
Planning Stories

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I recently came across some old notes I had made for a workshop on programme planning that I was asked to facilitate for a group of kindergarten teachers in 1990, pre-*Te Whāriki*. Some of the messages and practices that I was proposing then seem so foreign to my thinking now it is hard to believe that I wrote them. For example, as a rationale for 'long-term goals' I suggested that these 'give a picture of what we (teachers) want children to learn while they are at the centre' and that these 'would normally be set down at the beginning of the teachers' working relationship or at the beginning of the year.' Under a heading 'short term planning' I recommended using a grid format that included 'objectives, method, materials, vocabulary and evaluation' and suggested that teachers could 'develop an index system of activities across the full range of curriculum areas using this format' to make planning more manageable. Despite my best intentions at the time, I now see that I was advocating a model of planning which was teacher controlled, that portrayed children and their families as passive recipients and which was largely unproblematic - if only teachers could adhere to the linear process I was suggesting.

My exposure to socio-cultural theory and to *Te Whāriki* in the intervening years leaves me astonished at how naive and simplistic my assumptions were back then. On reflection, my own attempts at this type of planning when I was a kindergarten teacher had never been very successful. (Yes, you may well ask why I taught a model that had failed for me. The answer is that I never thought to question what had been so much part of my own schooling and later my teacher education qualification.) Apart from the obvious need to plan activities like excursions in advance, there seemed little point to forward planning when so frequently the plan was overtaken by the events of the day. Furthermore, children rarely demonstrated increased skills 'by the end of the activity' or 'by the end of the fortnight' as many of the planning frameworks suggested they should. I therefore felt that the effort and energy expended in programme planning far outweighed the visible difference it made to the quality of teaching and learning. With this realisation, my motivation soon waned and planning became a mechanical task that I felt obliged to do but which was hard to make a priority.

I have a hunch that I was not - am still not - alone in my experience. Meaningful and useful models of programme planning have remained largely elusive to early childhood teachers. Perhaps this is because, as in my early 90s example, they have so often been derivative of traditional school planning models and inappropriate for the experiences we value and the life-stage of children in early childhood education.

Looking back at past practices is a useful stimulus for thinking about the influences that have led to the very different view of programme planning I hold today, one which has its origins in early childhood, not school, pedagogy, and is still evolving. When Vygotsky and

socio-cultural theory entered our consciousness as a profession, facilitated by the publishing of *Te Whāriki*, what was considered important in programme planning began to change, at least in theory. The emphasis on designing and listing unconnected activities for various curriculum areas – an approach consistent with a Piagetian view of the teacher as resource provider and one which I call the ‘cheap thrills’ model of planning, as it largely focuses on keeping children entertained – has given way to a greater emphasis on planning for teaching and learning itself. This shift was formally acknowledged in the Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) 3 and 5 (Ministry of Education 1996). DOPs 3 for example states that

Educators should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the learning and development of each child, identify learning goals for individual children, and use this information as a basis for planning, evaluating and improving curriculum programmes.

However, in the 1990s when DOPs and the supporting document *Quality in Action: Te Mahi Whai Hua* (1998) were published, the influence of business principles and models on all aspects of education was substantial. Early childhood education did not escape the pressure to conceptualise planning as a matter of establishing some predetermined learning goals for individual children (albeit based on teachers’ knowledge gleaned from systematic observation). While the emphasis might have shifted from activities to learning goals with DOPS, the old assumptions of the pre-*Te Whāriki* days have largely remained intact. In *Quality in Action: Te Mahi Whai Hua* (1998, p.30), the planning cycle which is illustrated still works on the assumption that planning is the prerogative of teachers and that setting predetermined learning goals *on behalf of* children is unproblematic, both of which I wish to challenge.

It is now six years since the implementation of the current DOPs document and in that time both a heightened interest in the image of the child, stimulated by Reggio Emilia and a more mature understanding of socio-cultural theory within the sector, have opened up new directions for practice and changed perceptions about children’s competence. For example, it is more widely accepted now that children’s learning and progress is ‘messy’ rather than linear due to the overarching influence of the contextual ‘people, places and things’.

