



The Golden Thread: Rethinking Learning Outcomes in Early Childhood Education

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JUDITH DUNCAN

University of Canterbury College of Education

SANDRA EATON

Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres

SARAH TE ONE

Victoria University of Wellington

ABSTRACT

Using the metaphor of the 'golden thread', drawn from a parable written by New Zealander Robyn Lawrence (2002),¹ this article presents one case study from an empirical research study investigating adult participation in early childhood education. The methods of gathering information on learning outcomes (through teacher conferences, learning stories and anecdotal records) will be discussed, as well as our discussion on representing children's learning outcomes. Early childhood education has come under increasing pressure to describe, record and present evidence of the benefits for learning. We argue that it is time to understand children's and families' lived experiences in new, complex, and meaningful ways. We propose that learning narratives would benefit from a reframing of centre-based child learning narratives to a family/community-based design, which includes narratives that encompass the wider contexts and experiences of the child.

INTRODUCTION

As a team of teachers, parent facilitators, and researchers, we approached teaching and learning at the Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres (CBK) as a provocation within a two-year TLRI research project (2010-2012).² Our prime focus was to imagine what teaching and learning would, or could, look like with increased parent and teacher involvement in the lives of the children, the early childhood centres, and the families' communities. Our imaginings involved rethinking taken-for-granted assumptions about early childhood education, child development, learning outcomes and parent partnership in early childhood education (Cannella, 1997), shifting our lens to community-based pedagogy. As an example of this shift in our thinking we constructed different processes for considering learning narratives. To do this we changed our gaze from centre-based child-centered

practice to early childhood education practices embedded in whānau, family and community life. We moved from thinking about the child in the centre supported by their family and community and bringing *funds of knowledge* and experiences with them **to the centre**, to considering what learning could look like when the emphasis was on 'early childhood education as embedded in the community'; that is, how learning narratives could encompass a community-based understanding of the child and his/her whānau.

Our research team included all teachers, parent facilitators, and managers and administrators of the four early childhood centres, and the Parenting Resource Centre (called 303), at the Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres (CBK). Judith Duncan, University of Canterbury, and Sarah Te One, Victoria University of Wellington, worked alongside the CBK teams as researcher leaders over the two years of the project.

Background to the Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Learning Centres (CBK)

This research project was shaped by the history and position of the CBK in Whanganui, a small town in the North Island of New Zealand. For many years CBK has been actively involved in the wider Whanganui community not only as a provider of early childhood education with four early childhood centres but also as a provider of a range of parent supports, programmes, interventions and networks, offered through an attached Parenting Resource Centre (303) to ensure a wrap-around approach to parenting. As children transition through the four centres from infancy to school, 303 creates a sense of social cohesion for parents and teachers based on shared histories evidenced in relationships between child/parent/teacher and community (see CBK website: www.centralbaptistkindergarten.org.nz/). It is from this model that our research project took its activities and frame of reference – particularly in regards to the community focus and the active adult involvement in CBK.

The research project

For the purpose of the research we selected 18 children and their parents/ whānau as case studies from across the four centres, and 303. The case study children, and their families, were chosen on the basis that they had been involved in CBK for several years, had accessed some or all of the wider parent support opportunities offered by 303, and were a cross-section of family constructions (single, married, reconstituted families, extended families etc.). The case study families engaged in interviews, collecting photo-stories, contributing to the discussions around teaching and learning for their child, and in engaging in community activities and events.

Multiple data sources included: audio and video observations, mapping adult movements; parent, child and teacher photo journaling; child case studies; individual and focus group interviews with social service workers, community based service providers, children, families, whānau and teaching staff; CBK document analysis (learning stories, planning records); teacher conferencing; and, parent surveys.

