

Writing Love Letters to Teachers as Experts of Their Practice

by Christie Angleton, Kathryn F. Whitmore and Pamela Jett

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Christie Angleton is an assistant professor of early childhood education in the school of teaching and learning at Illinois State University. She studies critical literacy with preschool children and preservice teachers, and situates her teacher education courses in the Reggio Emilia philosophy.



Kathryn F. Whitmore is department chair and professor of special education, early childhood education, and culturally and linguistically diverse education at Metropolitan State University of Denver. She uses qualitative and arts-based research methods to study early literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy in pre-K and primary classrooms.



Pamela Jett is a retired professor who specialized in elementary teacher education preparation, science methods education, and teacher action research methods.

On a cold morning in late February, Christie Angleton arrived in Debora Stephenson's toddler classroom for a scheduled observation. There was a productive hum in the air as children chose invitations and play spaces around the room. As Christie greeted children and took field notes, she and Debora chatted about the morning and recent happenings in the classroom. After a moment, Christie noticed a small plastic terrarium with a frog inside.

"Oh my goodness! What is this?" she asked.

"Oh, is he out?" Debora exclaimed. "We hardly see him!" She quickly scooped up the terrarium, set it gently on the floor, and invited her toddlers to the carpet. With exclamations of delight, small bodies smushed together around Debora and the frog, the first moments of a group discussion that would last nearly an hour.

Another day, Pamela Jett visited the 3-year-old classroom down the hall from Debora's, where Lonnie Warfield and her preschoolers were finishing breakfast. A small group of girls, lately

very interested in fashion and makeup, invited Lonnie to play dress up. As she helped create magnet earrings and put rollers in Chanel's hair, several girls surrounded Lonnie's chair. Extending paint brushes with pretend make-up powder cases in their hands, they gently began stroking Lonnie's face quietly exclaiming, "Beautiful!"

Carr and Lee (2012) developed Learning Stories as a way of understanding and celebrating learner identities in young children. These narratives are stories about children "based on [teachers'] observations that reveal new insights into children's perspectives" (Curtis & Carter, 2013). Curtis and Carter note that many teachers "write them directly to the child, which some people have characterized as akin to a love letter. This brings [the educator's voice] into the story powerfully, always conveying a sense of how competent children are."

One group of early childhood centers that writes Learning Stories to children can be found at the Excellence Academy of Louisville, Kentucky. The EA, as it is often called, provides professional development about the

Reggio Emilia philosophy through reflective practice, classroom coaching and monthly seminars for infant, toddler and preschool teachers. EA teachers learn to use Learning Stories as part of pedagogical documentation (Stacey, 2015) to record, narrate and celebrate the ever-developing identities of young learners.

EA professional development occurs within a national context that emphasizes standardized definitions and measures of “quality,” including kindergarten readiness, licensing and accreditation, and classroom environment and interaction evaluation scores. While early childhood centers must participate in these practices to comply with regulations, we recognize they also homogenize teachers and their classrooms, reducing them to experts of the measures, rather than experts of early education. As a result, teachers can feel stripped of their expertise and prevented from cultivating classroom spaces and practices that are responsive to children. We offer Teacher Learning Stories as an antidote to these necessary but narrow practices, as one method of validating and recognizing teachers as individuals with personalities, strengths, identities and growing knowledge.

We watched closely as teachers in the EA wrote Learning Stories to reflect upon and celebrate children’s identities. They wrote *to* children, rather than *about* them; they wrote to highlight their strengths, interests and competencies as learners. We adapted Learning Stories practices to accomplish the same with EA teachers. In this article, we share our composing process, offer two examples (one from a toddler and one from a preschool classroom,) and emphasize the merits of Teacher Learning Stories for supporting early childhood teachers’ professional development.

Our Composing Process

Christie Angleton developed our Teacher Learning Stories process. It includes selecting an observation, writing a Teacher Learning Story and illustrating it with photographs, sharing it with the teacher in conversation, and finalizing it to include the teacher’s response. The final Teacher Learning Story includes three sections (illustrated in Figures 1 and 2).

The first section is a love letter written directly to the teacher. We think of Teacher Learning Stories as letters that come from a place of love and celebration, rather than evaluation or judgment (Carter & Curtis, 2013). The second section (“what this tells me”) contains our interpretation of the story told in the letter, and emphasizes what the story teaches us about the teacher and her practices. We read aloud these sections of the Teacher Learning Story to each teacher and invite a response, either verbally or in writing, and then craft the response into the third section, called “your voice.” Finally, we title the Teacher Learning Story with a word or phrase that captures the essence of the story.