I think it is time we asked questions such as: “How well does the model of planning outlined in DOPs represent the four Principles of Te Whāriki?” and “What assumptions about children’s competence are implied by this planning cycle?” It is also time we looked to a planning model that is born out of our curriculum rather than derived from other times and contexts.

‘We plan from children’s interests’?

Much of my current thinking around programme planning has been precipitated by my work with teachers in assessment, in particular Learning Stories. In DOPs, assessment is treated rather differently from planning insofar as it is firmly anchored to the four Principles of

Te Whāriki (DOPs 4). Just as these principles provided a useful foundation and direction for Margaret Carr (1998) to develop her framework of Learning Stories, so too they open the way for some refocussing within planning and the documentation of this.

Consider a planning framework that is founded on: the holistic way children learn; responsive and reciprocal relationships; parents/whanau involvement; and children's sense of themselves as capable and competent. It would surely be a framework in which children and parents/whanau had considerably more opportunity to contribute to the actual process of planning than occurs in most current practice, or indeed is suggested by DOPs and *Quality in Action Te Mahi Whai Hua*. Furthermore, the attention to responsiveness would require that planning was viewed as continual 'work in progress' rather than 'a list of detailed expectations [or learning outcomes] in advance' (Fleet and Patterson 1998: 35).

I often hear teachers say "Here we plan from children's interests" (my italics), the assumption being that it is still up to the teachers to decide what experiences will be offered. With the principles of *Te Whāriki* as the foundation, a more appropriate claim would surely be "Here we are part of a community of planners" (made up of children, parents/whanau and teachers). In practice this would mean genuinely seeking out children's ideas on what they would like to happen next, preferably through informal conversations rather than at group times, and recording these as part of the plan.

Documenting group planning as narrative

One of the difficulties with sharing the kind of responsibility I am suggesting stems from the way programme planning for groups of children is traditionally documented through tables, grids and webs. With the best will in the world – and many teachers put hours of creativity into making them eye-catching – these tend to trivialise the complexity of what happens within the programme, and often make for rather confusing and dull reading for someone who has not been part of the planning process. Again, Learning Stories provide a helpful lead here. They have demonstrated the power of narrative to make written assessments very accessible to a variety of audiences, including the children themselves. Writers such as Kieran Egan (1999, p.16) suggest that this accessibility can be partly attributed to the universal appeal of the story form and also to the capacity of stories 'for catching and fixing meaning'. He goes as far as to say that there is not a single culture on the planet that does not value and engage in story telling. Bronwen Cowie and Margaret Carr (2004, p.98) suggest that the advantages of such accessibility are that it 'enables children and families to suggest developments and alternatives, to bring ideas and knowledge from home, and to clarify teachers' interpretations' – features which are all indicative of socio-cultural theory working in practice. In the same way, conceptualising planning as a narrative makes it more accessible and therefore opens the door to similar kinds of power-sharing and responsiveness.

So, what might a documented 'Planning Story' look like? In order to be read by children and families, it needs to make use of both written and visual literacy, and it needs to contextualise the focus of the investigation or interest for the reader. Writing under headings like 'where this all began' facilitates the latter while using familiar story telling techniques such as titles ('The Time We Investigated ...'), headings and sequencing, all help embed the story form in the documentation. A planning story would need to be recorded over time, as new 'chapters' or directions emerge out of the experiences, conversations and reflections of children, parents/whanau and teachers. We know that stories offer enormous possibilities for revisiting and making new sense of past events (Rinaldi, 2001). For this reason, it is useful to think of planning stories as potential literacy artefacts that can be kept in a form that continues to be accessible long after the focus has passed.

Traditional planning frameworks have been strong on deciding and documenting intention but weak on recording the evidence of what actually happened or changed as a result. Consequently, the whole point to planning is often never achieved in a way that rewards teachers, let alone children and parents/whanau for their efforts. The observer or reader is left wondering, "so what?"