NEW ZEALAND EARLY CHILDHOOD CHILD LEARNING OUTCOMES AND LEARNING STORIES

Internationally, there are a variety of terms that are used to describe documentation of children's experiences, broadly conceived of as 'learning', in early childhood education: for example, pedagogical documentation (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Olsson, 2009); pedagogical narration (Berger, 2010); and, learning stories (Carr & Lee, 2012). The challenge to track and trace learning outcomes, whatever we call the documentation, has become a daily puzzle for many educators, policy makers, researchers, and advocates for children's learning in early childhood education settings across the globe.

In Aotearoa New Zealand our recent focus has increasingly been to track and trace learning outcomes for children who attend early childhood services. Participation in early childhood education is high by international standards, with more than 94% of children entering school having identified that they attended some early childhood education prior to school start (Ministry of Education, 2012a). However, there are differences in attendance with Māori and Pasifika attending less than other ethnic groups, and attendance higher in different geographical and economically advantaged areas. Despite evidence both nationally and internationally, the benefits of early childhood education are, however, still being debated in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our own government is requesting information on the value of increasing expenditure in early childhood education and is developing ways of measuring and assessing this 'benefit' (for example, the ECE Taskforce, 2011). In response, the Ministry of Education (2012b) has developed a 'Draft ECE Learning Outcomes Framework' which will be tested during 2013-2014. This document was

developed by a working group from ECE Research Policy Forum members comprising of ECE researchers and academics Margaret Carr, Carmen Dalli, Judith Duncan, Helen May, Anne Meade, Linda Mitchell, Lesley Rameka, Rita Walker along with ERO and Ministry of Education staff. (Ministry of Education, 2012b, p. 2)

The Research Policy Forum members brought experiences, research, and knowledge to the construction of a document that, similar to the early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), and learning stories (Kei Tua o te Pae/Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars, Ministry of Education, 2004-2009) will enable educators to create their own narratives and examples to demonstrate children's learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes within early childhood education have most often focused on the 'child in a setting', where the setting is required to take a responsibility for the growth and achievement of the child: this might be the 'child at home' or the 'child in the ECE setting'. In our study we needed to rethink these understandings of learning as 'taken-for-granted notions'. To do this we collected learning stories on our 18 case study children, looking for traces of community, family experiences, and adult involvement in the children's

learning. This meant we shifted from seeing the child as a 'child in a setting', to seeing the child 'within and across' settings. A simple linear causality model proved elusive for us to generate this understanding of the children, and so we turned to multiple tools, narratives and analyses to begin to understand what this holistic *learning*, community-based learning, parental-involved learning would look like for each for the case study children.

Developing new ways of understanding *learning*

Where to start – to begin – is the first question in undertaking such investigations: where along the learning journey does one begin? Which line of learning do you follow? Stephenson (2011) suggests, in her understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's approach to beginning:

the beginning is never really the beginning but the middle
... Recognizing the impossibility of this position, we must
choose a starting point if we are to start. (p. xi)

Our starting point was the existing learning stories of each case study child, individually crafted in each centre that the child had attended over their time at CBK. When we began our research we felt confident that we had the tools, the methods and the skills to investigate and generate our outcomes. Exemplars for tracking learning dispositions in children had been developed by Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee and Marshall (2010), and models of learning stories have become a dominant style of recording children's learning in Aotearoa (Carr & Lee, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2004-2009), which we were all familiar with. However, it became apparent that our ability to trace, or map, the impact of adult participation on children's outcomes was not going to be a simple matter.

Narrative stories (building on the learning story models the teachers were already familiar with) began our investigation, but the existing documentation alone could not tell us about:

- 1) Learning over time (between and across the three or four centres that the case study children had progressed through);
- 2) Examples of parental engagement and involvement (most of the learning stories were focused on centre-based experiences of the children and excluded 'adults' from the stories);

Nor,

- 3) Capture the out-of-centre experiences (at home, in the community, outside of the centre).

