

EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PROGRAMME

The education of the child shall be directed to...
the development of the child's personality,
talents and mental and physical abilities
to their fullest potential.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)



Transition from pre-school to school:
Emphasizing early literacys—Comments
and reflections by researchers from eight
European countries

CHAPTER I

Introduction

by Ole Henrik Hansen, Irene Kascheffi-Haude, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson & Anders Skriver Jensen

1.1 Abstract

This article deals with the Learning-Stories approach developed by Margaret Carr. It is based on narrative assessment which makes learning visible in such a way that the learning community (children, families, teachers and others) can foster ongoing and diverse ways of learning.

Learning-stories integrate learning dispositions into a story framework and include an analysis of the learning.

This mode of documenting children's learning gives feedback to learners, educational staff and families dedicated to better learning and teaching. The goal is to assist teachers in the process of noticing, recognising, and responding to learning in order to reflect the integral way in which children learn and to enhance children's sense of themselves as capable individuals and competent learners.

In the **EASE** project we have adjusted the Learning-Stories approach to fit the interest in early literacy. We have developed a list of early literacy indicators to assist teachers in spotting early literacy aspects of children's everyday activities. The indicators are also available for inspiration once the learning story has been captured, as they can function as guidelines for analyzing the early literacy content of the learning story.

The EU-project presented in this documentation is based on an approach that embraces a view of learning which focuses on the relationship between the learner and the environment, and seeks ways to document complex reciprocal and responsive relationships in that environment. We have adapted the New Zealand learning stories, which are holistic and general, to a more didactical approach, where the content and the object of the child's learning become central. The content we are focusing on in the **EASE** project

is early literacy. Children's learning dispositions and the competences acquired by children and the strategies they have applied in acquiring them are central. This approach is seen as paving the way to more individualised learning where the child is seen as a capable and competent learner. We are emphasizing interaction and communication between children, and between children and their teachers.

1.2 Background

In 1996 the New Zealand Ministry of Education introduced a new national early childhood education curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which was strongly grounded in the socio-cultural and ecological context (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner & Haste, 1987).

The curriculum framework recognises new conceptions of early childhood education (Carr, May, & Podmore, 1998). The focus is on the learner as an individual-in-action, and learning as transacted and distributed (Salomon, 1993). Four guiding principles establish this new concept of curriculum: Empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships. Simultaneously the Ministry of Education funded formative assessment *research projects* (Carr, May, & Podmore, 1998; Carr, 2006) that were to try out the empowering, holistic, transactional and ecological nature of *Te Whāriki* in different early childhood settings. The instrument for assessment was called learning stories.

1.3 Learning-Stories

Using learning-stories is a method of credit-based narrative assessment that makes learning visible. As a consequence, it is valued so that the learning community (children, families, teachers and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways. Documentation is a central aspect of this assessment. This mode of documenting children's learning gives feedback and additional hints to learners, staff and families in the interest of better learning and teaching. The goal is to assist teachers in the process of noticing, recognising, and responding to learning within a socio-cultural curriculum and to contribute to discussions about assessments.

The learning-story approach includes practices that:

- enhance children's sense of themselves as capable individuals and competent learners
- reflect the holistic way that children learn
- reflect the reciprocal relationships between the child, teachers and the learning environment
- involve parents and where appropriate the extended family
- document children's engagement in learning experiences

1.4 Subsequent assessment of the learning influences ongoing learning

One important connection between assessment and learning is feedback. Research tells us that feedback to learners improves learning. Some of this feedback will be carried out through documentation (such as assessments that families and teachers can pass on to children and photographs which children can interpret themselves). Some of this will be verbal and some will be non-verbal (through a gesture, a nod,

or a smile). Feedback tells the learners what outcomes are valued in the learning community and how they are doing, and it acknowledges the goals that children set for themselves. Teachers share stories as well as feedback, and this enriches their abilities to notice, recognise developments, and respond to them.

1.5 Learning dispositions in action

Learning stories integrate learning dispositions into a story framework and include an analysis of the learning. Margaret Carr refers to dispositions, ‘as combinations of being ready, willing and able that emerge from learning experiences which occur often and which are supported, recognised and highlighted’ (page 93).

Learning and development will be stimulated by involving the child in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity and by gradual shifts in the balance of power from the teacher to the learner. These shifts reflect children’s ability and inclination to steer their own course, set their own goals, assess their own achievements, and take on some of the responsibility for learning. Children in this way will construct new knowledge, by becoming curious, getting involved, persisting, communicating, and taking on responsibility. The competence acquired by the children and the acquisition strategies they have developed are of central importance.

