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Portfolio assessment: Practices in special education teacher education

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Abstract

Reform in teacher education has made teacher education preparation programs re-examine their current practices and makes changes in the assessment and instruction of teacher candidates. In the search for more authentic assessments of teacher candidate knowledge and abilities, portfolios have been offered as a viable option. After more than 20 years of portfolio use in teacher preparation programs, there is little empirical information on portfolio assessment use across special education teacher candidate preparation programs. The purpose of this study was to examine, using quantitative and qualitative methods, the practices, satisfaction, and issues associated with portfolio use across multiple institutions that offer special education teacher preparation programs. Results, implications for practice, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Special Education, Higher Education, Teacher Candidate Assessment

Portfolio assessment: Practices in special education teacher education

Standards based teacher education is becoming common practice, and portfolio assessment has emerged as a recommended way to assess teacher candidates (Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), 2003; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2006). While no single assessment method can reflect a true image of a candidate, a portfolio that includes an array of artifacts may project a holistic image of future teachers and demonstrate their teaching capabilities (Bartell, Kaye, & Morin, 1998). Portfolios are a type of output assessment that allows teacher education programs to view products developed by teacher candidates associated with authentic teacher tasks and include objective consistent rubric guided performance evaluations. Much of the existing literature base comes from the 1990's when output assessments of teacher candidates were limited and researchers were looking at individual parts of the portfolios assessment development process within singular programs trying to incorporate portfolio use and guide others in the integration of output assessment in other teacher preparation programs. The next wave of literature from roughly the year 2000 onward focuses on electronic portfolio use and the benefits of electronic portfolios in teacher education program reviews.

While numerous program descriptions (e.g., Dollase, 1996; Duarte & Quatroche, 1999; Kenney & LaMontagne, 1999; Lyons, 1996; Rakow, 1999; Verkler, 2000) and anecdotal articles (Montgomery, 1997; Simmons, 1996; Wolf, 1996) exist from the 1990's that describe how to construct a portfolio, the empirical research on construction focuses on candidates' perceptions regarding the portfolio development process. The processes used by candidates in these studies to develop portfolios typically included collection, selection, and reflection activities. The

instruction given to candidates was not delineated in the research literature, but typically included one or more of the following: (a) oral instructions, (b) handouts, (c) reflective questions, (d) assignments, (e) activities, (f) demonstrations, and (g) sample portfolio presentations.

Research on content explores what could be included in a portfolio and how that content should be selected. Artifacts typically included the demonstration of knowledge and skills such as self-reflective philosophies, videos, P-12 student work samples, and lesson and unit plans (see Zeichner & Wray, 2001 for further discussion on content). How content is selected is more specific to programs and the overall purpose of the portfolio (see Carroll, Potthoff, and Huber, 1996 for further discussion on content selection).

Research on portfolio assessment includes how portfolios are assessed and teacher candidates responses to portfolio assessment. A few studies on portfolio evaluation in teacher candidate education indicated that reliability of scores across evaluators was typically consistent after some practice (Naizer, 1997) and when rubrics were used for scoring (Burns & Haight, 2005). The studies that include teacher candidates perceptions show benefits and drawbacks to the process. On the one hand, teacher candidates believed that the assignment forced them to think about their learning and practice as teachers (Borko, Michalec, Timmons, & Siddle, 1997; Stone, 1998); and encouraged candidates to explore, reflect, compare, and evaluate their practice as teachers as well as set goals for future learning (Bloom & Bacon, 1995; Davies and Willis, 2001; McKinney, 1998). On the other hand, candidates commented on confusion over the assignment (Stone, 1998), the intense time commitment required to construct the portfolio (Bloom & Bacon, 1995), time and timing of the portfolio project, and the amount of reflection required appeared to be the major concerns (Borko et al., 1997).

While research on the logistical components of portfolio assessment (use, content, construction, and evaluation) provides technical information, value of portfolio assessment from the perspective of candidates and to some extent faculty also exists. The information comes primarily from data collected in individual programs so the thoughts on portfolio use clearly span a wide range of opinions. Only one study, more than 10 years ago, gathered information from faculty from across multiple universities (Anderson & DeMeulle, 1998). Numerous recommendations for future research have been made, but with the lack of research across programs more research is needed to inform teacher education.

Clearly there is informative research on portfolio assessment, but we have limited information on practices and perceptions of the value of portfolio assessment across multiple programs in today's climate of accountability and even less research focused on special education programs. This study was conducted to gather information on the prevalence of portfolio use, how they are being used, construction practices, evaluation practices, and the satisfaction and prevalent issues surrounding portfolio implementation as described by individuals that use portfolios in their special education teacher candidate preparation programs.

Methods

Participants

Participants were identified and contacted using information from the *National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education* (www.specialedcareers.org). A total of 62 colleges and universities were contacted from a randomly selected region of the US (mid-west region which included Illinois=31, Indiana=23, Wisconsin=18) for participation. The department heads for the special education programs were identified, contacted, and asked if they would

agree to participate by anonymously nominating a person who could best describe the use of portfolios in their teacher candidate preparation programs.

Of the 62 programs contacted, 82% (n=51) of the department chairs responded with a nomination. Of those 51 people who were nominated, 76% (n=39) completed surveys and 69% (n=35) completed audio-taped interviews.

