

## Rethinking Teachers Accountability and Evaluation through Portfolios

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### **Abstract**

This study explored teachers' views on the use of portfolios as part of accountability and evaluation system. It was conducted to determine the effectiveness of the use of portfolios to evaluate teacher performance both for the purpose of being accountable and for ongoing professional development. The teaching portfolio at Al-Eman Schools in Jerusalem/ Palestine is a careful and thoughtful compilation of documents that teachers create to highlight their teaching philosophies, methodologies and goals as well as their experiences, expertise and growth- things that couldn't be achieved during the traditional way of evaluation which was based only on classroom observation. The introduction of teaching portfolio assisted Al-Eman Schools administrators to take better decisions for achieving the quality of teacher performance. The data showed that teachers viewed the portfolio as a better way to evaluate their performance but they also had some concerns about the demands of time commitment. Further research is needed to help teachers better develop the creation of their own portfolios for their own professional growth and development.

**Keywords:** Teaching portfolios, evaluation, accountability, professional development, analytical reflection

## Introduction

This study was conducted as part of decision making process at Al-Eman Schools in Jerusalem, Palestine. It aimed to decide whether to use teaching portfolios as an essential part in teachers' evaluation and teachers' professional development. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the field of implementing effective teacher evaluation systems that leads to teacher improvement and development. Research asserts that teacher evaluation continues to be "a pressing issue in education and educational reform" (Pearlman and Tannenbaum, 2003, P. 633).

Part of developing English language teachers at Al-Eman Schools is teacher portfolios. Teacher portfolios are a topic of growing interest in the field of education and have become an effective tool in improving instruction. They are considered an essential part of teacher development and evaluation. Portfolios are a collection of teachers' work that allows them to reflect on. They are living documents that will change over time as teachers reflect and evaluate their own work. In other words, teachers will revise and update their teaching portfolio throughout their career as instructors. The change and the revision of the portfolio are considered part of teachers' growth and development (Sledin, et al 2010).

Al-Eman Schools consider teacher portfolios as a description of teacher/ teaching strengths and accomplishments. They include data which teachers collect through their action research and through their reflective experiences. They represent evidences about teachers' change in their practices over time and the quality of English language teachers' teaching performances.

Portfolios at Al-Eman Schools are designed to promote professional growth and accountability through the process of developing the portfolio and through the review of portfolio by another professional.

Therefore, teacher portfolios are used at AL-Eman Schools as a way to demonstrate one's teaching credentials to the institute and to colleagues. Portfolios are used as a means of intelligent accountability. They are also used as a means to help teachers to think critically about their practices and as a way to improve the quality of teaching English as a foreign language at Al-Eman Schools. They are samples of teachers' breadth and depth of work.

## The Significance of the Study

People involved in education recognize the importance of the evaluation of teachers. A successful evaluation process should assist the professional development of teachers and not to hinder it. Therefore, the purpose of this action research is to explore alternate ways to evaluate and empower teachers' development.

Al-Eman institute needs to help most teachers be committed to quality education. The institute believes that there is always room for teachers to improve and develop through their teaching career. Through teaching portfolios teachers are being held accountable for their own growth and development.

Teachers' evaluation can become a very positive experience when the process is continuous rather than occasional especially when evaluation is directed towards professional development. Portfolios could be appropriate measures that encourage the fullest development of teachers. These measures imply that Al-Eman Schools have trust in professionals. They also imply that teachers are accountable for identifying their own strengths and weaknesses and for working hard to improve their performance as an English language teacher and as a leader of continuous improvement and development.

Accordingly, this research determines how English language teachers respond to the use of portfolios as an evaluative process that leads to professional development.

### **Problem Statement**

Teachers' evaluation at Al-Eman schools has relied heavily on direct observation either by the supervisor or by the school principal (hierarchical control). Teachers' class is observed three or four times a year by the supervisor and two times by the principal who often lacks specific content expertise especially in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. Feedback is given to a teacher through a written document without any oral discussion or explanation. This typical classroom observation has limitations and isn't always a purposeful way to assess and evaluate teacher performance. A classroom observation checklist is not enough in measuring the quality of classroom practices and teacher accountability.

