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# TEACHERS NETWORKING

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## Hearing Students' Voices: The Role of Reflection in Learning

by Kathy G. Short and Gloria Kauffman

*Before we did not look back on our learning. This year we look back on our learning and learn more. Before I got frustrated when I got something wrong. This year I don't because it is the learning that counts.*

*Julie, Grade 3*

It seems appropriate that an article on student reflection and self-evaluation should begin with a student's voice. We know of no better way to demonstrate how powerful children's voices become when they are given the opportunity to reflect on their learning. Of course, students do not just walk into school able to reflect and talk about their learning. As teachers, we have spent many years exploring how to build powerful learning environments with our students that encourage both action and reflection. Here, we share how we have worked to make reflection and self-evaluation an ongoing part of daily classroom life and we describe a more formal strategy, self-evaluation portfolios, which allows students to periodically step back even further in self-evaluating their learning.

### The Need for Reflection

Our journey in understanding the role of reflection began eight years ago, when we co-taught and co-researched in a first grade class (Short, 1986). Since that time, we have taught in different places — an elementary school and a university —

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Kathy G. Short



Gloria Kauffman

but have continued to think together about curriculum and evaluation. When we first began working together, we struggled with moving beyond a

traditional curriculum structure based in textbooks and teacher imposition. While

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## The Power of Talk

by Mary Giard

*Welcome to our room! Some of the things we do are: reading, writing, publishing, having mini lessons, doing research, talking, drawing and math. We value lots of things about our room. Mrs. Giard, our books, making choices, materials, sharing ideas, solving problems, and learning from each other.*

During a morning meeting in January of this school year, one of the girls in my class shared a frustration she had. "We have so many visitors coming to our room that it is hard to explain what we're like to them when they are here for such

a short time. They don't understand our room because they are not here long enough to know us. I wondered if some kids wanted to get together to make a handout for visitors so they would begin to know what we do and what we value." About half the class expressed the same concern and wanted to be part of the planning group. They drafted their plan and brought it back to the class. Everyone decided that the group had clearly represented the class as a whole. Sarah, who

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both of us used literature, writing, and thematic units in the classroom, they were supplementary to the core of the curriculum, which was based on the school's scope and sequence charts. We wanted to establish a curriculum based on children and our understandings about learning. We wondered, however, whether it was possible to create a curriculum in which students actively engaged in meaningful learning experiences as an ongoing feature of the classroom, rather than an occasional experience.

We did not want the curriculum to become just a set of "neat" activities, and so we searched for a framework within which we could create curriculum with children. The *Authoring Cycle* (Jerome Harste, Kathy Short, & Carolyn Burke, 1988) became that framework for us. More importantly, we realized that in order to determine what would happen next in the classroom, we could no longer refer to the scope and sequence charts. Out of desperation, we began closely observing children as they engaged in classroom activities and spent hours talking together about their responses and the implications for what should happen next.

With the students as our curricular informants, we moved from "doing" curriculum to reflecting on that "doing." Earlier in our teaching careers, we would have argued that we were too busy *teaching* to *think*, but now we realized we needed to *think* in order to *teach*. Through our observations and reflections on their learning, we were able to create an environment characterized by choice and active engagements in meaningful learning.

We felt, however, that something was still missing. As we listened to children talk about their rough drafts in Authors Circles and explore interpretations in Literature Circles, we realized that we had underestimated their ability to reflect on their own learning. We had assumed that reflection was what we

did as teachers, to evaluate and plan, but not what children did. By not encouraging and trusting children's reflections on their learning, however, we kept them dependent on us to determine what was to be valued.

If we truly wanted curriculum to be a collaborative process in which children took control of their own learning, then we needed more than choice and active engagements. Children were making decisions about their actions, but were excluded from reflective decision-making about the meanings of those actions. For their voices to become part of the curriculum, we needed to encourage reflection as well as action.

