

Using Learning Stories as a Resource to Identify Gifted Children

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Abstract: This article promotes the use of learning stories for identification and assessment purposes in gifted education. Based on research and personal experiences, the authors highlight the need to use an identification tool that is suitable for the varied contexts of early childhood settings. It is suggested that the narrative approach in the form of learning stories is used. This tool is commonly used by early childhood teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand; however, it is generally not being used for identifying giftedness. The authors believe that early identification of giftedness is possible using learning stories, but the effectiveness of this tool increases with contributions from teachers, children and parents/whānau. Personal perspectives provide insight into the realities of using learning stories in gifted education. The article concludes with suggestions for future practice that the authors believe will improve teaching practice and identification of giftedness in young children.

Key Words: gifted education, early childhood education, learning stories

Introduction

This article was drawn from research into inclusive practice that explores how learning stories can be used as a tool to identify and support gifted children in early childhood contexts. The authors also give insights from their own experience about how learning stories can be used to support gifted education. The early childhood context is an environment where children can extend their learning. According to the early childhood curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*, every child is a competent learner (Ministry of Education, 1996). The curriculum integrates education and care through planned learning experiences and spontaneous interactions between teachers and peers, thus enabling every child to be a competent learner. It also emphasises the diversity of children and their needs as well as the diversity of early childhood contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand, stating, “*Te Whāriki* is designed to be inclusive and appropriate for all children and anticipates that special needs will be met as children learn together in all kinds of early childhood education settings” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11). Thus, teachers need to focus on children as individuals and not as a group, and consider each child’s needs and interests, including those children who are not learning at the same pace as their peers. This article considers the use of learning stories to identify and support children who are gifted and twice-exceptional in early childhood contexts. It refers to children younger than five years, but its content might also be relevant to older children in school contexts.

What is Giftedness?

It is not easy to describe giftedness because there are many different views of giftedness and hence many definitions of it. Moltzen (2011) explained how definitions of giftedness evolve all the time, with the definitions often reflecting how society values gifted education. We, the authors of this paper, believe that a child is gifted when they have an inner ability that is

significantly advanced in one or more areas compared with the abilities of other children of the same chronological age. Gagné (2009) stated that gifted children are born with a biological potential that will allow them to develop a high ability in one or more areas. However, potential does not automatically equate with success, and it must be highlighted that children who are gifted are not always high achievers and that some gifted children do not obviously show their potential. Gagné (2004) said that gifted children need to have a stimulating learning environment and support from teachers and family so their talents can be shown. It should also be noted that outstanding ability does not need to be academic, but that giftedness can be found in different areas of learning that are not academic. Harrison (1995) explains that “a gifted child is one who performs or has the ability to perform at a level significantly beyond his or her chronologically aged peers and whose unique abilities and characteristics require special provisions and social and emotional support from the family, community and educational context” (p. 19). Thus, one definition does not fit all learning settings and so definitions of giftedness should reflect the education contexts. Furthermore, when defining giftedness, consideration should also be given to gifted theories as well as to the skills and knowledge that are valued by the learning community.

Identifying Giftedness

There are many identification tools that can be used to support gifted children’s learning and development. However, “there is no single identification tool that perfectly evaluates children who are gifted and talented” (Wong, 2013, p. 98). One of the identification tools commonly recognised by schools is the intelligence quotient (IQ) test. It is possible that this test is popular because it is divided into just a few categories, and it is thus easy for teachers to support children based on those areas in the test. However, this kind of practice does not work very well in early childhood contexts because the early childhood curriculum advocates for holistic development of children. As a consequence, early childhood teachers have little, if any, experience with IQ testing and so know little about it. This is not a problem, though, because as mentioned earlier, there are many other tools available for identifying giftedness and many of these are useful in the early childhood context. In this paper, we consider the advantages of using learning stories as a tool to support giftedness.

Learning Stories

Learning stories are a narrative or storied approach to capture children’s learning dispositions and interests (Carr, 2001). Stories are built by children, parents/whānau and teachers.

Stories catch what children learn, and document how teachers notice, recognise and respond to children’s learning and interests. This assessment tool is commonly used in many early childhood contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand.

