

Lenses for learning

THIS SERIES WE WILL BE RUNNING IN *THE SPACE* MAGAZINE OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL EDITIONS. WE ARE KEEN TO EXPLORE WITH OUR READERS THE MANY THEORETICAL and philosophical lenses we use when we recognise, respond to, and document children's learning. When we understand the various theoretical and philosophical lenses we are better able to identify and articulate the possible learning taking place. Then we can write learning stories from the head and the heart which capture special moments and specifically identify and document each child's learning journey.

So far we have explored schemas, Te Wheke, dispositions and urges followed by a learning story example that looked at learning through each lens. This issue we take a closer look at Te Whāriki.

In upcoming editions of *The Space* mag we will continue this format of an article followed by an example as we explore the following theoretical lenses for learning:

Holistic dimensions
Multiple intelligences
Values

We will also explore the following philosophical lenses for learning:

Reggio Emilia
Relationships as curriculum
Continuity of care
Te Whatu Pōkeka
Māori dispositions
Te Whare Tapawhā

We welcome contributions of learning stories and article content if any of the above lenses are in your special area of interest or research. If you are reading this and thinking "I should probably contribute something on this" then you definitely should!

Be in touch with toni@childspace.co.nz and we can discuss how you might share your wisdom with other early childhood educators and parents.

***"Let the child be the scriptwriter, the driver, the author in his own play."* Magda Gerber**

Te Whāriki: Child-centred and learning-oriented, challenging us all to be our best possible selves and to make the difference that children are entitled to

LORRAINE SANDS

Asking direct questions can be confronting, but despite this risk, I do want to set the scene for thoughtful inquiry about how we all might continually stretch our learning and teaching. The Ministry of Education, the Teaching Council and ERO expect this from teachers, and furthermore each of these statutory bodies require evidence of our continued professional growth. So here goes...

What will your legacy be as you, year after year, day after day, moment after moment, intentionally nurture the children in your setting, to build the brains they will have for their lifetime? What impact will you have? What impact are you having?

This goes to the heart of your philosophy and deep into your practice, for as the brain science shows us, what we do really matters.

"Our job is not to shape our children's minds; it's to let those minds explore all the possibilities that the world allows" (Alison Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, 2016).

At a core level, it is how we listen to children and enable them to pursue the things that interest them. Te Whāriki (1996, 2017) gives us a values driven platform on which to consider our learning and teaching, and how children's agency to learn is empowered, through relationships, family and community, and in meaningful holistic ways. There's a challenge here, for we must ensure children's motivation to learn comes from deep within, and we must do this without hijacking children's agendas, their energies, their passions and their spirits.

I am fascinated by the idea of play as the vehicle to grow a complex brain. A few days ago, as Francesca and I were

chatting about her play, I became more and more intrigued by what she was telling me, and this question tumbled forth: “What kind of brain do you want to grow for yourself Francesca? She thought for a moment and a little quizzical smile emerged as she said: “I want to grow a thinking brain”. She paused.” I want to grow a kind brain”. At this point she tilted her head, thinking further: “I want to grow a creative brain and a hard-working brain”. Then a final comment: “They’re all mixed up together.” I was stunned! At barely 5 years old, Francesca understands all the elements for building a brain that will lead her into a fulfilled, happy life. It struck me, with lightning intensity, that she had heard these things over and over her whole life, from her family, her teachers and from the Learning Stories we have written about the tenacity she brings to the learning she chooses to pursue, (Carr, M., Lee, W., 2019, Learning Stories in Practice). In the context of her play, we have written about her creative spirit, her kindness and empathy, and the curious way she explores her world, with and alongside her friends. These are messages that she is very familiar with, and over time, they have become embedded in the way she thinks about herself. She was not fazed by my question, certainly not confronted by its directness, and I was captivated by the matter of fact way she responded. It was no big deal to her. It is just what it is.

We talk about building children’s learning character for the life they will lead, and hearing her this day, I was reminded that learning emerges from each child’s social/cultural context: her family and her community. Outside of her home, Francesca has been embedded in a culture of learning and teaching since she was a baby, in an early learning centre where teachers design the physical/social environment to strengthen children’s agency, to offer opportunities for resilience and resourcefulness to be practised, and for meaning to be at the essence of all that we do. This requires time, and space that is full of possibility for her to wonder, to experiment, to test things out, to fail and to try again. In an equitable Te Whāriki infused world, this would be so for all children and for their teachers. So I ask another direct question: Does this sound like the kind of environment you experience in your working life as a teacher?

