

Learning Stories: Tracking learning progress, making a difference in children's learning lives.....



Lorraine Sands

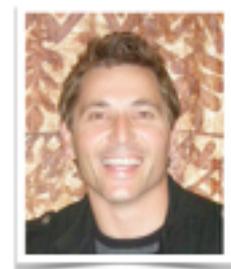
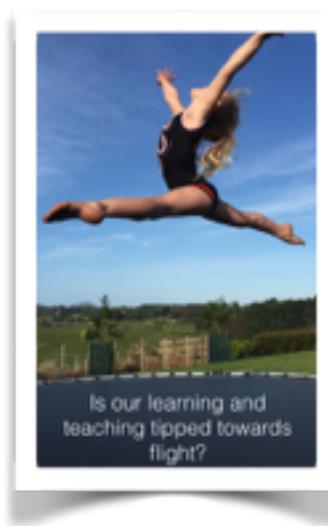
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Stories have been told ever since we could scratch marks onto cave walls. They have been powerful forever, across all cultures, all time. The ones we remember are the funny, sorrowful, poignant, bumpy, joyful ones that capture our hearts and minds. They connect the past and the future, into the present, and make us remember; let us imagine; create possible worlds; other identities.

What a stroke of genius then to connect stories and learning together. I think back to the time before Margaret Carr (2001a) first brought Learning Stories to teachers' attention and realise how bereft we had been, with the limited way we had tried to convey the learning erupting all around us in our early learning settings. As I think about the reports we offered families/whānau, I remember feeling that these reduced, anecdotal, or testing accounts of learning, fell so far short of the energised efforts of children. Each and every moment we witnessed children's struggle to stretch themselves, far beyond anything teachers could plan for them, yet we persisted in thinking these limited accounts of children's fine and gross motor skills, and the accumulated rote learning of numbers, colours and letters, could define a child's learning progress. I remember feeling uncomfortable, somehow 'short changed', but ensnared in the plight of 'short changing' children and families, all in the name of being accountable. It was what we thought we were supposed to do. Fill children up with skills and knowledge, set up activities with learning outcomes in mind, and then steer children towards acquiring an ever increasing cupful, so they would be 'ready for school'. It took a while to think beyond this into what being 'ready for life' might mean.

Te Whāriki (1996) was the catalyst for this angst about learning, teaching, planning and

assessment. The current assessments, the running records, the time sampling, the disguised testing, the judgements, based on anecdotal samples, couldn't fit philosophically into a principled, research based curriculum that called on learning communities to 'be all they could possibly be'. As with all major shifts in thinking, there was a 'disconnect' that created the space for teachers to re-think their role. And so, when the theory of Learning Stories / Narrative Assessment was presented, as a response to Te Whāriki's embedded socio-cultural theoretical framework, teachers were primed to explore this way of working. Finally, we could really grapple with how the Principles of Te Whāriki, 'empowerment, holistic development, relationships, family and community' (Ministry of Education, 1996) could look and feel like for infants, toddlers and young children. And not just for some children, but each and every one, as teachers thought much more carefully about ways to nurture learning inside a community, focussed on learning for all, where fairness and equity meant every child's learning journey was tracked. A fundamental shift, in the way teachers thought about their role, and the way they thought about learning and teaching, occurred.



Nathan Mikaere-Wallis says parents' and teachers' job, for children between 3 and 7 years is to create the thinker.

We write about the edgy, open ended learning that happens as children are irresistibly drawn into learning. This is what makes the difference as children re-visit their learning and reconnect with those times when they were 'being brave, being determined, being imaginative, being social. These stories must be full of the characteristics that help to shape children's identities of themselves as learners. "I am brave...." "I don't give up...." "I practice...." This is how I learn...."

