

# **DOCUMENTATION OF LEARNING STORIES: A POWERFUL ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Following the development of a national early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996a), two New Zealand Government-funded research projects are developing assessment methods for early childhood. Both projects take the view that, 'If we want to see real curriculum reform, we must simultaneously achieve reform of assessment practices' (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992, p.29).

The first project (1995-1997) involved research in five different settings, with the aim being to explore ways in which the socio-cultural basis for Te Whāriki could be reflected in assessment processes. That project (Assessing Children's Experiences in Early Childhood Settings) developed a framework for assessment that was dubbed 'Learning Stories' (Carr, 1998a, 1998b, 2001). It was a narrative mode of documenting children's learning, and took a 'credit' rather than a 'deficit' approach to assessment. That first project argued that the 'outcomes' of early childhood education are 'participation repertoires' or 'learning dispositions', and it promoted a wide definition of 'learning dispositions' so that they included skills as well as funds of knowledge.

The second project (the Early Childhood Learning and Assessment (Exemplar) Project) began last year, working in 50 different centres and settings to collect 'exemplars' of assessment that reflect different aspects of implementing Te Whāriki. This project is part of a wider, national, school-based assessment project.

Both these early childhood assessment projects are about formative assessment: feedback and feed-forward to learners, other staff, and families in the interest of better learning and teaching. Both projects are designed to assist teachers with the process of noticing, recognising, and responding to learning within the framework of Te Whāriki, and to contribute to discussions about assessment. The second project has an additional element: advocacy for the rich opportunities to learn in early childhood settings.

In between these two projects, a number of professional development programmes have taken up the Learning Story framework, and assisted early childhood teachers to adapt it to their situations and communities. One of these programmes, the Educational Leadership Project (ELP), is developing assessment techniques in early childhood centre settings. This paper presents examples of the application of Learning Stories for assessment using examples from both the professional development programme (ELP), and the Exemplar project. All the examples have come from Centres who have participated in ELP.

These examples reflect 'work in progress' to develop assessment processes suited to each setting. Even when the ECLA Exemplar Project is completed (February 2003), it will still be work in progress, since one of the outcomes of the project is to develop procedures whereby early childhood practitioners can develop their own exemplars; examples of assessments that reflect the opportunities to learn in their particular setting and their community. Not all settings in the Exemplar project are using Learning Stories as a framework, but all settings are required to implement assessment procedures that follow the four Te Whāriki principles, and many centres are trialling Learning Stories to see if they reflect these principles.

#### **Four assessment principles**

These principles are embedded in the Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (commonly known as DOPs, that became mandatory in 1998; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996b). Early childhood settings in New Zealand that receive

government funding are required to document some assessment, and DOPs includes a requirement that educators should implement curriculum *and assessment* practices that:

- (i) Enhance children's sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners.
- (ii) Reflect the holistic way that children learn.
- (iii) Reflect the reciprocal relationships between the child, people and the learning environment.
- (iv) Involve parents/guardians and, where appropriate, whānau (extended family).

Another major influence in the use of learning stories is the socio-cultural and ecological perspective provided in Te Whāriki.

### **Learning Stories reflecting socio-cultural and ecological perspectives**

The kinds of assessment we are looking for are not unique to Te Whāriki; they would be relevant to any socio-cultural approach to curriculum at any level of education. In the UK, Caroline Gipps has written about what a socio-cultural approach to assessment might look like in schools (Gipps, 2001). She points out that “how we construe learning taking place is crucial to how we construe teaching as an activity, but it is also crucial to how we construe assessment.... Teaching learning and assessment are inextricably related.” (p.1). She suggests that the following key aspects of Vygotsky's ideas relate to assessment:

- The role of assessment in identity formation is important.
- The inseparability of social affective and cognitive dimensions of action and interaction: learners should be assessed in social settings.
- The critical role of tools and relationships in human activity, and the implications of offering assistance and guidance during the course of an assessment. The relationship between expert and ‘apprentice’ around which intellectual development hinges is an important one.

As for other innovative curricula in the last decade Vygotsky was an important background figure for the New Zealand curriculum because he wrote about the central importance in learning of: belonging, contribution, exploration and play, communication and language, and well-being within positive relationships with others. The strands of curriculum in Te Whāriki are well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and

exploration. Vygotsky didn't say much about families, so we added Bronfenbrenner (1989), and the fourth principle of assessment (as well as curriculum) about family and community involvement.

