

Assessment: When parents are learners too



At the heart of sociocultural learning and assessment is the clarity that learning happens in relationship with people, places and things. At the heart of formal sociocultural assessment is documentation that reflects values which are often unexpressed: what is worthy of documenting? Who documents, and in what circumstances? In the engaging with the documentation, what is documenter looking for? How does sociocultural assessment build capacity for all those involved? Valued learning is key here – but what happens when both the child and the adult are learners?

Wondering what all this might mean in contemporary Playcentre settings, we embarked on a research project which involved meeting in focus groups consisting of members active in seven Playcentres within two associations – one North Island; one South Island.

We wanted to learn more about how sociocultural assessment – especially learning stories – are understood and used in Playcentres. Although we did not set out to engage with any particular type of Playcentre, we were pleased to see that the seven who volunteered to participate included some that were group supervised, as well as educator-supervised. Participants came from both urban and rural Playcentres; from small ones as well as large ones. We undertook our research in 2016, so the references to Te Whāriki in these learning stories are to the 1996 version – not to the 2017 version. (For a more detailed account of the research project, see Stover & deVocht, 2017.)

In this article, we are focusing on one of the basic assumptions about sociocultural assessment: that assessment happens in a context, that that context will be evident within the assessment, including the underlying values and beliefs held by those involved. We recognised that in Playcentre, sociocultural assessment is particularly dynamic because of the ongoing process of engaging with new families. This means new children as learners but also new adult

learners who have responsibilities to contribute to the learning community. We present our research findings here as provocations for discussion rather than definitive statements about Playcentres more generally.

In analysing the transcripts of our focus groups, we recognised two broad areas which reflect underlying values. The first area is within the learning stories themselves. We suggest that underlying values are evident in:

- what the learning stories focus on,
- who they are written for
- how learning is recognised,
- how the learning story is used, and
- what, if any, analysis is written down as part of the documentation.

Underlying values also become evident when we consider:

- who is encouraged (and how are they encouraged) to produce a learning story,
- what (if any) feedback is given on what is written as a learning story;
- how writing and engaging with learning stories affect the culture of a Playcentre.



What valued learning is evident in learning stories?

In total, the focus groups considered more than 50 learning stories. These learnings were brought to the focus groups, and participants were encouraged to discuss their significance.

These learning stories were gifted to the researchers as part of the project. Working through these learning stories, we found that most were written 'to the child' – in other words, that the learning stories are often written conversationally – or as a 'letter' to the child. Grammatically, this has the author as 'I' and the child as 'You'. An example: 'When we arrived at Playcentre today, you told me you were going to get some toys out.'

But there are learning stories that are written as a commentary about the child – with the author as 'I' and the child as 'he/she/they'. An example: 'She decided to run...'. Others are written from the child's perspective – a sort of 'ghost writing' with the child referred to as 'I'. An example: 'Today my mummy and daddy got married, it was such a lot of fun and a special day us all... I was making everyone smile and giggle at me.'

Some learning stories were written in storytelling form, such as: 'Ahoey there, Captain Yasi! Today you set off on a hunt for 'golden treasure' on the island. With your band of merry pirates you waves the flag and set sail across the seas. You succeeded to find a safe place to bury your treasure so the other pirates couldn't find it! The long swishy grass was perfect...'

And some are written in rhyme:

'SPLASH SUMMER DAY: Way hey we're having fun today / Having wet and splashy water play / Sliding down the slippery slide / All the water makes for a great ride / Time to go home, to say good bye / Mummies and Daddies will have lots of washing to dry!'

Several learning stories consist of a child's storytelling, as recorded by an adult: "Once upon a

time, there was big bad wolf. And what did it eat? Fish. And the Big Bad Wolf said, 'Yucky fish' and it dived into the water. A shark came...." In our research, there was recognition that listening to learning stories can help encourage dispositions for learning, (such as 'confidence') as well as 'their character'. This can occur 'by listening to stories that other people have said about them and remembering things, building their memory and building imagination for things that they might want to revisit or through hearing about that story again.'

Several spoke about learning stories as documenting the story of each child's early life – something that may be of interest later on. Several participants saw the documentation as providing a memory bank about the early years. An example: "My child, when they're older, will be able to say look, as a three-year-old I worked really nicely in a group!"

Once learning stories are written up, what happens next varied. None of those Playcentres in our research were using any online assessment platforms in 2016. The participants reported that in some Playcentres, learning stories were displayed on the wall for a term, and then removed and put in portfolios. In at least one Playcentre, children's portfolios were regularly brought out to encourage children to open them, to discuss, to remember. One Playcentre with a 'story time' routine, regularly included portfolios as a source of stories to be read out loud. Interestingly, some learning stories were formatted so that analysis appeared on a separate page from the learning story, so that the learning story could be easily read out loud without the analysis.

We found that while the learning stories often had evidence of forward thinking ('What next?'), the focus groups indicated that planning for Playcentres was much more complex than following up on learning stories. One focus group decided that in their experience, learning stories were about transforming the learning story author;



that observing a child and www.Playcentre.org.nz writing a learning story – taking the author to new understandings of the child – which could impact immediately on planning, but equally could mean that the adult might have a new insight about how to be alongside the child. Informal discussions often happened. Insights – often tentative insights – were shared with the child's parent.

