

# Assessment in New Zealand early childhood settings

## *A proposal to change from Learning Stories to Learning Notes*

Ken E. Blaiklock

### Abstract

Although Learning Stories are widely used in New Zealand early childhood settings, there are doubts about the effectiveness of this assessment technique. A different approach to assessing young children, known as Learning Notes, is introduced in this article. Unlike Learning Stories, Learning Notes do not follow a story format or focus on dispositions to learn. Learning Notes can be used to provide an accurate description of an event, an interpretation of the learning that occurred, and ideas for future learning. When evaluated against key principles of observational assessment, it is argued that Learning Notes provide a more comprehensive and practical approach than is possible with Learning Stories.

### Introduction

The assessment of young children's learning is a crucial area in early childhood education. High quality assessment is needed to support children's learning and to provide information on the effectiveness of early childhood programmes. The most common way of assessing young children's learning in New Zealand is through the use of Learning Stories but there are significant problems with this technique. This article outlines a new approach to assessment that I call Learning Notes. Learning Notes include a description of an event and optional sections that interpret the learning that occurred and suggest ideas for future learning. Learning Notes can be used for both formative and summative assessment. Because Learning Notes may be easier to record than Learning Stories, they can be produced more frequently. This should allow educators to carry out a range of assessments across key domains of learning for each child.

### The use of Learning Stories to assess children's learning

During the last 10 years, Learning Stories have become the dominant form of assessment in early childhood centres in New Zealand (Education Review Office, 2007).

The technique of Learning Stories was largely developed by Margaret Carr (1998, 2001) and requires teachers to write narrative stories that interpret the learning that occurs in particular situations. There is a focus on describing dispositions to learn rather than on assessing knowledge and skills. Part of the reason for the success of Learning Stories is because they are said to be appropriate for assessing all young children in any type of learning experience. Stories may focus on individuals or groups of children. At the end of a Learning Story, a teacher writes a review that focuses on the learning that occurred, and provides ideas for future learning experiences (Carr, 2001).

Substantial amounts of government funding have been directed at providing resources and professional development courses to promote the use of Learning Stories in early childhood centres. Much of this funding has gone into the development of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, 20 booklets that provide exemplars of assessment using Learning Stories (Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009). The Education Review Office (2007) has supported the use of Learning Stories and has promoted their use in a wide range of centres. Currently, however, there is little empirical evidence that the widespread use of Learning Stories can be justified in terms of gains for children's learning.

I have written elsewhere about a wider range of concerns related to the use of Learning Stories as an assessment technique (Blaiklock, 2008; 2010). The concerns include:

- Problems with establishing the validity or credibility of Learning Stories
- A lack of guidance on what areas of learning to assess.
- Problems with defining the learning dispositions that are supposed to be the focus of Learning Stories.
- A lack of rationale for the links between particular learning dispositions and the strands of *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996).

- Problems in using Learning Stories to show changes in children's learning and development over time.
- Problems in using a Learning Story about a specific experience as a basis for planning future learning experiences in different contexts.

It is useful for teachers to be aware that it is not compulsory for centres to use Learning Stories when assessing children. The licensing criteria for early childhood services (Ministry of Education, 2009) state that services should be 'informed by assessment, planning, and evaluation (documented and undocumented) that demonstrates an understanding of children's learning, their interests, whānau, and life contexts' (p. 8). The type of assessment that centres choose is not prescribed.

## Learning Notes: An alternative to Learning Stories

Having made several presentations about problems with Learning Stories, teachers have often asked me about what could be used as an alternative approach to assessment. I generally reply that we need to be cautious when assessing young children and should ensure that the techniques we use are manageable, are well supported by research, and have benefits for children. Although I have been critical of the way that observations are reported in Learning Stories, observations of children in authentic contexts should be the basis of any system of assessment of young children (see Bagnato, 2007; Brassard & Boehm, 2007). A different way of capturing observations, and a viable alternative to Learning Stories, is to use what I call 'Learning Notes'. In contrast to Learning Stories, Learning Notes do not focus on dispositions to learn but instead can be used to describe the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of children.

Learning Notes consist of three components: 'Describe'; 'Interpret'; and 'What Next?'. The 'Describe' section provides a description of a child's involvement in a particular learning experience. The description may be short (a sentence or two) or long (several paragraphs) and should be recorded as accurately as possible. Sometimes a photo of the child's involvement or work (e.g., a construction, a writing attempt, a piece of art) will be included. The description should be written at the time that the teacher observes the event or as soon as possible afterwards. Teachers can record their observations in a notebook or on 'post it' notes for later transfer into a child's individual record. Information that is recorded can include the child's name, place of event, time, other participants, knowledge, skill or attitude demonstrated, and examples of the language that occurred. The practicalities of recording observations while working with children may mean that only abbreviated details are recorded. A teacher can use these details to write a longer description later in the day if desired. The information that a teacher records can be affected by the teacher's own perception of the event (see Chapter 7 in McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2010). Teachers should try to be aware of the ways that personal bias could influence observations. The Describe section of

the Learning Note needs to be written in clear descriptive language with minimal interpretation. A useful question for a teacher to consider is 'would another observer describe the event in the way that I have?'

