

How to use learning stories in ECE assessment



ECE resources

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 environments 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 colleagues' input, for not demonstrating continuity and change in learning over time, for being produced infrequently, and for 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 evaluation of 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 those of children, families, and the wider community, and Māori as well as other cultural perspectives, learning stories can 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 offered.
- **Enabling children's voices:** Learning stories have the potential to develop children's metacognition by 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 provocation 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 that enable assessment information to be shared and discussed are established between schools and ECE settings. 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. Assessment practices that empower children with strong learner identities as competent, confident learners, and that connect the knowledge of home and the ECE setting with that of school, foster children's sense of belonging and engagement and support positive transitions.

How to write learning stories

Firstly, it is important to position yourself as a learner when engaging in assessment, undertaking a learning journey together with the child, and focusing on getting to know the child well through assessment. This means you use assessment to learn more about the child, their knowledge and strengths, and their unique ways of approaching learning. When assessments are carried out by teachers who know the children well, assessments made will be more valid. Next, you need to engage in cycles of **noticing**, **recognising**, and **responding** (which create the three components of a learning

story, as narrative, analysis and planning): you notice a range of things as you work with children, then you recognise some of that as learning and develop your responses.

What should learning stories include?

- 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's response
- 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
- Cultural knowledge and ways of learning
- Use of relevant languages appropriate to the child's background

What learning should I write about?

You cannot write a learning story for every piece of learning you notice, recognise or respond to in daily practice. It is most important to write learning stories when you think there might be some merit in reflecting on and planning for the learning to continue. Other tips include:

- Writing 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, planning will be more meaningful.
- Writing stories **as close as possible to the time of the learning event** 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.
- Writing about **the learning that is valued** in your ECE setting.
- Writing about **children's self-initiated work** in order to explore and come to understand children's interests and motivations for learning. Don't just identify children's interests, but try to find out what the children are thinking about those interests.
- Writing 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.
- Writing stories that show **children demonstrating learning dispositions, or developing working theories**, as these are the key outcomes of Te Whāriki

How do I analyse learning in a learning story?

The analysis of learning involves recognising the learning that has occurred. The aim of the analysis section of a learning story is to make learning (rather than activity) visible, revealing the learning within children's activities and products, so that children can better identify themselves as capable, competent

learners. For example, this means not just describing children's confidence or participation, but what they have learned in terms of what has changed in their behaviours, language and action. Other tips include:

- Trying to identify and positively describe **the underpinning learning processes that children use**, so as to present children as competent and confident learners.
- Valuing children's resourcefulness, creativity, problem-solving and curiosity as important **dispositions for learning**.
- Analysing the **skills, knowledge and dispositions** demonstrated in this learning.
- Taking into account **the whole child** including their interests and the family's culture, activities and aspirations for their child.
- Making analysis about **tracking the child's learning over time**: draw the threads of learning together in order to explore the continuity of the course of the child's learning.
- **Using 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.
- **Seeking new perspectives** on the learning that has occurred from teachers and families, as learning stories are strongest when a diversity of perspectives are included. Be willing to see and value learning in different ways and use observations of children as the basis for professional discussions with colleagues and families.
- Review portfolios periodically to determine whether assessments demonstrate the **breadth of children's learning and development**, and document progress and increased complexity over time.

How do I encourage family and whānau involvement?

Families and whānau are an important resource for effective assessments as they can provide a wealth of information and ideas that can help you better understand the child and a learning event, as well as offering additional perspectives that increase the validity of the assessment. Some tips for involving families and whānau include:

- **Sharing 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.
- **Focusing conversation with families** on discussion of a learning story you are currently writing.
- **Making 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. Ensure there are effective notification systems for families when there is a new story has been written. Prepare copies of portfolios that families can take home to read the stories aloud to children.
- **Asking families to share useful information** about family, language and activities from home, perhaps through enrolment sheets or special templates.
- Ensuring 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, perhaps by using a parental comment as an initiation point for an assessment or planned event. This leads to greater

confidence of families and whānau to participate in assessment activities by making links with the home experiences and cultural context of the family.

- Providing extensive **opportunities for families to contribute their own voice** to teachers' stories, and to add stories from home. Document verbal contributions and reply to written comments made by families.
- 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, or provoke their thinking and reflection with specific questions related to the story.

