



Stories are a central way people make sense of the world. In this article, Laura Hope Southcott introduces us to a special kind of storytelling—Learning Stories (rich descriptions of moments of classroom life, illustrated by photographs, dialogue, and children’s creations). Southcott shares two learning stories from her kindergarten classroom, demonstrating how by making learning visible these stories can: deepen educators’ understandings of children’s thinking, guide instruction, and support home-school connections. Southcott contributes to our understanding of how authentic assessment is a key component of good early childhood practice.

—Ben Mardell

# Learning Stories: Connecting Parents, Celebrating Success, and Valuing Children's Theories



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I am a kindergarten teacher in a public school in Ontario, Canada. As teachers in Ontario began expanding into a full-day kindergarten program, we experienced a change in the focus of the Ontario schools' official early years' learning philosophy. As educators of young learners, understanding and naming the learning unfolding in our classrooms each day is both an opportunity and a challenge. Documenting children's thinking and making it visible for teachers, families, administrators, the school community, and for the children themselves is critical to effective teaching. It requires us to carefully choose from a wide variety of assessment tools.

We started searching for meaningful ways to document children's theory-making and emerging understandings in play- and inquiry-based programs. The traditional assessment methods we were using—such as running records, checklists, and standardized tests—did not necessarily capture the learning unfolding in the classroom (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer 2007). I began rethinking how I used documentation and assessment in my classroom to extend learning, embarking on my own pedagogical journey. My search was this: What assessment tool supports my view of children as capable learners, deepens my understanding of children's theory-making, celebrates their successes, and helps strengthen connections between home and school?

In an inservice training, the school system introduced a process known as *learning stories* as a method of both documentation and assessment in Ontario kindergarten classrooms. As Reisman relays (2011), learning stories

help give guidance to teachers about practice; they are in essence informative stories about children's learning and teachers' own learning (see Figure 1 for an example). Learning stories, a form of pedagogical documentation and narration, have a rich history of supporting teachers' understanding of what children can do and what they know. They are widely used in early years' classrooms in New Zealand (Carr & Lee 2012), and more recently in the United States (Carter 2000) and Britain (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). Teachers can use learning stories to document children's learning and open a window into their own professional learning (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer 2007). Wien, Guyevskey, and Berdouss describe the use of pedagogical documentation as a way to understand children's thinking. They argue that

[A] parallel process goes on for the teachers who create the documentation in an effort to understand and represent the children's theories and the ways these theories may shift back and forth between playful fantasy and reality. (2011)

The learning in learning stories is twofold: teachers come to understand how their own thinking is being shaped at the same time as they learn about children's thinking. It becomes a learning story nested within a learning story.

Learning stories feature children's experiences engaging in learning, and are written by educators and shared with families (Hatherly & Sands 2002). Families are often encouraged to add a home connection, which strengthens the link between home and school. The learning story includes the voices of those present during the learning experience, such as the child, early childhood educator, and/or parent. There is a title, an explanation of what happened, and its significance in relation to the child's thinking and development. They not only highlight the actions of the child, but also illuminate how educators support the child and extend learning. In this way, learning stories have the potential to reveal the reflections and actions of both children and educators in the classroom, capturing the complexity of learning and teaching.

Although we were encouraged to use this tool, and some teachers began using it in their classrooms, learning stories were new to me. I began experimenting with learning stories shortly after a workshop held in the spring of 2012 by our school board. The next fall, I wrote learning stories as a way to illustrate the learning in my classroom. I also decided to use learning stories to make learning visible in a Ministry of Education project in which I was involved that same year. There was a gap in what we knew about how the teachers in Ontario use learning stories, how these stories align with our documentation and assessment practices, and fit with key goals of the full-day kindergarten early years' program. I decided to engage in a self-examination of documentation and assessment in my classroom, launching my pedagogical journey in pursuit of an alternative assessment tool that supported my view of children as capable learners. This is my own learning story, as well as that of my students.



Figure 1. Example of a Learning Story

## Learning Stories— Potential Elements

Not all learning stories contain all of these elements; teachers choose what best illustrates the subject.

