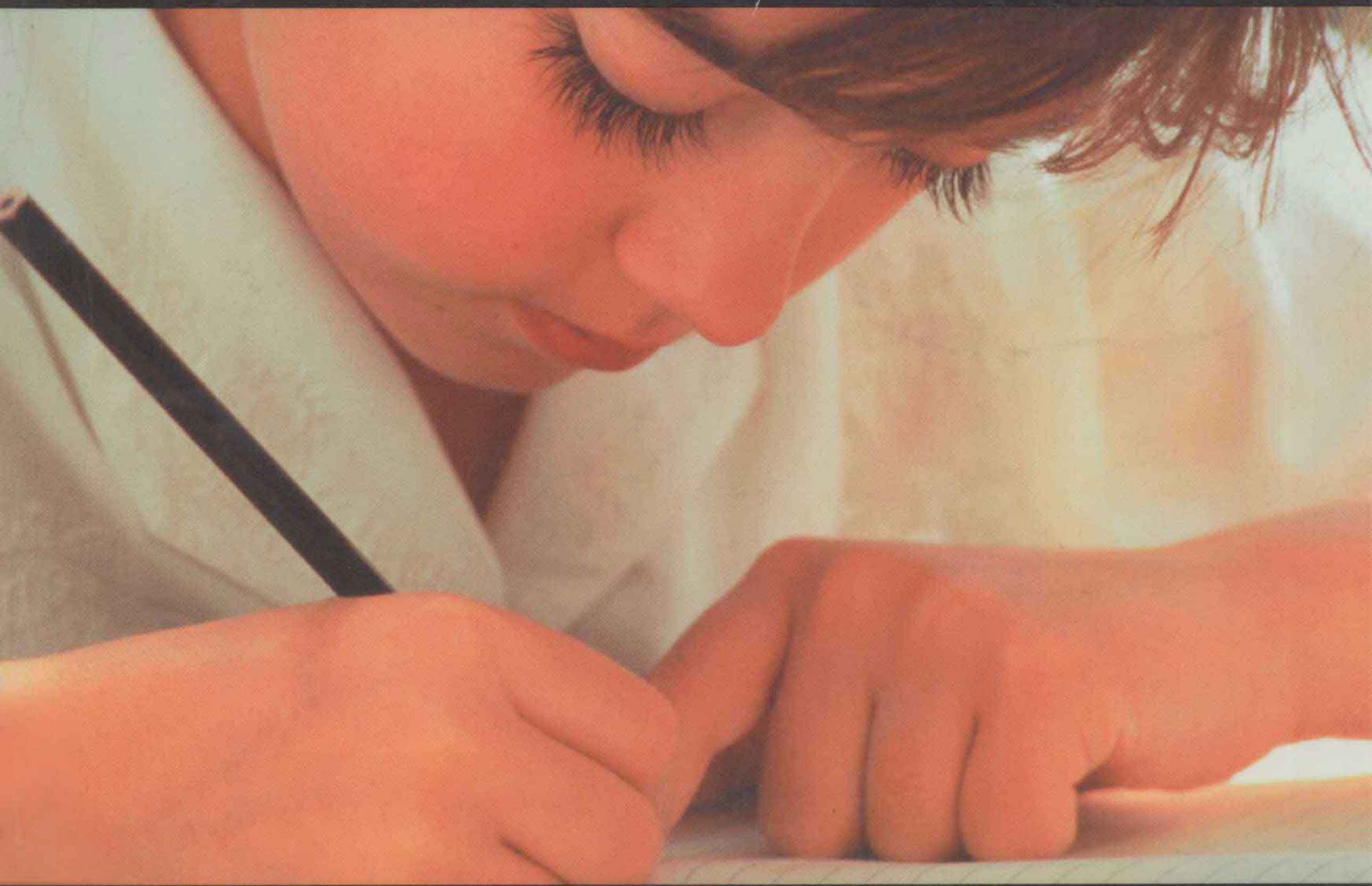
The Power of PORTFOLIOS



what children can teach us about learning and assessment

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PREFACE

Portfolios have been with us for a very long time. Those of us who grew up in the 1950s or earlier recognize portfolios as reincarnations of the large memory boxes or drawers where our parents collected starred spelling tests, lacy valentines, science fair posters, early attempts at poetry, and (of course) the obligatory set of plaster hands. Each item was selected by our parents because it represented our acquisition of a new skill or our feelings of accomplishment. Perhaps an entry was accompanied by a special notation of praise from a teacher or maybe it was placed in the box just because we did it.

