At Lincoln Middle School, the use of portfolios in student-led conferences began six years ago, when a group of three teachers successfully obtained grant money to explore alternative assessment. They used the money to attend workshops and provide planning time and materials. These funds allowed them to pilot the process of using portfolios for student-led conferences. The teachers shared their results by conducting workshops for other teachers in their school, which soon expanded to include teachers district-wide. The administration offered continued support by polling teachers about their needs and providing half-days to reflect and work in groups. Through grant money and other district funds, schools like Lincoln Middle School have received financial backing for similar programs.

As a university professor in the Education Department at the University of New England, I believe it is crucial to stay in touch with what is happening in local classrooms while instructing future teachers. I learned of the work of the teachers at Lincoln Middle School when I became active in collaboration between the Portland, Maine, campus of UNE and nearby public schools. This affiliation provided a great opportunity for connecting with classroom teachers and resulted in an invitation for me to attend a staff development day at Lincoln Middle School.

The workshop, devoted to the use of portfolios in student-led conferences, was especially intriguing because it is a major topic explored in my assessment class with university students. The experience led to an ongoing connection with some of these classroom teachers. Their willingness to share gave me the opportunity to learn much from their first-hand experiences. I spent time in their classrooms talking with students and parents and observing the portfolio process. Meeting with the teachers provided insight into the procedures they used, as well as the challenges they faced.

Lincoln Middle School principal Kathleen Rossi showed support by attending this workshop. Further discussions with both her and district administrators made it clear they encouraged the use of portfolios in student-led conferences. During an interview, Rossi stated that she felt this process was very valuable because it "redirects responsibility and accountability to the student" (2003).

In addition to providing administrative support, the school informed parents were of the process through a series of newsletters. As this use of portfolios became more institutionalized, individual teachers developed their own letters to clarify the process to parents, invite their participation, and ask for their feedback.

In my collaboration with Lincoln Middle School, I learned much about their portfolio process that I could share with my university students. Thinking of the thousands of children whom these future teachers would influence, I was compelled to consider carefully what I stress in my classes. With this in mind, it seemed imperative that I instill the importance of emphasizing meaningful life-long skills. I wanted my students to focus on promoting these real world skills for their future students. As I observed this portfolio process, I was impressed by what seemed like an exceptional opportunity to promote these same skills.

During my affiliation with the teachers at Lincoln Middle School, the school district administration instituted a plan requiring all teachers in the district to work with some form of the portfolio process. What I had witnessed developing in some classrooms led me to

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approach the administration with an offer to explore whether teachers, parents, and students supported this idea of using portfolios for student-led conferences. They accepted my offer, and with their input, I developed a survey to include information that would help the district and also measure the items of particular interest to my research, which focused on the promotion of real world skills.

**Establishing a Purpose**

In exploring the use of portfolios in classrooms and in literature, I found the portfolio technique applied in various ways. Although many school districts used portfolios—some even required them—their uses were different from classroom to classroom. They ranged from being a place to store student work to an integrated process in students’ daily routines.

Educators, students, and parents disagree about the effectiveness of this educational process. A major cause of these differing views is that currently portfolios are used for too many purposes (Airesian 2001; McMillan 2001). To come to a logical decision about effectiveness, you must first decide what you are evaluating. Critics of portfolios would be more open to their use in student-led conferences if their purpose was clearly defined in terms of importance to stakeholders, that is teachers, students, and parents.

**Connection of Portfolios with the Real World**

Much has been said about the importance of using authentic assessment in the classroom (Hibbard 1996; Saphier 1997; Wiggins 1993). Many educators consider focusing on real world situations a major component of authentic assessment (Cangelosi 2000; McTighe 1996–97; Popham 2000; Wiggins 1993). Portfolios are an authentic assessment, providing a viable alternative to the more traditional paper-and-pencil tests (Adkison and Chad 2001; Cleland 1999; McMahen and Gifford 2001; McMillan 2001). Using portfolios in student-led conferences promotes real world characteristics and provides valuable life-long skills (Condon, Hatcher, and Ikan 1998, 2000; Countryman and Schroeder 1996; Courtney and Ahbeer 1999; Hebert 2001; Johnson 1996; Lake and Kafka 1996; Smith 2000).


Literature about classroom use of portfolios for student-led conferences supports the notion that this process genuinely involves students in their learning. The required self-evaluation is valuable for students after they finish their schooling and are functioning in the real world (Airesian 2001; Cangelosi 2000; Cruikshank 2002; Marzano 2000; Popham 2000; Williams 2002).

In 1995, the National Middle School Association published a document titled *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools*. One of the five major programmatic areas addressed was “Assessment and Evaluation that Promote Learning.” Explaining appropriate changes in the evaluation process, the document went on to state, “These approaches are less competitive and more informative, and they involve students in self-evaluation” (para. 4; Loubsbury 1996).

