

# Using ‘Learning Stories’ to strengthen teachers’ relationships with children

by Margie Carter

*Writing learning stories gives educators the freedom to share themselves and take important risks to discover who they are as educators.* — Lorrie Baird, Kawartha Child Care Services

Ever since discovering the New Zealand (NZ) approach to writing Learning Stories I've been struck by its value on many different levels. Margaret Carr (2001) and her NZ colleagues created this approach, not only as a way to assess desirable outcomes, but as a means to strengthen practitioners' ability to use documentation as a tool for their own learning and teaching. I've seen this in action in Aotearoa New Zealand and watched the growing interest of U.S. and Canadian educators in using learning stories in their work. Our Seattle colleague Tom Drummond has begun using learning stories as a cornerstone in his community college classes, setting up a web site with examples and a set of guidelines for writing learning stories.



Margie Carter works as a teacher educator and travels widely to speak and consult with programs. She extends gratitude to colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand and Tom

Drummond for developing useful resources on learning stories. To learn more about the March 2011 study tour Margie lead will to New Zealand, visit [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).

He says, “Learning Stories are the way we can all do research and create communities of practice that help us grow as teachers and as human beings.”

While there is much to be said about the value of Learning Stories as a form of pedagogical narration for assessing children, I want to take that up elsewhere. Here I consider the value of the NZ approach to improve outcomes for children by strengthening the teacher's relationship with the child. I've seen how the use of learning stories develops better observation skills, critical thinking, and self-reflection in teachers. They see children anew and find new things in themselves. The writing conventions for learning stories call forth the teacher's curiosity, voice, and identity as a passionate educator.

## Rethinking the idea of objectivity

In my early years of teaching observation classes I stressed the importance of objectivity and just capturing descriptive details without interpretation. I believed taking a scientific approach was the only way to be professional, not to mention ‘fair.’ In a recent e-mail exchange, my Canadian colleague Lorrie Baird put her finger on one of the problems with this approach:

“I recall as a student sitting in the observation booth of our lab school being so caught up in looking to see which hand the child was using and whether or not she was proficient in using her pincer grasp. It felt so prescribed, so clinical, but it was what we had been asked to do. We were trained to look at a child's development using a checklist, to be totally objective and not add any of our assumptions or opinions. I now characterize this as ‘observation without feeling.’ Looking back, I see I was so detached from the child, never really seeing who this person was, only what she could or couldn't do. I have been reflecting on why educators have a greater ability to find their voice in learning stories. I have come to believe that it has a lot to do with letting go of how we have been trained to observe.”

Lorrie's words resonate with me. While my teaching still emphasizes the importance of writing descriptive details, I no longer perpetuate the myth that there is any such thing as objectivity. What I think we've sought with the concept of objectivity is avoiding unfair judgments, misrepresentations, or oversights. But that's a far cry from teachers to adopt a scientific ‘observation without feeling’ posture with children. Instead, we must identify and acknowledge our own

subjectivity, with the best interests of the child in mind. I think this helps us see and think more clearly. As Lorrie said, "When you speak from your heart, your mind speaks too."

Steve Seidel (2008) of Harvard's Project Zero has written:

"We are, at this moment in the United States, so deeply invested in the idea of psychometric and 'scientific' justifications for our educational practices that we seem to have forgotten there could be any other justification paradigm. We seem to have forgotten there could be any other way to hold ourselves accountable."

Today, I urge teachers to stretch their hearts and minds to clearly see each child's noble intentions and to assess whether their interactions and teaching plans are providing adequate opportunities for children's abilities to expand. We should be continually assessing our efforts as teachers, holding ourselves accountable to work that is worthy of our children. Documenting should fill us with excitement and curiosity, not indifference or stress.

### **Considering other perspectives**

In rethinking the idea of objectivity, I think our goal should be to seek out different perspectives on what we are seeing. This practice expands our thinking about possible interpretations which, in my mind, meets the intent of the objectivity mantra. In New Zealand, Learning Stories offer the perspectives of the teachers, describe professional perspectives by referencing desired outcomes, and invite the perspectives of the child's family. Learning Stories are often written directly to the child, which nearly always results in the child offering more perspective from revisiting an experience.

