May 2024

Learning Stories as Assessment for Liberation

Helen Frazier

Follow this and additional works at: https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons, Early Childhood Education Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, and the Educational Methods Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.
Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank Dr. Lorraine Falchi for being a generous and knowledgable reader.
I wrote the following letter to a child named Cecilia and her family. Letters such as this are central to the assessment approach called Learning Stories that I use in my pre-K class. Because these letters are used to inform families and children about the connection between the activities the child is doing and their ongoing learning, they include three parts: a description of their activity, a connection to what is being learned, and an idea about future growth.

Dear Cecilia,

Today in the block area you built a camera. You used the nesting boxes that have different magnifications and put one in front of the other. You put the toy people on the other side of your camera and looked through your lens at them. You said they look funny!

You reached around with your hand to take them and said, “My hand surprised me!” It looked bigger than usual through your camera. Then you lined up the red cylinders in front of the camera lens. You said that you wanted to see what they looked like. I looked through your camera. They looked amazing!
Learning Stories is a narrative approach to assessment that acknowledges and welcomes teacher, child, and family perspectives; it is done for, not on, the child. This approach was developed in New Zealand, where it is currently the primary form of early childhood assessment. As an educator and professional development provider working in New York City, I became interested in Learning Stories because of my frustration with widely used “authentic assessment” systems. In this paper, I will illustrate my steps toward unlearning exclusionary assessment practices, and I will share my exploration of Learning Stories as a liberatory assessment approach. Through sharing this reflection, I hope to provide the “engaged practitioner” with a “thickly described example” that then can be “adapted in ways that change practice” (Tobin, 2005, p. 31).

For 20 years, I used standard industry tools, such as Teaching Strategies GOLD, HighScopeCOR, and WorkSamplingSystem, for assessing children's development, and I supported practitioners in using them. I have looked at these tools from every angle and tried to see them as feasible and constructive—but I have long been troubled by my impression that they are doing more harm than good. Early care and education providers, whose work is already taxing, have the additional (unpaid) responsibility of uploading observations and comparing children's skills to the dominant culture's developmental norms. The implication of this process, as well as the reports that the ratings lead to, is that childhood, even infancy, is a race—a competition to exceed expectations. The data that the commercial early childhood assessment systems produce, which they misleadingly label “authentic,” is very rarely meaningful to teachers and is often so flawed as to be useless to policy makers, although it is perhaps of value to the corporations and private equity firms that own the systems.

I decided to put aside the “data banks and dead ideas” (Roy, 2020, n.p.) and consider, through practice, how to assess children in a way that is “socially just by design and . . . aims to promote greater social justice within society as a whole” (Hanesworth et al., 2018, p. 9). As an experienced White teacher, I was able to leverage my privilege to try an alternative form of assessment within a publicly funded early childhood program. My reflections are new and process-oriented; I have only been using Learning Stories for one year. The dimensions of my unlearning include embracing emotion: assessment for attachment; enactment of asset-based pedagogies: assessment for pluralism; and awakening of creativity: assessment as art. In this paper, I will describe the shifts in my practice and present examples of Learning Stories to illustrate each of these dimensions.

**EMBRACING EMOTION: ASSESSMENT FOR ATTACHMENT**

I will never forget the Head Start training I attended in 2014. Exhausted educators sat at tables in the basement of a community-based organization in Bushwick, Brooklyn. An orange was set in the middle of each table. We were asked to objectively describe it as an object. Our responses included, “It is round,” “It is orangish-yellow in color,” and “It has a stem.” We were then asked to describe the way a child’s face looked when she was happy and responded that “Her mouth turns up at the corners.” The trainers
impressed upon us that authentic assessment documentation should contain no trace of emotion, interpretation, investment, or connection.

The pseudo-scientific gaze is a kind of power, and that may be reassuring to a profession insecure about its professionalism. But as a caregiver, I found removing love from my gaze painful. Attempting to become more “scientific,” I became more estranged from the children—and from myself. My co-teachers were dispirited by the relentless work of data collection and entry. What was it for? Multiple studies demonstrate the value of responsive interactions during early childhood (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Early childhood teachers do not need child outcome data to prove that their work is important.