Using photos is one way to indicate evidence that all the work put into planning has made a difference and it has many advantages. In particular, photos can be easily 'read' by the children. However photos alone, unaccompanied by annotation, provide only surface-level evidence. They do not tell us how children's – or teachers' and parents'/whanau – thinking, knowledge and participation have changed as a result of planning. For this to become visible, we need to document the essence of informal conversations with children in which their 'new' knowledge, skills and dispositions are revealed. We also need to capture moments where children demonstrate these same changes through their play. As a seasoned reader of planning documentation in early childhood centres, I rarely see evidence like this of the difference planning has made.

A recent example I recall was a Learning Story of a child showing his interest and detailed knowledge of how to lay down a Hangi in the sandpit two weeks after participating in a real Hangi with his centre. The Learning Story was incorporated into the documentation as evidence of the difference the planning had made. Planning stories are strengthened when they also contain reflections on the adults' learning and involvement. Included in the Hangi planning story were 'parent voices', detailing the learning that had occurred for them through this experience. As a seasoned reader of planning documentation in early childhood centres, I rarely see evidence like this of the difference planning has made.

The reason for documenting planning is to demonstrate to a variety of audiences, in a robust and transparent manner, that we take teaching and learning seriously and as a result make a difference to the lives of children and their families. While using a storied approach helps leave behind some of the outdated assumptions of past programme planning models in favour of an approach that honours the spirit of *Te Whāriki*, it does not in itself guarantee that the requirements of external accountability will be met without some special attention to these.

A good planning story will not only make the processes of planning, learning and teaching visible in the ways I have outlined in the previous paragraph but will also ensure that the DOPs requirement to evaluate is met. Once again, the DOPS step-by-step planning cycle presents an overly simplistic view of the relationship between planning and evaluation when it illustrates the latter neatly following the former. If programme planning is to be truly reciprocal and responsive then evaluation must sit inside planning (and be documented as such), not as an add-on at the end. Part of the narrative will therefore include reflective comments, made along the way, as the story unfolds. To ensure comments retain a strong evaluative component, headings such as: ‘what we are learning about “wise teaching” is...’ and ‘how this investigation is contributing to learning ...’ might be useful. Once again, to work within the principles of *Te Whāriki*, the vision will be for a collaborative approach to evaluation rather than one in which only the teachers contribute.

