

Narrative Assessment: identity and equity for disabled students

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Abstract

Narrative assessment is learner centred, credit based, and illustrates learning and achievement within authentic contexts. It offers new insights into the way in which ability and disability are socially constructed. For teachers, the process of assessing in this manner is enabling them to 'see' students, the curriculum, assessment, and their pedagogy with different eyes. They are finding new pathways to personalise assessment and learning for diverse students.

This paper will describe a project whereby Education Plus, University of Canterbury and the Ministry of Education have been working with teacher-writers to develop exemplars of learning for students with high to very high learning needs developing curriculum exemplars using narrative assessment in a range of primary and secondary school settings. This approach links closely to the vision, principles and values of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and focuses on strengthening learners' key competencies within the context of the learning areas and effective teacher pedagogy. *The New Zealand Curriculum* states that the national curriculum is for *all* students and we argue that a narrative assessment approach supports inclusion.

Introduction

In 2007 the University of Canterbury Education Plus professional learning team began work on a New Zealand Ministry of Education funded project *Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers* and the development of *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs*.

Teachers from primary and secondary schools, special schools, attached special class units and mainstream school classes have been involved in the project to write Curriculum Exemplars that will help meet the learning, teaching and assessment goals of children and young people with significant learning challenges. These students with high and very high learning needs are working long term within Level 1 of *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

In 2007 we developed the first 20 exemplars and a draft narrative guide. During 2008 these exemplars are under evaluation, and we are working with teacher writers to develop a further 45 to 50 exemplars as well as re-working the earlier exemplars and guide in response to feedback from the evaluation. It is proposed that a professional development phase will begin in 2009, when the exemplars and guide will be piloted by teachers.

The ministry has described the project as occurring within a *culture of professional*

development. The process of this resource development is an iterative and reflective one, based on key principles of assessment for learning. The project is an exciting opportunity for collaboration across education sectors, across learning areas and has brought together advisers and academic staff in the College of Education. To date the project has provided the participants with opportunities for further research, reflection, writing and dissemination within and beyond the project's immediate parameters as we situate the work within wider discussions of assessment for learning, curriculum for all, and how we understand disability in our society.

This project has developed out of our interest in pursuing a more coherent and planned exploration into what difference a narrative approach may make firstly, to the experiences and educational outcomes of students with special educational needs and secondly, to how the teachers and families of these students understand, recognise and report their educational achievements and view them as learners.

The purpose of *Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers* and the accompanying *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs* is to support teachers in noticing, recognising, responding, documenting, and reporting student learning in ways that are meaningful for students, their families, and educators. The scope of the guide and the exemplars is inclusive of *all* teachers whose classes include students who, throughout most of their time at school, are working at level 1 of the New Zealand Curriculum.¹

The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs focuses particularly on assessment of the key competencies **within the context of** the learning areas of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. For this reason, possible pathways of learning are not expressed as progress indicators set out in matrices.

Teachers are often puzzled about how to include students with special education needs in their planning, teaching, and assessment processes. The guide and exemplars are designed to support teachers in these processes as well as to reflect on their teaching.

The key documents that have informed development of *Narrative Assessment: A Guide for Teachers* and *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs* are:

- *The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation 2006* (Ministry of Education, 2006b)
- *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2003)
- *The New Zealand Disability Strategy: Making a World of Difference: Whakanui Oranga* (Ministry of Health, 2001)
- *Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004 and 2007b)
- *Statement of Intent: 2007 to 2012* (Ministry of Education, 2007d)

In the past thirty years, there have been considerable changes in the way people view disability and special education in general. Over this time, researchers have identified two different ways in which disability and special education are viewed.

Disability

¹ Note that the group of students that is the focus of the guide and the exemplars does not include those learners with high and very high needs who are able to access achievement objectives beyond curriculum level 1 through adaptations such as: Braille writers, hearing aids, visual aids, assistive technology, and similar. (Ministry of Education request for proposals for Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs and a Narrative Assessment Teachers' Guide).

One way of viewing disability is now known as the functional limitation or medical model. This is where the focus is on a defect or inadequacy that is located within the person. A criticism of this model is its emphasis on individual deficit. Our traditional approaches to special education assessment and to teaching and learning have been largely focused on diagnosis and intervention, or remediation, of deficit. These interventions were carried out by, or under the direction of, experts.

A second way of looking at disability is as a social construction. In this view of disability, the focus falls on how people make sense of disability or how they decide what it means when someone is described as “disabled”. For example, is disability understood as a form of difference similar to gender or ethnicity? Understandings about disability are not developed in isolation. We learn the meaning of disability in interactions with others, both disabled and non-disabled persons.