If, as I believe, a central goal of early care and education providers is to build children’s capacity for healthy attachment, it is counterproductive to treat children as objects for study. Love is at the heart of learning (Carr & Lee, 2021). The more reciprocal our interactions with children are, the more children will learn. What, I wondered, would assessing for the child and the family—rather than for the state, policy makers, or corporations—look like?

A learning story includes a letter to the child, a description of what the child is doing, and some ideas about next steps in learning. In their helpful book, Learning Stories and Teacher Inquiry Groups: Reimagining Teaching and Assessment in Early Childhood Education, Escamilla, Kroll, Meier, and White (2021) explain the role of emotion in Learning Stories:

The teacher begins the story with his or her own interest in what the child has taken the initiative to do, describing what the child does and says. The teacher writes in the first person using “I,” which brings a personal perspective that is essential to the tale, writing directly to the child. For example, “Miguel, yesterday I noticed that you …” or “Gaby, today I heard you say …” or “Nathan, this morning I saw you …” The teacher describes what the child does and says from the perspective of someone who deeply cares and is listening closely to discover what is actually happening and the learning that is taking place. It is important to note that, quite often, this description is not totally objective. The teacher is present with his or her own feelings. Usually, the teacher includes his or her first name so the child and the family will know who wrote the story. (p. 23)

Interpretation that includes emotion is often gendered as feminine, and “perhaps as a result of internalized patriarchy, a less valid way of knowing” (Hayter, 2021, p. 86). Learning stories acknowledge our subjectivity and welcome ambiguity. They might be a way of reclaiming (affective, embodied) feminist discourse in a feminized profession. The inclusion of emotional expression is also consistent with what I know about how children learn: identifying and expressing authentic emotions strengthens relationships and builds trust, and it is in the context of trusting attachments that children flourish.

Unlike online authentic assessment systems, which often act as repositories for reams of decontextualized observations, Learning Stories are shared with families the day that they are written. The family then reads the learning story at home to their child. As a teacher, I began to see my assessments as gifts I was creating for each child. Here is another learning story that I wrote for Cecilia, who delighted in creating presents of her own:
Dear Cecilia,

During the Tuesday afternoon work time, you chose to go to the cozy loft. As you were looking out at the children from the loft, you noticed some cardboard, beads, and pipe cleaners in the art area. You came down and asked if you could join the activity. First, you sorted out the beads with the letters on them and strung them on to a pipe cleaner. Then, you made your pipe cleaner stick into the cardboard like a rainbow. Next, you decided to make bracelets for the children in the class. Children were so happy to receive your gifts. They each asked me to help them fasten the bracelet on their wrists. You were so thoughtful to use our materials to make gifts for the children. You have such a kind, generous, and joyful spirit, Cecilia. Thank you for being a loving member of the Hawthorn community.

What Learning is Happening Here?
As you strung the beads onto the pipe cleaner, you exercised the muscles in your hands. This will help you with your writing and drawing. The stronger your hand muscles get, the easier it will be for you to draw shapes and write letters. Cecilia, when you were doing this activity, you also focused for a long time—over 30 minutes! You kept on stringing beads to make bracelets. Developing the ability to focus and pay attention is an important part of becoming a student. Most of all, when you were doing this work, you showed that you care for your friends.

What’s Next?
Cecilia, after they received your bracelets, many children became excited about stringing beads. I think I will look for more beads to add to our art area so we can continue to make jewelry and sculptures. I am also wondering if you might like to draw pictures or make cards for your friends and family.

From,
Helen
Her mother read the learning story to Cecilia that night and responded, “This is too adorable. She is such a thoughtful child and finds it easy to appreciate all of her peers for who they are.” When Cecilia entered the class the next morning, her eyes were shining with recognition and pride. It was just October; the children were new to the class. Cecilia had taken chances in coming down from the loft, in creating, and in giving. She had been seen in her courage and kindness. The gift of the learning story strengthened Cecilia’s attachment to us as her teachers and affirmed her unfolding self to her family.