In our work with EA, we read the Teacher Learning Stories aloud when we shared them with each teacher, which afforded intimacy and collective storytelling. Teachers often interjected new insights as they listened, reminiscing about a classroom event or describing particular children, for example. To conclude, we read a prompt about the Teacher Learning Story to extend the conversation, and the teacher spoke back directly to the prompt or anything else. These conversations were often punctuated by clarifying questions and frequently led to more tangential stories.

Next, we transcribed the entire conversation about the Teacher

Learning Story, indicating in bold the portions that were most relevant to the questions or prompts. We wove together the bold pieces to arrive at the words we included in the final version. We asked each teacher for her approval of how we represented her words before we considered a Teacher Learning Story complete. Finally, we printed the Teacher Learning Story and gifted it to the teacher. Sharing Teacher Learning Stories created opportunities for teachers’ reflections on their everyday work with children, and became a co-constructed space that supported professional development.

Next, we share examples of Teacher Learning Stories written about the observations that open this article. Debora Stephenson, a toddler teacher (Figure 1) and Lonnie Warfield, a preschool teacher (Figure 2) each have more than 20 years of teaching experience. The Teacher Learning Stories we wrote to them demonstrate this practice as an opportunity for teacher reflection and co-construction of knowledge between professional educators (Rinaldi, 2006).

“They Got Rights, Too”

Debora engaged her toddlers in conversation as they gathered to inquire about the frog. She pointed out its features and asked children for their theories about its behaviors. Christie composed the following Teacher Learning Story to illustrate for Debora how children deeply engaged with one another when she exhibited genuine curiosity about their knowledge and understanding of the subject at hand.

Although Debora thoughtfully planned invitations for her toddlers to play, create, and explore each day, she was acutely attuned to impromptu small moments that led to meaningful engagement. When Debora invited

Figure 1

A Teacher Learning Story to Toddler Teacher Debora Stephenson

EVEN THE YOUNGEST LEARNERS

Dear Debora,

When I think back to memorable moments from my time in your classroom – and there are a lot of them! – I always think first of the “frog story.” When I arrived that morning, an impromptu meeting was taking place, and it was calling you out of your classroom. We passed in the doorway, and I settled in to observe the children. After a few moments, you returned, saying that it was more important for you to be with the children than in a meeting. As we chatted, I noticed a small plastic terrarium on the shelf that hadn’t been there the last time I’d visited. Your face lit up and you told me how the frog was climbing up the front door one morning when you arrived at work. I laughed as you described Doris plucking the frog from the door and bringing him to his new home in your classroom. As you finished the story, you gently lifted the terrarium from the shelf and brought it to an open space on the classroom floor. The children rushed from all parts of the room, wiggling and shuffling their way into a circle around the tank. I watched from nearby and imagined the sun, the terrarium at the center and you and the children folding out like sunbeams, bright with questions and excitement. You told me that usually the frog was tucked under a rock, so it was a special thing that he was now clearly visible for all the children to see.



As the children settled around you, you passed out magnifying glasses and asked them questions. “Can you see his eyes? If we took off the top, do you think he could hop out? Is he woke or is he asleep? Tell me what you see.” Then you listened patiently to their answers with genuine interest.

What this tells me:

You often tell me that people underestimate toddlers because they are so young. In both your words and actions, I see how you do the opposite – you give children the space and time to show you their competencies. Every time I’m in your classroom, I see immediately how you value even the youngest children as capable and competent learners. You understand that all children have something to offer and you create spaces where they can demonstrate what they know – and continue to grow.

Your voice:

What do you remember about the frog story? What does it tell you about yourself as a teacher?

“Everybody had so many questions, and they all seemed so observant of the frog. Everybody had a different something they was looking at when they was looking at the frog. If the top would of came off, they all probably would have scattered (laughs)... People don’t realize that they are competent. They think just ‘cause they little people, that they don’t understand, comprehend. They may not comprehend the way we want them to, but they comprehend in they own way. Just think about it. I think if everybody take they time and look through they lens, they will see it. Some takes a little more patience than others... I think if people can understand that, they have a better understanding of the little people. ‘Cause they got rights, too.”

children into conversation about the frog, she asked genuine questions, encouraged them to be gentle and brave, and supported their needs to come and go from the group. Capturing this moment illustrated how Debora’s careful attention to the needs and interests of children informed her professional decisions. Here, Debora demonstrated that her work with children is underpinned by her belief that even young children are competent and have distinct rights. As she stated in the Teacher Learning Story conversation, “I think if everybody takes the time and look through [the children’s] lens, they will see it... [and] have a better

understanding of the little people. ‘Cause they got rights, too.”