Assessment frames

Theories of assessment have traditionally been based in psychometric notions of intelligence. Over the past 40 years, assessment has been reconceptualised as having educational and formative purposes (see Glaser, 1963; Wood, 1986; Gipps, 1994; Crooks, 1988; Sadler, 1989; Cowie and Bell, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Stobart, 2005; Carr, 2007). Despite this growing international discourse of assessment for learning, much assessment practice in schools privileges normative and comparative frames.

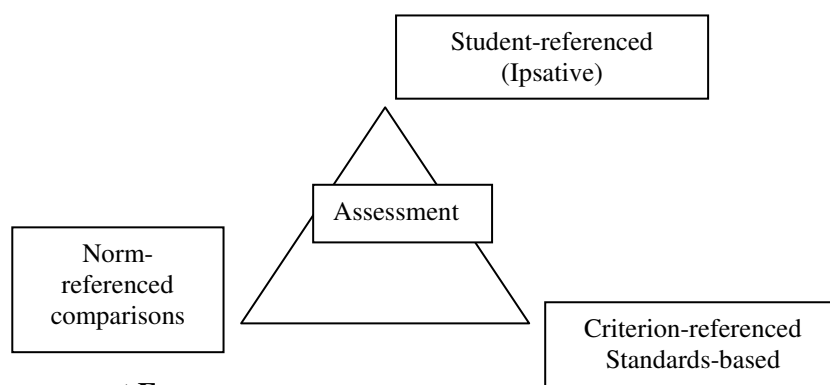


Figure 1. Three Assessment Frames

When teachers apply norm-referenced or criterion-referenced and standards-based assessment (refer to figure 1) to students with special education needs particular problems often arise. When compared to other learners, these students can readily become categorised as *abnormal*, low in ability, not fitting the curriculum, and slow to progress (or even regressive). Deficit views of these students are therefore normalised by the use of such assessment frames, exacerbating their exclusion from the curriculum, and the regular classroom community.

Writing in relation to assessment, Bell & Cowie, (1999); Stoll, Fink & Earl, (2003); Hattie, (2005) and Timperley & Parr, (2004) point to teachers needing more than numeric data, grades and marks to support effective learning in their classrooms. Teachers need assessment data that is more holistic, interpretive and reflective. This is particularly so with students who do not conform to the norms suggested by the achievement levels defined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* and for whom academic achievement is not a clear measure of success or progress.

Assessment that is student-referenced and related to the learner’s dispositions, (competencies) is a hopeful way forward for these students. We argue that this project

is highlighting how the use of narratives (Learning Stories), enables teachers to capture rich descriptions of learning in relation to *The New Zealand Curriculum* key competencies and learning areas, in the context of culturally responsive pedagogy (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Learning Stories not only look back, but they are constructive and forward looking through providing teachers and learners a process of seeking and interpreting evidence to open up possible learning pathways. They are also enabling teachers to view the students as mindful and competent in learning contexts; able to access learning in and through *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

The New Zealand Curriculum(2007)

The New Zealand Curriculum includes a vision for learners who are confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners. It is written as a curriculum for all students and this is expressed in the principle of inclusion (page 9):

The curriculum is non-sexist, non-racist, and non-discriminatory; it ensures that student's identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognized and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed.

The Curriculum provides a framework for pedagogy and assessment through the eight learning (subject content) areas. These learning areas are presented in successive levels of learning outcomes, with level 1 being the beginning or foundation, and level 8 being the most complex or sophisticated learning outcomes expected by the end of secondary school. So, for students with special education needs, who may never achieve beyond level 1, *The New Zealand Curriculum* presents particular challenges.

Key competencies

The New Zealand Curriculum also sets out five key competencies as “capabilities for living and lifelong learning” which challenge traditional norm-referenced and standards-based approaches to assessment. Within the one document it is thus possible to identify policy statements supporting inclusion and approaches to curriculum, assessment and pedagogy that both work for and against inclusion (The New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, page 12).

The key competencies draw on knowledge, attitudes and values. They are both a means to an end and a valued educational outcome. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (p.12) describes how key competencies involve the learner in engaging personal goals, other people, community knowledge and values, cultural tools and the knowledge and skills found in learning areas. Key competencies exist in a constellation interacting with one another, and also with a range of resources and learner dispositions.

This *resources* view of competence is aligned with socio-cultural views of learning as described by Vygotsky (1978); with understandings about learner efficacy and motivation (see Bandura, 1986,1994; Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986); and with situated and activity learning theories (see Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2001;Wenger, 1999; Engestrom, 1999; Sfard, 1999).