Dame Tilly Reedy, in her keynote address, Te Whāriki: A Tapestry For Life, at an OECD meeting in Wellington in 2013, made this statement:

“Te Whāriki promises strong and durable foundations on which to weave a tapestry for life. The key word is ‘foundations’. Oku tūrangawaeawae, my foundations. That is what Te Whāriki seeks from us...we really have to know who we are, what we are, why we are the way we are, before we can be any good to ourselves, let alone the children who have been entrusted to our care”.

This means we take very seriously the idea of being life-long learners ourselves, ever curious to find out about things that intrigue and interest us. However, for teams to really understand their collective synergy, there must be connection between our individual professional growth and the building of a shared understanding of how learning and teaching

unfolds in our place. There must be a central, entwined effort from everyone, to ensure teachers’ wellbeing, and generate a depth of feeling and commitment to each other. ‘Whanaungatanga’ is one way to understand these collective responsibilities. When this kind of social responsibility is generated, by every member of a team, then trust is the result. With trust, rather than judgement, teachers will stretch themselves to the edge and beyond and make the difference in children’s lives that Te Whāriki expects of us. Do you hear me? (Carr, 2000) This question, tied to the Strands of Te Whāriki and written to alert us to the child’s right to be heard, is equally as important for teachers. Can we also explore, with curious intent and wholehearted energy, the aspects of learning and teaching that excite us? When we engage in inquiry research, with a passion that

ignites our investigative spirits, we shift our thinking, our practice and our shared understanding of what it means to learn and teach in a vibrant learning community.

Peter Gray has this to say about being free to learn:

“When children are provided with the freedom to pursue their own interests, in safe settings, they bloom and develop along diverse and unpredictable paths and they acquire the skills and confidence required to meet life’s challenges” (Free to Learn, 2015).

I think when teachers have this same freedom, they excel too. This will not happen

when the timeframe for inquiry research is short, or when the inquiry goals, often phrased as areas to work on, are imposed by leaders as a result of a teacher appraisal process. That is not credit based learning and does not nurture a ‘high trust / high expectation’ learning and teaching environment.

How then, might we design research so that everyone benefits from deepened understanding, and stay true to this notion of meaningful work, around areas we are highly motivated to explore? Teachers in New Zealand have been writing Learning Stories now for over twenty years (Carr, 2001). These narrative accounts of children’s learning, in the context of play, bound up in a child’s inner energy to explore their world, have the power to draw children, families and teachers into a deeper understanding of each child’s learning identity, and grow this as a community together. They really do. Over many years now, I have seen their influence on both children and their families, as valued learning characteristics like creativity, perseverance, determination, kindness, collaboration and camaraderie are written about. The learning that happens as these kinds of dispositions are described have strong, long term effects on children’s feelings about who they are, as we saw in Francesca’s analysis of the kind of learner identity she wants to grow. However, the potential of Learning Stories to achieve this is bound up in a whole lot of things that have everything and nothing to do with a child’s wellbeing, or for that matter a teacher’s wellbeing. When a learning environment, in its fullest expression of the principles and strands of Te Whāriki, is encountered, each and every day, each and every moment, then children thrive. Teachers thrive too because they feel a deep sense of satisfaction in contributing to the shape of each child’s brain, as children begin to hardwire the brain they will have

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for life. It is incredibly important that teachers feel this sense of satisfaction, for it leads to wellbeing. I think wellbeing can't be underestimated as a major factor contributing to the reasons why teachers stay in their teams. Relationships can only happen with connection over a long time and we must therefore find ways to keep teachers excited, energised and passionate about their work so they stay in children's lives.

I am interested to know when and how accountability driven expectations for assessment were allowed to impact teachers' professional practice? Questions ought to be asked and answered and there are many people in powerful positions that need to do the answering. How might teachers disrupt these kinds of expectations, because sometimes it takes a very brave heart to ask 'what is the purpose of this work, what difference will it make and is it meaningful and shared with children and families?' Photos with captions are not assessment. Isolated accounts of activities fall short of the rich narrative of learning that Te Whāriki expects from teachers, and individual development plans double the workload. When teachers write a pseudo learning story about a child they have barely connected with, they know they are churning out a quota for the month. Low teacher/child ratios cause this. Fear based accountability driven tasks compound the issue. They suck the life blood out of a teacher's deep desire to tell a story of learning that is meaningful, one that children, families and teachers are emotionally connected to. Te Whāriki asks us to paint the rich context of learning, in words and pictures, of this child we care about, wrapped in the blanket of her family experiences, and the ones we offer in our settings. Teachers honour Te Whāriki Principles when they write in thoughtful, timely ways that offer feedback, not only to the child here and now, but to the family and the child of the future, who will look back at what a teacher has written and still be impacted by that story. Those poignant questions (Margaret Carr, 2000) asked from a child's perspective: Do you know me? Do you hear me? Can I trust you? Do you let me fly? Is this place fair for us? are as relevant in the way we think and write about learning, and then put this into action, as they ever were.

