

NARRATIVES FOR LEARNING:

Sharing giftedness through learning stories

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ABSTRACT

Learning stories, as a narrative assessment method, provide rich opportunities for documenting and sharing examples of giftedness in social contexts. The documentation method is one that is accessible to teachers, parents and students, and able to capture broad multicategorical aspects of giftedness, including creative, cultural and leadership domain, and dispositions for learning. Examples of two learning stories of 4-year old precocious readers are included in this paper to illustrate assessment for learning and to make learning visible.

BACKGROUND

The recording of learning stories is a method of showing and making sense of learning using narrative and annotated photos (Carr, 2001). The model is now well-embedded in New Zealand early childhood practice through the support of Ministry of Education (2004/2007) exemplars *Kei Tua o te Pae* and professional development. However, these nationally-provided exemplars do not include any specific recognition of giftedness.

A *Massey University Research Award* is supporting a project in four early childhood services which will gather examples of learning stories of young gifted children and consider their usefulness for teaching. By making learning of gifted children and students visible, opportunities to advocate should be strengthened. This paper is written as a background document to position learning stories as a narrative assessment approach, and to consider how the strengths of this approach may be useful for young gifted learners in New Zealand. Two examples of learning stories are included in the paper, but it is recognised that many more will be needed to showcase the breadth and depth of giftedness.

There are a number of definitions of giftedness, and individual services may use their own. One definition is:

Gifted children are those who demonstrate "high performance relative to their educational context in one or more of a wide range of areas such as:

- *Specific academic, technical or mechanical aptitude and achievement*
- *Creative, productive or intuitive thinking*
- *Cultural arts: verbal, visual and performing*
- *General intelligence*
- *Cultural traditions, values and ethics*
- *Social skills and leadership*
- *Aesthetics.* (New Zealand Department of Education, 1986, cited in McAlpine, 1996, p. 31).

The holistic nature of learning stories will be able to reflect this multicategorical definition of giftedness, including cultural, creative and interpersonal dimensions of giftedness. Learning stories are also able to acknowledge interactions and contexts of learning. The effectiveness of learning stories for facilitating planning and teaching for gifted children is a deeper issue that will continue to be explored with participants, along with identification of implications for teachers, for educational leaders, for children and for parents.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CONTEXT

In 2008 there were 198,784 early childhood education enrolments, across 4,649 early childhood education services (Education Counts, 2009). The *Licensing Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Centres 2008* (Ministry of Education, 2008a) requires services to “plan, implement, and evaluate a curriculum that is designed to enhance children’s learning and development “ and ensure that each service “responds to the learning interests, strengths, and capabilities of enrolled children” (p. 8). In order to achieve these requirements the assessment approach must be capable of capturing interests, strengths and capabilities.

Te Whariki, the early childhood curriculum, (Ministry of Education, 1996), is designed to be “inclusive and appropriate for all children” (p. 11) and includes the goal that “children experience an environment where: there are equitable opportunities for learning, irrespective of gender, ability, age, ethnicity, or background; [and] they are affirmed as individuals” (p. 16). An intention of *Te Whariki* is to ensure empowerment for the learner and their family, and all children are viewed as confident and capable learners.

Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2004/2007) supports teachers to notice, recognise and respond to learning. *Kei Tua o te Pae* invites teachers and other adults who work with children to consider competence according to three aspects:

- “Personal goals, interests, and working theories;
- Learning strategies and dispositions
- Social roles and culturally valued literacies” (Ministry of Education, 2004, booklet 6, p. 3).

Defining competence in this way means that assessment needs to be able to capture rich examples of interests, activity and interaction in social and cultural contexts. Narrative assessment, including learning stories, is able to document rich and meaningful evidence that could never be captured within formal and standardised assessment tools. It is also useful to note that a broad interpretation of competence can avoid pre-determination of expectations which can limit learning and achievement.

NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT

Narratives

People have always told stories, and story-telling can be a powerful way to transmit information. When we share narratives of learning with other people, including the learners themselves, we also share our understandings about people and our own values. When we discuss narratives with others, we give

participants the opportunity to engage in construction and reconstruction of what learning means, and extend our understanding of people. Narratives may be orally transmitted or written down. Both documented and oral narratives can enhance communication between teachers, students, and families and support notions of 'ownership' and 'legitimation' (Moore, Molloy, Morton & Davis, 2008). Carr (2004) claims that narrative assessment keeps learning complex rather than fragmented, ensures that learning is holistically connected and contextually meaningful, and enhances credibility.

Learning stories are a common method of documenting learning in early childhood settings in New Zealand (Ministry of Education 2004/2007) and increasingly used in school settings (Carr & Peters, 2005; Davis & Molloy, 2004; Molloy, 2005). Other narrative assessment approaches include the use of portfolios, anecdotal observation, video recording, interviewing, and use of peer and self-assessment. Narrative assessment is not new, but formal recognition of the approach as a valid assessment approach is more recent.

One way to advocate for gifted education is to record narratives of gifted learners. These narratives can effectively share stories of ability and competence, highlight issues of importance, and illustrate useful connections with other people. Gifted learners are neglected in current assessment resources and sharing narratives of gifted learners would provide visibility for this group.

Assessment for learning

Traditional theories of assessment have been based on a psychometric conception of intelligence. Norm-referenced assessment defines and measures a construct of what is "normal". Students who are exceptional become positioned as "abnormal" and outsiders. Moore et al. (2008) assert that

Over the past 40 years, assessment has been reconceptualised as having educational and formative purposes ... Despite this growing international discourse of assessment for learning, much assessment practice in schools privileges normative and comparative frames." (p. 3)

To support learning, assessment needs to do more than label; it needs to support learning (Bell & Cowie, 1999; Hattie, 2005; Timperley & Parr, 2004). Teachers need assessment data that is more holistic, interpretive and reflective than numeric data, grades and marks. Assessment that is personalised, contextualised and related to the learner's dispositions is more likely to be useful for teaching and learning than an isolated score, ranking, stanine or percentile.

Learning Stories not only look back, but they are constructive and forward looking through providing teachers and learners a process of seeking and interpreting evidence to open up possible learning pathways. They are also enabling teachers to view the students as mindful and competent in learning contexts. (Moore et al., 2008, p. 4).

Narrative assessment is "learner centred, credit based, and illustrates learning and achievement within authentic contexts" (Moore et al., 2008, p. 1). The key purpose of narrative assessment is understanding of learners (Drummond,

1993). *Kei Tua o te Pae Assessment for learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* is a resource provided by the Ministry of Education (2004/2007) to support teachers in noticing, recognising, responding, documenting, and reporting student learning in ways that are meaningful for students, their families, and educators. However, narratives of gifted children are not visible within the exemplar assessments.

Narrative assessment challenges the assumption is that giftedness can only be assessed by normalised tests that rank or rate populations in comparison to one another. Instead, narratives describe what giftedness means in terms of sociocultural contexts, and across broad domain. Narratives can capture aspects of curriculum not easily assessed in any other way, particularly non-academic aspects of curriculum. Narrative assessment enables multiple participants to engage and have their voices represented, and can be responsive to local cultures, communities and contexts.

Learning stories

Carr (1998a, 1998b,) refers to learning stories as a type of documented assessment narrative which highlights dispositions for learning connected to the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). Examples of dispositions include curiosity and perseverance. Learning stories focus on actions and relationships and enable the teacher to see the child and their learning in a wider context. This approach does not compare students to others, nor to standards. In this way, learning stories value and foster the students' progress and achievement at the same time recognising that this progress is socially mediated and co-constructed.