So we experimented with the following methods that we developed over the project:

1) *Teaching conferencing*

The teachers engaged in collective conferences to discuss the 18 case study children's learning stories, that is, the teachers from across the four centres and the management (including the Family Support Co-ordinator) discussed their understanding and knowledge of each child. These conferences tracked the child's learning over time, alongside the involvement, participation and relationships with the families, and were shaped into a narrative for each child, and each family. These conferences enabled the teachers to brainstorm, remember, consider, revisit, reform and re-understand each child and their family. Each conferencing event produced new understandings and relationships with the children and the families. These encounters demonstrated that the traditional approach to discussing children within teaching teams (and not across teaching teams) was too simplistic and did not capture the complexity of the child's learning, nor learning over time. Each teacher was surprised at the depth and breath of knowledge they gained of each child at these conferences.

2) *'Out and about' photos*

Digital cameras were given to each case study family to capture photos of their home experiences. Fondly entitled 'out and about' photos, the only directive the parents were given was to capture their lives 'outside' of the early childhood centre to share with the researchers and their child's teacher. The images provided a new perspective on the children and their families' everyday lives (Duncan, Te One, & Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres, 2013) – the images and understandings that are often silenced, invisible or missing from an early childhood setting.

3) *The Golden Thread*

Robyn Lawrence's 'The Parable of the Golden Thread' (See Figures 1 and 2) provided us with a visual image and metaphor to represent our ideas, questions, and findings across and between settings. Initially 'The Parable of the Golden Thread' was a reflective tool that stimulated teacher conferencing as we sought to understand the links between what was known and embedded in the teachers' everyday practices, and what was documented. Later, identifying the golden thread between learning stories revealed hidden knowledge about children's learning, adult participation and teachers' pedagogy.

The Parable of the Golden Thread

Once upon a time a young child had as his most precious possession a beautifully woven mat.

The coloured threads intermingled presenting a mat of great beauty. Yarns of deep gold, sparkling silver, rich purple, brilliant blue, refreshing green, glowing yellow, warm red and many others.

The colours represented threads of learning combining together to form this precious mat of knowledge.

The child spread his magnificent mat out and sat on it to play and listen to stories.

When he was tired he slept on it. When unsure he wrapped himself in it and tucked his fingers between the woven threads and was comforted by its strength and beauty.

One day a visitor came and thought about the child and his precious mat.

He saw the colours and admired their individual beauty, impressed he decided that it would be interesting to isolate, measure and count the threads of each colour.

He slowly tugged and pulled the golden threads out one by one.

They lay in a wrinkled heap.

He looked back at the mat and began to ease out each green thread and soon they too lay isolated and separate.

He was impressed by the size of each pile.

The child watched him and then looked down at his precious mat.

The richness of the gold and the crispness of the green had vanished.

His mat was no longer complete. The gaps lay dark and awkward.

He picked up the spoilt mat.

When he was tired he lay on his mat but felt the cold ground through the gaps. When he dragged it the holes caught on objects and the mat was pulled out of shape. When he wrapped himself in it it wasn't the same, his comfort was compromised.

The threads had been separated into piles of knowledge and now as they lay isolated and alone they had lost their purpose to contribute to and strengthen the child's mat of learning.

The strength and beauty of the child's learning lay in the complexity of the threads woven together. When the threads are isolated they lose the potential to contribute to the complexity of the mat of learning.

When considering unravelling children's learning or keeping areas of learning separate, remember the option of keeping it complex!