A total of 69% of the initial 62 institutions contacted participated. Of those responding, 46.5% were faculty, 46.5% were administrators, and 7% were clinical staff or other. The majority of respondents represented programs with 5 or fewer faculty (59%, n=23) and 1 or no non-faculty clinical supervisors (77%, n=30). Most programs graduated less than 50 students each year (85%, n=33) and required between 3 and 4 years of study to complete (41%, n=16). Most teacher preparation programs reported that their teacher candidates were full-time (79%, n=31) undergraduates (72%, n=28).

Survey and Interview Description

A survey was constructed and piloted using five faculty members from three different universities who were familiar with the use of portfolios in their programs. The survey contained four sections: 1) demographic information, 2) use of portfolios, 3) portfolio content, and 4) portfolio evaluation.

The phone interview contained four sections. The first three sections were consistent with the survey. The purpose of the fourth section was to elicit information regarding the participants' satisfaction with the outcomes, both expected and unexpected, of using portfolio assessment to evaluate teacher candidates, the issues related to portfolio assessment implementation, and how portfolios were being used. The participants also shared any additional information about portfolios that they felt was important.

A semi-structured interview with a pre-established set of questions was asked to each participant in the same order. If respondents' information was unclear a follow-up question was asked in order to clarify the information. In some cases, the interviewer repeated or rephrased information for clarity. If the participant asked for the interviewer's thoughts or opinions she responded in a neutral manner.

Procedures

An e-mail introducing the study, requesting consent for participation, and requesting the name and contact information (e-mail and phone number) of the person in the department who was most familiar with and would best describe the use of portfolios in the special education teacher candidate preparation program was sent to department chairs. If the chair did not give consent, he or she was thanked and no further communications were pursued. If the department chair indicated that the department did not use portfolios, he or she was asked to complete a short survey by fax indicating why portfolios were not used and if the department had plans for future use of portfolios.

For those programs using portfolio assessment, if the chair agreed to participate, he or she was thanked and the nominee was contacted. Nominees received an e-mail introducing the purpose of the study, the data collection method, approximate time required to complete the survey, and an informed consent letter. If the nominee agreed to participate, the survey and the telephone interview questions were faxed to him or her with requests to return the survey by fax and select a time for the interview.

After an individual returned his or her survey, interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted no more than 30 minutes. An introductory statement was read to the participant that asked for consent for recording and transcribing the interview and outlined the interview

questions. When the participant completed the components of the study an e-mail thank-you letter was sent. Individuals who did not give consent were asked by e-mail for information as to the reasons for declining, in order to better understand any factors relevant to the study.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey data as there were not enough responses from varied groups (i.e. public university vs. private university; research one universities vs. non-research one universities; male vs. female respondents; tenure vs. non-tenured respondents, etc.) to conduct sound statistical tests. Frequency distributions and percentages were calculated for each question. Open-ended questions were read and similar responses were grouped and summarized, which included percentages of responses within a question.

Qualitative methods (Bogden and Biklen,1998) were used to examine the responses to the interview questions. The transcriptions were read several times for content. A random selection of 30% of the transcriptions was reviewed to ensure the audio-tapes were transcribed accurately. Questions that formed a series or related responses were clustered. Responses from each participant were sorted by question or clustered questions. The first response was read for content, and phrases from the response were written into a summary document. Response number two was read and compared with response number one. Phrases and ideas that were different from the first response were recorded in the summary document. This process continued until all responses to the question had been examined. After all questions had been analyzed, a set of categories for each question was developed, reevaluated, and refined, and emerging themes were identified. Finally, examples of responses were selected that clearly represented the themes.

Investigator triangulation was used to determine the trustworthiness of the coding of interviews. Thirty percent (n=10) of the responses from each interview question were randomly selected for trustworthiness. The reviewers were given the codes and definitions, and the selected responses with their corresponding codes. The reviewers were asked to read each response and its assigned codes, read the definition of the assigned code, and agree or disagree with the assigned code. They were also provided with space to write questions or comments concerning the assigned codes. Agreement for the coding was 100% without a need for follow-up questions regarding the definitions of the codes.

Results

Forty-three individuals participated in the study. Four of the participants did not use portfolios at the time of data collection and were not asked to complete a survey or interview. Therefore, percentages for survey results were calculated using a total of 39 participants. The four participants that did not use portfolios were asked follow-up questions and reported that they would be using portfolios within the next 2 years but were held up by logistics of creating a college wide system for all education majors. Thirty-five participants completed an interview with 32 of the audio-tapes being audible.

Portfolio Use

Across Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin, 91% (n=39) of the participating programs were using portfolios, and the remaining 9% (n=4) had plans to use portfolios in the next two years. Responses indicated that portfolios had been in use somewhere between 1 and 20 years with a mean of 5.5 years and median of 4 years. Thirty six percent (n=14) of programs had been using portfolios for 3 to 5 years. Paper, electronic, or a combination of paper and electronic formats were being used. Respondents indicated that their programs used portfolios because they

believed it to be good practice (74%, n=29), but portfolios were also used because they were a department (72%, n=28) or college certification requirement (51%, n=20).

Many respondents indicated their programs required an assessment portfolio and a learning portfolio. Follow-up interview data from the 32 programs revealed that 47% (n=15) of respondents selected multiple types of portfolios but actually required a single portfolio, which served multiple purposes. Interview data revealed that 75% (n=24) of the interview participants' programs used a single portfolio and 31% (n=10) used multiple portfolios. Typically, programs utilized a single developmental portfolio (candidates add to the portfolio as they progress through a program) with or without assessment checkpoints to track learning, which turned into a showcase portfolio by the end of the program that demonstrated the candidate had met all required standards or program components. In some cases reflective writings were used to demonstrate how artifacts related to the standards and teaching.