- Subject headings at the top of the page
- Activity summary as opening text
- Title
- Teacher observations
- Photographs and images of children's work
- Quotes from children's discussions
- Teachers' questions about children's learning
- Teachers' observations about children's learning
- Teacher contact information
- Question presenting overarching pedagogical concern

exploring and celebrating families, heritage, and culture

We have been working on our self-portraits. Our first attempt was using fine black marker and white paper. A copy of the drawings were sent home last week for families and friends to enjoy!

## self-portraits & the art centre

The self-portraits were truly amazing! Each one is very special in its own way. The children took such care drawing their faces, noticing the differences and similarities between them. They used a mirror to look deeply at their faces, admiring their eyes, shape of their ears, and the rich colour of their hair. One student even counted his teeth!



My mouth looks like a banana

That's you?

I have hair behind my ears. This is the way I usually look.

My hair goes down to my ears.

You should put spots on your face.

It will look just like you.

That's the neck.

I have cheeks. Oh! I forgot my ears.

I have a huge head and a tiny body.

I'm going to have to look in the mirror to copy myself. I need

teeth.

Look at my hair!

I have glasses on. My hair is long

and messy.

What are the children learning while they are drawing or making their collages? What are their OWN theories of learning?

- The children are noticing same and different characteristics in their features (math connection).
- They are beginning to or furthering their appreciation of themselves as individuals (personal and social development).
- Some have observed that they look like their family members.
- They are thinking about the materials that they chose to make their self-portraits.
- What material makes the best hair? What colour are their eyes? What should they use to make their nose?



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This article shares my reflections on my practice regarding learning stories in my early years' classroom, focused on this question: **Can learning stories serve as an assessment tool that supports my view of children as capable learners, deepens my understanding of children's theory-making, celebrates their successes, and helps strengthen connections between home and school?**

## Review of literature

Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer (2007) suggest that documentation informs instruction by helping to individualize learning as well as to plan and gather useful materials. With these three aspects of documentation in mind, teachers are able to meet children where they are and move them to the next step in their learning. Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer (2007) go on to say that teachers choose a particular method of documentation that fits their curricular focus; plans for sharing with the child, family, and school community; and accounts for the depth or breadth of the data needed. Learning stories are an authentic way to gather the data of practice, to collect small stories from the classroom, and nurture trusting relationships with families.

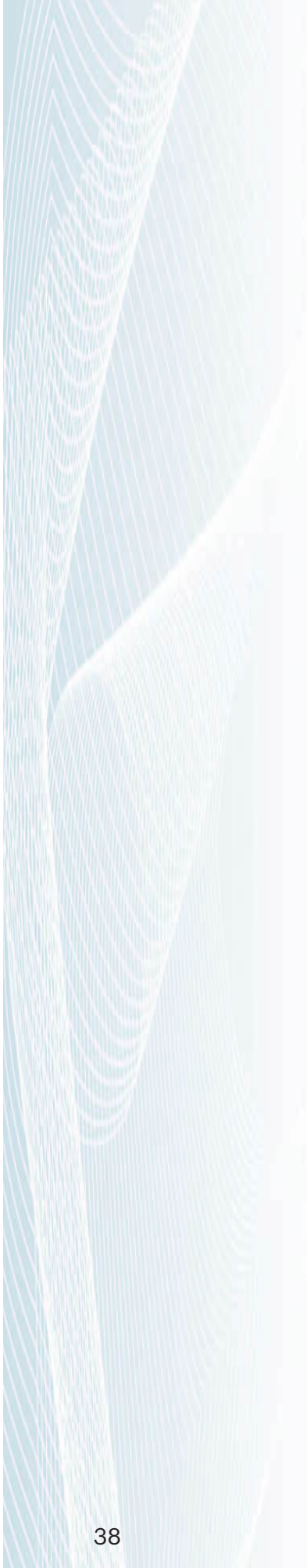
Learning stories are a form of pedagogical documentation, which “is a research story, built upon a question or inquiry ‘owned by’ the teachers, children, or others, about the learning of children”

(Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). Pedagogical documentation examines children's learning more closely through a researcher's lens, drawing on teachers' observations, artifacts, and student dialogue to create a rich picture of and a window

into children's thinking (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer 2007). Fraser refers to documentation as a “cycle of inquiry” which echoes the action research spiral of plan/act/observe/reflect (2012, 148). Children and/or teachers pose questions or statements that can be framed as questions; observations of children help the teacher to gather materials for exploration; children's theories are interpreted and reflected on; and new questions based on this learning are developed. The next cycle in the spiral involves more planning to support the children's new questions. Learning stories can help teachers and children document this reflective research spiral.