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### **... we try to make reflection a natural, daily part of the curriculum.**

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In order for learning to occur, learners need to pose their own questions. When these questions arise, a cycle of inquiry is put into motion in which learners form ideas or hypotheses and then act on those ideas to observe what happens. John Dewey argues, however, that this action is not enough. The learner needs time to reflect and look back over what has occurred, to organize ideas for future use. Action provides the content for reflection, but reflection is the driving force behind action. Children need many extensive engagements with reading, writing, talking, listening, drawing, and experimenting so they have something on which to reflect. This action needs to be balanced with reflection so they can pull together important meanings from their experiences, which will, in turn, lead them to new questions and engagements.

When students are involved in making choices about their learning, but not in

reflecting on that learning, they often make choices which are not productive. Dewey points out that the ability to reflect on learning allows self-control to develop. Instead of acting on impulse or having others determine what will be learned, learners reflect on the possible consequences of their actions. Self-control combines choice with reflection and so brings freedom to learners because they can intellectually formulate their purposes and plans of action.

### **Establishing a Reflective Learning Environment**

Reflection can support students in connecting with what they already know, considering alternative perspectives, solving problems, and summarizing and organizing their experiences for future use. We searched for ways to invite students to reflect on their learning. We did not want to turn reflection into mechanical, orderly responses to teacher-posed prompts. Students do need support and strategies for reflection, but not a workbook approach in which they must fill out endless forms and checklists. We also did not want to force learners to overfocus on reflection at the expense of actively engaging in learning. Rather than reflecting on every learning experience, learners choose those that are most significant to them.

Instead of formal self-evaluation techniques, we try to make reflection a natural, daily part of the curriculum. We have found that strategies such as brainstorming, webbing, conferencing, author's circles, literature circles, inquiry groups, class discussions, and various types of journals and learning logs encourage reflection on learning.

We frequently pull learners together for short oral reflections on how particular experiences have affected their learning.

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These discussions occur when students try out a new curricular strategy, encounter problems, or engage in a particularly significant experience. At the beginning of the year, these sharing times occur frequently throughout the day so that students reflect on and understand the purposes behind classroom procedures and activities. As teachers, we participate in these discussions to provide demonstrations of our reflective thinking.

When students engage in an experience such as partner reading for the first time, we ask them, "In what ways did you and your partner decide to read? Talk about what you were doing as a reader. What did you notice about reading with someone else?" When literature circles begin to meet, the class comes together for short 5-10 minute reflections at the end of the literature time. We begin by asking, "What did you talk about today in your groups?" so that the focus is on meaning. We then discuss, "How did your group members help keep the conversation going? Are there problems we need to solve?" Later in the year, these reflection times are held only when needed by group members.

Reflection is also an important part of math, as Jason, a third grader, explained, "I have grown as a mathematician by coming at the problem from behind and discussing what is needed, why it's needed and how it's used."

When particularly significant experiences occur, a short reflection on why the experience was powerful can help both teachers and students understand the implications of that experience. When we first moved toward using student-generated inquiry cycles rather than teacher-directed units with students, we were struck by how eagerly and deeply students engaged in the inquiry. At the end of the inquiry cycle, we asked the students, "Why were your inquiries on dinosaurs more exciting for you than the unit we did on the ocean?"

The students' reflections helped them

pull together the content and process of their learning. The insights we gained helped us respect them as learners and work with them in planning future inquiry cycles.

After students have engaged in a particular cycle of experiences and presented their learning to others, reflection can play a major role in allowing them to stand back from those experiences. Through reflection, they can summarize what they have learned, integrate that learning with previous experiences, and establish questions and goals for future learning. After we published a family story newspaper to conclude a month-long focus on families and research, we came together as a class to talk about, "What did you learn about families? What did you learn about note-taking and other research strategies? Where do we want to go next as a class?"