Recently, Al-Eman Schools administration has realized that there is a need to modify the current evaluation. It needs formative evaluation that helps teachers develop individual skills, discover new techniques and enhance their present ways of teaching. We need formative assessment that provides feedback that aimed at promoting continuous improvement. Therefore using the portfolio as a tool for evaluation and accountability to support teachers' professional development and as a source of multiple data that can greatly enhance comprehensiveness of teacher performance evaluation might highly be appreciated by the teachers and by the administrators.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the study is to explore the views of the seventeen English language teachers towards the first implementation of "Teaching Portfolio" for the purpose of formative evaluation that helps in continuous professional growth and development of teachers.

The goals are first, to help teachers document and record their achievements or accomplishments that allow them to reflect analytically and critically on their own work and help them develop different approaches to teaching.

Second, to help teachers improve and develop their work by providing them with formative feedback and giving them opportunities to communicate their teaching practices effectively with their supervisor and with their colleagues. By providing them with sufficient information, teachers will be able to evaluate themselves and modify their performance accordingly.

**To facilitate the implementations of using teaching portfolios, several actions were taken:**

**The First Action was explaining what teaching portfolio is:**

The first action was a meeting that was held at the beginning of school year 2012-2013 to all English language teachers to discuss the idea of teaching portfolios and the possibility of implementing it at Al-Eman schools as a process of formative evaluation that leads to professional development and growth. The English language supervisor explained to the English language teachers that "teaching portfolio is a means to document individual growth, excellence and talents of one's professional practices."

In further support research findings were provided to the teachers. Sledin, et al. (2010) in their studies about teaching portfolio preparation emphasized that teaching portfolio is also a means to improve teaching practices through reflection. Reflection helps teachers critically observe and evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching practices.

Teachers were told that through portfolio they can think about their teaching practices both in and outside the classroom. It is a way that helps them develop and analyze more effective approaches to their teaching. It is a valuable resource through which they can demonstrate their teaching abilities and accomplishments to other people (supervisor, colleagues, principal, and to the administrators at Al-Eman Schools). Materials from portfolios will help others see beneath the surface of teaching performance and the presentations of teaching portfolios will help teachers practice discussing their teaching practices in a thoughtful and analytical manner. Through discussing their teaching practices, they will be actively engaged in learning together and from each other.

Finally, teachers were told that their teaching portfolio assumes their responsibility of their own practices and their commitment to their personal development in teaching and their evaluation of students' learning outcomes. It was concluded that portfolios might help teachers think deeply about their teaching practices inside and outside their classrooms

**The Second Action: Showing a sample of a teacher portfolio to see how it looks like and showing the principles in developing a portfolio of professional practice**

The second action was presenting a sample and discussing its content and then taking decisions of what Al-Eman Schools portfolios should include. Based on research about portfolios the main three principle of portfolio is **collect**, **select** and **reflect**.

**What a portfolio should include and how it is organized (content and organization)**

We decided that the portfolio should include the following:

- Cover page
- Content
- Curriculum Vitae
- Teaching Philosophy
- Statement of Teaching Responsibilities
- Teachers' Prayer
- Professional Development Certificates
- Teaching Objectives, Strategies, Methodologies

- Description of Teaching Materials
- Annual Plan
- Lesson Plan
- Teachers' Reflection
- Teachers' Action Research
- Evidence of Teaching Effectiveness
- Innovative Teaching Projects
- Samples of Worksheets
- Samples of Students' Work
- Samples of Test and Exams
- Analysis of Students' Achievement (Charts/Diagram)
- Flashcards (Other important visuals)
- Projects and Activities
- School Newspaper Stories
- Videos
- Supervisor Reports
- Any Other Teaching Accomplishments/ Documents

#### **The Third Action: Reading articles and watching You Tube to take a decision**

The third action was encouraging teachers to read some articles or watch some You Tubes related to the importance of having teaching portfolios. Then, the decision of developing teachers' portfolios was taken anonymously.

The decision was that teachers must develop a portfolio with written summaries and reflections on their teaching that explore not only what they did in particular lesson but what they would do differently in the future in order to develop the quality of teaching English as a foreign language at Al-Eman Schools. The portfolio is tended to emphasize aspects of good teaching and adjustment of instruction to meet the needs of students with different learning styles. Through portfolios, teachers can identify their strengths and accomplishments and they can also work on their weaknesses. They can also celebrate success stories where other colleagues can read, discuss or implement. Effective portfolios are deliberately structured to allow for both accountability and creativity.