Pedagogical documentation reveals the teacher's understanding of the children's theory-making and ideas about the world around them; learning stories zoom in to closely unpack this understanding. As Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss suggest, “habits of documenting also include becoming aware

**Learning stories are built on a question that is ‘owned by’ the teachers and children and draws on teachers’ observations, artifacts, and classroom dialogue to create a rich picture of children’s thinking and learning.**



of the potential that moments of classroom action may have for yielding something meaningful about learning” (2011). Teachers choose a significant classroom moment to enlarge in a learning story in order to explore children’s thinking more closely.

### **A collaborative effort**

Similarly, Gandini and Kaminsky describe pedagogical documentation as a way to listen with care (2004). They argue that adopting a pedagogy of listening focuses teachers’ efforts on exploring children’s ideas, theories, and hypotheses. We take our cues from children’s conversations with each other and the relationships they have with the classroom environment, their peers, and the materials that we set out with purpose and intent. This holistic form of documentation encourages us to negotiate a common understanding of unfolding events with children. Children’s views and conversations are at the heart of learning stories, and their words are transcribed as a source of reflection and exploration into their thinking and theorizing.

Seitz states,

[A]n effective piece of documentation tells the story and the purpose of an event, experience, or development. It is a product that draws others into the experience—evidence or artifacts that describe a situation, tell a story, and help the viewer to understand the purpose of the action. (2008, 88)

Documentation may focus on student growth, development, actions, behaviors, relationships with other people, materials or the classroom environment, curricular expectations, and inquiries or projects (Lewin-Benham 2011; Seitz 2008). These factors help teachers to shed light on and make provisional interpretations of learning and thinking.

Reisman (2011) describes writing a learning story as a means to demonstrate what children are saying, doing, and representing as well as suggest a direction to follow with guidance. Photos are key to this process. Reisman also points out, “With learning stories, children’s choices and languages show us where we are now, and point us in the directions we could go. We only need to know what to look for” (2011, 91). Learning stories are similar to holding up a magnifying glass or taking a picture with a camera, allowing the moment of learning to be frozen and/or bringing it further into focus. The more precise and sharp the documentation created by the teacher about the significant moment of learning, the clearer the children’s thinking is made visible (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). Learning stories are essentially about taking an ordinary moment and making it *extraordinary* as a way to pay close attention to children’s emerging theories as they play and inquire (Shor 1992).

A learning story also provides the educator and the child an opportunity to further reflect on the learning unfolding in the classroom—what the learning might mean and what next steps could be taken to extend the learning and support the child (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). This approach is an alternative way to interpret children’s learning. This method can be



used to guide instruction, communicate with families, and plan next steps for learning. We create a story that brings our emerging insights and understandings of children's growth into focus (Ontario Ministry of Education 2012). Hatherly and Sands point out that "a good story gives insight" about how children make sense of their world (2002).

## Methods

### Setting and participants

My research was conducted in a full-day, three days a week kindergarten program in an Ontario public school. The participating children ranged in age from 4 to 5 years old. Three adults, including an early childhood educator and a student support professional, were also involved, as well as the children's parents.

### Research plan

To support our learning stories, I took hundreds of photos of children as they played and followed our classroom inquiries. I collected work samples that acted as a spark for many learning stories, such as a child's drawing, wire sculpture, math work, journal writing, or a painting. I set aside time to observe children several times a day and record what they were saying and doing on observation sheets. I would observe and write for different lengths of time depending on the play the children were involved in and as I looked for an ordinary moment to make extraordinary. I watched and waited for moments of learning that gave me a window into children's thinking.

