The portfolio as an authentic assessment tool for learning: Is it serving its purpose?

Mr Milton L van Wyk & Prof Arend E Carl

Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch

aec2@sun.ac.za

Abstract

This article focuses on the utilisation of the learner portfolio in the learning area Social Sciences as an alternative, authentic assessment tool to demonstrate the performance, progress and growth of learners in relation to the expected learning outcomes. The purpose of the portfolio, namely to promote learning, is not disputed, but the question is whether this assessment tool is really being used to its best advantage, and if not, why not. An attempt is made in this article to shed light on the apparent under-utilisation of learner portfolios. Although the use of portfolios is widely commended, the purpose of this assessment tool is not being realised in practice. This begs the question: why use a portfolio if it is not optimally utilised?

Keywords: Portfolio; Authentic assessment; Curriculum; Social Sciences; Outcomes Based Education (OBE); Western Cape.

Introduction

Since 1994 the South African society has been characterised by significant changes. Le Grange and Reddy (1999:1) rightly claim that the changes have also affected the field of education and training. According to Reddy (2004:32) the political and social changes in South Africa have had a great impact on education, not only with regard to changes in curriculum, but also in terms of the reformation of assessment as a practice. In 1998, with the implementation of the new curriculum (known as Curriculum 2005), and later with the Revised National Curriculum Statement in 2004 that follows an outcomes-based approach, new demands were made on teachers. These demands, which are very closely linked to the successful implementation of the new, revised curriculum, include an increased involvement of teachers with regard to assessment practices.

Various authors, such as Gronlund (1998:2) and Reddy (2004:37), were of the opinion that transformation was necessary in assessment practice. That required a paradigm shift from the 'traditional' assessment to more alternative approaches to the assessment of learning. According to Gronlund (1998:2) a strong reaction had arisen to the exceptionally high emphasis on traditional pen and paper tests and examinations of the past.

Traditional assessment, which is linked to summative assessment ('assessment of learning'), is inadequate for the taking of decisions, particularly those that apply to learner progress and growth. Valeri-Gold, Olson and Deming (1992:298 – 299) maintain that this is why teachers should develop a broader understanding of the concept – an understanding that learner growth cannot be measured by written tests only. Since tests focus on memory, information and behaviour (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997:188), they do not reflect learners' actual knowledge and abilities (Black, 1993:28). This is why critics were appealing for the practice of assessment to be supplemented by other forms of assessment in order to gain a more holistic picture of the individual learner's learning. In accordance with this view, Reddy (2004:37) pointed out that policy documents indicate that there should be a move away from traditional assessment practices towards a more authentic approach to assessment.

Authentic assessment is closely linked to the realities of the learner's field of experience. Gronlund (1998:2) explains that it has to do with tasks from daily life, such as solving problems that exist in the world. In authentic assessment, it is very closely linked to formative assessment ('assessment for learning') and the learner is seen as an active partner in the assessment process. Through learners' involvement with the assessment process in which opportunities are given for self- and peer group assessment, they are encouraged to reflect in order to take the responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, because authentic assessment is a more qualitative and valid alternative to traditional pen and paper testing, it provides a more comprehensive picture of the learner's performance, growth and progress. Journals, practical work, exhibitions, discussions, interviews and portfolios are some of the tools that could possibly be utilised in authentic assessment. A portfolio could therefore be only one of the many possible means used to gather data or evidence for authentic assessment.

In using portfolios as one of the alternative ways to assess a learner's achievements, progress and growth and thus to promote learning the question

arises: does it truly comply with this ideal or has it simply become a technistic process whereby information is merely gathered, kept in a file and then supposedly demonstrates the learning that has taken place?

This article focuses on an enquiry into this aspect, specifically with regard to the learning area Social Sciences (the Intermediary Phase). Disturbing findings were made on the present role of portfolios in the promotion of learning. The position of the portfolio within the assessment process is briefly explained in the next section.

Literature review

Assessment as a concept in outcomes-based education (OBE)

Much has already been written about assessment and for the purpose of this article only a few relevant aspects are briefly mentioned as part of the contextualisation. These aspects are: the place of continuous assessment in teaching and learning, the possible role players, and a few forms of assessment. Assessment will always be included in certain policy aspects since an education department would want to ensure that the aims of the policy are attained in this way. The literature review is therefore intended to highlight the context in which the portfolio features as an assessment tool.