#### **The Fourth Action: Evaluating Teachers Portfolios**

The last action was discussing the rubric that will be used for evaluating English language teachers' portfolios (See Appendix One). The rubric was designed based on some samples but it meant to be very simple and brief as this was the first year in which teachers develop their teaching portfolio.

Some questions were provided to teachers as to lead them after developing the draft of the portfolio. The following questions served as a helpful checklist. The questions were based on the book "The teaching portfolio; A practical guide to improved performance and promotion: tenure decisions (Seldin, et al, 2010):

- Does your portfolio identify your own responsibility as a foreign language teacher?
- Does the reflective statement adequately describe your teaching philosophy, strategies and methodologies?
- Does your reflective statement help in improving your teaching actions?
- Does your portfolio include some activities that support or inform teaching and learning?
- Does your portfolio include some data related to performance evaluation?
- Does your portfolio include some evidences of student learning?
- Does your portfolio clearly identify what, how and why you teach your subject as you do?

### Literature Review

In this literature review, the researcher summarized some of the research related to teaching portfolios and their effect on teacher growth and development. Portfolios are intended to provide a comprehensive sampling of the broad spectrum of teacher performance over time and in varying contexts. However, the portfolio, itself, is not an end; it is the means to achieving the ultimate end of improved student achievement. Organizing teacher portfolios for effectiveness and efficiency is a critical step in implementing a teacher evaluation system. Organizing portfolios requires that the role of teacher performance standards be established and that the role of artifacts relative to those standards be set (Tucker, et al, 2002. p. 34). Thus, a teaching portfolio is a means to the end and not the end itself.

Mokhari *et al.* (1996) defines portfolio as “a cumulative record of progress that fosters reflective thinking and can be used for advisement, assessment and eventual placement” (p.245). While Perkins and Gelfer, (1993) defines portfolio as “a folder of personal data on an individual basis that includes a record of achievement, samples of work, observations made by a supervisor, a colleague, or oneself, personal evaluations and any other relevant data” (p. 235).

Teacher portfolio is a careful and thoughtful compilation of documents that teachers create in order to shed a light on their teaching philosophies, methodologies, techniques, strategies, and goals in addition to their experiences, expertise and growth. Teaching portfolios serve as learning instruments that guide to improvements in teachers’ professional practices.

Unfortunately most teacher evaluation processes identify effective and ineffective teaching without addressing teachers’ needs and questions of how they really need to change some of their teaching behavior in order to be better teachers. Research asserts that using portfolios as formative way to evaluate teachers allow them to make adjustment to what and how they are teaching (Arreola, 2000).

Formative evaluation is expected to improve the content, process and outcomes of teaching for teachers. Hammond (1990) states that schools are always asked to document their accomplishments for the purpose of evaluation and measuring educational programs. As teachers play a very important role in developing educational programs, professional portfolios are frequently recommended.

Boliington (1994) states that effective formative evaluation is a very important part in teacher professional development. Formative evaluation guide teachers with steps required for comprehensive improvement and development. It is considered part of the ongoing learning

process for teachers. Formative evaluation is based on providing constructive feedback to teachers to improve their performance. It is a process that helps teachers receive information from various sources, their peers as an example. Teachers usually need specific information regarding their performance that helps them improve and employ appropriate methods.

Fisher (1994) notes, "a teacher portfolio offers the educator opportunities to display quality work examples which can be used for evaluative purposes" (p. 20). She also *suggests* that "another use is a vehicle for the selection and development of professional entries so that teacher reflection, dialogue, and growth can occur" (Fisher, 1994, p. 21).

Shifts in beliefs and practices about the teacher professional development and evaluation have led educators and scholars to explore new approaches that can serve education and that can give trust and professional responsibilities to the teachers. One of these is teaching portfolio which in its basic form is a collection of work which highlights and demonstrates teachers' knowledge and skills of their professional practices that is used for self assessment, self reflection and for professional development. So, rather than abolishing authoritative accountability systems on teachers, we apply a new type of accountability system that builds on mutual accountability and responsibility.

## Methods and Data Collection

### Research Questions

This research addresses the following two questions:

1. How do the teachers at Al-Eman Schools in Jerusalem view the employment of teacher portfolios in the formative evaluation process and professional development?
2. What issues emerged from the use of portfolios as noted by the teachers involved?

