Learning Stories ako metóda formatívneho hodnotenia v českom predprimárnom vzdelávaní

Learning Stories as a Formative Assessment Method in Czech Pre-primary Education

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Abstract

In the last decade, formative assessment methods have gained international prominence in pre-primary education. The Learning Stories method is a formative assessment method which was designed specifically for pre-primary education. It was developed in the late 1990s in New Zealand and has been used in Canada, Australia, in the United States and some Western European countries. The aim of the article is to introduce the results of a two-year action research (2019–2021) that focused on the implementation of the Learning Stories method in six Czech pre-schools and the documentation of its impact on teacher's assessment processes and children's learning. The research data indicate that this method is an effective tool that reinforces child-centred approach to assessing children's learning. The method enhanced the teachers´ understanding of the importance of formative assessment, guided them to re-evaluate their concepts of assessing children's development and learning. The method enabled the teachers to have a deeper understanding of children's learning processes and increased participation of children in assessing their own learning.

Keywords: Pre-school Education. Formative Assessment. Learning Stories Method. Learning Dispositions. Observation. Action Research.

Introduction

Formative assessment has received international attention with great potential to improve teaching and learning for the last thirty years and has roots in evaluation practices which have evolved over this time from a focus on formative evaluation to formative assessment (Shepard, 2006; Black, William, 2010; Gareis, Grant, 2015). Within pre-school education, Nutbrown (2006) defines assessment 'as the process of identifying the details of children's knowledge, skills and understanding in order to build a detailed picture of the child's development and subsequent learning needs' (p. 2). To be effective, it

is essential for this process to be informed by professional insight into children's learning and is an important outcome of established relationships with individual children. Although not formally known as 'assessment for learning' or 'formative assessment', the practice of observing and documenting young children's learning has a long tradition. The term 'assessment for learning' was first used to help define the differences between summative and formative assessment (Harlen, James, 1997). Assessment for learning aimed to provide students with teacher feedback about their progress but also recognised the significance of students' direct involvement in assessing their own work. "Formative assessment often uses staff observations and focuses on children's well-being and engagement" (Sim et al., 2019, p. 44) to "foster increased autonomy and responsibility for learning on the part of the students" (Cizek, 2010, p. 4).

More recently, Drummond (in Schmidt, 2009, p.12) states that assessment should help teachers to "appreciate and understand what children learn", know them as individuals. She considers assessment as a critical aspect of providing quality in early childhood education. When teachers of young children observe not only what they see, but they are also alert and sensitive to receiving information from children (as well as their families) they are able to evaluate their own practice and to support the next steps on the child's unique learning journey.

Most European countries have basic information on their approach to assessment in their national curricula. The assessment methods based on observation of the child's learning processes predominate. This corresponds to a child-centred approach in pre-school education, in which the child's interests, their individuality and a respect for their own way of learning are the starting points for a teacher's work. While portfolios and regular observation with documentation of the child's learning are often used, forms of assessment using summative checklists still appear to be common in about a third of European countries (European Commission, 2019; OECD, 2015). The majority of countries in Europe favour formative forms of pre-school assessment due to their long pedagogical traditions and an awareness of the risks associated with summative assessment practices which can lead to "schoolification" and inappropriate practice in pre-schools (Sim et al., 2019).

In the past, Czechoslovak pre-school education was closer to a school-based approach to education. Especially since the 1970s, an assessment model persisted which perceived the child as an object of the monitoring and assessment process (Opravilová, Uhlířová, 2021). In contrast to this model, a socio-constructivist perspective views the child as an active participant in the learning process (Simina, 2012) who participates in, and is a beneficiary of, the whole assessment process (Knauf, 2020).

Current professional discussion in the Czech Republic in many areas concerns the assessment of children's learning and the efficacy of the educational process. The Czech Framework Educational Program for Pre-

Primary Education (FEP PE) (MŠMT, 2021) states that the assessment of educational outcomes for children should not focus on performance in relation to an agreed standard, nor on comparing one child's performance against another, but on a child's development of key competencies. To ensure an individualised approach, the personal development and educational progress of each single child should be observed and documented with an emphasis on the importance of identifying any difficulties in the child's development and education (MŠMT, 2021). Within recent years, Czech pre-schools have started using new tools for assessment of the child (e.g. VÚP, 2007; PREDICT by Syslová, Kratochvílová, 2018 or Welcome IDEA, 2019). Also, the Czech School Inspectorate has stated criteria for the development and outcomes of education and requires teachers and pre-schools to monitor and assess young children's development against them (ČŠI, 2019).

