

## **Preservice Professional Employment Portfolios for Middle Schools**

**Roberta Devlin-Scherer**

Seton Hall University

### Abstract

The thoughtful thematic presentation of artifacts or exhibits can visually represent preservice teacher candidates' experiences as they grow into the teaching role. The literature on professional portfolios in teacher education has refined its expectations and the advent of electronic possibilities offer teacher education students varied ways to present their accomplishments. This article considers ways to incorporate the trends in middle level education to a professional portfolio and suggests guidelines and sources.

### Introduction

Over the past decade, teacher education portfolios have attracted increasing interest as a means of stimulating reflection on teaching and learning, assessing teacher competence and documenting K-12 student performance (Biddle & Lasley, 1991; Berry, Kisch, Ryan, & Uphoff, 1991; Long & Stansbury, 1994; Piper, 1999; Wolf, 1991; Zubizarretta, 1994). College faculty note that portfolios add a human dimension to assessment and enhance reflection in their classes (Dye, 1994; Ohlhausen & Ford, 1990; Stahle & Mitchell, 1993; Whittaker, 1995). Typically, in teacher education programs, significant assignments and exhibits are collected for various classes or field experiences, and candidates present a thoughtful collection for faculty review before they enter student teaching. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has indicated that part of their review of teacher education programs will be based on teacher education students' performance, and a program portfolio is one tool teacher education programs can use to provide evidence of effectiveness. Accreditors are exploring using portfolios as one means of documenting student work and program quality (Bradley, 1997). The professional employment portfolio gives portfolio creators the opportunity to focus and modify their program portfolio. This experience can serve as a culminating and satisfying activity. By developing a personal document of one's potential as an educator, students establish a professional identity.

Skimpy, one page resumes can barely communicate the commitment and excellence of many college students during their teacher education programs and student teaching. The competition for initial positions requires that students find unique ways to communicate their competence. The purpose of this article is to discuss print and electronic professional employment portfolios for middle school preservice teacher candidates. Students applying for positions in a middle level need to show that they understand that the middle school is more than an organizational pattern. Communicating understanding of the distinctive middle school philosophy and its implementation is essential to the creation of a successful portfolio.

### Portfolio Contents

Zubizarretta (1994) comments that "...student teachers...can write remarkably convincing and detailed portfolios that include plenty of substantive information as well as statements of reasonable teaching goals" (p. 325). And when asked, middle school teacher education students create a long list of what materials they could include in a portfolio: outstanding college papers, philosophy statements, lesson plans, units, tests, creative teaching ideas, honors and awards letters, certification documents, Praxis test results, student teaching supervisor evaluations, student evaluations, bulletin board displays, and sample games are possible entries. Initially, some students confuse quantity with quality. Portfolios are not memoirs; limiting the number and range of items can enhance the final portfolio and can stimulate thoughtful reflection of one's work. Berry, Kisch, Ryan and Uphoff (1991) comment on the importance of selectivity. Important, too, is the manner of presentation. Photographs, transparencies, computer graphics, artwork, audiotapes, and videotapes are vehicles for displaying these materials and talents. Wolf (1991) describes the Teacher Assessment Project at Stanford in which experienced teachers outlined themes around which they documented their experiences. Literacy and biology teachers determined the essential tasks of teaching, then listed main headings which they addressed in their portfolios, e.g., creating a literate environment or student evaluations. Thinking about what a piece or visual communicates about teaching and learning within a theme, current trend, or standard requires reflection on the pertinence and meaningfulness of the task or display. Selecting a few best works from many choices and communicating about them clearly is a difficult responsibility that experienced teachers find challenging. Considering the extensive possibilities, then setting parameters for suitable contents for an employment portfolio is a useful starting point. The University of Maryland Lab School (Constanzo & Lorenzo, 1997) has developed a step-by-step manual for creating a standards-based portfolio with an accompanying videotape. Typically, university sites offer guidance in portfolio development applicable to their institution (Devlin-Scherer & Zinicola, 2000) and provide preservice and inservice sample portfolios (Sardone & Skeeel, 2000). Recent books also have useful suggestions (Campbell, Melenyzer, Nettles, Wyman, 2000; Cole, Ryan, Kick, Mathies, 2000; Martin-Kniep, 1999).