1.6 The EASE adaptation: Learning stories and early literacy

As already stated, the original learning story approach to documentation is holistic, and the learning dispositions in focus are somewhat generic, focusing on children’s learning and personal development more generally. The EASE project is—on the contrary—built around a specific interest in early literacy related to transition. An adaptation was needed; an adaptation that would be able to fruitfully address the following two parallel concerns: One regarding the early literacy curriculum and one regarding the (re)design of the actual learning story template. In short: The task was to optimize the learning story approach for the focus on early literacy, without forgetting or betraying the versatility of the original design.

With regards to the early literacy curriculum, the socio-cultural core of the learning story approach dictated a children’s perspective (Broström, 2006; Strandell, 1997) sensitive to the rich and diverse forms of literate and pre-literate activities that happen every day in early childhood settings. This in turn meant a focus on literacy as something tied to social events (Gee, 1996; 2002; Street, 1995), and on the whole a questioning of the traditional borders between oral and written language. Literacy as a means of constructing meaning is inclined to view speaking, reading and writing as different strategies of *communication* instead of sets of discrete skills. Whether this communication is drawing in the sand of the sandbox, making play-money to pay the bill for sandcakes in the “restaurant” at the pre-school, participating in read-aloud-activities by using dialogue in the classroom, scribbling and doodling small stories—it is calling for an early literacy curriculum fit to actually see and recognize such activities. Both function as important stepping stones on the way to (adult) literacy, but also as meaningful social events in their own right. Emphasis is on early literacy in diverse contexts of peer-to-peer interactive learning, and on the qualities of the one-on-one teacher-to-child interactions.

The adaptation (or: the early literacy transformation) of the learning story template has a somewhat turbulent history. The EASE project was implemented with a strong participatory dimension. The teach-

ers participating in the project were regularly called upon to try out and reflect on various draft versions of a learning story template intended to capture the ambitions indicated in the above paragraph on curriculum. Central to the matter was—and is—a list of early literacy indicators, intended to help the teachers discover the early literacy qualities in the activities of the children. In this way the indicators have a “what to look for” function. Additionally, the indicators are thought of as tools in the interpretation and analysis of the learning stories.

By employing a list of indicators, we are aware of the risk of narrowing the pedagogic practice. From a “purist” socio-culturally oriented position, indicators are viewed as promoting an unwanted, so called tick-off approach to assessment (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), where the focus eventually will be on the child’s weakness or deficits as deducted from a standardized curriculum (indicated by the indicators). The earliest versions of the early literacy learning story template actually had an indicator tick-off list next to the actual story, but this design was eventually abandoned, as it did not connect with the underlying socio-cultural basis of the EASE approach.

Some of the pre-school- and kindergarten class teachers participating in the project objected to abandoning the indicators, as they thought the indicators did a great job in assisting in the task of spotting diverse strands of early literacy in the children’s activities. It was clear that some sort of compromise was needed. The current version of the early literacy learning story template—the EASE adaptation of the learning story approach—tries to hybridize the socio-cultural, holistic traditions of Carr’s approach and the strengths of indicators. The result is a pretty traditional learning story template, with preset boxes for the story, photos, analysis and notes on possible follow-up activities. The indicators have developed to a carefully designed separate hand-out to be used either as observation assistant or as a tool for the analysis of the learning stories of the day. The hand-out is the teachers’ companion in the midst of the action of the actual classroom setting, and can be called upon in the after hours as a tool for the analysis of the learning stories captured. See these handouts as an annex.

The strength of the indicators is that they point to literacy aspects of the everyday practices of the children which are not so obvious, promoting the socio-cultural view that literacy is more than words in textbooks and worksheets. We have recently added context-indicators as guidelines towards early literacy friendly classroom environments and forms of interactions. And as the indicators no longer appear on the actual learning story template, they are not as likely to steal the focus and interfere with the holistic backdrop of the learning story approach.

1.7 A didactical adaptation of learning stories

Although we all believe in a holistic approach to early childhood education, in recent years there has been more emphasis put on young children’s learning. And learning is always learning about something that is an object of learning—something we want children to learn. We also have a lot of information today about how to design pedagogy that will help the children to develop an understanding about different aspects of the world around them (see chapter 3 or e. g. Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). This means that we in our project have tried to transform the New Zealand learning story approach into a more didactical approach, which means that the object of learning, aspects of literacy, is the content dealt with, while the perspective of the act of learning, how children learn is closely related to the original idea of Carr. We regard it as becoming more didactic since the teacher’s role is considered as equally important to the child’s learning. The teacher has to take the responsibility to make children aware about

the aspects of the world around them that the curriculum states as important, and in most of the European curricula for early childhood education, literacy is a central skill to develop, and the development depends on the experiences provided by the environment, where the teacher's acting and communication with children is the deciding factor. So the didactical approach means that the teacher does not only follow each child's development and offer support in it, but also initiate and challenge children's learning. At the same time, each child's learning has to be based on their earlier experiences and perspectives (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010).

