

# Introduction

## Background

The education of young children during their first years of formal schooling creates a powerful social and educational foundation for lifelong social inclusion and academic excellence. Early childhood educators, including teaching assistants, head teachers, and administrators, are critical to creating this foundation along with families and the community. Yet, teachers do not always receive the resources they need for professional growth and development, nor is there a cohesive system for collegial dialogue and collaboration between early childhood educators. Until these issues are addressed, the field will continue to be stymied in its efforts to provide the frequent and high-quality professional support that educators need. This book, *Learning Stories and Teacher Inquiry Groups: Reimagining Teaching and Assessment in Early Childhood Education*, offers a model for better professional support. Its examples highlight educators dedicated to strengthening assessment and instructional practices. The stories and processes on the pages that follow will help educators rethink and redo some of the most persistent patterns and cycles that may have hindered progress in their professional growth.

It is a crucial time for new ideas and new actions, and the field needs a concerted effort by early childhood educators to improve our assessment and instructional approaches and to provide universal access to meaningful social inclusion and academic excellence. This book contributes to this conversation by describing and explaining how to use Learning Stories well in early childhood education, integrated within the professional development process of teacher inquiry, documentation, and reflection. The primary vehicle for this process is the use of regular inquiry group meetings where educators come together and present and reflect upon their documentation and Learning Stories. Inquiry groups make visible the knowledge and insights of early childhood educators, elevate their voices, and provide a forum for sharing and reflecting on that knowledge with peers in a collaborative, democratic structure.

## Using Learning Stories

Learning Stories originated in New Zealand (Carr 2001; Carr & Lee 2012, 2019), where educators have shown the value of this approach to make children's learning visible and to highlight key insights and questions about children's play, interactions, languages, cultural traditions, and family and community affiliations and strengths. This book focuses on the role of Learning Stories in promoting new connections between authentic assessment and critical pedagogy in every child's education. Learning Stories can help educators find new avenues toward improving how and why to observe, document, and reflect upon children's learning and development.

The book is intended for early childhood teachers taking courses at the AA, BA, and MA levels, as well as teachers engaged in on-site professional development through professional learning communities, inquiry groups, book clubs, and other forms of professional collaboration and dialogue. It is also intended for administrators, professional development specialists, instructional coaches, and teacher educators who work with teachers to improve assessment, instruction, relationships with families, and collegial team building and collaboration.

The use of Learning Stories is relevant for educators who work in public and independent programs and schools, and who use a mix of varied assessment measures as well as curricular and instructional approaches. The use of Learning Stories can be integrated in both general education settings as well as those serving children with special needs. It is also relevant for educators working with children from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as for programs and schools that feature multilingual instruction. This program is primarily for children from birth through age 8, but it can also work well with school-age children.

# Learning Stories and Inquiry

When educators connect Learning Stories with the professional development process of participating in inquiry groups, and with the systematic collection and reflection of material from early childhood settings, the level of discussion and reflection becomes elevated. The power of stories to retell and relive seemingly insignificant moments in children's development takes on new significance and importance when shared with colleagues in a trusting, collegial forum such as the regular use of inquiry groups. The Learning Stories that educators create and share improve the observational and documentation skill set of individual educators and uplift and empower the other participants in the group. When inquiry groups are maintained and nurtured over months and years within and across early childhood settings, a new sense of trust and collaboration takes root and encourages educators to rely on each other's observations and insights to improve their own practice. In a profession that emphasizes teamwork and small group problem solving, there is remarkably little time and professional development space for US early childhood educators to present and give each other feedback on their teaching stories. This book shows how to make that time and space.

## Organization of the Book

The book features six chapters, two appendices, and an online study guide. All of the chapters begin with a set of reflection prompts and include additional features such as callout boxes that highlight key ideas, strategies, and additional insights on the Learning Stories. Chapters 2 through 6 feature examples of Learning Stories created and supported by the authors and their colleagues. The Learning Stories are written in English, Spanish, Cantonese, and Hawaiian.

Chapter 1 focuses on defining and explaining the most important forms and functions of inquiry, documentation, and reflection. The chapter explains effective ways to form and run inquiry groups, collect and share data and material on children's learning, and reflect on Learning Stories and other documentation within the collaborative forum of inquiry groups.

Chapter 2 explains the basic structure of Learning Stories and how they can be used for authentic assessment. The chapter discusses the basic principles at the foundation of high-quality, meaningful Learning Stories.

Chapter 3 explains the process for identifying and creating Learning Stories and how to identify a moment or series of moments that might be documented in a Learning Story. The chapter describes effective goals and strategies for collecting material on children's learning, play, and interaction, and the use of writing, audio, and video for creating Learning Stories.

Chapter 4 focuses on the power of Learning Stories to capture and make visible children's social development, play, and language growth. The chapter emphasizes the value of Learning Stories for making visible children's individual, cultural, and multilingual resources and talents for socialization and play on their own and with peers.

Chapter 5 examines how Learning Stories can empower educators to recognize and share children's and families' cultural, social, and linguistic interests and strengths. In keeping with a strengths-based and equity perspective, the chapter shows how selected Learning Stories were created in inquiry groups to help educators reflect on their understanding of languages, cultures, biases, and stereotypes.

Chapter 6 focuses on the role of family outreach and engagement in Learning Stories, and how inquiry groups provide an effective forum for sharing and reflecting on new ways to include and make families visible in early childhood assessment and curriculum.

Appendix A describes an array of assessment tools commonly employed in early childhood education settings, the QRIS, CLASS, DRDP, ERS, ASQ, and PALS, all of which Learning Stories can be used in conjunction, as contextual evidence.

Appendix B includes a list of useful resources, examples of inquiry group meeting protocols, and a study guide for teachers and center directors and other administrators to use this book in their professional development.

Additionally, a Study Guide for individuals and groups is provided as an online resource and can be downloaded at [NAEYC.org/learning-stories](http://NAEYC.org/learning-stories).

# How Learning Stories Appear in the Book

As you read the chapters, you will see many examples of Learning Stories. We show small images of the original Learning Stories, so that you can get a flavor of how unique each story is and can be. Learning Story excerpts are included and discussed, and full text of Learning Stories is also provided.

## Getting Started

This book marks a new effort in US early childhood education to link Learning Stories with collaborative and structured teacher inquiry. We, as authors and educators ourselves, consider this book a way of collaborating with you as fellow educators. We encourage readers to contact us for further discussion and dialogue around Learning Stories and inquiry, documentation, and reflection. We look forward to an exchange of ideas and strategies for implementing Learning Stories as linked with the inquiry process to take root in US early childhood education, and to widen the circles of professional collaboration and dialogue.



## References

- Carr, M. 2001. *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Carr, M., & W. Lee. 2012. *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Carr, M., & W. Lee. 2019. *Learning Stories in Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.