

## How to use learning stories in ECE assessment

Assessment in early childhood needs to reflect the complexity of children's learning and development, and the context of their interactions with people, places and things. Less standardised forms of assessment are often the most appropriate for assessing complex learning in context. Qualitative and interpretive methods that focus on showing the learner and their achievements in the contexts of relationships and environment are better able to capture multiple and less pre-determined outcomes.

Learning stories are narratives created from structured observations, designed to provide a cumulative series of pictures about a child's learning. They are observations that are reinterpreted as stories, then analysed and used as the basis for planning. Teachers collect 'critical incidents' or moments which seem significant for a child. By analysing several of these through narrative, teachers can come to understand the path of the child's learning and the pattern of their learning dispositions. Several consecutive narratives can be pieced together to make a fuller picture, while remaining open for other pieces to be added.

A series of learning stories is often kept in a portfolio alongside examples of children's work. This enables teachers to review learning and identify continuity and opportunities for development. Developing stories over time and space (in other words, linking separate stories or adding extra 'chapters' to existing stories) enables assessment documentation to show the development of dispositions in different situations, and enables better understanding of the learner in action. When the same sort of learning story appears in different areas of the curriculum, the disposition can be considered more robust.

However, other assessment strategies may also be required in addition to learning stories which do not provide the measurement tools required by the Ministry of Education for identifying specific difficulties or indicating the need for early intervention. Learning stories have also been criticised for a lack of validity, for focusing on one teacher's observations and analysis rather than drawing on a range of colleague's input, for not demonstrating continuity and change in learning over time, for being produced infrequently, and having limited value in different contexts such as school. These are important concerns that can be addressed by embedding effective assessment strategies within the practice of learning stories.

### Strengths of a learning story approach

- Encouraging involvement: Stories are generally more engaging and interesting to read than more objective accounts of observations. Using narrative and photographs, which are emotionally appealing and affirming, learning stories can act as a 'conscription device' inviting families and children to participate in assessment practices by engaging with the stories, and helping to interpret and plan from them. Learning stories also allow families a window into the practices and purposes of the ECE setting, and draw attention to the kinds of activities which lead to the development of learning dispositions.
- Ability to account for the complexity of learning in early childhood: Learning stories encourage detailed observations and analysis of learners, seeking connections and affirming complexity as an integral part of early childhood learning. By providing rich descriptions, learning stories convey the intensity and complexity of events. They also provide description of the environment and teaching interactions that accompany and support the learning. Stories might say as much about teaching as they do about learning, and therefore they can provide a source of validation for teaching.
- Generative of multiple meanings and interpretations: Learning stories can have various meanings depending on teachers', children's, families' and community values. Learning stories recognise and value the ways in which teachers' lenses are shaped by their own realities, histories and cultures. By adding other perspectives, including children's and families' views, Māori as well as other cultural perspectives, and the values and influences of the wider community, learning stories generate diverse interpretations and ongoing possibilities for sharing, negotiating, revisiting, developing and changing meanings. Such diversity makes space for the uncertainty that should accompany the complexity of learning in early childhood, as development is not standard or linear. Also, the integration of different voices in the assessment process addresses issues of objectivity or validity, so that a more robust analysis of children's actions can be presented.

- **Enabling children’s voices:** Learning stories have the potential to develop children’s metacognition, in helping them to think about their knowledge, skills and learning. Inviting children to make their own self-assessments opens spaces for children’s voices and for crucial connections between their everyday realities and the curriculum, which might otherwise go unseen and unknown.
- **Constructing competence:** ECE assessment in the curriculum document Te Whāriki is underpinned by notions of promoting each child’s growing competence to participate in, and learn about, the world. Learning stories are congruent with this aim in both supporting children’s sense of competence and helping to construct competencies. Learning stories aim to recognise and strengthen children’s learning dispositions, and to create affirming stories that identify children as strong and capable in various roles and contexts. A portfolio collection of learning stories celebrates the child as a competent individual and acknowledges the child’s strengths.
- **Enabling continuity:** Learning stories can also document interconnections between stories, and aspects of children’s learning, by making links backwards (to previous events) and forwards (to potential plans, the outcomes of which are then documented). This recognises learning as continuous and open to development. Learning stories support ongoing continuity in learning, by identifying connections between and across interests and strengths, and by providing the materials to take learning in new directions.
- **Supporting transitions:** New Zealand and international research shows that negative impacts of transition to school can be overcome when effective communication channels are established between schools and ECE settings that enable assessment information to be shared and discussed. This sharing and use of assessment information highlights learning and progress over time, and enhances the links between learning that has taken place at an ECE setting and that which occurs at school, and helps children see themselves as competent, confident learners, making transition more likely to be successful. Assessment information empowers children with a strong learner identity as they enter school and, in connecting knowledge of home and the ECE setting with that of school, fosters children’s sense of belonging and engagement.