Sometimes a Learning Note will consist only of the Describe section. This may, for example, be all that is required to record a child's accomplishment in a particular area of learning and development. At other times, a teacher may find it useful to add an 'Interpret' section to the Learning Note in order to provide a comment that highlights the significance of the learning that a child demonstrated. This comment could be linked with a specific section of *Te Whāriki* or with other publications on children's learning and development.

Another optional component of a Learning Note is the 'What Next?' section. The teacher only needs to complete this when it is useful to document ideas for future experiences that follow on from what was observed. These ideas should be enacted as soon as possible after the observation. For example, a teacher who observes a child's new interest in a particular topic may make a note to extend the child's learning through introducing some new resources related to the topic.

## Evaluating the worth of Learning Stories and Learning Notes in relation to principles of assessment

When evaluating different ways of assessing young children, it is important to examine the principles that underlie particular approaches to assessment. The principles that underlie the Learning Stories approach, as exemplified in *Kei Tua o te Pae*, are adopted from *Te Whāriki* and set out as a series of questions (Ministry of Education, 2007, Book 10, p. 6):

- Is the identity of the child as a competent and confident learner protected and enhanced by the assessments?
- Do the assessment practices take account of the whole child?
- Do the assessment practices invite the involvement of family and whānau?
- Are the assessments embedded in reciprocal and responsive relationships?

Affirmative answers can be given to all of these questions, for both Learning Stories and Learning Notes. The general nature of the questions, however, limits their usefulness for evaluating the worth of different assessment practices.

A more comprehensive and in-depth set of principles of observational assessment was recently developed following consultation between early childhood teachers and assessment experts in Britain (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The principles are as follows:

1. Assessment must have a purpose.

2. Ongoing observation of children in everyday activities is the most reliable way of building up an accurate picture of what children know, understand, feel, are interested in, and can do.
3. Practitioners should both plan observations and be ready to capture the spontaneous but important moments.
4. Judgement of children's development and learning must be based on skills, knowledge, understanding, and behaviour that are demonstrated consistently and independently.
5. Effective assessment takes equal account of all aspects of the child's development and learning.
6. Effective assessment takes account of contributions from a range of perspectives.
7. Assessments must actively engage parents in developing an accurate picture of their child's development.
8. Children must be fully involved in their own assessment.

These eight principles provide a useful framework for comparing the value of Learning Stories and Learning Notes. The following sections of this article discuss each of the principles in turn.

### 1. Assessment must have a purpose

Assessment is most commonly used for two purposes, formative and summative (Gullo, 2005). Formative assessment is an ongoing process and is sometimes referred to as 'assessment for learning' (Absolum, 2006). It is what occurs everyday as teachers work with children and observe their strengths, interests, and needs. Most of this occurs in an informal way and is not documented but teachers may choose to record information about some of what they observe. Teachers are constantly adapting their teaching in response to the information they gather through formative assessment. Documented observations can be useful for building up information about a particular child and can inform planning for future learning experiences.

Summative assessment is used to 'sum up' a child's performance in a particular area of learning and development at a particular time. Reporting against National Standards is an example of summative assessment at the primary school level. At the early childhood level there are no requirements for New Zealand teachers to conduct summative assessments. Such assessments may occur, however, when teachers wish to describe a child's performance in order to seek additional educational assistance (e.g., for a child who has special learning needs).

Learning Stories are designed as a formative assessment. A problem exists, however, in working out what they are intended to assess. Carr (2001) stated that Learning Stories should focus on children's dispositions for learning but the concept of dispositions is unclear. Learning dispositions

were defined by Carr as 'situated learning strategies plus motivation-participation repertoires from which a learner recognises, selects, edits, responds to, searches for and constructs learning opportunities' (p. 21). This definition is open to many different interpretations. Carr (2001) suggests that teachers focus on how 'five domains of disposition are translated into actions: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, expressing a point of view or feeling, and taking responsibility'. Each domain of disposition is described in general terms of children 'being ready, being willing and being able' (pp. 24-25). It remains unclear as to what these dispositions are, whether they can be assessed, and how teachers are supposed to identify progress in these dispositions for individual children from birth to five years of age.