When multiple portfolios were required, this typically consisted of an on-going culminating portfolio with additional portfolios for individual courses. In addition to the portfolio being used for assessment, learning, and employment, respondents stated that portfolios also were used as a holistic approach to candidate development, program evaluation, NCATE accreditation, and for standardizing some of the program experiences for candidates.

Eighty-four percent of interview participants (n=27) responded that the portfolio implementation process had changed since its inception. Logistical changes regarding the transition from paper to electronic format (selecting and purchasing software and equipment, additional time to teach candidates and faculty technology use, and increase in technology support) were repeatedly mentioned (38%, n=12). Participants also cited redefining the portfolio with focus on standards as a change to the process (34%, n=11). The evaluation process (move to

a required portfolio, development or refinement of a rubric, introduction or refinement of a checkpoint or gate system, developing different benchmarks for graduate and undergraduate teacher candidates, and giving evaluators more time with the portfolios prior to presentations) changed for many of the respondents (28%, n=9). Clearer and more frequent communication with candidates regarding portfolios (25%, n=8) and changes to aid candidates in the portfolio completion process (25%, n=8) such as beginning the process sooner, moving from an end portfolio to a whole program portfolio, and providing a 1 credit hour seminar for portfolio completion were also cited. Participants also indicated that they alter the process as needed and when it doesn't meet candidates' needs.

Changes in how to select and present artifacts also were made (22%, n=7). In most cases the move was toward more prescriptive requirements regarding artifacts. Faculty advisors were getting more involved in the selection of artifacts and the portfolio moved from an open format with non-specific categories and artifacts to more specific requirements. Specific products were required, as was the use of reflective writing to link artifacts to standards.

Portfolio Content

The framework of the portfolio, limitations on the amount of evidence that can be included, where the evidence originated, who makes decisions about how evidence was selected and organized, and what candidates were told about how to select evidence was examined. Respondents were also asked if the end product represented more than the sum of its parts, in other words, was there something that unified the content of the portfolio.

The majority (92%, n=36) of the 39 survey respondents stated their programs used standards as the framework for the portfolio. Nearly half (44%, n=17) of the survey respondents indicated that their programs had some type of limitation to the amount of evidence that could be

included in the portfolio. Candidates were given specific requirements for the portfolio. Survey respondents replied that faculty or staff (79%, n=31) decided the portfolio content areas under which evidence was organized, but candidates select the evidence from a variety of sources to include in the portfolio.

Interview data, based on 32 interviews, indicated candidates were given prescriptive information about what to include in the portfolio (34%, n=11). Examples of prescriptive information included (a) telling candidates which pieces were required and giving them descriptions of the pieces along with scoring rubrics, (b) giving directions about which artifacts they needed to show in the portfolio from specific classes, and (c) stipulating the use of specific documents so everyone showed the same tasks were completed. In addition to or in place of prescriptive information, teacher candidates were given other types of information. In nine cases, candidates were given the standards with examples of artifacts that met each of the standards. Eight respondents reported that they told candidates that certain entries were required. Eight programs let candidates select whatever they (the candidates) believed demonstrated their attainment of skills in a standard area. Other respondents reported class syllabi which outlined the assignments aligned to the standards (n=5) or discussions with faculty (n=4) influenced decisions about selecting artifacts. Typically, interviewees reported externally defined teaching standards such as the Illinois Teaching Standards or INTASC principles and teaching principles unified the content (47%, n=15).

Portfolio Evaluation

Evaluation of portfolios was also examined. Information about who was selecting criteria and what format was used for evaluation is presented along with information about who was evaluating portfolios and how many portfolios these individuals were required to evaluate at a

single due date. The purpose of the evaluation, what is being evaluated, and how often and when portfolios were evaluated were also given. If the portfolio was reviewed more than once in the duration of the program, then interview participants were asked whether the evaluation was the same each time. They were also asked if they had a forum for sharing portfolios and to describe the forum if they used one. Finally, interview participants were asked to describe the training their evaluators were given.

Faculty or staff, based on survey responses, played the greatest role in the evaluation process. Typically, faculty or staff selected the criteria for evaluation (95%, n=37) and was most often responsible for evaluating the portfolio (92%, n=36). Usually a lone individual evaluated a portfolio (64%, n=25). The number of portfolios evaluated at a single due date by a single individual ranged from 1 to 100 (mean=10; median=14). Rubrics were used most often (92%, n=36) as the format for evaluation.

Survey data also showed portfolios were used to evaluate completion of state standards (77%, n=30), end of program performance (77%, n=30), and student teaching performance (51%, n=20). They were used as a medium to evaluate candidate ability to demonstrate knowledge and performance (100%, n=39), candidate reflection (92%, n=36), candidate communication skills (67%, n=26), and candidate ability to integrate all program components (62%, n=24). Fifty-nine percent (n=23) of respondents indicated that the portfolios were reviewed 3 or more times in the duration of their program.