Assessment – and more specifically continuous assessment (CASS) – is an important assessment strategy in outcomes-based education. CASS is a process through which valid and reliable information on a learner's performance, measured against clearly defined criteria, is gathered on a continuous basis in different contexts by using various methods, tools and techniques (Western Cape Education Department, 2003:7). Since continuous assessment is a core aspect of teaching and learning, the point of departure is that assessment must be for learning; in other words the assessment process must contribute to the advancement of learning. Therefore a clear connection exists between teaching and learning and assessment. In order to integrate these two aspects the planning for assessment needs to coincide with that of teaching (Gronlund, 1998:4). Locatelli (1998:87-88) supports this view by arguing that assessment can only be understood or developed together with supporting curriculum and teaching. In the same vein Van der Horst and McDonald (1997:167) contend that assessment is not something teachers should think of when they reach the end of a unit or a lesson; it must form an integral part of all planning and preparation – that is, of the teaching and learning activities.

Assessment can be carried out at different stages of the learning process and in different forms, such as initial assessment, summative assessment, formative assessment, diagnostic assessment, norm-directed assessment and criterion-directed assessment. Although assessment can be used for different purposes such as grading, diagnosis, teaching and certification, the ultimate purpose of assessment is to determine the quality of the learning that has taken place by establishing to what extent the learning outcomes have been achieved.

There are various closely related key role players and factors that determine the success of assessment. Siebörger (1998:11) claims that assessment has very little value if the learner who is being assessed has no trust in the assessor (whether it is the teacher, the learner him- or herself or the peer group) and the assessment methods (whether formal or informal). For this reason all assessment must conform to the criteria of fairness, validity and reliability (Western Cape Education Department, 2003:5). Kotze (2004:54) contends that teachers should not be the only assessment agents in the classroom, but that the learners themselves and their peer groups should be included. These latter forms of assessment are known as self-assessment and peer assessment respectively.

It is within this context that portfolios are applied as assessment tools and where it is decided whether this method is successful or not.

The learner portfolio as an authentic assessment tool

Various definitions of the learner portfolio are to be found in the relevant literature (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, 1991:60; Siebörger, 1998:48; Du Toit & Vandeyar, 2004:121). According to Paulson et al. (1991:60) a learner portfolio is a purposeful, structured collection of the learner's work that displays learners' attempts at learning, their progress and their performance in one or more areas. The collection must include the following, among other things: involvement of the learner in the selection of content, the criteria for selection, the criteria for value judgement, and evidence of learner reflection.

Some definitions of portfolio assessment are relatively simple, while others are more complex. Valeri-Gold et al. (1992:298) define portfolio assessment as formative assessment in which learners become "active learners and questioning thinkers". Other authors such as Harlin and Phelps (1992:203, in Gillespie, Ford, Gillespie & Leavell, 1996:482) describe portfolio assessment as a multidimensional system that provides teachers with a complete view of a

learner's abilities and literacy development. According to Herman and Zuniga (2003:123-139) portfolio assessment can be regarded as the examining of learner-selected examples of work that are related to the outcomes that are assessed, and that address the learners' progress towards attaining academic goals, and their learning efficacy.

Ideal learner portfolios therefore contain evidence of learners' growth and the learning that has occurred. The process of keeping a portfolio ought to be a continuing one in which evidence is provided of how the learner has progressed with regard to outcomes. Portfolios can be used for various purposes. They serve as a basis for discussion between teacher and learner, as well as between teacher and parent, and parent and parent. Portfolios can also be used, among other things, to demonstrate to parents what is being done in the school, for self-reflection, evaluation and grading, as a culminating activity that consolidates all aspects of the learning area, for promotion to the next grade, and to support the next grade's teacher when it comes to planning for individual learners' needs.

It is clear that portfolio assessment, as a form of authentic assessment, holds many more benefits for both learners and teachers than the traditional testing of learners' learning. The most important advantage of portfolio assessment is that it allows learners to participate actively with their teachers in the evaluation process. This gives them the opportunity to reflect on their progress and growth in order to accept co-responsibility for their learning. As independent and self-reliant learners they can therefore develop a stronger self-concept and a more positive attitude to learning. The information that is generated by portfolios can be useful to the teacher in many respects. For example, the data from the portfolios may provide a teacher with a more meaningful and holistic picture of a learner's growth – something that could in turn provide a basis for future decision making.