We formed part of our identity from the contents of these memory boxes. We recognized each piece and its association with a particular time or experience. We shared these collections with grandparents to reinforce feelings of pride and we reexamined them on rainy days when friends were unavailable for play. Reflecting on the collection allowed us to attribute importance to these artifacts, and by extension to ourselves, as they gave witness to the story of our early school experiences.

Our parents couldn't possibly envision that these memory boxes would be the inspiration for an innovative way of thinking about children's learning. These collections, lovingly stored away on our behalf, are the genuine exemplar for documenting children's learning over time. But now these memory boxes have a different meaning. It's not

purely private or personal, although the personal is what gives power to what they can mean.

Memory Boxes with New Intentions

What is the meaning of portfolios—these modern memory boxes—and why has their purpose changed? What portfolios can really accomplish is significant, but in many instances their full potential is not being reached. That is because portfolios are sometimes made into something they shouldn't be. Teachers who are uneasy with standardized tests and single-number characterizations of children's progress instinctively use portfolios in an attempt to prove their students' achievements. In these portfolios teachers select or they encourage their students to select what they believe is the child's best work and highest achievements and not necessarily what might be significant in the child's eyes or what reflects actual experiences. The teachers' hope is to supplement the narrower evaluation gleaned from standardized tests. But in doing so, the idea of a portfolio reflecting the realities of a child's education rather than only the high points has been lost.

This shift in function from memory box to standardized test supplement is an impediment to the portfolio's usefulness. The first problem is that the overriding expectation to serve as a qualitative companion to quantitative measures has placed a huge burden of expectation on portfolios—an expectation that cannot be fulfilled appropriately. A second, more serious problem is that fulfilling that first obligation sacrifices purposes and benefits unique to portfolios. Understanding what portfolios can do is what this book is about.

Portfolios as a Qualitative Companion

In experimenting with portfolios, teachers have understandably applied a format that is familiar to them. Organizing a portfolio that evidences a child's best work and a teacher's best teaching makes good

sense. But we need to ask ourselves where the coupling of *best work* and *portfolio* comes from? Why does it make such good sense to us?

It makes sense because many teachers naturally feel compelled to structure and standardize a child's portfolio to conform to the concept of evaluation we were raised on, that is, a single correct response. The notion of "one right answer" reinforces accustomed images of school and of the expected roles of teacher and student. This is how we experienced school as children. Teacher as knower, child as learner; teacher as in control, child as in compliance; teacher as posing questions, child as responding—these are some of the familiar dichotomies deeply rooted in our educational experience. And for that very reason, that is, just because this relationship is so viscerally familiar to us, we should scrutinize its obvious assumptions.

Examining and possibly changing our deeply ingrained attitudes and habits is a major hurdle to overcome. But until we confront the predictable attraction to our comfort zone, we will continue to superimpose a standardized template on portfolios or any other form of assessment without regard to its appropriateness. Dennie Wolf and her colleagues from Harvard Project Zero articulated the dilemma well:

> The design and implementation of alternative modes of assessment will entail nothing less than a wholesale transition from what we call a testing culture to an assessment culture . . . the observable differences in the form, the data, and the conduct of standardized testing and its alternatives are in no way superficial matters or mere surface features. They derive from radical differences in underlying conceptions of mind and of the evaluation process itself. Until we understand these differences and their network of consequences, we cannot develop new tools that will allow us to ensure that a wide range of students use their minds well [1991, p. 33].

The testing culture is well defined because we have devoted close to a century of experience toward the development of the form, data,

and conduct of standardized testing. The content of evaluation and the explicit standards for achievement on those measures have been clearly defined. Most important, testing has a language and format that is understood by teachers, parents, and students alike.