Features of good quality assessment using learning stories		
	Good quality assessment practice	Poor quality assessment practice
<b>Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>notices, recognises and responds to children's dispositions and working theories</li> <li>pays careful attention to the breadth and richness of children's learning dispositions and experiences</li> <li>describes the context to interpret how the learning has occurred through people, places and things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>does not meaningfully show children's interests, abilities and skills</li> <li>focuses on developmental milestones of infants and toddlers rather than interests or strengths</li> <li>rarely refers to working theories or dispositions</li> </ul>
<b>Coverage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrates multidimensional learning linked to a range of <i>Te Whāriki's</i> strands and principles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>addresses few of the strands and principles of <i>Te Whāriki</i> (e.g. focusing only on well-being or belonging or relationships)</li> </ul>
<b>Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>finds out what children know and what they can do, how they are progressing, what interests them, what new learning might be possible, and what additional support might be required</li> <li>analyses learning progression and considers how the environment and interactions contributed to learning, and what adjustments might be made to increase learning</li> <li>supports reflection on teachers' interactions with children, changes made and the resulting improvements in interactions</li> <li>invites families to participate in interpretation and planning from stories, and supports the child in self-assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>tends to highlight children's participation, confidence and competence, but not learning or change</li> <li>lacks higher-level analysis of learning over time and context to show progress and continuity, providing only a description of children's activities at a given time or place</li> <li>omits next steps, or gives brief or vague ideas such as doing more or similar activities, or finding more resources (templates used tend to have a very small box for next steps)</li> <li>includes children's comments related to their enjoyment of activities rather than self-assessment</li> <li>does not meaningfully involve children or families in the assessment process, and does not make connections to children's home-related interests, skills or knowledge</li> </ul>
<b>Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>helps teachers to get to know children really well, to recognise activities and experiences likely to interest children, and to respond to their interests, strengths and cultural knowledge</li> <li>helps teachers engage children in interactions that support children's sense of belonging and their learning and development, that challenge their thinking and extend their abilities</li> <li>supports the design of a responsive curriculum, which connects different learning experiences that are meaningful to their family and community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identifies changes to activities and resources as future planning, rather than responding to what children are interested in or seeking to develop, and enhancing current learning</li> <li>does not provide evidence of teachers building on or extending children's learning (if teachers use their assessment knowledge formatively, they do not include that within the written narrative)</li> <li>focuses feedback on behaviour rather than supporting learning strategies such as curiosity or experimentation</li> </ul>

<p><b>Accessibility</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• makes assessment documentation accessible to children and families</li> <li>• encourages children and families to use and contribute to assessment</li> <li>• gives children a sense of agency and enhanced mana</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• does not provide evidence of children’s or families’ use of, or involvement in, assessment</li> <li>• is not useful in helping families or others identify learning or continuity in their child’s learning over time</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collegiality</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is supported by a shared understanding of assessment and its purposes, processes and practices</li> <li>• is backed by adequate support structures</li> <li>• encourages active and meaningful participation by families and children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrates a lack of shared understanding of assessment among teachers</li> <li>• does not share assessments among teaching teams to seek further interpretations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Links to Te Whāriki and learning priorities</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is underpinned by a good understanding of <i>Te Whāriki</i> and an alignment between the focus of assessment and the priorities and values articulated in the setting’s philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• makes few links to the setting’s philosophy statements regarding valued learning, or the setting lacks identified priorities for children’s learning in their context</li> </ul>

## How to write learning stories

See yourself as a learner, undertaking a learning journey together with the child, as the Māori concept of ‘ako’ suggests. This means you use assessment to learn more about the child, their knowledge and strengths, and their unique ways of approaching learning. Focus on getting to know children well through assessment. When assessments are carried out by teachers who know the children well, assessments made will be more valid.