Currently assessment in Czech pre-schools usually takes place without the direct involvement of the child, although it is based on continuous observations by the teacher. Observational outcomes are the basis for planning educational activities designed to support and further develop the child's learning. Assessment records take the form of a portfolio that contains an assessment checklist and the child's work which demonstrates their achievements and readiness for transition to primary education. Although parents can view the child's portfolio the child has not personally contributed to the process of their assessment, nor to influence the creation of their own learning journey.

In order to contribute to current understandings of assessment in Czech pre-schools, the Learning Stories method was chosen to illustrate the features of formative assessment such as its child-centred principles and its promotion of children's agency.

Theoretical Background of the Learning Stories Method

The Learning Stories method of formative assessment was created in the late 1990s by Professor M. Carr, at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and was developed as part of research following the newly introduced curriculum for pre-school education *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Learning stories are primarily designed for children themselves. Only afterwards do they serve parents and teachers, and support communication between all participants in the educational process. Learning stories help children to construct their own identity as a learner and become more aware of their own learning processes and help to make planning for further learning more effective (Carr, Lee, 2012).

Learning stories are written by one or more teachers based on their observations. An important principle is that the child themselves should be involved in making the story of their learning. The child can narrate how they participated in the activity, or they can help to decide which moments should

be described which in turn leads to the development of their ability to reflect on their own learning processes (Carr, Lee, 2012).

The underlying concepts of the method include the learning dispositions (MoE, 2017). Learning dispositions can be defined as a *participation repertoire* from which the child selects or creates learning opportunities, or a *habitus* in learning (Carr, 2001, p. 9–10). The learning dispositions are described as a situation, when the child "is prepared (being *ready),* wants (being *willing)* and is capable (being *able)* to participate in a variety of ways; it is a combination of inclination, sensitivity to the situation and relevant skills and knowledge" (Carr, 2001, p. 21). The dispositions are based on responsive and reciprocal relationships between the individual and their surroundings. They can be divided into five main areas, which are directly reflected in the observation, documentation, reflection and recording of the individual child's Learning Story – *taking interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, communicating with others, taking responsibility* (Carr, 2001, p. 23).

Based on observations of children playing, the teacher recognises which moments are important for their learning. This allows the further planning of a possible educational offer for individual children, based on their interests, actual learning achievements and strengths. Every other learning story should connect, integrate, and relate to previous moments within the learning process of the child, thus creating a holistic picture of children's learning (Goodsir, Rowell, 2005, p. 12). Learning stories can be based upon one child, as well as a group of children.

An adaptation of Carr's Learning Stories by the German Youth Institute (DJI) entitled *Bildungs- und Lerngeschichten* is used as one of the methods of formative assessment in some regions of Germany. The DJI also developed practical resources to support the effective introduction of the method into practice. This represents a development of Carr's original model which retained the essential principles but also provides greater support for a systematic approach for all adults working with pre-school children.

The Bildungs- und Lerngeschichten method is based upon four steps: (1) Description – Teachers observe individual children's learning processes and activities in everyday situations without any formal assessment. (2) Discussion – Teachers analyse their observations as a group in relation to the learning dispositions and the curriculum and reflect upon their own understandings as well as taking account of the child's (and parents´) perspective. (3) Decision-making – Teachers consider and decide upon as a team how to further develop the learning dispositions of the child. 4) Documentation – Teachers are required to document the child's development as part of their systematic support for the child. Records (usually in a form of a letter) are kept in the individual child's portfolio (DJI, 2007; Leu et al., 2007).