Interview participants (n=24) stated that the portfolio is evaluated more than one time. Thirteen interview respondents (41%) replied that the evaluation is the same each time. Completion of the standards was the focus for the portfolio. The artifacts that were added at each phase of development may be different but the rubric used in the evaluation of the evidence

remained the same. Eleven interview respondents (34%) said the evaluation was not the same; generally, the expectations at each developmental phase were not the same and the rubric was also different. Fewer participants (9%, n=3) said that their programs reviewed the portfolio along the way to assist candidates with development but only evaluated the portfolio at the end of the program. Approximately half of the participants stated that their programs used a forum for sharing portfolios (44%, n=14). Those programs that used forums typically had a showcase night or event (19%, n=6) where candidates presented their portfolio to their peers, faculty, and other university staff. The presentation forum was often used for evaluation purposes (n=7), a means for candidates to learn from each other (n=4), or an opportunity for candidates to share and celebrate their learning experiences (n=4). Candidates were typically given 20 minutes to share their portfolio, but the time given to candidates ranged from 15 minutes to up to 1 hour.

Finally, interview participants were asked what training was given to evaluators. Forty-four percent (n=14) of participants stated that their programs or colleges had made an organized effort to train evaluators. Formal training included (a) offices of teacher education organized and trained faculty from various departments, (b) bringing in external consultants to assist them in the development and evaluation of the portfolio, and (c) attending department sponsored workshops or in-services on portfolio evaluation. Thirty-four percent (n=11) of participants responded that a type of informal training occurred where the rubric was explained and examples of artifacts were reviewed to try to establish some reliability across faculty in the evaluation process.

Satisfaction and Issues

Another area addressed in this study was respondents' satisfaction with the expected and unexpected outcomes of using portfolios with teacher candidates. Participants' perceptions about

what worked well with regards to the portfolio implementation process, what issues still existed for their programs, and any issues regarding how candidates, departments, and offices of teacher education in their colleges or universities were using portfolios were identified.

Satisfaction with outcomes

Several themes emerged from the interviews regarding satisfaction with portfolio use. Participants were satisfied with (a) positive outcomes for candidates, (b) enhancement of their program's evaluation of teacher candidates, and (c) benefits for their teacher preparation programs. A few respondents felt it was too early for them to tell, but they were hopeful that they would see positive outcomes in the future.

The first theme that emerged from discussion of portfolio use with teacher educators was positive candidate outcomes. Statements related to positive candidate outcomes were sorted into five categories: (a) candidate oriented, (b) understanding of standards, (c) candidate self-evaluation, (d) candidate reflection, and (e) job searching. Respondents commented that portfolio assessment was candidate oriented and assisted candidates with learning professional standards and professional expectations. Portfolio assessment allowed candidates to evaluate their own progress. Teacher educators also believed candidates reflected on their abilities. As one respondent said,

“They know what their strengths and weaknesses are. They don't have to wait for, you know, possibly someone to point it out to them.”

As another participant stated,

“The unexpected outcome was their [candidates'] creative abilities to showcase their talents. We're also pleased with student growth through the reflective process and ... well they've really grown from the process of putting together

their portfolio.”

The second theme derived from respondents' comments was how using portfolios enhances the evaluation process for the candidates. Comments relating to this theme fit into four categories: (a) evaluates candidate needs, (b) provides documentation, (c) provides structure, and (d) eases the evaluation process. Respondents stated that portfolios allowed programs to track candidate progress, identify those who may be struggling, and intervene to help them succeed in their program. Portfolios provided a permanent product of candidate learning which allowed candidates, faculty, and external parties to review the work. Respondents said the portfolio provided structure and something concrete to the daunting task of tracking the completion of standards. As one teacher educator said,

“It’s helping us to really target individuals who we have major concerns about at prior to admission and prior to student teaching particularly and I think that’s helpful...[with] any kind of intervention advisement with students.”

Another theme related to satisfaction of outcomes was positive outcomes for programs including faculty benefits and program benefits. Faculty benefits included learning from and with candidates and developing relationships with colleagues from different programs whom they did not know prior to the implementation of the portfolio assessment. Program benefits included the acquisition of data generated by portfolio use that helped inform program decisions and positive reports given to the program from external program evaluators. One respondent summed up her satisfaction by saying,

“It has provided us with data that we can use to inform our thinking for the program.”

Respondents were less satisfied with (a) relying on portfolios to predict a teacher

candidate's success as a professional, (b) the implementation process, and (c) using portfolios for program evaluation purposes. One respondent was very dissatisfied and said the program did not like using portfolios but uses them because the program is mandated to do so. One theme that emerged was portfolios not being a predictor of future success. These statements were sorted into four categories: (a) does not document dispositions, (b) does not document teaching ability, (c) should not be the only assessment tool, and (d) electronic portfolio restricts assessment. Teacher educators were concerned that portfolios do not accurately assess a candidate's professional dispositions (i.e., communication with others, interactions with students and other teaching staff, follow-through on tasks, etc.). One respondent explained,

“What it does not capture are the dispositional concerns that you have for a student. The things that, the interactions with other faculty, with students, with their own students out in the field, the follow-through on certain activities that they need to do in their teachings and in their pre-service teaching. So it does not quite capture the dispositional stuff that could make or break a student's future career.”

Teacher educators also had concerns about whether portfolios were representative of teaching ability and what transpires in a classroom. They expressed dissatisfaction with making decisions about who would be a good teacher based on a collection of paperwork.

“My concern is that we're evaluating teachers still on a collection of paper, we're not getting to see them teach. I mean we also have their student teaching evaluation, but many times the person doing the exit interview has not been the person who actually observes them student teach, so it concerns me a little bit about saying yes this is a person I want to graduate and I want to teach children

or you know adolescents to judging it all on paper work.”