The way in which portfolios are managed influences the measure of success that is achieved in the implementation process. Learners ought to play a meaningful role in determining the content of the portfolio, but teachers and members of the learners' peer group can also be allowed to participate in deliberations on relevant matters. By allowing learners to be actively involved in choosing examples of the work they want to keep in their portfolios (Gronlund, 1998:159) – bearing in mind specific, relevant guidelines – they are effectively motivated to take another look at their efforts. Since reflections (written commentaries that accompany the examples of the work)

are a core component of effective portfolio assessment, the learner portfolio should contain evidence of learners' self-assessment. Du Toit and Vandeyar (2004:125) point out that the reflective commentary focuses on "what was gained in the process; what steps were accomplished; what could be changed in the future; and what the next steps in the process will be". Gillespie et al. (1996:48) argue that portfolio assessment cannot exist without the element of learner self-reflection. If it is lacking, the portfolio is no more than a notebook filled with meaningless pages.

What should be included in a portfolio? According to Le Grange and Reddy (1999:23) a learner may have a portfolio for each individual learning area, or the learner may build up a combined portfolio for different learning areas. Portfolios that contain a purposeful collection of examples of learners' work can take on different forms. This evidence of learners' assessment tasks can be kept in a file, a binder, an envelope or some or other container. What is important is that the content of the portfolio should be presented logically and systematically (Du Toit & Vandeyar, 2004:129). The results of the learners' work that has been compiled in the portfolio over time may, for example, include the following: written assignments and pen and paper tests, sketches, photographs, graphs and drawings. It may also contain information on assessed tasks that cannot be stored in the portfolio, such as models, artworks, practical work and oral presentations. Besides sufficient and varied examples of assignments, the learner portfolio can include a cover page, a contents list and a declaration by the learner. Clearly, a portfolio could be made up of various kinds of evidence, but the mere presence of such material does not necessarily imply that learning has taken place.

The value of evaluating a portfolio must be strongly emphasised, since it is during this process that the nature and scope of the learning that has taken place can be determined. In order to assess the learner portfolio as a complete document, predetermined criteria that are summed up in a checklist, matrix or rubric can be used. The defined criteria are based on the kind of evidence that is included in the portfolio, the degree to which or the level at which the demonstrated performance, progress and growth have taken place, and the expected learning outcomes (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997:197). The National Protocol on Assessment for Schools in the General and Further Education and Training Band prescribes codes and percentages that are awarded for each performance level (Department of Education, 2005:9). Feedback to learners is an important component in the assessment of the learner portfolio.

The feedback entails more than merely a mark, code or percentage – the assessor(s) (teacher or learners) should give proper, constructive feedback in the form of written commentary on the final outcome of the content of the learner portfolio. The feedback should highlight the strengths or weaknesses of each learner's performance, progress and growth so that it may reinforce the learning experience (Kemp & Toperoff, 1998:8).

In the light of the foregoing it is clear that as far as the literature is concerned, there are certain positive or optimistic views of what a portfolio is or ought to be. Essentially, it is supposed to act as an authentic assessment tool, not only to assess but also to promote learning: the portfolio itself must promote learning. The question is however whether this does indeed happen. An enquiry was conducted to determine the extent to which these optimistic views of the role and value of portfolios in the South African context are in fact realised. In the following section the process of portfolio assessment is explained against the background of an enquiry into the previously mentioned aspects.

Research problem

In some other countries, particularly the United States of America, portfolio assessment became an educational buzzword in the 1990s (Valeri-Gold et al., 1992:298). Relevant research, such as the Hudson Valley Portfolio Assessment Project (Martin-Kniep, 1998) and the Portfolio Project (Underwood, 1999), showed that the learner portfolio can be used for more than just providing evidence of learners' learning: it can also present a holistic picture of how they are performing. Research results have shown that the learner portfolio can be utilised as an alternative assessment tool to inform individuals of their real level of competence in one or more learning areas in the course of a particular period.

Although various authors such as Martin-Kniep (1998), Siebörger (1998:98), Le Grange and Reddy (1999:23) and Du Toit and Vandeyar (2004:122-141) mention that a learner portfolio is a valuable assessment tool, relatively little research has been done on this subject in South Africa. The following questions arise: To what extent does the learner portfolio actually demonstrate the performance, progress and growth of the learner, in relation to the learning outcomes? Is the portfolio truly an assessment tool that assesses learning or is it merely a collection of tasks and assignments that does not really promote learning?