In this way *key competencies* may be better described as *cooperatencies*, or as *completencies*, where they enable the development of unique learner capability, while being strengthened in large part through interactions with others. This is captured in the Nelson Mandella quote “a person is a person through other persons” (cited by Stoll, 2006) and represents the perspective of social constructionism (Burr, 1995).

A significant feature of the work done in the Curriculum Exemplars project is the use of the key competencies as a means to highlight learning. Our work builds on the work of Carr, Peters et al (2008) in contributing to a theoretical understanding of key competencies which

are central to our narrative assessment approach. Margaret Carr's ABCD conceptual frame (2006) provides another way of appreciating learning development over time and we explore the impact of this on our target group of students, their teachers and the learning community, including home, through narrative assessment.

Learning for those with disability

The educational experiences of students with significant special education needs have been characterised by low expectations and limited outcomes. Previous research has identified that many teachers in New Zealand struggle to see the relevance of the curriculum for many students with special education needs because they do not believe their students will ever achieve at level 1 (McMenamin, Millar, Morton, Mutch, Nuthall & Tyler-Merrick, 2004). Many teachers may unwittingly base their expectations for these students on views about the students that reflect a generalised and deficit view of disability and fail to see the students as capable and competent learners.

Narrative assessment

Equity

Narrative assessment appears to provide a means by which assessment, through using key competencies, challenges traditional assessment practice. In this way assessment can be looked at "through a different lens" (Hipkins, 2007). Anecdotally the teacher/writers in the Curriculum Exemplars project reported changes in their thinking and practices in relation to their students' learning as a consequence of using a narrative approach.

Knowledge of the processes New Zealand teachers use to make curricular and pedagogical decisions in relation to the educational goals of students with significant learning needs is slight but what we do know suggests that decision making is based on a deficit model and is often done on an ad hoc basis (McMenamin, Millar, Morton, Mutch, Nuthall & Tyler-Merrick, 2004). This narrative project appears to be showing other findings- that of strengthening learning for students, teachers and families.

A study by Lepper, Williamson and Cullen (2003) describes the development of a learning community of teachers, parents, psychologists and other professionals working as a *transdisciplinary* team with the use of narrative. This team used Learning Stories with two young disabled children. The participants reported feeling empowered and appreciated the strengthening of relationships.

Dunn (2004) argues that narrative assessment "can become a vehicle for inclusion, as the teacher increasingly sees the learner, not the disability" (p. 126). Narratives have the potential to help us resist the powerful pull of deficit thinking.

Learning Stories

Carr (1998a, 1998b,) uses the term *Learning Stories* to describe the type of documented assessment narratives she believes are useful in the early childhood context of *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki mātauranga mo nga mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). *Learning Stories* are a New Zealand, home-grown response to the emerging socio-cultural views of learning, teaching and assessment.

Learning Stories focus on actions and relationships and enable the teacher to see the child and their learning in a wider context. This approach does not compare students to others, nor to standards. In this way Learning Stories value and foster the students' progress and

achievement at the same time recognising that this progress is socially mediated and co-constructed.

Learning Stories have been explored in schools (Carr & Peters, 2005; Molloy, 2005; Davis & Molloy, 2004). More recently, teachers in primary and secondary settings have adapted Carr's Learning Story approach to suit their classrooms and learners while exploring the use of the revised *New Zealand Curriculum. The Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs* show some of the ways teachers in primary and secondary settings have adapted Carr's Learning Stories for use in their places. Teachers have used the key competencies, in the context of learning areas as the framework for their learning stories.

Several of the teachers and parents involved in this project present their work in Learning Story formats or templates, while others write their narratives freely. Learning Stories will usually include some form of story, analysis and possible learning pathways, regardless of presentation style.

Learning Stories may be more time consuming than some traditional approaches to assessment (Carr, 2001), however, those experienced in using narrative as a method for assessing have found creative and innovative ways for managing the process. More often than not, once teachers establish the use of narrative in their settings they find this to be an extremely satisfying and motivating approach for themselves, their students, families and other central audiences.

Many practitioners tell us that once they start documenting children's learning in this way they begin to see potential Learning Stories everywhere. These teachers often comment on how motivated they are to document the learning they see in their classrooms, though they quickly realise they cannot document everything they would like. Teachers often find they need to make decisions and judgements about which stories to document.