Another theme that emerged related to the need to improve the implementation process. Comments related to this theme fit into three categories: (a) want to do more, (b) who is responsible for implementation, and (c) miscellaneous issues with implementation and evaluation. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction and a desire to do more with the portfolio than they were currently able to do. They were dissatisfied with and questioned who was responsible for implementing the portfolio development and evaluation process. As one senior faculty member explained it,

“The dilemma becomes one of, which faculty have the time to do this. I’m a full professor, I don’t have to worry about tenure, ...Can a non-tenured junior faculty person invest the level of effort to doing portfolio evaluations and I don’t know the answer to that. I wish I could say I think everyone should, but there’s a lot of time invested.”

Issues related to implementation

Participants were also asked to discuss issues with regards to the portfolio implementation process in their programs. Several themes emerged from this interview question. Participants talked about: (a) the need for adequate resources to carry out the assessment appropriately, (b) the evaluation process including questions and problems they had with the evaluation of portfolios, (c) professional ownership of the portfolio process by faculty, (d) issues related to communication with candidates and between faculty members, and (e) issues related to making the portfolio implementation process more meaningful for candidates and faculty.

The first theme in implementation—resources—included four categories: (a) time, (b) training, (c) funding, and (d) data management. Teacher educators stated that the portfolio

implementation and evaluation process was very time consuming. One respondent discussed candidates' time being a resource that was scarce given their [candidates'] work schedules (most were working teachers) and program requirements. Respondents also talked about the need to train candidates and faculty on the technology required to develop a portfolio and train faculty how to integrate the portfolio into their courses. Funding was a major issue, both as compensation for faculty and public school staff and for acquiring the space, equipment, and support needed to implement an electronic version of the portfolio. The last resource was related to data-management. Programs need additional resources to organize and make use of the data related to the portfolios that they were collecting to assist them in program improvement. As one faculty member asserted,

“We’ve got this very expensive process in play, it’s generating, you know tremendous data that can inform our thinking, but we really don’t have a sort of efficient way yet to manage the data that’s being generated across the candidates.”

Another theme related to portfolio implementation was evaluation. Comments related to evaluation fit into four categories: (a) validity, (b) reliability, (c) checkpoints, and (d) high stakes assessment. Respondents talked about the issue of validity and whether or not the artifacts required for the portfolio provided evidence of teaching ability. They were also concerned with issues of reliability. Respondents stated that even with a strong rubric there is subjectivity and they questioned how reliable the process really was across faculty evaluators. Respondents also discussed the use of checkpoints. The general sense was that checkpoints were needed to track candidate progress and prevent candidates from waiting until the end of the program to do the portfolio only to realize that they did not meet all of the program requirements. The last category related to evaluation was the use of portfolios as a high stakes assessment. Respondents

questioned whether or not it was right to fail candidates who passed their coursework but failed to complete portfolios. When talking about the struggles her department has had with evaluation, one professor noted frustration with using portfolios in a high stakes situation while employing a gate system. She explained,

“There are students that have passed the courses, the content of the courses, but don't pass the gate. So that creates problems, as well. So, you know, they can get two C's or a B and a C, because they're taking these two courses together...and they don't pass the gate because they have not, and for numerous reasons, you know, maybe they didn't do their portfolio or they did a poor job on their portfolio. And, so then we're in a situation that, it's set up now that technically they should fail the block because they didn't pass the gate.”

Professional ownership of using portfolios to evaluate candidates also emerged as a theme. Responses fit into two categories: (a) professional decision-making, and (b) faculty buy-in. Teacher educators responded that the decision to use or not use portfolios and how to implement their use was not up to them. One respondent felt the process had been taken away from the department and turned into something with little or no meaning because it had been so standardized that the picture of the candidate was lost. She explained,

“We had a system that was wonderful in terms of showing us student growth, and students were really excited about being a part of it. And now it has become so mechanized to meet national accreditation and state program approval, that it's tragic (laughs).”

Teacher educators also stated that not all faculty members were buying into the use of portfolios and the level of commitment demonstrated by faculty varied widely.

Another implementation theme that emerged was communication. Communication focused on two categories: (a) communication with candidates, and (b) communication between faculty. Comments on communication with candidates included the need to formalize the process for delivering information to candidates, and the need to communicate more clearly the requirements and evaluation procedures for the portfolio. One respondent remarked,

“We’d like something like a handbook that includes the more detailed information we’d pass out during either the student teaching or the research project experiences.”

Communication between faculty members and faculty across programs included comments about dispersing accurate and meaningful information to all faculty and staff, and how to share information about candidate progress across faculty and programs.

The final theme relating to implementation issues was how to make the process meaningful for candidates and programs. The three categories used to organize this information included: (a) artifacts, (b) usefulness, and (c) candidate reflections. Respondents stated that they wanted the selection and presentation of artifacts to be more streamlined because the process is so cumbersome. They wanted the selection and presentation to be more focused to avoid redundancy because in some instances too much information is not helpful. Teacher educators also wanted the portfolio to be useful—something candidates would use beyond school—but questioned whether or not it would be. They also questioned its usefulness with regards to program refinement. Finally, respondents talked about reflections and the need for these reflections to be more targeted towards demonstrating knowledge of best practice. As one respondent pointed out,

“I think it is important for the reflections to also, the reflections of the artifact, be

...tied back to the theory that they learned, and they picked out in their previous classes. So it's not just, this is how I feel about it, but this is how I feel about it and it's also based on either evidence-based research or a theorist or a course that I took, and so that indicates this is in fact best practice."

Participants whose programs did not use portfolios but plan to do so were asked what issues they felt were of concern regarding the implementation of portfolio assessment.