Remember all three components of a learning story: the narrative, the analysis and the planning. **Notice, recognise and respond.** First, you notice a lot of things as you work with children, and you recognise some of that as learning. Finally, you respond to a selection of what you recognise.

Write when you are emotionally invested, when you notice things that matter to you, rather than planning to write for an allocated set of children or following a schedule. When teachers have an emotional connection and responsive engagements with children’s learning, then planning will be more meaningful. It is also important to write stories as close as possible to the learning event time in order to be most responsive to children’s learning, and also to share stories with all teachers in the setting so that every teacher can support this learning.

### Components of a learning story

- Descriptions of key behaviours or dispositions
- What learning has taken place
- How learning relates to children’s interests and dispositions
- What steps might be taken to extend and support future learning
- Children’s interests, skills, knowledge and working theories
- The child’s voice, and a teacher response to child voice
- Setting learning goals (perhaps with the child)
- Links to the child’s family context
- Māori knowledge and ways of learning and being, and use of te reo
- Pasifika knowledge and ways of learning and use of relevant Pasifika languages

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## Tips for content

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- Reflect upon the learning that is valued in your ECE setting.
- Assess children's self-initiated work. Positively describe children's learning processes in order to present children as a competent and confident in their learning and achievements, and value children's resourcefulness, creativity, problem-solving and curiosity as important dispositions for learning.
- Write stories about larger projects that include several children, to explore social relationships and to observe the different roles children assume in the development of group interests.
- Take into account the whole child, including skills, knowledge and dispositions, as well as their interests and the family's culture, activities and aspirations for their child. Make links to children's culture, development and interests so that assessment is highly individualised.
- Focus on strengthening the dispositions associated with the five strands of the curriculum (well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration) as well as children's strengths and interests, and on identifying and developing children's working theories. Don't just identify children's interests, but try to find out what the children are thinking about those interests.
- Review portfolios periodically to determine whether assessments demonstrate the breadth of children's learning and development, and document progress and increased complexity over time.

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## Tips for analysis

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- Make learning (rather than activity) visible, by revealing the learning within children's activities and products, so that children can better identify themselves as capable, competent learners. For example, do not just describe children's confidence or participation, but what they have learned, in terms of what has changed in their behaviours, language and action.
- Make analysis about tracking the child's learning: draw the threads of learning together in order to explore the continuity of the course of the child's learning.
- Use headings for both analysis and planning so that learning is made quite visible, and to avoid tendencies to stay in the descriptive phase. When the analysis and planning components are absorbed into the narrative, their significance is not so obvious for children and families.
- Be confident in offering new perspectives (learning stories are strongest when a diversity of perspectives are included), and in taking risks in professional discussions with colleagues and families. Be willing to see and value learning in different ways.
- Consider whether assessment information indicates a change in practice is needed.

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## Tips for family and whānau involvement

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- **Share assessment information** in many ways, not only through portfolios but also through email diaries, videos, daily notebooks, information evenings, wall displays, slideshow presentations and parent interviews.
- **Make assessment documentation accessible** to families and children (both physically available, and also easy to read and comprehend). Position displays at a suitable height so children can see them, discuss them and recall past learning. Alert families to a new story in their child's portfolio through a note or message, and allow families to take portfolios home to read. Or perhaps systematically send the portfolios home in an official 'book bag' with an invitation to read the stories aloud to children.
- **Focus conversation with families** on discussion of the learning story.
- **Ask families to share useful information** about family, language and activities from home, perhaps through enrolment sheets or special templates.

- Ensure that portfolios **celebrate children's cultural background**, and incorporate families' values and aspirations. Use children's and families' first languages when appropriate. Allow parents and children's aspirations to have an ongoing influence on what is noticed as learning. This leads to greater confidence of families and whānau to participate in assessment activities, for example, to make and offer links with the home experiences and cultural context of the family.
- Provide extensive **opportunities for families to contribute their own voice** to teachers' stories, and to add stories from home. Provide space for families to add their contribution to a learning story and provoke their thinking and reflection with specific questions related to the story. Consider using a parental comment as an initiation point for an assessment or planned event. Reply to written comments made by families in the portfolio.
- Consider writing the analysis of learning and ongoing opportunities **after families have read the observation** and had a chance to add their own ideas. Sometimes families can be discouraged from adding their interpretation after reading the teacher's more polished analysis. Question the meaning of an observation and invite child or family input.