I took video of children to reflect on afterward and transcribe conversations. The transcription of the children's conversations helped me identify moments of learning and served as catalysts for learning stories. For example, many of these moments of learning demonstrated children's ability to share or help a peer, explore a theory about a math concept or a big idea from science such as the property of materials or objects, highlighted skills such as cutting paper or holding a pencil, or revealed an interest in writing or reading. Learning stories were created to reflect on and share with children, administration, parents, and critical friends. I wrote at least one learning story for each of my students and many whole class or small group learning stories. Sometimes, I included the learning stories on our classroom documentation panels, in inquiry binders, on our classroom website, in children's portfolios, or in a slideshow.

I collected data for approximately one school year and wrote learning stories for each of the children in my classroom during that time. Many children had more than one learning story written about their thinking and theory-making. I also wrote learning stories for small groups of children involved in a variety of inquiries in the classroom as well as learning stories that involved the whole class. I read and reread the data, looking for children's thinking and new understanding. From these insights, I wrote about

the children's learning, using photos and the children's own words to add depth and meaning to the stories. The data was organized into inquiry binders for the children, families, and administration to read.

I have highlighted two particular learning stories: Kyler's learning story at the block center and a small group learning story about painting Ukrainian wooden eggs during an afternoon at the art table. The children's names in the learning stories have been changed and the learning stories included in this article have been shared with permission from families. The Ukrainian eggs example was part of a grant from the Teacher Leadership and Learning Program (TLLP) from the Ministry of Education in Ontario, and the layout was formatted by my school board's desktop and graphic technician. I have used this same format (pictures, photos, and text) as a template for all of my recent learning stories, using a blank publishing template on my computer.

### **Data collection and analysis**

I was first introduced to learning stories at a school board workshop. I was intrigued by all the possibilities learning stories presented for my own students and my own practice. Afterward, I went home and wrote my first learning story, as I had a meeting the next day with parents about their child. I wanted to share a learning story with the family during our meeting as a starting point to our discussions. The learning story starred Kyler, and gave some insight into his thinking as he built ramps in the block center. The learning story was linked to expectations in the language, personal and social development, and science and technology areas of the Ontario Kindergarten document (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010–11). Noticing Kyler's keen excitement as he began his work with the moldings and marbles, I started to document his learning. I took photos and carefully transcribed his own words as he talked to other students, another educator with whom

he worked, and as he thought aloud. I wrote the learning story that evening using the documentation I had gathered earlier in the day.

For Kyler's learning story, my first learning story, I used a PowerPoint Presentation slideshow. Most slides contained a photograph of Kyler at the block center as well as his own words as he explored. Other times, I have used a simple publishing template from my computer and inserted text and

photos to create a learning story. Since Kyler's learning story, I have experimented with different formats and templates in Microsoft Word, and found that the layout of the learning story is an important element in the telling of the story. The simpler the format, the clearer the learning story is and the child's thinking takes center stage.

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I had technical and design support from our school board's desktop graphic design technician when the learning stories for the TLLP grant were created. Inspired by *The Wonder of Learning, Browsing through Ideas* posters, these learning stories were shared at a Ministry of Education learning fair in Toronto, Ontario, and beautifully illustrated all of our learning. The Ukrainian eggs and the self-portraits learning stories are two examples from the TLLP grant.

To document the second learning story, I used photos taken that afternoon and transcriptions of the children's conversations with each other that supported the development of a learning story about our wooden eggs. I was interested in hearing what the children at the art center would talk about as they worked together, painting their eggs. Some children looked at the eggs carefully in order to replicate the patterns they saw, while others took inspiration from the eggs, creating their own scrollwork and swirls. I sat with the children while they painted, taking pictures and writing down their conversations to reflect on their learning. That evening, I wrote a learning story about painting our Ukrainian eggs and shared it with the children, parents, and administration of our school. The learning story was displayed in our classroom, included in our inquiry binder and in our newsletter, and uploaded onto our classroom website. The learning story included many photos and some of the painted eggs the children created at the center. The painting experience provoked some conversations from the children about the eggs, the art of painting, and respect for a friend's treasures. At the end of the children's dialogue, I decided to summarize what they were thinking as they worked.

Both learning stories were shared with families, and copies were placed in our inquiry binders about our classroom explorations and children's individual portfolios or file folders. The inquiry binders showcased our learning during an exploration.

## The learning stories

Kyler's learning story reveals his work with materials at the block center during play one morning. That day, I added new resources such as cove molding, marbles, and small wooden blocks to spark children's interest in building ramps. Children who were interested in exploring and experimenting with the materials were encouraged to visit the block center.