### Guidelines for Developing a Portfolio

Professional employment portfolios have a specified purpose; they need to reflect outstanding and unique qualities of an applicant. They need to communicate information about the candidate's experiences and skills succinctly and sincerely. This section on guidelines is divided into three topics--professional appearance, thematic emphasis, and selection. These recommendations for portfolio preparation can also serve as criteria for reviewers as well.

#### Professional Appearance.

Introductory sheets for each section, which are computer-generated or artfully written, capture attention. Computer graphics skills add to a portfolio and classroom environment. Anderson (1991) and DeFina (1992) offer suggestions for elementary students' presentation of portfolio pieces, helpful for all portfolio developers. Ordinarily, word-processed material is preferred, but there are exceptions, such as in the case of a young students' work. Occasionally, preservice teacher candidates have created captions in calligraphy and connected this skill with artistic activities done with students.

A table of contents communicates planning and organization. Numbered pages and dividers make topics of interest easy to follow. Dating the portfolio, indicating the time span of

the contents represented, enables viewers to recognize current efforts and skills developed over time. Captions and brief overview statements are useful for groups of items. Individual items require captions and descriptions that relate the artifact to a theme and show its use. Pieces can illustrate one's philosophy or display a curricular innovation.

### Thematic Emphasis

Stemmer, Broom, and Smith (1992) describe grade 6-12 students whose Employability Skills Portfolios respond to three categories: teamwork, personal management, and academic skills. Similarly, items in a beginning teacher's portfolio are organized around pertinent themes. The organizing concepts can be based on standards of professional organizations or certification, principles of child development, current issues, or individually generated. Professional portfolios of middle school candidates can reflect their adoption and implementation of best practices in a middle school setting. Below are noted philosophy and practices commonly found in effective middle schools (*Turning Points*, 2000) followed by descriptions of applications that can be displayed in middle school preservice teacher portfolios.

### Interdisciplinary Teams of Teachers Assigned a Common Group of Students.

- list of teachers and specializations who serve on the interdisciplinary team with commentary on plans, tasks and accomplishments of this team while the candidate was a participant along with picture of team at work on a project
- future ideas section noting some goals this candidate would have for a new team
- description of specific talents and skills a candidate could bring to a team, perhaps illustrated on a website.

### Planning Periods for Interdisciplinary Cluster of Teachers who Work Closely with a Common Group of Students.

- candidate describes uses of team meetings (meeting with parents, team planning of unique events or units for students, discussion of student academic and social growth and team planned interventions) and his/her participation
- list of meetings and topics and brief description of candidate involvement or tasks
- photograph of candidate with team with caption highlighting topics and decisions the group made for unit planning, handling problems, or field trips/special events for middle school students

### Flexible Scheduling to Support More Intensive Instruction in One Subject or to Encourage Team Teaching Among Two or More Teachers.

- candidate notes how flexible scheduling supported her/his work with students on an extended project with samples of student work

- candidate describes lessons (s)he has team taught with teachers in the same or different subject field(s) and provides sample lesson plans

Thematic, Issues-Centered, and/or Community Service Unit Planning, so Students can Begin to See Connections Among the Disciplines and Become Participatory Citizens in a Democracy.

- photographs or videotape of thematic unit in progress, focusing on students at work and candidate involvement
- photographs of service learning project done under candidate's leadership
- comments from agency or clients served on benefits/results of service learning project
- summaries of thematic units highlighting a unique of teaching strategies and activities
- summary of student assessment of learnings from a particular unit with work samples

Teacher Advisory where Teachers Discuss Academic, Social, or Career Issues with Students.

- listing of discussion topics conducted with advisory group
- highlights of comments from students about careers and candidate reactions
- sample goals set by middle school students, noting strengths/improvements in academic and social areas
- results of interest surveys and commentary on uses of information

Orientation Programs to Middle School and to Support Transition to High School.

- schedule of orientations and description of activities
- description of additional activities that would be appropriate for middle schools to consider for these programs and ways candidate could contribute

Exploratory Classes in which Students take 6-9 Week Classes in the Arts, Drama, Health, Business, Technology, and Physical Education.