An important part of the Learning Stories method is the routine of producing a letter about the child's learning. An individualised letter addressed to the individual child is the result of the teacher's observation and subsequent analysis of the information gained from it. The letter, assessing the child's learning processes, highlights the achievements and any learning difficulties overcome by the child and at the same time emphasises any examples of the child's personal development and perseverance during the observation. This is an example of the innovative approach of the method, as it demonstrates how the child can be drawn into the process of assessment and self-assessment.

The starting point for the research project was the need to improve assessment of the learning process in Czech pre-schools (ČŠI, 2018). The German adaptation of the Learning Stories method *Bildungs- und Lerngeschichten* (DJI, 2007) was used for the action research for several reasons. Most importantly, it focuses on the child's competencies, learning dispositions and their holistic development which is closely aligned to the principles of pedagogical work in Czech pre-schools and the values of Czech teachers working with young children (MŠMT, 2021). Within the preparatory phase of this research, the *Bildungs- und Lerngeschichten* materials were translated into Czech and modified to reflect the Czech context and FEP PE (2021).

Methods

The aim of the research was to document the implementation of the Learning Stories method in Czech pre-primary education and to analyse the impact of the method on teachers' work with children in the pre-schools involved in the research.

The research questions focused on:
  (1) what impact does the implementation of the Learning Stories method have on teachers' understanding of children's learning processes,
  (2) how teachers perceive the impact of the method on their practice of assessing children's learning,
  (3) how teachers evaluate the impact of the method on participation of children in the assessment of their own learning.

The research was carried out from September 2019 to the beginning of June 2021 in 6 Czech pre-schools and included 12 teachers (156 children in 6 classes) and 20 parents. All teachers received theoretical training in the Learning stories method as a part of their initial professional studies at the Charles University, Faculty of Education. They subsequently implemented the method in their own practice and agreed to participate in the research. During the years 2019–2021, their activities were monitored and analysed by the research team.

Action research projects provide opportunities for practitioners to explore the efficacy of their own educational work so that change and

improvement can be brought about (ATA, 2000; Hall, Keynes, 2005; Nezvalová, 2003). The research took place over four phases (1. planning, 2. action, 3. monitoring and 4. evaluation) which were repeated on a yearly basis.

Tab.1. Research phases

Research phase	Activity description
Phase 1	Documentation, observation forms and guidelines were prepared for use in Czech pre-schools. Teachers and parents were informed about the research aims and methods to be used and their consent to participate was agreed.
Phase 2	The teachers implemented the Learning Stories method in their pre-schools (planned on observations of children; carried out direct observations; evaluated the observations; prepared the Learning Story letters and handed them over to the children).
Phase 3	Teachers and parents were interviewed about the impact of the method on the children's learning processes. Furthermore, teachers were asked about the impact of the method on their practice of assessing children's learning and on participation of children in the assessment of their own learning.
Phase 4	Data from interviews were analysed. Recommendations for the teachers were carried out on how to modify their own practice in order to improve the implementation of the method in the following cycle of the action research.

Qualitative research methods were used for data collection. Data were obtained primarily from interviews with teachers and parents. Additional data sources were participant observations and direct observation records (videos, photographs) which enabled triangulation of the data obtained from the interviews. Interviews and observations were realised on yearly basis in two cycles within the action research. Data snippets representing key codes and categories were extracted from the open-ended responses of teachers and parents. Responses were open-coded ad-hoc. Individual codes were grouped into categories and analysed by thematic coding (Miles et al., 2014; Švaříček, Šeďová, 2014; Yin, 2018). The analysis resulted in 7 categories (process of implementation; assessment outcomes – letters for children; impact on children's learning; communication; impact on teacher´s perception of children and their learning; benefits of the method, risks of implementation).

Subsequently, the categories were compared and clustered in relation to the selected research questions.

Results

Several key themes emerged as significant results relating to the research questions, and these are discussed below.

A Deeper Understanding of Children's Learning Processes

Targeted observation gave teachers a deeper **individualised perspective** of the child and enabled them to record and recognise strengths (learning skills and dispositions) of children which had previously remained unnoticed in the daily routine. The following comment from an interview with a teacher illustrate this:

"At first I couldn't find my way to Anička[1]. She didn't seem very interested in anything, she'd rather say she couldn't do something than try it, and sometimes her attention could be tiring. But while observing her, I realised how many good qualities Anička has – she is incredibly empathetic, selfless, helps everyone and tries to make others happy. She can also entertain herself and come up with imaginative games. Suddenly I saw Anička with completely different eyes, I was able to accept things that used to irritate me. I was very relieved and grateful."

