

Exploring the Benefits of Implementing ePortfolios in Elementary Classrooms

A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

In 2020 education took a massive turn into a direction that a lot of educators and students were not used to. The rapid need for technology resources and skills were in high demand. Education leaders began to realize new and modified strategies were needed in order to fulfill the learning needs of students in order to prevent them from falling behind and increasing the size of learning loss. Research provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) from 2019 to 2021 detailed a decline in student performance level. The report included information about the declining of reading and math scores due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2019-2021 reading performance level dropped from 47% to 43%, while math performance levels dropped from 50% to 35%. Now more than ever it is important to not only teach in a way that better suits students but also provide opportunities for them to showcase their learned skills by giving them choices, and ways to prove what they have learned through a variety of platforms.

In this review of literature we will explore and analyze the benefits of implementing ePortfolios into third through fifth grade classrooms. The reason for this study is to focus on providing enriching opportunities for students to showcase their learning by building their own ePortfolio and sharing examples of their work through written & video reflections and also sharing created content based on learning goals. The focus of this literature review will be based on my action research question: How does the utilization and implementation impact 3rd-5th grades students in the classroom?

What is an ePortfolio?

Before beginning to analyze the benefits of implementing ePortfolios in third-fifth grade classrooms, a clear definition of the term must be known. (Abernica, 2009) breaks down the definition of an ePortfolio into two phrases. One of which is the description of a portfolio as a

collection of students' work and progress. And what makes a portfolio an ePortfolio is it being an electronic version of it (Harapnuik, 2018.) describes the minimalist definition of an ePortfolio as digital evidence of the learner's meaningful connections. As ePortfolios can be presented in a variety of formats, utilizing them can provide opportunities for learners to showcase learned skills in many different formats.

The Benefits of ePortfolios

As education methods and strategies continually change year after year, there are a number of factors to consider when implementing change. (Harapnuik, 2018) describes that utilizing and the practice of ePortfolios advances learner centered activities through the COVA approach. The COVA approach contains elements that allow learners to have a (C)hoice, take (Ownership) of their own learning, and establish their (V)oice through (A)uthentic learning opportunities. These are just one of the many benefits that learners and educators can obtain from implementing and utilizing ePortfolios in the classroom. As educators begin implementing ePortfolios into their classroom, a factor that provides learners choice is the contents, design and presentation of their ePortfolio. And while providing choice for creating ePortfolios, this also enables learners to take ownership of their own learning. (Eynon, Gambino, & Török, 2014) describes that data based on the success of students is important, however offers limited insight compared to the use of ePortfolios. This means that although assessment data from tests, quizzes and other forms of testing can be beneficial, ePortfolios of learners have opportunities to showcase their learning in ways that are unique to them. (Fitch, Reed, Peet & Tolman, 2008) lists ways that ePortfolios can be utilized as assessment tools for K-12 educators. One of which is as a formative tool that will provide opportunities for learners and their teachers to monitor progress. ePortfolios could also be utilized as a way for students and teachers to collaborate

through the content of what is being taught and the development of the learners' technical skills. Lastly, ePortfolios can serve as a way for educators to utilize created content from the students as a formal assessment and summative of their knowledge throughout learning units. Through the use of ePortfolios learners are able to choose and develop their own ways to demonstrate the skills they have learned in the classroom.

The utilization of ePortfolios allows students to show a collection of their work while also giving an opportunity for them to show progress and learning through reflections. (Miller & Morgaine, 2009.) describe an example of a good ePortfolio practice as one that includes students showcasing their work and learning progress. As more technology tools have become available to K-12 students in just the past few years, learners now have ample opportunities to display skills that they have developed in alternate forms than standardized testing. One of the key elements in the learning of students is making connections to key concepts. Students must be able to connect the dots from what is being taught to what needs to be learned. (Goldsmith, S. 2007.) describes a benefit of ePortfolios as a way for students to connect and comprehend their coursework to their (students') personal lives.

Challenges of Using and Implementing ePortfolios

With all new methods and strategies, challenges can be expected at first. Although many school districts take it upon themselves to train and teach students basic website building and presentation tools. There are some school districts that may not have the same access to technology or skills that others have. Technology availability as well as district budgets and funding play a significant role in this challenge. This is especially true for rural school districts. (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, and Klein, 2012) states that approximately 20% of children

educated in the United States attend school in rural districts. Typically this results in lower student enrollment and less funding through taxes compared to districts in suburban and urbanized areas. The effect of this ultimately makes it more challenging for students and districts to obtain an appropriate quality and quantity of equipment needed.