It is against this background that the following research question directed an enquiry that was undertaken in the Social Sciences in 2006 within a certain context:

> To what extent is the learner portfolio applied in Social Sciences as an assessment tool to demonstrate the performance, progress and growth of the learner in relation to the expected learning outcomes?

Aim of the enquiry

Arising from the central research question, the research project was launched in a few schools in the Western Cape with the aim of identifying the perceptions of teachers of Social Sciences (Intermediate Phase of the General Education and Training Band) with regard to the role of portfolios. A further aim was to determine the role of portfolios in promoting learning and to establish how and whether the use of portfolios contributes to learning outcomes being reached.

Research methodology

In an attempt to answer the research question a qualitative research study was undertaken within the interpretative research paradigm. This particular research paradigm was chosen because the research was aimed at providing an in-depth description of the perceptions of teachers who are involved in teaching in the learning area Social Sciences in the Intermediary Phase, as well as of their understanding of the use of portfolios as an assessment tool.

According to Mertens (1998:159) qualitative research entails an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the phenomenon that is being investigated. In Babbie and Mouton's (2001:178) view it means that the qualitative researcher prefers to enquire into human actions as they occur in natural environments. Therefore, qualitative research focuses on examining the phenomenon in the real world.

In this research project qualitative data were obtained through interviews with teachers in the Intermediate Phase, and by analysing learner portfolios. Qualitative data were supplemented by data gathered by means of questionnaires. The sample is an important mechanism by which to increase the reliability of the research. Both De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2005:203-208) and Denscombe (2003:12-13) refer to different ways of

selecting a sample as well as the cases for that particular sample. In the case of probability sampling the researcher would have an awareness or understanding that the selected cases could possibly be representative of people or events from the whole population. Sometimes researchers might find it difficult or undesirable to make use of probability sampling as a technique; for instance it might not be feasible to include a large number of examples or there might not be sufficient information on the population. In such circumstances it may be necessary to make use of non-probability sampling because the circumstances dictate such an approach (Denscombe 2003:15). For the purpose of this enquiry it was decided to make use of non-probability sampling.

Participants were therefore purposefully selected (purposive sampling) and not instinctively, while convenience was also a criterion in the selection of participants (convenience sampling). In the case of non-probability sampling, there is no certainty that the selected cases will in fact be representative.

For the purpose of the research project, individual, semi-structured interviews were held with the identified teachers. The interviewer made use of an interview guide consisting of two sections, namely Section A: Knowledge of assessment (10 questions) and Section B: Knowledge of the learner portfolio (11 questions).

Based on the essential characteristics of a learner portfolio as set out in Section A: Structure of the portfolio (which consisted of the first five questions) and Section B: Content of the learner portfolio (which consisted of nine questions), learner portfolios in this research were analysed and interpreted.

The questionnaire, which comprised a combination of closed and open-ended questions as posed to the respondents, was divided into the following categories: Section A: Introduction (a brief overview of the aim of the enquiry); Section B: Demographic aspects (7 questions); Section C: Knowledge of assessment and the learner portfolio (14 questions).

As mentioned above, the researcher chose to make use of a purposive sampling strategy in selecting the participants. A few typical cases (Durrheim 1999:37) that had sufficient information and were also representative of the population about which the researcher wanted to draw conclusions were selected. In order to ensure internal consistency and coherent logic in the research strategy, the researcher selected four schools in the Western Cape province of South Africa to participate in the research project.

Results and discussion

For the purpose of this article only the results of Section B (Questions 13-21) of the interviews, the results of Section C (Questions 11-21) of the questionnaire, and the results of Section B (Questions 6-14) of the portfolio analysis are discussed.

Biographical information of the respondents

Approximately 70% of the respondents were above the age of 35 years. With regard to experience as school-based teachers the teaching experience of the groups varied between 50% with 21-30 years, 20% with 11-20 years, and 30% with 1-10 years. These are very important facts because they show that the respondents were relatively experienced teachers who were capable of giving informed opinions. The data show that the majority of the respondents were female (70%) and Afrikaans-speaking (80%) and that they held a position at Post level 1 (70%). Of the respondents, who were all involved in teaching in the learning area Social Sciences, approximately 60% had completed a formal four-year qualification.

Perceptions and points of view with regard to knowledge of the learner

What is a learner portfolio?