Learning Stories are a collaborative form of assessment. Cecilia’s mother’s observation that Cecilia “finds it easy to appreciate her peers for who they are” was so true—specific and beautiful. As the year progressed, Cecilia thoughtfully connected to each child in the class, paying special attention to children who were sometimes unhappy. She noticed what children liked and brought them gifts—a coloring page from home, a pine cone, a ladybug. Her mother’s observation helped me to see Cecilia and join in a loving appreciation of her.

If I had created this observation for a traditional authentic assessment system, as I had done for 20 years, I might have written “C sorted out the beads and strung them on pipe cleaners. She said they were bracelets and carried them to her peers.” I would then have used a standardized time line to assign a numerical rating to her fine motor and expressive language skills.

The commercial authentic assessment system might also ask me to rate Cecilia’s emotional development. Where to begin? Not everything that we value can be quantified. The system seems to assume that Cecilia’s awareness and generosity need to be measured and improved, but I would argue that she is already offering a full expression of a powerful disposition that should simply be noticed and appreciated. Writing Learning Stories helped me to shift my gaze from one of power and domination to one of genuine respect.

ENACTMENT OF ASSET-BASED PEDAGOGIES: ASSESSMENT FOR PLURALISM

At the heart of rating systems is the myth of the normal child (Baglieri et al., 2011). Teaching Strategies GOLD asks educators to determine if children’s skills are below, consistent with, or exceeding “widely held expectations” (MyTeachingStrategies, 2023). Whose expectations are these? In the Core Considerations to Inform Decision Making section of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Position Statement, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020) asserts that normative schedules can reinforce “systems of power and privilege” by excluding the developmental expectations of marginalized families:

When considering commonalities in development and learning, it is important to acknowledge that much of the research and the principal theories that have historically guided early childhood professional preparation and practice have primarily reflected norms based on a Western scientific-cultural model. Little research has considered a normative perspective based on other groups. As a result, differences from this Western (typically White, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking) norm have been viewed as deficits, helping to perpetuate systems of power and privilege and to maintain structural inequities. (p. 6)

When educators complete ratings such as those in Teaching Strategies, they are measuring each child against cultural, economic, and linguistic norms; when they use these ratings to inform instruction, they are planning to move each child closer to that norm. Sen (2007, pp. 16–17), as cited in McArthur (2016), notes that “Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization.”

A culturally responsive and sustaining approach to assessment, by contrast, supports students in
order to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the
democratic project of schooling” (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016, p. 6). In their seminal article “[Re]
claiming ’Inclusive Education’ Toward Cohesion in Educational Reform: Disability Studies Unravels the
Myth of the Normal Child,” Baglieri et al. (2011) state that “an authentically inclusive education invites
the denaturalization of ‘normalcy’ to arrive at a ground zero point from which we banish idealizations
of center” (p. 2142). Learning Stories may be part of an asset-based approach to assessment that works
within culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy as well as within authentic inclusion.

As an experienced early care and education provider, I deeply internalized the developmental
continuum that defines normalcy. I am just beginning to undo my “idealizations of center.” The “What
learning is happening here?” section of the learning story did not include checkboxes, but it may as well
have, given how hard I found it to think outside those lines.

Carr (2021), who contributed to the development of the Learning Stories approach, acknowledges the
importance of powerful frameworks such as New Zealand’s national Te Whāriki curriculum that define
the values and goals of education. She also notes what is lost when educators connect their stories to
normative developmental ratings:

> These diminish the professional role of the teacher as a thoughtful and knowledgeable
analyst of the learning. They can deny the vital opportunity for the teacher to tentatively
and collaboratively enable the learner to recognize some possible next steps and how to
take them. (p.131)

While the measurement procedures of commercial assessment systems falsely promise certainty and
accuracy, Learning Stories encourage the educator to be “tentative.” The “next steps” section is written
as a question (“perhaps we might?”) that the family or student themselves are invited to answer.

Carr (2021) encourages educators to focus on children’s learning dispositions, which might include
creativity, curiosity, persistence, and generosity, rather than to connect observations to normative
skills. Learning dispositions “reflect the emerging values of children and the values and beliefs of
teachers, families, schools, and even the larger community” (Escamilla, 2021). Who is this unique
person? What are their interests and ways of being?