Anticipated issues with implementing portfolios included: staffing issues, training of staff, evaluation reliability across faculty, and finding adequate time to evaluate portfolios.

Respondents also cited the addition of coursework to programs to develop the portfolio, orienting candidates to the process, and implementing supervision and additional advisory time for candidates to complete the portfolio as concerns. The purpose of the portfolio for programs was also an issue. Respondents questioned whether the portfolio would be used by the department to evaluate competence or used by the candidates for employment purposes. Finally, one respondent questioned the use of portfolios for high stakes assessment by asking,

"Can we pass students who pass courses but not the portfolio assessment?"

Issues with how portfolios are used

Participants were asked to discuss issues with regards to how portfolios are used, including how they are used by programs, candidates, or any other group within or outside of their university. Respondents repeated several themes and categories that were previously discussed with regard to the implementation process including: (a) candidate self-evaluation, (b) candidate reflections, (c) how to make the portfolio process more meaningful, (d) program benefits, (e) communication between faculty, (f) faculty buy-in, and (g) the use of checkpoints for evaluation purposes. However, several new themes emerged during the discussion on how

portfolios are used. Respondents (a) talked about a lack of consensus on how to use the portfolio, (b) questioned the usefulness or value of the portfolio to candidates, and (c) discussed candidates' rights with regards to the use of portfolios as a high stakes assessment.

Statements related to consensus fit into four categories including: (a) purpose, (b) consensus between programs within a college, (c) consensus between faculty and candidates, and (d) shift in focus. Teacher educators said that there were often different views about the purpose of the portfolio and how it should be used. Different purposes for the portfolio included professional development, program assessment, and employment. When explaining her school's situation, one respondent stated,

“We’re trying to figure out how best the portfolio is going to fit within our unit. Are we going to look at it a professional developing tool for the students, are we going to look at as an opportunity to go back and reassess the program from the quality of the work the students are producing... you know there is a lot of issues involved with how we’re using it and there is a lot of people. We’ve got thirty people in the department or the school and there are different views about how it should be used.”

Respondents also stated that how the faculty viewed the portfolio impacted on the message they gave to candidates regarding the purpose of the portfolio, which sometimes created confusion about candidates' views of the purpose of the portfolio. Respondents also indicated that there was sometimes confusion between programs regarding the use of the portfolio. This was more of a problem for teacher candidates in dual-major programs that were trying to satisfy requirements for both special education and regular education. Teacher educators talked about the lack of consensus between faculty and candidates. Respondents reported that candidates are

looking at the portfolio for pragmatic uses such as aiding them in the attainment of future employment, while faculty want candidates to view it as a professional development and/or assessment tool. Teacher educators also wanted to get more use out of the portfolio as a program evaluation or accreditation tool.

Value or usefulness of the portfolio for candidates was another concern. Responses related to the value or usefulness of portfolio use were sorted into four categories: (a) value of the portfolio to candidates, (b) not being used by candidates, (c) post-preparation use, and (d) use as a professional with p-12 students. Teacher educators questioned the value candidates placed on the portfolio and reported that candidates did not get as much use out of the portfolio process as they would like for them to have gotten. Respondents said that candidates did not see the usefulness of the portfolio for post-preparation professional development. When thinking about the meaningfulness of portfolios, one faculty member remarked,

“You know, I think the student body feels its just something for licensure and see we have them doing electronic portfolios and they kind of feel like its just a hoop. You know, and it certainly needs to be more than that because ...it’s an issue down the road for professional development.”

Respondents also said that administrators and mentoring teachers were telling candidates they were not likely to use them once they left their teacher preparation program. One respondent said that faculty members in her program worried that the candidates would develop a negative view of the portfolio and not use it when they entered their own classes with school aged children.

The final theme to emerge from this discussion was candidates’ rights. Respondents were concerned about candidates’ perceptions of the fairness of the evaluation process and their right

to a fair evaluation. Respondents spoke about candidates requesting a second opinion on their portfolio because they believed they had been evaluated unfairly. As one teacher educator explained,

“Different faculty members evaluate portfolio expectations in unique ways. So, for example a student will come to me, and in fact I have two portfolios sitting on my desk, this is a special ed student who is in a different seminar than mine and she says my faculty member is not willing to accept my expectations. I don’t understand it. I think if I were in your seminar you would accept my expectations.”

Finally, respondents were concerned about candidates’ rights with regards to using the portfolio as a high stakes assessment. They felt that they needed to find a way to integrate the portfolio assessment into the program so that candidates viewed it as a part of the program and not an additional requirement. Respondents were concerned about what to do in cases where candidates passed all of the coursework but failed to complete the portfolio assessment satisfactorily. One respondent considered the issue when describing an interaction with a colleague who was upset about the use of portfolios to determine certification, saying,

“I don’t really know yet, but you know he’s right in the sense that they make A’s on all their courses and then fail their portfolio they probably have grounds for a lawsuit and that’s probably true, so how do we incorporate that outcome measure within our program and make it clear that they can’t get certification unless they do well on their portfolio.”