We simply have not devoted that amount of time to discovering and developing the form, data, and conduct of portfolios. We've assumed a link to standardized tests without probing the correctness of that premise. The language of the testing culture has assimilated portfolios because no language about the use of portfolios exists. *Reliability*, *validity*, *quantitative judgment*, *measure*—these terms commonly describe standardized tests. They need to be redefined and clarified, however, when applied to portfolios (Gipps, 1999, p. 384; LeMahieu, Gitomer, and Eresh, 1995, pp. 11–28). In addition, we need to listen for the words that are unique to the portfolio experience.

Putting Portfolios to the Test

Schools across the country experimented with student portfolios in the 1980s. Those portfolio projects that approximated the ideals of the memory box received numerous criticisms. Evaluators of these projects were looking for a common measure to judge these portfolios—to find a way to compare one to another—to define the standard for a so-called good portfolio (Koretz and others, 1993, 1994; Mills, 1996; Sacks, 1999). In response many project designers promptly reworked portfolios to accommodate a quantitative ideology. The question was whether a substantially qualitative assessment tool could provide powerful and genuine insights into a child's learning as well as data about a student's comparative achievement.

Portfolios performed poorly on this test—and we shouldn't be surprised. The expectation that portfolios could yield a reliable and valid measure of one student's achievement as compared to another's, yet capture the uniqueness of a child's learning story, was unrealistic. This misguided attempt to fulfill incompatible goals is at the heart of the precarious future of portfolios. Standardized tests are a much better tool to measure *which child knows more*. Portfolios are—

or can be—the best vehicle to show us *what a child learns* and how schoolwork fits into that child's personal universe of knowledge. The combination of standardized tests and portfolios can provide a comprehensive assessment profile as well as invaluable insights into each child's process of learning.

It is a naive and unnecessary proposition to attempt to understand a child's learning by examining it through only one lens. We have multiple tools available to assist us to both measure and appreciate the complex dimensions of a child's learning. One tool is not better than another; rather each tool addresses different aspects of the learning profile. We need to know how to use each tool, however, so that we can understand the information gleaned and translate our insights into purposeful furthering of each child's learning.

Schools must be accountable to their communities. In support of that universal mandate teachers are encouraged to focus on what children can produce, and what can be seen and easily understood by parents and the community as students' progress toward meeting objective standards. Standardized tests are a good tool for this purpose. A longer view of the purposes of education, however, should urge us to be equally mindful of the process that children actually use in learning new skills or understanding new concepts. We should want to know how new knowledge changes children and how children incorporate new learning into everything else they know. This focus on a more far-reaching notion of lifelong accountability is just one of the unique benefits that portfolios can provide.

The Portfolio Advantage

Much has been written about the merits and drawbacks of standardized measures versus alternative modes of assessment, including portfolios. This ongoing debate has distracted us from attending to a more in-depth look at the unique benefits of portfolios. Too much time has been devoted to asking the wrong question ("What *should* a portfolio represent?") and not enough time has been directed to addressing the more substantive question of "What *can* a portfolio represent?"

In an insightful article that enumerates issues that will determine the success or failure of alternative assessments, Blaine Worthen states that "ultimately the success of alternative assessment will be judged by the persuasiveness of its internal rationales, rather than by external contrasts with traditional assessment. Criticisms of standardized testing are obviously less relevant to the future of new modes of assessment than are careful analyses of the most important advantages and drawbacks of those alternative assessment methods themselves" (1993, p. 446). The indigenous features of portfolios need to be brought to light. They must be understood as a generative tool for expanding and describing a child's learning.

More than a dozen years ago, at Crow Island School in Winnetka, Illinois, we began our long-term work with student portfolios. It still continues. Encouraging children to gather their work over their six years in elementary school so that they can see evidence of their own learning has taught us a lot. Understanding what the children and teachers think about portfolios sheds light on their fundamental value, as will be clear in succeeding chapters.

But it is important to remember that this has been the work of more than a decade. What problems did we confront and how did we resolve them? How did we learn to live with issues that seemingly couldn't be resolved? It began with very small steps toward very large ideas, and with a group of teachers who supported each other and who came to require of each other a school culture where ideas can be nurtured. That's when really important things can start to happen.