David Perkins makes these comments:

“It’s never just routine. It’s about thinking about what you know and pushing further. It involves open ended or ill-structured problems and novel, puzzling situations. It’s never just problem solving it involves problem finding. It’s not just about right answers. It involves explanation and justification. **It’s not emotionally flat.** It involves curiosity, discovery, creativity, camaraderie” (Making Learning Whole, 2009, p.29).

What powerful language; the kind that shifts hearts and minds. So what could this possibly mean for teachers as they engaged with children moment by moment? **Learning Stories** (Carr and Lee, 2012) have enabled us to share insights with each other, think deeply about our practice and become better learners and teachers as a result. In Greerton Early Childhood’s, Centre of Innovation Research Project, 2006-2008, the teachers made these comments:

“It is this context of learning and teaching as ‘collaborative endeavour’ that captivated teacher interest to find out more about what kinds of settings and relationships make a difference to children’s learning. It is our intention to disrupt conventional thinking through exemplars that show invested teaching that includes; co-construction between children and teachers, sustained shared teaching episodes extending children’s thinking, valuing of children’s contribution to the learning experience and making links across time by revisiting children’s ideas and interests”.

Learning Stories offer possibilities for conversations with parents and whānau/family about children’s learning. Having and building on those conversations can powerfully grow our relationships with whānau and provide the productive partnerships we know help us to realise children’s potential. Only Learning Stories that are thoughtfully, lovingly, written can lay claim to this.

As children build their ideas about risk and challenge they start from where they feel comfortable, then stretch the edges of their competence. They practice. It is when they are crew members, rather than passengers that children ramp up their capacity for social learning.



Those accountability driven ones, hurriedly or belatedly written to tick the accountable box, are imposters! And those ones written because we have been given a list of children we are expected to write for ...? The spirit of emotional connection is often lost when we are tunnel focussed, and we miss so many opportunities when our tasks to be done are put before our search for the intricate, complex, courageous learning that ought to be leaping out in front of us. Celebrating and then stretching emotionally charged learning, gives form to learning identities that sit inside a learning context - not abstract but real experience, thoughtfully and sensitively written, from the perspective of a teacher who cares deeply about this child.

Te Whāriki and Learning Stories have enormously shaped our vision of the child today. We are focusing on the process of what it takes to be a learner, rather than focusing on the child’s skills being the evidence of their learning. Learning is much more than skills, testing and compliance. And when the motivation for learning comes from within and is nurtured by teachers inside a curious environment, skills and knowledge catapult to the surface as the natural result of sustained, thoughtful, practiced inquiry.

It is always a humbling experience to think how we can 'grow children's learning' because children are in the driver's seat! They choose what they will learn, and it is often something we haven't considered, that is until we start to write. Arthur's Learning Story is an example of this kind of surprise (see appendix 1 & 2).

This is why it is important to lessen the 'surety' of the language we use in the Learning Stories we write. We don't actually know what each child has learnt, only a well informed guess, depending on how well we know this child and how much we know about their whānau context. Children do not come as isolated learners. They come into our lives as fully connected beings to their wider whānau and the experiences they have there, as well as the gifts they have inherited from their whakapapa lineage (ancestry). **As we write Learning Stories and assess children's progress we are much more honest when we talk about 'wondering, puzzling, thinking, exploring' as ideas on a continuum; a journey that spans a life time.**

I recommend a re-read of Te Whāriki's (1996) section on the characteristics of infants, toddlers and young children. It is so interesting to track the progress from vulnerable infant to powerful toddler and young child and think about the ways we can shift our understandings of what a 'confident and capable' learner looks like over time. How, for example do we write about the competent infant? (See Appendix 1)



Learning Story, Narrative Assessments, are designed to track children's progress and plan for encouraging children's learning to be more complex.

Teachers write with this in mind. The first part of the process is to write the story in a way that connects emotionally with families and children. To do this effectively we put ourselves into the writing process.

For example:

Cora, Catalina has been telling me about how adventurous you are at the farm and I am a little bit sorry I don't get to see this first hand! However, those adventurous exploits hardly ever stay in one place and once you get that feeling that there are things to push to the edge, they show up in all sorts of spaces.