### **Documentation**

To assist in the development of assessment we have developed a series of computer-based formats for the presentation of Learning Stories that can be modified to suit both the setting and the modes of data collection (i.e. narrative, digital photography etc). In general, this format requests documentation in adherence with the four assessment principles.

The documenting of learning stories has been an open and evolving process, providing opportunities for teachers, children and parents to make visible the learning that is valued in that setting. The different forms that this documentation has taken includes:

- a. written narratives,
- b. computer generated narratives,
- c. film-based and digital photography,
- d. video footage, and
- e. examples of children's work.

The tools that have been used apart from pen and paper comprise a number of electronic media including:

- a still and digital cameras,
- b audio and video recorders,
- c computers,
- d scanners, and
- e photocopiers.

One of the areas of great interest and development has been the way in which such computer technology is assisting us and teachers with this documentation process. For many teachers, their own learning in using computer technology has been exponential. Teachers have reflected on this with much enthusiasm and excitement as they strive to find ways to document children's learning in a manner that is both formative and integrated into the curriculum. Digital video and still cameras coupled with computers

have been pivotal in many settings in providing easier access to ways of truly integrating assessment and curriculum. Accessing user-friendly computer software like 'imovie' has meant that teachers have been able to rapidly develop narratives about events involving children quickly and easily. Families unable to go on excursions have been included in these experiences with the use of shared videotapes and photographic records that the child can take home to share with the family. This type of sharing has enabled families to share their perceptions of their child's learning journey. The documentation of children's learning is no longer hidden in filing cabinets and restricted to teacher discussion, but is often now in the public domain as an integral part of the programmes. This enriches the curriculum and the learning in that setting. The ongoing, multi-media documentation is enabling teachers to truly listen to each child and access what that child's interests and strengths are. This assists them to find the place in which deep involvement in learning can take place. This multimedia documentation has also been instrumental in including families in their child's learning.

For example, from one piece of video footage a whole raft of useful documentation can be developed to enhance children's learning and involve the family. The trip to the Weird and Wonderful Display at the Museum was video taped by teachers. On return the following documentation resulted:

1. A video tape of the event for children to take home and to share with their families, particularly valuable for those who were unable to attend. This not only provided access for the families but also an opportunity for children to revisit the experience.
2. Using the same video footage, group learning stories were put together of the experience to place in each individual child's portfolio - again an opportunity to revisit and discuss
3. Again the video footage was revisited to provide information to help individual children reflect their own perspectives of the day and this was documented into individual child voice documentation for each child.

4. Again the video footage is visited to provide photographic material for individual learning stories, documenting that which is valued and significant for individual children.

A second example is of Bailee's mathematical learning and demonstrates the usefulness of video in capturing the different episodes in children's learning. Initially the video is used to revisit and then some key elements of the learning are documented for the child's profile.

The example of the story book created from a video is an excellent example of the integration of curriculum and assessment, the blurring of the boundaries between these two areas. "The Day Fuka's Hen came to Kindergarten", provides ongoing documentation for an enjoyable event that can be built on by teachers, children and families.

### **EXAMPLES OF LEARNING STORIES REFLECTING ASSESSMENT**

What kinds of assessment would best fit with the principles of Te Whāriki, and its socio-cultural and environmental approach to learning? We started to write stories about the children; stories designed to work in four key ways to enhance children's learning and development. As Covey (1999) said;

"I've come to realise not only that a picture is worth a thousand words, as the far eastern expression goes, but that the picture created in the heart and mind of a person is worth ten thousand."

Such stories have become an important foundation for the documentation of children's learning. They are assembled together in portfolios, not as an end product, but as a 'work in progress' that are fully accessible to children, parents and the teachers. The documentation includes not only stories, but also photographs, as well as children's voices, teachers' voices and parents' voices. Along with photographic narratives and group learning stories, this 'living' documentation forms a powerful framework to provide direction for teachers and children in the provision of rich and challenging learning environments. The documentation is inextricably linked to the curriculum. Narrative

modes of assessment focussed on a credit model are particularly effective conscription devices because they:

- (i) Provide a means of access for families to the practice and the purposes of the setting.
- (ii) They have an emotional appeal: that is affirming for families, children *and* teachers.
- (iii) They crystallise some of the dialogue about learning into formats that both represent and document something valuable about the community's practice.