I hope the examples of Learning Stories attached offer an insight into learning and teaching that does everything I have discussed above. Learning stories contribute to learning identities as children tackle challenge, assess risk and make decisions about their learning, but they also contribute to a teacher's sense of identity. As teachers track children's learning, offer insight into their learning identities, and include conversations about how to stretch this learning further, Learning Stories become the trace of teachers' professional lives (Carr.M., Lee.W., 2019, p.165). They therefore provide direct evidence for Teaching Council certification and appraisal and when shared inside a setting wide investigation, they are evidence for Internal Evaluation.

We are time poor. That's a fact, so let's not waste our time on things that sit in a cupboard or on a computer file, and do little other than tick an accountability box. We know stress is a major factor in teachers leaving our profession and we must therefore

do everything we can to lessen teacher workload, and stay stridently focussed on only those things that matter because they connect deeply to children's and families' lives, now and into the future. We must enable teachers to focus on Learning Stories because when written with heart and brain firing together, they are the golden thread that makes a difference to children's learning lives. There ought to be no need to write additional reflections, out of the context of children's learning and often in the evening or weekends. The emphasis is on writing thoughtful, invested learning stories, full of continuity that make these curious explorers' learning visible.

Learning Stories acquire validity and reliability through multiple voices and when teams engage in conversations that take them into shared experience, they go beyond the ordinary and the unexamined. It is essential that we offer feedback to each other and when we use both the Teaching Council Standards and Te Whāriki Principles and Strands to do this, we offer affirmation and stretch to each other. This builds a robustness into conversations that is equitable, for each of us are offering and receiving feedback. It is not top down; it is a shared responsibility; it is whanaungatanga in action. This makes our vision for learning and teaching palpable, constantly examined and in flux, as we consider the ramifications for our community in the way we choose to engage in learning experiences.

I have selected three learning stories from Brielle's folder to illustrate what I mean and you can see movie footage and further stories linking these into a continuity focused portfolio that tracks her progress by going to this link https://www.elp.co.nz/tracking_children_s_learning_through_learning_stories.cfm I would like to thank Brielle for her permission to share these stories, and offer my appreciation to Ameer and Simon, Brielle's parents, for their generosity. Thanks too, to Melissa Osmond and Tanya Johnson, two of our team at Greerton Early Learning Centre, for sharing their thoughts about learning and teaching, with you through these Learning Stories. If you wish to offer me feedback on this article you may also email me at lorraine.sands@elp.co.nz for I am very happy to engage in robust conversation to grow my own professional practice. Of course there is a whole lot more that can be said on this and you can find further articles at www.elp.co.nz under the resource section.

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Lorraine Sands is a Professional Learning Facilitator at Educational Leadership Project. In this role she works alongside teachers in a wide range of early childhood settings, particularly to strengthen teaching teams' pedagogical engagement with the principles, strands and goals of Te Whāriki and to be able to measure their effectiveness through Internal Evaluation embedded in inquiry research. She supports teachers to use thoughtfully constructed Learning Stories to track children's learning to grow children's identities as life long learners. She has written many journal articles focused on strategies to nurture children's identities as capable, confident learners in action, fully immersed in play.

Extraordinarily competent, immensely confident...

(Te Whāriki Aspiration Statement, 2017, p.7)

Brielle, when you choose to create something, you do it with a big heart!

Brielle, it is hard not to notice how you set your mind to creating, and then do this with a big focus that keeps your attention for a very long time. We have seen, over and over, how you have loved to wrap up presents you have made, and then keep them close to your heart through the rest of the day. What I notice now is that this creative expression, driven so often by empathy and kindness, has turned itself into 'art plus technology' and the results are dramatic!

My thoughts on your Learning... Brielle, these photos are only a very small window into your burning interest in the glue gun, and all kinds of materials that can be used to form a collage of creative beauty. The point that no one here has missed is that these take extraordinary amounts of time to complete and that your attention is very focussed throughout. What is of big interest to us is the way you are constructing these with an intention to build them in a 3D format and thinking about the technological problems you have to solve in order to achieve your plans.



How might we all support this learning to flourish?