Another challenge that can be an issue is class size. In the previous paragraph it was discussed that the availability of technology can be an issue in classrooms. However, something that can be closely related to that challenge could also be class sizes. In order for students in third through fifth grade classrooms to successfully build an academic ePortfolio it will require instruction from their teachers. Class size can be a challenge for the educators who are delivering instruction on ePortfolios as it can require teaching to a large group and ensuring personal instruction time for students who require additional support. (Hoxby, 1998.) states that the reduction of class sizes affords increased learning and investment for students. However, not all schools are able to take advantage of such opportunities. As the building and maintenance of ePortfolios rely heavily on the instruction from a classroom teacher, the amount of students in a classroom can play a huge role in the learning experience of students. As many students today can be considered “digital natives” (users of technology at an early age), there are some who are not as experienced or have had it accessible to them. Therefore, if a large number of students require more attention and support, the instructor cannot provide it in a timely manner.

An additional challenge with implementing ePortfolios into third-fifth grade classrooms can be instruction time. One of the many challenges and issues with educators today is simply finding the time to teach certain skills. As building an ePortfolio is not a learning skill that is accustomed to being seen in the elementary curriculum, it can be seen as an enriching or extra curricular activity. According to a 2021 Grattan Survey on Teachers’ Time, 442 teachers were

asked about if they have an acceptable amount of time to prepare and plan lessons and teach. The results concluded that 92% of teachers selected “always/frequently” to the question: “Do (teachers) not have enough time to prepare for effective teaching?”. While 86% of the teachers responded “always/frequently” to the question: “Do (teachers) not have sufficient time for high-quality lesson planning?”. Many factors that coincide with teaching time also play roles in this challenge. (Hicks & Miller, 2022.) include a list of standardized tests for all states in the U.S. , all of which begin with students testing in their third grade year. As state testing can determine whether school districts can acquire grants and special funding, many programs that are seen to enrich rather than influence content mastery can be overlooked. However, there are many opportunities for students to connect skills they are learning in the classroom to the content they develop and add to their ePortfolio.

Reflections Through Blogging with ePortfolios

If you were to walk into a classroom in the 1960s, think of the things you would see in an elementary classroom. Mostly likely you would see rows of desks with all students facing a blackboard. The only supplies being utilized are pencils, paper, and occasionally crayons. Education has evolved and continues to evolve year after year. In today’s elementary classroom, you may find students sitting at tables or desk clumps. A person will see that strategies such as small group instruction is utilized daily in order to ensure that students who require more support in certain skills get the help they need. However, one of the things that has not changed much is how assessments are carried out. Most assessments that are of extreme importance come in the form of multiple choice tests. The opportunity of utilizing ePortfolios can provide opportunities for students to showcase alternative ways to demonstrate how they have mastered certain skills.

One way students can do this is through blogging. (Boling, 2008.) describes the opportunities that students receive with blogging being able to safely connect with real audiences such as their classmates while teachers act as moderators. Since students are able to connect a learning objective and write a reflection, it makes the message they are projecting more meaningful and authentic. Blogging also allows learners to interact with classmates and view other perspectives about a similar topic.

Summary of Literature Review

An ePortfolio is a collection of an individual's work in a digital format. As education continues to evolve year after year, it has become imperative to educators and their leaders to continue to adapt with the trends and how students learn. As many students are considered "digital natives" because of their exposure to technology through smart devices and computers at an early age, educators can utilize this to better enhance the learning opportunities for their students. E-portfolios allow students to build on their technology skills but also showcase what they have learned while also giving them opportunities to have choice, ownership, and voice through authentic learning. E-portfolios can also be utilized as a reflection tool for students to enhance their writing skills and monitor progress throughout periods of time.

Strengths & Weaknesses of the Literature

The literature review spotlights the benefits and challenges of utilizing ePortfolios in third through fifth grade classrooms. The strengths of this literature includes information about how utilizing ePortfolios provides students with opportunities to take ownership of how they showcase and reflect their learning of academic skills. Another strength of the literature is how ePortfolios can be used as an assessment tool for students to provide reflections on their learning

and monitor learning progress. However, while there are benefits of ePortfolios, there are also barriers that make its implementation challenging for educators. Some of the weaknesses of literature pertaining to this topic is the lack of information related to implementing ePortfolios into third through fifth grade classrooms. The majority of information that can be found pertaining to utilizing ePortfolios relate to secondary and college education.

Focus on the Current Study

The focus of the current study is what are the benefits of implementing ePortfolios in third through fifth grade classrooms. The literature that was found has helped illustrate a clearer picture of what tools can be used with implementing ePortfolios into classrooms while also highlighting some of the barriers that could limit the success in the process. What is encouraging is that while searching through articles and resources, many organizations are building on the foundation of having and creating portfolios. Many of the articles indicate the importance of having academic or professional portfolios. However, the majority of articles reference professional, college or secondary portfolios. There is clearly an emphasis through the research that having a portfolio of some sort is important. While many of the resources do not mention elementary education, they can still be considered beneficial (with modification of questions during research) and help support the data retrieval currently in progress.

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