In Etienne Wenger's (1998) words, they 'reify' the practice, translating it into an artefact or a resource. Such documentation and formats also anchor practice.

In the following examples we illustrate how the documentation of children's learning through stories can be used to reflect both the principles of Te Whāriki expressed in DOPs, and the socio-cultural, holistic approach to assessment.

The examples of learning stories are presented in the framework shown in the Table, this framework lists a number of the important elements of learning that contribute to the four principles

**Table. Framework for the examples of Learning Stories**

**(i) enhance children's sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners.**

- about children's developing identities as learners, based on learning dispositions that parallel the five strands of the curriculum
- take a credit rather than a deficit approach, in order to develop learning repertoires and dispositions
- include children's voices
- describe progress in a way that families and children could appreciate

**(ii) reflect the holistic way that children learn.**

- follow children's enterprises over several days
- document centre projects

**(iii) reflect the reciprocal relationships between the child, people and the learning environment.**

- advocate for early childhood
- reflect the relationship with the environment
- reflect the relationship with the teacher

**(iv) involve parents/guardians and, where appropriate, whānau (extended family).**

- stories that are accessible and interesting to families
- stories that provide opportunities for families to contribute stories of their own from home.

**Stories enhancing children's sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners.**

About children's developing identities as learners, based on learning dispositions that parallel the five strands of the curriculum

Firstly, Learning Stories should show how children enhance their sense of themselves as capable people and competent learners. Learning stories are about children's developing identities as learners, based on learning dispositions that parallel the five strands of the Te Whāriki curriculum (i.e.: the tips of the curriculum iceberg). The assessment project took the view that children should leave early childhood settings for further education with some well-established learning repertoires: such as packages of 'inclination', knowledge, and skills to do with *being a learner*. 'Being a learner' includes a view of self as; interested and interesting, someone who gets involved, a learner who persists with difficulty and uncertainty, a communicator, and a citizen or member of a community with rights and responsibilities. The outcomes in Te Whāriki were summarised as, 'competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society'. (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996a)

To present an example of this, we see the development of learning in the assessment portfolio for a child called Caitlin. One of her learning stories describes her construction of a birdhouse. In this learning story, Caitlin is initially involved in designing the birdhouse. She was able to communicate her ideas and then to seek the support she needed to complete her project. This project provided rich opportunities for problem solving. She exercised her imagination and initiative, persevering with this quite tricky task. There is no doubt from her comments that she has a view of herself as capable and competent.

Take a credit rather than a deficit approach, in order to develop learning repertoires and dispositions

Learning Stories must also take a credit rather than a deficit approach in order to develop learning repertoires and dispositions. For example, Bishop & Glynn (1998) state that;

'If the image we hold for Maori children or indeed any children, or of interaction patterns, is one of deficits, then our principles and practices will reflect this, and we will thereby perpetuate the education crisis'.

This is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of our framework. Teachers have for years been trained with an image of the child as needy. This view provides a framework where teachers seek to fill the gaps, rather than focus on the strengths and interests of the child. It requires a strong shift in thinking, to a socio-cultural view, to enable teachers to bridge the divide and focus on the credit model. Jack's story and specifically the documentation of the credit experience is a potent indication of the powerful impact of documentation in enhancing children's confidence in their learning. When Jack arrived at the childcare centre he was described by the Early Intervention Teacher as a serious behaviour problem. Intervention teachers and psychologists had collected a file on Jack describing his difficult behaviour. At the early childhood centre teachers began to collect positive stories about Jack's learning. Jack and his family were very excited and interested in this new portfolio. The portfolio pulled in the grandparents and his father to take an interest in Jack's stories. When Jack went to school, his mother and father opted to take only the learning story portfolio and not the intervention and psychologists assessments. At school Jack settled well, and there was no suggestion by the teacher that he had a behavioural problem. All of the people who have worked with him, have recognised the powerful impact of the credit based documentation that became an integral part of his life.

Another example is shown by documentation for Adam. His story initially reflects his uncertainty and lack of belief in his ability to carry out the task he wants to. Fish are his passion and he is keen for others to draw them for him. In this case, a teacher who is responsive and sensitive to his learning goals supports him in his efforts to realise these goals. The documentation of this story is further enhanced with the use of the computer to exemplify Adam's passion for fish. This delights the child when he sees the documentation of his learning story surrounded by fish.

