be applied'. The methodology is further based on the belief that complex processes like assessing and reporting can best be understood by investigation within a bounded system (Stake 1988). The 'bounded' system is portfolio implementation in a particular school.

The case school, although on the upper north shore of Sydney, is socioeconomically diverse. Single houses, unit dwelling and community housing support a range of ethnic communities. While 52 languages are represented in the school, there is no one dominant group. There are 18 regular classes, 515 students, and a range of ages and teaching experience among staff.

Having completed the survey, nine teachers were interviewed, each for approximately 45 minutes. A range of portfolios from all grades was examined, as were assessment and reporting policy documents. Evidence from the three sources (interview, survey, documents) was clustered in themes, in such a way that the themes emerged from the data rather than being imposed on it (Miles and Huberman 1994). The final reduced set of data was displayed on matrices with text in cells. Each cell in the teacher interview matrix contained a teacher response to a particular

interview question. So, results are reported by noting clusters/patterns. The following is a brief reporting of these results.

- *The perceived purpose and use of portfolios is linked to the achievement of outcomes.*

The portfolio or 'student progress folder' is spiral bound and contained in a hard cover complete with school crest, and work is preserved in plastic envelopes. Advertised as 'an integral part of our assessment and reporting procedures', to 'assist communication between home and school', it contains outcomes, indicators (of outcomes) and relevant work samples in number, space, measurement, reading and writing. Each outcome has the response options of 'working towards', 'achieving' and 'achieving above', and boxes relating to the more precise indicators have to be ticked. For example, for the outcome 'counts, compares and orders whole numbers up to seven digits and represents them in symbols and words', the indicators include 'states the place value of any digit in a number', 'places a group of numbers in ascending or descending order', and 'counts on and back by 10, 100, 1000 from a given number'.

The samples, with related outcomes sheets in maths and English, are the basis of a parent-teacher interview in April. The equivalent information will be sent home to parents in the progress folder in September. The progress folder, with a written report covering all key learning areas and social development with selected work samples, will be sent home both in July and at the end of the school year, when an interview may be arranged on request.

The work samples are typically printed sheets that have to be completed and are often marked, sometimes numerically. Examples include: determining sides and angles in drawn 3D shapes; writing a narrative on 'A strange thing happened on the way to school'; using appropriate words in a sentence (cloze); rewriting centimetres as metres and determining both the area of shaded parts and the volume of containers; and artwork using circles, triangles and ovals.

Many of the interviewed teachers affirmed the primacy of outcomes in assessing and reporting, referring to outcomes-based education as a 'mindset'. The link between the outcomes-based assessment regime and portfolios was often made explicit. The following statement about the impact of portfolios on assessment and reporting practice within the outcomes context was typical:

> for one, I find there's no ifs, buts and maybes as to whether you have taught the specific things you're supposed to have taught and followed each syllabus down to the 't', and things like that, you KNOW if you've gone through the outcomes, gone through the indicators and specifically designed all your lessons to target these, you're on the right track. I know that now, because of the portfolios, we have a very specific program that simply states the outcomes and indicators, and once again I don't feel that anything has been

missed, so I can focus all my attention on trying to achieve these specific outcomes.

In the following extract, in which the teacher expresses concern about the time-consuming nature of portfolio implementation, the notions of portfolios and outcomes-based assessment are even more fused:

T: I think that if the Department wants this whole outcomes based idea, planning and everything to work, they need to reconsider how much time it actually takes in reality.

I: Do you mean portfolio implementation or a distinctive school notion of portfolio implementation?

T: I think it s both

The Deputy Principal, given the responsibility of introducing portfolios as part of an assessment and reporting policy, viewed portfolios as 'the expression of outcomes-based education'; 'a tool to educate people in outcomes-based education'. For her, the greatest problem in implementing portfolios was in 'identifying what outcomes looked like'; a perception which justifies her gradual implementation of portfolios in selected key learning areas. What at first may appear to be a narrow or limited approach to portfolio development was certainly not the product of limited vision. It was part of a coherent program of professional development.