Identity

Narrative assessment provides a particular way of understanding a student, a particular way of seeing and interpreting a student. When we share the narrative with other people, including the student, we are sharing our way of interpreting the student, sharing our sense of who the student is. As we engage in conversation about the narrative, all participants in the conversation are together constructing, and re-constructing the student's identity. In our conversations about narrative assessment, we can be excited, affirmed or even challenged in our sense of who a student is.

We should not underestimate the power of writing something down; nor how the written word can make something feel 'more real.' As we write we might sometimes 'catch ourselves in the act' of creating a particular view of a student, drawing on generalised views of disability.

In developing the exemplars we have collected together a series, or string, of narratives. We have started with the assumption that all students are active, capable and competent learners; that our role as educators is to provide opportunities for the student to show what they know, and to identify how we might "orchestrate opportunities for [students to learn] from and with others" (Hipkins, 2007, p.4).

A socio-cultural tool

Narrative knowing... is concerned more with human meaning than with discrete facts, more with coherence than with logic, more with sequences than with categories, and more with understanding than with predictability and control.

Rossiter, 2005, p. 419

Carr (2001) maintains that narrative is ‘more suited to translating situated and personal learning and is, therefore, a more holistic assessment procedure’ (p. 62). Narrative assessments keep learning complex rather than attempting to fragment it, showing learning connections rather than highlighting knowledge or skills alone. Narrative assessments present a richer picture of learning-in-action in authentic contexts. They engage those involved in striving to understand (Drummond, 1993) the learning taking place and the complexities of this, through analysis, interpretation and discussion. More often than not, narrative assessments lead those involved to respond to the insights of the learner or learners in some way, thus informing and supporting the learning and teaching process.

One of the reasons narrative is useful as a method for communicating assessment is its accessibility to multiple audiences and perspectives. Both documented and oral narratives can help to bridge the communication gap between teachers, students, and families; they allow each of these audiences into the process of assessment, thus supporting the notions of ‘ownership’ and ‘legitimation’ that Cowie and Carr (2003) describe as desirable when a ‘distributed’ socio-cultural view of learning is taken (p. 106).

Teacher changes

The teacher-writers involved in developing curriculum exemplars have described changes in their thinking and practice as a result of using Learning Stories. This section provides a brief overview of how these teachers have come to **see things with different eyes**. Our individual and shared meeting notes during 2007 and teacher-writer presentations provided the quotes and interpretations used.

Seeing the student: *Are they doing it because we are watching them harder?*

The teacher-writers have described how they, and others, have seen their students as learners that are more competent. In some instances, the students have begun to exceed expectations. A question that has arisen for some teachers is whether the students have always had these competencies, and teachers simply hadn’t noticed these before. Learning Stories have supported teachers to look at the students differently, to “watch them harder” and notice different behaviours. Another possibility is that things that students have done are being re-framed and re-interpreted differently, particularly when the key competencies are used as a lens through which to view student behaviours. The teacher-writers described now being able to value behaviours and achievements, as these could be recognised as demonstrating competence in one of the key competencies, or within Level One of a learning area. A third possibility is that, through using learning stories to reflect on student and teacher learning, the teachers were now facilitating different learning opportunities, that provides students with opportunities and support for new learning.

Seeing the family

The teacher-writers described how they saw the impact of narrative assessment on families. For example:

One parent shared that for every learning story in her son’s portfolio she had shared with him, sitting in the park one sunny day, she fed him a grape. By the end of the portfolio,

she was in tears because she had not heard anything positive about her son in a long time (as a result of his poor behaviour) and our learning stories changed this.

The Learning Stories gave parents insight into what was going on at school. Parents valued the visual aspect of learning stories. The Learning Stories were frequently shared with other family members. Some teachers sent Learning Stories home as a portfolio each term. One teacher described how she had set up a “learning wall” in her classroom, so that stories about learning in the class are displayed for all to see.

The stories also inform planning with parents. Many teachers described parent reactions to stories describing learning, preferences and strategies from home. These in turn influenced the direction of school learning opportunities. For example, Matthew’s mother suggested that soccer was a real interest and this interest was utilised as a way to encourage Matthew to look down while he was running. This helped the teacher meet her goal of encouraging Matthew to look down for greater safety.

Parents can also be writers of Learning Stories. Bridget has used her own background as an early childhood educator to develop learning stories for her two school-aged sons. Her sons’ teachers are now interested in Learning Stories as an approach to assessment in their classrooms.

Seeing the curriculum

Now we’re focusing on the key competencies, I’m looking at ... in a whole new light.

Learning Stories work well because in the reflective process we are designing individualised curriculum, rather than focussed on little bits of skills – that link to curriculum.

Having the key competencies- my children finally fit somewhere.