Kian's story is a poignant one written by a mother in response to seeing a learning story written to reflect a deficit view. This was her first experience of receiving credit documentation of her child. Previously, the majority of the documentation she received was written in a deficit mode and reflected strongly the gaps in her child's development.

Immy's story is another that builds strongly on the credit. If we are to stand by the principles of inclusion then surely the importance of ensuring that children with special needs are assessed using the same assessment techniques.

It has become very evident in Early Childhood Education that documentation matters. However, what and how we document matters even more. It has the ability to have a profound impact on children's lives. Children's voices are becoming stronger and stronger through this process. Portfolios are becoming a rich source of the child's history, a celebration of the learning shared by children, parents and teachers.

*Learning Stories should include children's voices.*

The focus on assessment as part of a learner-in-action has encouraged teachers to look for ways to include the child's voice. One of the ways in which this is done is by documenting children's responses to their work. An example is provided by documentation for Sophie. She had been painting roses that the teacher had brought to kindergarten that morning. The teacher had also brought along a rose book as well, which Sophie had shown a lot of interest in. They had looked at the different roses as well as identified the ones that were in the vase. The story for Sophie reflects not only her interest (i.e.: her voice) but also her competence as a learner.

In another story, the teacher had presented an X-ray picture to a child as a 'provocation'. Nic's response is in my view insightful. He is clearly drawing on his own experiences to understand the picture. "Look it's showing his bones," and when asked by the teacher 'How is it doing this?' he responds, "I don't know - its pretty odd isn't it. Maybe they did it just for fun. They do that when you've got broken legs. The last time I broke my leg, it snapped off the side. I don't know why they have to do it (x-ray) two times, maybe in

case they lose one". This story reflects Nic's voice, encouraging communication and reflecting his use of experience and theorising his learning.

Koasigan and Cameron's learning story is about peer teaching and how other children's voices matter too. So often we witness the children being the teachers in an early childhood setting. Koasigan and Cameron are sitting together viewing a book titled 'How your Body Works'. Cameron is turning the pages. "Look at that funny hat" says Cameron. "Oh! That's not a funny hat, it is your brain. Your brain is for thinking," says Koasigan in an informative manner. "Look at that funny hat too" says Cameron. "No that is your skull, it protects your brain, stops it from being sandwiched" said Koasigan. This story certainly demonstrates that children are great teachers and that the "voice" of peers is important. It also shows that children construct knowledge together.

George's voice has been captured by his mother and she has returned to the centre to give it to the teachers. While George attended the centre, his competence and particular strengths in the area of mathematics were well recognised. The mother captured this voice when they visited his new school to meet the Principal and to talk about George's transition into school. After the Principal had shared all she wished to with George and his mother she turned to the children and said, "Now children, is there anything you would like to ask me?" Given George's interest and passion for mathematics he immediately asked an 'easy' maths question, "What's five plus five?" The Principal proceeded to count to ten using her fingers. George was most perturbed that the Principal didn't immediately know the answer, and had to resort to her fingers!!!! It is hoped that teachers working with George will take up the opportunity to read his Portfolio and thus begin to appreciate and value his strengths. They will then be able to build effectively on this foundation.

*Describe progress in a way that families and children could appreciate*

Learning Stories also describe progress in a way that families and children can appreciate. One parent shared this view with the teacher, "As an adult who's never been involved in teaching, you tend to think of learning as being where your child needs to be sitting down, and counting or trying to write a word, or trying to learn their letters. Learning

stories have really taught me that at this age, kindy age, that they really don't have to be learning like that. They learn in so many other ways. It's really made me realise, and I'm so glad, cause I'm quite happy to do more fun things with Tom, and don't care if we don't do what I used to call 'learning'. Learning stories are excellent, and I think it will be wonderful for Tom to look back on, when he's grown up".

Many parents have used the parent voice forms to document their views of their children's progress, here are two examples.

"Cameron has come a long way since attending kindy, and I would like to thank you all for helping Cameron to achieve that. Cameron's talking has also come a long way, when he first started kindy all he could do was "grunt" now he can use sentences. Thanks!!!"