The Untidy Life of Ideas in a School Setting

In a school the life of an idea is filled with ambiguity, interruption, and chaos. Possibilities occur to teachers and principals at unexpected times—on the drive to school, in the middle of teaching a math lesson, during a conference with parents, or while putting children on the bus at the end of the day. With luck you have the

opportunity to share a seed of an idea with a colleague in the hallway or in the copier room. The act of talking about an idea—however briefly—greatly increases the chances of a new thought taking root within that school.

Unlike problems that can be solved and routine emergencies that schools anticipate with procedures and drills, ideas follow a different path. The journey between inspiration and outcome is not direct. Ideas require long periods of incubation while our immediate energies are focused on urgent interactions with children, parents, and teachers. Even when it is shared, a good idea requires time to traverse a school's circuitry in search of connection and energy. Further shared reflection generates additional possibilities and projects that only in retrospect can we identify as connected to the initial idea.

Our work with portfolios happened in just that way. We had an unclear notion of portfolios at the start. Influenced by Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), we spent a great deal of time with projects that explored the multiple learning experiences of our students. We wanted to redesign our form for reporting pupil progress to parents. Both explorations proved to be directly related to our future work with portfolios, although we didn't realize it at that time. We now know that these ancillary projects were not only necessary but added vitality to our growing interest in portfolios.

The following pages are an attempt to revisit over fourteen years of faculty conversations. The reader who is familiar with schools will recognize these chapters as an accurate portrayal of how the untidy life of ideas evolves in the school setting. The meandering rhythm of the beginning chapters is an honest depiction of how our faculty took the time to gather our thoughts and chart a direction.

We learn best through stories, so in many chapters the reader will find a vignette of school life. I hope these lessons will contribute to a new way of thinking about assessment in our schools. Here are the lessons that we have come to recognize as the internal rationales of student portfolios:

LESSON 1: Children Can Assess Their Own Learning

The most powerful reason for teaching children how to organize a portfolio of their work is to engage children in the assessment of their own learning. No other assessment tool can accomplish this goal as well.

LESSON 2: Children Learn All the Time

Children recognize a broader range of valued competencies, and attribute importance to them more evenly, than do their teachers. Teacher discussions of the multiple intelligences theory illuminated the many faces of learning and transformed our understanding of teaching and learning, and of ways to assess both.

LESSON 3: Teachers Learn All the Time, Too

In discussions about curriculum we often talk about providing large curricular concepts for children that offer many entries into a topic. Unfortunately, we don't always recognize that teachers require that same curricular model for growth. It's called good staff development. Redesigning our parent reporting form provided us with a rich project that stimulated our own multiple intelligences.

LESSON 4: Getting Clear on Portfolio Purpose, Ownership, and Content

"Whose portfolio is it?" is a question that must be addressed in order to know who will be making decisions about the contents of the collection. The transfer of ownership from teacher to child is a gradual process that evolves over time. Both teacher and child experience parallel stages of metacognitive insight that clarify issues of ownership. The ownership of the portfolio can be plotted along a continuum from exclusive teacher ownership to exclusive child ownership with an almost infinite number of intermediate stages.

LESSON 5: Portfolios Encourage Children to Think About Their Learning

The creation of portfolios and repeated interaction with them provides children with repetition and rehearsal of the act of self-reflection, discovery of strategies for learning, and affirmation of topics of interest. The presentation of a portfolio to a purposefully specified audience (say, parents) engages the child in a substantive conversation that further supports insights and self-knowledge required for the presentation of self to the world. As children become more aware of their strategies and dispositions for learning and learn how to exert control over these strategies, they become more confident learners.

LESSON 6: Portfolios Respond to the Individual Needs of Students

Children learn at different rates and demonstrate competence in a wide variety of subjects and projects. The portfolio is a tool that is responsive to a wide range of children's abilities. It serves as a means for the child to organize and assess present learning as well as set goals for future learning. The portfolio experience across the grade levels highlights development of emerging skills.

LESSON 7: Designating a Place and Space for Gathering Memories

Issues of space, accessibility, and innovative design of a school are directly connected to the child's portfolio experience. Thoughtfully designed spaces for learning have the power to evoke the dispositions required to engage in reflective assessment of learning. Establishing a school archive adds a sense of history to the portfolio and a place for our collective history as well.