- sample lessons taught in these classes by candidate
- survey of interests of students before and after taking the exploratory class
- photographs of displays of student work products at an evening School Exhibition

Clubs to Support Development of New and Special Interests and Group Interaction.

- listing of common middle level clubs with asterisk by those the candidate could lead

- description of co-training and leadership of peer mediation group
- description of sports or academic activities candidate has or could coach, e.g., soccer, Odyssey of the Mind, Mock Trial, Newspaper, Computer Club
- photographs of preservice student demonstrating how to do a particular skill (e.g., ceramics, volleyball) to group

#### Shared Decision-Making and Governance of the School.

- examples of topics of discussion candidate has observed or participated in at governance meeting with effects on classroom activities or school functions
- sample communications with families on instructional activities that enhance student learning

Individual contents need to relate to larger themes as shown or demonstrate implementation of current practices (examples that display ways of teaching reading, cooperative learning, multicultural approaches, or family involvement strategies). Some teacher education students use poems or quotations that guide their thinking about teaching and learning, then organize their portfolios around these. A portfolio loses its value if filled with unexplained and unconnected visuals or lengthy unit outlines. Displaying photographs of bulletin boards is not adequate; their link to topics taught and student learning must be evident. Appearance and substance are both important.

#### Careful Selection of Materials

In the case of a professional employment portfolio, emphasis needs to be on audience. What might a principal or interview team of teachers, parents and/or school board members like to know about a potential new hire? Examples drawn from actual teaching situations are best. The uniqueness of an individual's experience should be evident. Since many candidates will present lesson plans, interviewers will look for unusual sample lessons. Rather than burden the portfolio and viewer with past papers, a summary of research used to enrich the classroom might be worth of inclusion. Citing recent studies in cooperative learning and showing effective use of this strategy in the classroom, through student products, or an outline of a unit with student outcomes, the portfolio preparer demonstrates implementation of a recommended practice. Similarly, teacher candidates who include an award should briefly explain the award's relationship to one's teaching and students in a caption. The best portfolio exhibits incorporate K-12 student work, have an overview explaining the assignment and expectations, and show results. Teacher work sample reports can provide solid information on the effects of a preservice student's teaching on student learning (Schalock, 1998). Individual work products can also be a testimony to a teacher's ability to guide students. Teachers' feedback, shown with follow-up revision of a piece, can demonstrate student understanding of the feedback and learning and quality of the teacher response.

The further removed from the school setting an individual interviewer is, the more interested (s)he may be in activities beyond classroom-specific materials. Portfolio preparers

may want to consider showing ways in which they have exerted leadership, demonstrated team membership, contributed to extracurricular activities, actively participated in professional development and school committees, as well as demonstrated excellence in the classroom.

Choosing the best work involves several considerations. Photographs can be valuable illustrations of teaching and learning. If a picture is dark, too small, or streaked, it should be retaken or eliminated—even if it is a display that the children loved. Teacher education students have had pictures enlarged, so their exhibits or displays are clear. Pictures of children doing unidentifiable activities are not useful. Pictures can display hands-on projects, such as a deck for a house created to scale with specifications for the product highlighted in a brief description. For lesson plan samples, specifically indicating questions, describing activities, and noting student responses is better than listing page numbers and topics. The portfolio is an opportunity to display a candidate's work, rather than prepared materials. In assessment sections of lesson plans, rather than stating "quiz, observe students and monitor," specifically noting what areas will be on the quiz and which student behaviors will be observed (initiating questions or ideas, taking turns, extended responses, etc.) makes the strategy used clear to readers.

Audiotapes of class discussions can be transcribed to show the quality of classroom dialogue between teachers and students. Short videotapes (10-20 minutes) of lessons can give viewers a sense of teaching style and classroom atmosphere. Introducing the listener to the class, its purpose, and the topic studied and providing a brief outline is helpful for viewers. If interviewers do not have time to play the tape, they will at least have a sense of topics or activities conducted during a lesson from the outline. Videotape portfolios of effective sample lessons created by a group of preservice students can serve as materials for program accreditation and be used to teach future students. Wolf (1991) noted that an experienced teacher, wishing to illustrate the concept of a literate environment, prepared a classroom tour, highlighting purposes and student progress for different activities. A pre-service teacher candidate could also introduce viewers to sections of their classroom which highlight learning students can do there.

