Learning
Stories in
Practice

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Introduction

Throughout the ages and across cultures story continues to express the fundamental nature of humanity. Stories are not to be treated lightly as they both carry, and inspire, significant obligations and responsibilities: stories must be cared for as they are at the heart of how we make meaning of our experience of the world. (Janice Huber, Vera Caine, Marilyn Huber and Pam Steeves, 2016: 214)

> ## Key messages
>
> - The power of stories
> - Continuing a conversation about a dispositional theory of learning
> - Funds of learning disposition
> - Assessment for learning in early years or early childhood education: the purpose and structure of this book

The power of stories

The viewpoint of Janice Huber and the others named on the title page of this chapter is also the view in this book. It is that: *stories* of teaching and learning are at the heart of how we make meaning of our experiences. The classic storyteller about the power of stories is Jerome Bruner; his writing about education and development in terms of language, learning and narrative has inspired many of the ideas in this book. In Chapter 4 of his book *Making Stories* he asks 'So why narrative?', and responds to his own question (2003: 89, 93):

> One truth is surely self-evident: for all that narrative is one of our evident delights, it is serious business. For better or worse, it is our preferred, perhaps even our obligatory medium for expressing human aspirations and their vicissitudes, our own and those of others. Our stories also impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience, even a philosophical stance.
>
> Through narrative, we construct, reconstruct, in some ways reinvent yesterday and tomorrow. Memory and imagination fuse the process.

Vivian Gussin Paley writes about the *children's* stories in her classrooms. Her many books document the stories told by children, written down by teachers, and acted out by the children. In her 2004 book *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* she states that:

> If fantasy play provides the nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative, and social connectivity in young children, then it is surely the staging area for our common enterprise: an early school experience that best represents the natural development of young children. (2004: 8)

Perhaps Learning Stories are a combination of the teachers' stories about their children's stories; often teachers will ask the children's advice, and certainly they will have a curriculum in mind. But they will be stories, and they will pay attention to 'Making Learning Whole' as David Perkins argues in his book with that name. The power of Learning Stories is not restricted to the early childhood sector. It is increasingly being adopted in the primary sector and Bevan Holloway, a secondary school teacher, says in his paper on assessment and play (Holloway,

2018: 39), 'Learning Stories made me notice the front end of the curriculum in a way I hadn't before, giving me an authentic way to acknowledge students exhibiting those "soft" skills'.

Continuing a conversation about assessment and dispositional theory of learning

Bruner and Paley also inspired two earlier books on Learning Stories (Carr, 2001; Carr and Lee, 2012). *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories* (Carr, 2001: 4–11) argues for a shift in outcomes from skills and knowledges to learning dispositions, and the development of Learning Stories is told in *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education* (Carr and Lee, 2012: 34–40). A reason for this book was to finish a conversation that began towards the end of our 2012 book on Learning Stories, where we used the term 'Stores' to refer to 'the intermingling of stores of knowledge and stores of disposition' (Carr and Lee, 2012: 130), and in note 4 at the end of the first chapter in that book, we acknowledged the significant introduction to the literature of the expression 'funds of knowledge' by Norma Gonzàlez, Luis Moll and Cathy Amanti (2005). This expression referred to 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (Moll et al., 1992: 133). For the children and families in an early childhood centre or a school classroom these household funds of cultural and community knowledge meet the funds of knowledge (both informal and the formal, espoused and hidden) in the curriculum. In the 2005 book *Funds of Knowledge*, Norma Gonzàlez writes about the *hybridity* that emerges from the intersection of these diverse funds of knowledge. She argues that it is with a 'mutually respectful dialog' that 'we can cross the constructions of difference' (2005: 44). We agree. The viewpoint in this book is that assessment practices like Learning Stories can cross boundaries via assessment portfolios to begin conversations about learning between teachers and children, children and children, teachers and families, children and families. These conversations and the revisiting of Learning Stories with adults and other children build, celebrate and critique the children's growing funds of learning disposition.