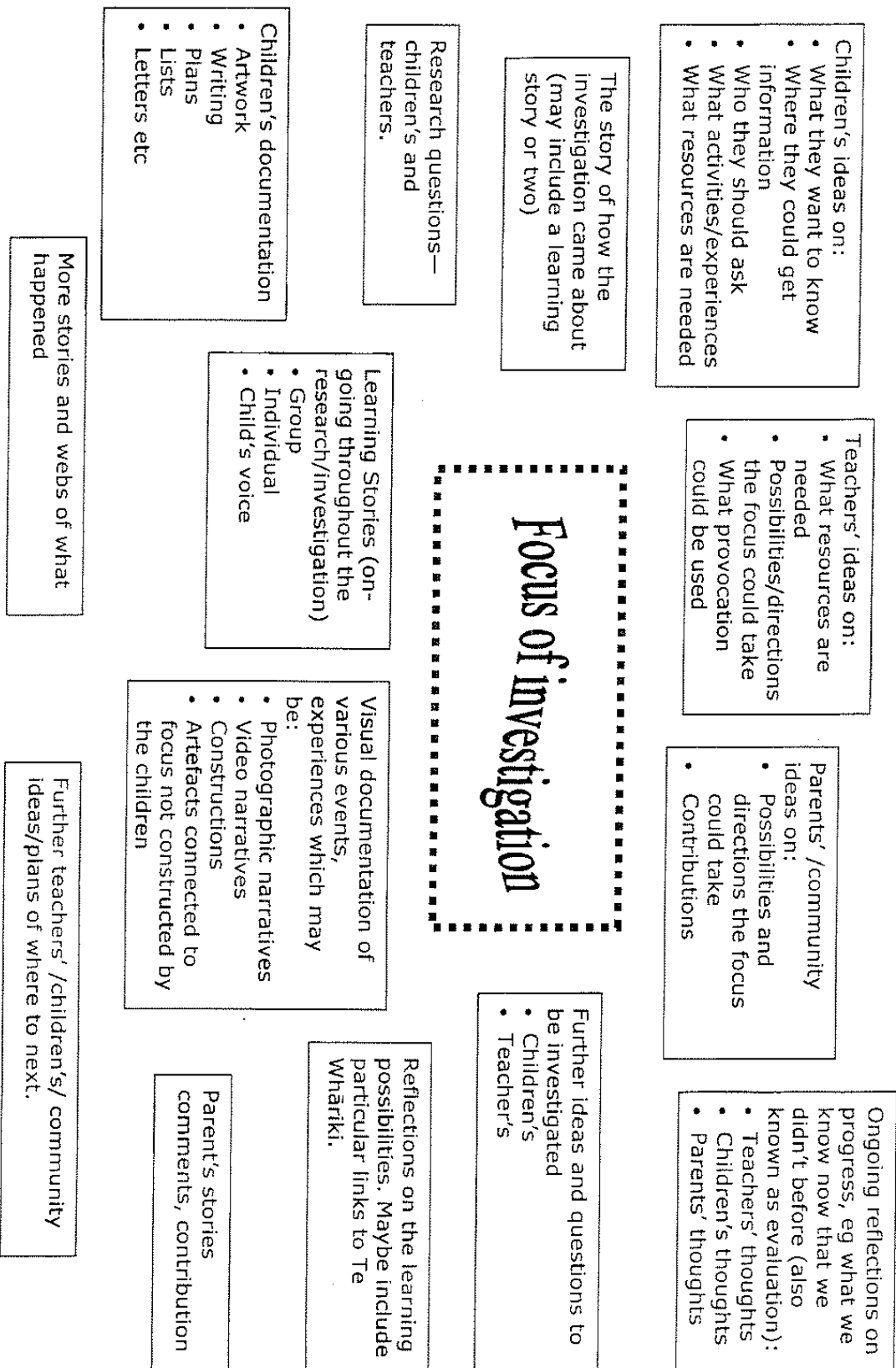
Some final thoughts

I would like to end this article with another personal story of how my thinking about programme planning has been influenced. In 2000, I was fortunate to visit an early childhood centre at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. When the conversation came around to programme planning, the supervisor told me that after several attempts at finding a meaningful and workable system, the staff had decided to abandon all planning and see what happened, a move that took some courage. Interestingly, what I saw at that centre (six months after this decision was made) was the most meaningful and authentic ‘planning’, both in practice and documentation, that I had ever encountered up to that point. The documentation on walls and in books told absorbing stories - through written and visual means - of children deeply engaged with ‘people, places and things’.

As an outsider, I very quickly saw evidence of children’s thinking changing and expanding, and of children having time to practise and hone their skills. This was a culture in which encouraging complexity of thought – in children and adults alike – was certainly cherished over one-off novelty activities and learning goals, and where children’s ideas seemed to have equal status and respect as those of adults. Around the walls there was evidence of teachers problematising taken-for-granted assumptions about children’s learning, and critiquing aspects of their own practice publicly. There was also valuable input from parents, suggesting and even on occasions questioning some centre practices. It was obvious that this had all been heard and responded to by the teachers. What was particularly interesting here was that the supervisor – and presumably the other staff – did not view what I saw as ‘real planning’. However, applying the notion I suggested earlier in this article, that planning is about working with intentions and evidence, clearly this was planning at its best.

Since my experience in Brisbane, I have wondered about the continued and largely unchallenged emphasis we place on traditional frameworks of programme planning in early childhood education in New Zealand, frameworks that still contain many of the assumptions of my early 90s model. When I have asked groups of staff in centres how they feel the quality of the centre would change if they were to abandon their formal planning, the response is often “Hardly at all”, or “It might improve”! This seems deeply unfortunate when so much staff time and energy is often spent on planning meetings.

The Possible Elements of a Planning Story



Part of the problem is that with the advent of *Te Whāriki* we have outgrown the term 'planning' in the strict sense of the word - 'a scheme drawn up beforehand', as defined by my Chambers Dictionary. While we wait to find a more appropriate word or phrase let us continue to ask ourselves "Is planning as we have known it really making a positive difference to teaching and learning or is it hampering our ability to fully realise the principles of *Te Whāriki*?"

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