Analysis of interviews with teachers and parents clarified another benefit of the method. The children offered their own interpretations and comments on their learning stories in the classroom and at home. In this way the teachers had **opportunities** to view events from the child's perspective and compare it with their own point of view. The teachers could deepen their **understanding of how children think and what they are genuinely interested in.** The following comments from two parents illustrate this:

"...he talked more about how they played together with Honza and how he didn't know the numbers – he couldn´t understand it, we talked quite a deal about it...He said that the teacher didn't understand nothing, he was building a house."

"He retold everything to us again, confirmed that it really happened like that, and explained how they played with Peter."

As a result, a more authentic understanding of children's interests made it possible to **adapt the learning environment and educational offer** to effectively support children's motivation to learn.

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[1] The names of the children have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Improving the assessment of children's learning

The teachers felt that the Learning Stories method does not differ from the usual approach to assessment carried out as continuous observation. However, unlike the fragmented learning skills on an assessment checklist (national guidelines for assessment, FEP PE, VÚP, 2007), the Learning Stories method depicts development of learning dispositions **in the context of learning situations and environments** in which they take place, and this provides a more 'authentic' form of assessment. Claxton and Carr (2004) and Dowling (2013) point out that the learning process cannot be removed from the context in which it takes place such as the learning moment and the learning environment. The Learning Stories method was mainly seen by teachers as a complement to the existing assessment tool. In contrast to the Learning Stories method, the teachers noted the risk of a lack of individualisation in standard summative assessment tools. The following comment from an interview with a teacher illustrate this:

"The method really allows us to see the child, to tune in to him, to see what his interests are, what he's really good at, that it's not just ticking off the do's and don'ts..."

"Because when you think about what the child is doing and you start writing about it, you think more about how you can actually support the child, their play or even their interests."

The guided observations made teachers notice more closely the individual interests of children and reflect upon these when **planning subsequent activities,** based on the child's interests. For example, the subsequent activities included children being involved in making an adventure book for a boy with special educational needs, reading a humorous book reflecting the theme of a construction activity or making coins for shopping in the role play area. Planning for next steps in learning, based on the analysis of these observations, is an integral part of the Learning Stories philosophy. Carr emphasizes that "the aim [of Learning Stories] is to push the learning forward, to expand it, not just to describe an event" (Carr, Lee, 2019, p.14).

Results of the action research showed that the method moved the teachers' perspective from summative to formative assessment. The teachers acknowledged the impact of the formative assessment on the children's learning processes and the complementary relationship with some aspects of summative assessment practices. During the implementation of the action research, teachers began to see **the importance of a reflective description of the learning process** and began to concentrate less on merely summarising outcomes which they had previously been their practice. After becoming more familiar with formative assessment they started assessing children according to

each child's individual characteristics. The following comment from an interview with a teacher illustrate this:

"After the second observation of Adam, I returned to the first letter and found out how he had moved greatly in free play – that he was already at least a little interested in what the other children were doing, while before he didn't care and mainly wanted my attention."

Involvement of other practitioners in the project established **a system of mutual sharing of information about the child** and the sharing of tasks such as sharing observations, analysing the documentation, writing, and giving out the letters to the children. The transition from assessing as a team rather than as an individual, together with planning for the next steps in children's learning are important characteristics of the Learning Stories method. The teachers also appreciated the process of observing, evaluating, and documenting the child's learning processes supported by the resources and guidance adapted from the original *Bildungs- und Lerngeschichten* method.

Increased Participation by the Child in Assessing Their own Learning.

Narrative assessment is the biggest asset of the method as assessment in the form of a letter describing the learning process **is familiar and understandable for children** (Bruner, 2003). The child can offer their own interpretation of their learning story, explain as well as reformulate it and as a result becomes an **active participant in the assessment process.** The following comments are from an interview with a parent of a boy with special educational needs (different mother tongue, ADHD, and developmental disorder):

"Alex was very happy that he got his Learning Story. I had to read it twice a day for a whole week, always in the morning and in the evening before he went to bed."