Oral reflections allow students to hear each other's and the teacher's reasoning and can be done quickly and informally, as an ongoing part of classroom activities. Written reflections should also be included because they encourage individual students to think deeply and support students who feel uncomfortable sharing orally. Written reflections, however, take time and are more formal. When overdone, students react negatively and see the reflections as assignments which take too much time from active engagements. Some teachers use logs to "check up" on students to make sure they have read their literature circle books or to keep students under control. When this occurs, students write to fulfill the teacher's assignment, rather than to explore their own thinking.

We found that it was important for written reflections to be given a definite slot in the classroom schedule. Gloria has students start each day by writing in reflection journals so they begin to make a connection between learning experiences at school and at home. Some teachers have students write in learning logs at the end of each day to reflect over that day's experiences. Kathy and her first graders ended each day by

discussing what they had learned and dictating a short paragraph for a weekly parent newsletter. Other teachers have students reflect at the end of a week or biweekly, rather than on a daily basis. Teachers make decisions on the frequency of written reflection based on the amount of time available or to allow for more time between reflections.

### Including Children's Voices in the Formal Evaluation System

As reflection became a natural part of our classroom life, we valued the ways in which it helped us to know students, as well as allowing students to take control of their own learning. When we examined the formal evaluation system, however, we realized that the students' voices were still not being heard. Their oral and written reflections informed our evaluation but were not heard by parents or other educators.

Gloria experimented with children writing a letter of self-evaluation to send home with report cards. While the letters were effective in letting parents hear their children's voices, children had difficulty writing broadly about their processes and goals as learners. We began to search for some other way to support students in more formal reflections on their progress as learners.

As we listened to educators talk about portfolios, we wondered whether these portfolios could support self-evaluation within the formal evaluation process. Most educators begin the portfolio process by suggesting that teachers list the desired learning outcomes and then work with students to create portfolios to provide evidence of those outcomes. Because we wanted the portfolios to reflect what students saw as their learning outcomes rather than ours, we decided to explore a different kind of portfolio that would highlight the children's perspective. The district report card and state standardized tests reported on whether students were meeting society's expectations for learning. We were collecting anecdotal records,

checklists, learning logs, and examples of children's work as evidence of student learning based on what we valued in learning. We wanted others to know what children thought about their learning and let children know that their perspective was valued by others. The curriculum could then grow from all of these perspectives, rather than being dominated by one voice.

The portfolios we develop give students the chance to step back and look at themselves as readers and writers over time. They are collections of work that reflect children as readers and writers — their efforts, improvements, processes, strengths, and needs. Gradually these portfolios have expanded to include the rest of the curriculum. While children reflect continuously through oral sharing and learning logs, we see the portfolio as a chance to step back and look more broadly and deeply at their learning. If reflection were not an ongoing part of the curriculum, however, the portfolio process would be difficult and unproductive.

Three times a year (October, February, and May), students spend a week to ten days gathering, sharing, and reflecting on their learning during their regular reading/writing time. They start the process by focusing on their writing across the curriculum because they have more concrete evidence of their growth as writers. They gather together all their work as writers — their journals, logs, notes, messages, rough drafts, publications, etc. They spend time alone with their piles of papers, reviewing their work and getting a feeling for who they are currently as writers.

The class then meets to brainstorm what they have discovered about themselves as writers. This brainstormed list allows them to hear each other's ideas and to think about why they might want to select particular pieces. After brainstorming, the children choose pieces from their piles that reflect who they are as writers. They can choose any piece of writing but are asked to include several

rough drafts from their writing work time.

Once they have made their choices, they share these with a partner, explaining how these choices reflect who they are as writers. From this sharing, they make decisions about which pieces to select for their portfolios and write a reflection for each item which explains why they selected it and what it shows about them as writers. They write these reflections

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### **Student self-evaluation portfolios do not preclude other kinds of portfolios**

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on half sheets of paper and staple them to the pieces of writing.