"When Fe'ao arrived home with his school folder. He wanted to show everyone what insides the folder. He explain what he was doing on the photos. He will name each person appear on the photos. If he notice anyone looking up his folder, he will come and sit next to that person and explain all inside the folder. We are so glad that we made the right decision by bringing Fe'ao up starting kindy... He will never be at this stage right now if we left him at home till he's 5 and ready for primary. THANK YOU ALL TEACHERS for your kindness and being there for Fe'ao. Bless you all"

Suelisa's learning story is a story that demonstrates very vividly the power of documentation. Suelisa arrives and finds separating from her family difficult. In time her father leaves and she stays close to one of the teachers. They then sit together with her portfolio and talk about it. At this point, the teacher remembers that some years ago Suelisa's siblings attended the kindergarten and that she had photographs in some old albums of a trip that the siblings went on that also involved Suelisa's father. The photos are taken out of the album and placed in the Portfolio. Suelisa's delight is evident as she clutches the Portfolio tightly and gradually moves away with the portfolio in tow to explore the wider kindergarten environment. At the end of the day, Suelisa insists that she take the Portfolio home to share with her family. The next day she returns, but alas has forgotten the Portfolio. Again she returns to stay close to the teacher for the session. The

next day she returns with the Portfolio and keeps it close at hand as she moves around the environment happily involving herself in a range of activities. Not only is this story a story about the links with the environment, but a superb example of the responsiveness of a teacher who was able to use past documentation to enable Suelisa to make the connections with her family to the kindergarten and increase her sense of belonging in her new and somewhat unknown environment. The learning stories that followed are testimony to the increasing sense of belonging that she developed over this period.

**Learning stories should also reflect and show the holistic way that children learn.**

*Follow children's enterprises over several days*

Such stories focus on meaning as well as the actor, the stage, and the plot. They don't divide experience up into fragments like the old PIES (physical, intellectual, emotional, social skills) framework did. Such stories include children's enterprises over several weeks. I have talked earlier of Bailee's work that developed over several days. Another example is of Charlotte who needed a cat, so 'Mitzy' was made; the first of several small animals constructed over several weeks. Charlotte's mother's story is testimony to the importance and value placed on these learning experiences by the family. There is no fragmenting of the learning experiences and clear evidence of a wide range of learning opportunities.

*Document centre projects*

Stories illustrating holistic learning also include examples such as a series of stories for different children at the same centre. These started with Belinda's dress. She was very passionate about the Spice Girls. The centre had a sparkly dress and everyone wanted to wear it. Belinda made her own 'spice girl dress'. Belinda's mother tells us "Belinda loves her dress so much! She wore it to bed!" Belinda's dress became a motivational point for many others in the centre, who decided they also wanted to make clothing. Then others began to diversify. From here on in, sewing has become a developing passion in this centre, an embedded part of the centre's culture. Binal's ensemble was inspired by looking

at earlier documentation of sewing projects in the centre. Many projects have been undertaken from Olivia's monkey to Harry's Donkey.

**Learning stories that reflect the reciprocal relationships between the child, people and the learning environment.**

Learning stories also document the reciprocal relationships between the child, people and the learning environment. The teacher's voice is a key part of this: it is both very powerful for the teacher's voice to be heard and important that it is not silenced (Smith, 1998 pg 41). Assessment in narrative form, as a story, keeps a connection between the individual learner and the environment. It describes a learner-in-action (Wertsch, 1991). The role of tools (including language and relationships with adults and peers) is seen as critical. Assessments document what the children can achieve with assistance, and that assistance is included in the documentation. Research tells us (Ames, 1992 p.263) that there are three important features of a classroom that influence learning orientation:

- (i) The design of the tasks and learning activities (they should be varied and diverse and have meaning for the children),
- (ii) Assessment practices and rewards (external assessment pressure and social comparison appears to have negative consequences for children's interests),
- (iii) The degree to which teachers involve children in decision making and give them responsibility.

*Advocate for early childhood*

Learning stories can also advocate for early childhood. For example, one parent in the first assessment project commented. "As a parent, the Learning Stories have given what is seemingly 'play' a new perspective" (Carr, 2001 p.180).

Portfolios become literacy artefacts, enjoyed by children, parents and teachers. Children demonstrate an understanding that adults value their learning. They then actively participate in gathering documentation of their work. They often direct adults to 'write that down' or ask 'are you going to put that in my Portfolio?'