The New York State Education Department’s *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Framework* (2019) provides
guidance on how to “build rapport and develop positive relationships with students, and their families,
by learning about their interests and inviting them to share their opinions and concerns” (p. 26).
Through listening, educators can identify and connect the culturally accumulated “funds of knowledge”
that children bring to school with them. Here is a learning story about a child whose pretend play
revealed his fund of knowledge about child care:

> **Dear David,**

> On Tuesday, at Forest School, you found two big smooth rocks and carried them over to me. You
said, “These are my babies.” You sang them a little song, “Babies, babies, babies ....” You told me
to come with you because “We have to put them to bed.” You laid the rocks down under a tree and
patted them a bit. Then you said that they were waking up. “Let’s check in the fridge for milk.”
You carried them carefully to a different part of the Forest School area. Sometimes it was hard to
carry them both at once and you asked me to hold one for a bit. You handed it to me so gently. You
said, “I am the daddy. We will give them some oatmeal. We need to go to the store to buy milk.”
You pretended to use leaves as money to buy milk. Then you said, “There you go babies.” Amy was
interested in what you were doing and you took her over to the place where you found the rocks.
Once you got over there you told the babies, “It’s time to leave the playground.” You said that the
babies were crying about leaving the playground. They had to go back to bed. When you brought
them back to the bed by the tree, you and Amy arranged some leaves over them to make blankets.

David, you played the game with your rock babies for over 30 minutes. You really knew all about
what babies need and how to take care of them! Maybe you were thinking of your little sister. You
may be a parent one day, and you will know just what to do.

What Learning is Happening Here?
David, you are learning how to act out a story in play. This is an important skill that will help you
learn to be a good writer when you get older. You thought about what daddies say, where they go,
and what happens in a baby’s day. You used a lot of language to communicate your ideas to us. You
were so creative about how to use the rocks, leaves, and trees as part of your story.

What’s Next?
David, you know so much about how to care for a baby, and I’m sure that many of the other children
in the Hawthorn class would like to play rock babies with you. Maybe next time we go to Forest
School, you can try playing it again, and you can teach another child how to care for a little one.

From,
Helen

David’s mothers responded, “This is the sweetest. Thank you so much for sharing. He does love taking
care of his little sister and he has a baby doll that he always hugs and took care of prior to his sister’s
birth. I love it.”

Looking through the lens of learning dispositions, rather than of skills, I see how responsible David
was, not just for his rock babies in his pretend play, but also in the classroom. He conscientiously made
sure all the chairs were pushed in and swept up the sand from under the sand table. Responsibility was
a strong value in David’s family and one that I was able to notice and connect to through the Learning
Stories process.
For children whose functional skills make classroom participation difficult and whose families have concerns about their development, we provide referrals to the norm-referenced evaluation process through our district’s Committee for Preschool Special Education. This process, with its opaque language and itinerant experts, is often confusing and dehumanizing for families, but it can ultimately allow children access to services to which they are entitled by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. I hope that asset-based Learning Stories may help these families maintain their image of their child as they navigate an ableist system.

AWAKENING OF CREATIVITY: ASSESSMENT AS ART

Early childhood education is a creative field of work. We are creative in the construction of the classroom environment, in the modulation of the rhythms of the day, in our singing and in our storytelling, in our curation of art materials, and in our documentation. Learning Stories honor the educator as an artist and offer a new mode of expression.

While commercial assessment data sits in the cloud, inaccessible to children and families and deleted at the end of each year, our Learning Stories are a tangible creation. We collect our stories in booklets that have a special place in the library area. Children read their Learning Stories with their parents during arrival times, side by side with one another during work times, and on their mats at nap time. Sometimes we read them out loud to the class during story time and talk about our memories.

Assessment has become community work. We honor one another’s emerging selves. Late in the year, Cecilia was sitting at the art table talking to her friends. She said, “This is us on the swings, and this is Helen watching us play.” Although it is expected that children will imitate the behavior of their teachers, I felt moved that a child had documented my work. Assessment had become accessible, public, and democratic.