Funds of learning disposition

In our 2012 Learning Story book, we chose the term 'stores of disposition' rather than 'funds of disposition', and we set them beside 'stores of knowledge' having reminded the readers of the significant work on social and cultural funds of knowledge by Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzàlez (1992), and Gonzàlez, Moll and Amanti (2005). However, in this book we have entitled them *funds of learning disposition*. Developments in early childhood and school contexts of Learning

Stories and learning dispositions have convinced us of the sociocultural parallel of funds of knowledge with funds of learning disposition. In 2016, Bronwen Cowie and Margaret Carr contributed a chapter to an *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* that set out the possibilities that narrative assessment offers in documenting, supporting and reporting the breadth of children's learning. That chapter is titled: 'Narrative assessment: a sociocultural view'. It discusses the implication of a sociocultural understanding of assessment through a focus on three points:

> (i) narrative assessment as a way of acknowledging the distributed nature of learning, (ii) narrative assessments as improvable objects and opportunities for developing a learning journey, and (iii) narrative assessments as boundary-crossing objects that mediate conversations across interested communities. (2016: 397)

The first point acknowledged that 'learning is entangled with, and made possible through, the material, social, cultural, and historical features of the context for learning'. Children are sensitive to the opportunities to learn, and these features are designed to encourage children to be ready and willing to engage with the opportunities in this place (the topic of Chapters 2 and 3). The second point is about boundary-crossing from one community (the early childhood centre or the school) to another (the home); it is the topic of Chapter 7. The third point is about progress over time (Chapter 8). We return to the notion of learning as a 'tangle' in Chapter 8.

In the 2001 Learning Stories book we explained our assessment frame as children being 'ready, willing and able' to learn. We acknowledge our debt to Lauren Resnick (1987) and to David Perkins, Eileen Jay and Shari Tishman at Harvard (Perkins et al., 1993) for their paper entitled 'Beyond abilities: a dispositional theory of thinking'. In that paper, thinking dispositions are described as having three parts: ability, inclination and sensitivity to occasion. We had adopted this triangle to refer more broadly to learning. These three dimensions overlap, but *inclination* includes the notion of a preferred and positive attitude towards this opportunity to learn something; *sensitivity to occasion* includes a 'reading' of the environment or the culture of the classroom (for example, whether the environment encourages curiosity and exploration; who will be chosen; whether expressing uncertainty or critique is OK), and *ability* includes having at least some of the skills and knowledge needed to approach and to learn this 'something'. These three aspects of a learning disposition have been translated as 'being ready, willing and able' (Carr and Claxton, 1989); this book has more to say about a learning disposition, and we include many Learning Stories that illustrate this in practice. Here is a quote (abridged) from Gary, a primary school principal, talking to researchers during a research project on key competencies, assessment and Learning Stories. The five school key competencies are dispositional 'capabilities for living and lifelong learning'.

We need to make a mind shift in terms of how we go about assessing Key Competencies. You can't tick off 'I'm a caring citizen', 'I participate and contribute'. That form of assessment doesn't sit comfortably cos these are dispositions that we are developing throughout our lives. … So teachers need to make that shift from the tick box mentality. What's a better way? How can I show development and growth in the Key Competencies? … How am I going to show that children are reflecting on their learning? Learning Stories have the ability to do that in a very powerful way. (Davis et al., 2013: 19)

Guy Claxton, Meryl Chambers, Graham Powell and Bill Lucas (2011) write about split-screen and dual-focus lesson design. On the one hand the focus is on content or subject area (or the learning area). On the other hand the focus is on learning dispositions (the key competencies). They argue that:

All lessons have a dual purpose, irrespective of the age and ability of young people or the subject area being taught. There is the content dimension, with some material being mastered; and there is the 'epistemic dimension', with some learning skills and habits being exercised. The risk in conventional classrooms … is that students can be learning habits of compliance and dependence, rather than curiosity and self-reliance. Where teachers are making conscious choices about what habits they will introduce and stretch in the course of the lesson, we call that split-screen, or dual-focus, lesson design. (Claxton et al., 2011: 93)

In the Claxton et al. book, there are graphs that represent data over time from when teachers in seven primary and nine secondary schools began to focus more on 'building learning power' or 'learning habits'. During this same period their test (SATs or GCSE) scores improved – often significantly.