While the link between portfolios and outcomes was generally regarded as both automatic and desirable, there was the odd exception:

T: Do we have to have this outcomes sheet in front of everything we do I don t think we do.

I: Does this mean portfolios don t have to be linked to outcomes?

T: No, I don t think necessarily so. I think it s quite beneficial to have the outcomes linked to basic skills like English and maths so people who understand it can see how their child is progressing, but it s not necessary in all areas sometimes the child does something really special in the classroom or event at home, and you think brilliant things like that, individualised work could go in there.

- *Portfolios have changed assessment and reporting practice through their explicit focus on outcomes and indicators.*

One major argument advanced by teachers was that portfolios necessitated a more explicit focus on outcomes in assessing. The claim that 'they [portfolios] help me understand outcomes', was a common response, as was the reference to the provision of clearer direction. These arguments about the

greater clarity afforded by precise statements of intent are those advanced by the objectives movement of the 60s and 70s, and the outcomes movement of the 90s.

A second change in assessing and reporting practice noted by teachers was the reduced dominance of marks, though this observation was confined to those teachers with relatively more teaching experience (those whose teaching experience pre-dated the outcomes movement). Reference was made to the transition from marks 'to which the community was wedded' to outcomes-based reporting. One teacher, referring to the impact of portfolios on her assessment and reporting practice, claims that 'it's turned it upside down'. She continues:

> it focuses you in some ways, and in other ways it takes your focus away from other things, and I really think that you need both … you need the tests because by putting a number on something it gives you a quick overview of how things are really going, whereas if you don't do that, and with outcomes you don't have to do that, it doesn't give you that quick 'pull up' of how a kid's going.

A third change, though not a common response, relates to the benefits espoused by the authentic assessment movement, viz performance assessment that is contextualised:

> for children it's more like the schoolwork they're doing every day … it's more like work they do every day in the classroom … especially for smaller children.

Teachers were more willing to concede magnitude of change in reporting than assessing. Common reference was made to 'talking to the folder' in parent-teacher interviews, and how the portfolio was helpful in exemplifying the nature of student achievement. Even so, there were exceptions. One teacher, conceding the benefits of the portfolio in reporting, argued that NESB parents simply want to know 'is my child good in class', and 'where are they coming in the class'. Another teacher, while acknowledging the value of the portfolio as 'a presentation of what students can do', claims:

> I use them when I write reports, but I don't think they've made a lot of difference to be honest … what I seem to know is in my head, and the number of times I've sat to report-write, with the most incredible pile of information on the child in front of me and ignored it all, and just written it … The portfolio, nine times out of ten, is one tiny part of what's going on in the classroom.

- *Portfolios have impacted on teacher planning, but have had little perceived impact on pedagogy.*

Portfolios, particularly in the context of outcomes-based assessment, have given teachers direction and focus in their planning. The impact of portfolios is indicated explicitly in the following comments:

> mostly in preparing and planning when you have to give prior thought to what you're going to put into it, and how you want it presented to parents.

The impact of portfolios on teacher planning, specifically within the context of outcomes-based education, is expressed by the claim that:

> I look at the curriculum a lot more and I also, well it focuses on certain aspects … the other thing I find it disciplines you into focusing on that aspect of what you have to do, and looking at that area you're supposed to be covering because it's part of the outcome …

Apart from reference to focusing on curriculum content, the greater direction provided to resource provision was also mentioned.

A number of teachers attributed the increase in focus and awareness to the reduction in summative assessment and the consequent increase in formative assessment associated with the introduction of portfolios.

However, while teachers argued that portfolios have impacted on their planning, there was little expression of an impact on teaching practice. Of course, some planning decisions do have implications for pedagogy:

> we look at children in different ways … they are all at a different stage … so that we expect that each child will be different in what they can do in it. In the classroom you cater more for the individual … more group work and individualising in the program.

