



Learning Stories: Documentation with the Power to Transform

Wendy Lee, Director, Educational Leadership Project, New Zealand



My teaching career began in the 1970s in a New Zealand kindergarten. There were 120 children on the roll, plus a group of five profoundly deaf children. Staffing included two full-time teachers, one part-time teacher, and a part-time support for the

group of deaf children. Reflecting on this today, I appreciate how far we have come!

It was my work with the deaf children that made me powerfully aware of the importance of documentation between home and kindergarten. To strengthen communication between the families and children, each child had a small notebook in which we wrote about their day at kindergarten. Each night, the notebook went home and parents responded and shared some of their home experiences.

I soon came to realise how valuable this platform was for deepening relationships and strengthening connections between home and kindergarten. I initiated what I called at the time 'The Home-Kindergarten Contact Book' for each of the 120 children.

These books became a rich source of shared experiences. Parent responses typically included comments on children and photos of experiences the children were involved in with their families. Although a far cry from the fabulous documentation that now surrounds our Learning Story philosophy, these were powerful connecting documents that informed our teaching practice. We were able to build on the funds of knowledge children brought from home to enrich their learning experiences at kindergarten.

In 1996, New Zealand adopted Te Whāriki, a new curriculum for early childhood education. It soon became obvious that assessing children's learning in response to Te Whāriki would need to change drastically. If not, the old assessment practices would continue to drive this new curriculum, rather than the reverse. The Government recognised this and Dr Margaret Carr from the University of Waikato won the contract to explore what assessment might look like with this new curriculum.

These were exciting times and Margaret involved teachers in writing narratives about children's learning experience while thinking deeply about the principles of Te Whāriki. She soon realised how valuable these were, and how valuable they could be for charting, directing, and encouraging children's learning.

She coined the phrase 'Learning Stories' to describe them. This was the start of a powerful journey of exploration and development as we steadily explored the potential and power of this form of narrative assessment.

I now consider this concept transformational. The learning lives of children have been made visible by this very accessible way of both exploring and making visible the pedagogy of the early childhood setting.

Learning Stories are not just a format of assessment – they are a philosophy of learning and teaching.

Engagement in the writing of Learning Stories has and is changing the practice of teachers and educators both in New Zealand and around the world. Teachers find themselves to be more present with children and become more responsive to their learning. They build strong and articulate ways of making learning visible to children and their families. The power to strengthen and deepen relationships among children, teachers, parents, and families on all levels is now completely transparent.

Each Learning Story creates a connection with whoever is reading the story. Teachers connect their hearts and minds as they offer ideas about the child's learning, and in so doing they often provoke an emotional response from the reader. Teachers are also learning that the act of teaching, learning, and documenting brings joy and builds a legacy of relationships that underpin more powerful learning.

In New Zealand, our Learning Stories journey began in 1998. However, over the last two decades, Learning Stories have developed into a dynamic process. The documentation flowing from them has led to a broadening of the concept that today includes:

- Welcome stories;
- Stories that reflect wider community engagement;
- Stories that tell of the values held in each learning context or early childhood setting;
- Stories from home, by parents, siblings, grandparents etc.;
- Teachers' stories, some connected to appraisal and registration;
- Stories of Interest that reflect the long-term programme development in an early childhood setting.

Learning Stories have the capacity to make learning visible, to strengthen relationships, to build the identity of the learner, to engage the family, to support transitions, to evolve into planning stories, and to meet all requirements for accountability.

For me, perhaps the three most powerful aspects of Learning Stories are their capacity to deepen the relationships of all involved, to both strengthen and shape the identity of the learner, and thirdly to inform, engage, and strengthen the involvement of parents in their child's learning.

These Stories will be read by families for many generations to come and will become the history of these children's early learning lives. It is these aspects that make a teacher's work and children's learning both visible and transformational. What a privilege it is for teachers to enter children's lives in this way. Their Learning Stories become a powerful trace of our professional lives.

As Carla Rinaldi says so eloquently, 'It is a difficult path that requires effort, energies, hard work, and sometimes suffering, but it also offers wonder, amazement, joy, enthusiasm, and passion. It is a path that takes time'.