The second learning story involves a small group of five or six children that I had invited to the art table to create colorful painted eggs. As part of our celebration of families and cultures funded by our TLLP grant, I



**Figure 2. Kyler's Learning Story**

## Kyler's learning story

Exploring new materials, talking about his thinking,  
inviting friends to join in the learning



Kyler began play time with marbles and mouldings. He quickly built a structure to test his theory about where the marble would roll when released down the tube.


Science and technology:  
2.1 state problems and pose questions before and during investigations.  
2.3 Select and use materials to carry out their own explorations

"Its move slide down to the bottom of the shaft". Kyler began to roll the marble down the tube but noticed that it fell off the track at the bottom or jumped over the moulding he had placed at the end of the tube. He seemed to want the marble to round the corner and follow the next set of mouldings rather than leave the track. "Need tracks where this one is" Kyler offers.

"It keeps on jumping over" someone offered as she walked by. She tried to uncover what Kyler was thinking. "I put a lot of junk here" replied Kyler, referring to the growing pile of wood at the end of the ramp. He was trying to stop the marble from leaving the track by piling up mouldings to act as a barrier. "It's so high" notices Kyler as he started to moved the moulding once again to allow the marble to work its way down the tube.

## Kyler's learning story

- \* A student came by and asked if she could play. "This is mine but you can make something here" suggested Kyler, pointing to the other side of the tube closest to the chart stand. She joined in and started to roll a marble around the far end of the structure. "I wonder if you win like this?" she asked Kyler.
- \* Personal and social development:
  - \* 1.3 express their thoughts and share experiences
  - \* 2.5 interact cooperatively with others in classroom events and activities




Kyler piled up the mouldings to stop the marble from leaving the track and talked about his thinking.

Language:  
1.2 listen and respond to others for a variety of purposes  
1.6 use language to talk about their thinking, to reflect, and to solve problems

"The marbles better have to look out" and "Its all covered up". "I can't get there" were comments Kyler made as he began to add more moulding. Another student joined Kyler at the carpet to play. Some of the blocks that were holding up the structure were moved. With help, Kyler was able to share his concern about the removal of materials that he was using.

A few minutes later, one more student came over to see what was happening on the carpet with the marbles and moulding. After being asked to gather more blocks to build the ramp, the other student began to build his own structure.





suggested the children might be interested in sharing some special treasures and artifacts from home. In response, a child brought in a beautiful Ukrainian wooden vase and eggs as well as an embroidered doily from his grandparents' house. These treasures were displayed on our culture table for children to explore. Shortly afterward, I decided to place an art invitation with the beautiful wooden eggs. I mixed some lovely paint colors similar to those on the wooden eggs and found small delicate paintbrushes for the children to use. Many children were interested in exploring the materials at the art table over the course of one afternoon. As a space opened up at the table, other children joined in the learning. Paint, brushes, our beautiful wooden eggs, water, and paper were set out for children to use.

### **Figure 3. Ukrainian Eggs Learning Story**

The child who brought the eggs to the classroom shared his understanding of the special eggs and their place in his family's traditions and celebrations. He was able to talk about the importance of the eggs to his family, becoming our expert in the learning experience. During the following week children would often walk by the culture table, pick up the eggs, or draw new pictures of the eggs or the vase. They also took time to look at the inquiry binder where I had placed some of the paintings of their eggs, photos, and a transcription of their initial conversations.

### **Presentation and discussion of the findings**

Use of learning stories has deepened my understanding of children's theory-making, the importance of celebrating their successes, and has helped strengthen connections between home and school. Celebrating successes honors children's learning and thinking. When we view children as capable and strong learners we recognize the prior experiences and knowledge they bring with them to school in all domains of learning. Teachers have an opportunity to immerse themselves in the children's ideas, thinking, and wondering. Teachers meet children where they are and support their next steps in learning. In the past, the focus has been on the expectations or developmental stages that children haven't reached or met, an approach that equates children with an empty vessel waiting for educators to fill with their knowledge and a deficit view of children's learning. By sharing the children's successes with others through learning stories, for example, we invite others to reflect on the learning, celebrate with children, and open up new possibilities for understanding