As far as tracking a child's progress, we also talk about how this child's learning has deepened. For example:

And Cora, watching you flourish as a learner has much joy attached to it. As we see you move from quiet observer, to the competent expert that other children are watching with admiration, we are just so delighted! I know all the teachers here would love to hear about your adventures elsewhere with your family because we know you are not at this point without the most fabulous support and encouragement from them.

(For Cora's entire Learning Story see Appendix 3)

Margaret Carr's Learning Story Narrative Assessments were always designed in 3 parts.

1: the narrative

2: the analysis (tracking children's progress)

3: the planning (thinking of ways to deepen the complexity of children's learning. Going beyond the superficial.)

There seems to have been a marked shift, and although these 3 aspects are still expected, the titles for each section are falling out of the Learning Stories in children's folders.

Perhaps this happened because the titles for these sections were originally full of jargon and direction (short term review and what next). However when teachers use more connecting phrases like:

What did I learn about you today? or My thoughts on your learning.... or How has your learning progressed?; they uncover their personal

perspective about a child's learning to share with children and their families/whānau. This is not objective. It is a personal perspective and the 'reliability for assessment' comes from hearing many perspectives from different teachers, the child and the child's family. It is essential to hear the 'many voices' not just one teacher's view.

Always, always there ought to be the word learning in these titles because this gives a strong signal to everyone that teachers are assessing learning in the context of the child's interest, strengths, dispositions and skills. It is not just a nice story. While the photos selected to illustrate learning are very important, the written words reveal this learning more thoroughly. Over time these become the trace of teachers' professional lives and offer evidence for teachers' inquiry research, for their Teacher Practising Certificates, Staff Appraisal and Internal Evaluations.

And then the third part, the planning which is more accurately described as thinking about the way to deepen this learning, asks another question. **How can we grow your learning? How can we offer further learning opportunities? Where might you take your learning next?**

I really recommend that the titles become part of your Learning Stories for the above reasons but also because they help to remind the teacher about analysing the learning through tracking the child's progress. To ensure continuity of learning, there ought to be very clear links between Learning Stories rather than stories standing alone. So at this point the teacher is reminded to think about those links and draw the threads of learning together. This will mean focussing on the dispositions driving the child to want to explore with energy, passion and spirit, but also a clear link to skills and knowledge gaining more complexity as a result. This shifts teachers away from thinking about skills in isolation which is a recipe for emotionally flat learning, while still seeing these skills and knowledge as important outcomes of a dispositional, internally driven, vibrant learning character.

The key thing to remember is that it is the learner who decides what to learn, not the teacher. All we can do is create the opportunities for children to be excited, engaged, committed, and then learning will happen, often at rates far beyond what might be considered 'developmentally' appropriate. When children are deeply, internally motivated they push the limits far beyond anything adults might set as learning goals.

Now this doesn't mean that we are too 'airy fairy' about this, and to see in a child's folder, time after

time, "I wonder what you will decide to do next", takes away the necessity for us (teachers) to act as experienced companions, nurturing learning and giving solid feedback (Carol Dweck, 2006).

So in the How can we grow this learning further ? which is the planning for this individual child we must be very clear about our role. I suggest writing something like this:

- *As I look back over the learning that I saw happening today I can see that this learning is happening in a fluid, fast way. You keep stepping up the difficulty of the goals you set for yourself. I can see our role will be to keep adding more complex language, as well as offering additional resources as provocations. Then we will see what you do with these. Watch this space because I know I will be writing more.....*
- *Your learning today was immense. I think you have become an expert and I know that your skills, born of much practice, will be valued by your friends. I am going to seek you out to help other children who want to be able to do expert somersaults on the bars too, just like you. I think a series of photographs of each part of the technique will be useful. Would you like to do that? We could take some of your best moves and you could choose which you liked most, then we could laminate them and put them in order and up on the wall. Or would a little booklet that we could take outside to the bars be more useful? Now that I've thought about these possibilities, I will be sure to ask you your opinion.*

And of course we must always follow through with a proposal like that! Unless there is clear, in depth thought, about the possibilities we cannot call this planning.