### *The Sample*

The sample population for this study consisted of all the seventeen English language teachers teach at Al-Eman Schools in Jerusalem. Fifteen teachers were females while two teachers were male. Seven teachers teach at the two elementary schools while ten teachers teach at the two secondary schools.

### Data Collection

In this study the researcher attempted to investigate the views and reflections of the seventeen teachers regarding the development of teaching portfolios and the employment of portfolios as a part of teacher formative evaluation and professional development.

This study used qualitative methodology relying on the seventeen participants. The researcher collected field notes during staff meetings that were held every two weeks about how teachers view the employment of teacher portfolios in the evaluation process and the professional development. It also included "think-aloud" techniques which involved verbalizing one's thoughts while engaged in their work. Additional data were collected by reviewing, examining and analyzing the teacher portfolios during the first and the second semester

(documents as the primary source of data collection, teachers' artifacts and documentation review). The portfolios were examined for content, personal professional knowledge and analytical reflection on practice and the implementation of action research. The researcher observed some classes to identify the materials that teachers submitted in their portfolios as well as to examine their written reflections. Peer observation and peer review for the portfolios were also used during the staff meeting that was held every two weeks.

### **Research Findings**

Through the various qualitative data collection methods, fifteen teachers (about 88%) revealed that using portfolios in formative evaluation is better than the traditional classroom observation checklist approach because teachers through portfolios have evidences of their strengths and accomplishments. They said that they have the opportunity to include samples of their best work. They reflected that the most important part of developing the portfolios was the open communication and the feedback between the supervisor and the teacher, and among teachers themselves. They believed that this open communication created dialogue that might enhance the development of professional growth of a teacher. They emphasized that portfolios help them organize their work and get as they said a bank of documents from which they can adopt and reuse in coming years. These documents also helped them dialogue their work with their colleagues and thus enhance professional learning communities. Teaching portfolio helped them practice the skills of being selective, realistic, reflective and organized. One sample of written teacher reflection on the use of teaching portfolio is included (See Appendix Two).

Teachers who have positive views towards portfolios indicated that using teacher portfolio as a tool for evaluating and improving their performances was encouraging. They revealed that this evaluation is more constructive and informative. They felt that they are more trusted and supported. Having their living documents to present and share either with their supervisor or their colleagues has been very fruitful. They implied that using portfolios as a part of teacher formative evaluation and professional development can reinforce cooperation among teachers and reduce the atmosphere of ineffective competitiveness.

Twelve percent (12%) of teachers indicated that they were not really convinced with the validity of the portfolio in evaluation. They think that portfolio is only a gathering tool for documents and materials. They believe that teachers may include excellent documents in the portfolio but without applying them in the classroom. They think that the end product of teaching and learning is actually not presented in portfolios. They are convinced that classroom observation is more credible diagnosis of teachers' performance. Though, one of the teachers indicated that the use of portfolios might identify ones strengths and weaknesses. Teachers who were not fully convinced with the importance of creating portfolio of professional development agreed that the discussion and the dialogues among colleagues are the most valuable. They believe that learning communities are the best tool for professional development and not the compilation of documents. They suspect the validity of formative evaluation to evaluate their portfolios.

Some issues emerged regarding the use of portfolios as noted by the teachers involved. They recognized that there is an improvement in communication between the teachers and the supervisors and among teachers themselves. The process of self observation and self reflection through creating their own portfolios helped them think all the time about what they do in the classroom and collect information about what goes on to explore their own practices that lead them to changes and improvements in their teaching.

Teachers complained that portfolios required a considerable time commitment. It seems that teachers need to determine what to include in their portfolio and subsequently reduce the time commitment. A teaching portfolio is so demanding and their schedule is overloaded. Developing a reflective teaching portfolio is undoubtedly a demanding and time consuming process in some cases and for some teachers. Teachers also commented that they need to learn more about how portfolios will help them to reflect on their own performance. They commented that their reflection is still more descriptive than analytical (See Appendix Three).