The following three points are intended to summarize the learning story approach, and the adaptation is aimed at optimizing it for the documentation of children's learning processes involved in early literacy events:

1. Learning stories emphasize how learning is a social constructivist phenomenon, creating meaning and being inscribed in diverse contexts and forms of interaction.
2. The use of learning stories for documentation of early literacy learning calls for holistic and functional views of literacy, able to see and respond to the often not so obvious literacy qualities in the everyday activities of children.
3. Early literacy indicators do—if used wisely and with caution—assist the teacher both in noticing these literacy qualities and in analyzing the stories captured.

1.8 The content of the report as a whole

Chapter 1: *Introduction* by Ole Henrik Hansen, Irene Kaschefi-Haude, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson & Anders Skriver Jensen

Margaret Carr's learning-stories approach is briefly described, but also how we have adapted this into a more didactic approach by using literacy as the content in the learning stories. This first chapter also describes the EASE project with its intention and aims and how the report is structured.

Chapter 2: *Transitions from pre-school to primary school*, by Kalliope Vrinioti, Johanna Einarsdottir & Stig Broström

Here a brief overview of research in the area of transition between pre- and primary-school is outlined, but also the long history of transition questions is being dealt with.

Chapter 3: *Early literacy learning in the perspective of the child: Literacy Stories*, by Elisabeth Mellgren, Anders Skriver Jensen & Ole Henrik Hansen

This chapter lays out the socio-cultural theoretical concepts that are forming the basis of the approach to early literacy of the EASE project. But it also describes the indicators of importance for literacy learning like: 1) interaction, 2) expression, 3) structures, 4) graphic symbols and 5) interaction. These 'early literacy indicators' are adapted into Early Literacy Stories.

Chapter 4: *Observing, supporting and challenging children's learning*, by Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson

The author enlightens the distinction between child perspectives and children's perspectives, as well as a conception of development as increased discernment which has become central in early

childhood education. Communication and interaction become key factors and important tools for the teacher in observing, supporting and challenging children's learning.

Chapter 5: *A seamless transition or an oasis to rest in? The children's pictures of the Swedish pre-school class*, by Helena Ackesjö

This chapter presents a study of children drawing pictures of their days in the pre-school class. The pictures are regarded as literacy events in the study. The result shows that the pictures reflect the pre-school class as a playful child-centred educational practice at the crossroads between pre-school and compulsory school, or as an oasis for the children to rest in.

Chapter 6: *"In pre-school we speak Swedish." Children's perception of multilingualism*, by Hiba Abou-Touk

The focus here lies on children with another mother tongue than the majority language. A group of children have been interviewed about the use of their mother tongue as well as Swedish. They are quite aware how their mother tongue is being used less than Swedish in institutional settings, and that it was chiefly being able to speak, read and write Swedish that made it possible to participate in Swedish society.

Chapter 7: *Connecting curricula through action research*, by Jóhanna Einarsdóttir

This chapter is a detailed description of how the EASE project has been carried through in three phases in Iceland with pre- and primary school teachers, and other specialists who took part in the project. The approach reminds the reader about action research since the teacher's own questions are primarily dealt with.

Chapter 8: *The relationship between family and kindergarten*, by Ágnes Nyitrai-Szombathelyi, Mónika Kicsák, Judit Villányi & Katalin Zóka

Here the focus is put on values and traditions related to cooperation and collaboration between pre-school and family in Hungary. Also questions concerning the strategy, plan and tasks to deal with as formulated in the Hungarian guideline are described.

Chapter 9: *Involvement of parents*, by Roman Lewicki, Anna Pol & Magdalena Bialek

The authors focus on presenting a survey and discussion of the parents' role in their children's learning process. It usually happens that children who regularly work at home with their parents are more likely to achieve success than those who do not have an opportunity of cooperation with adults. Thus, parental support in education—at home and in the classroom—is vital to effective learning and discipline and can improve the social and emotional development of young learners.

Chapter 10: *Early literacy in transition from pre-school to primary school: Connecting curricula*, by Irene Sivropoulou & Kalliope Vrinioti

This chapter is based on an investigation in Greece. The aim was to find out to what extent mixed groups of pre-schoolers and first grade students contribute to early literacy development, as well as to describe teachers' discoveries about the transition.

Chapter 11: *Social development and the role of the pre-school from the viewpoint of the EASE project*, by Johann Pehofer

The author explains how the change in our society at the same time highlights a change in education. We know today, that pre-school already extensively determines the educational success of the child: So this chapter deals with the tasks and obligations of pre-schools in the present society.

Chapter 12: *Evaluation*, by *Elisabeth Mellgren & Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson*

In conclusion each country's results from the questionnaire completed by pre- and/or primary school teachers and parents are presented mainly in terms of the most important results drawn from all the statistics behind it. The most important result is however the change from the first to the second questionnaire, which means that a lot of the participants in **EASE** have been influenced in their way of looking at transition questions related to literacy.

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