Hatherley and Sands (2002) state that “a hallmark of Learning Stories is that they apply a credit rather than a deficit approach to assessment. In practice, this means that stories document what children ‘can do’ rather than what they ‘can’t do’” (p. 11). The approach is informed by Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological-contextual model, which provides a framework for understanding the contexts in which humans develop. It is an approach that emphasises the importance of relationships and whanaungatanga (Ministry of Education, 2008b). A strength is the visible connection within the learning story between the child’s learning opportunities and the action of the teacher. Thus, in learning stories the teacher becomes part of the narrative and not merely an objective outside observer. Hatherley and Sands (2002) refer to learning stories as giving teachers “vitality” to the assessment process.

Each learning story will be unique in content and form; some use templates and some do not, some show clear connections across time and space, others are snapshots in time. Some of the expected elements of learning stories include:

- The narrative
- Images
- Voice (teacher, child and/or parent/whānau)
- Making the learning visible
- Possible pathways.

Attached to this paper are two learning stories to illustrate how narrative assessment can document gifted children's learning.

Examples

The learning stories attached to this paper are by no means presented as exemplary examples of quality learning stories, but they are examples of how narratives can capture children's behaviours, interests, dispositions and interactions. The examples are drawn from a doctoral study of 11 four-year-old precocious readers (Margrain, 2005). The study obtained ethics approval, with individual families providing permission for the use of records, although the names used are pseudonyms.

The narrative *Orbit* brings to life Henry's interest in astronomy and understanding of the concept: "orbit". Many learning stories would show images of learners, in this learning stories it is images of the concept "orbit" that have been included. This learning story was recorded by a researcher, but included parent and child voice. The possible pathways recognised that there are multiple learning journeys and it can be dangerous to assume what the basis is for interests and motivations that underlie competence. In this example the possible pathways included focusing on the content topic of astronomy or the exploration, through play, of physics concepts of orbits.

Little Problems – Big Help documents David's confident contribution in helping his teachers and other children using computers at his preschool¹. The learning story illustrates how competence is viewed socioculturally – it is not merely constructed as knowledge and skill but instead framed as application of this within a social context. This learning story includes multiple voices: author, teacher, parent and child. In the home context David's interest in problem-solving inquiry is more apparent. A benefit of learning stories is the opportunity to include multiple perspectives and contexts. Parents can learn how David supports others in the preschool context, and teachers can be reminded that this is not the only role for David; he also needs opportunities to investigate and engage in new learning.

Collaborative assessment

Sociocultural perspectives of learning recognise that learning is socially and contextually situated. Learning stories can support parents and whānau in their understanding of what learning is happening at school or early childhood education settings. Portfolios of learning stories can also be a tool to support students to reflect on their learning and to share this with their whānau. In addition, learning stories provide an opportunity for parents and whānau, students and their peers to directly contribute their voice and/or reflections. Learning stories are not only written by teachers. When, for example, parents share learning, preferences and strategies from home, these narratives can influence the direction of school learning opportunities. Thus, learning stories do not only record learning, they also inform planning.

¹ David's education and care centre described themselves as a "preschool", although this is a term that is not used within the early childhood strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002a).

In a project collecting learning stories of students with special education needs (Moore et al., 2008), the assessment approach:

challenges a sense of assessment being predictive and predictable. Narrative assessment reminds us of the complexity of life and of learning; it also provides us with the means of better describing some of this complexity ... The teachers have appreciated narrative assessment as an approach which better supports noticing student learning in more holistic ways, that better supports telling about learning in ways that are more accessible to students and families (pp. 8-9).

NATIONAL POLICY FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

Amongst the *Core Principles for Gifted and Talented Education* (Ministry of Education, 2002b) are the following principles:

- Gifted and talented learners are found in every group within society
- The early childhood and school environments are powerful catalysts for the demonstration and development of talent.

Clearly, in order to provide an individually-oriented education there needs to be effective assessment of the learner and their giftedness. This assessment needs to ensure that demonstration and development of talent can be observed and documented. To date the Ministry of Education has provided limited direction regarding assessment. In fact, some national assessment tools have such low ceilings that giftedness is impossible to recognise, for example *School Entry Assessment* (Ministry of Education, 1997) and the *Six Year Net* (Clay, 1979).