To the question, "What do you understand a learner portfolio to be?" not one of the respondents could provide an appropriate description as is found in the literature. In the literature (see par. 2.2.1) a learner portfolio is described as a purposeful, structured collection of the learner's work that demonstrates the learner's attempts, progress and performance in one or more areas. The examples quoted below show that the responses were divergent:

> ... all the tasks done by the learner ...;
>
> ... all the work they did ...;
>
> ... represents the child's ability ...;
>
> ... assignments that have been assessed ...;
>
> ... results ...;
>
> ... where the learner kept her or his work ...; and
>
> ... our lessons must reflect in the child's work ... .

It appears that the respondents had a superficial knowledge of the nature of a learner portfolio. In the analysis of all the target schools' learner portfolios the respondents' superficial knowledge of a learner portfolio was confirmed. It is apparent that all the target schools' learner portfolios were simply proof of the learners' work and that the contents of the learner portfolios were not logically and systematically presented to provide evidence of the learners' development. It is cause for concern that teachers at the target schools seemingly did not manage the learner portfolios in such a manner that it was a structured collection of the learners' work showing their real learning, growth and development. In this enquiry it appeared as if the portfolio was not being used to its best advantage.

Does the portfolio contain a variety of examples of tasks?

Regarding the question whether the learner portfolio contains a variety of examples of assignments/tasks, it appeared as if not one of the target schools' portfolios contained an adequate variety of examples of assignments. According to the literature (as explained earlier), products of the learners' work over a period of time, as contained in the portfolio, could include the following: written assignments and pen and paper tests, sketches, photos, graphs and drawings. It may also contain information on assessed tasks that cannot be kept in the portfolio, such as models, artworks, practical work and oral presentations. This enquiry revealed that there was not sufficient variety.

What is the purpose of a learner portfolio?

The respondents appeared to find difficulty in answering the question, "In your opinion, what should the purpose be of the learner portfolio?" As indicated earlier, the literature indicates that portfolios can be used for different purposes, among others as a basis for discussion, for self-reflection by the learners, for assessment and grading, to demonstrate to parents what is being done in the school, for promotion to the next grade, or to assist the teacher in planning for individual learners' needs. The following examples of the respondents' divergent responses indicate their uncertainty about the true purpose of the learner portfolio:

> ... can show progression ...;

> ... whether the learner needs more time in the grade ...;

... to identify shortcomings ...;

... to see how the child progresses ...;

... to help the learner with problems ...;

... multifunctional team inspection ...;

... to check the progress of the learner ...; and

... to give evidence about the work done by the learner ... .

Who determines the selection of the content?

The responses to the question, "Who determines the selection of the content of the learner portfolio?" also varied:

... the educator ...;

... the teachers and the learners together ...;

... class teacher and learner ...;

... the teacher and the learner ...;

... the learner with guidance from the teacher ...;

... the learner and the educator ...; and

... the learner him/herself ... .

Only the last response appears to be in accordance with the trends mentioned in the literature, and it indicates that the other respondents have limited knowledge of who ought to determine the selection of the content of the learner portfolio. According to the literature learners ought to play a significant role in determining the content of the portfolio, but teachers and members of the learners' peer group may also be allowed to provide inputs. Learners ought to have the opportunity to explain in writing why certain assignments are placed in the portfolio. None of the learner portfolios of the target schools included evidence of learner involvement in the selection of the content, or demonstrated that the learners have a share in determining the content of the portfolio. It is clear that the learners of the target schools were not actively involved in the selection of content of the learner portfolio.

Who determines the criteria for the selection of the content?

The respondents' answers to the question, "Who determines the criteria for the selection of the content of the learner portfolio?" show that there was not really any certainty about who determines the criteria for the selection of the content of the learner portfolio, especially if it is compared to the description found in the literature. It is assumed that learners will participate in the identification of criteria, but in this enquiry it was found to be lacking. The literature mentions that the learners ought to assist in drawing up the guidelines for what should be kept in the portfolio. The following responses of some of the respondents in this enquiry suggest that their knowledge regarding the criteria for the selection of what should be kept in the learner portfolio was inadequate and that learner participation was not considered.

> ... the teacher ...;
>
> ... the teacher ...;
>
> ... the educator and Teacher Support Teams (TST) ...;
>
> ... head of the phase in co-operation with teachers ...; and
>
> ... the education department ... .