Assessment for learning in early years: early childhood education and school. The purpose and structure of this book

We have often been asked for a follow-on or companion to the 2012 book: one that provides practical advice for teachers who are embarking on a 'narrative assessments-for-learning' journey. So, here, influenced by our ongoing work with teachers across many countries and consistent with the companion 2012 book, is our list of characteristics of assessment that promote learning in early childhood settings or schools with particular emphasis on implementing Learning Stories. Most of our examples are from early childhood centres for children before school, but a number of schools use Learning Stories as well. In both the sectors the principles of assessment for learning are the same, and we explore them in this book using examples from teachers across the world.[1]

This book also encourages discussions about the key features of narrative assessments and the portfolios that we describe as *assessment for learning*. The chapters have developed from the thoughtful comments and questions that teachers have asked us during conversations at conferences, lectures and professional development programmes, and during our research. We have turned these conversations with teachers and students into key ideas, and they frame up this book.

Another implication of these conversations is that teachers in early childhood environments already give feedback to children in order to encourage their learning. This feedback includes gestures, smiles, frowns, laughter, body stance, and nods. In this book, we want to include Learning Stories as 'reified' feedback (made into a thing, an object; in this case, written down, and maybe photographed). We will discuss some of the ways in which this reification works, while at the same time providing ideas that may answer some of the key questions that have concerned teachers. Each chapter title is a quick reply to the 'teachers' question' that is the subject of that chapter.

Learning Stories are formative assessments. They are not summative in intent, although they may include summative elements. The question to be answered is: 'Are Learning Stories *really* assessments?' This is the discussion in Chapter 2: **Being Formative**.

Narrative assessments focus holistically on *learning dispositions*: being 'ready, willing and able'. The question to be answered is: 'Is there a key feature of Learning Stories assessments that tests can't do?' Assessment for learning will focus not just on knowledge and abilities; the learning will be determined by the characteristics of on-going features that wrap around (are woven with) abilities: inclination and sensitivity to occasion. If the learning environment does not enable the knowledge and ability to flourish, then the assessment is not fair, because the learner will not be *willing* to participate. And if the learning environment or tasks available do not encourage *inclination* – an emotional response, revealed as vital by neuroscientists interested in learning – then the teachers are wasting their time. This is the topic of Chapter 3: **Being Fair**.

The assessments *will be embedded in a clear view of the aims of teaching and learning*. The question here is: 'What do we look for when we write a

Learning Story?' These are the powerful frameworks or Big Picture learning that we want for our youngest learners. The connection between the big picture and the parts (the events that the Learning Story is about) will need to be recognised by all the authors and audiences. Usually this will be enshrined in a national curriculum. In Chapter 4 we have called it **Recognising Powerful Frameworks**.

A question to also be answered here is 'Children are at play much of the time: is it OK to be uncertain about what's going on?' We appreciate this: both of us (Margaret and Wendy) have been early years teachers. As a collective, teachers in any one site will need some time together to constantly work towards a culture, a climate, where formative assessment is the 'home language' and the 'next steps' for the learning will feature in the children's portfolios. Team teaching and meetings are a significant feature of maximising a collective climate. Because of the nature of dispositional learning, and the frequently mercurial nature of children's responses and interests, a teacher's disposition to *manage ambiguity* is a major requirement. This is the topic of Chapter 5: **Managing Ambiguity**.

Encouraging the children to assess their own learning achievements and strategies can begin early: 'Can we do this as part of their Learning Story portfolio? Do we have to teach differently?' This includes helping them to notice and recognise that what they are doing is an example or an opportunity that connects with the framing in the curriculum. This is about revisiting the portfolio and the Learning Stories. Teachers have wondered what is the best way to do this. Chapter 6: **Sharing Responsibility with the Learners** is about these questions.