### Tips for child self-assessment

- Use children's language in the narrative, or assume a child's voice in order to represent a child's perspective and encourage children to offer their own perspective.
- Record children's narratives, conversations and explanations about their learning experiences, which might be provoked by looking at photographs or art work.
- Ask questions that encourage children to discuss and think further, for example, such as asking them to think about how they might develop an idea or skills. Comments might be written in speech bubbles affixed to the story.
- Perhaps use PowerPoint slides or photo presentations to construct an open-ended storybook that describes children's activities, strengths and learning style, then ask them for their comments about what might happen next.
- Invite children to create their own learning stories by choosing photographs and dictating words.
- Make opportunities for children to contribute to assessment of their own and others' learning, by making judgements about their achievements, and participating in deciding which photographs and artwork to include. Use materials and resources to provide points of reference with which children can assess their achievements. Consider referring to earlier assessments in their portfolios to compare with current ability or performance. Sometimes children might be empowered to correct their portfolios.
- Include older children in setting goals and in planning next steps for their learning journey. Acknowledge the goals children set for themselves, use them as a basis for spontaneous and formal planning, and indicate through your feedback how children are doing.

### Example

The documentation consists of a photo of child using the carpentry drill, accompanied by a short story written by one of the teachers, which explains how the child displayed resilience and persevered with the difficult task of making a hole in the wood for her screw.

Child's comments: "That bit's too small, get a bigger one."

She chooses a screwdriver and tries to use it. "It's stuck". She keeps trying even when it is difficult.

This is just enough detail to provide a discussion point between the teacher and the parent on collection, and for the child and his teacher to revisit (the next day perhaps) and plan the next steps. This narrative is compiled with others that tell of similar occasions when the child has completed a difficult task of her own choosing.

Adapted from Carr, M. & Claxton, G. (2002). Tracking the development of learning dispositions, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 9(1), 9-37.

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### Tips for next steps

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- Suggest new challenges that involve transferring learning to a new context, taking on a new responsibility, strengthening a disposition, extending knowledge or skills, or revisiting and improving a product.
- Indicate diverse possibilities for the child's ongoing learning journey. Hypothesise about the learning that is occurring and express uncertainty about next steps, in order to invite more perspectives and further inquiry, but also to reflect an understanding that dispositions and working theories evolve in unpredictable ways.
- Show the links between children's learning, the analysis of this learning and the next steps planned. Ensure that plans are implemented, and show that planned next steps lead to progress over time.

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### Tips for continuity

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- Use assessment to guide planning, curriculum decisions, interactions and teaching practices in the setting, so that curriculum and practice relate to assessment analysis.
- Make links with past learning and be explicit about children's progress. Make links between stories, and recognise significant learning moments for children.
- Carry identified interests, skills and knowledge into subsequent narratives. Try to produce a series of stories that show progress and change in learning dispositions and working theory development. For example, store the story electronically and periodically add observations to it until you feel that the learning sequence has been captured.
- Use information provided by families about activities, culture and language at home to show continuity between learning at home and learning in the ECE setting. Make links to the information you gain about children's lives outside the ECE setting where possible.

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### Tips for assessment for the transition to school

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- Develop the portfolio as a mechanism for communication with primary teachers, focusing the portfolio on illustrating the ECE curriculum, activities and setting, and the strengths of a particular child. Find out from teachers and families how useful the information you share is in supporting transitions for children.
- Ensure assessment information demonstrates children's learning in relation to the strands of *Te Whāriki*.
- Provide families with two copies of a summative assessment report about their child's learning and encourage them to give a copy to their child's teacher at school. Include a detailed narrative about children's learning in relation to *Te Whāriki*, and comments on children's dispositions, and literacy and mathematical skills and knowledge. Also add any additional support that might be required for a successful transition.