Book Review: Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories
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What is This?
such as specific language impairment and dyspraxia. Perhaps by looking at ‘learning disability’ in general terms rather than the more severe end of the spectrum, the editors feel such cases may be included. One of the editors, Abudarham, defines his terms and clarifies his intention is to focus on the communication needs of people with a learning disability rather than learning difficulty. This is halfway through the second chapter, however. Unwittingly, this book could add to confusion in the undergraduate’s mind and it would seem a useful addition to the preface to define the terms used and be more explicit regarding the client group in question. A glossary of the many confusing terms would be an extremely useful addition to the student.

A text book regarding learning disability for speech and language therapists by speech and language therapists was long overdue and I will certainly be ordering copies for our university library.

 Reviewed by Fiona Kevan, Human Communication & Deafness, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

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Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories
M. Carr

This thoughtful book challenges the standard assessment process that is commonly employed within the context of early years provision. It suggests that only by looking at the learning schema of children can meaningful assessment that will be functionally appropriate be undertaken. The author challenges professionals to consider the most sensitive way to track the acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding in a way that is useful for practitioners, interesting for families, and supportive for the individual child. At a time where Government emphasis is firmly focussed on mechanistic outcome measures, this book provides a very positive reminder of the way in which individual children approach learning and suggests positive ways this information can be used to inform the assessment process. In addition to a wealth of research evidence Carr provides an opportunity for the voices of practitioners, parents, and children to be heard.

The model of learning stories put forward combines approaches from psychology, sociology, and education, producing a powerful and coherent argument for centering attention on the processes involved in achieving a
specific outcome rather than simply the outcome itself. Initially the importance of placing our understanding of a learner within a learning context is strongly emphasised. Carr explores the concept of ‘transformation of participations’ considering the central features of participation: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, communicating with others, and taking responsibility within the learning process. Following description and discussion of the five learning domains in respect of the research base and the model proposed, five chapters provide eloquent exploration and discussion of these concepts through the use of narrative examples. The examples are drawn from a wide range of settings, from the formality of attainment targets for education in the UK to the community-based setting of Reggio Emilio in Northern Italy and day care centres in New Zealand, including a total immersion Maori language early childhood centre. The children’s stories are important reminders of the complex and detailed learning processes in the daily routines of children and of the very diverse and specific settings in which children learn. This information is brought together in a chapter on ‘Learning Stories’ where the learning domains are used to inform the development of an assessment process—the learning story. It challenges the practice of assessment that sits outside the everyday experience of busy children and seeks rather to use the natural situations that arise. Theoretical and practical examples are used to develop this theme.

The second section of the book draws on the experience of practitioners in five early childhood settings, specifically exploring their approach to assessment within the framework of the Learning Story approach. Such a radical change in emphasis within the assessment process is not without challenge for experienced practitioners. The approaches taken to meet this challenge are discussed in four chapters: describing, discussing, documenting, and deciding. These processes are illustrated through a range of imaginative and exciting approaches that seek to ensure all the key participants in the learning process are able to express their perspectives. A strong emphasis is laid on what children can do and the strategies employed in approaching, attempting, carrying out and completing a task. Thus, practitioners, parents and the children themselves all participate in the process of assessment. Examples of effective practice are used to illustrate the creative approaches undertaken by practitioners to demonstrate the learning story principle in practice.

The final chapter provides an excellent summary and review of the book. There is a comprehensive list of references. At a time when the focus for therapists has moved away from individual work to working with small groups, this book provides an excellent reminder to all professionals of the individuality of children, the importance of the process of learning and the
complex interplay of factors that impinge on that process. At present there is a strong emphasis on early screening and early intervention to enhance later outcomes, typically at school entry. This book is both fascinating and thought provoking. It provides an important contribution to current thinking and to practice, both education and therapy in an early childhood setting. It offers a child-centered approach that seeks to enhance the child’s contributions and to capitalise on the whole learning process, rather than a simple assessment point, inventory, or checklist. It lays particular emphasis on the importance of the group dynamic within the learning process. For any practitioners working in early years settings this is a powerful and exciting book that helps to remind us that the child must be placed centrally within the assessment process, not as a recipient but as a proactive contributor to the situation.

Reviewed by Wendy McCracken, Human Communication and Deafness, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

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