In her course outline for teachers, “Students Taking Responsibility for Their Own Learning,” Dona Cruikshank (2002) listed as a course objective that teachers should “understand that making students more responsible for their own learning will prepare them to be responsible, thinking citizens.”

Talking about portfolios and student-led conferences, J. Williams (2002), a science teacher from Minnesota, remarked: “I decided that portfolios would be a collection of student work or artifacts that is self-evaluated and reflects the learner’s skills and thinking. . . . Students grow as they take responsibility for evaluating their own learning. . . . Allowing students time to reflect on their progress and to communicate what they have learned is a step in the right direction.”

**Study of Portfolio Use in Student-Led Conferences**

**Scope**

My study included teachers, students, and students’ parents from Lincoln Middle School, a suburban school of grades six through eight. The school is located in Portland, Maine, and has an ethnically diverse population, with an enrollment of 615.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers’ students’, and parents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of student-led conferences using portfolios on promoting the real world skills of responsibility, reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting.

**Methodology**

Data collection included surveys of teachers, students, and parents using a five-point Likert scale; interviews with teachers, students, parents, and the school principal; and my role as a participant-observer in classrooms.

Surveys requested input from teachers, students, and parents about the value of several aspects of student-led conferences. Although these conferences were student-
led, we used the title, "Student Portfolios and Involvement in Parent-Teacher Conferences," to make it clear that teachers, students, and parents would all be present (see appendix A).

Further collaboration with teachers and administrators allowed me to observe in classrooms. I was able to sit in as a surrogate parent for several students as they explained their work; interview teachers, students, and parents; and develop a symposium that included, two teachers, a student, a parent, and myself. Together, we presented information at the New England Educational Research Organization Conference in spring 2002.

Through spending time in the classrooms and talking with teachers, I became aware that several teachers focused on promoting life-long skills during the portfolio process. In these classrooms, teachers used the guiding principles of state standards to evaluate their portfolio work. The state standards, State of Maine Learning Results, list these guiding principles as the "building blocks for successful and fulfilled adulthood in the 21st century." These state standards "identify the knowledge and skills essential to prepare Maine students for work, for higher education, for citizenship, and for personal fulfillment" (1997, ii). The portfolio process addresses these objectives by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own work through reflection, self-assessment, goal-setting, and explaining their work to parents certainly.

The results of the surveys revealed that the majority of these stakeholders were in favor of promoting student-led conferences using portfolios (see appendix B). One teacher commented: "My portfolio conferences have gone extremely well, so far! The parents have really been impressed with the 'book style' portfolios my home-room created. The students have been excited to share their portfolios with their parents and thus become more engaged and vested in the whole process. My conferences have truly been a student-led conference...[sic] I am enjoying this process tremendously!"

Although students generally rated these conferences positively, some expressed varying views. During one interview, an eighth grade student said: "It made you think about what your work was and what learner expectation it was under and why. If you can explain something to someone else, you really understand it. This is the only part of school where we think about our work and learner expectations."

Parents' remarks were predominantly positive, as illustrated by the following example: "It is the evidence of a child's growth that is supported through student-led conferences. I also strongly believe that learner expectations are advanced as well. Kids at any age can set goals, reflect, and self-assess if given the opportunity. Student-led conferencing allows that to happen."

Interviews also supported this positive parent perspective. One mother commented: "My frustration with parent-teacher conferences, previous to student-led conferences, was that I would get this litany of ninety-eight, ninety nine, ninety-six [her daughter's grades]. 'Your daughter is wonderful to have in the class! 'Thank you very much.' I wasn't getting any meaningful or new information about her work which I wanted to appreciate" (White 2001).

The three groups of stakeholders also made negative comments. The teachers opposed to the portfolio process usually rated all ten items on the teacher survey (see appendix A) with a low score and rarely wrote comments. One teacher remarked: "The high-achieving students seem to benefit from this approach. I find that the less motivated students with minimal parental support merely see it as another unwelcome demand upon their energy."

During interviews, the school principal and various teachers said they felt that many of those reluctant to support the process were concerned about successful implementation and the teaching time it would take. Some teachers were also uncomfortable with the process because it required changes in philosophy and the daily classroom routine. Others were also concerned with the challenges of implementing the process in a middle school versus a self-contained classroom. These challenges included teachers instructing up to one hundred students on a rotating class schedule; motivating students to continue a process that had been repeated for several years; and the feeling that it was most beneficial for the advanced students.

Students were also concerned with the amount of time the process took. A characteristic remark from the students who rated the portfolio and conference in negatively was: "I do not enjoy doing portfolios because I think it is too much of a hassle [sic]."

Parents with a negative perspective of the process focused on wanting time to talk with the teacher without their child present. One parent remarked: "I wish that at least one conference was between teacher and parent—no children. There are many things that I'm uncomfortable discussing with my daughter present, and I don't think that I should have to set up a different time."