None of the respondents could give an acceptable response to the question on which resources or tools are used to assess the learner portfolio. The majority of the respondents demonstrated only a basic knowledge of the resources that are used to assess the learner portfolio, as is obvious from the following quotations:

> ... the criteria ...;
>
> ... the matrix ...;
>
> ... a checklist ...; and
>
> ... an assessment list ... .

One of the other respondents' inadequate knowledge is demonstrated by her view:

> ... I suppose basically only the teacher ... .

In the literature that was mentioned earlier, it is stated that predetermined criteria can be used in the assessment of the learner portfolio to measure the learning outcomes that have been encapsulated in a checklist, matrix or rubric.

Learner involvement

In the analysis of the portfolios not one of the target schools' learner portfolios could provide any evidence of learner involvement in assessing the evidence of the learners' work. (The researcher analysed the learner portfolios.) It was clear that this situation was not in accordance with what is stated in the literature, namely that learners ought to be part of the decision-making process in assessing the portfolios. According to the literature the assessment of individual examples of work should include both teacher assessment and learner assessment (self- and peer assessment). It was obvious that the learners were not involved in assessing the documentary evidence of their work.

Teacher feedback

The respondents seemingly had problems in answering the question, "To what extent is there evidence of teacher feedback in the learner portfolio?" None of the respondents could explain what teacher feedback entails, especially when compared to the assertion in the literature that teacher feedback ought to be more than a mark, code or percentage. Written and constructive teacher feedback should highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the learners' performance, progress and growth so that it can lead to a deepening of the learning experience. All the respondents appeared to be confused about what is meant by teacher feedback, as is shown by the following quotations:

> Each task has an assessment tool ...;
>
> ... an assessment tool included in the portfolio ...;
>
> ... graded enquiries, assignments and other assessment tools ...;
>
> ... the assessment criteria ... reports and graded tasks ...; and
>
> Results ... the learner's work that is in his/her portfolio must be in accordance with my file.

From the analysis of the learner portfolios it was apparent that none of the target schools' learner portfolios provided any evidence of teacher feedback as it is described in the literature. Comments such as "Good", "Excellent" and "Well done" in the learner portfolios of two of the target schools were the only form of teacher feedback. Therefore no real, descriptive or comprehensive feedback existed. The schools' learner portfolios clearly did not include adequate evidence of teacher feedback.

Learner reflection

In the case of the question, "To what extent does the learner portfolio contain evidence of learner self-reflection?" none of the respondents could provide an acceptable response regarding the extent to which the learner portfolio provides evidence of self-reflection. Responses such as "I don't know", "Report and tests", "None to minimal", and "Little" indicate that there was no real certainty about the nature of learner self-reflection. From the analysis of the learner portfolios it appeared that none of the learner portfolios of the participating schools contained any evidence of learner self-reflection. This indicated that the knowledge of what learner self-reflection entails was inadequate, especially when compared to what is mentioned in the literature. From the literature it is clear that written reflections are commentaries that accompany the examples of the learners' work, in which the learners explain what has changed in the course of time or what still needs to be done or achieved. The reflective commentary will give an indication of the quality of the content of the portfolio, and explain the learner's progress in achieving the learning outcomes. In view of the research question (see 3) it can be said that this issue is a cause for concern since it may be an indication that the learning outcomes were not being realised.

Portfolios and learner growth

All the respondents apparently encountered problems in answering the question on the extent to which the learner portfolio demonstrated the learners' performance, progress and growth over a period of time. The respondents' responses show that they were uncertain about the extent to which the learner portfolio demonstrated the learners' performance, progress and growth:

> ... my work is drawn up in such a way that it progresses from easier work to more difficult work ...;

> ... depending of course whether the teacher possibly worked according to it ...;

> ... because work from each learning area is placed in a file throughout the year ...;

> ... the learner's results throughout the term ...; and

> ... only the best items ... .

From the analysis of the learner portfolios it appeared that the learner portfolios of the target schools did not demonstrate the learners' performance, progress and growth. The learner portfolios presented only the final products of the learners' work. This conclusion is based on the fact that evidence with regard to content did not reflect the total learning process. This, together with the responses of the respondents, is not at all in accordance with what is prescribed in the literature. In the literature it is stated that the learner portfolio demonstrates the performance, progress and growth of the learner when the portfolio includes examples of both unsatisfactory and satisfactory work. This means that the portfolio would contain evidence of learners' struggles, failure, success and change. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this state of affairs indicates that this issue is cause for concern, since it is an indication that the learning outcomes were not being realised at the schools in question.