I think the many possibilities are just surfacing, as this burning interest will see you returning to express your ideas again and again. We had you in mind as we put more glue gun sticks on the shopping list and plenty of them, for you are so very intent on further exploration of this media, as you combine determined precision, technological innovation and creativity together! That is one explosive combination for learning success lifelong!
Arohanui Lorraine

"A creative process may begin with a flash of a new idea or with a hunch. It may just start as noodling around with a problem, getting some fresh ideas along the way. It's a *process*, not a single event, and genuine creative processes involve critical thinking as well as imaginative insights and fresh ideas."

Ken Robinson -author of *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative*.

Brielle's Riding

Today Brielle set herself a lofty goal. She decided, on her own accord, that she was going to learn to ride the two-wheeler bike. She didn't ask for help; she didn't need advice; she just jumped on the bike and started to practice. It was hard work! The track is narrow and full of obstacles. Did this deter Brielle? NO, it did not. "I can do it, I can do it", she chanted to herself as she bravely went about her work. Before we knew it, she was managing to pedal two rotations before having to put her foot down! I was a little unsure about whether Brielle should be riding so soon after her surgery, but she was just so determined that I couldn't say no! When we showed this footage to Mum she was super proud and agreed with Brielle that it was time to take her training wheels off and have a go on her own. Then, on Monday when they returned we heard the fabulous news that Brielle was now the confident, capable rider of a two wheeler bike! She had ridden up and down the driveway and around the park at the Lakes. Go Brielle!



Unpacking the learning for Brielle...

Amy and Simon, your Brielle continues to show us just how strong, resilient and powerful she is! As a learning community, we have done a lot of research about children as they build their 'Learning Identity'. Effectively, it's about a child's self driven urge to 'learn how to learn'. We have long believed that helping children to build this identity is the single most important thing we can 'teach' them and here's why. Learning is full of ups and downs.



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Sometimes we will come across challenges, like learning to ride, and self doubt might creep in. I might crash; I might get hurt; I might not succeed; people will watch me fail; etc. In these moments we have to choose the learner we will be. This is not who Brielle is. When she takes on a challenge she says to herself "I can do it!" She has decided that her learner identity involves practice, hard work, and loads of effort. Sometimes she will make mistakes, but these are little moments to learn from and find new alternatives. Carol Dweck calls this having a Growth Mindset, and Brielle will take this approach to learning with her for the rest of her life. With this approach to learning new things, the sky is the limit for our friend Brielle!

Where might this learning lead for Brielle?

In a few weeks we will be moving to our new centre and we have big plans for the driveway. It will be the perfect place for practicing to ride and we have been talking about designing our own 'road' for children to follow. I wonder if Brielle will be interested in helping with this process? It will involve lots of planning and 'real work' to make it and, with Brielle's attitude towards such things, I think she will be the perfect role-model to work beside throughout this process.

Exciting!

Arohanui, Melissa

May 2019



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It's a fashion extravaganza!

Lily and Brielle rarely (if ever!) spend a day at Greerton without showing me a marvellous creation that they have made. As the days have ticked by, the creations have become more intricate, more effort invested into them, and the variety of materials used have been extensive. So, really it was a natural progression to see the two of them creating these fabulous costumes in the photos below. The power of learning to tie their own knots has extended the breadth of these creations, as they can now test and trial their ideas independently. Magical!

My thoughts on the learning for Brielle and Lily.

Creativity stands at the top of the hill for growing intelligence. This is what many researchers like Peter Gray are telling us, as they advocate for children to have the right to play and be creative. The time and resources for children to immerse themselves in, without right or wrong outcomes, creates brains that are wired up for greatness! These costumes are fabulous within their own right, but these creations have come backed by many, many hours of practice, cutting, making choices, trusting their ideas, combining these ideas with previously trialed experiences.....

When Pennie Brownlee advocates for free play and building imaginations, she reminds us that it is a process of great intelligence to combine the images in your mind with the realities of the physical world. *"Practice builds expertise, and expertise builds trust in the creative process"*. This is what Lily and Brielle have achieved with these costumes. The pride and joy that they felt will continue to inspire themselves to go further each time one of them finds something a little bit gorgeous and irresistible!

Where could this learning lead to?

Yet more fantastic creations are a certainty! Lily and Brielle will continue to build their intelligence as they experiment, create and inspire each other every day. We will continue to offer them the time, resources and support to keep being as amazing as they are!

Arohanui, Tanya. June 2019



Brownlee, P.; Crisp, K. (2016) *The Sacred Urge to Play*. Good Egg Books, Thames, New Zealand. (p. 87)
Gray, P., (2015) *Free to Learn*

Good Egg Books, Thames, New Zealand. (p. 87)