- *Portfolios are perceived as a tool for teacher accountability rather than a tool for student learning.*

A common theme in describing the purpose of portfolios was that of accountability to parents. The following are typical:

> … a way of showing the parents what the children have been doing, and what the children can achieve … it should be a presentation to parents of what their children are capable of doing. They're a very good tool for the teacher's assessment as well.

> … firstly, I think it's a way to evaluate the child, and show how the child is progressing through the curriculum that we're teaching them. Secondly, I think parents see it as a way of keeping their work in a nice little bundle for future reference.

> … so parents and students can see what students are working towards, and see what deficiencies students have to address.

While the latter extract suggests a greater degree of student responsibility, the role of the portfolio was generally not seen as a tool for student learning. Even the survey response had relatively low means for items relating to student self-appraisal; student determination of portfolio contents; and teacher-student collaboration in selecting work.

Only two teachers nominated portfolio strengths as the provision of opportunity for students to appraise their own work. One, a teacher of a senior 'opportunity' class, claimed to explain to students why they were assessed in particular ways, and how the portfolio sample demonstrated the outcomes.

This case represents only one instance of primary school practice in relation to portfolios in NSW. While some schools known to the author have been engaged in portfolio implementation for a few years, and others not at all, this school only began the process in a concerted way in 2000. The staff regard the portfolio as a highly select strategic collection of student work (an accountability/showcase portfolio), though the school intends to broaden the application to include greater content coverage and student involvement in selection and reflection. The major reason for 'hastening slowly' is the perceived need for staff to fully understand the application of portfolios within an outcomes framework. Currently the portfolio is an instance of Paulson and Paulson's (1994) 'emerging portfolio', in that there is a sense of organisation and purpose, but it hasn't yet achieved the status of a comprehensive learning narrative.

Conclusion

One response to the mandate of outcomes-based education in NSW may well have been a concerted return to formal testing. However, the authentic assessment movement of the 90s, with its emphasis on performance and situated assessment, has produced a leavening in traditional assessment to the extent that with the advent of the new millennium, performance assessment and traditional assessment comfortably supplement each other. In this context, portfolios enjoy recent and widespread prominence.

The international literature proposes a great variety of models and purposes for portfolios. In NSW primary schools, they are regarded as strategic collections of student work that demonstrate the achievement of syllabus outcomes. They are not just a showcase of student's best work, but nor are they 'process' documents involving students in continuous self-reflection. In fact, the degree both of student self-assessment, and student negotiation of submissions, is arguably secondary to the priority of teacher accountability.

While it may appear that primary schools in NSW are evolving from what Paulson and Paulson (1994) dubbed the 'emerging portfolio' stage, there is a need for the Department of Education and Training to take a more proactive role through publications like *Strategies for assessment and reporting* (Department of School Education 1997) and through inservice education, to focus on the portfolio as a tool for student learning. Such a focus might incorporate the need for student self-reflection and teacher/student collaboration in portfolio implementation, and could gain momentum from the more general and emerging trend towards self-assessment.

There is an emphasis on including work samples in English and maths with statements of outcomes attached, with such inclusions determined by executive or year level teachers. Currently in NSW, a Quality Teaching Project involving the three school systems (state, catholic and independent) is developing assessment resources for staged outcomes in literacy and numeracy. While this work is valuable in demonstrating the ways in which outcomes may be assessed, similar work could provide models of 'what outcomes look like' in portfolios for areas other than English and maths.

Other 'artefacts' (Wolf 1991), like learning contracts, test papers, accounts of out-of-school experiences, merit certificates and student journal entries relating to learning, do not enjoy the same importance, and their legitimacy in reflecting quality student learning needs to be promoted.

Portfolios have only recently evolved in NSW, though their development has been dramatic. The case study school is arguably typical both in the degree of implementation and in the deliberate attempt to introduce portfolios gradually as part of a coherent professional development program.

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