Portfolios and the achievement of outcomes

The respondents could not provide definite answers to the question, "To what extent do you utilise the learner portfolio as an assessment tool to determine whether or not the expected learning outcomes have been reached?" From the responses it appeared as if all the respondents found the idea of the learner portfolio as an assessment tool to be altogether foreign:

> ... to give a supplementary exercise and then to assess again to see if they fare better this time ...;

> With each assignment I write which learning outcomes are reached ...;

> Compile a list of the marks ...;

> There must be recorded work ...;

> In the teacher portfolio you must indicate which learning outcomes have been reached ...;

> Assignments are of such a nature that each one tests a specific learning outcome ...; and

> Compare the targeted learning outcomes and activity ... .

The responses consistently show that the respondents were uncertain about how to apply the learner portfolio as an assessment tool to establish whether expected learning outcomes have been reached. This implies that the respondents were unable to determine by means of the learner portfolio whether the learning outcomes had been reached.

Findings and conclusions

Arising from the enquiry, the following findings were made:

The responding teachers who participated in this enquiry did not have in-depth knowledge regarding the learner portfolio. The learner portfolios in question were not purposeful, structured collections of evidence of the learners' growth and development, and they did not contain a variety of examples of assignments. Respondents were not sure of the purpose of the portfolio and how it should be assessed.

Learners in the Intermediary Phase of the schools that participated in this enquiry were not sufficiently involved in the deliberations concerning the management of the learner portfolio. They were not adequately involved in determining the content and the criteria for selecting the content of the learner portfolio, nor were they involved in determining the criteria for evaluation, or in the evaluation of examples of assignments that were placed in the learner portfolios. Moreover, the learner portfolios demonstrated no learner self-reflection, which ought to be a core component of effective portfolio assessment.

The learner portfolios contained no evidence of descriptive and comprehensive teacher feedback. Feedback is a vital aspect of the portfolio as an authentic assessment tool; if it is lacking, the quality of the learning process is impaired and the portfolio is no longer a proper learning tool. Furthermore, the learner portfolios in the participating schools were simply display portfolios in which only the best, final products of the learners' work was exhibited. The learner portfolios did not demonstrate the learners' performance, progress and growth over a period of time, and therefore did not reflect the learners' total learning process.

The teachers who participated in the enquiry appeared to have relatively little experience in utilising the learner portfolio as an assessment tool. The learner portfolios of the target schools in this specific enquiry were therefore not being purposefully applied as assessment tools to demonstrate the performance, progress and growth of the learners in relation to the expected learning outcomes. It is clear that the learner portfolio was not being properly utilised as an assessment tool.

Learner portfolios that were analysed showed no evidence that the set learning outcomes were being realised. The schools that participated in this

enquiry had not succeeded in realising the aims of the learner portfolios. The researchers are aware that the findings of this enquiry cannot be generalised to all schools and that these findings are not applicable to all schools. However, it is of great concern that such a situation existed at all.

Educational implications

The implication of the aforementioned is that a more in-depth enquiry should take place with regard to the learner portfolio as an assessment tool. There should be a move towards a more authentic approach to assessment. It became clear from the enquiry that the learner portfolio as an assessment tool is indeed being used in the South African education system. However, the apparent doubt as to whether it serves its purpose as an authentic tool is a cause for concern. The learner portfolio, as a more qualitative and valid alternative to traditional pen and paper testing, can undoubtedly provide a more comprehensive and holistic picture of learners' performance, progress and growth.

Recommendations for further research

Arising from the above-mentioned findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- Since only four schools participated in the enquiry, the perceptions and points of view of teachers with regard to the utilisation of the learner portfolio as an assessment tool in a wider group of schools could not be taken into account. For this reason the findings cannot be generalised to a greater population and it is recommended that a similar enquiry be done among a wider group of schools to extend external validity.

- An empirical enquiry on learner involvement in the management of the learner portfolio is further recommended.

Conclusion

The utilisation of the learner portfolio as an alternative, authentic assessment tool in the South African education system is necessary to monitor learner growth and development in order to optimise learning. The portfolio has vast possibilities to help develop learner potential, but it must be used correctly to succeed in this goal. Traditional pen and paper testing and examinations are

not adequate for decision making in this regard – particularly not in terms of learner progress and growth. Learner portfolios can be used in conjunction with the previously mentioned forms of assessment to gain a more holistic picture of learners' growth and learning processes. Only then will learner portfolios contribute towards realising the true purpose of assessment, namely the optimal development of learner potential.