When all of the pieces are chosen and tagged, the children share them with a partner and give a broad description of who they are as writers. The class then comes back together to share their descriptions of themselves and to brainstorm possible goals. After this class discussion, students write a one-page reflection describing themselves as writers and establishing their goals. Because reflection has been an ongoing part of the classroom, they are able to think deeply about their learning.

The children then shift their focus to reading. They begin by choosing and re-reading favorite books and then meeting with a partner to discuss what they were thinking while reading these books. Following this sharing, the class brainstorms on who they are as readers and students gather literature logs, reading lists, projects, webs, charts, and any other evidence of their reading. Because actual samples of significant reading experiences do not always exist, they often web favorite literature circles, write about favorite books, or illustrate part of a literature presentation. Then they repeat the same process of choosing examples,

sharing with others, selecting for their portfolios, writing and sharing reflections, discussing as a class, and writing a one-page reflection with goals.

Once the children have finished, they sit alone and read through the entire portfolio. Then they meet in small groups to celebrate with each other. Sometimes students conference with the teacher or share the portfolio in a joint child/parent/teacher conference. After an initial joint conference, children may take the portfolio home to share with parents. The one-page reflections are included in the report card to encourage parents to focus on their child's perspective, not just the school perspective.

At the end of the year, the children write letters to their parents and their next year's teacher telling who they are as learners and how they have changed and grown over the year. This letter becomes part of the child's cumulative folder, which stays in the school. The portfolio itself goes home with the child, giving the child ownership over what happens to the portfolio and who has access to it. Because a portfolio reflects a child's voice, we do not feel comfortable taking it from them and passing it on to the next year's teacher. Children do willingly accept invitations from teachers to bring their portfolios back to school to share.

Some educators have criticized student self-evaluation portfolios because children's choices do not always reflect the school or teacher objectives. When teachers determine what goes into the portfolio, students' perspectives are again devalued. Teachers may want to keep their own portfolios with their records, checklists, and selected pieces of children's work. These teacher portfolios should be kept alongside the child's portfolio in the classroom so that teachers and students have access to both, rather than combining the material into one

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portfolio. If the school wants a portfolio passed on to the next teacher, that portfolio can be a combination of teacher and student choice. Student self-evaluation portfolios do not preclude other kinds of portfolios, but their function for the individual learner is often lost when one portfolio has to serve all audiences.

### Reflection and Learning

Through reflection and self-evaluation, students learn to think about their learning. They reflect on what they are learning (content), how they are learning (process), why they are learning (purpose) and where they want to go next in their learning (goals). When they are able to evaluate their own and others' assumptions about the world, they are able to act on those assumptions and make their own meaning about the world. If we expect students to integrate their learning experiences into a focused whole, we need to provide time and opportunities for reflection upon those experiences.

We want to end, as we began, with a student's voice. Mandell wrote this self-evaluation letter to her parents and teacher at the end of the year. As she reflects, she brings alive her past experiences in ways that bring new meanings to the present and new potentials for the future.

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I have grown by the things we do in here. Before I came here, I did work sheets and work books. I was learning again something I already know. When I came here I felt like a whole new person, meaning when I walked in this room it was so different once I started to get to work I could tell that this was a totally different room. For here we have no work books, at all. For we do fun things and I learn more.

As an author my stories are improving more than anything ever will. But sometimes and a while I get of track.

As a communicator I think everyone has improved for us trust everyone and none of us are shy anymore.

In literature circles we get to choose a book, read it and then discuss what the meaning communicates and how it connects with other books. As we go about doing a good job or discussing this book.

As a reader I think I do a good job but I do read fast and sometimes I skip some of the most important words or information I read the most.

When doing math and in math we are doing multiplication to me it is good because we talk about what we need multiplication for.

As a scientist I think I do a magnificent job. We do a lot of experiments. I really found a lot of neat things from a book. When we took a walk I felt like a whole new person meaning I felt like a real scientist. And I was exploring a whole new world.

I am a new unique third grader. I think of myself as looking on a spider web. I do all activities all connected together.

Mandell