Discussion and Implications

This study identifies some of the common portfolio practices but also brings to light some

issues related to portfolio use. Programs are using portfolios for multiple purposes, have both positive and negative perceptions of the impact of portfolio use, and identify a number of questions that professionals in the field have regarding portfolio use. As discussed by respondents in this study, questions still remain regarding whether or not portfolios are a reliable measure of a teacher candidate's level of knowledge or ability to teach. Several conclusions can be drawn from the results presented here. First, teacher preparation programs are moving ahead and implementing portfolio assessment. Moreover, in many cases portfolios represented a high stakes assessment where progression through a program or certification/licensure was on the line. Issues identified by respondents indicated an awareness that a multitude of problems— theoretical, philosophical and/or logistical—exist, but programs felt compelled to implement portfolio assessment. While many reported that they believe it is good practice to use portfolios, they also indicated that portfolios were a program or college requirement. Some felt that the decision to use portfolios and how to use them had been taken out of their hands and that preparation programs were influenced by external forces such as state boards of education and accreditation organizations, suggesting a loss of professional ownership of portfolio assessment. This lack of ownership may be one reason why respondents said buy-in from faculty on the use of portfolios varied widely even within individual programs. Based on findings from this study, teacher educators have been asked (in some cases required) to implement the use of an assessment without being allowed the time to examine the practice and establish empirical evidence that portfolio use is a meaningful practice that actually meets the needs of teacher educators.

Second, results show there are differences in the field regarding purpose, development, and evaluation of portfolios. While most programs indicated that they were using portfolios for

the assessment of teacher candidates' attainment of professional standards, their expectations exceeded the purpose of assessment alone and hoped that the process would track development, promote reflection and self-evaluation of learning, and help teacher candidates secure jobs after graduation. The portfolios were also being used for program evaluation purposes, indicating an expectation that the work candidates produced and presented would help guide program development. Respondents reported a lack of consensus within individual programs about how portfolios should be used. Consistent with earlier findings of Snyder, Lippincott, and Bower (1998), programs using portfolios continue to report that they believed multiple purposes caused tension, confusion, and frustration for candidates. While some general comments can be made about the portfolio development or construction process, interview data confirmed that each program had its own method for getting to what may be defined as a common practice (i.e., creating a single developmental portfolio that grows with candidates as they progress through a program). There were no standard expectations or guidelines across colleges and universities for developing portfolios and instructing candidates on how to use portfolios to gain maximum benefit from the process. Evaluation practices and training for evaluators were equally varied. Most programs used a rubric for assessment, but the rubrics were developed within programs or colleges and were altered over the years to fit the needs of the individual programs. Few programs had formal training for evaluators, and most training was done within programs. There was no standard rubric and more importantly standard definitions of what it means to be competent in any given standard area. There are a few data to indicate what or how much training evaluators need to evaluate portfolios. Carroll et al. (1996) found that faculty agreed that formal training for faculty on how to use portfolios is important and suggested that teacher candidate preparation programs consider the training of evaluators as they move towards

implementing portfolio assessment, but the data presented here indicates this process of preparing portfolio evaluators is still in the developmental stages.

Third, candidates' rights with regards to using portfolios as a high stakes assessment should be considered. Though the use of external reviewers was employed in previous studies to lend some reliability to the evaluation process (McKinney et al., 1995; Scanlan & Heiden, 1996), respondents in this study reported that typically a single person evaluated a portfolio. Candidates have the right to question why a single person should be in control of determining their progression through a program of study or their attainment of a certificate. Respondents reported that the portfolio allowed them to track progress and identify candidate needs early. When the portfolio is used for this purpose, programs should make it clear to candidates that group decisions are being made when candidates are in danger of not progressing. Teacher candidates may not perceive the evaluation decisions as being fair if they do not have a clear understanding of the process faculty use to make their decisions. This may be more problematic when candidates only see that a single person is initially evaluating the portfolio.

Respondents indicated that portfolios were typically used to evaluate the completion of state standards, end of program performance, and student teaching performance but were also used as a medium to evaluate knowledge and skills, reflection, communication, and a candidate's ability to integrate all program components. This list suggests there were a number of expectations for the candidates beyond the attainment of professional standards. While teacher educators saw the potential benefits of using portfolios with teacher candidates and believed that there were positive outcomes, teacher educators would benefit from clearly communicating to candidates the expectations and the candidates' responsibilities. As reported by McKinney et al. (1995) and Dutt-Doner and Gilman (1998) candidates often find the portfolio development and

evaluation process confusing. Programs should consider, if they have not already, candidates' rights to develop a remediation plan when they discover they have not met stated professional standards and expectations. Few participants in this study identified that they had an action plan if a candidate did not complete the portfolio, and many expressed concerns about having to deal with this problem at some point in the future.

Fourth, preparation programs have been asked to implement this assessment process without adequate resources and planning time, and so teacher educators reported uncertainty about how to implement this process so that it is meaningful to the candidates and the preparation program. While some teacher educators were beginning to introduce the portfolio in the early phases of their programs and were attempting to have it be a developmental process, there are data to suggest that candidates are using what they have been taught, or developing a more complex understanding of the learning process (their own and that of their p-12 students) as they develop the portfolio. Based on the findings from this study, there seemed to be a split in how programs were handling portfolio development.

One approach to portfolio assessment involved programs creating very prescriptive directions about how the portfolio should be organized, what should be included, and how candidates should reflect to demonstrate competency of professional standards. In some ways this process has benefits. The more prescriptive the requirements, the less time consuming the portfolios are to review and grade. It's easier for candidates because they have less to think about and know exactly what the faculty wants to see, which means there may be less anxiety about getting a passing grade. However, as suggested by Potthoff, Carroll, and Anderson (1996), this prescriptive approach may take the process of development (and ownership) of the portfolio away from the teacher candidate and in some ways standardize a process that has been lauded for

its strength in showing individualized holistic portraits of teacher candidate learning. But how do teacher educators otherwise direct teacher candidates on the path to future self-reflection and professional development if they do not first give them some basic knowledge and strategies for examining their own learning?