"When Alex got his second Learning Story, he opened it and then started ´reading´ and re-telling the story with the photographs. Only then he gave it to me to read what was written in it. It was amazing! He was the only one who's done it like this! And although his language skills are very limited, what he said was more or less in the written story."

Children's motivation is one of the key requirements for learning (Carr, 2001). With the child's motivation and interest, the learning process begins, and the child's personality and moral values start to develop. The data analysis showed that the Learning Stories method is **highly motivating** for all children. Giving out the learning story letters became a much-anticipated part of the routine and children experienced **a sense of uniqueness** as their learning stories became their property (a copy would be included in the portfolio), and the children treated it with "respect". The routine of letter giving has become an opportunity to repeatedly strengthen children's self-concept and self-awareness and the emphasis on mastering learning dispositions helped to create a "**culture of success**" in the class (Carr, Lee, 2019; Black, William, 2010).

Following the children receiving their learning stories, teachers have noticed in them a greater willingness to overcome difficult tasks (from the

child's perspective) and there is more self-confidence with solving problems. From the teachers´ perspective, the Learning Stories method has improved children's attitudes to, and motivation for, the learning process. The following comments are from an interview with a teacher:

"Yes, it was extra work, but after a while… I realised that thanks to observations, letters, interviews with colleagues, I feel that I know the children much better… and above all that we finally managed to involve them in the whole process… that they do things because they really want to, that they really are interested in them, and not because we [teachers] prepared something for them."

Many pre-schools in the Czech Republic already work with portfolios and photographic documentation of children's learning to assess children's development (Syslová, Kratochvílová, Fikarová, 2018). However, the Learning Stories method could be viewed as taking these practices further by obtaining evidence of and deeper insight into the child's own learning processes. This method actually invites the child to assess their own learning processes and involving the child in the assessment process is another source of learning (Earl, Katz, 2006).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has deepened the theoretical discussion on formative assessment in pre-primary education and disseminated knowledge about the possibility of implementing formative assessment methods such as Learning Stories in Czech pre-schools. Currently, formative assessment in the Czech Republic is considered primarily for its contribution to the development of pedagogical work as "assessment of learning" or "assessment for learning", but very little consideration is given to its role as a means of "assessment as learning" (Harlen, James, 1997). In other words, the process of formative assessment can provide the child with very important motivation for accepting an active role in their own development and effective support for their lifelong learning.

Although the research was limited to six classes of pre-school children, the implementation of action research confirmed that the Learning Stories method is an effective way of assisting a child's learning and personal development. Through the Learning Stories method, the teacher's view of the child develops as they begin to emphasise the role of the child more in their planning and perceives the child as a co-creator in the learning process (Rogoff, 1990). In a situation where the child's skills or knowledge are insufficient to solve a problem, the child has the opportunity (after talking to the teacher) to work out for themself what knowledge is needed in order to solve the problem. The Learning Stories method therefore enables the child to think of themself as an agent who is involved in their own development and to strengthen their internal motivation to learn and their participation in the process of self-

assessment (Siraj, Mayo, 2014). At the same time, the position of the child changes as the child takes centre stage and so too does the position of the teacher in the process of the child's education ("facilitator of learning model" in Stone, Burris, 2019). Another advantage of the method is its relative simplicity which helps to establish an effective partnership with parents from socio-culturally disadvantaged backgrounds.

Action research has shown that the Learning Stories method supports teachers to see the importance of formative assessment, to re-evaluate their concepts of assessing children's development and learning. The research also points out the difficulties of implementing this method in Czech pre-school education where there remains a very strong and influential historical model in the education system which maintains the superiority of the adult over the child. Therefore, when implementing the method, it is necessary to take a long-term view. A deeper knowledge of children and an understanding of their potential and strengths through sharing information and resources is required by all those working within pre-schools.

The formative assessment is an integral part of high-quality teaching and learning, taking place within the context of respectful and responsive relationships promoted by teachers who value the uniqueness of the child and create an enabling environment to support children's flourishing as learners.

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