“Come Play With Us”

Lonnie noticed children talking about makeup and hair styling and using magnetic game pieces to create earrings. In response, she added hair rollers to the dramatic play area and brought paint brushes for children to sweep imaginary color on their eyelids and cheeks. When the children talked about watching their mothers put on makeup at home, Lonnie listened and asked about what they knew. Soon, makeup play was a regular part of play in the classroom. “It all started,”

Lonnie recalled with a laugh, “because they were petting their faces with little erasers!” Figure 2 is a Teacher Learning story written by Pamela that describes what happened when the children invited Lonnie to “come play with us.”

Lonnie valued children’s experiences from home and paid careful attention to what ignited their curiosities. She noted that the children loved to do what their parents do, and that everyday occurrences at home inspired pretend play at preschool. Lonnie noted that often, children adapted invitations to “make them their own.” She co-created learning experiences

with the children in productive cycles of observations and invitations.

Writing Learning Stories to Teachers

We wrote Teacher Learning Stories to Debora and Lonnie to intentionally emphasize their shared image of children as competent and capable, and to make visible to them that in their classrooms, young learners asked questions, attended to topics for long periods of time, and connected with their teachers through conversation and play. Children's interests and ideas were valued; they knew their teachers were genuinely interested in what they knew and wanted to learn. Teacher Learning Stories communicated our interpretations, understandings, and appreciation of Debora's and Lonnie's pedagogy. Teacher Learning Stories

have many values for early childhood education. They:

- create a deliberate time and space for reflective conversations about classroom events and pedagogical practices;
- encourage observers' (coaches, directors, researchers) specific attention to teachers' practices and reveal beliefs about children, teaching, and learning;
- resist narrow, preconceived notions of who teachers are;
- acknowledge teachers' expertise regarding their classroom community, their students, and their teaching practices;
- value teachers' voices, including their language(s) (Green, 2002). In the examples we shared, we validated Debora's and Lonnie's African

American English, and we would do the same with other languages;

- balance power between observer and teacher to open spaces for the co-construction of new knowledges and fostering authentic dialogue; and,
- invite opportunities for teachers to tell stories layered with close observers' interpretations of classroom practices.

Positioning Teachers as Experts of Their Practice

Much like Learning Stories written to children (Carr & Lee, 2012) which narrate and celebrate children's identities as learners, Teacher Learning Stories offer insights into the pedagogies and processes teachers enact with children. Because each story highlights a teacher's strengths, and because teachers are invited to offer their

Figure 2

A Teacher Learning Story to Preschool Teacher Lonnie Warfield

Dear Lonnie,

Recently your girls have been very interested in fashion and makeup and you have supported them in several ways. I loved when you put rollers in their hair, helped them make earrings from magnetic blocks, and watched them put pretend makeup on themselves while wearing their fancy play dresses. But the icing on the cake was when they put "makeup" on you! You sat patiently as they gently stroked your face and hair with paintbrushes and giggled with each other as they made you beautiful. They were so happy to be able to connect so closely with you.

What this tells us:

You invite the children to explore and play in ways that offer them control over their own learning, noting their interests and funds of knowledge, and then making the most of those interests to create connections between school and home. This story demonstrates to us that you value the children as individuals, and that you welcome them together to foster a sense of community. When you create an invitation, you keep a watchful eye on what the children do with the materials, document their learning, and patiently observe to inform your future curricular decisions. By creating deep and meaningful connections between home and school, you are creating a culturally sustaining environment, one that values what children learn in school while emphasizing the funds of knowledge each child brings to their school experience. The memories these children are establishing will form the foundation of future pursuits, giving them confidence in what they bring to each learning experience.

NOTICING CHILDREN

Your voice:

What do you think about when you create invitations based on the interests of children?



"The kids who are in my room have been in my room for a while, and some of them I've known since they were little kids. So when they would [bring stuff] for show-and-tell, I watch and see what they bring in and what is so interesting to them... I just observe them with things that they bring to the classroom and things that they do within the classroom. I know who's very interested in dramatic play, I know who's very interested in blocks, or who likes to play alone. So when I'm setting up invitations, or I'm out and about picking up things at the store, or from my church, or my family, or friends who are offering me things for the center - Sometimes I have to say no, that doesn't fit with my kids. Then when I bring it in, sometimes the ones that I didn't think would be interested in it, become interested in it. So I just observe what my kids like... When I see them do something, I think, "Whoa, I wonder if I go get this..." Then I slowly bring it out, put it on the table, and just watch them adding things. And that's how my day gets started..."

interpretations through shared readings, Teacher Learning Stories position teachers as experts of their practice.

In an era in which early childhood educators feel mounting pressures that may reduce their professional identities to readiness scores and standardized measures of “quality,” Teacher Learning Stories center teachers as the experts of their practice and celebrate the work they do with and on behalf of children.

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