**Use of learning stories has deepened my understanding of children's theory-making, the importance of celebrating their successes, and has helped strengthen connections between home and school.**



Figure 3. Ukrainian Eggs Learning Story

exploring and celebrating families, heritage, and culture

## ukrainian eggs & the paint centre

### Beautiful Ukrainian Eggs

We set up an invitation to paint Ukrainian eggs today at the paint centre. A child had brought in some wooden painted eggs and a beautiful wooden container from his grandparents. He visited his grandparents on the weekend and together they chose some treasures to share with us. We displayed the collection on our culture table with a lovely embroidered doily. Some children came to draw the eggs on small pieces of paper we had left for their use. Later in the afternoon, we set up colours (orange, blue, yellow, white, brown, purple) to paint paper eggs.



I like these eggs. I wonder what kind of paint is this? Will it come off? It's not the same paint as we are using. Maybe it's Ukrainian paint? Some one must have very fancy paintbrushes.



I'm doing the big one.  
I used all the colours for mine.  
And this is white. I made the big one.  
What colour is this?  
Pink.



Those are really beautiful. We don't just go like THAT. That jar protects them.



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their thinking (Wien 2013). Children and teachers also have a further opportunity for reflection on learning as they reread the learning story. My findings were that:

- learning stories deepen understanding of children’s thinking;
- learning stories can engage parents in the learning at school; and that
- learning stories helped me reflect on my use of authentic documentation to make children’s learning visible.

## Finding 1: Learning stories deepen understanding of children’s thinking

**Kyler’s learning.** Kyler’s learning story gave us insight into his thinking as he built ramps in the block center earlier that day. As I wrote:

*He quickly built a structure to test his theory about where the marble would roll when released down the tube. Kyler began to roll the marble down the tube but noticed that it fell off the track at the bottom or jumped over the molding he had placed at the end of the tube. He seemed to want the marble to round the corner and follow the next set of moldings rather than leave the track. ‘It keeps on jumping over . . . I put a lot of junk here,’ referring to the growing pile of wood at the end of the ramp. He was trying to stop the marble from leaving the track by piling up moldings to act as a barrier. He piled up the moldings to stop the marble from leaving the track, and talked about his thinking.*

Kyler had set up cove moldings, wooden blocks and marbles on the carpet. He was trying to find a way to stop the marble and struggled as it continued to jump over the “junk.” As he tried new ideas to stop the marble, he piled the cove moldings higher and higher. Kyler shared his plans to modify and adapt the ramp as he worked. Using photos and Kyler’s own words, I wrote a learning story.

The learning story deepened my understanding of Kyler’s thinking as he built a ramp—I discovered that he was also interested in finding a way to make the marble race down the cove molding in a particular way. Kyler persevered and tested many theories to move the marble by manipulating the materials as he worked, such as piling up the cove molding and moving the molding around to facilitate the movement of the marble. As I transcribed his words I noted the language he used as he thought out loud.

Kyler’s learning story provided a glimpse into his thinking about ramps, marbles, gravity, force, movement, and “junk.”

### What were the children thinking about? Shared thinking made visible

- How beautiful the Ukrainian eggs are.
- How special the treasures are and how thankful they are that they are being shared.
- The wonderful patterns we saw on the eggs.
- What kind of paint is needed to paint the wooden eggs.
- Is the paint used on the eggs different than what we are using?
- Size of the eggs (smallest and biggest).
- The name of different colors and color mixing.
- How to make their own patterns, lines, dot, swirls, flowers, or reproduce what they see.



*Children's learning while painting Ukrainian eggs.* At the end of the children's dialogue, I decided to summarize what they were thinking as they worked. Writing our learning story revealed what the children noticed about the various sizes of the wooden eggs, the type of paint needed to paint the eggs, and different aspects of color mixing as they attempted to replicate the delicate scrollwork and patterns they saw. As I recorded in my observational notes, one child noted as she worked,

*These are really beautiful. We don't just go like THAT. That jar protects them.*

The child admired the beauty of the eggs and the delicate paintings on them. She wanted to paint her own egg very carefully and deliberately just like the one she saw, wanting her friends to be as careful in their paintings as well. She also shared her new learning about the wooden vase that her friend brought in, and its purpose to protect the egg. Listening to the children's viewpoints as they examined the wooden eggs at the culture table or painted their own eggs at the art center allowed me a window into their wonderings.

