

Learning Stories in the USA: Relationship-Based Practice in a Data Driven World

Many educators in the United States of America (USA) are overwhelmed and frustrated with completing time consuming standardized child assessments. Increasingly, teachers of young children are challenged and struggling to make meaningful connections with mandated assessment methods. Teachers are longing for change and seeking a more authentic documentation approach to make children's learning visible. An exciting paradigm shift has begun. This growing movement has allowed USA educators to reclaim their voices through a strength-based narrative approach. Learning Stories, a powerful formative assessment tool, has been a catalyst for change, transforming teacher practices and relationships with children, families, and communities.

In the USA, early childhood educators are facing a data driven, accountability movement where teachers must integrate standardized assessment requirements. Often these assessment methods have resulted in teacher's narrow attention on developmental levels rather than children's learning experiences. These practices have also resulted in teachers' lack of joy in observing and documenting children's learning, and have excluded child, family and community voices; however, USA educators have renewed hope from New Zealand Learning Stories practice (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012; Carr & Lee, 2019), and believe it is a better, more authentic documentation approach. Teachers and program administrators have started to push back and vocalize a need for change in current assessment practices. A ripple effect has ignited and courageous USA educators have begun to incorporate Learning Stories in Community Colleges, University courses, and early education programs. These change agents have embraced Learning Stories as a formative assessment approach that uses narrative stories to document the power of relationships, supports child learner identities, and increases family engagement.

Learning Stories helps USA teachers and parents look beyond basic skills and abilities to dispositions and approaches to learning. For example, many educators in California have found the value of parent voice as integral to this process as teachers engage with families to understand their unique perspective. The Learning Stories documentation serves both as a pedagogical guide and precious artifact, documenting the child's learning experiences through teacher analysis, reflection, and planning. Learning from one another, families and educators deepen their understanding of the child, and identify possibilities to further stretch the child's learning. Learning Stories have freed teachers to return back to what they know is best for children and families.

Family engagement is a key factor that leads to positive child learning outcomes. Therefore, educators need to continue to explore how to develop specific teaching abilities, knowledge, and learning dispositions to effectively include families in young children's education. Many USA educators are working to incorporate teaching practices that honors and respects families' lived

experiences and the funds of knowledge they bring to school. Learning Stories creates a partnership between educators and families that strengthen relationships, recognizes the child's unique identity as a learner, and naturally embeds engagement practices with families (Carr & Lee, 2012; Carr & Lee, 2019; White, 2016; White 2019). Learning Stories provides a way for educators to thoughtfully integrate families in assessment practices. This narrative approach is written by teachers and parents as equal partners which has a powerful impact on the family's view of their child. Learning Stories documentation highlights the child's interests and strengths and contributes not only to the child's developing sense of self but also to the parents' expectations of their child, as well as perception of the child as a competent learner (Carr, 2001; Lee, Carr, Soutar, & Mitchell, 2013). Some USA educators have begun also to write Learning Stories to adults as a coaching tool for professional development.

Learning Stories has changed USA educators' view that parents need to be physically present in the classroom setting to be engaged in their child's education. In its place, Learning Stories include family collaboration with teachers who listen deeply to the child as a powerful agent in their own learning, and also to parents' thoughts, beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams for their child. USA educators write Learning Stories which create opportunities for authentic dialogue with families that celebrate children's growth and learning, leading to success in school and life.

With open arms, Learning Stories has been welcomed from the shores of New Zealand to the shores of America. Gaining momentum and steadily advancing across the states, Learning Stories is a conduit to promote values and effective practices that include multiple voices and perspectives. In a data driven world, USA educators have found Learning Stories provides a simple yet profound practice that allows assessment, documentation, and responsive relationship-based practices to not only coexist, but thrive.

References

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