*"It is a questionable practice to rely on Learning Stories as a base for individualised planning of future learning experiences."*

Formative assessments should contribute to planning future learning experiences. This poses a challenge for Learning Stories because they are situation specific and are usually made infrequently. The published guidelines on Learning Stories (Carr, 1998, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009) do not suggest how often to make Learning Stories but the considerable time required to produce each Learning Story means that a common practice in early childhood centres is to produce just one Learning Story per child per month. Each Learning Story is specific to a particular event and is only a small sample of a child's experiences at the centre. It is therefore a questionable practice to rely on Learning Stories as a base for individualised planning of future learning experiences.

The flexibility and ease of recording Learning Notes means that they should be of more value for planning than are Learning Stories. Because Learning Notes do not have to follow a story format, they can be recorded far more frequently than is possible with Learning Stories; teachers may find that they can record several brief Learning Notes for each child every week. Teachers can write short Learning Notes while they are working with children and can therefore capture a wider range of experiences. Ideas for future learning experiences (e.g., in response to a particular interest of a child) can be followed up that day or the next. This is in contrast to the writing of Learning Stories where there may be a time delay of several weeks between initial observation, writing up of the Learning Story, and implementation of suggestions for future experiences.

Learning Notes can also contribute to summative assessment. Teachers can record information that shows children's achievements in particular areas of learning.

This information could be linked to the goals and learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki*. However, the generalised nature of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, along with its lack of information about developmental change in key areas of learning (e.g., physical development, language development) is problematic for teachers who wish to record progress in children's learning. For these reasons, New Zealand educators may find it useful to examine international developments in early childhood curriculum development. For example, The Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008), recently developed after extensive consultation in the UK, provides a useful description of key areas of children's learning in the early childhood years.

**2. Ongoing observation of children in everyday activities is the most reliable way of building up an accurate picture of what children know, understand, feel, are interested in, and can do.**

As noted above, the more frequent documentation that is available with the use of Learning Notes allows teachers to build up a more comprehensive record of a child's learning and development than is possible with Learning Stories. A Learning Story, as the name suggests, is meant to tell a story. Carr's guidelines for writing Learning Stories suggest that teachers watch out for a set order of behaviours. Carr (1998) stated, 'within a particular activity or interest, the behaviours often appear in sequence – hence the name 'Learning Story' for the package of behaviours' (p. 15). The sequence is as follows:

- (1) Taking an interest;
- (2) Being involved;
- (3) Persisting with difficulty, challenge and uncertainty;
- (4) Expressing a point of view or feeling; and
- (5) Taking responsibility.

The problem with this advice is that a teacher may feel obliged to record information that fits this sequence even if what is observed follows a different pattern. (e.g., a child may actually 'express a point of view' before 'persisting with difficulty'). Learning Notes do not impose the constraints of a 'story sequence' and hence allow teachers to focus on accurate recording of the event.

Accuracy of recording is crucial when making observations; a point made in many publications on assessment of young children (e.g., Brassard & Boehm, 2007; Fawcett, 2009; Gullo, 2005). Although all teachers may be influenced by preconceived ideas, they should strive to be as accurate as possible when carrying out observations (Martin, 2007; National Research Council, 2008). The Describe section of Learning Notes should be written in clear descriptive language. Interpretation and professional judgements can then be made in the Interpret section. A difficulty with Learning Stories is that teachers are not advised on the importance of objectivity when first describing a child's learning experiences. Indeed, advocates

of Learning Stories suggest that this type of assessment is 'less concerned with keeping interpretation out of recording', and note that 'it is generally more interesting and engaging to read a [learning] story than an anecdotal or running record account' (Hatherly & Sands, 2002, p.9).

**3. Practitioners should both plan observations and be ready to capture the spontaneous but important moments.**

**4. Judgement of children's development and learning must be based on skills, knowledge, understanding, and behaviour that are demonstrated consistently and independently.**

**5. Effective assessment takes equal account of all aspects of the child's development and learning.**

Published guidelines on Learning Stories (Carr, 1998; Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009) make no mention of the need to carry out both planned and spontaneous observations. Guidance on what to assess is often phrased in very general terms. For example, the introductory booklet for the *Kei Tua o te Pae* series (Book 1) stated that assessment is described as 'noticing, recognising, and responding'. 'Teachers *notice* a great deal as they work with children, and they *recognise* some of what they notice as 'learning'. They will *respond* to a selection of what they recognise' (p. 6). With regards to what learning is important, the introductory booklet refers to the strands of *Te Whāriki*.

Teachers who use Learning Notes can make spontaneous and planned observations. Spontaneous observations are appropriate when teachers are working with children and recognise significant moments in children's learning. Recognising these moments is enhanced when teachers have knowledge of developmental pathways in children's learning. Information that highlights the significance of a child's learning can be included in the Interpret section of a Learning Note. Here a teacher may choose to make links with the strands and indicative learning outcomes of *Te Whāriki*. Again, the lack of information in *Te Whāriki* on developmental progressions (e.g. language or physical development) limits the value of this document for interpreting the significance of particular learning events.