I found that the Learning Stories process provided a new kind of accountability. Writing for the child themself and for their family, I took time to see them and strove to be as true to their actions and words as possible. If I got the story wrong, the child would almost always correct me! One day, a child named Ben was reading his learning story book with me. He wanted to add onto a story about a block building he had made. He began to draw what the character in his block building should have looked like.

Figure 7. Ben revising his learning story
This spontaneous action made me wonder if we could expand our Learning Stories books to include the co-teachers’, families’, and children’s contributions, clarifications, and reinterpretations. As we journey further away from the confines of commercial assessment, the learning story collection might become a kind of scrapbook.

Perhaps thinking of Learning Stories as a form of scrapbooking might be an invitation to educators who are less comfortable with traditional literacies. In *Cutting and Pasting: The Rhetorical Promise of Scrapbooking as Feminist Inventiveness and Agency from the Margins*, Hayter (2021) writes, “I feel connected to women and others who engage in scrapbooking as a means to assert agency when the circulation of print and electronic textual materials is overwhelming or dominated by a system that largely privileges a patriarchal or otherwise oppressive framework” (p. 3). Like a collection of Learning Stories, a scrapbook is a personal record—and often a gift. Scrapbooking offers a form of reflective practice and multimodal approach to meaning-making. It might also be an approach to early childhood assessment that is “socially just by design and that aims to promote greater social justice within society as a whole” (Park, 2020, p.1).

CONCLUSION

I’ve had a happy year of unlearning. I feel more human. As with any offering, the act of giving a learning story is at least as emotionally rewarding as the experience of receiving one. The stories invite the teacher to see a more complete version of the child. Each child is leaving for kindergarten with a strong sense of self and a joyful understanding of how to be in a community. Commercial assessment systems look violent in comparison.

The Call for Papers for this issue of Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* asks authors to offer recommendations for how to remake systems. At the heart of the effort is trust. The early care and education field recognizes the importance that trusting relationships have for human learning, but, sadly, early care and education quality improvement systems are centered on mistrust. They offer a mechanistic intervention—rating and improvement—to remediate the imagined deficits of children, families, and teachers. People of all ages don’t like to be rated; why should we trust the rater, especially if they do not know us or share the values of our communities? Lacking the element of trust, the anxious, monetized, deficit-based processes of commercial assessment systems cannot lead to learning. Recognizing this essential flaw, educators are putting aside these broken tools.

Teachers who would like to change assessment practices are not alone. There are groups of engaged educators in Head Start programs, state-funded pre-K programs, and family child care networks developing the Learning Stories practice all around the United States (Escamilla, 2021). Teachers might begin by considering what it would look and feel like to make assessments for, not of, the child. They might then think with the families in their communities about what values, skills, or dispositions they would like to reflect on together. Write a letter. Read it to a child.

Trust, so long broken, can only be repaired bit by bit. Small programs, or even individual classrooms in local communities, can look for ways to hold a protective space for children. Art cannot be scaled, so each person’s approach to Learning Stories, as well as each communities’ valued learning dispositions, will look different. The stories might be decorative, digital, or verbal. The important thing is that they are gifts.
REFERENCES


MyTeachingStrategies (2023, August 7). What are the raw score ranges of widely held expectations in GOLD reports? teachingstrategies.my.site.com/portal/s/article/What-are-the-raw-score-ranges-of-widely-held-expectations-in-reports

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) position statement. naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents


Roy, A. (2020, April 3). The pandemic is a portal. Financial Times. ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Helen Frazier, GSE ’05, has worked in early childhood education as a preschool and kindergarten teacher, special educator, adjunct instructor, and professional development provider. She was the lead writer and project coordinator for the Revised New York State Early Learning Guidelines and a creator of the NYAEYC Interest-Driven Learning Framework. Helen was a member of NYS Board of Regents Early Childhood Workgroup’s Blue Ribbon Committee. She holds a master’s degree from Bank Street Graduate School of Education and is the proud mother of two sons who attend New York City public schools.