There are different ways of writing learning stories but the central purpose of this narrative resource is to describe a child’s current strengths and interests as well as a “follow-on” in their learning. The follow-on may include what actually occurred directly after the learning moment or plans for potential future learning that are directed by the child and/or the teacher. Early childhood teachers use learning stories to document learning and development as well as dispositions, all of which provide valuable information for assessment purposes. Learning stories document the positive aspects of a child’s learning that show progress of learning rather than negative aspects that expose deficits in learning.

Learning stories in this article and the insights we provide from our own personal experiences are based on the discussion of documenting gifted children’s learning dispositions and development. The discussion also refers to the importance of integrating the voices of all the

parties involved in the children's learning, i.e. the voices of the children and their parents/whānau as well as their teacher. Integration of voices enables teachers to recognise children's giftedness and talent holistically. However, as Radue (2009) noted, this is an area that is currently not addressed well in the context of gifted education: "While early childhood teachers have been observing behaviours and dispositions in learning stories as part of their assessment practice for some time, this information has not been used in the process of identifying giftedness" (p. 50). Identification is fundamental to effective planning because teachers first need to identify these children's gifts and talents – only then can the teachers plan for a variety of appropriate learning experiences that will both meet the children's special learning needs and extend their potential. We argue that many early childhood teachers are familiar with using learning stories to support children's learning and development, but the use of learning stories to advocate for giftedness has not always been highlighted in early childhood contexts.

Why Learning Stories Should Be Used

Research shows that early childhood professionals consider observation to be the most important identification tool for young children (Margrain & Farquhar, 2012). Margrain and Farquhar (2012) commented that assessment tools for identifying giftedness should be reliable, appropriate for children's learning, manageable for teachers, and reflective of the learning progress. Although there are many different assessment tools available, learning stories have been widely used in early childhood contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Teachers are familiar with the style of this narrative assessment and its intention that children's learning dispositions and interests are noticed, recognised and responded to by teachers.

Learning stories enable teachers to view learning through different angles and to see children as competent learners in ways they, the teachers, may not have noticed before. This form of narrative assessment also enables teachers to look at how the environment and provided resources are supporting giftedness, as well as enabling teachers to review the strategies they used. Moreover, during the process of reflection, teachers can explore who might also be able to contribute to the children's learning; for example, other peers, teachers, student teachers, and parents and whānau.

Learning stories can be described as a shared assessment tool because both the child and their teacher "write" the learning story and play an equal role in contributing to the assessment. Some children do not learn at the same pace or at same level as other children of a similar age, and teachers can see individual differences by the process of doing the narrative assessment with children. Thus, teachers can explore learning through the shared assessment (Ministry of Education, 2009). This is especially true in the context of gifted education, where the gifted child's dispositions and interests are used to identify their special learning needs. Throughout the process of noticing and recognising learning and interests, teachers can see giftedness within the assessment.

Some early childhood contexts like to adapt the ideas in *Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars*, and some like to create their own way that links to their philosophy of teaching. There is no particular way to write a learning story; the most important element is to notice, recognise and respond to giftedness as well as use different sources to contribute to the learning stories. After a series of learning stories have been written, teachers can see children's progress in learning and skills development, as well as changes or continuity in their interests.

Melanie's Voice

I believe narrative assessment is a useful tool for supporting giftedness as well as a way of collecting information that can be used to develop individual education plans (IEPs). Many teachers pay a lot of attention to photographs instead of the written part of the assessment, possibly because they believe photos are more attractive to parents and children. The appeal of photographs is very true, but the written part of the assessment can help teachers to recall the learning experiences and enables them to see the child's learning progress over time. Thus, both the visual and written parts of a learning story are equally important and teachers should aim for a balance that includes both photographs and written work in their learning stories.

It is not necessary to be trained in how to write a learning story: it is all about practice and the willingness to support giftedness. Having said that, though, it must also be acknowledged that teaching is a very busy role and teachers cannot always find a set time to observe children. Moreover, learning happens all the time, not just at a set time, and teachers do not know in advance when spontaneous learning will occur. Therefore, teachers should always be prepared to notice children's learning at any time. I recommend that teachers carry a small notebook and a pen in their pocket so that they can immediately write down observations when they see learning happening. The observations do not need to be a full page of writing; indeed, even just a few notes can be useful because brief annotations to photographs can help learning stories be more accurate and reduce the risk of unjustified assumptions being made.