Analysis of the Data

A review of the data gathered by surveys, interviews, and notes collected while serving as a participant-observer revealed the following:

- The large majority of teachers, students, and parents reported the use of portfolios in student-led conferences was effective in promoting the real world skills of responsibility, reflection, self-assessment, and goal-setting (see appendix B).
• Teachers spent a varying amount of time and effort on portfolio development, especially as it related to student-led conferences.
• Teachers who focused on connecting student portfolios with the learner expectations (life-long skills derived from the guiding principles of the Learning Results) invested more in the use of portfolios.
• Teachers opposed to portfolio use were concerned about time spent on the process or were uncomfortable changing from their current teaching methods.
• Middle school structure, with its changing classes and large numbers of students seen by each teacher, made it more difficult to implement this process than in self-contained classrooms.
• National, state, and local standards could potentially provide a framework to focus the portfolio process on developing the life-long skills students need in the real world.
• Strong support by the school principal and district administrators encouraged the use of portfolios in student-led conferences.
• Parents' major objection to the portfolio process was their desire to meet with the teacher to discuss specific issues without their child present.
• Some students saw the process as a "hassle" or too much work.

Conclusions

This study suggested that using portfolios in student-led parent conferences carries significant value for teachers, students, and parents. This research also indicated that giving additional attention to the following key components seemed essential to increasing the effectiveness of this portfolio process.

Common meaningful purpose: Once a decision is made to use the portfolio process, it is crucial that a common, meaningful purpose is established. Promoting the learning of life-long skills is a far-reaching focus.

Communication to all stakeholders: The purpose of the portfolios and the conferences must be communicated clearly to all teachers, students, and parents. This communication should be done before beginning the process and frequently during implementation. In addition to the student-led conference, it is also important to provide an opportunity for parents to meet with the teacher without the student present.

Substantial staff development: Staff development must begin prior to implementation and be ongoing to provide teachers with the necessary information and skills. Teachers must feel supported if the process is to remain focused on a common purpose. Staff development should include providing overarching guidelines and standards (such as the guiding principles used at Lincoln Middle School). Mentors are also a key component. Teachers already successfully implementing the process are an excellent resource.

Flexibility: Flexibility should be built into the process to allow for the creativity of individual teachers. However, it is important to remain focused on the common purpose of fostering the development of real world skills.

Time: Sufficient time must be allowed for the implementation of this portfolio process. Teachers need to incorporate the necessary skills and information into their daily classroom routine. Adequate time avoids overwhelming teachers because many will need more time than others to successfully implement the process in their classrooms.

With these considerations in place, student-led conferences using portfolios can play a crucial role in establishing valuable skills that students will use throughout their life.

Key words: portfolios, student-led conferences, self-assessment

APPENDIX A

Teacher Survey

Providing students with an education that will best prepare them for a successful future in their life after school is a common goal of parents, teachers, and students. All three groups have an important role to play in this critical undertaking. A recent attempt to engage these groups in three-way communication involves the development of student portfolios and student participation in parent-teacher conferences. Your experience and input are valued and completion of the following brief survey would be very helpful. (Students and parents will also have the opportunity to complete a similar survey.)

Please circle the number that best describe whether you agree or disagree with the following, 5 meaning strongly agree and 1 meaning strongly disagree:

Student portfolios and involvement in parent-teacher conferences:
1. helped students to communicate the meaning of their work. 1 2 3 4 5
2. helped students demonstrate evidence of meeting learner expectations. 1 2 3 4 5
3. helped students organize their work. 1 2 3 4 5
4. helped students take responsibility for their own work. 1 2 3 4 5
5. helped students reflect on their work. 1 2 3 4 5
6. helped students self-assess their work. 1 2 3 4 5
7. helped students set future goals. 1 2 3 4 5
8. helped parents, students, and teachers quickly evaluate student achievement. 1 2 3 4 5
9. helped parents, students, and teachers plan for the future. 1 2 3 4 5
10. helped parents, students, and teachers plan for accountability. 1 2 3 4 5

Other comments or suggestions (Please use the back of this sheet if more space is needed):
# APPENDIX B
## Response to Survey Items—Lincoln Middle School

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Total number of responses</th>
<th>#1 or 2</th>
<th>#3 or 5</th>
<th>#4 or 5</th>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Helped students take responsibility for their own work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helped students reflect on their work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helped students self-assess their work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Helped students set future goals</strong></td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Instructions were: Please circle the number that best describes whether you agree or disagree with the following, 5 meaning strongly agree and 1 meaning strongly disagree.*

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National Middle School Association. 1995. This we believe: Developmentally responsive middle level schools. Columbus, Ohio. Author. ERIC, ED 390 546.


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