We start with understanding that 'play', uninterrupted complex opportunities for children to be in charge of their learning, is the key. It is in play that children are able to experience every aspect of cultural and social competency, of resilience, of social justice and resourcefulness, of creativity and resilience. These are the building blocks of a strong identity as a learner who will be successful long term. Write Learning Stories with heart energised intelligence, based in the view that children's play lights up every synapse in their brains, and the stories you write will make a difference - to children, to families, to you.

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Old teaching styles that direct children and seek to fill them up with knowledge, do not suffice in a world where knowledge is changing at an exponential pace.

Children who are resilient, resourceful, creative problem solvers, who can work alone and in teams to achieve their goals, develop the drive and motivation to tackle problems in positive, creative ways.



The tree

Arohanui Karen Hose

Arthur lay under the tree with his friend Hazel. The leaves moved in the slight breeze. His mindful gaze was captivated by the tree. Hazel lying beside him was intent on engaging Arthur's attention, but Arthur was intrigued by the tree. Hazel was disappointed, by Arthur's lack of attention, so together we lay on our backs just like Arthur, looking up into the tree, to find out for ourselves what Arthur was studying. We discovered, that in doing this your body first must relax. Together like Arthur our bodies stopped fidgeting and we too became enveloped under an umbrella of leaves.



"Be careful what you teach. It might interfere with what they are learning." Magda Gerber

My thoughts on this learning.....I felt totally wrapped within the tree and began to notice the movement of the leaves and the filtered light that shone through the gaps in the branches and leaves. The colour of the leaves changed with the amount of light they received and just like magic I too was caught under the tree's spell.

This was a very empowering moment for Hazel and me for we could see that Arthur was not just a quiet baby with nothing much going on, but a person feeling, observing, listening, thinking, engaging and finding real knowledge about his world.

Maga Gerber describes beautifully what Arthur is doing in these quiet times, " an infant is constructing a worldview based upon input actively elicited from people and things around her, with"down time"for integration of new learning..."

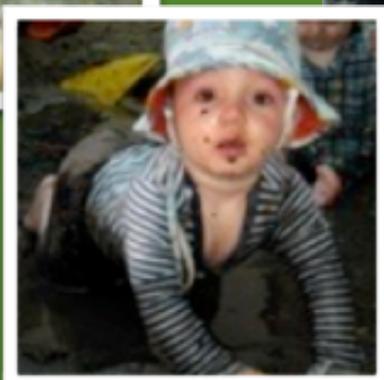
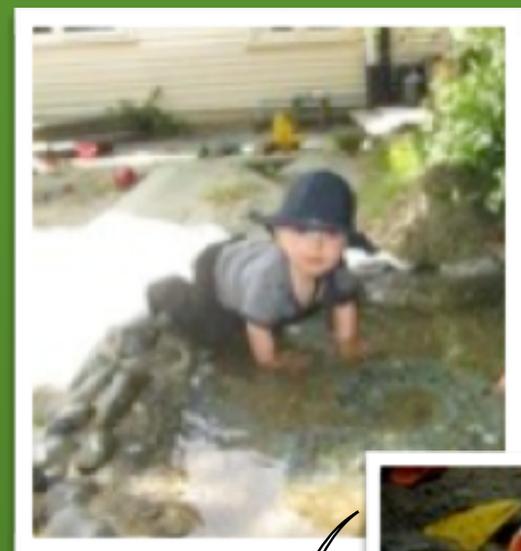
Hazel and I learnt that there is so much we can learn from Arthur, if we take the time to really listen.



How can we grow this learning further?

At Greerton we see the environment and nature as the great teacher that inspires our children to be artists, authors, poets, scientists, conservationists and politicians.