Carr and Lee refer to learning stories as "shared thinking about learning" (2012, 46). As I wrote down the children's conversations at the art center, I began to appreciate the many languages the children used to express their learning—painting the eggs, listening to their friends talk about the eggs, noticing the colors, materials, and designs of the eggs, sharing materials, showing appreciation for the beautiful artifacts, and giving positive feedback to each other for their efforts. I was also learning how important moments of learning such as this one were to community building, growing children's own capacity, and to my own under-

standing of an ordinary event made extraordinary.

For example, that afternoon the children spoke about mixing colors. Here is how their conversation started:

*If you want brown, you just mix the colors.*

*I want blue.*

*I want another one (paper egg).*

*I like these eggs. I wonder what kind of paint is this? Will it come off? It's not the same paint as we are using. Maybe it's Ukrainian paint?*

*I'm mixing the colors. Look at what blue and orange makes. She is making another egg.*





*It makes grey. Someone must have very fancy paintbrushes. Red and blue makes purple.*

*I'm mixing colors.*

*How do you use white?*

## **Finding 2: Learning stories can engage parents in the learning at school**

Sharing a learning story with Kyler's family was a starting point to our discussions one evening after school. We had planned to meet that day and I was eager to share Kyler's block play, using his learning story as a point of reference and reflection.

After the meeting, I received an email from one of Kyler's parents:

*I have read his Learning Story several times at bedtime. He was thrilled to see himself inside a bedtime story, and it has been a great starter for conversations about his classmates and his classroom behavior, as he is the expert on the story, and I am the learner.*

As shown by the parent's email, learning stories have the potential to engage families in the learning at school. The response from Kyler's parents is echoed in the literature (e.g., Carr & Lee 2012; Hatherly & Sands 2002). Hatherly and Sands contend, "learning stories [can be] sites of interesting conversations as students, parents and children reflect on the learning together captured in the story" (2002, 9). Parents can share what is occurring at home or how they might use the learning story to support their child. In Kyler's case, the parents used the learning story as a bedtime tale and a starting point to engage Kyler in a discussion about his day and his learning. Kyler's parent noted that the learning story made Kyler the expert in the story and he was able to tell about his ramps. Kyler's parent added,

*The learning story experience is positive in so many ways. It is a relationship builder and reinforcer for all three dyads in the learning triangle: teacher-student, teacher-parent, and student-parent.*

Carr and Lee suggest learning stories "provide opportunities for learners to revisit stories about learning in which they are 'heroes' and to write or dictate their own stories about learning, often using photographs taken of the event as cues" (2012, 42). For Kyler and his parents, the learning story about the ramps and marbles carved out a space for the family to share and talk about learning before bed for several nights. In Kyler's story, he was the expert ramp maker who best understood how to stop the marble from rolling away. His parents and I were the learners in this story.

Kyler's learning story provided all of us with a place to reflect on his learning as he played at the block center that morning. His parents were able to talk about a specific moment of learning from his day at school, using the story to support their conversation. I could also share with Kyler's parents his actions, thinking, and feelings as he experimented with the materials at the block center.

### **Finding 3: Learning stories helped me reflect on my use of authentic documentation to make children’s learning visible**

A closer examination of learning stories as a way to capture small moments of learning helped me to better understand how to use documentation to name the learning, plan for instruction, and connect more meaningfully with children’s ideas and their families. As Reisman states, learning stories “point us in the directions we could go” (2011, 91).

I reflected on what I learned about Kyler’s thinking. I could add or remove materials to support his learning about movement, gravity, or force. I could set up a different invitation to provoke thinking. I could also reflect on how he had met aspects of the curriculum expectations as he played with the resources at the blocks center. As well, I could plan to ask open-ended questions to dig deeper into his thinking to explore his developing theories:

- Why did this work/not work?
- What would happen if . . . ?
- Why did you choose to use . . . ?
- What did you notice about . . . ?
- What might you do differently?
- Tell me about your thinking?