Rinaldi (2001) discusses the importance of encouraging revisiting, interpretation and 're-cognition' as being important to the knowledge-building process. There is no doubt that the portfolios provide rich opportunities for children to revisit their earlier experiences. Alex's story is about revisiting her portfolio and reproducing a block tower she had built six months earlier. Alex appeared with her portfolio and began to look at it with one of the teachers. There was a lot of discussion as Alex chose the exact blocks needed to replicate the original tower. Alex then looks at the photo and says it wasn't finished when the photo was taken and points to the blocks in her hand, she then carefully matches the blocks and adds them to the new construction and completes it. The teacher could feel the excitement and enjoyment Alex was experiencing as the tower took shape. Alex announced that she would write the story and began to carefully copy the story written in her portfolio. Alex had initiated the whole exercise and was actively pursuing the opportunity to write. She not only connected the narrative in the story to her current block building, but she wanted to be the storywriter. Another opportunity in which the portfolios are providing rich opportunities to building a culture of purposeful literacy.

Portfolios of Learning Stories are now firmly embedded in curriculum in many centres. They have been woven into the fabric of curriculum. Children are thereby engaged with their own and other children's learning. Sharing their portfolios is a regular event, helping children to make connections, helping teachers, children and parents to build a community of learners.

Yvette's mother shared with the teachers what her child told her about a recent trip to the StarDome Observatory.

"There were lots of talks about the trip and the stars and moons and how the moon was talking. I would have loved to come on the trip but unfortunately I couldn't but I was very glad that Yvette went and it was one of her first experiences going somewhere without me and she really enjoyed it. I find taking them on trips is a great idea as they learn more. It has given Yvette great encouragement to be going on her own and she is not shy now. I had great fun reading the story and even listening to her stories. She has gone more into learning about stars and planets and more questions for me to answer which I enjoy as I am learning through her as well. After the trip she has been telling me more about it and

also telling stories to her little brother Brendan and has even asked her Dad that he should take Brendan to see the stars as well. I find it very encouraging for my daughter to be going out and learning. She loves going through the file and her photos and telling the stories about what happened. It is great to have the video, which reminds the children of what happened, and they remember more of the happenings. It is great and I enjoy looking through it myself. Thank you for all your hard work and devotion."

*Learning stories that reflect the relationship with the environment*

This is an example of a Group Learning Story which focussed on the sea and the river but then expanded greatly to encompass the wider environment. Some of the stories reflecting this engagement with the environment concentrated on a range of experiences:

1. The Paua story - children were fascinated with the story and showed great interest in the sea.
2. They then went to the Library in search of books about the sea.
3. And then the fascination grew about the book titled 'The Gentle Giant Octopus', the book took the teachers 6 days to read the 24pages, such was the enjoyment of the group.
4. The children were fascinated with the size of the octopus which was 4.8 metres long, they recreated the octopus on the roof
5. The project developed, now the creation of a 'taniwha' (dragon-like) began to take place.
6. Other members of the community joined in and shared their expertise and knowledge.
7. Eels came to visit.
8. Finally the Kaitiaki (guardian), our taniwha was fixed to the wall and the children all sat down to look at it and sing karakia (blessing)
9. The children are continuing to work with the harakeke (flax)
10. and then the programme continues to develop.....

The programme is documented in a way that it can be shared with the wider community. Photographic documentation is placed on the wall. A group learning story is written for all the children, sharing with the families and children what has been happening and

outlining 'what learning is going on here?' Photographic group records are also documented in the childrens' portfolios. At the same time many individual stories are recorded, focussed around the programme but reflecting the individual child's interests and responses to the programme.

A group of Burmese families entered the refugee centre. Families spend six weeks in the centre before they are resettled somewhere else. The teachers write learning stories about the children, and they are translated for the families. The teachers had prepared for this group of families by finding photographs of Burmese temples, resource materials such as small ornate blocks that provided a range of shapes were also collected. When the first intake from a refugee camp on the northern border of Burma arrived, the children were delighted to find the images of the temples. One of the children, To Po was totally fascinated by the photographs and during his time in the centre drew fantastic drawings of temples and spent hours building temple structures. He and his work were photographed and documented and placed on the wall. Some months later another intake of refugees arrived from Burma. This time one of the children, Noel sees the documentation of To Po in the centre and says "Wow, is my friend here?". There was such delight when Noel made this connection and realised that he would again see his friend To Po in his new country. A third intake arrives at Mangere and yes another connection is made, this time by Prasit, he recognises both To Po and Noel from the Refugee camp and is clearly full of joy to discover they will all meet again. This is again such a wonderful illustration of the powerful nature of documentation, this time in helping children to make connections with their past experiences in the refugee camp and help them to bridge experiences into their new country.