An implication of topics in Chapters 5 and 6 is the common notion that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.[2] Assessment for learning in the early years requires a partnership with families, others in community support roles and the teachers at the local school. The teacher question is: 'How do we encourage

families to read, and respond to, the stories?' Some of the opportunities for Learning Stories to contribute to developing partnerships with families and community are canvassed in Chapter 7: **Developing Partnerships with Families**.

A portfolio of Learning Stories will recognise, construct, and record the growth of learner identities. Teachers often ask 'How do we describe progress?'. Chapter 8: **Constructing Progress** reviews the ways that progress has been described in Learning Stories earlier in the book. Using a case study as well, it illustrates the way Learning Stories recognise and construct (tangled) lines of progression.

We introduce here a 'progressive filter' of a Learning Story assessment process, and we will return to this in the discussions about progress in Chapter 8. Teachers are noticing, recognising and responding to the children's learning many, many times during any one day at the early childhood, or early years, centre. Some of those occasions will be written down, recorded, as Learning Stories for portfolios.
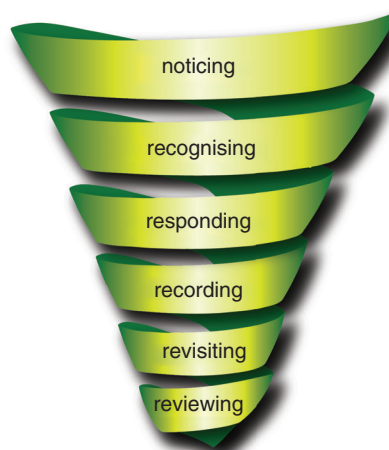
Sharing learning experiences

Jared, this morning I was working at the mosaic table when I heard some excited chatter coming from the purple couch by the portfolios. It was you and Zavier, looking at your portfolios together.

"Look, I can do the monkey bars. I practise it", said Zavier. You looked at the Learning Story that Zavier was showing you and then started flipping through the pages in your portfolio. "I can do the monkey bars too!" you said, pointing to a story in your book.

For the next little while, you and Zavier shared your learning with each other, you showed Zavier your story about building with the train tracks, and Zavier showed you his story about making books. "I can make books too", you said.

What learning do I see happening for Jared?

Children's portfolios are a literacy artefact and play a very important part in their learning at kindergarten. We know that Jared loves his portfolio, and almost everyday he takes the opportunity to sit down and revisit his learning through this tool, sometimes on his own, and sometimes sharing his learning with his friends and teachers.

We know that children are more likely to engage in conversations about learning while using their portfolio as a tool for revisiting previous experiences. Jared used the visual pictures to help him to talk with his friend Zavier about his interests, and to learn about Zavier's interests and what they have in common.

The revisiting of prior learning experiences is one pathway in which Jared is developing his identity as a learner. It is the Learning Stories and the portfolio that enable children to recognise the learning journey that they are on. Through using his portfolio, Jared is developing the capacity for self-assessment, and for reflecting on his learning.

Jared, it was exciting to see you sharing your learning with your friend Zavier. I know how much you love your portfolio, and you took great pride in sharing the stories and photos with a friend.

Written by
Nadine

Learning Story 1.1 *Sharing learning experiences*

Author: Nadine Priebs

Many Learning Stories in a portfolio will be revisited and reviewed by the families (see Chapter 7), the teaching team and the children, as we see in Learning Story 1.1 in this chapter. In this example, the two children are reading the photographs to revisit the events in their portfolios. The teacher hears the revisiting and reviewing conversation: one of the children, Zavier, comments on a story where he is practising to climb on the monkey bars; Jared finds a parallel story, 'I can do the monkey bars too'. We note that the 'monkey bars' often appear in portfolios as a record of progress: counting the rungs achieved before the child jumps down. The teacher recognises that the portfolios 'are a literacy artefact' and they provoke conversations.