Kyler’s learning story and the story of the painted Ukrainian eggs afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my use of an authentic documentation tool to push my own thinking about ways to make the children’s thinking visible. I found that the learning stories I wrote demonstrated where the child was and the next steps in his or her learning journey or where a group

of children’s interests and wonderings lay.

Learning stories revealed opportunities for, of, and as assessment of learning. I was able to plan for daily instruction that was responsive and meaningful to the children in a way that was respectful of children’s ideas and thinking. Writing learning stories also required me to slow down and really listen carefully and with intention to my students’ conversations with each other and myself to find out what they were thinking and what theories they were exploring.

The painting experience provoked some interesting ideas about the eggs, the art of painting, and respect for a friend’s treasures. At the end of the children’s dialogue, I decided to summarize what they were thinking as they worked. The learning story helped to illuminate the children’s thinking about the wooden painted eggs and the craftsmanship needed to make such intricate designs. The children



were very curious about the colors that we chose to make for the eggs, the designs that were intricately drawn on the eggs, the size of the eggs, and the type of paint that was used. I transcribed the children's conversation as they painted their eggs to help clarify my thinking and deepen my understanding of their theories and interests. Writing our story revealed what the children noticed about the various sizes of the wooden eggs, the type of paint needed, and aspects of color mixing as they attempted to replicate the delicate scrollwork and patterns they saw.

## Conclusion

Our school board introduced learning stories to a group of teachers during an in-service workshop. A closer examination of learning stories as a way to capture small moments of learning was needed to better understand how to use documentation to name the learning, plan for instruction, and connect more meaningfully with children's ideas and their families in my classroom.

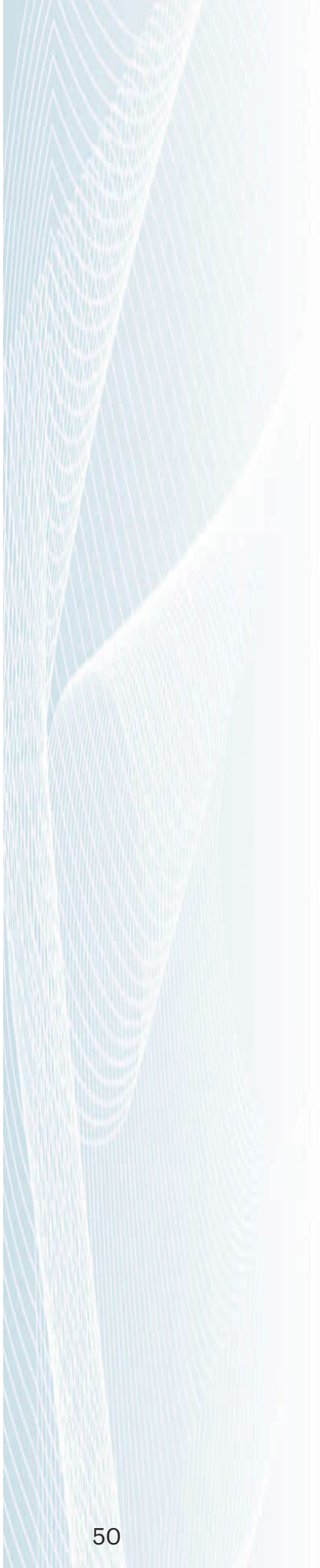
Learning stories invite perspectives of all those involved in the learning experience, especially those of the child. Indeed, when explored from this lens, learning stories give voice to all the learners in the story—the child, the teacher, and the family. Carr and Lee (2012) view learning stories and narrative as an assessment tool where “adults and children tell and retell stories of learning and competence, reflecting on the past and planning for the future” (2012, 2). Perhaps this is where the value of learning stories is at its most powerful and empowering. Learning stories focus on what children can do, say, and represent, and support teachers' insights on next steps. This form of documentation tells a story of learning using the children's own words and highlights the questions and wonderings that they have and are in the process of researching. Learning stories celebrate children as capable learners with their own theories ready to be tested about the world around them.

They also support teachers' understanding of their own practice as they reflect while gathering data from their practice about the children's learning, writing the learning story, and then sharing the story with others. Learning stories helped me to identify the strengths of this documentation and assessment method for my practice and my students' growth.

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