A further core principle for gifted education (Ministry of Education, 2002b) states “Gifted and talented learners should be offered a curriculum that has been expanded in breadth, depth and pace to match their learning needs.” Effective assessment is required in order to determine what the child’s learning strengths, needs, interests and dispositions for learning are, and to inform curriculum planning.

Other Ministry-funded initiatives to support teachers include a limited number of advisers, a website, a handbook and in earlier years some funding for research/evaluation and talent development initiative. The website is available to all teachers, however the handbook was only provided to schools, and not to early childhood services. The core principles for gifted education apply to both school and early childhood sectors, however to date “most of the initiatives are aimed at the school sector” (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008).

A recent publication *Nurturing Gifted and Talented Children: A parent-teacher partnership* (Bevan-Brown & Taylor, 2008) promotes collaboration between home and education settings, affirming that “research and common sense highlight that parents play a vital role in nurturing and developing their children’s gifts and talents” (p. 136). This aligns well with another core principle for gifted education (Ministry of Education, 2002b) that “schools and early childhood centres should provide opportunities for parents, caregivers, and whānau to be involved in the decision making that affects the learning of individual students.” The intent of working in collaboration with parents and families is likely to be advantageous for all groups, and potentially useful given limited direct funding and national leadership. Parent-led groups such

as the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children (NZAGC) has extensive expertise that has been able to support many schools and teachers.

As noted earlier, narrative assessment offers the opportunity to record learning in a way that can be meaningful and accessible to a range of participants. Further, narrative assessment is able to qualitatively record evidence of broader aspects of curriculum than traditional academic areas. This means that narratives can, for example, effectively share examples of giftedness in cultural, aesthetic/creative or leadership domain. These aspects of giftedness are less likely to be captured in traditional academic or psychometric tests that have little relationship to the everyday learning context of early childhood education settings.

CONCLUSION

Recording learning stories is one way of using narrative assessment, and is a method widely and increasingly used in New Zealand. The use of learning stories is an assessment approach that has great potential for adding to our understanding of gifted learners and, concepts of giftedness, and gifted education. Strengths of learning stories include the opportunity they offer to capture: multiple dimensions of giftedness; dispositions for learning; strengths and interests; contextual information; relationships; multiple participant voices. Learning stories allow partnership between key participants: teacher, family and child in ways that formal tests do not. Parents should not feel obliged to seek expensive psychometric tests – in fact these may provide little connection to teaching and learning in early childhood contexts and little opportunity for collaboration.

Learning stories also allow teachers the opportunity to provide evidence of their responsiveness to giftedness. In the attached learning stories teachers consider ways to extend the children within the social context of early childhood, simultaneously attending to individuals and groups. The more learning stories of gifted children that can be documented and shared, the more confident that teachers are likely to be that they can identify and provide for young gifted children. Thus, learning stories also offer the opportunity for professional learning across early childhood education that will strengthen outcomes for teachers, families and children.

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Orbit

Henry X
Age: 4 years, 9 months
(October 2001)

Written by Valerie Margrain

Learning Story

Henry was working with Valerie to help her with her university research, completing a language assessment, the *British Picture Vocabulary Scale*. He was shown a page with four black and white pictures on it, and asked to point to the one that represented the word "orbit". He began to animatedly discuss the concept of "orbit."

Henry said that the picture on the page was incorrect, because there were only five rings around the sun, and if it was our solar system then there should be nine rings. He also said that it was a shame the picture wasn't in colour, because if it was the fourth planet would be red - "that's Mars."

Henry then drew a map of the solar system, showing the nine planets orbiting. He was in a hurry and ran out of room on the page to show all of the orbits. He wrote "For You" on the map and gave it to Valerie to keep.