How do I include the child's perspective?

An important way in which to represent the child's ideas, perspectives and opinions on their learning is to include the child's actual language in the narrative, or assume a child's voice in order to represent a child's perspective on the event. Other ideas include:

- **Looking at photographs or art work with children and then talking to them about their learning experiences**, recording their narratives, conversations and explanations. Ask questions that encourage children to discuss and think further, such as asking them to think about how they might develop an idea or skills. Perhaps use PowerPoint slides or a photo presentation to show a series of photos of their learning activities, then ask them what might happen next.
- Inviting children to **create their own learning stories** by choosing photographs and dictating words.
- **Making 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. Consider referring to earlier assessments in their portfolios to compare with current ability or performance.
- Including 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.

How do I plan the next steps for learning?

One of the most important purposes of the learning story is to offer an opportunity for teachers, families and children to consider how to extend and expand on the learning recorded in the story. The planning section of your story builds on the understandings and hypotheses you developed about children's interests and learning in the analysis section, and enable you to suggest what kind of interactions, resources and activities will support the child's learning to become deeper, more robust or more complex. Tips for planning the next steps include:

- **Using a heading** for the planning section, which helps you to be quite intentional about planning. If planning is absorbed into the main narrative, it has less prominence and significance for readers.
- Not restricting planning to activities in the same area or with similar resources, but **suggesting 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. The ability to transfer knowledge and skills to a new context demonstrates secure learning for the child.

- **Considering how children might explore the ideas underlying their play** in different ways, or using different resources or media. Making a shift from exploring an idea through one medium/activity to another helps children to create and consolidate concepts and conceptual maps.
- Thinking about whether assessment information indicates that a **change in practice** is needed.
- **Evaluating how comprehensive this assessment is** in order to determine whether any more observation or documentation is needed. For example, look at whose ideas and actions have been documented, and whose ideas and actions are missing. What can you learn about the children and what do you still need to know? How can you find out?
- Using the next steps section of your story to **encourage reflection** and see the assessment as something that can inspire as well as inform continued learning and exploration. Try using questions to the child or family, for example, that encourage children to think further about a topic or something they've made.
- **Being tentative** and expressing a sense of diverse possibilities about how the child's ongoing learning journey will develop. This will reflect an understanding that dispositions and working theories evolve in unpredictable ways.
- Ensuring there are **clear links** between the learning described in this story, the analysis of this learning and what you are planning.
- **Making every attempt to carry out your plans**, and make a note of what happened. This might be another learning story or a short annotation on this existing story.

Creating continuity in learning stories

A series of learning stories that show the development of an interest, skill or disposition over time is an important aspect of quality assessment. Learning stories that are interrelated in terms of their focus enable teachers to better review learning and identify continuity as well as opportunities for development. Tips for creating continuity in learning stories include:

- **Making links with past learning** and being explicit about children's progress. Make links between stories, and recognise significant learning moments for children.
- **Carrying 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.
- **Using 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.

Assessment for the transition to school

One important feature of a successful transition to school involves open communication channels between schools and ECE settings that enable assessment information to be shared and discussed. Learning stories can support this when they highlight children's learning and progress over time, and the links between learning that has taken place at an ECE setting and that which will occur at school. Other tips include:

- **Developing 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.

- **Ensuring assessment information demonstrates children's learning** in relation to the strands of Te Whāriki.
- Providing families with two copies of a **summative assessment report** about their child's learning and encouraging 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.

A sample learning story

The story 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 her 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.

Further reading

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

Hatherley, A., & Sands, L. (2002). So what is different about learning stories? *The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi. New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, 4(1), 8-12.

Sands, L. (2017). Learning stories: Tracking learning progress, making a difference in children's learning lives.... Retrieved from [https://www.elp.co.nz/files/Learning%20Stories-%20Are%20these%20powerfully%20reflecting%20the%20learning%20culture%20of%20your%20setting\(1\).pdf](https://www.elp.co.nz/files/Learning%20Stories-%20Are%20these%20powerfully%20reflecting%20the%20learning%20culture%20of%20your%20setting(1).pdf)

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