In terms of supporting giftedness, teachers and parents can identify gifted children through learning stories. The stories can show children have advanced abilities in some areas and give examples of their creative thinking and/or sustained interests. Moreover, learning stories can identify needs and areas where gifted children require more support from their teachers.

Lynette's Voice

I understand very well the realities of providing gifted and talented education in early childhood settings. I know that recognising gifted indicators and behaviours requires pedagogical knowledge and teaching experience in order to informally and formally identify what is considered exceptional. I have gradually developed my knowledge and experience in gifted education over the years. While this is important for identification purposes, equally as important is finding the courage to make statements about children who are gifted. In my early gifted education days, I stood alone as I made comments about children who showed gifted indicators and behaviours; I was met with disbelieving looks from my colleagues. I soon learned that sharing my gifted education knowledge to support my comments was essential if I was to be believed, and I shared this knowledge using learning stories. Using examples from my learning stories backed by my knowledge of research and information provided the professional development that was needed by the team. I know from experience that not all teachers will be open to the notion of giftedness. Parents, on the other hand, seemed mostly relieved to see their own thoughts written in the learning stories.

Those of us, both teachers and parents, who advocate for these children need to provide evidence to support our statements about giftedness. Weaving descriptions of giftedness into the learning stories followed by an analysis of the learning is evidence that supports identification. I have used learning stories to document continuity in learning by recording ongoing interests that sometimes lasted years. I have also documented rapid progress and indicators that were consistently exceptional compared with those of peers of the same age. In my work, learning stories proved to be the most powerful tool that supported my beliefs of

giftedness. The key to successfully written learning stories is to include details that specifically describe exceptionality. Teachers need to be committed to gathering information that supports the gifted child's special needs in the same way that they would gather information to support any other child with special needs. I would even go so far as to suggest that the teacher who is not committed to collecting such data is choosing not to support children who are gifted, and challenge the inclusiveness of their practice. I hope that in time more early childhood teachers will begin to use learning stories for identification purposes. Unlike teachers in the other education sectors, early childhood teachers have the potential to use, in my opinion, this most powerful tool to document learning and assessment. Learning stories do more than provide a comment or a score like many other assessment tools; instead, they open descriptive windows of opportunity to view the gifted child for the learner that makes him or her exceptional.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Communication with parents.

Open communication with parents of gifted children needs to be considered (Margrain, 2010). Asking for ideas from parents is always helpful because parents understand their children's needs. Perhaps teachers could ask for parents' involvement and include their contributions in the learning stories. This could be done by adding a parent/whānau comment at the end of the learning stories, thus encouraging them to add their contributions to the story. A second benefit of communicating with parents would be to promote understanding in the centre's extended community about gifted children and their education. Many people have a misconception that parents of gifted children are pushy because they usually focus on how much their child achieves and how much teachers could offer to support their gifted child to further achievement. Having open communication between children, teachers and parents could reduce unnecessary misunderstanding about giftedness. A third benefit would be that parents would develop a better understanding of how the child's early education centre operates, including its programme planning and assessment tools. And finally, open communication between teachers and parents would enable the parents to realise the benefits of being a co-author of learning stories.

Team work and consistency.

All teachers need to support gifted children in early childhood contexts – it is not the responsibility of just one dedicated teacher to look after the gifted children. Some early childhood contexts adopt the primary caregiver approach, where particular children are looked after mainly by a single teacher. It is a great approach in general, but team work is essential in gifted education. It may be that one teacher has the knowledge in a specific domain that enables that teacher to be the identifier of giftedness in that area where as the teacher assigned to the child may not have the knowledge that supports observing giftedness in that particular domain. If the team does not have a whole-team approach to promoting giftedness, then there will not be efficient support for the primary caregiver, and hence for the gifted child.

Professional development.

Teachers first need to have an understanding of what giftedness is and an appreciation of the importance of supporting gifted children. Secondly they need the strategies, tools and resources to be able to provide that support. These requirements obviously relate to professional development on planning and implementing the qualitatively differentiated curriculum in early childhood contexts (Riley & Bicknell, 2005). Moreover, as Gagné (2004)

noted, gifted children also need the support of their parents. Professional development for teachers is essential in order for teachers to know how to support parents of gifted preschool children. This is particularly so because parents can help identify early signs of giftedness. Finally, teachers will be more capable of using learning stories if they have adequate professional development in gifted education and practice – they will be able to recognise the gifted characteristics in learning stories they have written (Radue, 2009).

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