Consider how most U.S. teachers are instructed to document their observations. In many cases this involves completing a

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checklist, filing photos and work samples in portfolios, and sending notes home to families. While these all have their place, teachers often tell me this documentation rarely expands their perspectives or professional knowledge. In contrast, the Learning Story approach serves as a pedagogical tool, prompting teachers to become more reflective, to consider other perspectives and what else they need to learn to be responsive to the children.

### **Writing Learning Stories**

Building on the initial conventions developed by Tom Drummond, I suggest the following guidelines for becoming familiar with writing a learning story. Each of these steps provokes deeper reflection as you study what is unfolding in your classroom, try to understand and plan from what you think would be worth pursuing.

1. Begin with reflections on your own interest in what you see children exploring. When you talk about yourself using

"I," you must reflect to discover your own perspective and give a 'voice' to the storyteller.

2. Describe what the child does and says from your perspective as someone who cares and is listening closely to discover what is happening. Be present with your heart, paying close attention to the observable details you can carefully describe. If you write your story in the first person, talking to the child, you must reflect on what you want the child and his or her family to consider. Your story invites reflection and a relationship with dialogue. You consider how to paint a picture with words and introduce new language to the child, building on the research that suggests an expanding vocabulary is a significant predictor of school success.

3. Write a paragraph focused on "What it Means" describing why you see this observation as significant. This meaning-making process deepens reflection and is best done in a dialogue with other

## Using Learning Stories for Professional Development

by Sarah Felstiner, Hilltop Children's Center, Seattle, Washington

Over the last decade our Reggio-inspired full-day child care program has established a strong expectation that our teachers regularly study and write up their documentation of the children's activities and conversations. These include ordinary moments and in-depth investigations. Documentation is put in children's individual journals and in classroom curriculum binders, with selected pieces displayed on the walls. Because this work is central to our pedagogical practices and culture at Hilltop, we are continually seeking ways to make it more meaningful and more accessible for both teachers and the children's families. Learning about the New Zealand approach to documentation added some new dimensions that I thought might help us better reflect on each child's strengths and interests, and share that thinking in a deeply personal way with the children and with their families.

I planned a Professional Development meeting, where we looked at some samples of Learning Stories from schools in the U.S. and New Zealand. I then shared a learning story I'd written about one of the teachers in our school.

I wanted to honor some extraordinary work that a teacher had just done with children in her class, and also to try out for myself the practice of using the Learning Story protocol to frame my own reflective thinking. Time and again I've been advised to model with teachers the practices I hope to help them employ with the children. I challenged myself to create a learning story, from start to finish, in only 30 minutes. Teachers often have a limited timeframe to create written documentation of children's work, so it seemed important to work within those constraints, and to help set the expectation that writing learning stories can be powerful without being time-consuming.

After some guided discussion about the learning stories I brought, we tried another exercise, designed to give teachers hands-on practice at creating a learning story. We watched a short video of a child at play in one of our classrooms. Then I gave each teacher a transcription of the dialogue from the video snippet and a two-page layout of still shots from the video, along with blank lines and section headings for each of the elements of a learning story. We took just 20 minutes for each person to create a handwritten learning story on that form, and then sit with another teacher to discuss what they'd written (see sample form on page 44).

Teachers at Hilltop Children's Center are already highly skilled at observing and documenting children's play, but I think the Learning Stories protocol offers another, more intimate convention for spotlighting children's work. Trying out the model myself, I also found that it's a very 'doable' framework, one that helped me notice and honor a teacher's work. At the end of our Professional Development meeting, another teacher asked enthusiastically "So, are you going to do Learning Stories about all of us?"

teachers and the children's families. You consider such things as culture, context, and child development and early learning theories. Perhaps you can connect the observation with other things you know about this child from past experience.

4. Write a paragraph focused on "Opportunities and Possibilities" and describe what you might do next and the reasons for your choices. This gives insight to the reader about how teachers think about what they do.

5. Offer a blank page for the family to respond with their perspective. Members of the family may have things to say to the child and to the teachers. You might prompt them with a question and even offer to write up any comments they care to make.