Angel's story is the story of a child who now well understands the 'literacy' culture of this centre. Angel understands that this is a place where teachers and children record information about their work. Angel now has a clear idea that her thoughts and ideas can be recorded in print.

### Learning Stories that reflect the relationship with the teacher

Stevie's story is a story of exclusion and the ways in which the teacher supported him to enter play. It is an acknowledgement of his feelings that demonstrates and documents the respectful relationship that is developing between the teacher and the child.

Dunja's learning story is not only about her relationship with the teacher, but about a number of other relationships involved; Dunja and her friend Madeline, her Mother's relationship with the Teacher, and of course Dunja's relationship with her mother. It is a story of strong reciprocal and respectful relationships, acknowledging Dunja's increasing competence and her mother's delight in her learning.

### **Learning Stories involving parents/guardians and, where appropriate, whānau (extended family).**

Learning Stories should document involvement with parents/guardians and, where appropriate, whānau Helm et al (1997) make the following comment about documentation:

"It is worth the investment of time and money. However, a side effect, not predicted but perhaps the most far reaching, was the frequently reported increase that teachers experienced in their joy in teaching and the parents' joy in their children's learning."

Such narrative forms of assessment must be accessible and interesting to families. They should capture parents' interest.

### Stories that are accessible and interesting to families

The story of Vinni's slippers is an example of not only the extent of this child taking responsibility for his own learning, but also the appreciative participation of his mother and her involvement in the assessment process.

There are many, many examples of learning stories that capture parent interest. Nicholas's Mum responds with a Parent Voice:

"The folder put together by the teachers at kindy is wonderful! Nicholas was very excited today about the new pages in his folder. He raced me over to see them with much pride!

A beautifully written description of his latest 'art and design' activity impressed me! I had no idea how talented my wee boy was. With great photos of his design (plans) and the design made up. His accuracy amazed me! Thank you for the wonderful stories and photos in his folder. The detail and attention is a credit to all the teachers and we will take away precious memories. Thank you".

Another example is made available by a small vignette provided by a teacher's narrative of an observation with a child's portfolio:

"It was our Christmas Party on Tuesday. The next morning I walked into the centre and watched. Jak and his Dad were walking towards the Portfolio cabinet. Dad had a photo and together they put it in the portfolio and smiled at each other. His Dad said, "we will put it in here Jak" and he pointed to the empty envelope (in the portfolio). It was a precious moment and I didn't interrupt, I quietly enjoyed the pleasure of seeing it happen and realise how precious that portfolio is becoming to Jak's family, not just his Mum and Dad, but his Grandparents as well. The respect each family member demonstrates to Jak through his Portfolio is awesome."

Documentation of Learning Stories certainly helps parents. For example, Faisal's Dad arrived at the Centre, somewhat concerned that his child is just playing, playing, playing. He expressed concern that at home Faisal does not do any study, or drawing, or writing, nor does he bring much work home. At this point the teacher suggested that he might like to spend some time looking at his son's Portfolio. After reading the Portfolio his Dad returned to the teacher, shaking his head saying, "Wow, the book is fantastic. I have never seen anything like it. Yes, my son has done a lot of work and the photos are beautiful".

Learning Stories Portfolios also help grandparents. One of the teachers shared a story stating that Micah's Mum had photocopied his portfolio twice and had given a copy to both sets of Grandparents for Christmas. They had been quite astounded and very, very excited over it. What a lovely gift. . On seeing the Portfolio all family members were lining up to read it including Micah's Aunties!!

Stories that provide opportunities for families to contribute stories of their own from home.

Learning Stories can reflect funds of knowledge and ways of 'knowing' from home. Here is a series of stories for two-year-old Zahra, in this early childhood centre for refugee children and their families.

- Story 1 Zahra spots the rocking horse, clearly feels at home rocking on it at the beginning of each day. (This story is translated for the family.)
- Story 2 Mother reports that Zahra asks each evening if the 'donkey' at the centre is warm, asleep (Parent's voice)
- Story 3 Brother explains that there were many donkeys at the refugee camp
- Story 4 Grandmother spends considerable time at the centre, explains that the family has been donkey traders for two generations. (Grandmother's voice)
- Story 5 The teachers finds songs, stories and pictures about donkeys for Zahra.

The teachers have learned that donkeys are of great significance to Zahra. She has found something to talk knowledgeably about in English with both Zahra and her family, an entry point for the curriculum. Zahra's story, and its re-storying, goes with her to her next early childhood centre. It is a story of formative assessment and belonging.