Student evaluations, which note specifics about the lessons/material taught, can convey information about curriculum and learning, while general comments on being a pretty or favorite teacher do not. Summaries of survey forms or narratives can be shared with actual student evaluations available in an appendix. Specific positive comments by the principal, cooperating teacher, or university supervisor can be highlighted, drawing a reviewer's attention to the candidate's outstanding teaching qualities. Including evaluation statements may suggest that the candidate is open to feedback about her/his work. Summarizing these comments under headings makes this information accessible for the reader.

To reduce bulk and share more extensive information, teacher education students can list ten bulletin board topics and display three. Major units can also be described in an outline format for each similar to this one: purpose, major activities, displays, and assessment strategies. Sometimes a candidate can introduce him/herself, capture attention, and demonstrate skills with one artifact. One student created a bulletin board about himself for his class, suggesting creativity and displaying computer skills. He submitted a copy of this artifact with his cover letter and resume as well as in his employment portfolio.

Technology is helping with the creation and management of portfolios. Electronic portfolios contain the same types of information as the paper portfolio and the guidelines

discussed previously also apply, but the information is collected, stored and managed electronically (Barrett, 2000; Riggsby, 1997). Since current technology allows the capture and storage of information in the forms of text, graphics, sound and video, portfolio creators can display writing samples, solutions to math problems, artwork, science projects, and multimedia presentations in one coherent document. High quality examples of e-portfolios (Garcia, 2000) have been developed as part of the Seton Hall University PT3 grant (Skeele & Sardone, 2000). Technology-based assignments including web quests, virtual field trips Devlin-Scherer, 2001) and unique projects (Zinicola, 2000) naturally fit in an e-portfolio. Candidates can share websites, diskettes or CDs with potential employers as well as a print version. In any format, organizing and summarizing information carefully guides reviewers' attention to the candidate's significant contributions to students and colleagues. Devlin-Scherer (2001) has developed an instructional e-portfolio that provides examples and recommendations for the contents of program and professional employment e-portfolios.

### Reactions to Portfolios

While quantity of materials, need to direct the interview process, and time constraints can interfere with administrative acceptance of portfolios, principals have commented on the rich environments conveyed in the pictures, evidence of planning and computer skills, candidates' use of current information, and attention to detail. *Selecting Teachers for Tomorrow's Classrooms* documents increasing interest among school administrators in using portfolios in hiring decisions, particularly for finalists (Jacobson, 1997). Biddle & Lasely (1991) suggest that administrators can view portfolios as an important factor in employing candidates. Anecdotally, candidates have attributed successful interviews to their portfolios. They felt prepared. Interviewed in a school board meeting, an applicant reported that after she shared her portfolio, one school board member said if she knew that much they had better hire her. In the case of several teacher and principal interview teams, candidates noted that the portfolio served to stimulate questions in their areas of expertise. Several candidates, interviewing out-of-state, believed leaving copies of several artifacts for consideration helped establish their interest in the position and made their application memorable for interviewers. In school districts committed to portfolios for student assessment or where interviews are a shared responsibility among teachers, community members, and administrators, interest in quality portfolios may be high.

In advising candidates, it is important to discuss introducing the portfolio in the interview. Educators are busy and often have a specific agenda for the interview. One suggestion is to introduce the contents of the portfolio within the context of the interview. If interviewers ask about experience with using computers, applicants can take the opportunity to display an item in their portfolio related to that subject. Since some interview teams may request materials to be left for review, candidates might want to have a handout prepared, have multiple copies of the portfolio and/or provide a copy of their e-portfolio.

### A Final Note

A structured approach to teaching the portfolio process builds student confidence and professionalism. Throughout their programs, preservice students reflect, clarify, and summarize their thinking of what is important in teaching and learning through designing their personal program portfolios. In employment portfolios, they consider their work as professionals and design it for audiences of hiring committees.

For school administrators and site-based management teams, a portfolio can provide supplementary information to interviews and facilitate a selection process. The portfolio also provides another lens to view a college preparation program for K-12 educators. Yancey and Weider (1997) indicate that college faculty can use portfolios to gain understanding of the teacher education curriculum experienced by their students and identify program gaps and successes as they review evidences of learning selected and displayed by their students.

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