A different approach to portfolio assessment involved programs trying not to be prescriptive and giving teacher candidates the opportunity to document their learning. This freedom may create confusion and frustration for teacher candidates who have no prior experience with portfolios and have grown dependent on external evaluators to identify what they know and don't know. Responses in this study were consistent with a Loughran and Corrigan study in 1995 where they reported that teacher candidates were not accustomed to taking ownership of their learning. In order to meet the spirit of many of the anecdotal and opinion papers on the topic of portfolios, teacher educators may need to provide additional instruction on not just how to put a portfolio together but how to actually use it to reflect on their professional practice in its current state and what they want for their future professional practice.

Fifth, in practice, teacher educators appeared to be mixing and matching the basic components of teacher preparation like coursework, field experiences, faculty-candidate contact, and direct supervision and then claiming that portfolios are a successful practice without isolating the components or variables in order to identify the impact of portfolios. Respondents had issues with the amount of time needed to plan for and evaluate portfolios, but they were excited about the amount of time spent with teacher candidates in helping them to understand their teaching, the standards, and portfolio development. They reported that they enjoyed the process and felt it impacted on teacher candidates' learning. In these particular cases, the portfolio was a conversation piece that facilitated the direct faculty-candidate contact that

Renzaglia, Hutchins, and Lee (1997) identified in the special education teacher education literature as having an impact on candidates' beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions.

Finally, professionals in the field seemed to be hesitant to take control of the portfolio process and integrate it into their existing programs or restructure their programs to make it a meaningful part. Portfolios seem to be viewed as an additional requirement and not something integral to teacher candidate professional development. Portfolio implementation and evaluation do not appear to be given adequate resources for effective and efficient use. This lack of integration and allotment of resources prove particularly problematic when one considers the message they may be sending to candidates about the importance of the portfolio. Given the amount of thought that went into the responses by the participants in this study, it is clear that teacher educators are looking at this practice and wondering how to make it better.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations exist for this study. Rather than using a random sample of programs from across the nation, an entire population within three states was used for the study. Therefore, generalization of the results may be limited. As with all survey research, the data is dependent on the respondent correctly interpreting items on the survey. Though efforts were made to use consistent terminology within the survey, teacher preparation literature is filled with inconsistent use of terminology, especially with regards to portfolios, and such inconsistencies may have contributed to some misinterpretation of survey items. Another limitation of survey research is the lack of depth of information that can be conveyed in a survey. Open-ended questions and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted to clarify and add richness to the data, but the survey alone was more descriptive and informational than insightful.

Another limitation of this study is the dependence on respondents to accurately answer

interview questions. On several occasions questions had to be repeated or additional information had to be given to the respondent for clarification of the question. This additional information may have influenced a participant's response to the question.

Problems still exist and questions remain unanswered about portfolio use. Teacher educators need much more empirical data to inform and establish good practice for using portfolios. All stakeholders need evidence that portfolios increase attainment of employment, increase or improve teacher candidates' reflection on teaching and learning, and that the instructional methods being used with candidates to educate them about portfolio development and use are improving their ability to evaluate their own learning and develop professional goals. Now that there is evidence that portfolios are being used as an accepted practice for teacher candidate assessment, future research is needed to establish that portfolio assessment is a valid measure of future success and representative of what candidates know and can do in order to justify its use as a high stakes assessment.

Researchers need to address the issues and concerns that currently exist regarding portfolio development, in order to identify those components that make this process more meaningful for candidates and faculty so that they can be used throughout the field. Research needs to be conducted on the impact of instructor (faculty, staff, and cooperating teachers) knowledge and expertise in using portfolios on teacher candidates' use of portfolios. Researchers also should investigate ways to streamline the process without reducing the quality of instruction or evaluative feedback to candidates, and without losing valuable information teacher candidates want to share regarding their learning. Research is needed to develop guidelines for developing portfolios and instructing teacher candidates on how to use portfolios to gain maximum benefit from the process.

The impact of technology on the process should also be examined. Many new logistical problems are arising with the increase in the use of electronic portfolios. Research needs to be conducted on the growing number of commercially developed software packages that teacher preparation programs are considering using to make electronic portfolio development more user-friendly.

Another important area for examination is the portfolio evaluation process. Teacher educators need to know what and how much evidence demonstrates competency in a standard area; how much involvement in the evaluation process should be expected of teacher candidates in the different phases of their learning and portfolio development; what external evaluators contribute to the evaluation process; whether the timing of evaluation(s) impact candidate learning and portfolio development; and what is the content of the rubrics used to evaluate portfolios, together with the criteria for validating those rubrics. Standards appear to be guiding the content of the portfolio but the level of assessment. However, it is not clear whether what is represented in the portfolio assesses knowledge, product, or performance; with performance being the desired and most difficult to define and assess.

Finally all stakeholders' perceptions of the value of portfolios should be examined to determine how to foster positive perceptions of portfolios. Faculty is under-represented in the literature, as are public school personnel. Teacher candidates often have daily contact with teachers in schools and share their experiences with their mentoring professionals. Respondents reported that public school teachers and administrators often give candidates the message that portfolios are a waste of time. Teacher educators should find ways to involve public school personnel in order to demonstrate the value and benefits of portfolio use.

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