LESSON 8: A Celebration Connects Child, Portfolio, and Audience

We needed a unifying experience that would consolidate all of our discussions and provide an experience for the children and parents that would clearly communicate the value we held for portfolios. Learning is an event worth celebrating, and children can be competent participants in that celebration. Portfolio conferences led by children have become for us the celebratory event that provides children with an authentic opportunity to relate their story of learning.

LESSON 9: Teaching Parents How to be Part of the Portfolio Conference

Each year we invite parents to a Portfolio Panel, where representative teachers from all grade levels discuss the reflective and assessment milestones achieved by children as they progress from Kindergarten to fifth grade. We recognize that the confidence and experience we've gained over these years is, in fact, more helpful to parents than if we had attempted to share our initial explorations and questions about portfolios many years ago. Now we are able to provide the appropriate scaffolding based on our years of conversations and direct experience so that the parents can hear their child's portfolio presentation and gain a more in-depth view of their child as a learner.

LESSON 10: Listening for Children's Meaning

As one fifth grade student reflects on her six-year archive, she connects prior and present learning experiences that describe and explain her dispositions for learning and future career goals as well. The underlying coherence and organization of the portfolio can only be expressed by its creator. Linkages between early learning experiences and present projects affirm the value of the portfolio as a vital collection of topics of interest and skills attained.

LESSON 11: Creating a Language for Portfolios

New language signals new thinking that in turn generates new language. There are words and phrases that have emerged in our language over the years that we commonly associate with the portfolio experience. We use these words and phrases with each other, with children, and with parents so as to define portfolios and to communicate what portfolios can do.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT STUDENT PORTFOLIOS

A final chapter sums up and weaves together the lessons we have learned from the portfolio process. The most significant benefits of portfolios for children, for teachers, and for parents are highlighted.

This Book Is a Portfolio

This book is not just about the portfolio concept—it is a portfolio in itself. It tells the story of my learning about portfolios and, hopefully it is a story that will help you learn about portfolios as well.

I confront a file drawer in disarray.

As I thumb through folders of old memos and early writings I realize these records comprise my portfolio. It is a collection that chronicles my developing understanding about a single topic—the making of student portfolios. I reread this accumulation of documents in the same way, I now know, that children review their portfolios. I don't recognize some pieces as mine because I don't remember thinking that thought or using those words. But here they are with my name on them—reminding me of important episodes in my learning.

My portfolio is also a collective portfolio. As principal of an elementary school, I have been inspired and influenced by the innovative ideas of an outstanding group of teachers and countless conversations with children. The open exchange that fosters the

growth of ideas is present here. Each of us would have different ways of organizing those ideas, which is the very nature of a portfolio.

As I sort this jumbled yet coherent collection, I am struck by the many different organizational possibilities. Slowly and carefully I intuit a scaffolding that will allow me to make meaning out of this accumulation. Yes, that's the underlying purpose—to make meaningful connections. As I browse through these materials, I come across articles I have written in which I was able to make important connections among the many fragments of my observations, conversations, intuitions, and experiences. It satisfies me to retrace what I now understand was a purposeful development of my thinking.

Some of the ostensibly unrelated contents of my portfolio—articles about multiple intelligences theory, a videotape of a child playing golf, classroom schedules, drafts of parent reporting forms, a taxi receipt from a Washington, D.C., conference, and scribbled vignettes of daily life at Crow Island School all make sense to me now as meaningful items in the evolution of my understanding. I realize that only I can make the associations that connect the items that influenced my learning. That's an important idea. It has taken me all these years to really comprehend that it's not the content of the portfolio that matters—it's the meaning associated with the content. And the meaning can only be attributed by the portfolio creator. That's a very different notion of how to assess a child's work than the one I grew up with, that is, that my achievements were evaluated by teachers or judged by scores I received on standardized tests.

Portfolios encourage a unique response to the question "What have I learned?" because the response is personal and self-generated. Collecting and reflecting on self-selected evidence of learning allows the portfolio maker to assume genuine responsibility for both assessing learning and expressing that assessment to others who have a stake in it—teachers, parents, and colearners. An external and less personal, but also valid, evaluation of learning is gleaned through a variety of testing instruments. These capture a child's demonstration of specified learning objectives as stated by the school. They show