Finally, Henry took Valerie into his bedroom and showed her some of his other illustrations of the solar system. They were carefully completed and showed excellent understanding of the order of the planets, features such as colour and rings, and clear orbits around the sun.

Possible Pathway: Astronomy

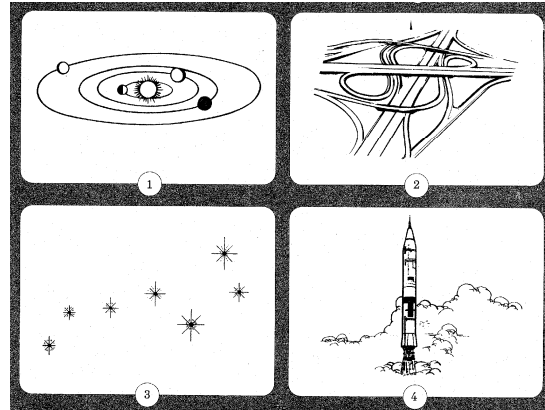
Henry's interest in space could be extended through a visit to an observatory. A mentor or his family could help him track the movement of some constellations across the sky. He could share his learning at kindergarten. A useful resource is the website <http://www.astronomynz.org.nz/the-night-sky/the-night-sky-2.html>

Possible Pathway: Orbit

Henry could explore the concept of orbits further through physics with hands-on exploration of pendulums, spheres and boomerangs. Games that he could share with other children include rotational marble tower construction, swingball and other ball games, water vortex (eg down the plughole) and art spirographs.

Parent Voice

Henry is definitely interested in space. We have been to the library and checked out books and posters. He has drawn a lot of space pictures lately and enjoys discussing the different planets. Since your learning story he has discovered that Pluto is not a "real planet" but a dwarf planet and he thinks that it is frustrating that many books incorrectly state that there are 9 planets.



Teaching and learning

Henry has shown that he has advanced understanding of the concept of orbits and knowledge of the solar system. He enjoys discussing concepts with adults, demonstrating confident and effective communication. His sustained interest and investigation demonstrates the disposition of perseverance. The behaviours connect to the curriculum goals exploration 4.3 and 4.5 and communication 3.1.



Little Problems – Big Help

David Z June 2001
4 years, 3 months
by Valerie Margrain



Teacher Voice

David is a great help with the computers. He helps the other children and sometimes helps us teachers too - Very handy!



Learning Story

David, today I saw you working on the computer in your preschool classroom. You read aloud from the screen: “Press a key to continue.”

Your teacher, Sue, came over and said “Yes, so press one of those ... and again.” Then the computer took a while to get going and Sue thought that it wasn’t working, so she suggested that you should give up and she said “OK, just leave it.”

But you knew what the computer was doing and said “submitting file” – you were right! There was a problem with the safe mode, and you knew that too.

You are a super computer whiz
David!



Later, one of the girls in your class was having trouble with the computer. I noticed that she asked you for help first of all, *then* went to the teacher because you were busy doing something else.

Parent voice

It took him no time at all to pick up things like the computer. I bring laptops home from work and he gets through the passwords, I almost have to ask him how to do things.

We have a lot of computer games ... I think he’s learned a lot off the computer – basic maths, reading, addition.

Teaching and learning

David knows a great deal about how computers work. Particularly important however is his contribution to his early learning community: he is a helper and guide. David also demonstrates problem-solving investigation as he experiments and explores with technology. He shows learning dispositions of inquiry and responsibility. Curriculum links: Exploration 3.1 and Contribution 3.6

Possible pathways

David enjoys using advanced learning games on the computer, especially for maths and problem-solving. He has great technological and problem-solving skills. At preschool we could use put out some electrical circuit-building equipment and also bring in dismantle some appliances. Some of the problem-solving strategies could be applied off the computer through orienteering, treasure hunts. In these activities David could apply his literacy and leadership skills in another context. We could also talk about internet security and web safety.