Participating in the professional learning aspects of this project enabled teachers to look closely at the key competencies in the curriculum and consider how these would look in their classrooms. With the support of the curriculum advisers, the teachers began to see more evidence of their students working within Level One of the learning areas. The teachers noted that, for the purpose of writing up a Learning Story, they might highlight one or two key competencies within the context of a particular learning area. With the help of the curriculum advisers, and later in discussion with their fellow teacher-writers at a cluster meeting, they could identify *additional* key competencies or learning areas that they might have highlighted, or that they would follow up in other Learning Stories.

The teacher-writers in this phase of the project understood the curriculum as relevant for their students. The students are not seen as ‘pre-level one’, everything is considered to be within level one as a starting point.

Seeing assessment

A bit of background helps to understand the change that has taken place.

You can see where you have come from.

The teachers were excited and invigorated by the process of collecting together a group of stories, then looking back and across to see the learning(s) that may not have been noticed or recognised in the moment of recording. It became apparent that *the progression is only evident with the benefit of hindsight*. This recognition challenges a sense of assessment being

predictive and predictable. Narrative assessment reminds us of the complexity of life and of learning; it also provides us with the means of better describing some of this complexity.

For some participants, understanding about feedback (and feedforward) is changing. Feedback is no longer simply a gift from teacher to student. Rather, feedback is dialogic (Askew and Lodge, 2000). Both teacher and student are learning about each other and about themselves in each interaction. As Anne Marie pointed out, the process of using Learning Stories invites teachers to be reflexive:

In the process of setting learning goals for the student you necessarily set learning goals for yourself.

The term ‘Learning Stories’ tested some participants’ thinking, particularly where they may have viewed assessment as objective truth, and where ‘stories’ are thought to be made up and open to interpretation. On the other hand,

Assessment doesn’t have to be a tick on paper in a box.

The teacher-writers found Learning Stories to be a more holistic and honest way of reporting on student learning.

Some of the teacher-writers were also reporting assessment differently to wider audiences. In Libby’s school, the principal has supported Libby to use Learning Stories for assessment and reporting. Recently Libby sent along a portfolio to the board of trustees’ meeting to inform them about this form of assessment and reporting. They were very positive and complimentary.

Seeing myself

I saw the students that way [...] but I didn’t report it that way, I’m a lot more honest now, Learning Stories allow you to teach and assess honestly. As a teacher, through Learning Stories I am able to express better what happened.

Some teachers brought previous experience of Learning Stories to the project. They commented that they saw the students in the way Learning Stories portrayed them, but that she reported in (different) ways that were required of her. Through the use of Learning Stories, these teachers’ reporting practice was now able to be more congruent with their beliefs and philosophies. We interpret this to mean that any assessment tool provides a framework that can both enable and constrain what can be noticed and reported. The teachers have appreciated narrative assessment as an approach which better supports noticing student learning in more holistic ways, that better supports telling about learning in ways that are more accessible to students and families.

The difference between the first and later drafts is that they are now more personal.

The project provided an opportunity for teachers to act as a community of practitioners to co-construct professional knowledge. The cluster workshops and school visits have offered both productive opportunities for teachers to share their emerging work in an atmosphere that focuses on learning and fosters positive descriptive feedback for learning (Watkins, 2000). This *community of practice* (Rogoff, et al., 2001) approach to professional learning models the learning and assessment paradigms that underlie this work. The focus is on constructing knowledge through co-participation in professional learning. It encourages participants “to view their contribution collaboratively rather than through an expert lens” (Anning, Cullen & Fler 2004, p.79).

Sadler (2002) talks about *vital dispositions for teaching* as, “persistence, recovery from setbacks and failures, imagination and improvisation lateral thinking, confidence in tackling the unknown, self-control, infectious enthusiasm for learning, dedication to learning for mastery, joy in emerging capability, goal-directedness, palpable curiosity and conviviality” (p.249). Teachers have told and shown us that when they begin to write they actually change and grow their teacher dispositions, through the process of narrating the learning. They have displayed greater confidence in their professional judgement, even as they seek out comment and critique from their peers.

Conclusion

Narrative assessment in this project *Curriculum Exemplars for Learners with Special Education Needs* provided a platform along with the introduction of the Key Competencies from our recently revised *New Zealand Curriculum* to strengthen identity and equity of disabled students. Learning was made more visible through the Key Competencies in Learning Stories and links to Learning Areas were strengthened. Students actively participated in their learning within authentic contexts and this was captured and encouraged throughout the project through professional development and dialogue in learning communities. Seeing with different eyes enabled teachers to grow their pedagogy within a socio-cultural credit based learning model.

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