A participant mused that because so much of what happens at Playcentre is child-led, adults are not directing the learning: 'Like today for instance, the child came with an idea and they wanted to do that idea and it was feeding the birds and thankfully we had some bird feeding apparatus.' She explained that learning happens through 'full engagement' between the child and the environment. Several participants pointed out that – prompted by a learning story, a Playcentre parent might set up an activity and find that the child is not interested. So adult intentional planning is only one component of the planning that occurs in a Playcentre environment.

In addition, there are pragmatic reasons why learning stories may not feed into intentional planning. One participant pointed out that there is often a delay in getting learning stories written up so their usefulness for immediate planning is often in conversation, rather than because someone read and acted on a learning story.

Nearly all learning stories had a graphic attached, sometimes a piece of children's artwork, but more usually a photograph or two. Photographs were described as adding value to learning stories. As one research participant said: "Photos aren't a necessity, but a great photo is amazing" Participantssuggested that young children often found that the photographs were a meaningful prompt for remembering. Sometimes the memories were about what was happening in photo, but more often the children's strongest interests were about who was in the photo.

The normalising of photography on Playcentre session was commented on in one focus group

where concerns were also raised about parents potentially being overly focused on photography and less interested in engaging meaningfully in what their child was doing. However, another participant suggested that photographs can substitute for effort on the part of the learning story author. A learning story could be "just a bit pretty as opposed to really giving much grunt". A strong learning story might combine both the aesthetic of the 'pretty' and the 'grunt' of author effort.

What was the valued learning that was evident in these learning stories?

Below are eight broad areas that we suggest indicates what was important for those writing the learning stories. The examples given are extracts from learning stories which we think illustrate the values underlying.

1. Documenting children's interests

In some cases, this was a discovery for the learning story author, but in many cases, it was reinforcing the value of a child's interest. In some learning stories, this included hypothesising ('What do you think will happen? Why?') and sometimes making evident subject areas – such as maths, science and literacy. Examples: "Wow Cooper! You sure love the sandpit at Playcentre! You are the master of the digger, spades, trucks, trailers and rakes...", "Your family of elephants came to Playcentre again today and you wanted to give them a bath..."

2. Making connections

Often these were connections between the child and the Playcentre community and local environment. But connections were also made to the child's home and especially home culture, to distant family members, and to past experiences. Eg: "Mia – you told us about a friend who had a cicada wing. It was nice that you shared your world outside of Playcentre with us.", "I love how you bring your ideas of places you have visited into your play."



3. Affirming experiences at Playcentre

This was especially common for children who are relatively new at Playcentre or with whom the learning story authors are still developing a relationship. For example: "You filled the sandpit with water and jumped in the big sandy puddles... I've really enjoyed our sandpit fun today.", "Thomas, your communication is amazing. You knew what equipment you wanted and where you wanted to put it."

4. Naming and affirming capabilities and emotional states

For example: "He poured with excellent concentration and precision exactly to the mark...", "As we continued to look, I told you all how I actually didn't really like bugs and that they made me feel scared.... 'Scared,' Rogan said copying my actions, pulling in his shoulders and quivering. 'Yes,' I said. 'Scared!'", "You are growing to be a kind and considerate girl."

5. Identifying learning dispositions and working theories

For example: "You put a foot out and tested the water it seemed as though you were thinking, will I or won't I? ... I saw you stamp your foot. You had a determined look in your eye.", "We could not find any spiders... We decided perhaps they were at work for the day and they would come back to their web later when we had all gone home."

6. Using te reo, as well as using whakatauki and identifying aspects of tikanga

"Owen – you made the most of the lovely

weather on Ramere and went o whakahaere waho. I loved how you paused for a moment as the warm wind blew the leaves around you. A real taste of ngahuru." "Kai pai tātou mahi – next week we have another great extension using the big pipes.", "'Mā whero, mā pongo – ka oti ai te mahi / With red and black, the work will be complete'. Today it was time to take the blue mat back to the shed. Matthew, Higan, Jessica and Flynn helped me. It required co-ordination, strength, communication and teamwork to lift together and walk carefully so no one fell over."

7. Recognising aspects of Te Whāriki.

For example, in response to a young toddler's tapping and sucking on rākau as part of titi toria, a Centre co-ordinator identified 'Communication Goal 4 – 'Children discover different ways to be creative and expressive' pointing out how the child was learning to keep a beat and growing in familiarity with the Playcentre's repertoire of songs and chants. In response to a child helping locate spoons for the outdoor kitchen, a new parent wrote: 'It was so lovely have you show me where things are'.

8. Making planning evident.

For example: "Perhaps we could go on a spider hunt soon." "I think the best way to encourage you to write more ... is definitely to try and make some sort of game of it, like Mum did today."

References

Stover S., & de Vocht L. (2017). *Assessment in Playcentre: Where has it come from? What happens now.* *Playcentre Journal* 156:20-23