### What it means:



*You really challenged yourself this spring, Christina. You jumped into facilitating a complex project, and it required you to develop familiarity with a lot of new tools and techniques. I appreciated your willingness to learn alongside the children, rather than positioning yourself as an expert on puppet making. Your attitude of "I wonder how we can make this next part?" rubbed off on the kids, and helped them feel like they were collaboratively inventing the process of puppet making. Most important, you let the pace and direction of the investigation be driven by what those six children cared about.*

### Opportunities and possibilities:

*Initially, the children's focus was on how to build their own marionettes, and that focus was pretty intense! I'll never forget that moment in the community studio when you asked the children what steps they thought came next, and they all started chanting: "The head...the head...the head, the head, the head!" But as their marionettes neared completion, it became clear that they wanted to perform a show. And as amazing as their show was, after their weeks and weeks of work on the puppets, it was hardly the main focus of the work team. I wonder whether they'd want to script and perform some more shows for their characters?*



6. Give the story a title that captures its essence.

In using these guidelines with teachers across many different settings in the U.S., I've watched teachers come alive with new interest in children's pursuits. Sometimes I begin side-by-side with teachers, narrating what I'm seeing, helping to take notes and photos. During naptime we review our documentation and go through the Learning Story guidelines to write the story together. I encourage teachers new to English to write in their first language and together we find the words to translate this into English. This often creates a bridge for us to review child development knowledge, learning standards, or required assessment tools.

Lorrie Baird tells a powerful story about a teacher finding a stronger relationship with a child's family and his culture through engaging in this learning story process at Kawartha Child Care Services. I've encouraged her and others to write about their experiences with using Learning Stories as a professional development tool. Lorrie's insights quoted at the beginning of this article harken me back to the writing of Bill Ayers (1992) on the importance of teachers finding an identity for themselves as important contributors to our professional knowledge.

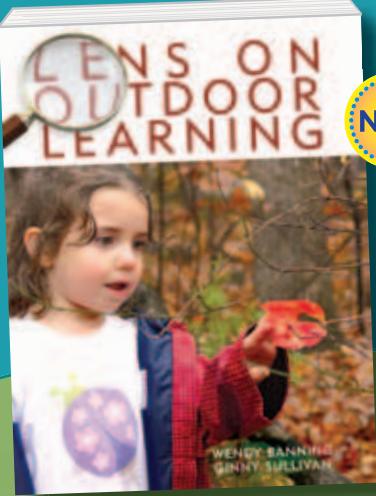
Recovering the voice of the teacher, usually a woman, increasingly a person of color, often a member of the working poor, is an essential part of re-conceptualizing the field of early childhood education. The question "What can these teachers tell one another and the world about teaching and about children?" has largely been ignored in favor of more distanced questions, such as "How shall we explain what these teachers ought to know?"

In my view, helping teachers strengthen their relationships with children and

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**-RICHARD LOUV**  
author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*



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Title \_\_\_\_\_ (write last)

(What happened: write your own interest about the details of what happened, including what child does and says.)

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(What it means: write your process and insights about how this connects with other observations, your knowledge of this child, child development and learning theory; identify your own perspectives and those of others.)

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(Opportunities and Possibilities: write your ideas about possible next things to do.)

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(Write a question to invite the perspective of Moritz's family.)

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

families should be a major goal in any documentation and assessment process. Learning Stories can serve as a valuable tool and help teachers enhance their own voices for an expanded view of quality in early childhood education.

## References

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*early childhood curriculum: Beginning the dialogue.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning Stories.* Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Seidel, S. (2008). Lessons from Reggio. In L. Gandini, S. Etheredge, and L. Hill. (Eds.), *Insights and inspiration from Reggio Emilia.* Worcester, MA: Davis Publishing.

## Resources

Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education. *Kei Tua o te Pae / Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* is a resource to help teachers use Learning Stories to improve the quality of their teaching: [www.educate.ece.govt.nz](http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz)

Drummond, T. Writing learning stories. Website focused on learning stories: <http://earlylearningstories.info>