As an alternative to linking with *Te Whāriki*, teachers may find it helpful to make use of more recent approaches to early childhood curriculum. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) resources (Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2008), developed after extensive consultation in the UK, provides a very different approach to *Te Whāriki*. Detailed information is provided on six domains of learning and development: Personal; Social and Emotional Development; Communication; Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development. Each of the six domains is further divided into more specific areas (e.g., Physical Development is subdivided into Movement and Space, Health and Bodily Awareness, and Using Equipment and

Materials). Information is provided about developmental progressions in each area along with pointers on what it is useful for teachers to observe. Ideas are provided on effective practice to further extend children's learning in each area.

Although children learn in a holistic way, it can be valuable for teachers to be aware of major domains of learning to ensure that none of these areas is neglected in teaching and assessment. Linking Learning Notes to the domains and areas of learning in the EYFS would be one way to ensure that teachers build up a comprehensive picture of each child's learning. This would facilitate the planning of learning experiences to further extend children's learning. Using a framework such as the EYFS can help teachers to become more aware of when key domains of learning have not been assessed for individual children. On realising this, teachers can plan to carry out observations and record Learning Notes to cover these learning areas.

In contrast, guidelines on Learning Stories (Carr, 1998, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2004/2007/2009) do not consider the need to ensure assessment of key domains of learning. Consequently, it is quite likely that no assessments are made of crucial learning areas (e.g., physical development, language development) for many of the children who are enrolled in New Zealand early childhood services. The lack of assessment of these areas is a particular concern for children with marked developmental delays because it may mean that these children miss out on opportunities for additional educational assistance.

**6. Effective assessment takes account of contributions from a range of perspectives.**

**7. Assessments must actively engage parents in developing an accurate picture of their child's development.**

**8. Children must be fully involved in their own assessment.**

Because interpretation may occur at the time a teacher records a Learning Story, it can be difficult for other staff members to provide different perspectives on the event that is documented. Ensuring that initial observations are made as accurately as possible, as recommended for Learning Notes, makes it easier for other staff to provide interpretations. The more frequent documentation that is possible with Learning Notes in comparison to Learning Stories also makes it easier to have opportunities for contributions from a range of teachers.

In most early childhood centres, Learning Stories are added to children's individual portfolios and are available for parents to view and comment on. Some centres include a form entitled 'Parents' Voice' as a way of requesting parents to make written comments related to the Learning Story (Carr, 2001).

A similar approach can be used for Learning Notes. These can be filed in children's portfolios along with photos of learning events and examples of children's work (e.g.,

a photo of an event or a painting). Parents can be invited to discuss the portfolios with children and teachers and to make written comments if possible. Sending portfolios home can also be a way of requesting parents to provide information about a child's interests and learning in the home setting.

Because Learning Notes can be brief (e.g., a sentence describing a child's accomplishment) they require less time and work to produce than Learning Stories. This means that Learning Notes have an immediacy that is often not found with Learning Stories. A Learning Note about a child's new achievement or interest can be written in the morning and followed-up by the teacher with related experiences that same day. A Learning Note describing what happened can be sent home so that the child and parent can discuss the event at a time when it is still of particular significance. When Learning Notes are kept in portfolios, they are ideal as conversation starters for teachers and parents to talk with children about past events and to make links with other experiences in children's lives. Such conversations are valuable for facilitating language development (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002).

Children can be involved at the time of writing a Learning Note. A teacher can inform a child when the teacher notices something to document. The teacher can talk to the child about the learning experience and listen to the child's perspective. If a photo is taken, it can be immediately printed out and discussed with the child. When a Learning Note is written up in more detail after the event, the teacher can relate the information to the child and ask for further comments. Writing a Learning Note with a child is an ideal way to develop understandings of literacy.

## Conclusion

Although Learning Stories have become the dominant, and often the only, form of assessment in New Zealand early childhood centres, there is little evidence that they are an effective way of assessing and enhancing young children's learning. One reason for the dominance of this approach to assessment may be due to the large amounts of government funding that has gone into providing resources and professional development related to Learning Stories. In this article I have suggested that Learning Notes offer a more effective and comprehensive way of assessing young children's learning than is possible with Learning Stories. I would recommend that teachers try out the use of Learning Notes so that they may examine whether this approach to assessment can have real benefits in early childhood centres. It is to be hoped that the Ministry of Education will support research into comparing the effectiveness of Learning Notes and Learning Stories in order to see which approach is most practicable and effective for assessing and enhancing children's learning.

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