Robyn Lawrence (Adelaide, September 2002)

Figure 1. The Parable of the Golden Thread

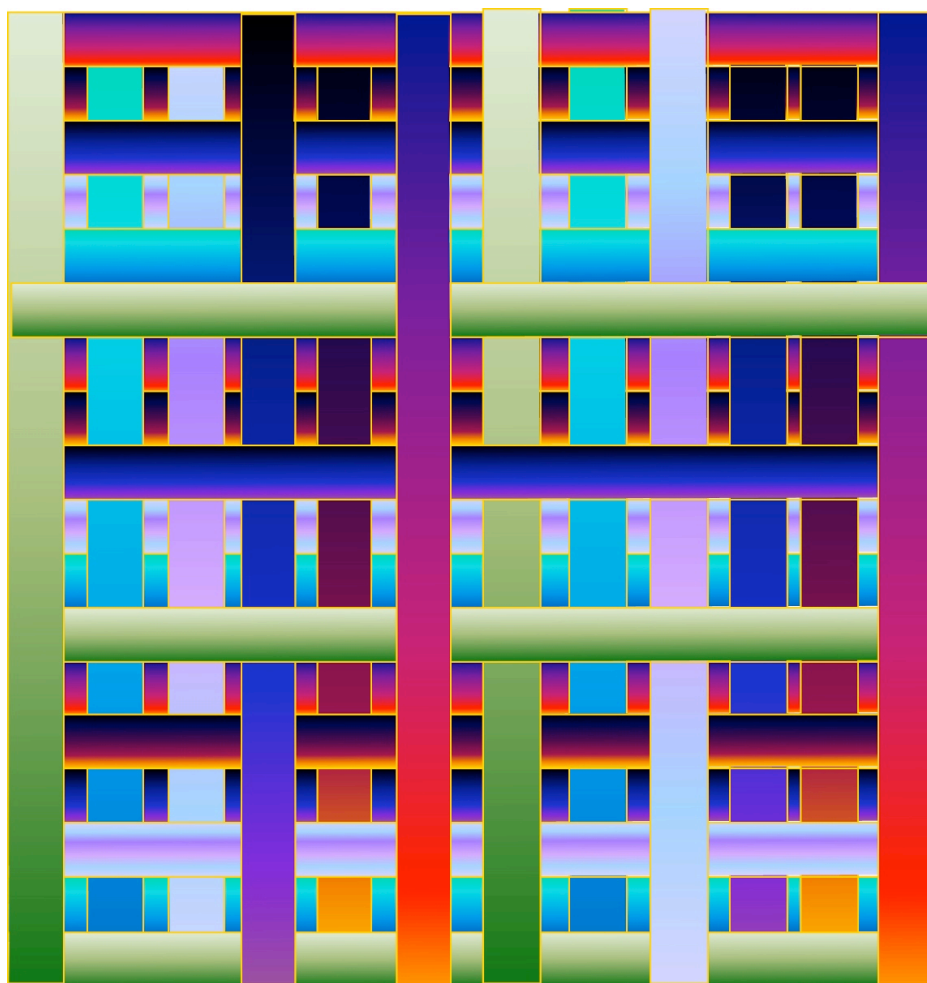


Figure 2. The Golden Thread Mat

It was this 'parable' that became a turning point in our thinking about learning (and teaching). Looking at our children's learning stories, adding to these with our teachers' conferences and the 'out and about' photos, enabled us to follow the complex golden threads of learning that flowed from children's homes and communities lives into CBK and back out again from CBK to the children's homes and the wider communities. Our golden threads worked to reorganise children's time and space at CBK and the connections and events in their family lives and community (see Duncan & Eaton (2013) for further discussion of 'The Parable of the Golden Thread').

What follows is a narrative of one case study child from our research, reproduced from the record generated at the teachers' conference.³ This is one example generated from the methods of teacher conferencing, 'out and about' photos, and the use of the parable, to guide our discussions and reflections in the creation of the narrative. This example demonstrates the complexity and connections of children, family, community, teachers and the spaces and places in their lives, which we traced and followed over the two years of our research. Howard's⁴ example shares the desires and pleasures of parent involvement where it complements and supports the early childhood setting, bringing parental and community involvement as an event into the early

childhood spaces. While a narrative can be read from multiple perspectives, we present Howard's story with its golden threads 'to understand how active adult participation in early childhood education enhances child learning outcomes' described through time and place, from his beginnings at CBK through to his leaving for school.