A Learning Story represents a way of assessing and teaching. The Learning Story portfolio acts as a 'boundary object' to provide two children something to talk about together, and to grow friendships: as we see in the Learning Story attached to this chapter. It is a literacy event too: in this case the children were 'reading' the photographs and talking about their common attempts to achieve success. These opportunities to 'read' a portfolio include turning the pages in sequence, and being introduced to print connected in deeply personal and emotive ways to photographs of the reader. There is research evidence that similar narrative events at home predict competence at reading (Reese et al., 2010).

The topics in Chapter 9 for **A Learning Story Workshop** mirror the chapter topics in this book. That chapter includes more questions to explore, ideas to try, topics for further thinking and collaborative activities for a team.

Learning Stories as a philosophy of assessment and learning and teaching

Learning Stories provide each teacher with the opportunity to use their authenticity, passion for life, joy and creativity to celebrate the uniqueness of each child. Learning Stories also provide the vehicle by which teachers can transform their relationships with children, parents and teachers while deepening their reflection to demonstrate teaching that makes a real difference. Carlina Rinaldi says of teaching: 'It is a difficult path that requires efforts, energies, hard work, and sometimes suffering, but it also offers wonder, amazement, joy, enthusiasm, and passion' (Rinaldi, 2006: 67). Learning Stories can: provide teachers with the opportunity to make visible the value of learning in their community, raise professionalism, develop enthusiasm for teaching and record a powerful trace of their professional life.

Although Learning Stories are a powerful tool for assessment, they are also a sociocultural philosophy of teaching. This is about the power of the learning environment and the culture of the classroom or the early childhood centre. Assessment often sits outside or alongside the teaching of the setting but assessment via Learning Stories becomes deeply embedded in the daily life of the education setting. It becomes woven into the very fabric of the teaching. It should be noted that in some Learning Stories and throughout the text of this book, we use Māori words. The meaning of these is given in a glossary at the end of the chapter where they are first mentioned.

Photo 1.1   *Storyteller Children's Center*

It is critical that children have daily access to their portfolios of Learning Stories and share them with others (children, parents and teachers) as this helps build the 'learning and teaching' culture in the setting. Vivian Gussin Paley describes how children's stories should become an embedded part of the life in the classroom. So too should Learning Stories become deeply embedded in curriculum. In sharing the stories, teachers and children are also building the learning culture of the early childhood setting. Learning Stories not only have the capacity to make learning visible, but they also strengthen relationships, build learner identities, engage the family, support transitions, evolve into planning stories and contribute to accountability. We have added a picture from the Storyteller Children's Center, Photo 1.1, designed to illustrate their philosophy about the power of stories to make learning visible. Every day, individual children's Learning Stories are selected and shared with the class.
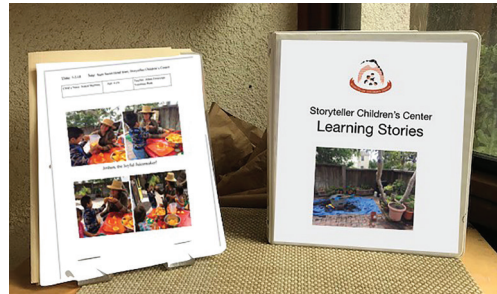
Further thinking

- Looking back: Think of a story about learning something when you were very young.
- Why do you remember that?
- Have you noticed a young child learning something? What captured your attention?

Further reading

Carr, Margaret and Lee, Wendy (2012) *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*. London: SAGE. Chapter 2: Why story?

New Zealand Ministry of Education (2004) *Kei tua o te Pae* Book 1 – *An Introduction to Kei Tua o te Pae*. Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars. Downloadable at: www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/Kei-Tua-o-te-Pae/ECEBooklet1Full.pdf (accessed 3 December 2018).

Notes

1. In this book we use the word 'teachers' for all practitioners who care for and facilitate the learning of babies, toddlers and children outside their home. In many countries, teachers in early childhood centres are, like their primary school equivalent, 100% qualified in three-year programmes of study and practice, and we all aspire to this.

2. Wikipedia tells us the following: This is an African proverb. It means that it takes an entire community of different people interacting with children in order for a child to experience and grow in a safe environment. The villagers would look out for the children. This does not mean an entire village is responsible for raising your children and/or the children of a crowd.