Various questions subsequently arise: Is not perhaps true that, given the vast emphasis on portfolios, the workload that this form of assessment places on learners and teachers alike, the cost involved and the validity of the results gained through portfolios, the usage of portfolios be revisited? How valid and trustworthy are the results that are derived from learner portfolios? Is this form of assessment a true reflection of the learners' learning process? The enquiry has shown – as far as the target group of this specific investigation is concerned – that the learner portfolio is not being used to its full advantage and therefore does not serve as an authentic assessment tool to promote learning.

References

Babbie, E & Mouton, J.2001. *The Practice of Social Research.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press of Southern Africa.

Black, S. 1993. Portfolio Assessment. *The Executive Educator,* 15(1):28 – 31.

Denscombe, M. 2003. *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects.* Second edition. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Departement of Education. 2005. The National Protocol on Assessment in Schools in the General and Further Education Band (Grades R – 12). Pretoria: Government Printers.

De Vos, AS, Strydom, H, Fouché, CB & Delport, CSL. 2005. *Research at grass roots for the social sciences and human service professions.* Second Edition (Fourth Impression). Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.

Du Toit, PH & Vandeyar, S. 2004. Innovative portfolio assessment – portfolios as performance assessment tools. In Maree, JG & Fraser, WJ (Eds). 2004. *Outcomes-Based Assessment.* Sandown: Heinemann.

Durrheim, K. 1999. Research design. In Terre Blanche, M. & Durrheim, K. 1999. *Research in Practice: Applied methods for the social sciences.* Cape Town: University of Cape

Town Press.

Gillespie, CS, Ford, KL, Gillespie, RD & Leavell, AG. 1996. Portfolio assessment: Some questions, some answers, some recommendations. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* 39(6): 480 – 491.

Gronlund, NE. 1998. *Assessment of Student Achievement.* Sixth edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Herman, JL & Zuniga, SA. 2003. Portfolio Assessment. In *Encyclopedia of Education.* Vol. 1, Second edition. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2003, 123 – 139. http:find.galegroup.com/gvrl/retrieve.do? (Accessed December 15, 2005.)

Kemp, J & Toperoff, D. 1998. Guidelines for Portfolio Assessment. http://www.anglit.net./main/portfolio/default.html (Accessed April, 17 2005.)

Kotze, GS. 2004. Outcomes-based assessment strategies. In Maree, JG & Fraser, WJ (Eds). 2004. *Outcomes-Based Assessment.* Sandown: Heinemann.

Le Grange, L & Reddy, C. 1999. *Continuous Assessment: An Introduction and Guidelines to Implementation.* Kenwyn: Juta & Co.

Locatelli, L. 1998. Ongoing Assessment Strategies Allow Me to Meet the Needs of My Students. In Martin-Kniep, GO. 1998. *Why Am I Doing This?: Purposeful Teaching Through Portfolio Assessment.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Martin-Kniep, GO. 1998. The Design Process. In Martin-Kniep, GO. 1998. *Why Am I Doing This?: Purposeful Teaching Through Portfolio Assessment.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Mertens, DM. 1998. *Research Methods in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Paulson, FL, Paulson, PR & Meyer, CA. 1991. What Makes a Portfolio a Portfolio. *Educational Leadership,* 48(5): 60 – 63.

Reddy, C. 2004. Assessment principles and approaches. In Maree, JG & Fraser, WJ (Eds). 2004. *Outcomes-Based Assessment.* Sandown: Heinemann.

Siebörger, R. 1998. *Transforming Assessment: A Guide for South African Teachers.* Kenwyn: Juta & Co.

Underwood, T. 1999. *The Portfolio Project: A Study of Assessment, Instruction, and Middle School Reform.* Illinois: The National Council of Teachers of English.

Valeri-Gold, M, Olson, JR & Deming, MP. 1992. Portfolios: Collaborative authentic

assessment opportunities for college developmental learners. *Journal of Reading.* January 1992. 35(5): 298 – 305.

Van der Horst, H & McDonald, R. 1997. *Outcomes-Based Education: A teacher's manual.* Pretoria: Kagiso.

Western Cape Education Department. 2003. Assessment Guidelines for the General Education and Training Band. Cape Town: Government Printers.