Howard's Golden Thread

Howard's golden threads of learning

Bringing his confidence with him enabled Howard to become involved and to participate fully throughout his time at CBK. He was an explorer, a thinker and a contributor. Howard's growth in perseverance saw him progress from being a constant mover to seeing projects through to completion. He developed leadership qualities transferring his learning from home to centre and sharing this with his peers.

Tracking the Golden Threads for Howard

Howard and his family joined CBK by attending Crèche⁵ and participating in CBK for three years before moving to school at age five. Howard is the eldest of three children and the family all live in a rural area 25 kilometres from town. Howard's family was observed as being confident and involved with his early childhood education right from the beginning.

At Crèche, Howard was seen as a caring, friendly and a social boy. He developed good relationships with both adults and children and in particular enjoyed a special friendship with another boy also with a farming background – although experiencing ups and downs they generally played well together showing some lovely dialogue. He participated in all areas of the curriculum with a special interest in books – asking for these to be read to him. Howard was active, adventurous and enthusiastic – into everything and didn't do things by halves. He was inquisitive, asking lots of questions.

Howard's inquisitive nature continued at Kindy House, the centre for four year-olds. He enjoyed group mat times, a place where he confidently communicated his questions and voiced his knowledge, theories and answers, which contributed to the group's wider learning. Howard was able to think of strategies to help him master physical tasks; for example, getting his teacher to say, 'Batter, are you ready?' immediately before pitching the ball to him. This along with increased co-ordination, concentration and a growing level of perseverance has enabled him to hit a ball with accuracy.

Howard continued to willingly and confidently share a vast general knowledge and experiences that linked his learning between home and centre with his peers at Kindy House. Such opportunities were often supported by parental involvement at the centre, photographs and conversations at home about current interests. Howard showed growing leadership whilst transferring new learning, gained from Dad at home, by sharing the same experience with his peers; giving accurate instructions enabling his friends to complete a similar project and teaching them how it operates.

Howard's parents

Like Howard, his Mum and Dad were seen as being very confident in their parenting roles right from the beginning of their time at CBK. They were a very involved family and actively participated in Howard's learning, often sharing and making links between Howard's interests at Kindy House and home. Mum's parenting confidence, in particular, enabled her to actively participate fluidly between home and centre. At pick up times, Mum would encourage Howard to reflect and discuss his day and with continuing family discussions providing additional information, photographs and/or artefacts, Howard would be encouraged to feed this back to his teachers and other children – strategies that helped to increase Howard's learning and that of the wider group of children. Mum would also readily share her employment interests and associated artefacts with the children, making valuable contributions to the teaching focus in our centres and was available to support CBK operations. The family showed a commitment to attending all centre events as a family and supported this with preparation such as conversations around the topic/event and spending time during the weekend to prepare costumes and so on.

Howard's Mum shared her observations with Judith, and when asked what had made a difference for Howard and what were the benefits of ECE for Howard and their family, she explained:

I've spent a lot of time at home with him reading books and, yeah, I spent a lot of time with him at home, but the kindy and stuff complemented that I feel ... They helped him physically, and mentally, just grow into a more confident – I mean I look at him now, he's settled really well into school, he's a good all round kid. He does quite well academically, like as I said I've spent a lot of time with him reading him books and working on writing and all those kinds of things and he's come into his own ... I watched him blossom over his time at the centre.