Arthur will have lots of opportunities to continue researching his natural world while at Greerton, for we will actively continue to design our environment to offer natural experiences and ensure he has time and space for his learning to flourish.



Postscript: Arthur, a few months later actively exploring water, once again enveloping his whole body in spirited inquiry.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT MUD?



Good question... for today this mud excited some serious experimentation. Quite often it is fun that arrives in big dollops as children and mud are added together. But not today. This mud experience seemed to raise so many questions, more questions than answers, as Arthur deliberately got stuck in it, scooped it up in handfuls and both patted the globules and smeared them onto his body. There was no laughter, simply serious inquiry. No scientist could have proposed an experimentation more carefully or thoroughly than I witnessed today and the photos tell this series of hypotheses. Which science lab did this happen in? Straight into the mire itself, down in the forest where the water gathers from the surrounding hills. I don't think there could have been a more perfect laboratory than this.





My thoughts about your learning.....

Arthur, finding something so absorbing as this and then checking out its properties, is what a seriously involved learner does. Time does not matter. I think it is impossible for me to try and put all this learning in a box and say what exactly happened. It was more about the process of learning about this big world that really made me think about you as a learner. In fact it is not really about the mud at all but what this experience did to start connecting all those millions of brain cells you have in abundance. Quiet, thorough exploration, careful watching of the older children and trialling the ideas that rolled into your brain. Then some checking in with the other children and teachers around you who were also exploring the possibilities that this completely guggy mixture presented. Could you actually get stuck so thoroughly that getting out meant losing your gumboots? Not worried or scared about this but like every good scientist having another go to see if the experiment could be repeated with consistent results.



How can we grow this learning further?

There is something about scale here and I think being with a group of older children. Arthur had come with me with the farm children from Mitchell Street and of course this included Addi, his cousin. So it was pretty special. And the time was another factor, meaning there was no pressure to go or do anything else, just enjoy the experience of being utterly surrounded by mud that sucked your gumboots in and changed the whole way your body could move. So in terms of growing this kind of learning, we will have to go back. Of course we will and it will be very interesting to see what Arthur does this time. Maybe with the rest of his big cousins.

Arohanui Lorraine



Dear Cora, Savannah, Kayla, Zarah and Bryan
Cora, Cat has been telling me about how adventurous you are at the farm and I am a little bit sorry I don't get to see this first hand! However, those adventurous exploits hardly ever stay in one place and once you get that feeling that there are things to push to the edge, they show up in all sorts of spaces. Witness today, for example. Here you are on the bungee. This can be a 'walk in the park' meaning, not too much effort involved - a little swing; a little jump perhaps. BUT!! You're not content with that sort of easy 'comfort zone' stuff when you can push yourself to the edge for real adventure, where it is a little bit hard and takes a whole lot of practice and effort. This is exactly where the rewards are great! At that fabulous edge place, pushing further to grow your skills. The photos give you a little window and we have the video which we will post on EDUCA to share with your whole family.

My thoughts on your learning.....

I recently heard a very famous researcher, Alison Gopnik, say: "You don't have to make children learn, you just have to let them". She went on to say that this kind of edgy learning has to happen inside a challenging environment with people who care deeply that you have the opportunity to be excited about possibilities, the time to practice, and the conversations that explore what and how all this works. In other words, useful, specific feedback conversations. So that's what we try to do here. Whether it's at our farm/forest, out in the wider community, or at Mitchell Street, we're working out together what will stretch us and then it's up to you. This is a challenge that you have risen to with determination and thoughtful risk assessment.

Where might this learning flourish further?

And Cora, watching you flourish as a learner has much joy attached to it. As we see you move from quiet observer, to the competent expert that other children are watching with admiration, we are just so delighted! I know all the teachers here would love to hear about your adventures elsewhere with your family because we know you are not at this point without the most fabulous support and encouragement from them. Arohanui, Lorraine October, 2016