The main limitation of this study is that it was based on the English language teachers who teach at Al-Eman Schools. For the generalization of the results more teachers in other schools should be included. Despite this limitation, the researcher believes that the results clearly appear to indicate that teaching portfolio is a useful tool to highlight and demonstrate teachers' knowledge and skills of professional practice. Teaching portfolio serves as learning instruments that help teachers held responsible to criticize their work and to evaluate the effectiveness of their professional practice. Portfolio construction provided cues for teachers to gain insight into their own teaching and learning processes and professional development. Portfolio constructions provided useful starting points of the importance of conducting continuous portfolio meetings.

More research is required regarding the use of teaching portfolio for formative evaluation that helps teachers be responsible and accountable for their professional growth. More research is also required to study the process of teachers' reflection on their own work in the portfolio and how this reflection helps in their professional development.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this study it was emphasized that portfolios can serve as an evaluative tool that helps teachers be accountable and helps them develop a continuous professional development. In brief the goals of English language teachers' portfolios at Al-Eman Schools are to develop and improve teaching skills, experiences, enhance success stories and use as credentials in a meaningful positive package. Teaching portfolio is a tool for an ongoing professional development and professional growth through which we can help teachers be long life learners.

A careful consideration of the purpose of the teaching portfolio can guide teachers, administrators, and policy makers in making informed decisions about the design and the use of teaching portfolios.

### About the Author

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### Appendices

#### Appendix A

	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>	<b>In Progress</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>
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<b>Understanding Conceptual Framework Principles</b>	Artifacts were selected and the explanation of why selected demonstrates no understanding of the conceptual framework or principle	Artifacts were selected and the explanation of why selected demonstrates a primary understanding of conceptual framework or principles	Artifacts were selected and the explanation of why selected demonstrates an understanding of conceptual framework or principles	Artifacts were selected and the explanation of why selected demonstrates a thorough understanding of conceptual framework or principles
<b>The Organization of the Material in the Portfolio</b>	Portfolio portrays little or no evidence of ability to organize the material and to respond in a thoughtful, critical manner	Portfolio portrays some limited evidence of ability to organize the material and to respond in a thoughtful, critical manner	Portfolio portrays adequate evidence of ability to organize the material and to respond in a thoughtful, critical manner	Portfolio portrays exceptional evidence of ability to organize the material and to respond in a thoughtful, critical manner
<b>Portfolio Elements</b>	Portfolio addresses at fewer than 80% of the required elements contained in the portfolio template	Portfolio addresses at least 80% of the required elements contained in the portfolio template	Portfolio addresses at least 95% of the required elements contained in the portfolio template	Portfolio addresses 100% of the elements required in the portfolio template
<b>Overall Quality</b>	Lacks relevant material and organization; fails to meet the professional standard	Few required documents are relevant to specific instructional context; is not very well organized, but could be improved	All required documents are relevant to instructional context; is organized, but could be improved to reach exemplary	All required documents are included; organization is excellent; the presentation of information is effective; meets a high professional standard

**Portfolio Rubric**

**Appendix B  
A Sample of Teachers' Comment**

Teaching portfolio is an efficient way to evaluate continually our teaching as we gain experience in the classroom. I believe that teaching portfolio can improve the delivery of our syllabus. Teaching portfolio helps us develop new teaching methods and strategies. It is a way to document our strengths and to pinpoint our weaknesses. We use our teaching portfolio to improve teaching skills and develop new strategies, methods and techniques. Teaching portfolio is changeable as teachers' take on new teaching challenges. Through this experience we learnt that it is good to criticize oneself and others work and to know that we are not always correct. Portfolios embody professionalism because they encourage the reflection and self-monitoring that are the hallmarks of the true professional.

### **Appendix C**

#### **A Sample of Teacher Reflection**

Class 4C was given Unit 8 Lesson 4 from Pupil's Book. The warm up activity was well liked by the students and many didn't want the activity to end. All of the students wanted to participate in that particular activity. When it was time to do the review using *shouldn't be* and *should be*, many students said the sentences by using *shouldn't be* and *should be* incorrectly. Some students eliminated the use of *shouldn't be* and *should be* altogether. I should have used a different approach when I saw the incorrect responses to the exercises such as writing on the board the words *shouldn't be* and *should be* to help students comprehend the directions. Also when the students listened to the song they weren't very interested in the tune of the song, therefore, when it was the students turn to sing the song, most of the students' voices were not heard. I should have changed the tune of the song to suit their style of music.