In these narratives of Howard and his mother, the golden thread can be seen to move to and from CBK to home, community, and back to CBK. The involvement of Howard's family in CBK flowed from their involvement in his life and learning at home which, when shared at CBK, not only enriched Howard's learning but other children's learning at the centre as well. Howard's family benefitted from being involved with Howard 'blossoming' at the centre, engaging in new friendships that they made through and at CBK, and spending time with him both at home and in the centre. The teachers were able to – together using the idea of the 'what is the golden thread for this child and his family?' – see the learning progressions over time, from when Howard began as a two year-old till he transitioned to school. While we often asked 'what was the golden thread?', it was often the plural of thread – golden threads – that provided the greatest insight into a child's learning. Howard's narrative reveals complex threads of learning firmly tied to his family, his community and his life both inside and outside of CBK. Connections for children between home, community and CBK were evident in all our investigations with our 18 case study children. Where these home connections were built on by the teachers the children's learning at the centre became easily observed.⁶ This is a finding consistent with other New Zealand research examining the trajectory of children's learning dispositions (see Carr et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

Teachers' collective thinking, discussing and debating in regards to children's learning assessment narratives in this research project provided new mechanisms to track learning over time, to identify affordances of learning for the children with their family and whānau (Carr, et al., 2010) and to position pedagogy within the wider community (Duncan, Eaton & Te One, 2012). At the beginning of this project, centre-based, teacher-only, child-centred reflection on children's learning documentation was the norm. Wider participation over the two years resulted in substantial changes in understanding children and their contexts and learning. Rethinking children's learning outcomes in relation to adult/parent participation necessitated a move away from the more familiar *learning stories* that the teachers had been comfortably using for many years.

Will this rethinking of how we understand learning address the concerns that our governments hold over the impact that early childhood education makes to children's lives? We argue that this community-based family-inclusive approach to capturing and making sense of children's learning will not only show the difference that we make in early childhood education to children's lives but to wider social experiences and community wellness.

END NOTES

¹ We thank and acknowledge Robyn Lawrence (robyn.lawrence@elp.co.nz) who created 'The Parable of the Golden Thread' and agreed to share it with us, and to Professor Margaret Carr, University of Waikato, who linked us with Robyn Lawrence.

² This project was funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, 2010-2012. For further information and a summary of the whole project see: Duncan, J., Te One, S., Dewe, R., Te Punga-Jurgens, J., Shaw, L., Eaton, S., Thomas, M., & Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergartens and Early Learning Centres Teaching and Parent Facilitator Teams. (2013). *Active adult participation in early childhood education: Enhancing child learning and community wellness*. Wellington, NZ: Teaching and Research Learning Initiative. Available at: <http://www.tlri.org.nz/tlri-research/research-progress/ece-sector/active-adult-participation-ece-enhancing-learning-and>

³ Parts of this paper have been verbally presented at the at the *Early Childhood Council Annual Conference*, Auckland, May, 2012, New Zealand and the *Canadian Association for Young Children Conference*, New Westminster, Vancouver, October 2012, Canada.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for all the children and families names.

⁵ The CBK, at the time of the research, was organised into four centres: KIDZ @ 303 (located beside the Parenting Resource Centre); two to three year-old centre – Crèche; three to four year-old centre – Kindy; and, four to five year-old centre – Kindy House. The children transitioned through to each centre as they passed their birthday and space was available in the next centre.

⁶ Hear the teachers describe this in their own words at Early Childhood Education Learning Outcomes:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe_B0BS7LBU

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

JUDITH DUNCAN

University of Canterbury College of Education



Judith's research and teaching interests include early childhood education, children's voices, gender and education, and education policy and practice. She has been involved in research that examines early childhood from multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives, placing central to each research project the perspectives of children and their families.

Email: judith.duncan@canterbury.ac.nz

SANDRA EATON

Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres



Sandra is a teacher at the CBK. She has mainly taught four to five year-olds, whose curiosity to learn about their world (and beyond) always amazes her. She finds it extremely rewarding to be a part of the partnership formed with families to support and extend their children's ongoing learning.

Email: timsandelly@xtra.co.nz

SARAH TE ONE

Victoria University of Wellington



Sarah Te One has had over 25 years of experience in early education as a teacher, researcher, unionist, and as a parent. She is a senior lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington where she is currently teaching childhood sociology, children's rights and researching parent support and development in early childhood services.

Email: Sarah.TeOne@vuw.ac.nz