Andrew's story tells vividly that his teachers value what aspirations Andrew's family have for him. His mother has written her own story sharing some of Andrew's interests and making her own assessment about what she would like Andrew to do. This information is immediately taken on board by the teachers and responded to. Andrew's mother is thrilled and instantaneously responds by writing again and giving more information about her child's interests.

I want to finish off by sharing an individual child's portfolio. A major part of the Exemplar Project is following 'case study children'. This is a story of one such case study. This is Neeve's Portfolio. Neeve was attending a childcare centre and there are many threads that I could follow in Neeve's portfolio. However, the thread I will focus on is the 'power of the learning disposition'. It includes both Neeve's stories and her mother Linda's stories. It is a portfolio that demonstrates the power of documentation: powerful when it

is both purposeful and meaningful to the learner. The following are just a few images taken from her portfolio in an effort to give some insight into the development of learning dispositions and how this can be documented.

- Story 1 Neeve's crocodile, created over a period of one and half hours - using a book for motivation and stimulation. By now Neeve's interest and passion in reptiles, dinosaurs, sculpture and modelling is well established.
- Story 2 The Green Playdough dinosaurs. Magnificently sculptured with problems solved when working with such soft materials.
- Story 3 The flat dinosaurs
- Story 4 The Dinosaur paintings, the start of a bigger project that would involve another child. An opportunity for Neeve to be a teacher as well.
- Story 5 Making the movie - together the children worked to create an event to share with all the children in the centre including a soundtrack.
- Story 6 The power of the documentation was epitomised when Neeve sculpted a dinosaur in the sandpit. When she had completed the work she sought out a teacher to photograph the work so it could be documented in her portfolio. By now Neeve knows well the value and power of the documentation. Alas the battery is flat to the digital camera. Neeve protects her work until the battery is recharged and the photo taken.

For some time the teachers had been having discussions with Neeve's mother about her child's learning. Linda had said I know Neeve is doing wonderful clay work, but she can't sit at school all day and do clay work. I can't see how this will help her get ready for school." The teachers continued to talk about Neeve's wonderful learning dispositions and the learning strategies she uses to drive her learning.

Then one day this mother came and shared this with Robyn (the supervisor)

"Robyn, I think I understand what you said the other day about Neeve using her learning strategies in other areas of learning. Neeve wanted to tie up her shoe lace and I showed her how. She practised and practised and practised and in the morning she said, "Look

Mummy I can do up my shoe lace!" And she could. Robyn, it was scary seeing how intensely she applied herself to the task and how quickly she learnt!"

It is absolutely clear from this documentation that Neeve's mother now understands without a doubt that Neeve is ready for the learning environment of the classroom, an independent and competent learner. This has been borne out in her transition into the school classroom.

For many parents, their child's Portfolio has become the motivating force in extending their understanding of how their child learns. It demonstrates how establishing a community of learners involving children, teachers and parents drives learning. The practice is reified by translating the child's learning into a significant resource, strengthening the connections between children, families and teachers, and is valued by all of the community.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

If we hold a socio-cultural and ecological view of learning then:

1. It means that we ought to acknowledge the part that we and the activity play in the child's learning, and include that in the assessment whenever we can.
2. It means that we take a wide view of outcomes that integrate the physical, intellectual, the emotional and the social.
3. It means that we will try occasionally to allow children the opportunity to make their own assessments, and to have a hand in what goes into their portfolios; we will also document those times when they take on responsibility.
4. It means that we will keep in mind the notion that we are integrally involved in developing children's identities as learners, and that this will be best achieved by modelling and creating a culture in which learners are valued.

The documenting of learning is a powerful way to not only support the learning but to nurture the future learning opportunities of each child. Successful aspects of the work being carried out in New Zealand include:

- Credit based documentation
- Multiple voices (teachers' , children' and parents')
- Strengthening of the reciprocal relationships between children, teachers and parents
- Accessibility of the portfolio and integration of assessment with curriculum for children, parents and teachers at all times
- Making learning 'visible' for parents and children
- The use of digital technology and photographic recording to increase accessibility for both children and parents.

We are continuing to explore the ways in which we might better document learning. A new project will explore more fully the use of Information Computer Technology and more specifically the possibility of a child's learning being collaboratively developed on a computer with both video images and the multiple voices of those involved and participating in the child's learning. It is an exciting and positive journey!

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